

MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS

BY AUTHOR OF "GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY"
"WOMAN'S RANSOM"

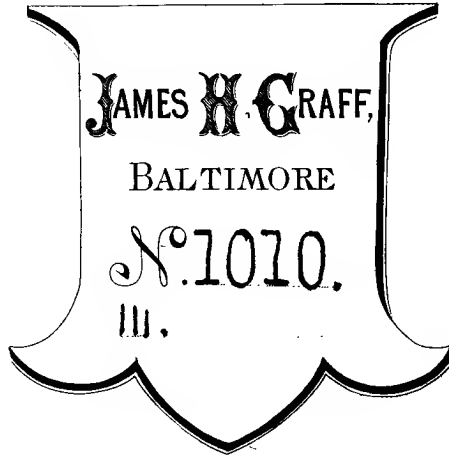


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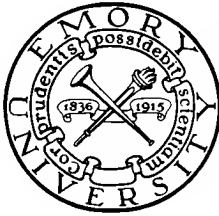
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MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS.

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "UNDER THE SPELL," "WILDFLOWER,"
"A WOMAN'S RANSOM," ETC.

"What is he, for Heaven's sake? Can no man give him his true character?"
HEYWOOD.

LONDON :
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.
1866.

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MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS.

Book II.

HOUSEKEEPER BERTIE.

CHAPTER I.

WAITING FOR MONEY.

WHY it did not come on the twenty-fifth of March as usual, was a great perplexity to me—greater to my brother John, for whom it was intended. Every Lady-Day, my mother had received the cheque in trust for John, until John came of age, took his arrears—and spent them. A great facility for spending his own money, and other people's, had John Kingsworth Casey—"like my poor husband," mother used to say, when grieving over my brother's improvidence.

When my dear mother died--John was two and twenty then, and I only sixteen--I had two things to wonder at: what would become of me?—what would Mrs. Kingsworth do about the money? The first was solved before my eyes were dry; the committee considered my orphanage, and professed to understand my character—I who never understood it in all my life!—and set me in my mother's place, housekeeper and custodian to the Corkcutters' Hall, Primrose Street, City. It was a place of responsibility, and weighed upon my youth—driving a great deal of youth's lightness away, and rendering me just a trifle old-fashioned before my time—though I fought hard against *that*, for old-fashioned people were my abomination then.

"You have been brought up carefully and religiously," said these kind City folk; "your mother was a good servant to us, and we must not forget her daughter. If you honestly believe that you can fulfil the duties of this place, why keep it for your mother's sake, and by your industry, care, and perseverance, let us try to respect you for your own."

They said nothing about my youth; they knew nothing about my brother; through the usual mysterious channels of intelligence they had learned that I was staid and womanly for my years—as was natural enough, living in that gloomy City building, with a grave mother, who shunned company; and so they trusted me, made me housekeeper, and piled upon my head the cares of office before my seventeenth birthday.

The second matter for wonderment was solved at Lady-day; Mrs. Kingsworth had not replied to my deep, black-bordered letter, full of the worst news that it had ever been my lot to communicate, and I felt aggrieved at her silence and her want of sympathy with my loss. On the twenty-fifth of March, however, her letter came as usual, addressed to Miss Casey this time, and enclosing the usual cheque for one hundred pounds for John.

It was an odd, cold letter. I give it a place here for more reasons than one:

"I am sorry, Miss Casey, to hear of the death of an old friend," it began. "You may believe it or not, according to your degree of faith in me. Finding you in your mother's place, and knowing a little of your character, I trust you as I trusted her in old times. I enclose the usual cheque for my god-son—let it go the way of the other monies of which he has never known the use. I am true to my word—he is true to his nature, and there's an end of my charity and his obligation. Acknowledge the receipt of this per return, and oblige

"Yours truly,

"CHARLOTTE KINGSWORTH."

I showed the letter to John, who turned it over and over in his hands after its perusal, whistled, read it once more, looked at it upside down, finally put it and the cheque very carelessly into the breast-pocket of his shabby shooting-jacket.

"You don't want this letter, Bertie?"

"N—no," was my hesitative answer.

"Then I'll keep it out of curiosity—out of respect to the old girl whose name I bear. What an odd fish she must be! What a compliment to *my* years of discretion to trust you with the money girl!"

"You don't mind that, John?"

"Not a bit," was the reply; "she's sure of an answer from your methodical little self, and of the letter reaching my hands, which is a matter of greater importance, by a long chalk."

And with this "slangy" peroration, he took his departure.

I did not meet him again for twelve months—that was the longest time we had ever been apart; on the following twenty-sixth of March he came again, very worn in looks but better dressed than I had seen him of late years. The cheque had arrived the day before, and was ready for him.

"Punctuality is the soul of business," he said, lightly. "God bless Mother Kingsworth, and may her days in the land last as long as her money!"

"Hush, John!—I don't like that."

"I apologize—only my style of running on—anyhow. How's this dead-and-alive habitation agreeing with you, Bertie—badly?"

"No—why should you think that?"

"You're as white as a ghost, and you used to have a colour like a rose," he replied; "this is a kind of mausoleum to me—I am always glad to get out of it."

"Yes—I know that," was my quiet answer.

"Ahem—for the sake of the place, not of you, Bertie—you whom I ought to treat better—I confess that. But by-and-by I shall astonish you a little."

"In what manner?"

"By my brotherly return for all that has passed—all your forbearance with me—all your kindness in cutting the reproaches short. That is something like a sister, to spare me a sermon on a brother's backsliding."

"I know by this time how little a sermon affects you, John."

"Well, sermons always gave me the horrors, and engendered a hate of the sermonizer."

"Always?"

"Ah! with one exception, he added quickly, even sorrowfully; "*her* sermons ever kept me straight, but they never turned me against her—though she thought so."

"Scarcely."

"I *was* thinking of trying to prove that all my moral qualities had not run utterly to seed, when—she died."

He talked a little of his future after that—of his new idea of settling down with all the wild oats sown, and then he went his way to sow them. There was a rare harvest though, and he took an interest in his crops; he went on more wildly, became a worse man in all respects, even to the quiet precincts of the Corkcutters' Hall, there welled a rumour of the reckless spendthrift and drunkard that he had become. Then the day came round again—Lady-Day—and the money did not come with it, as I have already stated; so we begin our story-proper.

John made his appearance on the twenty-sixth of the month, as usual; he came in the night-time as usual also. For years I had not seen him in the daylight.

His appearance scared me, I remember. Sowing his wild oats, or reaping the harvest thereof, had been hard work, and reduced him to extremities. He was greatly changed, and my heart sank at the sight of him.

It had been raining all day, and he came in wet and muddy, leaving the imprint of his feet upon the crumb-cloth. He brought hat and great-coat into my sitting-room on the right of the entrance-hall, put his hat, battered and askew, on my fancy blotting-book, and began a struggle to free his arms from the toru living of his great-coat. Finally, he kissed me, and then sat down before me, with his coat across his knees, a tall, thin, haggard, fair-haired man, shabbily-dressed and altogether deplorable.

"Oh! John, I am sorry to see this," I ejaculated.

He laughed; he took the troubles of life with composure, and treated misfortune as a jest. He had always done so, and was not likely to change in his latter days.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Bertie. I'm well, strong, and in good circumstances."

"Appearances are against you, then, John."

"Never study appearances—'appearances are deceptive,' says the aphorist. Have a soul above them like your brother."

"What are you doing now?"

"N—nothing particular. Taking to anything that turns up in the natural course of events," he answered; "oh! I have been doing very well this year. If I had not I should have come begging here for a few pounds on account—you know my way."

"That has never been 'your way,' John."

"Simply for the reason that I have not required money," he replied; "that I'm clever enough to get my own living."

"Are you at the insurance office now?"

"How precious curious you are!" he said, with another laugh; "no, I am not. I have been airing my musical abilities, and playing in first-rate style at a music-hall. The leader and I quarrelled about something—I forget what—and I went to the Chelsea Gardens."

"To play there?"

"No—I'd sold my violin—a friend took a fancy to it, and gave me double its value for it—that's generally the way with friends, you'll find. I was check-taker at the Chelsea Gardens. Got on first-rate there until the manager and I quarrelled about something—I forget what."

"Quarrelled again!"

"Some mistake, I believe—he suspected my honesty, and I knocked him down. Only a little difference, you see; and yet he would not look over it, when he was sober—or when I was sober, I forget which. So I went to the Royal."

"Royal?"

"Theatre Royal—as box-keeper. Didn't stop there three weeks. Impossible to agree with old Gilford—he was always smelling spirits, he said,—so I gave up the whole affair for billiards, which has paid pretty well, Bertie—pretty well considering."

"Only to see you settle down, John, to something quiet and respectable!"

"Ah! that's it—that's the difficulty. I am looking out for something every day now, that I can go at with a will. I'm rather tired of hanging about town. You are getting on well I suppose?"

"Yes, pretty well."

"Dull as usual in this abominable den?"

"I don't find it dull—I am used to it."

"You were ever such a merry, light-hearted child, Bertie; it is odd that fate should have changed you to a staid, methodical woman at eighteen years of age. You have friends about here?"

"Not any."

"Keep no company?"

"No."

"Penal servitude, I call it. I suppose the Cork-cutters hold their committees here?"

"Once a month."

"And their dinners?"

"Twice a year."

"What a jolly place?—any clerks?"

"An old gentleman here from ten till four. Two, sometimes three clerks, for a week or two after the midsummer quarter, when rents are paid in."

"A favourite quarter-day with the Corkcutters' Corporation—well, Lady-Day for me!"

He filled two glasses with sherry from the decanter I had set out for him in anticipation of his arrival, and placed one glass at my elbow. He always took wine with me on Lady-Day, and it was quite a solemn event to bow and smile over our *Amontillado*.

"God bless you, Bertie!" he always said on that occasion; and I think he meant it, though he darted away from the sentiment at a tangent, and dashed into topics foreign to all evidence of feeling.

"I don't know," he said, on this present occasion, "if I haven't as great a right to pity you as you have to pity me. You look with regret at what mother used to call my idle and profitless life—I call such a life as yours slavery and isolation. You will grow old before your time—you will be a little withered old woman, with nothing to love but a favourite cat, at thirty years of age—yours will be a stagnant existence, devoid of incident, interest and colour."

What a prophecy! I laughed then at his picture, and said I was content with it. I did not care for change; the peace and rest of the old City office had stolen to my heart, perhaps, for the reason that no temptation had passed athwart it to disturb me. On the

verge of a great change—the shadow of it had not been cast upon my path to warn me of an end to “quietness.”

“So Lady-Day for me,” he said once more, by way of hint this time that he was there on business.

“Mrs. Kingsworth appears to have missed a post, John,” I said to my brother, “for her cheque has not arrived yet, I am sorry to say.”

“The deuce it hasn’t!” he responded; “that’s odd!”

For an instant he looked disappointed, thrust his hands to the depths of his pockets, and surveyed ruefully the muddy tips of his boots. Then he found his way to his meaningless laugh, somehow.

“Mrs. Kingsworth caught tripping in punctuality—the business woman—the woman with the memory that never betrayed her, Bertie! This is a good joke.”

“It is rather remarkable, John. It *will* come, I suppose, this money?”

My brother’s laugh came to an abrupt termination, and he stared hard at me.

“Why, you don’t doubt that surely? Phew!” he exclaimed, “that would be a clincher!”

He again examined the tips of his boots, with an aspect more rueful than he had hitherto adopted.

“That’s an ugly thought, Bertie,” he said. “You haven’t—heard anything, I suppose, from the old quarter?”

“Not a word.”

“Oh! then, begone dull care—I have faith in Mrs. Kingsworth’s *affection*! Why, my own god-mother is not going to turn against me at the eleventh hour?”

“I have often thought that she would tire of her liberality.”

“She’s a rich woman!”

“The hundred pounds were given in the first instance for your education—continued afterwards as a means of assisting your progress in life—your *progress*!”

“Yes, but—oh! I’ll not think of it,” he exclaimed, “sufficient for the day is the evil thereof—that’s a Bible text, and Kingsworth Casey’s. She would never throw a fellow off without due warning, and become suddenly harsh and uncharitable. Here’s Mrs. Kingsworth’s health.”

He drank more sherry after his disappointment; very rapidly the wine diminished in the decanter—there was excitement, even restlessness, in his demeanour after that. He had taken things easily through life—been ever careless and improvident—but there was an affectation of easiness that night, and he could not disguise it.

“Have you any bills to meet?—is there anything you have promised to pay, John?” I asked.

“Why?” he rejoined, looking under his thick eyebrows at me.

“I have saved a little money lately—can advance a little, if you wish it.”

He seemed to reflect upon the matter, then said suddenly, almost sharply—"I don't wish it."

"If——"

"I've plenty of money," he said hurriedly; "I'm not hard up—I can have a place to-morrow, if I like. It's all right enough—upon my soul, I'm not hard up, Bertie."

He started to his feet and began to fight his way into his great-coat again; in a few seconds he was buttoned to the chin, and in his haste and impoliteness had already pressed his shabby hat over his eyes. He seemed anxious to be gone, as though that were the better method to resist the temptation that had suddenly beset him.

"Going?"

"Yes—I have an appointment, Bertie—I expect to meet a friend to-night."

"I will not ask you to stay, then," I said; "and--and about the cheque—if it comes——"

"When it comes," he corrected.

"When it comes, shall I forward it? What is your address?"

He inscribed a black cross with his boot on the white crumb-cloth, then said,

"I'll come in three days. We'll give the old girl three days. After that, I'll write—or you'll write to her—and ask if she's well, poor old soul. Good night, Bertie. Don't come out in the cold, girl."

Of course I took no heed of this request, and rose to accompany him along the broad stone corridor, to the great hall, ever so full of echoes.

Under the lamp he stooped and kissed me, with that evidence of affection which flickered forth once a year at least—which had never wholly died away—which was even on that night more demonstrative, without being less real.

"Good night, Bertie—now steer clear of the door. It's a wretched night!"

He essayed to open the door but there were two locks, a chain, two bolts, and a bar, and people unused to them soon grew confused in their efforts to escape.

"That fool of a servant has locked up for the night," he said, as I took his place, and finally opened the door for him.

Some one who had been leaning against the door came with a backward step or two into the hall, and staggered to preserve a balance.

"Why, who's this?"

It was a tall girl, very poorly clad, with a black straw bonnet awry, and a black and white cheek shawl trailing behind her, that found herself suddenly in the Corkcutters' Hall, and began rubbing her eyes with her knuckles to wake herself up, and more thoroughly arrive at a correct state of mundane affairs.

"I—I beg pardon," she said, "I don't want anything. Oh! there you are, Mr. Jack?"

"There, that'll do," said my brother, "come away. What the devil do you mean by dodging a fellow like this?"

"Couldn't make out, Jack, where you were a-going to—you don't mind—you won't be hard?"

"No—come on. This—this nondescript, Bertie, is a kind of maid-of-all-work to my select establishment. Touched in the head, poor devil," he added; "just touched enough to make herself a nuisance. I'll tell you all about her another time. Come on—do."

"Who—is this?" asked the girl, advaucing to me, and looking me so steadily and earnestly in the face, that I shrank back a little.

"My sister—a real lady, so make your best curtsey, Em, for it's the first one you have ever seen."

The girl—she was not more than fourteen years of age—stared harder than ever at me, then, without attending to my brother's commands, seized his arm, and walked towards the steps.

"Then she's your sister—is she?—that's the girl you've bragged so much about?"

My brother laughed, and went down the steps with her in the wind and rain still rioting without there.

"I shall be here next Thursday, Bertie," he said; "good night."

In my amazement I did not respond to his adieux; I stood with the door half open, looking after him and his companion. I saw the latter look into his face with a wild, almost hungry look, and heard her say,

"The money—have you got it?"

"Hush!—no."

"What's to become of us, then?"

Then they went along the narrow roadway, hemmed in by the tall houses, offices and warehouses; and left me something more to wonder at, besides Mrs. Kingsworth's silence.

CHAPTER II.

“EM.”

I TRIED to wait patiently till the end of the three days; the solution to the riddle of John Kingsworth's strange companion could not arrive before that period, and it was useless to grow excited over the mystery, if mystery it were. I consoled myself with that assurance, and was all the more excited despite my consolation. I caught myself dreaming of my brother, and the large-eyed haggard girl who had been waiting for him in the doorway of the Corkentters' Hall. I almost forgot the absent money, and Mrs. Kingsworth's silence, until the third day came round, and the bad news of “no news” was left me to communicate.

Then I was troubled by the result; I knew how much the non-delivery of a hundred-pound cheque would affect my brother—how it had become a thing of course with him, that money—which he forestalled beforehand, doubtless, and had long considered his just due. More than once it had suggested itself to me, that that hundred pounds per annum had been, after all, my brother's ruin—that he had seen himself provided for to some extent, and so relaxed the little energy which he possessed once—only a little energy, even in his best days! It had sapped his efforts to make his own way; it had rendered him idle, when idleness was the slow murder of his manhood; it had thrown in his way careless and designing men; it had rendered him independent of his home, regardless of home ties, indifferent to his future; it had led him on the wrong road from which he had thought of deviating once or twice, but never made one honest, earnest effort to escape from.

I was pitied for the *onus* of such relationship; to most men he was nothing more than an idle scamp, devoid of all right principle; the little good there was in him no one saw but me. And I could see the good dying away, alas! and had no power to effect a change.

On the Thursday evening I arranged the room for his arrival; set another decanter of sherry on the table; made a good fire in the capacious grate, drew the red curtains before the window-shutters, and waited for my brother's coming. It was striking nine by the great clock in the hall when the bell rang, and I gave my final stir to the fire. The night was cold and wet again, and he would come in damp and chilly from the streets.

The servant entered, but ushered not my brother into the room.

“If you please, Miss Casey, here's a young gal wants to see you for a moment.”

"What kind of girl?"

"A poor girl—with a letter."

"Show her in, Mary."

The servant retired—reappearing, followed by the strange weird-looking girl who had gone away with my brother three nights since. She curtsied this time as she entered, and then stood abashed by the door, turning the letter she had brought with her over and over in her hands.

The servant withdrew, and left us together.

"Take a seat, please. Have you walked hither?"

"To be sure I have."

"Will you sit down?"

"If you don't mind, Miss Casey."

Her demeanour had considerably improved; she was evidently on her guard, and was somewhat stiff and unnatural in consequence. She had learned her lesson—possibly her first lesson—in proprieties, and was quiet, decorous, and respectful. But what a wild-looking girl it was still, despite the bonnet being carefully fitted on her head, the dark hair smooth and glossy, and the face unmasked by twenty-four hours dirt. "Touched in the head" my brother had affirmed in my last interview with him—was that true or not?

"How is it that Mr. Casey has not come to-night?"

"He's—you'll see in the letter," she corrected.

"Will you sit down?" I inquired again.

She gave me the letter, and then retired to a chair in the extreme corner of the room, as far away from my observation as possible. My critical glances had disturbed her equanimity. I opened the letter, and read the following hastily-written lines:—

"DEAR BERTIE,

"Business of an important nature keeps me from fulfilling my promise this evening. Kindly send the cheque by bearer, a girl whom you may trust implicitly. Draw her out if you can, and let me know what you think of her when we meet again.

"Your affectionate brother,

"JOHN KINGSWORTH CASEY."

An epistle that explained little, and showed his old carelessness in a new light. Confident of the money having come to hand, and thinking nothing of entrusting so large an amount to this ignorant, demented girl.

"Mr. Casey tells me that he is busy," I remarked, folding up the letter.

"Yes—very busy," was the quick answer.

"Is he at home to-night?"

“No—yes.”

“Yes, you mean, I presume?”

“I said ‘yes,’” was the half-aggrieved answer.

“I will write a letter to my brother, if you’ll wait,” I said, drawing my desk towards me. She nodded her head, and sat patient and observant, taking stock of everything in the room, on the mantel-piece, on the table at which I sat—taking stock of me in particular.

I found the letter hard to write with that strange figure watching the operation; it was a difficult letter, for I had to dash my brother’s hopes down by stating that no cheque had been received, and that there was no news to communicate. I reiterated my willingness to lend him any money of which he might be in need, and concluded by expressing a hope that I should see him to-morrow, or the next day, when we might arrange together a letter for the patroness who had forgotten us so strangely.

When the letter was written and sealed, I looked at the girl again, and she immediately became interested in the ceiling.

“You’ll take care of this letter?”

“Yes—Miss,” she added, after a pause.

“Have you far to go?”

“Not very; only across—the water.”

This seemed “drawing her out” on my own account, rather than on my brother’s, and I blushed at the idea. The difficulty was to “draw her out” at all, and the way was not very clearly defined.

“Have you been long with my brother?” I ventured to inquire.

“Oh! a very long time.”

“As servant?”

“As—as anything that can be of use to him, and show him how I love him,” she ejaculated.

“Love him!—what do you mean?”

“I ain’t got any one else to love—if it hadn’t been for him I should have been put in the workus when father died. He was good to father too, and promised father to see after me—he always took my part, and I take his—always. There’s not such another man in all the world as your brother.”

“So clever?”

“I don’t know if he’s clever—what’s the good of being clever? But he’s so happy—and as for trouble, lawks! Miss Casey, he don’t care a brass farthing for trouble! He says he likes it, and shouldn’t be happy without it.”

“Do you think that he is in trouble now?”

“Not more than he gen’rally is—not so much p’raps. He’s in want of money, of course—and as the money hasn’t come, he’s a bit screwed like—that’s all. And I shan’t take any good news back—oh! lor!”

“How do you know that?”

"You haven't put no cheque in there—I've been a-watching."

"Oh!—have you?"

"And after Lady-Day the cheque comes, and he buys me a new dress out of it, and takes me to the theatre, and all that. Then he goes it, Jack does, and I sit up for him, and he comes in later and later, until all the money's gone, and then he's happy. Never afore, that I remember. Let me see, now?"

She sat and thought for awhile, then meeting my glance, became suddenly on her guard.

"Shall I take the letter?"

"If you please—if you have nothing more to say to me."

"Nothing more—I don't know that I ain't said too much already."

She rose and took the letter from the table, keeping her gaze so intently fixed on the decanter, that I took it as a hint to offer her a portion of that refreshment so temptingly displayed before her.

"Will you take a glass of wine before you go?" I asked.

"Oh! no—it gets in my head. I never take wine now!" said she. "If you don't mind, I'll try a biscuit."

A long bony hand was extended from her shawl, and several biscuits were immediately confiscated and dropped furtively into the pocket of her dress. I thought that I had detected a motive for the act, and shuddered a little.

"You—you are not in want at home?" I asked, quickly.

"Oh! no," was the prompt reply; "he never wants for nothing—he's not the man, and he's such lots of friends, you see. And they come in at all times—especially about this time of year—the sneaks! I only wish that Jack would make a clean house of some of 'em."

"Not true friends, then?"

"Not all of 'em," she cried, passionately; "they're hard to get at—even in a fine house like this, I daresay."

"Yes, very hard."

"I suppose they come after that?" pointing to the wine—"If you keep too much of it about, they're sure to come!"

I could not restrain a laugh at the irony of this girl, who spoke in good faith, and even without an acrid meaning; she had seen the ill-effects in my brother's mode of living, perhaps, and deduced her moral therefrom.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Fourteen, Miss Casey," she added again, with that odd characteristic jerk that told of her afternoon's training in civility.

"Have you been to school?"

"Not had much time—tried it on once or twice, but could not bear the giv'nesses and *their* airs. I'm an awful temper, Miss," she said, her dark eyes lighting up, "and can't bear crossing. My mother bust a vessel and killed herself—Jack says it'll happen to me some

day, if I don't keep my tempers down. As if I could, with people making game of me, and talking against *him* who has been so very kind and good to me! Oh! Miss Casey, you're proud of your brother—ain't you?”

“I was—once.”

“You ain't turned against him—have you?”

“No, that is not likely.”

“Why *once*, then?”

“When he was a boy, he was very clever for his age, and I used to fancy that he would become a great man, and be talked about.”

“They talk about him awful—I've just said so.”

“Talked about in a different sense—with respect, girl. Don't you understand me?”

“Ye—es, I think so.”

“And his cleverness did not get him on in life, as I wished and hoped.”

“Has yourn?”

“I was never clever.”

“He says you are, and he meant it when he said so too. You'd be surprised how much he's got to say of you sometimes.”

“I am glad that he does not forget me. You and he are always together then?”

“Not always. I've a room of my own—and I—I know my place.”

“That's well.”

“I think I'll go now—thankee for not being hard with me. He said you wouldn't be, but I didn't believe him. Good night—Miss.”

She dropped her best curtsy again, and then left me, more perplexed concerning her than ever.

The next morning I rose early, fraught with the instinct that Mrs. Kingsworth's letter would arrive; the first post brought in country letters, and I took my early breakfast closer to the window, in order that I might see the postman come up the broad steps of the Corkcutters' Hall. And he came, dropped the letters into the box, delivered his welcome double rap, and departed. My maid brought me in the letters, but they were all official missives, and appertained to the old clerk's business—not mine. After that fallacious hope, I gave up. Friday was an unlucky day, and the chance would never come again for Kingsworth—we should hear no more from the eccentric patroness of our family.

I waited for my brother in the evening, but he came not. Saturday the postman passed the Hall, but I was not sanguine that day—I had given up Mrs. Kingsworth then. In the evening I made sure of seeing John again, and again the hours stole on into the night, and balked me of his presence. Then I grew perplexed about him; my only brother, the only relation I possessed in the world—the man who, with all his faults, his short-comings, his reckless disre-

gard of common prudence, I loved with all my heart. His want of forethought, his very weakness, drew that heart towards him; always to me he seemed my junior, rather than my senior by six years.

Sunday morning I went to church, and fought hard to keep him from my thoughts for awhile, but he would intrude, in spite of me: what would he do now?—what *was* he doing?—*where* could he be? Sunday evening, going down the steps to church again, he came face to face with me at last.

“Bertie!—is that you?” he said.

“Yes,” I answered; “where have you been the last two days, John?”

“Busy, child, busy,” he replied. “Am I keeping you from church?”

“Will you accompany me?”

“No, thank you,” was the dry response; “I am not respectable enough, just at present. Shall I wait till you return?”

“No—I will go back with you. I am excited and troubled about you.”

We went back; I opened the door with my pass-key, and he followed me into the sitting-room, where I turned up the gas, and stirred the fire for him. Then I looked at him steadfastly, and he laughed at me for my intent inspection.

“What do you expect to see in me, Bertie?”

“I don’t know—a change, perhaps.”

“A change for the better, because Mrs. Kingsworth tightens her purse-strings—odd, that would be.”

There *was* a change in him for all that. He was more haggard, even more disreputable. Had he given way more—become more reckless with the heavy disappointment which had suddenly encountered him? It seemed so.

“There is no letter, then?” he said.

“No.”

“I give her up now,” he added, with a forced lightness that set ill upon him. “Thanks for all past favours, Mrs. K., and so farewell. The old woman was right enough to say, ‘No further with my money—it has not benefited you, and so an end to misplaced charity.’ The only remarkable thing about it is, that she should have borne with me so long.”

“What will you do now?”

“Rattle along at something or other. I’m not afraid—I don’t look afraid, I hope?”

“N—no.”

“I shall drop into a clerk’s place again, I think—I don’t know.”

“And at present—are you short of money?”

“No,” was the sharp answer; “not short—exactly.”

“I think you are—I know you are!” was my half-angry exclaima-

tion. “Why do you hold aloof from one who *can* help you, and has a right to help you, John?”

“Help me with how much?” he asked thoughtfully.

“How much will relieve you from your present embarrassments?”

“Fifty pounds.”

“It will not ruin me to lend you that sum, John.”

John Kingsworth Casey unfastened the two top buttons of his great-coat, and surveyed me dreamily. His hands, hitherto enfolded together with a nervous clutch, relaxed, and were passed through his unkempt hair; he breathed hard, and glared at me till my heart beat more rapidly with the strange incomprehensibility of his looks.

“How much money have you got in the house?” he said, with a hoarse whisper, at last.

“Twenty pounds—you can have the thirty any day after to-morrow.”

“Give me the twenty—I’ll take that—no more,” he said, fiercely. “May I drop down dead here if I’ll take more than that!—if I’d take that—only—only—where’s the drink, Bertie? I can’t stand this!”

I produced the decanter of sherry at his request, placed a glass at his side, and then hastened up-stairs into my own bed-room, where my little cash-box was kept that held my savings. I felt that I was not acting wisely, but I would not reflect upon the matter. He needed help in that hour—I was sure of it, and I alone could help him, and keep the wolf away from the door for awhile.

Down-stairs again, I stopped and held my breath with surprise—the hall-door was open, and John was going down the steps, when I darted forward and seized his arm.

“Where are you going?”

“Away from you—don’t hold a rascal’s arm, but let him go. It will be better for you and him in this world—perhaps the next.”

“Come back—you must not go away like this. It is unkind and cruel of you.”

“I don’t want any money—I’ve suddenly thought of something, Bertie.”

“Come back, then.”

“Very well—if you wish it. **Just** for a minute.”

We closed the door and went down-stairs together. He did not sit down again, but commenced that rapid perambulation up and down the room, always so irritating to a female mind. His wild demeanour had vanished, however, and he was his free, easy self again.

“Look here, Bertie—it’s all right—I don’t want money. I know a fellow who—who owes me a lot, and will pay me to-morrow—and I can get a first-rate situation on Wednesday, if I like.”

“But I have a right to help you.”

“You”—with a laugh—“will have to help yourself presently.

Remember that prophecy in the days ahead of you, and then thank your lucky stars that a vagabond brother was too proud to touch your money. Too proud, by all that's holy on earth, and that's not much to swear by—*franged* if it be!”

He looked at me, anticipating a laugh at this morbid pleasantry, but my face was grave enough, and made his grave.

“Well, the truth is, I'll keep my word for once in my life. I swore—on the Bible—” he added with a shudder, “that you alone of all the world should not be preyed upon, or sponged upon, by me. I swore it to mother on the night she died—when you were down-stairs for a moment. She died all the happier for it, I think; and you—you must help me to keep my word, just for once in my life to keep my word, Bertie—will you?”

He entreated me like a child—weak to resist temptation—and I pressed him no further.”

“Yes, I will help you to keep your word, John.”

“So, if you have brought the money down-stairs, hide it from my sight, please. I shall be all the better and more rational for its absence. By Heaven! I am a hero to-night!” he exclaimed, tilting the sherry with a dash into his glass, and on to my best cloth table-cover—oh! dear! “and here's success in life to the heroics.”

“John, dear, what led you wrong in life?” I asked, leaning my hands upon his arm; “what took you first away from the good, generous thoughts that have not yet, even yet, wholly deserted you?”

“Oh! yes they have. You don't know what a scamp I am,” he said, curtly; “pure inclination for evil led me wrong—still keeps me going down to Pandemonium, steadily and easily. Temptation never beset me—I went quietly forth to meet it—I found it and—*sank*! Shall I pour you out a glass of sherry, Bertie?”

“No!—no! This is horrid!”

“Not horrid,” he said, intentionally mistaking my meaning; “only a little flat, through being decanted last Thursday. Tidy sherry in its way, though—Em told me about it, and *how nice* it looked. And by-the-way, that reminds me of a favour you can do me, Bertie.”

“What is it?”

“Take that girl away from me, as you would take her away from the devil, into whose clutches she has fallen.”

“Take her away!—what can I do?”

“She's an ignorant, wilful girl—foolish enough you may guess, to look upon *me* as her friend—a bad temper, intractable and fierce, but with a big heart, to be worked upon by a clever woman like yourself. I am tired of her—I can't afford to keep a servant any longer—she's growing too old, and should advance in life, and find a better place than mine. Besides—you, a woman of the world, know how people talk, and spare no one in their criticisms. Will you help her, or shall I send her to the workhouse?”

"I will help her, if it lies in my power; but I must think of the best method."

"I am afraid that there is but little time for thinking—I am heartily tired of the girl, and her wearisome ways, and—would foist her upon you like a generous man as I am. I——"

He paused, for there came a tap at the panels of the door, followed by the hasty appearance of my maid.

"Oh! if you please, Miss, here's a female won't go away in the hall—won't state her business, or anything."

"I have heard no bell ring—no summons at the door."

"Oh! if you please, Miss, I was at the door, just for a moment at the door, to see if the stars were a-shining or not, when she flounced in."

"Em!" ejaculated my brother; "confound that girl!--she's an unbearable nuisance, after all!"

The door opened, and the intruder, *sans cérémonie*, entered my apartments.

Not "Em," but a tall, thin, sallow-faced woman, with a walking-stick—a woman whom neither I nor John had seen before.

"You are Bertha Casey, I presume—I am Charlotte Kingsworth," she said; "now let me sit down and rest awhile."



CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN OF THE WORLD.

MRS. KINGSWORTH, our eccentric patroness, a woman who had held aloof from us through life, and yet been more than generous to our family, very slowly and steadily relapsed into a seat by the table, crossed her hands upon her gold-headed walking-stick, and proceeded to compose herself after her long journey.

She took a long time to compose herself, or to deliberate upon her best method of procedure; when I opened my lips to speak she detected the movement, and said somewhat sharply,

"Don't speak to me, please, just yet. When I am inclined for conversation, I will trouble you!"

So we relapsed into position stolidly and silently; I took the seat my brother had vacated, and my brother, discomfited and almost

sheepish, stood with his elbow on the mantel-piece, looking down at the fire-light. I had leisure to observe Mrs. Kingsworth, and being of a curious turn of mind, and having recovered the degree of nerve which had been seriously distracted by so sudden a raid upon my office quarters, I took the liberty of surveying my family patroness.

A very tall thin lady, looking more thin and angular for the absence of all under-skirts to her dress; clad in a black silk that had seen long service before its advent in the Corkcutters' Hall, and her head adorned by a plain straw bonnet crossed with a black silk ribbon. Her gloves were faultless at least, and fitted tightly the thin hands of their owner—but her boots were double soled sensible boots, admirably adapted for pedestrian exercise, or kicking an obtrusive enemy out of her path. And her face, at which I glanced more than once, and which attracted me despite myself—what a sallow, sharp-featured, keen face it was!—lit up by glittering grey eyes, that gave me the unpleasant sensation of being looked “through and through.” It struck me long before the silence was broken that Mrs. Kingsworth did not require time so much for self-composure, as for taking stock of my brother and me in *her* turn. She wished to become used to *our* faces before she began that explanation of her presence there; to judge us, possibly to steel herself against us. Hers was an uncomfortable face in its immobility; looking at the many lines thereon, the compression of the thin lips, the sharpness of her long straight nose, the air of sternness even gravity, which I felt was natural to her face rather than put on for the occasion, suggested to me a woman who had suffered much in life, and who, in contending against suffering, had hardened in the process.

She nodded her head towards me at last, by way of permission conceded to disturb the silence that had reigned in our midst.

“You are Mrs. Kingsworth?”

“I have told you so,” was the grave answer.

“I am pleased to see you, madam, for the first time—to be enabled personally to thank you for all past kindnesses to our family.”

“You are grateful, then?” she asked, quietly.

“Yes—very grateful.”

“Gratitude is a rare virtue, which it is difficult to foster in a heart so young as yours.”

“Why, madam? I do not understand.”

“Youth is selfish, spasmodic, quick to receive an impression, quick to erase one. Besides, I am not aware that *you* are indebted to me for any act of kindness or consideration.”

“No, madam; directly, perhaps, I have received no favour at your hands.”

“Are you waiting for one?”

I felt my cheeks crimson at this, and replied somewhat hastily,

“No, Mrs. Kingsworth. Neither waiting nor wishing.”

"You are a sharp woman," she said, steadfastly regarding me. "I have always understood that in you were all the virtues under heaven. A model heroine, to grow strong in time of trouble, and turn the left cheek to the smiter when struck upon the right."

"A character which I deserved not, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"I had it from your mother—a truthful woman in my time."

"Always, madam—always."

"And yet you endorse not her flattering opinion—well, mothers are blind to the foibles of their offspring, and see the common every-day virtues through magnifying—or distorting—glasses. What did your weak-minded mother think of *him*?"

She pointed with her stick at my brother, who moved a little uneasily at finding himself the leading subject of discourse, and even ventured to glance furtively in her direction.

"You may look me full in the face, John Kingsworth—I am not ashamed of my appearance yet."

"I—no—indeed, madam!" stammered John, as though that last assertion were matter of the deepest astonishment to him.

"Coming hither to-night, I certainly did not anticipate the honour of an interview with my godson, but I am glad to have the opportunity offered me of making his acquaintance. He has been often in my thoughts—I have heard a great deal of him in my time—I have not been neglectful of his advancement in life—I have done my best so far as money was concerned, to make a gentleman and a scholar of him."

"You have been more kind to me than I deserved, madam," said John, in a low tone.

"Humble, like your sister, I see—bowed down by the extent of my kindness, of course—ever my obliged and faithful servant, as those who wish me in my grave are in the habit of writing at times. Well, Kingsworth, you do my kindness credit."

"I wish I did!" he burst forth in more natural tones.

"You realize my expectations, for they were not raised too high, by any means," she said, very coldly, I may almost add very cruelly. "I am a woman of the world, and I have gathered together much store of worldly wisdom. It has been a comfort to me in my old age, and kept me from giving way more than once. It has preserved me, thank heaven, from becoming weak and childish. Have you any objection to sit down?"

"N—no, madam. I was bidding my sister good night when you arrived."

"Sit down, then, if your engagements for this evening will allow you."

She motioned him to a seat with a haughty gesture of her hand, and then bent her looks towards him again. She forgot me in her greater interest in him who bore her name.

"I am going to sketch a little picture, as briefly as I can. Will you bear with my prolixity?"

John Kingsworth roughened his hair the wrong way, coughed, and writhed uneasily. He would try to bear it, was implied by his demeanour.

“Your mother came of a good family, and married into a bad one. That is the fate of many of us, and not to be wondered at in this instance. Your father was an adventurer—keep your scat, Miss Casey, and learn to hear the truth, whatever it may be—he married your mother for money, spent her money like a gentleman, worried her old before her time, and then died, much to his annoyance, I have heard. After his death your mother fought a hard battle, till she obtained this situation. The last time your mother and I met was at the christening of your estimable self, sir; and then came oblivion, until trouble woke her up to a sense of friendliness again.”

“My mother—” I began.

“Patience, Miss Casey; I bore your mother no malice—she had many reasons for dropping my acquaintance; I should not have cared to continue hers. I was not surprised at her long silence, and I was not surprised in later days at a sudden letter from her. In all my life, after thoroughly understanding the strange nature of this world, the ways and doings of its worldlings have failed to surprise me. There is nothing on earth—or under it, I might say—which could surprise me now! I am prepared for any extravagance of conduct in anybody I love, hate, or am acquainted with. Therefore, my path of life is smooth and straight enough, and I meet with no perplexities, *en route*.”

There was nothing to reply to this egotistical assertion, uttered in good faith, and yet scarcely to be believed. She was cold, cutting, and hard enough, and it was just possible to imagine her the statue she asserted herself to have become.

“Your mother was poor, and I was a widow, with few claims upon the wealth my husband had bequeathed me. I had no call for money—it was rusting at my banker’s—I knew that it would be scattered broadcast by the harpies to whose share it would eventually fall—I had no reason to study anybody in the world, and I sent her a hundred pounds to relieve her embarrassments, and told her that every Lady-Day a cheque for the same amount should be sent for *your* education,” suddenly turning to my brother, “for your advancement in any station of life it might please you to pursue. I believe that I kept my word.”

“Thank you—yes.”

“I am not surprised that the money did you more harm than good—that you followed in your father’s steps, and became reckless, improvident, and false—I had made no bargain with you, and you were free to march on to perdition if it suited your tastes.”

She said it very bitterly, and John Kingsworth shrank at her words—covered even away from them, and turned his face towards the fire again.

"You are here to-night more out of anxiety for the money which I did not send this year, than in concern for a sister left a lonely woman in this house. Is that true?"

"Yes—quite true," he murmured.

"Scarcely—" I began, when Mrs. Kingsworth interrupted me.

"You have a most unpleasant habit of intruding your opinions upon those who do not solicit them, Miss Casey. Surely your brother is old enough to speak for himself."

"She is a good woman, Mrs. Kingsworth, who would take the part of a vagabond brother—spare her your satire, if you please."

It was the first time—the very first time in all his life—that I had heard him speak boldly—speak up for me! I was glad that he had not sat there cowering from her cold invectives all the while, and that there was some evidence of "spirit" in him.

"Time enough to speak to her," responded Mrs. Kingsworth, "when my business is done with *you*, Sir, and you have gone back to that world in which you are more at your ease. Shall I tell you why I did not send the money this year?"

"I'm all attention," murmured my brother, relapsing into his old manner, and becoming even more troubled by her presence there.

"I have found a new object more worthy of my thoughts and—my money. My brother, who was supposed to have died in India long since, has returned to England. A remarkable leap into life again, but my nerves were steeled against remarkable events, and I shook hands with him as though we had met yesterday instead of two score years ago. There had never been much love between us, and his coming back, ugly and cadaverous, was not likely to revive it. His daughter came with him, and will inherit all my money—she is the object of that worthier interest to which I have alluded. If she had not come back, you would have inherited a portion of my fortune—so remember my niece in your prayers from this time forth."

"Ye—es, ma'am."

"From this time forth careful with my money for her sake—you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"You are prepared to put up with the loss of a hundred pounds per annum?"

"I shall not fret myself to death at its withdrawal," said my brother. "I shall miss the money for a time—presently I hope that I shall not feel its loss."

"What scheme of aggrandizement are you fostering now?"

"Oh! I have not thought of any particular scheme yet awhile, Mrs. Kingsworth. Luck will not desert me—it will come."

"Sanguine and easy—well, for your own sake, and by your own efforts, I hope it will. I wish no harm to you. Are you going now?"

"Yes—I think I will," he answered, rising from his chair.

"You have nothing more to say?"

"I—I don't know that I have. I—I haven't said much to the point at all."

"Women, who are naturally loquacious, monopolize the lion's share of conversation."

"I will say," he added, with a second spasm of new energy, "that you have been more kind to me than I ever deserved—and that I have *not* been grateful for it, or done my best with the money you were good enough to send me annually. In fact, Mrs. Kingsworth, I have been a scamp—trying once or twice to become less scampish, and failing miserably from want of knowledge, want of courage, even want of principle! Fairly a man who deserves no helping—who does not care to help himself, and is—so they tell me, my way—his greatest enemy. Let me thank you for all past favours, and bid you, very respectfully, a good evening."

He looked towards me, and said in a different tone: "Good night, Bertie," then walked across the room towards the door.

"Stay—will you, Sir?" she demanded very sharply.

My brother came to a full stop. Mrs. Kingsworth turned to me.

"Now tell me plainly and honestly how much this man owes you—or has mulcted you of during his vain and profitless life?"

"Nothing, madam."

"He has borrowed no money of you!—he has never forestalled his income?" she asked.

"You are *surprised*, madam," I said, not without a little exultation at confuting her former assertion.

"No," she responded, coldly, "only interested in your brother's inconsistency."

How pleased I felt that John had not taken the money which I had proffered him at an earlier hour that evening.

"I told you that I had outlived amazement," she added, almost fiercely. "If you knew me better, you would believe me, Miss Casey. I am no boaster, and I never tell an untruth, therefore you need not have betrayed such genuine satisfaction at having—as you fancied—caught me tripping."

Having thus rebuked me, she turned to my brother, and drew forth from between the palm of her glove and her hand a strip of pink paper.

"There is your cheque for a hundred pounds, Sir—now take yourself away. I am very tired of you—very!"

I had had a vain thought—a vain hope—that John would have refused the gift, and shown himself above her charity, which stung whilst it bestowed; but my brother was far removed from heroism, and money was an object to him then.

"Really—really, Mrs. Kingsworth," he stammered, "I did not expect this after—your explanation. I—I am very much obliged to you—thank you, madam—thank you very much."

He was the cringing fawner on the bounteous giver after that—

money had not ennobled him, but robbed him of all honest sense of self-support—he was the brother I had ever known, then! Mrs. Kingsworth folded her gloved hands upon her walking-stick again, and said :

“ Good evening, Kingsworth. Please go now—I have already told you that you weary me.”

Kingsworth bowed and retired. After a hurried excuse to Mrs. Kingsworth for my absence, I followed my brother to the street-door. He was anxious to escape from the house, and his nervous hands were already fumbling with the locks.

“ Good night, Bertie, old girl,” he said again ; “ I’m off in a hurry now—it must be getting very late—curse these two locks, I shall never understand them !”

“ Going away for another twelvemonth, John ? ” I said, half-reproachfully.

“ Not so long as that, I hope. Perhaps not twelve days—why should I fly from my best friends to my worst, because the money turns up again—no, I will not !”

“ Keep your word, John.”

“ Trust me. And you—yours,” he added, suddenly and earnestly.

“ Mine ? ”

“ To take care of Em—the girl whom you know that I want to get rid of, and who is a nuisance to me, and hampers me terribly. We’ll talk of it another time—good night !—good night !”

On the steps he paused again to kiss me.

“ She’s an odd fish, Mrs. K.,” he said laughing—what a good temper he was in now !—“ the queerest old file out, I should say. A good sort, very likely—but, whew !—what a stinger. Upon my soul, Bertie, I wouldn’t have stopped half an hour longer for a cheque double the amount. Let her have her own way till she goes.”

He went away at a brisk step ; I shut the door after him, and became aware for the first time of a small black travelling bag behind the door. I took it up in my hand, and returned with it to the sitting-room. Mrs. Kingsworth had changed her position, placed her gold-headed cane on the table, moved her chair to the fire, taken off her bonnet and shawl, and was sitting with her feet on the fender, quite at home and at her ease. A strange figure to see in my parlour, so seldom troubled by visitors—a stranger and colder-looking woman now, with her grey hair pushed behind her ears, in which were glittering—first evidence of her wealth—two diamond ear-drops of an old-fashioned pattern.

“ This is your bag, Mrs. Kingsworth ? ”

“ Yes—is it not safe where I left it ? ”

“ Safe enough, I believe, but——”

“ Never mind—put it by the side of my bonnet, Miss Casey, and then favour me by a glass of sherry, and do all the honours of your inhospitable domicile.”

"I beg your pardon," I hastened to say.

"Perhaps I am too severe upon you—I beg *your* pardon. Thank you, Miss Casey," she said, taking the wine I proffered her; "I am a little exhausted with my journey."

"You have travelled from Peterborough to-day, then?"

"Yes—I am not particular upon what day I travel. My boxes will not reach till the morning, however."

"Your—your boxes, madam!"

"I shall stay a month with you at least—did you think that I had taken a return ticket, and was going back by the night mail?" she asked.

"N—no, madam."

"Put some more coals upon the fire, then, and sit there facing me, and let us talk a little more of the future in store for you and me. The nights are very cold still."

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

It took some time to recover from Mrs. Kingsworth's final announcement; my brother was gone, and my reasoning powers inextricably confused. Mrs. Kingsworth to stay a month with me!—to deliver that announcement as a matter of course, to drop as from cloud-land upon my solitary home, and take her place by my fire-side, unsolicited, unwanted!

She had been my mother's friend; she was my brother's god-mother; she had spent much money on our family; an interest in the Caseys and their pursuits had possibly brought her a long journey; I could not tell her that she was unwelcome to my house, and that her pride, harshness, and bitterness, had only turned my heart against her.

Mrs. Kingsworth sipped her sherry for awhile in silence, then she focussed me with her piercing eyes again.

"Your brother Kingsworth must be a great trial to you, Miss Casey."

"I am sorry that he has no fixed pursuit——"

"Or legitimate occupation, exactly," she concluded; "it *must* be a trial—worse than knowing that he was dead."

"Oh! no."

"I would rather have a brother in his coffin than a brother like your own, were I a young woman with the world before me."

"My little world is not distressed by him, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"It will be," she answered; "as the time rolls on, and he goes further and further down the hill, the troubles which go with him must be shared by *you*."

"I will try and bear them."

"You are a fearless woman."

She looked dreamily at the fire, and, for several minutes, was lost in thought. Suddenly she turned to me again.

"You do not suppose that an old woman like me has travelled a hundred miles to pay your brother a hundred pounds?"

"No, madam."

"I have other motives—shall I tell you them now, or leave them till we are better acquainted with each other?"

"That must rest entirely upon your pleasure. You have had a long journey."

"I am not tired," she interrupted; "nothing tires me. I am a late riser, and I go to bed late as a rule. But do not let me force my idiosyncrasies upon you; that would be scarcely fair in a—guest."

"It is not very late yet."

"No."

"Let me see," she said, thoughtfully, "you were eighteen years of age last month, I think?"

"Yes, madam, eighteen," I replied, somewhat surprised at the accuracy of my companion's memory.

"Do you admire this situation of yours?"

"I have grown accustomed to it, of course."

"That is a different thing to admiring it. We women, shut up in our own hearts, grow accustomed, or learn to endure—which is it?—strange things at times. They pay you well here?"

"Yes—very well."

"You are a good English scholar?"

"Not very good, I fear."

"You are a modest woman, at least—a steady young woman, I believe—a calm, staid, thoughtful kind of woman, as befits your office and Bertha Casey's daughter. So much the better."

What did Mrs. Kingsworth want with me?—why speak of me with an interest that was new in her until that moment?

"I am an old woman, hard, and cold, and callous—possessing a sharp tongue, some people think, and difficult to please, all people fancy. Only fancy, of course," she said with that unpleasant acerbity of speech which had already sensibly irritated me, "the fancy

of people who never try to please me, and so are astonished out of the few senses they possess with my apathy at their indifference. Now, would you prefer a housekeeper's place in this dreary monument of city pomp, or life with me at Wilthorpe?"

The proposition took away my breath once more—I was always losing my breath that night—Mrs. Kingsworth's suggestions or eccentricities were so suddenly fired off at me.

"With—with you, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"Yes—think it over, and let me know in five minutes."

I could have let her know in half the time, but felt a reluctance to appear churlish and ungrateful.

"The proposal comes so suddenly, and I am so unprepared for it, that you must give me a day or two to consider, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"You know already," was the quick response.

I felt myself colouring at this; the blank expression of my countenance had not been lost upon the old lady before me.

"There is as intense an expression of subdued delight at my proposal as though I had offered you a matronship at a mad-house—well, you are young and impressionable—I am old and querulous—all this is natural enough!"

"I—I would rather not give an answer just at present."

"Take your time—I have not explained my motives yet, and you, with a woman's quickness, have jumped at a misinterpretation of them. Understand me, in the first place, that your company would be of no service to me, brighten not one half-hour of mine, or chase away, even for an instant, those long weary trains of thoughts which weigh me down for ever. Your youth and my age are incompatible—I have said so before, but you were not paying much attention."

"What is required of me?" I asked, with some curiosity.

"Guardianship!"

"Of—of your brother's child, I presume?" I said, remembering her remarks before John had taken his departure.

"Yes—you *are* very sharp," said Mrs. Kingsworth, in almost an admiring manner. "Even such a place as this has not made you sleepy. In a different sphere you would become a very different woman. Miss Casey, you have guessed at the truth—I want you to take care of my niece."

"A responsible task, for which I should be wholly unfitted, I am sure."

"Do not be sure of anything in this world," commented Mrs. Kingsworth. "A more uncertain and vexatious world is not to be found in space. Now, my niece, the heiress to my estates and earthly possessions, finds Wilthorpe scarcely to her taste, the mistress of it still less so. And I find my niece—I find her at fifteen years of age—"

She stopped for a suitable expression, and failed in finding it. I waited patiently, but the sentence was never completed, and what

Mrs. Kingsworth failed to discover was only guessed at by her subsequent discourse.

"A large house with no life in it, to a girl full of life, is naturally depressing—and a girl full of life is too great a trouble for me—even for her finishing governess, her father, and all who may be interested in her. A girl with some fine traits of character, but impulsive, wilful, rude, and passionate—what vulgar people term a 'limb,' in fact."

"How strange!"

"On the contrary, the most natural thing in the world."

But it was strange to me; in Wilthorpe or at the Corkcutters' Hall, there would be "a limb" to encounter. Only a little while ago my brother John was speaking of the girl he called "Em;" of her wilfulness and bad tempers, and how I might subdue and mould her character anew—and here was Mrs. Kingsworth sketching in her niece what seemed to me a high order of the same class of ill-regulated girlhood.

"I dislike unnecessary trouble," continued Mrs. Kingsworth; "I have objected to it all my life. The trouble which has brought me hither I have considered necessary, for I never adopt a change upon the strength of an idea. My idea has always been that you were a steady, cool, unimpressible, shrewd woman, but I have come to London to make sure that that idea, based partly on your mother's rambling letters to me, was not incorrect."

"You have judged rather hastily, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"My first impression never deceives me," was the egotistical reply to this; "and I am satisfied—perfectly satisfied—that you are the very person to take care of Isabel. Call yourself friend, companion, anything you like, but understand that you will be Isabel's guardian, nothing more or less than that. Your salary will be equal to that which you receive here; when I die, or when Isabel marries, the same amount will be yours for life, wherever you choose to go; but if you leave Wilthorpe before those *accidents* occur, then you will not expect any consideration on my part towards you. You——"

"Pardon me, Mrs. Kingsworth, but I have not yet agreed to accept so responsible a post—its nature is very different from the one I occupy—the change is startling, and I scarcely comprehend anything save that I should disappoint you and be of little service."

"You will return with me to Wilthorpe!" said Mrs. Kingsworth, decisively.

"No—I think not."

"I say 'Yes'—I am always right—I am sure that you will give up this place. Why, I have made up my mind, and your refusal would almost—I say almost—*surprise* me!"

"I would not have you build——" I began, when she checked me by that quick characteristic flash of her grey eyes, always demanding and exacting silence, as it were.

"There will be time enough to think of this," she said; "we will dismiss the subject for a day or two. Think that I wish it when the subject intrudes upon your mind, that I was your mother's friend, and was always—after my own unsympathetic fashion—your brother's friend and yours. The obligation must not be all on one side—remember that!"

She rose, went to the table, took up her bonnet and shawl, travelling-bag and stick, and prepared to depart without further ceremony.

"You will have supper after your long journey, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"I never take suppers. Where is your maid?—what room shall she show me into?—have you thought about me at all?"

I had not thought of the sleeping accommodation which the Corkcutters' Hall afforded, for the reason that I was unprepared for Mrs. Kingsworth's intention of spending a few weeks with me until half an hour since. I did not explain this to Mrs. Kingsworth, but made the best of the unlooked-for circumstances.

"Let me show you to your room, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

She nodded her head by way of consent to that arrangement, and I led her up-stairs to my own apartment.

"Your room," she said, after a quick glance round her! "I am putting you out, I think?"

"Oh! no," I answered, "pray don't think that."

"Good night, then—come up-stairs softly, for I am a light sleeper, and if once disturbed, rest no more. Bear that in mind, Miss Casey, please."

"I will do so. Good night."

I slept that night in the spare room adjoining Mrs. Kingsworth, or, to speak more correctly, I tried to sleep, for the sudden break upon the even tenor of my way had disturbed my composure, not a little. The patroness was restless also; the walls were thin between us, and I could hear her talking strangely to herself, or muttering in her sleep—I knew not which.

CHAPTER V.

A LITTLE MYSTERY.

Mrs. KINGSWORTH'S boxes arrived the next day; it was a stern truth that the patroness of the Cascy family intended to remain with me some time. Evidently she was a woman of little consideration for other people's domestic arrangements, and did not stand upon the order of her—coming.

I made the best of it, and uttered no complaint; for many years my mother and brother had been indebted to her, and I felt that I could bear with her for a few weeks—and should even understand her better at their termination. Mrs. Kingsworth settled down, then—was not put out by my own ideas of housekeeping; even when I apologized for the homeliness of my table, she shrugged her shoulders, and satirized me for my humility. Making the best of it did not put me completely at my ease; she was so watchful a woman and I knew that she was studying me, and every trait of my character.

I was not anxious to please, to make any display, to appear the lady that I was not in her eyes; I remained, to all intents and purposes, my old self, and she was at liberty to like or dislike me—to repeat the offer made on her first advent, or by her reserve to imply that she had tacitly withdrawn it.

I thought that she had withdrawn it, she maintained for the first week so rigid a silence. On the night the offer was made I had only considered the disadvantages of life with Mrs. Kingsworth; woman-like, her new indifference now led me to reflect more seriously upon the offer which I had treated lightly.

Life in the country—to which I had looked forward in the days of “old maidism,” when I had saved more money, and been pensioned by the Honourable Corporation of Corkentters, for instance—offered me at once! Life in the country which I loved for its very unapproachableness, free air and sunshine, in exchange for the close, stifling City lanes! Again, there was to be considered the dullness of my housekeeping life—what could be more dull and objectless than to be shut up in that great mansion year after year, knowing no change, making no friends, beginning my poor mother's life at sixteen years of age, and almost old-fashioned two years afterwards.

This was still life; Peterborough way, would present its life of action. A girl three years my junior for companion,

eventually for friend; a country life, a good position, a fair income, an assured pension for life, and—Mrs. Kingsworth! The last item in the bargain did not scare me after a week's study of her in my own way; in a week I knew her better, and could see the glitter of some virtues through the hard case of her egotistical reserve.

She was my example of what a woman might become by isolation, want of sympathy, and absence from society. A proud, austere woman, whose heart had narrowed in its isolation; who had been charitable—a generous giver—a woman anxious to do good. Who had been misunderstood, and whose eccentric coldness had turned too-sensitive people away from her. In a word an unhappy woman—and that unhappiness too visibly expressed in her demeanour, turned my heart towards her before the week was out. She had been a different woman once; my mother had spoken of her in old times as a woman to be loved; marriage had changed her as well as my mother, and I knew—though she thought I was ignorant of the fact—that her choice had not been a wiser, better one than the friend against whom she railed. She had been simply a stronger woman, and resisted more—what her trials had been before her husband died, she knew, and she alone.

I became used to her. After a while even her acerbity was pleasant—it varied the monotony, and kept me brisk and sparkling. Her moods were somewhat variable, I discovered; there were silent moods, and there were loquacious and satirical ones. In the latter she had presented herself at the Corkenters' Hall, and somewhat dismayed me for a beginning; in the former, she awoke my interest, for her silence became deep and intense enough to alarm me. She could pass in an instant to a world of her own, and became so rigid and statuesque over it, that my voice, and even touch, would fail to rouse her. Before or since her time I have never seen one think so deeply, so utterly submerge herself away from the present. It was a waking trance and made me nervous.

At the end of the week—on a Sunday evening, after my return from church, to which she had declined to accompany me, “she was not always fond of church,” she said, irreverently—I found her sitting in the one easy chair by the fire, twirling a three-cornered letter in her hand.

“I have had a visitor during your absence, Miss Casey,” she said; “she would not wait for an answer. I think she must have been frightened at so old and grim a housekeeper.”

“Did she say from whom she came?”

“Mr. Casey.”

“It was Em, then.”

“Is Em a wild-eyed girl in a grey merino?—a girl whose quiet attire is strangely at variance with her looks?”

Grey merino!—quiet attire! Em had come dressed for company,

then, and John Kingsworth Casey had not forgotten her when his cheque was cashed.

"Wild-eyed, perhaps—large black eyes at any rate."

"The same, I should think. You might save time by reading the letter, however."

She passed the letter to me, and I hastily broke the seal.

"Oh! dear, what shall I do now?" I exclaimed; "read this, please."

A hurried letter, that had been scarcely decipherable to my eyes—that Mrs. Kingsworth, after inspecting at full length with one eye shut, and the other behind a large gold-rimmed glass, gave up in despair, and passed back to me.

"Incomprehensible hieroglyphics to me—will you attempt their interpretation?"

I read aloud—

"DEAR BERTIE,

"Detain the bearer. By any kindness, coaxing, or severity, keep her a prisoner in your house to-night, and break to her by degrees the tidings that I have left England. I shall be absent nine months; when I return I will call upon you at the Hall, and see her and you. I have spared myself the pain of a scene by thus eluding her. I rely upon you to take care of her, make a good servant of her, bearing with her as a help for my sake. At all events, in some way or other you can do her more service than

"Your fugitive brother,

"JOHN KINGSWORTH CASEY."

"Is that all?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes."

"A mild request, charming by its naiveté—a cool Casey-like epistle," she said; "do you understand it?"

"Yes. This girl he took pity upon after her father's death, I believe; he made her his servant, and saved her from the workhouse. He is too young, and she has become too old to wait upon him in his bachelor quarters—more than once he has asked me to find a place for her here, or anywhere away from him."

"I don't believe all this—do you?"

"Yes—why should I doubt him?"

"Because he is weak, false, and cloudy; fond of shabby little mysteries—concealing from you his mode of life—his style of home—the nature of his pursuits. Fond of these, or ashamed of them, it is difficult to say."

"Meanwhile, this girl whom he leaves in charge to me——"

"Well?"

"She will go home, find that he has deserted her—leave her, at her age, adrift on the streets."

"She will have her cue, doubtless—she will return hither."

"But if she keep away?"

"So much the better for you—one way or another, I see nothing to be surprised at in all this."

I was not alone surprised—I was excited. Only a week ago I had promised to take care of this girl—appreciated, as I thought, the motive which led him to a separation from her. And now the chance had perhaps passed away for ever.

"If I only knew his address, I could find my charge."

"Your charge!—you forget Wilthorpe, girl!"

"I have promised nothing—I have said nothing—I must see after this girl, standing alone in a dangerous world."

"You feel for her loneliness—for a girl unknown to you—*merely friendless and adrift.*"

"Yes. Why should I not?"

She did not reply; she rose and took her stick from its accustomed place by the chimney corner.

"Let us go in search of her, Miss Casey."

"Search for her in London!—you do not know the extent and bewilderment of these streets, madam."

"Oh! yes, I do," she said, quietly; "long before your wonderful self made an appearance in the world!"

"But the address?"

"The address of your brother is 34, Whiffen Street, Spitalfields. Shall we adjourn thither?"

"You know—you know where he lives?"

"I can make a shrewd guess, you see. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Ask Mary for my bonnet and shawl, then—I will accompany you."

"Had I not better go alone?"

"No—I am a woman of the world, and can take care of you. Now, Donna Quixote—to the rescue!"

CHAPTER VI.

WHIFFEN STREET, SPITALFIELDS.

ALTHOUGH I objected to Sunday travelling, we took a cab as far as Whiffen Street, Spitalfields. Haste was one reason, reluctance to expose Mrs. Kingsworth to the fatigue of a long journey, another. My knowledge of the City "without" extended only to the Shoreditch end of Bishopsgate Street. After the first divergence I was lost. Bumping and jolting down Union Street, Spitalfields, and making our way past the noble church, at the extremity thereof; taking the left road at the side of the church, and becoming after awhile submerged, cabman and all; time spent in searching for an intelligent aborigine; more information at last elucidated, and Whiffen Street finally discovered.

We drew up at No. 34, and I assisted Mrs. Kingsworth from the cab.

"Wait, please," she said to the cabman, and then looked up and down the street. A low-class street it was, even for a poor neighbourhood, and alive with noise, as such streets always are. Tall, gaunt houses on each side of the way, the upper stories, in many instances, a series of window-sashes, perched like dirty conservatories in mid-air. There were lights up there, and work going on in some instances in those grim forcing houses, where life is forced away—by hard competition and harder prices—at the weavers' looms. Children ran about the streets even at that late hour, or sat huddled together in the doorways, covering from the cold, and waiting for father and mother to come home; the sallow, pinched faces of hard-workers gleamed from many open doors at the strange visitation of a cab on a Sunday night in that locality; men and women extra curious, the former with short pipes in their mouths, lounged towards us to participate in the last sensation, Spitalfield's way!

"It's Loose-fish back agin, for tuppence!" yelled a diminutive boy in indifferent corduroys.

"No, it isn't," growled a deeper and huskier voice, "it's Loose-fish's mother come to supper with him."

Mrs. Kingsworth pressed my arm with the hand which she had laid upon it.

"He has gone, then," she said; "they mean him."

"Yes," I murmured.

We knocked at the door, with the motley group still interested in our proceedings. Had we been detective officers, a greater interest could not have been evinced in us.

A short, stout woman, with her cap awry, opened the door to our second summons—the first having proved a failure.

"We can understand one knock, two knocks, three knocks, four knocks in this 'ouse, marms," she said immediately, "but not worritings of knockers which brings us all out of our rooms at once and leads to rumpuses. What is it?"

"Mr. Casey—is he—" I began.

"Gone away to-night by train to Gravesend—at least he says so. He says a might of things that no one believes in, so it mayn't be true," said this voluble female; "at all events he's gone."

"And—his servant—Em, I think she is called," I said eagerly.

"Won't believe it, though every scrap of luggage has gone too—and though I've told her now the room is given up, she can't stay here after to-morrow morning. He took 'em on a Monday afore twelve o'clock, and he and all belonging to him, with their airs or no airs, will have to take themselves out of my house by that time precisely, or I'll have the law against them!"

"You are the landlady of this house?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes—I are."

"Show us to Mr. Casey's room, then, if you please. We are pressed for time."

Mrs. Kingsworth's decisive tones exercised their due effect upon the landlady, who, after one stare at the speaker, backed a little to admit us into the narrow passage.

"I don't mind showing you," she said, half a degree less irascibly, "though it's not my place by no means, marm. It's up here, please," she added, leading the way up a dirty and dilapidated staircase; "here it's been some years now, as you know."

"Has he paid his rent?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth.

"It wouldn't have been here some weeks, if he hadn't. Now and then he ran back horful, but he fetched up somehow. He was a trying lodger, and a worsor man for losing latch-keys, Gord knows—I don't. And to go a-moving away bag and baggage, all of a sudden, on a Sabbath night, the heathen—that *was* trying."

She continued to mount, discoursing volubly the while, and we to follow her. Mrs. Kingsworth's breath appeared to last longer than mine, for my heart was tightening unpleasantly when we reached the third landing-stage, and came to a full stop.

"This is the room—will you have the candle?—I don't suppose she's got a light."

"In the dark, then?"

"She flung it at me—brass candlestick and all, and said I was a liar for telling her that Casey had gone off without her. He managed well—he was mighty sick of this forward, wicked gal of his."

"Wicked!—who says so?" I asked.

"Who don't say so, marm," rejoined the landlady; "who can help it, I should like to know?"

"Leave us," said Mrs. Kingsworth imperiously, and the woman, on whom Mrs. Kingsworth's manner had made an impression, took her departure, leaving the candlestick with me.

We knocked, and receiving no response, turned the handle of the door and entered. The scene was striking enough—even touching. The room was bare and unfurnished, save a bed rolled up in one corner of the room, and a rickety wash-stand, which began rocking with the vibration of our steps. On the floor, full-length like a dead woman, lay the girl I had twice seen, her face downwards, resting on one bent arm. Her bonnet and shawl lay on the floor some distance from her, and a mass of raven hair, which a duchess might have envied, was streaming over her shoulders, and on the bare boards whereon she had flung herself.

It was a picture of a desolate home, a desolate heart. I see it now at times, and feel still the creeping horror that stole upon me as the thought that we might be standing in the presence of the dead checked the throbbing at my heart. The light glimmered faintly in my hand, and the pattern of the blindless window was thrown upon the shadowy floor from the gas light in the weaver's work-shop opposite. Mrs. Kingsworth was a woman of strong nerve; her coolness amazed me in this instance; after all, was she a woman whom nothing affected or surprised, as she had boasted once? She walked towards the girl, and touched her with her stick.

"Get up, child, and don't lie there," she said in accents that had a metallic ring in them.

The figure never moved, and I set my candlestick upon the floor, and kneeled beside it.

"Oh! Mrs. Kingsworth, if she's dead? *Em!*" I said, quoting the name by which my brother had called her, "don't you know me? I am Mr. Casey's sister, whom you came to see nine days ago."

Em suddenly struggled into a sitting posture, tossed back her hair, and, with her hands still pressed upon the floor, looked back from me to Mrs. Kingsworth, then to me again.

"Where's he gone?" she gasped forth.

"I don't know—patience," I said, catching her by the shoulders and frustrating an impulsive movement to fling herself back into her old position "we may know in time."

"He told you he was going away?"

"No."

"In his letter?"

"Yes."

"What was he afraid of?" she asked, "that he couldn't trust me he's knowed so long. Why didn't he say that he was tired of me, and I could have gone down the London Bridge steps and—IN!"

"Will you listen to me?"

"No, it's no good—you can't do any good to me! What do you

come here for but to tell me what he said a year ago, and I would not believe in——”

“What was that?”

“That I was too big to stay with him—that people talked—as if I cared for that;—that they would take my good name away—I never had any, I didn't want any! He was sick of me—I know that—but he was my father, friend, the only one who ever cared for me, and I couldn't go away because those—those devils down-stairs talked harm of him. If I'd been his daughter, he couldn't—couldn't have been any better—kinder, and now—now—now!”

She beat her right hand upon the floor with the fury of a tigress; she raised her voice and screamed, till the window glass rang again. Mrs. Kingsworth touched her with the stick again.

“Stop that absurd noise—and listen to me.”

“You're nothing to me!—what should I listen to you for?”

“Because I am an old woman, who has experienced all degrees of trouble, and may give you some advice worth attending to.”

“I don't want any,” was the sullen answer.

“Still, will you listen?”

No answer, but the restless hand clutching her throat now, and her great eyes fixed on the speaker. Mrs. Kingsworth took silence for consent, and resumed her discourse.

“Kingsworth Casey and you were father and daughter—brother and sister—nothing more, you say?”

“What more could we be?”

“I am not here to explain, but for explanation—I take your word—I think even by the light of that filthy candle I can read truth upon your face. What do you mean to do now?”

“Take poison, very likely,” was the bitter answer.

“Take yourself off that floor, you mean, and come down-stairs with us,”

“No—I'll stop here. He'll come back yet. Why, he was going to buy new things for these rooms, and sold off the old last Saturday.”

“He will not come back—the letter which you brought this evening,” I said, “was to tell us that, and to ask us—until his return”—I put in here—“to take care of you.”

“Where's he gone?”

“Abroad.”

“And he'll come back for me some day! Oh! if I thought he meant that!—if I could just think that, now!”

She held her head between her hands, and tried to press that thought into her brain. She was wavering, and I redoubled my efforts.

“The only chance of seeing him again is coming home with us—you cannot live here after to-morrow—you have no friends, you say?”

“No friends,” was the hollow answer.

“Trust in John Casey's——”

"In Kingsworth Casey's," corrected the old lady.

"—Sister," I concluded. "You are young; this is a minor trouble; the service that I may place you in will be more regular and better for you. You do not think evil of my brother—you speak up for him, and know more concerning his good qualities than I—take me for your friend in his place."

"I speak up for him no more—I hate him now for running away like this—like a thief! I'll never say a word for him again! Oh! what will he do, poor Jack, with no one to take his part, I wonder!"

"Let us go now."

She got off the floor slowly and sullenly, picked up her bonnet and shawl, and threw them on carelessly.

"Have you anything to pack up?"

"Very little—nothing. There's a little bundle somewhere; these"—indicating her present wearing apparel—"are new things which Jack bought me last week. There were some more things in the other room, where Jack used to sleep, but I tore 'em up. Oh! I could——"

Mrs. Kingsworth touched her with the stick again, and balked an impetuous stamping on the floor.

"Are you ready, then?" she asked.

"Yes, if you won't let me be, I'm ready. Sorry enough you'll be, Jack's sister, for taking me away from here. The wust job that ever you've done in your life is to notice a gal like me."

She moved towards the door with us, then stopped again.

"Oh! the money that Jack gave me to mind for him. What's to be done with it?"

"Where is it?"

"Somewhere—I pitched it somewhere. I hope it ain't gone out of winder. I took it from my pocket and heaved it away."

She went back, looked in "Jack's room," and came back with a small sealed packet.

"Here," she said, thrusting it into my hands, "take care of it for him, I've done with it."

I opened the packet, and found three five-pound notes, and five pounds in sovereigns. In my brother's handwriting was written, "This for a rainy day. Keep this, and—keep strong!"

I showed the paper to her, but she snatched at it, crumpled it in her hand, and threw it on the floor; stooped and picked it up again, and thrust it in her pocket.

"He meant the money for me, I suppose—he never cared where he flung his money to—I'll drop down dead before I touch it!"

"Hush!—let us go."

We went out of the rooms, and down the stairs; on the second landing, whither perhaps she had scuttled upon the opening of the door, we found the landlady.

“What’s to be done with the things, I should like to know,” said the landlady; “he’s left a bed, a wash-stand, two——”

“They shall be fetched,” said Mrs. Kingsworth; “nothing will be lost.”

“If they ain’t out of my house by to-morrow morning——”

“They shall go to-night,” interrupted Mrs. Kingsworth.

Down-stairs, and into the noisy street again; the cab before the door—the little group of unwashed still canvassing the topic of our appearance in Spitalfields.

Mrs. Kingsworth looked carefully at the faces within range. A hollow-eyed, sunken-faced man, shivering in his shirt-sleeves, and holding a child by one hand, arrested her attention.

“You’ve nothing better to do than waste time here?” she said.

“Wish I had,” was the answer.

“Will you do something for us?—we are in a hurry.”

His eyes lighted up at the prospect of a fee.

“Anything,” he said.

“On the second floor you will find one or two things belonging to us. Fetch them down. If we’re not here when you come back, take them home, and keep them till they’re sent for.”

The man left his child on the door-step; Mrs. Kingsworth followed us into the cab.

“Drive on,” she said; “let us get out of this fever-haunted street!”

“I was happy here,” moaned our captive; “shall I ever be happy again?”

“How old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“Humph!—never!” was the old lady’s consolatory answer.

CHAPTER VII.

CALLED BACK.

TAKING Em under my protection, sent my thoughts of becoming guardian to Mrs. Kingsworth’s niece far away into the background. From that time I considered the matter settled; henceforth a house-keeper for life, with my brother’s *protégée* in service under me! It had been John’s wish that I should take care of her for his sake—for her own, for her wild affection for him, I was now interested in her. We took the girl home to the Corkcutters’ Hall, and found a

room and bed for her. She was anxious to get to sleep, she said—not to be “talked to” any more that night. She had assumed a sullen demeanour that did not care to be intruded on, and Mrs. Kingsworth and I made no efforts to rouse her from her apathy. She refused all food and drink, and seemed only grateful for the little room into which I ushered her at last.

At the door I said—

“You will keep with us?”

“Yes, till you’re tired, as Jack was,” she muttered.

“May I ask your name?”

“Emma Eaves.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

Going down-stairs, I thought again of the knowledge which Mrs. Kingsworth had possessed of my brother’s address—that had ever been scrupulously kept from me. How did she discover it, and by what means, living apart from London? She put the mystery out of my head by her first question when I re-entered the room, and it was not till long afterwards that I remembered it again.

“Miss Casey, what is the day of the month?”

“The fourteenth of April.”

“We’ll enter it in our diaries. That girl said that we should rue the day we ever took her from her den. It is very likely.”

“I hope not.”

“I never believed in gratitude myself for any service given, at any sacrifice. I don’t believe that a genuine gratitude exists in the heart of any man, woman or child. If it exist I have not met with it, that’s all.”

“Have you, in your long life met with nothing but deceit, then?” I asked.

“With little else, Miss Casey,” she said, in an indifferent tone; “I have encountered fair professions, blank looks, earnest protestations, empty thanks at times—nothing more solid than those counters with which we play the game of life out. I was a young woman when I made this discovery; and old age, which brought me wisdom, only strengthened my conviction of human falsity.”

“I am very sorry.”

“What are *you* sorry for?” she asked.

“Sorry to find you sceptical of all good in the world, madam.”

“I did not say that; good exists; I have seen it, and helped here and there to foster it in past times—but I have seen more evil as was natural. I don’t repine,” she said; “I am resigned to humanity, and there is an interest in attempting to decipher its motives—a weak interest, which will die out as I grow older, and which will never stir my blood or warm my heart again.”

“This is akin to misanthropy.”

“Call it what you please—I term it philosophy.”

Hard and unimpressionable to passing events that startle less firm minds, she had proved herself; but not the woman indifferent to the future of those with whom she came in contact, I was certain.

The next day almost gave me proof of this, despite her admirable composure.

Early the next morning, before Mrs. Kingsworth came down-stairs, a telegram arrived for her. I took it to her bedside with my own hands, lest there should be any bad news for her, the suddenness of which might even unnerve *her*.

"Here is a telegram for you Mrs. Kingsworth."

Mrs. Kingsworth was propped up in bed, steadfastly regarding the hangings above her head. Without looking towards me, she stretched forth her thin hand languidly.

"From the country, I suppose?"

She opened the envelope, and then passed the telegram to me.

"Read it, Miss Casey—it will save me a vexatious search for my glasses. From Wilthorpe?"

"Who sends this?"

"Yes. It says—'*Bel is unmanageable—pray return.*'"

"*Walter Mannington, The Hall, Wilthorpe,*" I read.

"Extra trouble always unnerved him. Fill up the form of acknowledgment and send away the bearer. No answer. Walter Mannington's a fool. A serious assertion to make of an only brother, but so entirely truthful, that the uncharitableness of my verdict will be forgiven, I trust."

I fulfilled Mrs. Kingsworth's commission, then paid a visit to Emma Eaves, sitting in the servants' room down-stairs, sullen and taciturn still, and disinclined to move. On my return to the parlour I found Mrs. Kingsworth with her bonnet on.

"I am going back to-day," she said. "In half an hour's time, send the maid for a cab, Miss Casey."

"Going back—to-day?"

"You will be sorry to lose me, of course?" she said with a scornful quivering of her upper lip; "and the change and holiday for me—how *I* shall miss them!"

I did not reply; Mrs. Kingsworth in an acrid mood was an unpleasant being to discourse with.

"You are sparing of the compliments suitable for the occasion," she said, after a pause.

"I have no compliments to offer—I shall miss you."

"Miss a querulous old woman!—the most hateful specimen of humanity one can thrust upon society—oh! yes, you will miss her!"

"I did not mean in that sense."

"No matter. Shall we proceed to business?"

"To business?"

"When am I to expect you at Wilthorpe?"

"I—I thought that you had relinquished the idea of my coming to your home."

"I never relinquished an idea that I have formed, was the cool answer, "it is unlike me. I have made up my mind—have you made up yours?"

"I have considered the proposition, Mrs. Kingsworth. I am obliged by it, but there is Emma Eaves to consider now."

"Bring her with you, of course. There is plenty of room in the household for your charge as well as for yourself. I expect her."

"And there is——"

"Nothing to stop you, if your heart be set upon being of service to me in my old age. Bertha Casey, I, your mother's friend, ask you to come!"

It was an appeal that I could not resist; of late I had grown tired of the monotonous life in office, and there was an indefinable temptation leading me to the unknown life beyond its peace and rest.

"I will come," I answered.

My heart sunk, though; after I had replied to her appeal, I could almost have retracted, begged for longer time and deeper consideration.

"Thank you," she answered, "you will do me a service—more than me, I hope, in the good time when we shall know each other better. Remember all conditions; write me a line two days before you start for Wilthorpe; and now—send for my cab, business is over for the day."

She departed shortly afterwards in the cab which my maid had brought to the steps of the Corkcutters' Hall. Before she left, she called Emma Eaves to her side and said:

"In a month's time you are coming in the country with Miss Casey. There, a new life for you!"

The girl stared at her, but replied not.

"Good-bye," Mrs. Kingsworth said to me, and then went down the steps, into her cab, and away.

"In the country?" said Em, turning to me, suddenly. "How will Jack find us out?"

"We will arrange that by leaving our address behind us here. You will like the change."

"I shall like nothing!" she answered.

* * * * *

In a month's time we went away. I gave notice of resignation to the Honourable Company of Corkcutters, and received a kind letter, expressing the regret of the Corporation at the receipt of the intelligence, at the prospect of losing one, whose services—so it said—had been so generally and gratefully appreciated. All this, on the best cream-laid letter-paper, with the arms of the Corporation stamped in blue and silver relief thereon, like a highly-illuminated twopenny piece. I was proud of the Company's gratitude, however, of its

formal thanks, regrets, and so forth ; I found the letter amongst my old papers only a little while ago, and cried over it like a great silly!—wondered over it too, what would have become of me if I had held my ground there, and remained content with my station? Would life have flowed on peacefully, I ruminated; or even to that quiet, old-fashioned remnant of City greatness, would there have stolen much to trouble and dismay me? Should I have found more happiness, or less?—made more friends, or lost more?—been even there misunderstood by those whose hearts I sought to touch, and drawn amidst a crowd of incomprehensibilities to a world wherein I knew nothing myself, and grasped but vainly at the shadows flitting by?

And yet do I look back with regret at the new life I sought of my own free will?—at the faces that met me in the home at Wilthorpe, and the life spent there? Scarcely.

It unsettled me to give up my quiet life, and perhaps I never wholly after that settled down again!

END OF THE FIRST BOOK.

Book II.

BEGINNING LIFE AFRESH.

CHAPTER I.

MR. MANNINGTON.

ON the sixteenth of May, Emma Eaves and I arrived in Peterborough. We had quitted the Corkcutters' Hall for ever; my new address at Wilthorpe had been left with the clerk, with the servants, with the secretary to the Corporation, and with the Corporation itself; John Kingsworth Casey should have no difficulty in finding me out again, whenever his brotherly love desired the discovery. That would be about Lady-Day, I thought, with a sigh—not before, unless anything strange and unforeseen should happen in the interim.

I had given warning to Mrs. Kingsworth of my coming as requested; but had received no answer in reply. She had ever proved herself a bad correspondent, and her silence did not disturb me much. We set out at ten o'clock from the Corkcutters' Hall, and reached Peterborough at one; thence to Wilthorpe would be a matter for reflection, supposing that Mrs. Kingsworth had not sent a conveyance for us.

"How many miles is it, Miss Bertha?" Emma Eaves had asked.

"Nine or ten, I believe."

"Can't we walk it?"

And leave our boxes and fine things to the mercies of a booking-office, and arrive tired and disagreeable?"

"Jack—your brother and *me*, I mean," she corrected, "used to have a long walk—right to Edmunton—sometimes. That was a long while ago, though," she sighed.

Emma Eaves and I had become very good friends; I had found

her, despite her self-will and sullen fits, an impressionable girl—a girl upon whom a bright smile, a good word, was never lost, despite the appearances, which occasionally seemed against the effort. She had turned to me after awhile; next to the man who had taken pity upon her when her father died, was that man's sister, and my interest in her was soon reciprocated.

"You had a way with you, you see," she condescended to explain, as a reason for softening—an odd reason that I understood, and considered as a compliment.

Possibly in those days I was vain of "my way;" we are all vain of something or other, and concerning my way of managing matters, of winning friends, of settling differences, I was conceited, just a little! I was weak enough to imagine that Mrs. Kingsworth had taken to me on account of "my way;" that Emma Eaves would be faithful and true to me all the days of my life; that everybody with whom I came in contact would think what a nice, amiable, comfortable little soul I was. So we deceive ourselves with vain imaginings, and sow the seeds of future disappointments; we must take our life as we find it, step by step, not map it out ahead of us. For the future there is no preparation.

At the Peterborough station, I left Emma to look after the boxes—she was a sharp girl, not to be put off with other people's *débris* and went out of the station to look round me, and see if any vehicle without there was suggestive of a Kingsworth's thought of us. On Mrs. Kingsworth's letters I had been mindful of a crest—a bravo-looking leopard, with a dagger in his paw—and I looked for the family arms on the one or two private carriages outside the station.

I was returning to Emma, when some one from an elevated position touched the crown of my bonnet—my best bonnet, too!—with his whip. I looked round, and saw a very diminutive old gentleman, perched in a dog-cart, smiling and smirking at me. A glance at the dog-cart—chocolate, silver-mounted, and, on closer inspection of the side panel, the identical leopard still slicing mid-air with its dagger—and then I turned to the gentleman again.

"Am I right?—Miss Casey?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Thought I could not make a mistake—fancied that you would look about you for awhile—had your description, of course, powerfully struck off by my dear sister Charlotte, Mrs. Kingsworth that is. What a charming day!—is it not?"

"Very."

"Thought this sort of thing," pointing to the dog-cart, "preferable to a close carriage—always fond of air myself. When I can rely upon a quiet horse I enjoy driving amazingly—when the animal is restive I get the cold shivers. Disagreeable sorts of things cold shivers are—as you are doubtless aware, Miss Casey?"

"Very disagreeable indeed, Sir."

I was not quite at my ease with this voluble gentleman, who had dashed head-foremost into conversation in a remarkable manner.

"I am Mr. Mannington, of whom you have heard, I daresay," he said, getting down from the dog-cart and raising his hat to me; "we shall be the best of friends, Miss Casey—you'll like *me* very much. Everybody likes me, because I put up with everybody's nonsense, I suppose—he! he!"

"Sir?"

This interrogatively, being in doubt whether he had added another word after his supposition, or really attempted a laugh.

"I said 'he! he!' Miss Casey," he explained; "merely my humorous way, you know—or rather you will know when we're better acquainted. Here, boy, *boy*, boy, BOY!" he screamed after a shock-headed youth in a green smock frock, "stay one moment, if you please."

The boy looked round with his hands in his pockets, and his lower jaw dropped; hesitated, and then slouched towards us.

"Hold my horse, my lad—you know how to hold a horse, I suppose—like this, you see—not like that, you see, because it worries the mouth. And just mind that that cloth don't slip off the mare, there's a good lad, and keep your eye on that whip and wrapper, will you? Now do take your hands out of your pockets—if there's one thing more than another that fidgets me, it's a boy in a responsible position with his hands in his pockets. Let me see, now, I think that I have told you all, excepting that you must not allow anybody to touch the mare, of course, because it fidgets her—and if they will not mind what you tell them, just call a policeman, my lad. I shall not detain you long—now, allow me, Miss Casey."

He offered me his arm, then broke into a little canter by my side, and escorted me back to the station. He made several inquiries concerning my boxes, *en route*—what they were like—what was written upon them, size, shape, and general style of cordage; he appeared deeply interested in my luggage, and had button-holed a guard with the intention of giving him my full description at second-hand, when Emma came to tell me that everything had been collected and was ready for removal.

"Your maid, I presume," he said, taking his hat off again, to the intense petrification of Emma Eaves; "a very clever girl, to have got the boxes ready for us—I never could find boxes myself at a railway station—people get in the way so, and the guards are very rude at times—very. It has always struck me that no one should be too busy to be civil, because incivility wounds one's feelings deeply; and in the hurry of going or ending a journey of five or six hundred miles, you cannot find the time always to mention that fact—and, after all, it may be due to individualization of character—don't you think so?"

"I think it is very likely," I ventured to respond.

"Then we'll see about the boxes—three, you say?—one with brass

nails—oh! here they are, all on a truck, I see! Bless my soul, now, what shall we do with them? Dear, dear, dear, I don't exactly see the way to take them to Wilthorpe—one can go on end, and another under the feet—no, the other on end, and that one under the feet—and the third will fall into the road, and altogether it will look very ridiculous—he! he!”

The little gentleman was quite confused by the boxes; he bit the tips of his white driving gloves; he took off his hat, brushed his hair, dropped my arm, and executed a solemn march sideways round the luggage, the truck, and the guard who was in charge; he evidently did not see the way to Wilthorpe with those boxes.

“I think, Miss Casey, that the better plan will be to—send for them, or to have them sent after us. They'll be very inconvenient, and——”

“Be they for Wilthorpe, Sir?” asked the guard.

“Yes, my man—yes.”

“I'll see to 'em—the Hall, ain't it, Sir?”

“Yes, my man—the Hall. I leave it entirely in your hands, understand—the boxes are all properly addressed, and there's no occasion to make a mistake, unless you do it on purpose.”

“All right, Sir.”

“He says it's all right, Miss Casey—now, if you will allow me again.”

We left the boxes with the guard, who surveyed us very blankly—his expectations of a fee having been considerably raised by Mr. Mannington's complaisant manner. He was not allowed to receive gratuities, and he never did receive them, only under protest.

We were outside the station again, with Mr. Mannington assisting us into the vehicle. His assistance was demonstrative enough, took some time, and attracted the attention of all loiterers; he was anxious about the cushions, about the steps, about the wrappers, about the proper position of Emma Eaves at the back, about everything connected with the final preparations, that he could possibly disturb his mind concerning. Then there was the mare to see to, and the bit to inspect, and, finally, a general survey of the affair in its entirety before he stepped briskly into his place beside me, took his whip and reins in one hand, and began feeling in his pockets for some remuneration for the boy, now watching the last operation attentively.

“Sorry to have kept you so long, my lad, but better to be earning your living than idling about the streets, isn't it? You're too big a boy for this work, though, and ought to get apprenticed somewhere. There, my man, there's a penny for you, and don't spend it wastefully. Now let us be moving homewards.”

“Well, I'm darmed!” ejaculated the youth, turning the penny over contemptuously in his hand—“all that jaw for a penny!”

Mr. Mannington did not hear him; he half closed his eyes in an odd near-sighted manner, and drove on with a set smile on his face.

Full of the responsibility of getting out of the broad streets of the city of Peterborough, he was for awhile silent, and afforded me leisure to observe him.

A little man, I have said—almost the shadow of a man, I might have said, so thin and fragile was he. A shrewd-faced man enough, with a faint resemblance to Mrs. Kingsworth about his thin red lips. A face more wrinkled than his sister's, cut up, in fact, by wrinkles which ran right and left, and intersected each other, and gave him a shrivelled appearance, which his fragile proportions did not tend to diminish. He had been in India, Mrs. Kingsworth had said, and possibly had stayed out in the sun too long there, and dried up too much in consequence.

He was Mrs. Kingsworth's junior by a few years, I was aware; looking at him from behind, he might have passed for Mrs. Kingsworth's little boy, until he turned and scared you with his world-worn face. He was dressed youthfully; he followed the fashions still, and a strict study of them only becomes youth, who loses caste in society if he's cut the wrong way. Mr. Mannington was well-dressed, but he raised a smile; more than once, as I thought of the odd appearance my cavalier must present to the country folk on the road, I had to bite my lips to keep decorous. His French hat, which was very much curled at the brim, was out of place; his light grey coat, loosely put on over his black coat, with an azalea in the top button-hole, was striking; and his cream-coloured neckerchief, with a ruby breast-pin flickering in the sun's rays, was absolutely dashing. He wore patent leather boots and light trousers, and his white driving gloves were new for the occasion, and fitted excellently well.

Absorbed in the mare he drove, watchful of corner stones, full of gesticulation to half-sleepy drivers of carts and waggons making for Peterborough, he was silent a longer time than I had anticipated. I had leisure to look round me, and think what a fine open country it was beyond the old cathedral, which now loomed from the pile of house-roof in the distance.

It was my first sensation of "the real country;" of being a long way from London smoke and City turmoil—it was beginning my new unknown life at once, and under favourable auspices. The sky was a deep blue, dotted here and there by piles of swan's down floating lazily with the faint breeze astir that day. The trees and hedge-rows were in their first flush of greenness, bright, and full of colour; the land beyond was "looking well," I felt assured, both to artistic eyes and farmers'; there was a river meandering through the landscape, a strip of molten silver, which added a pleasant feature to the scene; all breathed of peace and rest, and I fancied—such odd fancies steal across one's reverie at times—that I should be happy and content here!

Leaning back to speak to Emma disturbed the companion at my side, who woke up from his study of the mare, and paid me more attention.

"You like the country, Miss Casey?"

"I have never seen it before."

"Indeed, now!—not a traveller, then, like myself, wandering from one end of the earth to the other, and seeing everything worth seeing, everywhere! A real Loudoner, Miss Casey?"

"Yes, Mr. Mannington, a thorough Loudoner."

"I was a thorough Loudoner myself when I was a young man," he said, "a clerk in a City house, afterwards a partner, then manager of our foreign branch. A fine place the city of London; rare opportunities for fortune-making and—breaking."

"Yes."

"You were at the Corkcutters' Hall, my sister tells me. Housekeeper?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Very young to be a housekeeper, Miss Casey—not eighteen yet, I should say?"

"In my nineteenth year."

"Dear me!—well, I'm not far out in my guess—I never was. And your mother was housekeeper to the Corkcutters' Hall also, doubtless? Many a time have I dined at the Corkcutters' Hall, and rare dinners they used to give in the good old times. Housekeeper too—and your grandmother, now?"

"I do not remember her, Sir."

"Housekeeper also, very likely. City people like generations of that sort of thing—it looks respectable and sound."

"My grandmother was a lady, I believe. We took to house-keeping when our losses came."

"Dear, dear me! Losses! what losses were they, now? I never like to hear of losses—they depress one's spirits so much."

I did not answer. My family losses I knew but little concerning; the story of them had been too painful to dilate upon, and my mother had always shunned the subject. I knew something of an unhappy marriage that my mother had made; of a quiet life that followed it, and wherein she hid her own sorrow, and thought of other people's; of the utter unselfishness that turned away from personal distress, and calmly and equably pursued a way that kept distress from me—and tried to shield poor John.

"Your mother and Mrs. Kingsworth were old friends—very dear old friends, it appears," continued Mr. Mannington. "How singular that I never met with your mother, or knew of this strong attachment between them! An early friendship—for late friendships don't last, or make sacrifices in a hundred different ways—do they?"

"I don't know—the earlier friendships are the better ones, no doubt."

He looked furtively from the corner of the eye adjacent to me, and put me on my guard—almost instinctively—against his further questioning. A courteous man, conversational and agreeable, but

evidently curious on most topics, and inclined to sift to the bottom a matter that perplexed him. Mrs. Kingsworth had evidently not entered into details concerning her past friendship with my mother, and he was anxious to know the exact degree of intimacy—how it had begun, and by whom, and in what way? I could not explain to him, and he gave up the subject.

Each topic that he dwelt upon, however, became equally embarrassing after awhile, he drove the details so persistently into a corner. He asked if I had any brothers and sisters; and upon my answering a brother, became deeply interested in him, his antecedents, his age, his present pursuits, even his mode of living and general deportment. Lastly, he wanted to know all about my maid, sitting within ear-shot on the back seat, and looked at me as if I were deceiving him when I told him that I had only known her a month.

“You are a lady easily impressed, then?” he said; “one who takes strong and strange fancies.”

“I think you are wrong, Mr. Mannington.”

“I do not say that I am quite right,” he answered; “there were reasons, of course, for a sudden attachment to your maid—a very amiable and lovable girl, perhaps? That article does exist, I believe,” he added, a faint tinge of his sister’s satire suddenly exhibiting itself, “although I have not met with it myself.”

“I am sorry for your experience of life, then.”

He looked at me sharply, and then edged a little away from me, as though my reply—somewhat cold in spite of myself—had frightened him. He coughed for a moment in an embarrassed manner, and said—

“An amiable and lovable girl is a great treasure, of course. Candidly, Miss Casey, I do not possess it yet awhile in my daughter Isabel. Mrs. Kingsworth and I count a great deal on your future influence over her.”

“Pray do not!” I exclaimed; “I am young myself—no judge of character—no powers of command. You do not expect me to mould your daughter at fifteen years of age into a different being?”

“Before she is twenty—why not? She only wants studying; Mrs. Kingsworth won’t study her, because she—she never studied anybody, that I am aware of—and I can’t, for I’m of a nervous temperament, and a very little unsettles me, and gives me the heartburn. Have you ever had the heartburn, Miss Casey?”

“Yes—I think so.”

“Think so!—good gracious!—why its a red-hot sixpence in the middle of the chest, or a trifle nearer perhaps the pit of the—God bless me!—of the junction thereto and so on. Are you tired with your journey?” he asked, anxious to dismiss an embarrassing topic upon which he had intruded.

“Not very tired.”

“Railway travelling to persons unused to it is very fatiguing,”

said he; "I should have fancied that the journey would have distressed you more. Any news in town to-day?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"You came first-class, of course?"

"No, second."

"I like economy—you couldn't have done better."

He continued to rattle on during the remainder of the journey; his topics of conversation were inexhaustible, his anecdotes of his personal experience, numerous. It must be confessed that I grew weary of him; that I was very sorry in my heart that this man at all times and seasons would be thrown in my way, and weary me with his obtrusive fidgetiness and garrulity. Even in that early period of our acquaintance, I imbibed a habit of submerging his ideas, and keeping my own uppermost, steering cleverly through the shoals of my own inattention, and answering in monosyllables, when a reply became necessary on my part. We got on very well after that, although Mr. Mannington was full of a long history of how he had cured of bronchitis the mare he was driving then, and I was thinking of the welcome that awaited me at Wilthorpe, and whether I should like it, after all.

It was nearly half-past three o'clock when we passed through a long and straggling village, in the midst of which a hunchbacked church, with a wooden steeple, stood pre-eminent.

"A pretty place," I said; "is this——"

"Wilthorpe," he concluded; "yes."

A bend of the road, a drive of another hundred yards; another bend in the road, shadowed by six fine elms that were in glorious leaf then, and finally "The Hall," a castellated residence of some extent, lying far back from the dusty road in its own fair park-land, where deer were browsing that May afternoon. A pretty scene to come suddenly upon—all symbolical of comfort and even happiness, judging by the bright exterior.

"Emma," I said, pointing to the Hall, "there's home!"

Emma nodded; she was thinking intently, and even the mention of home did not excite her very much, though she kept her gaze directed towards the residence of Mrs. Kingsworth.

Mr. Mannington answered for her.

"Yes, there's home. Strange that a girl should conceive so great a distaste for so comfortable a place, and not have the courtesy to disguise it," he said absently; "and all around here right and left is the Kingsworth estate, where there is rare shooting in the autumn months."

"And the cottage on our left, facing the lodge-gates?"

"That's our land-bailiff's quarters—Master Stewart's house. And here's Master Stewart himself—that's odd!"

CHAPTER II.

THE HALL—WILTHORPE.

A THICK-SET man in a dark velveteen coat and a Scotch cap came across the road towards us. He looked from Mr. Maunington to me, and from me to Emma, without saluting either of the three, and then became deeply interested in the horse, which he set himself to study intently, with his legs a little apart and his hands behind him.

He was a fierce-looking man with a brown and bushy moustache, eyes somewhat sunk in his head, forehead rather prominent—a man of middle height and whose age was difficult to guess at.

“You’ll kill that mare, Mr. Mannington,” he said curtly.

“Bless me!—what makes you think so, Master Stewart?” said Mr. Maunington, leaning over the chaise and surveying the quadruped in his turu.

“You’ve driven her too fast, and you’ve got the bit wrong, and the collar is chafing her shoulder.”

“That Tom always was a stupid!”

“Yes—that’s true.”

“When did you return from Edinburgh? I was down here this morning trying your door.”

Very likely,” was the dry response; “I’ve been home two hours, or thereabouts.”

“Found your brother well; I hope?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Mr. Mannington whipped his horse again, Mr. Stewart looked from the horse to the driver, then to me and Emma again, and turned away, unconcerned in any of us.

“That’s our clever man in these parts, Miss Casey,” he said, “but a man you’ll very much dislike.”

“I hope not. I don’t like disliking any one,” I answered, not very elegantly.

“Oh! nobody likes him.”

“Indeed!”

“He’s an ill-tempered man.”

“More ill-tempered!” I thought to myself.

“Don’t make himself agreeable, everybody ought to be agreeable, and conversational, and *communicative*. He’s a clever man at his own business, certainly—and at minding his own business, too, he said to me once. Very rude, very uncouth, wasn’t it?”

“Very.”

"I think his head has been turned by his brother's good fortune; little Dick Stewart—that's the name he goes by in these parts, although he is actually taller than I am—thinks a great deal of his brother. Long Mark Stewart, they called the brother before he went away from here. I had the pleasure of seeing him once, just for a minute, when I first came hither—don't think much of *him* myself. He's the Mr. Stewart—that uncivil personage we have just left is the Master Stewart. Mr. Stewart's twenty-seven—this party's twenty-nine, though I don't believe it, mind you—and that's all *I have found out.*"

"Found out?" I repeated.

"Not exactly found out," he corrected, "for I am not of a curious disposition. But that's all Mrs. Kingsworth knows or cares."

We were winding our way along a circuitous drive towards home; a sudden turn brought us in front of the Hall, a noble and castellated edifice of limestone, whilst on our left was a sweep of park land—the home-close I afterwards learned was its name—with a view of Mr. Stewart's cottage in the distance.

Under the porch, castellated also, and approached by a broad flight of steps, two figures were awaiting us, in that true old-fashioned style, which warmed the heart to those who offered welcome. Mrs. Kingsworth, in the same rusty silk she had invariably worn at the Corkentters' Hall, was leaning on her gold-headed cane with one hand, and with the other supporting herself by the arm of a dark-haired, dark-skinned girl of fifteen or sixteen years of age. Strange contrast in the two faces underneath the porch—in one the stern gravity of age, full of dignity, but expressive of no pain or pleasure at the sight of us—in the other a wild concentrative interest, even eagerness, which arched the neck, and even agitated the face.

Mr. Mannington assisted us to alight—Mrs. Kingsworth touched my hand with hers without relaxing her hold of the stick, murmured, "Welcome to Wilthorpe," and then brought her companion more into the foreground, despite a shrinking shyness on her part.

"Miss Casey, I wish to introduce you to Miss Mannington, a young lady with whom you will become intimately acquainted, I hope. It is my wish at least."

Miss Mannington and I bowed; the large eyes never left my face, which she seemed to fix indelibly upon her memory.

"You will show Miss Casey to her room adjoining yours," said Mrs. Kingsworth. "We dine in an hour—we shall not expect to see either of you before dinner. Well, Emma Eaves, you *have* come, then?"

"Yes."

"I thought that you would have run away before this; I am not always right, it seems. I will show you to your room myself—this way."

This was the welcome to our new home.

CHAPTER III.

ISABEL.

MISS ISABEL MANNINGTON led the way to the room reserved for me on the first floor—"my little room" from that day forth. A large room by comparison with my old-bedchamber in the Corkcutters' Hall, but after awhile appearing small to me, judging by my more capacious apartments in this old-fashioned edifice.

There were really two rooms, a bed-room and dressing-room, well and even richly furnished, the hangings, perhaps, a trifle too dark and sombre to my taste, but the windows commanding fine views of park-land and distant country, bright and exhilarating enough in the late spring-time.

"This is your room," was the quick almost impatient answer; and then Isabel Mannington dropped wearily into a chair by the dressing table, rested her elbow upon the table, her chin in her hand, and proceeded once more to attentively examine me.

"Thank you," I said, by way of hint that I could dispense with her attendance now; but she continued to sit there, and stare at me, until an uncomfortable nervous feeling took possession of me.

There was no getting rid of her steady, curious gaze; I was quite a study for her; wherever I moved, the eyes of Miss Mannington followed me, losing me not for an instant, and never tiring of their interest.

"I am detaining you," I said, at last.

"Not at all, Miss Casey," was the reply. "I am here on duty. I have received my instructions from my aunt, and it is more than my place is worth to disobey them."

More than her place was worth! I saw the red lip curl a little scornfully at her own words; did this girl resent my presence here already, and had I made the first grand mistake in coming hither? I felt my heart sink at her curt replies, and the magnitude of my task for the first time began to impress itself upon me.

However I did my best to maintain my composure, and to Isabel's incipient antagonism I betrayed not any outward sign of embarrassment.

"You dine at five here as a rule, Miss Mannington?" I asked.

"As a rule—yes."

I was thinking of another question to put to her—trying to start a topic which might draw her out a little more, and soften that peculiar hardness which she had assumed, and which did not seem

quite natural to her, even in those early days for judging, when she said :

"Mrs. Kingsworth is not particular about evening dress—full evening dress—when company is not expected. She is homely—oh! very homely in her ideas sometimes."

"I suppose Mrs. Kingsworth sees but little company here?" I said.

"Now and then we catch a—victim," she answered quite satirically.

Seeing my glance of surprise at her, she laughed. For the first time her intent look vanished, and was replaced by a brightness—even a lightness—which wholly changed her. Then the shadow fell again upon that dark face, and she was staring hard once more.

"You spoke of instructions a few minutes since, Miss Mannington," I said. "May I ask what they are, and whether I am concerned in them?"

"Yes, you may ask," she replied shortly. "I mustn't disobey you, and of course I am bound to give you a reply. I'm only a child yet, my aunt says, and ought not to have a will of my own. When I'm a woman I shall make an effort to obtain a little one, I think."

"And the instructions?"

She laughed again—this time somewhat bitterly and mockingly.

"I was to remain with you till dinner-time," she said; "to prove to you by that time what an interesting child I was, and to find in you—what do you think?"

"Some one in whom you could be interested also, I hope."

"Some one with all the virtues of the angels—a good, amiable, pious young lady, whose manners I was to imitate, whose heart I was to touch, whose every word I was to reverence, and whose example I was to profit by. So I am watching you, and trying to—make you out, Miss Casey!"

"You will not find that a very difficult task," I answered.

Miss Mannington shook her head dubiously. When should I make her out, I wondered; was this acting, I thought, or was there throughout this family a vein of acrid humour, that was apparent in each member, and made the blood tingle in the veins of one subject to it?

"No mystery about you, Miss Casey?" she asked; "no secret resolve to keep me down, and crush the spirit out of me, despite the blandness of that face of yours?"

This more impetuously, with her hand leaving her chin to beat a little tattoo on the dressing-table. This with a flushed face also, and her dark eyes sparkling somewhat.

"You speak as if you expected me to be your enemy, rather than your friend, Miss Mannington. You will pardon me also, but you speak rudely," I added, with a flash of spirit asserting itself, despite

my effort to be cool and ladylike. I had not felt so inclined to be "warm" for a long, long period.

"You must not come to Wilthorpe Hall for soft speeches, Miss Casey," Isabel said in a less bitter tone of voice. "You, who know my aunt, surely did not expect that?"

"I expected kindness here. I did not anticipate harsh words, or a harsh judgment upon me, quite so early."

"You have judged me—you have been told what I am!"

"Your aunt has spoken of you as of a daughter whom she dearly loves."

"Has she?" was the eager question; "perhaps I am wrong, then—perhaps you are not to be my stern custodian—my aunt's spy?"

"Spy!" I ejaculated.

"Pardon me," she said hastily; "I am not courteous in my speech—I know it—I have been ill-trained, neglected—I know that too! But they don't understand me here—don't make allowances for what I have been, and what I am. They're all against me—every one of them—and will not consider that I am sixteen years of age, *nearly*, and not disposed to cringe, and flatter, and behave prettily when I don't choose. I'm not a bad girl, Miss Casey—until twelve months ago I have had my own way in everything, and now comes the curb, or rather the chain to hold me down, and I can't have it—I will not have it!"

"I do not understand," I said, taking advantage of a pause for breath to break in here; "all is intended for your good, I daresay, but you are excitable and inconsiderate, perhaps."

"So was my mother, I am told—it is the legacy she left me, and I can no more shake it off than I can shake off this ugly head of mine," she said; "and I wish you to understand, Miss Casey, that I am independent here, and not to be lectured on everything I do. I cannot bear it, for my aunt's sake—how can I bear it for the sake of her money, which I hate!—which I don't want!"

"Who asks you to be obedient for her money's sake?"

"Don't ask me," she said moodily.

"I will ask you—when we are better acquainted, Miss Mannington—to be a little more patient for your own."

"Not for yours, then?"

"And for mine," I added; "and then you will understand your friends here, and be better able to appreciate their motives."

"I am never unfair."

"Is it quite fair to treat me with this acumen—this ill-feeling—on so early an acquaintance, before I have settled down here, and asked you to be my friend, in a world that is strange and new to me?"

She paused, and looked steadily at me again.

"I beg your pardon—no, that was *not* fair."

"A fair acknowledgment, at least," I said; "we shall be friends yet, I hope."

"Friends!" she answered; "oh! I shall never be able to trust you—all my life I shall be afraid of you and my aunt, till I marry and go away from here."

"Marry!—well, there will be time enough for——"

"Yes, yes, I know what you are going to say," she interrupted; "everybody says that, of course. But I am looking forward to a life a little different from this. It does not suit me—it is dull, monotonous—they are all too old and unsympathetic for me—is not that natural?"

"But you have friends?"

"I have been here six months—they are like six years to me already," she said; "they call this home to me now, and I am to settle down here and never feel discontented ever again. Well, I must try for awhile. I'm sorry that you think I'm rude."

"Shall we say plain-spoken?"

"Is that a virtue?"

"Not always."

"Why should it not be?—truth is a virtue?"

"Always. We'll speak of the distinction some day," said I; "it is too early for argument at present."

"I hate argument, because I always get the worst of it."

"A better reason for one antipathy than you have exhibited for another."

"Ah!" she said, "you wish to prey upon my feelings—that's my aunt's way. Well, I was in the wrong, but I wanted you to understand what kind of girl I really was, and I fancied somehow that you were going to be very stern and exacting, and—I—I wanted the upper ground to begin with, just to save trouble, Miss Casey."

Her eyes sparkled merrily at her own sauciness; and when I laughed at her hurried explanation, she laughed too, and we *were* better friends already. We were laughing still when some one tapped at the door.

"Come in," I said; and Emma Eaves, slowly and stolidly, entered the room.

"What is it, Emma?" I asked.

"I want to know what I am to do here, Miss Bertha?" she asked; "am I to keep in my room, or go down-stairs, or what? Oh! I shan't like this big house at all!"

"Is this your maid, Miss Casey?" asked Isabel.

"This is my maid for the present—she enters your aunt's service—she is a good girl."

"What is her name?"

"Emma."

"Emma," said Miss Mannington to her, "why don't you admire this big house?"

"It's very dull—outside it's so awful still—I don't like it at all! Oh! I wish I had never come here!"

"The journey has unsettled you, Emma," said I; "you must not judge the new home yet awhile."

"Patience, Emma," said Miss Mannington, "and then the place will be like heaven to you. It only requires time—a generation or so," she added, in a lower voice, "and then you'll be as happy as I am here. You've been used to the bustle of a city?"

"Yes."

"So have I," she added, "and this is a change to town-life, Emma. But as for it being dull—why, that's fancy! How old are you?"

"Going on for fifteen."

"You shall be my maid, Emma—my kindred spirit, who objects to the Hall!" she cried; "I'll take you into my service—come to my room, and see if you can brush up this hair of mine a bit. On probation, black eyes—now then! *Allons.*"

Before I could urge a faint remonstrance she had risen, seized the arm of Emma, and marched her out of the room. Emma passively accompanied her, looking back with her for an instant as they passed on to the broad landing beyond.

Both looking back at the same moment, two dark-haired, impulsive, passionate girls enough, Isabel's words struck me very forcibly. They *were* kindred spirits, perhaps!



CHAPTER IV.

MY NEW WORLD.

My boxes not having arrived, I had simply to wash, rearrange my travelling dress, and rest myself for awhile, until the dinner-bell rang. After Isabel Mannington had withdrawn, there was an opportunity for rest and thought—certainly the opportunity had not presented itself before. "Dressed for dinner," then, I opened my window, and sat down before it to enjoy the few quiet moments left me before I went down into my new world. A quiet new world enough outside, it seemed; surely there would come happiness to me here! I

felt that I was not a discontented being at least, and that I could bear a great deal before I turned against this place. I thought that I should understand them all in time; Mrs. Kingsworth, her niece, her brother, all eccentric, satirical beings, who would presently understand *me*, and with whom I should get on. I had come hither making up my mind to be contented with my station, and the little contrarieties I had already met with confused me somewhat, but did not daunt my courage.

A fair prospect beyond my chamber window—looking across the park, which undulated right and left of the mansion, and stretched far away beyond my ken. The deer that had been scared by my approach had stolen back again, and were gathered into one flock under the great elm-trees, beneath which they were comfortably dozing. The shadows of the trees were long upon the grass now, and the noisy rooks were floating slowly homewards.

From my window I could see—my eyes being good—the winding of the carriage drive, through the plantation, till it met the country road, and the land-bailiff's cottage facing the great gate of the Hall, and looking quite a feature in the landscape. The sky was bright still, all around was fair, and worth observing; the peace of the landscape stole upon my troubled senses, which had been a little disturbed since my first advent, and shared its calmness with me.

Thinking very deeply—growing even forgetful of the landscape, and of the figures that had met me in my new home, when a hand was laid gently on my shoulder.

"Sleeping, Miss Casey?" said Mrs. Kingsworth, so close to my ear that I started at her propinquity.

"Not sleeping, I think," I answered, with the feminine objection to be "caught napping" on any pretence whatever.

"You are tired with your journey, doubtless?"

"No, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Depressed in spirits at the great change which has come to you?" she said; "well, that is natural enough. Where is Isabel?"

"She has gone to her room, I believe."

"I asked her to remain—I wished you to have an opportunity of studying her, of forming fairly your first impression. Of course, my directions have not been attended to, and I am not surprised at finding you alone. What do you think of her?"

"Is it fair to ask me that question so quickly, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"I was never a fair or just woman," was the answer; "do not mind me, but give me a fair answer."

"But the first impression—"

"A little while ago, Miss Casey," she said, I told you that my first impressions had never deceived me—I have a faith in first impressions. Now then?"

I objected very much to this inquiry. I did not like her persistence, although I saw no valid excuse to delay my estimation of her niece's character.

"She is impressionable—plain-spoken," I could scarce refrain a smile at this—"good-hearted, I think."

"You are not afraid of her?"

"Oh! no."

"You will learn to love her as a sister, perhaps?"

"I hope so—I will try."

"That's well said. I am too old to try and love anybody myself," she remarked, "and so I have failed in doing any good. Perhaps I have made her fear me, once or twice; but she is wilful beyond her years, and I have no more patience to study such a child, than I have heart. *You* must take all this trouble."

"It will be my duty—I will do my best."

For an instant Isabel's head peered round the door.

"Oh! I beg pardon—I did not know that you were engaged."

"Isabel," called Mrs. Kingsworth.

But Isabel did not reply, and when Mrs. Kingsworth walked to the door, the landing-place was empty.

She did not return to me, but said,

"Shall we proceed to the dining-room at once?"

"If you please."

I followed her; at the foot of the stairs she waited for me, and we went down together. At the dining-room door she asked me if I had heard from my brother Kingsworth lately.

"No, madam."

"Enwrapped in cloud-land till the cheque is due," she said calmly; "such is human nature, and—human gratitude!"

The dinner bell began to ring as she spoke.

"We are not much too soon," she said as we passed into the dining-room together.

"Mr. Mannington, in a black dress-coat and white neckcloth, appeared almost at the same instant; in a little while the daughter followed, grave and silent again, as though something new had disturbed her. Had she objected to Mrs. Kingsworth's visit to my room, to the topic upon which she had suddenly intruded, and which had possibly engendered fresh suspicions of my purpose there? We were all assembled; there was no need to ring the second bell; in due course we were seated, a quiet party of four, with four stately menials flitting at the back. A formal dinner enough; even Mr. Mannington far from loquacious, attentive to his dinner, and yet not inattentive to passing things; his eyes shifting from right to left, from his daughter to me, from me to Mrs. Kingsworth, who sat very rigid and stony at the head of the table. He looked more frequently towards his daughter; asked one or two questions as to the way in which she had spent the day, when she expected Miss Castle, her

governess, back, &c. Isabel answered very briefly, and Mr. Mannington relinquished the attempt to distract her attention, and gave a little sigh over his fish.

"You are not well, Isabel?" Mrs. Kingsworth said at last.

"I am very well, annt."

"Has anything disturbd your usnal serenity of demeanour?"

"Oh! no," answered the niece, with an incipient toss of her head.

"I am glad of that," was the dry response.

"Bel allows very little to disturb her," said Mr. Mannington, darting in here; "her heart's too good, though I say it myself, before her face. Like her dear mother—oh! Charlotte, how I have often wished that you had known my poor wife!"

"So I have heard yon say," was the unsympathetic answer.

"Ahem!—another biscuit, John," in a peremptory tone to the lackey; "Miss Casey," to me, "I can strongly recommend you biscuit in lien of bread with your dinner. Keeps one from becoming bloated. Bel," he added, suddenly taking advantage of Mrs. Kingsworth's momentary distraction to lean across the table and address her in a stage-whisper, "talk to your annt—do!"

"What am I to say to aunt, pa?" asked his daughter, in her londest tones.

Mrs. Kingsworth looked up, Mr. Mannington looked down into his plate muttering,

"Bless my soul, how aggravating, to be sure!"

"I think I have said before, Walter," emphasized Mrs. Kingsworth, "that I object to any prompting of Miss Mannington. My niece is not compelled to imitate her father's easy flow of conversation, and I am sure it is not desired on my part."

After this there was a silence for the remainder of the dinner. My first meal at Wilthorpe Hall was not a pleasant one. I appeared to have dropped in like a ghost to the banquet, and marred the general festivity by my presence. First appearances were often deceptive, I had been assured in my copy-book days, and, therefore, I would not assert at once that this was an unhappy home, or likely to be an unlucky change for me. In good—or bad—time, I should be able to judge more accurately; meanwhile, I would rest content.

Mr. Mannington was very attentive to me at dessert, very anxious to recommend me claret in lieu of port or sherry—he had preferred all his life a genuine article to a "doctored" one—he fought very hard against the natural dulness of the atmosphere, but found no prompting in his sister and daughter's stolidity, and very little in my own natural reserve.

He led the conversation round to books by some ingenious and tortuous process, and then said suddenly,

"By the way, Bel, you never found that passage for me in Wordsworth?"

“No.”

“You said it was Wordsworth, I said it was Thompson—you said I was in the wrong, if you remember?”

“So you were,” was the blunt response; “I’ll fetch the book at once.”

Exit Isabel in a hurry; the door had scarcely closed upon her before Mr. Mannington rose, muttered something about the library books being difficult to find, and withdrew, leaving Mrs. Kingsworth and me together.

“Pretty acting,” said Mrs. Kingsworth; “don’t you think so?”

“I—I see no reason for acting, Mrs. Kingsworth.”

“Ah! but I do.”

She had withdrawn from her place at the head of the table, and had taken her seat in a capacious arm-chair near the fire-side.

“This is my favourite seat when company is not expected,” she said; “I have no great love for the drawing-room, which faces the east, and strikes like an iceberg before the summer sets in, in real earnest. Shall we adjourn thither, or stay here?”

I could but say “stay here” after so positive a hint.

Isabel is partial to the drawing-room—she is a clever pianiste, and likes to dream over the instrument, till her blood curdles as well as her listeners’. Poor Bel will not play to-night, however—her foolish father will lecture her to death on this evening’s demeanour.”

“She is not always like this, then?”

“She is as variable as April,” replied Mrs. Kingsworth. “A good girl, that requires tact, patience, study, *love* to make a woman of her. You will understand her, or I shall be grievously disappointed.”

“I will do my best,” I repeated, for the second time that day.

“Mr. Mannington has neither tact nor patience; he studies *the great question* in his way, but it’s a bad way; and as for love—well, he may love her after a fashion, too, but I doubt it.”

“Doubt his love for his daughter?” I exclaimed.

“I was speaking to myself,” she said, a little peevishly; “do not catch me up so quickly, Miss Casey. He would have been very much shocked if he had heard my maundering just now; in his own opinion, he is a good and just man. But he has not the spirit of his daughter, or—his isolated sister!”

“Isolated?”

Mrs. Kingsworth’s lips compressed for an instant, and her nose appeared to become more thin and sharp.

“That is an odd parrot-like habit of repeating my words in an interrogative sense, Miss Casey,” she said; “I shall be glad when you have broken yourself of it. I let nothing disturb me very much on principle, but there are little minor eccentricities in people’s con-

duct that fidget me at times, despite my efforts to go on calmly to the end."

I did not reply. I submitted to the reproof, and looked with her at the fire.

"Isolated was not a hasty word," she said, replying to my echo after a while. "I am a woman isolated here—resigned to my position, but still utterly alone. My brother pays me court for my money's sake—my niece pays me no court at all. You are paid for your attendance here—and those for whose services we bargain are not expected to be the best or truest friends."

"Not for the money's sake am I here, madam," I answered. "I had money enough, and to spare, before I left my City home."

"You did not come for my sake?"

"Yes. You were kind to my mother, you have been more than generous to my brother John; I am indebted to you—you pressed me to take my place here, and I came. For better, for worse, I am here for good!"

Were there other reasons for your coming hither?"

"Yes," I answered, after a moment's hesitation.

"What were they?"

"You will pardon me, but you did not seem a happy woman—rather a woman——"

"Go on—I like frankness."

"Rather a woman," I repeated, "who was somewhat *proud* of her unhappiness, and fostered thoughts that did her harm, and might be dissipated, to her great advantage."

"Never!"

"A woman who had been so good and generous, it struck me, should have shown a happier, brighter look, and I thought that, in good time, the chance might come for me——"

"Enough," she said, hastily, "the chance can never come, and you are a dreamer, Bertha Casey. You are romantic and unreal—you have no knowledge of the world, or your own sex. Dissipate all these foolish idle thoughts away, and make a model woman of my niece. To attempt to study me is to insult me! I am too old for any new impression."

"You asked for my thoughts, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Yes—I have brought it on myself," she answered. "We will change the subject, if you please. Had you been anyone else—had I less faith in you, I should have turned against you for this frankness, and seen in it but dissimulation. Ring for more coals, Miss Casey—the nights are very chilly still."

After the bell had been rung and the order attended to, Mrs. Kingsworth said to the servant as he was withdrawing—

"Where is Miss Mannington?"

"With her father, in the library, ma'am."

"Have Miss Casey's boxes come?"

"No, ma'am."

"Present my compliments to Miss Mannington, and inquire if we are to have the pleasure of her company this evening."

The servant retired, and Mrs. Kingsworth asked a few more questions of me concerning my boxes.

"Are you tired?"

"No, madam."

"I thought of sending a messenger down to Mr. Stewart's house to inquire if the boxes had been left there—the carriers have a habit of evading the drive, and considering Mr. Stewart my lodge-keeper, rather than my land-bailiff."

Mrs. Kingsworth continued to look at the fire and evade my gaze, I thought. Mrs. Kingsworth was evidently suggesting the expediency of getting me out of the house for awhile, and the *ruse* was somewhat of the clumsiest. It struck me that Miss Mannington had a lecture in store for her, or that her aunt feared my first impression of her niece would be a bad one, if I saw more of her that evening. She had faith in first impressions, and built her story from them—did she judge me by herself?

I took Mrs. Kingsworth's hint for another reason. My head ached; I was anxious for fresh air; a walk down the drive in the moonlight would do me good, give me time for a few of those conflicting thoughts that were already besetting me.

"I should like the walk to Mr. Stewart's lodge, if you would excuse me, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"As you please. Take your maid with you—I object to women walking alone after nightfall."

I retired, found my way to my room, encountered Emma Eaves wandering disconsolately about the landing, suggested the idea of a walk down the drive, met with her ready consent, and left the Hall with her, closing the great door quietly behind us.

The fresh air *was* welcome after that hot dining-room—I was glad that I had escaped into it. Fair, picturesque, and impressive was the great building in the moonlight; looking at it, I could not imagine that anything but a quiet life was to be mine within its walls. Emma looked back with me.

"It's a large house, I shall like it," she said, to my surprise—"I shall like *her*."

"Miss Mannington?"

"Yes—she'll be as good and kind to me as you are."

"I am glad you think so."

We went on together down the winding walk, flecked by moonlight here and there; it was a night to raise the spirits, and win one's heart to country life. Yes, here in good time would come happiness to us both! We were both full of thoughts of the life beyond, and not inclined to talk much. We went briskly and rapidly down the drive, reached the great swing gate, passed

through, crossed the road to the cottage fronting us, through the window of which a bright light was issuing. I knocked at the door, which was opened immediately, and disclosed on opening a view of the front parlour—the builder having objected to halls and passages. The gentleman who had spoken to Mr. Mannington in the afternoon, held the door by the handle and looked inquiringly towards us. By the table smoking a cigar, and looking towards us also, sat a very tall and handsome man.

“I have called to ask, Sir, if any boxes have been left here by the carrier to-day?”

“Oh! yes, they’ve been in the way these three hours. Step in, please, and swear to their identity. This gentleman,” seeing me glance to his companion, “is my brother—Mr. Stewart.”

CHAPTER V.

MR. STEWART.

A PAINTER might have sketched this scene with some effect—the light and shade without the land-bailiff’s cottage—two dark female figures in the moonlight—the sturdy bailiff at the open door—the warm, neatly-furnished interior—the iron safe let in the wall—the handsome man at the fireside, turned half towards the chess-board over which he had been intently bending, until his brother’s free-and-easy introduction of him.

Then Mr. Stewart rose and bowed towards us, and for the first time I felt somewhat nervous at my unceremonious intrusion upon the bachelor home of Richard Stewart.

“Step in a moment ladies,” said the proprietor, “my brother is not used to open doors and keen rushes of night air.”

“I—I need not detain you, Mr. Stewart,” I stammered. “If the boxes have arrived, I will send for them presently.”

“These are your boxes?”

I stepped into the parlour and looked at the boxes placed in a corner behind the door.

“Yes, they are mine.”

“Mr. Stewart was out when they arrived, or I should not have so

easily dropped into the trap. I thought they were yours, Mark," he said, turning to his brother.

"And yet we came hither together, and you insisted upon carrying my portmanteau—why, what have you been dreaming about to-day, Dick?"

"I had an idea that you intended a surprise—a long stay here."

"Was it likely?"

"Well, scarcely; but I have recommended it so many times, Mark—have told you so often what you are working yourself into."

"Ah! so you have!" replied the other.

During this cursory dialogue I had leisure to glance at Mr. Stewart—"long Mark Stewart," as he was called in these parts before he went fortune-hunting, I had been told. My first impression had been that he was a handsome man—my second that he was a bright-faced, keen-eyed man, rather than an Adonis of six feet one. His was a striking face, rather than a handsome one; men with features more truly classical would have escaped less notice than this gentleman. It was a very *intent* face, if I may use that expression; full of eager thought, stamped with a far-away look at the chances by which he might profit, lit up by large brown eyes, and dignified and rendered manly by a broad massive forehead, which seemed to account for that rise in life of which I had already heard.

He looked very much out of place in that humble cottage—one could scarcely associate him with the "surroundings." His brother wore still the velveteen coat that I had noticed in the afternoon; Mr. Stewart was in morning dress, even fashionable morning dress, and there was a large diamond pin flashing from his silken neckerchief. When he rose at my entrance he flung the cigar into the fire, as though he respected female antipathy to tobacco smoke.

"We were not prepared for ladies' society to-night," he said. "You will excuse the Havannah-like atmosphere of the room, I hope?"

I bowed assent, glanced at my boxes again, and then prepared to beat a hasty retreat. Emma Eaves still more shy, had backed against the door, which she held ajar ready for precipitate flight the instant a word was addressed to her.

Richard Stewart stood with his hand in the pockets of his shooting-jacket, and a cigar still in his mouth, surveying the boxes with somewhat of a contemptuous expression.

"May I inquire, Miss—Miss Casey," he said, stooping a little to read my name upon the address card I had securely fastened there, "how you expect these boxes to reach the Hall to-night?"

"Mrs. Kingsworth will send down some of the servants."

"Which servants?"

"Really I—I don't know."

"No—I suppose not," he answered drily, "nor anyone else across there," indicating the Hall by a nod of his head in that direction.

"Of all the lazy, unmannerly, disobliging, self-sufficient, and ignorant jackanapes, commend me to Mrs. Kingsworth's staff. If I had my will," he cried impetuously, and with two round eyes half out of his head, "I'd tie the lot in a sack, and drop them over Entil Bridge."

"A harsh judgment, Dick," remarked his brother.

"I mean it," said the other emphatically. "I have told them of the pleasure it would give me, half a dozen times. I had rather bag them than a brace of pheasants, Mark."

"Do you really think that they will not attend to Mrs. Kingsworth's orders?" I asked.

"They'll say 'Yes, mum! certainly, mum!' and never move a step. Oh! I know my fine gentlemen by this time. And about ten or eleven o'clock you'll discover that the boxes have not been sent, and mention it to Mrs. Kingsworth, and she'll grow indignant and insist, and down will come the oppressed flunkies with a barrow, and then we shall be locked up for the night, and they may knock till doomsday before I pay any attention to them."

I rather objected to this brusque description, delivered with considerable animation and much fierceness of countenance, although the narrative appeared to amuse his younger brother, who leaned his back against the mantelpiece and laughed at the recital.

"What are *you* laughing at, stupid?" asked Richard Stewart, at last.

At your virtuous indignation, Dick, and your graphic descriptions. I have always envied your powers of launching yourself into your subject."

"Thank you young man, for the compliment," was the ironical rejoinder.

Meanwhile I surveyed my boxes, and reflected upon the best method of getting them home. Here were the boxes with my neat morning dresses, my fine things, my white things, and—not to be too squeamish about the matter—my night-things. One box, at least, I could not do without.

Mr. Richard Stewart appeared to divine my thoughts somewhat, and my guilty conscience brought the colour to my cheeks.

"One of these you'll want, of course, Miss Casey," he said; "here are three—which two can you do best without?"

"Those two. Emma, do you think——"

I turned to Emma, but she had edged her way through the door into the moonlight again. I was about to follow her, when Mr. Richard Stewart flung his cigar aside, seized the box unindicated, raised it from the ground, took his Scotch cap from his pocket with his disengaged hand, set it on his head, and marched out of the door.

"Oh! Mr. Stewart, I did not wish to put you to any trouble," I said, following him, and conscious of his brother following me, and closing the door behind him.

But Mr. Richard Stewart was already across the road, and opening the large swing gate. Emma came to me, put her arm through mine and regulated her course by mine. Mr. Mark Stewart, gentleman, followed his brother, and was evidently not *too much* of a gentleman to offer to assist him in the menial office. There was a small altercation on the instant, Richard Stewart shifting the box from hand to hand, and dodging his brother—finally coming to a full stop in the carriage-drive, and sitting upon the box statue and obstinate.

“No, Mark—none of that,” he was saying as we came up with them. “What I choose to do is my own business—what you choose to do is other people’s. If it were heavy I would ask you to be officious and meddling—meanwhile leave the cord alone, or I’ll fling the box at you!”

“Miss Casey,” said Mark Stewart, appealing to me as I came up with them, “is not this too heavy a box for one to carry?”

“I think——”

“It does not matter what anybody thinks,” was the short answer, “if anybody wishes to interfere with me and my method of management, I shall take the liberty of going back with the box and locking it up for the night.”

“But——” I began again, when Mr. Mark Stewart interrupted me this time.

“Miss Casey, if you had only known my brother Richard two hours, you would have understood that he is very proud of his will—and extremely fond of his own unpleasant way. If he prefer all the weight, he must have it. Argument with Richard Stewart is like argument with that elm-tree. I resign.”

“Then keep your distance, old fellow.”

Richard Stewart lifted the box and marched on again; his brother Mark walked by my side a few paces in the rear. Chance, on the first day of my appearance at Wilthorpe, had brought me more companions than I had bargained for.

“You are new to Wilthorpe, Miss Casey?” Mr. Stewart asked.

“I came hither for the first time to-day.”

“You will like the place. It is a pretty spot for—inaction. A man having made his fortune in a more stirring scene, might come back here to spend his latter days, and love it very dearly. I often fancy that I shall settle down here in my old age—Dick and I together. We were born here, and grew up here together—it would be a fair ending to both lives.”

“You are attached to Wilthorpe, then?”

“Very much attached,” was the answer. “When I am hard at work in the North I bring the machinery of my schemes to a standstill for awhile, and think of Wilthorpe, and of my honest, unambitious brother. If he had left with me in the old days he would

have been a richer man, but he held his ground against all inducements, as you have just seen him holding to your box, Miss Casey. In all the world no better a fellow than Dick Stewart, or one more worthy of the world's respect."

I thought of Mr. Mannington's remarks on Richard Stewart, and endeavoured to reconcile the two verdicts which had been uttered that day.

"But I weary you, as well I may, singing to the praise and glory of my family. If you ever draw my brother into conversation you will find that he will make the *amende honorable* by singing to my praise and glory also—with less justice though," he added, in a strange voice that startled me by its pathetic intonation.

"Your brother is content with Wilthorpe, then?" I said after a moment's pause.

"Yes—he has the advantage of me—he is a contented man! Mrs. Kingsworth and he agree very well together; and there is little to disturb him, save a foolish idea that I am working too hard in Edinburgh, wasting my brains in gigantic efforts to increase my worldly substance. How is Mrs. Kingsworth, may I ask?" he said, suddenly changing the topic.

"Very well."

"She is always well. A hale, strongminded, gentlewoman, for whom I have a great respect—and, if my eyes have not deceived me, here she comes!"

"Mrs. Kingsworth!"

"Oh! yes. This is a favourite walk of hers when the weather permits—at least it was in my time. Mrs. Kingsworth is not afraid of ghosts—are you, Miss Casey?"

"Not very much afraid, Sir."

Mrs. Kingsworth, the rigid outline of whose figure I recognized at last, had come up with Richard Stewart, and was speaking to him as we advanced.

"You were always inclined to be eccentric, Mr. Stewart," we heard her say in that cool, disparaging tone that I already knew so well; "and this playing the part of porter and rendering yourself a laughing-stock to my servants, is scarcely to my taste."

"I am sorry for that, but Miss Casey wanted her box, and there's not a stick in your establishment who would not have made as much noise about fetching it, as fetching the steeple off Wilthorpe Church. And if anybody laugh at me, Mrs. Kingsworth, it must be, I take it at a *very* respectful distance."

"Who is this, Stewart?" she said sharply.

"My brother Mark, Mrs. Kingsworth. I brought him back from Edinburgh with me this morning."

"You did not tell Mr. Mannington so."

"No—I thought the news would reach him in good time."

We were all together in the avenue now; Mr. Mark Stewart raised

his hat to Mrs. Kingsworth, who inclined her head stiffly in return. We were all in the shade just here, and could not well see each other's faces.

"Back again at Wilthorpe, Mr. Stewart," Mrs. Kingsworth said; "there have been great changes since you quitted it."

"Yes, madam."

"Great changes in you, who have risen to wealth and fame—or report belies you."

"To a little wealth, perhaps—thanks to a few lucky speculations—to no fame that I am aware of."

"How is that?"

"Business men—commercial men—stand but little chance of fame."

"They are content with lucky bargains rather than with laurels, and so are wise men," was the answer. "Fame after all is for a few fools who seek out-of-the-way means of living and starving. My husband knew this in his day—so do you, Mr. Stewart."

"I like commerce, madam," was the reply.

"It suits you," she answered. "You were a man determined to rise in the world, and you succeeded. Well, this is the first opportunity of offering you my congratulations, Sir."

They were very cold ones, and he felt them to be so, for he answered as coldly and more proudly than herself:

"Thank you."

"The old house where your father died must appear a very poor and wretched domicile to sojourn at in these days."

"If I thought so, madam, I would kick him out," cried Richard Stewart.

"He must feel ashamed of the old home—the evidence of the past origin, I think. Men who have risen possess this weakness—which is natural enough, and, therefore, not to be complained of."

"Ask him," said Richard Stewart.

"I have heard the remarks—let me reply to them," said Mr. Stewart, quickly. "I have come back here full of love for the old home—for the brother who makes it home still. When I left Edinburgh, I left my pride behind me, as a useless incumbrance, scarcely worth bringing to Wilthorpe."

"And you tell me that you can settle down calmly and quietly in your brother's cottage?"

"Certainly."

"I have heard that you keep your carriage in Edinburgh—is that true?"

"That is true, certainly."

"You are a lucky man, considering your youth. Your life must be worth reading."

"It is not published yet," he said, more lightly.

"Oh! the true life, I mean—the life that no one writes in these

days. Mr. Stewart," turning to the elder brother, "be kind enough to leave the box there—it shall be sent for at once."

"Here?"

"If you please. Your brother," turning to Mr. Mark Stewart again, "is a prouder man than you are—his is a pride that apes humility, and always vexes me by its demonstrativeness."

"Confound it!" blurted forth Richard Stewart, "if that's not a cool affront, Mrs. Kingsworth, I never heard one! And before Mark too——"

"Who knows better than to take Mrs. Kingsworth's pleasant irony for sober fact!" said his brother.

"Meaning that I have been uttering falsehoods for the last few minutes," said Mrs. Kingsworth, quickly. "Good night, Mr. Stewart."

She turned her back upon him, and retraced her steps along the gravelled carriage-way. I bade the brothers Stewart good night also, and followed Mrs. Kingsworth, Emma Eaves still holding by my arm. Richard Stewart sat on my box, and whistled plaintively; Mark Stewart, after raising his hat to me said a few words to his brother, which elicited a growling response, despite the laugh by which those words had been accompanied.

Mrs. Kingsworth took my arm when I came up with her, and three abreast, we walked towards the Hall. She was silent for some time, but I fancied that her stick raug somewhat impatiently upon the ground as we proceeded.

"How long does that plebeian stay here, Miss Casey?" she said, suddenly.

"I do not know," I replied—"you allude to Mr. Stewart, I presume?"

"There is no other plebeian here—his brother is a gentleman by comparison."

"Indeed!"

"I object to these self-made men," said this uncharitable lady; "they annoy me—they thrust their greatness into the face of society, as a man would thrust his clenched fist into the face of a foe. This Mr. Mark Stewart will be an eyesore to me until he goes away again. We never agreed together—we never shall!"

Out of the avenue, and following the road to the flight of steps leading to the grand entrance. On the top step, a distinguishing feature in the moonlight, was the box I had seen a few minutes since, half-way down the drive.

"That man's slipped through the trees on our left, and got before us. I—I really think I hate him worse than his brother," affirmed Mrs. Kingsworth, with a dash of her walking-stick on the steps, that told of her equanimity being a trifle disturbed, just for once in a way.

CHAPTER VI.

“INVITED OUT.”

I THOUGHT that I should settle down to work next day, but I found it very difficult to determine my style of “work,” or to discover in which direction it lay. I found myself companion to a young lady who objected still to my companionship, who looked upon me with suspicion, and, despite my former explanation with her, possibly still considered me a spy. Hers was a quick, impulsive nature, I had already discovered; I did not despair of making an impression upon her, and of winning her in due course to my side. Still proud of “my way,” and consoling myself with egotistical ideas, the reader may perceive.

Well, even in those early days I did not wholly fail; my self-sufficiency did not lead me much astray. I proved myself no spy; I forced not myself upon Isabel at all times and seasons; I watched her variable moods and did my best to make a friend of her; by degrees her suspicions wore off, and she began to seek me out in the fitful moments of her better nature.

I became interested in her—strangely and deeply interested—therefore, I worked with my whole heart to gain an influence over her. She had been a spoiled child; an easy, worldly mother as I learned afterwards, had given her her own way, lavished upon her an intense but jealous affection, allowed no interference with her; her father was a man who disliked trouble, exercise of paternal authority, anything that affected his nerves, and after her mother’s death Isabel continued to grow up capricious and self-willed. Thus a naturally affectionate disposition, allied to a warm heart, had become warped and distorted, and her sudden induction to the Wilthorpe establishment, and to the Wilthorpe rules which regulated it, had depressed her spirits somewhat, but not bent her to the rule and form of its austere society. One thing Isabel Mannington had not bargained for; she had entered her new estate with a secret resolve to resist; she had met there a stern impassive woman, who was vain of her immobility and who exercised an iron rule, but she let her almost take the place of the mother whom she had lost. She turned, as if by instinct, to her aunt; the cold demeanour and the unsympathetic nature of Mrs. Kingsworth were restraints to her affection, but they did not turn it aside or stop its growth.

She succumbed to Mrs. Kingsworth more than to any one on

earth: only her aunt had power to influence those wild moods to which she was subject;—influence them, be it understood, rather than subdue them; for Mrs. Kingsworth possessed only the power to render her sorry afterwards. Isabel Maunington respected power, loved her aunt, and hated Wilthorpe, then. I was not long in discovering this, or in detecting that beneath the impassiveness of my employer there was a deep love for the girl whose youth had brightened her home. Mrs. Kingsworth would not have acknowledged this; would have even resented the imputation as unworthy of her stoicism, but I thought that I saw it in the early days, despite her admirable acting, and I was sure of it long afterwards.

Her first conversation with me concerning Isabel, two days after my appearance at the Hall, suggested the suspicion.

“How do you like my niece now?” she asked.

“I have seen but little of her yet, Mrs. Kingsworth.”

“She is distrustful of you—it will wear off. Hers is not an ungenerous mind.”

“No—I think not.”

“I am sure not,” she added; “you will like this girl—you will gain an ascendancy over her, for the reason that yours is an equable mind and hers is changeable. Subdue her passionate temperament, reason with or satirize her out of her sullen fits, turn that capriciousness a little aside, and she will become a perfect woman. I should like her a prouder girl—a proud woman is always safe.”

“Pride goeth before a fall, madam.”

“Not the pride that I mean, and that you do not seem to understand, or will not understand, Miss Casey, I cannot say which.”

And after this rebuke Mrs. Kingsworth left me, and I went in search of my *ward*.

With my ward I made progress even in the few days before Sunday came round. Miss Castle, the finishing governess, arrived during the week—a short, sharp-nosed lady of fifty, to whom Isabel had long had an insuperable objection, and whose place with a pupil, the reverse of tractable, was far from a sinecure. Isabel Maunington flew to me in preference to Miss Castle, after school hours; by degrees this wayward girl won upon my heart, by degrees I was beginning to understand her.

On the Saturday evening she surprised me by saying that she thought of taking Emma Eaves for her maid—she required a maid, and would teach Emma all that was necessary herself. I was sorry for her preference; I had other thoughts for Emma, and I felt that the girl entrusted to my charge by John, would not improve under a mistress so young, and whose moods were rather more variable than her own. Probably I gently hinted this, and more firmly fixed Isabel to her intentions.

“I have taken a fancy to Emma, and that’s enough, Miss Casey,” she said; “my last maid was an old fright and a fidget, and I like

younger people and younger faces about me. When I am a woman, I'll not have an old face about my house.”

“Not one?” I asked.

“Oh! my aunt will keep to Wilthorpe all her days, and when I am blessed with wings to fly, you shall be a witness to the graceful manner in which I will spread them and soar away from her.”

“When you are older in years, you will have less impulsive thoughts—be more inclined to settle down.”

“Ah! you know nothing about it. I shall be very glad when I have a will of my own.”

She spoke as though her will had been thwarted all her life, rather than the reverse. At dinner that day she communicated her intention of taking Emma for her maid, and looked from her aunt to her father for the opposition which she expected, and was ready to encounter. Mr. Mannington said nothing until his sister carelessly and coldly replied—

“Very well,” when he said “Very well” also, and appeared relieved at the general equanimity remaining undisturbed. He was in the best of tempers that evening himself: not too loquacious, which was never his weakness when Mrs. Kingsworth was at the head of the table.

Next day we went to Wilthorpe Church—a stone building of no particular order of architecture, which, surmounted by a wooden steeple, formed one of the ugliest edifices in or out of England. The interior was an improvement on the exterior—it was well-proportioned and well-fitted. There was that quietness about the place which more often pervades a country church than a town one; no bustle, no confusion, no people arriving late and looking vacantly about them; no loungers dropping in out of the rain, or people in search of excitement coming to hear the last sensation preacher. All Wilthorpe that desired to attend divine service that morning, was present before the clergyman's arrival—only the clergyman, who took things easily in this part of the world, was a quarter of an hour behind time.

Our pew was the state pew of the church—titled people had held possession of the Hall before Mrs. Kingsworth's day, and the comfort which they had studied Mrs. Kingsworth had kept up. It was the oddest pew into which I had ever been shown, and I had some difficulty in suppressing a smile at the ease and elegance thereof—it was a room rather than a pew, a high-panelled exclusive compartment, concealing us in our seats from vulgar gaze. It stood apart from the rest of the pews, at the side of the church and up three steps. It was handsomely carpeted, full of velvet cushions, and it possessed a stove, in which a fire was burning that bright May morning, and which fire Mr. Mannington immediately began to poke and stir, until Mrs. Kingsworth rapped him on the elbow with her stick. The stove, with its chimney built in the wall, and passing out

of the roof, was a novelty to me, and very unpewlike an appearance it presented. It was the fashion in those parts, I found out afterwards—my readers taking the tour of the churches within twenty miles of Peterborough may meet with one or two of these snug constructions, in which the comfort of lordly pew-renters is studied to advantage.

We were five in number: Mr. Mannington and daughter, Mrs. Kingsworth, Miss Castle and I. We sat about the pew as we might have sat about the drawing-room at the Hall, and the minister looked straight at us from his pulpit, and favoured us with more than a fair share of his attention—because we were great folk, and had dinner-parties occasionally, Mrs. Kingsworth asserted the next day.

I had already given Mr. Mannington the credit of being a gentleman anxious to know and see everything—that was his reigning weakness, which he even carried to church with him. When we stood up in our places, he kicked a stool to the front, skipped upon it, and looked round the church; never was a man less imbued with the right spirit of devotion.

“Charlotte,” he said to his sister, in no very subdued tones, “he’s sitting in the free seats!”

“I see him,” was the sepulchral response.

“Very remarkable—there’s plenty of room in the Cumberfields’ pew, and in his own brother’s for that matter. What an odd man!”

“All his pride—his ridiculous and demonstrative pride.”

Miss Castle, who was of a pious turn of mind, elevated the whites of her eyes and sighed at this profanity, but no one studied Miss Castle at the Hall. They paid her salary regularly; they expected her to do her best for the money, and they kept her in her place. If I were inclined to be shocked at the irreverence of my patroness and her brother, I restrained my feelings, and endeavoured to shut out their stage whispering.

It was a failure, partly for the reason that Isabel, perched also on a stool by her father’s side, suddenly leaned forward and asked me to whom her father was alluding—partly from my own instinctive glance towards the free-seats, which I could just see then, and where, amidst a crowd of country nondescripts, sat Mr. Stewart, the merchant from Edinburgh, the gentleman who had walked part of the way back towards the Hall with me the night of my arrival at Wilthorpe.

He looked towards the pew where we were standing, and did not appear abashed in any degree by the evident attention directed towards him from our quarter of the church—he was in an irreverent mood himself, for I could see the corners of his mouth twitching with an evident desire to smile at our curiosity. I turned away my head, and did not look in his direction again; I felt that his intent stare towards our pew had made me change colour, despite my efforts to

the contrary. Mrs. Kingsworth was right, I thought—I could not help thinking it was the demonstrative pride of long Mark Stewart that had led him to take his place amongst the farm labourers in their Sunday smocks, and to show himself above appearances. His brother, looking more fierce than ever in his black clothes, had a pew all to himself a few paces from him on the right, and yet Mr. Mark preferred, for the sake of effect, perhaps, to keep his place there and frown down the pew-opener, who persisted in offering him all kinds of seats in all kinds of places.

I did my best to forget him; I should have succeeded, I hope, had it not been for Mr. Mannington’s watch upon him, even his stealthy approach to the side of the pew during the reading of the Litany, and his clambering on to his perch to look after Mr. Stewart again. Mr. Stewart met his glance with interest it seemed, for Mr. Mannington stepped back suddenly, slipped off the stool, brought his chin in contact with the top of the pew and his teeth together, with a formidable clash.

“It’s a pity that you do not know how to behave yourself, Mr. Mannington,” his sister said at this juncture; and Mr. Mannington did his best to behave himself for the remainder of the service, after carefully feeling each tooth in his head, and making sure that no displacement had occurred from the shock.

I fancied that Mrs. Kingsworth made an effort to reach the churchyard before the Stewarts, she was so eager to quit the church that day; but when we were walking down the broad country road towards the Hall, the brothers were ahead of us, and before we were at the Hall gates they had closed the door of their small cottage and shut our greatness from their sight.

On the Monday, Mrs. Kingsworth surprised me.

“You must see the *élite* of Wilthorpe society, Miss Casey—you are one of the family, and under my protection. I am going to take you out to dinner this evening.”

“But I have received no invitation.”

“That makes no difference, Miss Casey. My friends, under any circumstances, are always glad to see me, I find.”

I was very nervous—the invitation to my first dinner-party—and such an invitation as it was!—had come with a shock upon me, from which I could not instantly recover.

“Be ready at six, please—evening dress.”

“Oh! I—I would so much rather be excused, Mrs. Kingsworth.”

“I have written to inform my friends that I shall take the liberty of bringing a certain Miss Casey with me—so they will not be wholly unprepared for your appearance. Besides, I wish you to be seen, and to see—to know all the stars in the Wilthorpe firmament, and learn not to be dazzled by their effulgency. They are a commonplace, scandalous, hideous tribe of people about here, but it is necessary to accept their invitations. My niece will have to accept

them in a year or two's time. When that time comes, you will take my place by her side, and I will go back within myself."

"For what reason, madam?" I asked.

"Because it suits me," she said sharply.

It snited her to take me into society also, and I consented. I had no valid excuse ready at the instant, and I could see that it was Mrs. Kingsworth's wish. Why should I thwart it? She was a woman of few wishes, and had been kind to me after her own eccentric fashion.

But I was very nervous, notwithstanding. My gay life was to begin in this place, against the quietness of which Bel Mannington had remonstrated. I was to enter society here, and make my world from its component atoms. I should get used to society in time, and be able to hold my ground there, I thought, when invitations came less suddenly and less at second hand. I did not even know whither I was going, or whom I was to meet—it was all on a par with Mrs. Kingsworth's secretive disposition.

My experience of dinner-parties was confined to the Corkcutters' stately banquets—twice or thrice a year—when the kitchen was given up to an army of cooks, and the hall and staircase to an army of waiters, and I was shut in my room till the City folk had dined and gone away again. But this was to be a dinner-party whereat I was to play a principal part as guest, and the doubtful part of a guest who had not been specially invited also. I was to meet company—real gentfolk; and the thought of real gentfolk was embarrassing to one who had but seen them at a distance, and stood, as was natural enough, rather in awe of them. It was not long before I discovered that they were very much like other people who were not real gentfolk, and that they had less high notions, take them altogether.

In my new silk, which I had purchased for evening wear at Wilthorpe before leaving London for good—was it "for good," I wondered very often?—I went down at six in the evening, and found Mrs. Kingsworth and Mr. Mannington, awaiting my arrival.

"Punctual to a minute," said Mr. Mannington, looking at his watch. "Miss Casey, I am charmed at your precision."

"Never mind what your softness is charmed with, Walter," said his sister, "stand on one side, and let me see if Miss Casey will do."

"Why, of course she will," he said.

Mrs. Kingsworth took me in from head to foot, and nodded her head towards me without a comment upon my personal appearance—and it had struck me that I was almost looking pretty that evening! I had passed muster, however; there was nothing to be said against me, and we proceeded down the entrance steps to the carriage waiting for us.

The coachman had had his directions previously, and I was balked in my desire for information. Balked for a short while, however, for before we had reached the main road I said:

“Where are you going, Mrs. Kingsworth, may I ask?”

She did not reply; she might have been enjoying my perplexity even, for she knitted her thick grey eyebrows at her brother, who answered for her at once.

“Don’t you know? Why, Sir Benjamin Prout’s, to be sure. His son comes of age to-day, and we consider that it will be a very grand affair indeed. Why he didn’t give a ball, I can’t make out—I like balls better than dinner-parties myself.”

“Gay young fellows invariably do,” was the bitter answer of his sister, looking the true gentlewoman that night in her black velvet dress—half-low dress, with lace across her shoulders, as befitted her age, although some people will display their bones to the last, no matter how terribly they rattle!

A grand affair—a large dinner-party—a baronet’s son coming of age!—oh! dear, I thought, if any City people were at Wilthorpe for change of air, and should recognize the poor little housekeeper of the Corkcutters’ Hall! How I wished myself at the Corkcutters’ Hall then—how the terrible nature of my ordeal struck me in all its intensity for the first time.

“Don’t be frightened, Miss Casey,” said Mrs. Kingsworth, “no one will attempt to eat you, take my word for it.”

Out of the one great gate which the hall possessed, and into the road, nearly running down Mr. Richard Stewart, who was coming in the reverse direction on horseback.

Mrs. Kingsworth pulled the check string, and then began hammering the glass with the handle of her stick to attract Mr. Stewart’s attention. A sudden idea had evidently seized her.

Mr. Richard Stewart reined in his cob; Mrs. Kingsworth lowered the carriage window.

“I wanted to speak to you about selling that timber to the Manchester man. I have altered my mind, and he can go some where else.”

“I’ll tell him so, madam,” he replied.

“Do, please. How is your brother this evening?”

“Very well—thank God.”

“At home?”

“No, madam. Gone out to dinner, like a gentleman.”

I fancied that Mrs. Kingsworth took a longer breath than usual, but it might have been fancy after all.

“To Sir Benjamin’s, I presume?”

“Yes. Sir Benjamin and he are old friends, Mrs. Kingsworth. Sir Benjamin is always glad to see my brother Mark,” the land-bailiff added quite proudly, but in his usual jerking way.

“Ah! well he may be.”

Mrs. Kingsworth drew up the window, and away we went once more, leaving Mr. Richard Stewart staring fiercely after us.

“I thought as much!” said Mrs. Kingsworth, and was silent for the remainder of the journey.

CHAPTER VII.

A DINNER AT SIR BENJAMIN'S.

I SHOULD scarcely have ventured to take up my reader's time with a description of a dinner-party given by people who have no connection with this story, had it not been for the link which connects that party with a strange chain of subsequent events.

A new phase in Bertie Casey's history begins from this date; life of a new pattern, crossed and intermingled with threads of divers' colours was commenced here, and if the story be worth the reading at all, this common-place matter of a dinner-party is at least worth recording.

Am I out of rule in calling a dinner-party at a real baronet's "commonplace"—a baronet of standing in the county, whose dinners and wines were excellent, and whose company was equally choice? Commonplace only in print—be it fairly understood.

It was a large dinner-party for country-folk. There were five or six-and-twenty people in the drawing-room when we arrived; the ladies sitting together on couches and chairs, talking of their "ailments and children;" the gentlemen standing in argumentative groups, deep in politics and parish matters.

Sir Benjamin, a fine old gentleman, tall and white-haired, received us at the door of the drawing-room; his son, Mr. Benjamin, a slim young gentleman, tall and carrot, followed suit, bade us welcome, received the congratulations of Mrs. Kingsworth and Mr. Mauntington upon reaching man's estate, bowed low at the same time as his parent, when Mrs. Kingsworth introduced me as her friend, expressed his pleasure at making my acquaintance, and formally introduced me—he was a very attentive young man—to every person in the room.

Thus I formed a passing acquaintance with the gentility of the country, and recognized three faces amongst the party—the clergyman of Wilthorpe Church who had preached last Sunday's sermon, the curate who had assisted him in the Sunday's service, and was a very meek-looking young man with pink eyes like a rabbit, and Mr. Mark Stewart, to whom I had already been introduced in a manner less rigidly correct.

Mr. Stewart held out his hand to me in lieu of the usual profound bow, and said, laughing at the same time:

"I have already the pleasure of Miss Casey's acquaintance."

We shook hands, whilst Mr. Benjamin, taken by surprise, said:

"Oh! I beg pardon. I did not know that."

"Quite old friends, Prout," said he.

"Then I leave Miss Casey in good hands," and Mr. Benjamin darted away to do the honours to the next arrival sailing in at that juncture through the door in blue brocade and cabbage roses, and having a little man with a hump-back in tow.

I was glad that I did not feel quite alone in the crowd—glad to meet again this singular man, who played two such opposite parts in the county, and aggravated Mrs. Kingsworth.

"I hope you are not very impatient for your dinner, Miss Casey?" asked Mr. Stewart.

"Oh! no."

"Country dinner-parties are always behind time—the guests come from long distances, their horses are not in good training, and ten to one if the cooks of the present establishment have not miscalculated the soup, or forgotten the thickening."

I objected to this half-sarcastic vein; I had quite enough of this at all times and seasons at home. I changed the topic of conversation.

"You know Sir Benjamin Prout, Mr. Stewart?"

It was an unnecessary question, but the only one that suggested itself on the instant.

"Sir Ben and I are old friends—he was my first patron, Miss Casey."

"Indeed."

"And a man who did not disgust me with his patronage, but sunk the patron for the friend when I rose from the first step on which he had placed me, to the second, third, and fourth. His cousin's firm in Edinburgh received me as clerk, constituted me as partner on my twenty-first birthday—when his cousin died, I was left sole principal. So I am indebted to Sir Benjamin, and therefore could not gracefully refuse his invitation to dinner."

"You wish to refuse, then?"

"I have no very great love for his set," was the evasive answer. "His friends are not mine, and do not belong to my world. I have come hither for change of air and scene, to keep my brother company, and *do the humble*—I have enough of *this* at home."

Yes, he was a proud man. Mrs. Kingsworth was right, or he would have never given emphasis to those words which I have italicized above. I scarcely knew whether he would improve upon acquaintance or not; I doubted if I should be able to judge, he being a fugitive character, whose days were not likely to be long in the land of Wilthorpe.

Sir Benjamin Prout advanced towards us.

"Sorry to interrupt this animated *tête-à-tête*, Stewart," he said, drawing him a little aside, "but——"

The lower tone in which Sir Benjamin spoke was lost upon me, but Mr. Stewart's response was not much to my amazement.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, in a subdued voice—or in a voice not sufficiently subdued for ears polite.

"Why, you don't object——"

"But I do very much, by your good leave, old friend," he said. "She don't like me. Can't you manage to pair me off with——"

I moved farther away as he sunk his voice still lower. Dear me! with whom did he wish to be paired off, I wondered. His request was not complied with, however, for Sir Benjamin began shaking his head, and spreading out both his hands in a deprecatory manner.

Sir Benjamin, it was evident, was anxious to leave Mr. Stewart and afford each gentleman a hint as to the lady whom he was to escort to the dining-room, but Mr. Stewart would not let him go; he held him by the button-hole, expostulating, reasoning and laughing, until Sir Benjamin laughed too, and scratched his head with his white gloved hands in his hilarity.

"You must take Miss O'Brien, then," he said, and darted away before any further expostulation—if any were intended—could be urged on Mr. Stewart's part. All this was done very quietly, unperceived by the guests conversing in their several groups. A few minutes afterwards dinner was announced, and the curate of Wilthorpe, blushing to the roots of his hair, and far more embarrassed than I was, advanced towards me, and offered me his arm.

Then, in most imposing marching order, we filed into the dining-room, and began the sober business of the evening. When we were settled down to the dining-table, bright and gay with its hot-house flowers, its epergnes and glass, I looked round for my home-faces. Mrs. Kingsworth was a long way from me in the distance, Mr. Mannington sat opposite, and commenced nodding and smirking across to me directly I met his eye. On my right sat Mr. Crease, the curate, on my left Mr. Stewart.

All a very brilliant scene in my new world, that I looked back at with some pleasure still. New life for me; good society; a scene that I thought worth studying when my heart had left off fluttering, and I had become acclimatized. It was my first entrance into society, and I was young enough to take a pleasure in it.

A grand dinner, that took three hours to get through; Mr. Crease talkative after awhile, when he had overcome his first degree of nervousness, full of village matters, district visiting, the people who came regularly to church and grew no better, and people who stayed away from church and grew much worse, those who were grateful for little favours, and those who received large ones and grumbled at their donors; the refractory nature of the Sunday-school children, and the ambition of the organist, who was always attempting to start a choir and failing miserably; the style of preaching in vogue at the church from which he had come, and the particular style which he should like at Wilthorpe, if the rector

would only let him have his own way. He was full of his profession; he was evidently a very amiable and earnest young man, whose heart was in his work—if all parsons and curates took after him, what a good world this might be made! I knew that he was an amiable man, for he at last changed the subject of discourse to his family, far away in Devonshire—a large family of seventeen of which he was the fourth in order of primogeniture. He gave me the history of all his brothers and sisters—especially of little Tom, the boldest young scamp in Devonshire, he said chuckling audibly—and he spoke reverently and tenderly of his mother, who was very old—too old almost for housekeeping.

Meanwhile the dinner went on—course followed course, pale sherry and still hock were replaced by the sparkling wines in fashion with the solids—the waiters flitted busily at the back, the guests thawed and became conversational, the curate was in full career, attentive, chatty, and agreeable, when Mr. Stewart touched my arm.

“This is the second time I have ventured to break the spell, Miss Casey,” he said, quite gravely; “the first was a terrible failure.”

“I am very sorry that you should have taken all this trouble, Mr. Stewart.”

“Pray don't mention it,” he said lightly; “I am seeking the favour of taking wine with you.”

“With pleasure.”

“Out of fashion some people say—out of rule, at a time like the present, others would observe—and the fashion prevails still, because it is a hearty and good one. Mr. Crease, may I beg the favour of your filling Miss Casey's glass?”

“I—I beg pardon—certainly, Mr. Stewart.”

I took wine with Mr. Stewart, who bowed and looked rather oddly and even comically at me out of his brown eyes. He continued to discourse after an interchange of compliments, and left the curate silent and ostensibly absorbed in his dinner for the next ten minutes; Miss O'Brien, a thin lady of forty with a Roman nose, sat also apart, and rather inclined to resent the slight put upon her by making faces at me in a monomaniacal manner. Once the curate, with an impetuous dash, took up the topic of country-life upon which Mr. Stewart was discoursing and made some allusion to it also; and if ever a man were looked down for his intrusion, poor Mr. Crease was by the steady, stern gaze of the Edinburgh merchant. Mr. Crease's remark was “taken as read” in a very different manner; and as I felt that the curate had not been treated well, I waited for the first full stop, and then addressed a few words to him, for which he was grateful, I think, all the rest of his life. Mr. Crease was a humble man, a poor man, and the wealthy folk about him had somewhat oppressed him. The dinner to which he had been invited had probably cost more than his year's salary, and had

affected him to a certain extent. Dinner was over at last, the dessert was on the table, and the speeches appropriate to the occasion set in, in due course. The health of the heir to the Prout estates, the young gentleman who had attained his majority that day, was proposed by a clumsy gentleman, overfull of his subject and neglectful of his host, drunk with the usual acclamations, and responded to hastily and nervously, with an extraordinary conglomeration of nominative cases excusable in a youth who had been learning his speech for three days, and then had utterly forgotten every word to it.

The response had not long been uttered, and the curate was again volubly discoursing on the topic of his Devonshire home, when two gentlemen suddenly rose to their feet, prompted by the same instinct to deliver an oration. Those gentlemen were the rector of Wilthorpe and Mr. Stewart.

The rector, the Reverend Mr. Gapwing, a stout and important-looking gentleman—that impression, I regret to say, had even seized me at Wilthorpe Church last Sunday—looked blandly across at Mr. Stewart, anticipating that gentleman's subsidence into the seat he had recently vacated; but Mr. Stewart maintained his ground, and took a critical survey of the guests at the table. Mr. Gapwing coughed—Miss O'Brien gently whispered to her companion that the rector evidently wished to speak; Mr. Stewart bowed his head to the lady, and then suddenly focussed Mr. Gapwing, who turned very red in the face, and sank slowly into his chair. The gentleman from Edinburgh had never intended to withdraw.

In this case I was certainly glad, for Mr. Stewart had puzzled me very much, and every opportunity of judging him, and seeing his true colours, I did not like to lose. He was certainly a singular man; singular in his address, appearance, and firmness, and I could but admire his self-command—he, the man who had risen from nothing, in the presence of the well-born. He felt himself an equal there—and certainly there was no guest who looked his equal, judging by appearances.

I need not trouble my readers by the words which he addressed to the company; I have no distinct recollection of every turn of speech. It was a clever oration enough, delivered with easy grace, good taste, and eloquence. Every word was well chosen, and deliberately uttered; precise, sound and clear, an epitome, as it were, of the speaker's character. His pride—if it were his pride, as Mrs. Kingsworth asserted—peered out I thought; he was proposing the health of the host, who should have been taken first in order, he considered, despite the motive which had brought them together that day, and he alluded to his wish, to propose the health of his friend, Sir Benjamin, for the reason that he considered no one present had a greater claim to take his place, more thoroughly appreciated the sterling merit of the host, or had so much cause to feel grateful

for his friendship. He gave way to no one in his esteem for Sir Benjamin—he never gave way, he added glancing at Mr. Gapwing, who was still far from his natural colour. He spoke of the host as the gentleman, the scholar, the friend, the father, and patron—how much was real, or how much the varnish of fine words incidental to health-drinking, I could not tell; but he spoke earnestly and well, and he carried his listeners along with him. Even the curate, whom he had snubbed, leaned forward with his hands clasped upon the table, listened intently to every word, and joined heartily in the applause which followed Mr. Stewart's remarks.

Mr. Stewart sat down amidst much noise and commendation, and said to me in a low voice—

"I'm afraid that I have put poor old Gapwing out of his element; I will consider myself more of a miserable sinner than usual next Sunday. Then he shall have it *all* his own way."

Sir Benjamin Prout returned thanks in somewhat of an embarrassed manner. He alluded in a left-handed fashion, that was not without its grace, to his young friend, Mr. Stewart, whose own talents, rather than any help of his, had raised him to so high a position in the merchant world. Then the speech-making was over, so far as the ladies were concerned—the representative of the ladies, Sir John's sister, rose; we imitated her example; the gentlemen rose in their turn to do due honour to our exit, and then, with a grand rustling of our party silks, we left the dining-room to the gentlemen, and the door closed upon the last skirt.

The gentlemen were a long time joining us in the drawing-room; the new fashion of not lingering over the wine till the wit was out, and the senses completely befuddled, had not found its way into Sir Benjamin Prout's establishment. Sir Benjamin was of the old school, and kept to the old-fashioned style.

The speech-making continued, we were aware by the hammering of dessert knives and nut-crackers on the dining-room table, and we were left unblest by the presence of the gentlemen to coffee and biscuits. Mrs. Kingsworth took the lead in conversation amongst the ladies; I observed that Sir Benjamin's sister paid her great attention, and deferred in no small degree to her opinion. The conversation presently turned upon Mr. Stewart, who, as I had already guessed, was the *bête noire* of Mrs. Kingsworth; he had attracted more than a fair share of attention at the dinner-table, and many ladies—more particularly the single ones—were curious concerning him. It vexed me to perceive how severe Mrs. Kingsworth was in her verdict, and how she took it for granted that her assertion unjust and unsparing as it was, would be confirmed by those who had known him like herself. Miss Prout, for the first time that evening, showed that she had an opinion of her own—a very feeble specimen, and capable of being trained contrariwise—but still an opinion for all that.

"I was much surprised to find Mr. Stewart here—I was not aware that he was so valued a friend of Sir Benjamin's."

"Oh! yes, a very dear friend of my brother's."

"I thought Sir Benjamin was very particular whom he asked to his house?"

"Don't you—don't you really think Mr. Stewart a proper gentleman to meet here?" asked Miss Prout, nervously.

"I have no right to express an opinion upon the matter, Miss Prout," answered Mrs. Kingsworth; "it is not my place to intimate who should be invited to the banquet. But candidly, I do not like Mr. Stewart—he has all the habits of the *parvenu* still, and their obtrusiveness is trying."

"Dear me, I never noticed his habits."

"The glitter of his wealth may bedazzle a few minds," said Mrs. Kingsworth, acridly; "but a little experience quickly detects the flaw in the diamond."

"Sir Benjamin considers him a perfect gentleman; not only as regards his present position, but his past. Why, if you remember, Mrs. Kingsworth, his education is very far above the average. Both the Stewarts were well-taught, and this younger brother studied hard in that little cottage on your estate. I remember——"

"Yes, I remember too," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "we all remember that he was clever enough—I never said that he was not a clever or a sharp man. He has made the best use of his wits through life—he has not neglected the main chance—he is a man whose rapid progress to wealth is worth admiring—oh! yes, I admire him very much!"

Mrs. Kingsworth gave a little emphatic tap on the carpet with her stick, to give force to her expression of admiration; Miss Prout looked dreamily at her; one or two younger ladies shrugged their white shoulders and smiled; several ladies who were inclined to be neutral sipped their coffee, and looked vacantly over the rims of their cups at the speaker. Mrs. Kingsworth had not quite finished.

"He may thank his early training for his good fortune—he may thank Sir Benjamin for taking an interest in him, and moulding his character for him, as it were. He was a lucky man—some men are born unlucky. I know one man about his age, whose character only required moulding aright in his youth, to have become a great man; he was more clever than Mr. Stewart, but he was ill-trained, and he went wrong. He had no father; he had no good advisers, and his cleverness became a curse, and helped him down to ruin."

Mrs. Kingsworth turned and looked across the room at me; I felt my colour rise, my heart beat quickly; I was sure that she was talking of my brother. What made her think of him at that juncture?—was her interest in her godson greater than I had given her credit for, and did it mortify her pride to see one without John's

chances rise to greatness, whilst he whom we loved better had let every chance go by him?

The gentlemen came lounging in at this juncture, Mr. Stewart leading the procession, as though he had set the example of adjournment; the curate following him, the remainder of the guests looking less grave and orderly, and a few of them—the very old-fashioned “after-dinner men”—walking just a trifle unsteadily.

Mr. Stewart looked keenly round the room as he entered, and then made straight for the vacant chair by my side. He marked his place, and went at once towards it, like a man who had matured his plans before hand. My heart began again its old rapid beats, for some unaccountable reason or other. Why should he wish to sit near me?—to talk to me in preference to many fairer, well-born women?

“Well, that dreary wine-bibbing hour is over,” he said, dropping wearily into the chair beside me; “all the vapid compliments that nobody means, and all the free and easy anecdotes which every idiot applauds. I trust you have been amusing yourselves more rationally, Miss Casey?”

“I trust so,” I replied.

“No scandal about Queen Elizabeth, I hope?” he said, laughing; “no fierce onslaught on the morals or manners of the absentees? Why, you are blushing as vividly, Miss Casey, as though I had caught you declaiming against ‘that dreadful Mr. Stewart!’”

“I never declaim against anyone.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

I do not know what business it was of his, but I did not say so. He was certainly a young man who embarrassed me very much to address. Looking across the room, I became aware of Mrs. Kingsworth's intent gaze in our direction, which confused me worse than ever. Mr. Stewart was very observant, for he followed the direction of my eyes, and took stock of Mr. Crease, who was sitting by Mrs. Kingsworth's side.

“Mr. Crease looks very melancholy in the distance, which lends, so far as I am concerned, *no* enchantment to the view,” said he. “I think I could wager a good round sum upon our reverend friend's thoughts.”

“You are a soothsayer then, Mr. Stewart?”

“Oh! no! Favour me by looking at him *again*, Miss Casey.”

I looked at Mr. Crease as directed. He was sitting with his knees pressed together, his toes turned in, his fingers interlaced, and his head very much bent forward, staring in so dreamy a manner across at us, that for an instant or two he was unaware of our intentness in return. Then he gave a spasmodic leap in his chair, turned very red, changed his position suddenly, and nearly upset the coffee tray which the footman was bringing round to him.

Stewart laughed again a little ironically, and said:

"Absent fellows these curates! Mr. Crease was thinking of us, of me in particular, and how I had managed to drop so readily into the seat upon which he had set his heart some time ago. Are you fond of curates, Miss Casey?"

"That is a most extraordinary question, Mr. Stewart," I said, trying not to smile at his *badinage*.

"It's a mere fashion, you know," he said, lightly. "Curates, especially young ones, are great favourites with the ladies, petted and spoiled and made much of on all occasions, to the disadvantage of us poor worldlings. I never accept an invitation to dinner if I know that a curate is asked."

"You are not fond of curates, then, Sir?"

"I am envious of them, their goodness *in* the pulpit and their influence out of it. I object to playing second fiddle to a man's imaginary virtues—I am a man of strong likes and dislikes—a positive being."

"So I should imagine."

He looked very steadfastly at me after this reply, as though it had puzzled him.

"You think I am a very conceited, priggish individual, flourishing my egotism a little too much in the air—well, I beg pardon. I apologize—the curate has put me out of temper somewhat—I hate curates!"

"Oh! Sir, don't talk in that dreadful manner!"

"Sir Benjamin Prout put me out in the first instance—would you believe it, he would have paired me off with Mrs. Kingsworth!"

"And you hate her also?"

"On the contrary, I admire her," he replied; "she is an old friend, and I know her character well. Bitter with her tongue, unpleasant with her personalities, a little envious of other people's greatness, perhaps,—but as good a woman, with as sound a heart, as it has ever been my lot to meet."

"I am very pleased to hear you say so," I replied, "I had fancied that Mrs. Kingsworth and you were bad friends."

"Fancied so, from Mrs. Kingsworth's manner, I presume," he said, "not from mine. I am bad friends with no one—they who are bad friends with me, misjudge me a little, which is their own fault, and does not seriously affect me. Mrs. Kingsworth would have loved me better had I kept to Wilthorpe Cottage, or, leaving thence, have made good her doleful prophecy."

"What was that?" I asked instinctively.

"She said that my ambition, 'my greed of gain' she called it, would lead me to ruin, and that she should live to see me a beggar yet. Well, the curtain has not fallen, the play is not over, the audience still gape open-mouthed at the man who 'struts his brief hour upon the stage'—we may wind up like a tragedy with a dire

catastrophe, and the lady in the private box will at least go home content with the finale."

"I hope not."

"Thank you. I assure you I hope not also, with all my heart! I shall do my best to ring the curtain down on a happy ever-afterwards scene. Do you like plays and books to end with the dagger and bowl, or the plighting of hands and hearts in the old stereotyped way?"

"To end happily, to be sure."

"Very good. It is not so much in fashion just now as curates are, but we'll do our very best, Miss Casey. So we get round to our old topic of curates, and there is Mr. Crease staring again, and wondering what we are talking about. Were you ever in Edinburgh?"

"No."

"You will like the City—the fairest and noblest of cities, seen from its fashionable side. I am of the business side—the factory side—High Street way. You will be disgusted with my large, dingy warehouses."

He spoke as if I had accepted an invitation to Edinburgh, and were likely to see him shortly there.

"Do you intend a long stay from home?" I asked.

"One week more, I think—this to oblige Dick, whom I have been endeavouring to seduce from his allegiance to the Kingsworths. It annoys me at times to see so clear an intellect, so shrewd a judgment, thrown away in this out-of-the-way district. What a good fellow he is," he said to me, with increasing animation. "You will say so when you understand him. *That* takes time, but the time will not be ill-spent. It often strikes me," he said, thoughtfully, surveying the tips of his dress-boots, "that I played a Jacob-kind of part with him, and robbed him of his birthright. Sir Benjamin could only advance one Stewart in the merchant world, and I was eager to be gone, and Dick saw it, despite my protestations, and let me go. Sometimes I even think that he is sorry now, although I have—but this is abominably wearisome to you. Shall I get you another cup of coffee?"

"No, thank you."

That country bumpkin of a waiter has passed me altogether—some one has whispered in the servants' hall that the lanky party is only a business man, and so the flunky shows his contempt for trade. Here, you, Sir," to a footman passing at this moment, with a tray of empty cups—"keep your eyes open; coffee for one, and look sharp! Yes," turning to me again, "you will like Edinburgh very much indeed. I might have made more money in Glasgow, people tell me, but there's good scope for trading in Edinburgh, and much less smoke. They are fine cities though, and the Scotch are fine fellows, all whom I have met. What time has Mrs. Kingsworth ordered your carriage, may I ask?"

"I did not hear any time mentioned."

"She is looking very tired, and even the curate has deserted her. Now, by all the adverse Fates, I'll chauce her annihilating glances, and hear my family from the first generation cut up root, branch, and twig. Am I looking pale?"

"Not very."

"But I really am frightened at Mrs. Kingsworth, and there's some courage necessary to attack an iceberg. Here goes!—wish me success."

He rose, and passed over to the side of Mrs. Kingsworth; a little man, with a very red face, and his white tie under his ear, dropped into his place, as though he had been waiting to pounce upon it. It was Mr. Mannington.

"Hope you have enjoyed yourself, Miss Casey," he said, with his eyes half-closed, and his head on one side.

"I have enjoyed myself very much indeed, thank you."

"Curious man that Mr. Stewart—no making him out exactly, is there?"

"Really I cannot say, upon so short an acquaintance."

"No—ahem—exactly. He's a man one can't very readily take to—he's so deep in his way. You don't see all sides of him—and I like to see all sides of all sorts of things. What has he been talking about now?"

"About Edinburgh, for one topic."

"What a great man he is there, I suppose?" he said, a little maliciously; "what a fine carriage and pair, and what a princely habitation he has in the fashionable quarter of the town. All about himself, he has been talking, I'm sure?"

I did not feel called upon to satisfy Mr. Mannington's curiosity, and I objected, just a little, to his peculiar tone of address. I had no lengthy explanation, therefore, to enter into, and Mr. Mannington went away a little disappointed.

Mrs. Kingsworth took his place, as if by magic. That blue and silver chair on my right seemed quite a focus of attraction that evening.

"Are you ready for home, Miss Casey?"

"I am at your commands, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Thank you. We will withdraw, then. A little society goes a great way with me—there's no ring of the true metal here—all base alloy and dross, and counterfeit!"

Mrs. Kingsworth looked very stern and grave; she had been disturbed that evening, evidently she had not enjoyed *herself*. Mr. Stewart had edged his chair to his next neighbour, and was discoursing volubly, with his eyes fixed in our direction. He seemed very grave and thoughtful also, for all his volubility. I did not look in his direction again, but I was sure that he watched our departure from the room.

"The party will not break up yet awhile—we will not hint that it is getting late, and that we are all getting tired of each other—that's not etiquette, Miss Casey."

"Is the carriage ordered?"

"Yes—we are punctual to the minute."

"And Mr. Mannington?"

"I told him the time before we started. If he has forgotten it, he must walk home in those tight boots of his."

When we had found our shawls in the ante-room, we passed into the hall where Sir Benjamin Prout awaited us—and Mr. Stewart, in a grey great-coat. Mrs. Kingsworth certainly looked daggers at the latter, but he did not wince.

"This is an early flight, Mrs. Kingsworth," the baronet exclaimed, "and you have set a bad example to my friend here."

"Are *you* going, Mr. Stewart?"

"I promised my brother that I would get home early and finish a game at chess with him. Dick and I are inveterate chess-players."

"I regret that I cannot offer you a seat in my carriage, Mr. Stewart," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "is Mr. Mannington aware that we are waiting for him?" she added, turning to her host.

"I—I don't think that he has the slightest idea," said Sir Benjamin, starting off for the drawing-room once more.

Mr. Stewart took this opportunity to state that he had not intended to take advantage of Mrs. Kingsworth's kindness in any way, and that his brother's horse was waiting at the door for him.

"Do not let us detain you, then," was the curt reply.

"May I be allowed to escort you to your carriage?" he said very politely, offering his arm to Mrs. Kingsworth.

The old lady gave vent to an emphatic grunt at this—but there was no help for it, and she placed her hand lightly on his arm. Then he turned to me and offered his arm, and away we went three abreast along the hall, through the doors, which the footmen held open for us, and down the steps to the carriage.

"Thank you for your attention, Mr. Stewart," said Mrs. Kingsworth, when he had assisted us into the carriage, "in the days gone by, I remember you a gentleman less courteous."

"Oh! I haven't changed much. This was a *ruse* of mine."

"A *ruse*!—what for?" was the sharp enquiry.

"To avoid giving the footman a shilling. Did you not see how hungry he was looking, and how impossible it was for me to remunerate him with *both arms engaged*."

"I will thank you, then, for the convenience we have been to you."

"No, that sounds satirical, and is so unlike my brother's generous mistress."

"Good night, Mr. Stewart."

"Good night, madam."

He extended his hand, but she did not or would not perceive it, and after a moment's pause he turned to me.

"Good night, Miss Casey, I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again, here or in Edinburgh."

I put my hand in his, and he held it somewhat firmly in his own, and looked at me with that odd almost comical expression again. Then he put up the steps, closed the carriage door, buttoned his coat over his dress shirt, and from his tail-pocket produced a Glen-tilt cap, which he put on his head, that had remained uncovered all this time.

"Drive on," called Mrs. Kingsworth to the coachman, "I shall not wait for Mr. Mannington. I cannot waste time here."

Mr. Mannington came flying down the steps like a harlequin. Mr. Stewart had gone in search of his horse by this time, and Mrs. Kingsworth's brother wrenched open the carriage-door for himself and tumbled in.

"Bless my soul, how eccentric of you!" he gasped; "how could I have got home?—why, it's nine miles!—and, oh! dear, these boots!"

"You should have remembered my directions."

"I beg pardon—so I should, Charlotte—I was in the wrong, certainly. And oh! how I have got the heart-burn, to be sure."

"I wouldn't talk any more, then—repose is good for you."

"Ahem—yes."

Mr. Mannington subsided into quiescence in one corner, the window was drawn up, and the carriage moved at last.

We had left the estate of Sir Benjamin Prout some miles behind, when Mrs. Kingsworth, whom I had imagined asleep, said suddenly,

"You like this Mr. Stewart?"

"I cannot say that I either like or dislike him."

"Possibly not. Let me say, take care of him—he is dangerous!"

"Not to——"

"A man, young, handsome, and rich is always a dangerous acquaintance, and he has been a trifle too gallant, I think. I do not know—I stand reproved if I am in the wrong. You are not to blame," she added, seeing that I maintained a rigid silence, though my heart was fluttering rebelliously; "I blame no one. But if this fine gentleman were to remain much longer here, I should certainly be curious concerning Mr. Stewart's intentions."

A riding-whip cracked suddenly against the glass, frightened Mr. Mannington almost on to his knees, and even startled Mrs. Kingsworth—a woman who never owned to a surprise.

"Good night, ladies," Mr. Stewart remarked, as he galloped rapidly by.

"Bother you!" peevishly exclaimed my mistress.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PIECE OF ISABEL'S MIND.

WE found Isabel Mannington in the drawing-room at Wilthorpe Hall, evidently awaiting our return. Miss Castle, her governess, was seated at the further extremity of the room, away from her; a handsomely-bound volume lay open on the carpet near the governess, its leaves turned under and crushed as though by precipitate contact with the floor.

Miss Castle, full of complaint, immediately hastened to Mrs. Kingsworth. Isabel, who had half-risen, resumed her seat upon finding Miss Castle in advance, and looked defiantly across the room at her.

"Still up, Bel?" said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"She would insist upon sitting up till your return, madam," said Miss Castle, "and I regret to say that she has *not* treated me with that kindness and courtesy which I expect here as my right. She has, on the contrary, set me at absolute defiance, Mrs. Kingsworth; and when I gave way to her and proposed that we should read a little history together, and—and got the book myself from the library—Lyttleton's edition, volume the second, where there is a very fine analysis of Queen Elizabeth's character—she flung it across the room, and said, 'I really don't want to know anything about Queen Elizabeth,' and stormed and raved at me quite dreadfully. And there's the book, just as she left it, and—and—" beginning to sob spasmodically—"I haven't been accustomed to be treated in this manner, and—though I'm sorry to make words—I must claim your protection from a repetition of this un—un—un—unladylike behaviour."

"Bel, what do you mean by this?" peremptorily asked Mr. Mannington.

His sister touched him on the arm.

"Miss Castle is not addressing you, Walter. Your head is a little dizzy with extra libations—favour me by retiring to rest at once."

"My dear Charlotte, I'm surprised——"

"So am I—and shocked at you. This is a matter entirely between Miss Castle and me. Good night."

Mr. Mannington looked vacantly at her for an instant—yes, his head *was* a little dizzy—and then marched out of the room in quite a military fashion.

Mrs. Kingsworth turned to Miss Castle,

"Be good enough to understand, Miss Castle, that I am not to be worried by any details of the differences between you and Miss Mannington. I object to all complaints of a trivial description, and shall only interfere in those cases of graver importance, which will possibly occur in due course. Miss Mannington objected to history at this hour of the night—very natural, I think. Good evening, Miss Castle."

Miss Castle left off sobbing, drew herself up indignantly, and marched off in her turn. At the door she paused and delivered her parting valediction.

"I am a lady, Mrs. Kingsworth, and have not been treated like one. Consider, please, that I resign all charge of Miss Mannington after this quarter."

"Very well."

Miss Castle retired; Mrs. Kingsworth loosened the hood of her cloak and sat down in her favourite arm-chair. Her niece looked askance at her, but retained her seat at the table.

"Exit governess number nine! You do not treat them well, Bel—you have no consideration for anybody—you reserve for me, when I come back tired and dispirited, the petty annoyances of a home made miserable by your wretched tempers."

"Miss Castle don't consider——"

"Neither do you. Good night."

Bel Mannington rose, looked at the carpet, walked slowly towards the door, turned, and made an impetuous rush back to her aunt's chair, and put her arms round the neck of the old lady.

"I'm very sorry—I think I'm getting better, just a little, of these wicked ways of mine. You'll not be very cross with me to-night?"

"There don't crumple my point lace, Bel, like that. Good night."

"Good night, aunt."

Mrs. Kingsworth suffered herself to be kissed on the cheek, but made no demonstration of affection in return. Bel Mannington retired, and Mrs. Kingsworth crossed her hands on her stick, and rested her chin upon her hands in quite a Mother Shipton reverie.

"There's only one man who would make her a good husband—only one man I have ever seen who could subdue her wilfulness, without making her less happy," she said at last.

"You are not thinking yet a while of Isabel's marriage, madam?"

"I am thinking, just at present," said she, her great grey eyes looking up at me without moving her position, "that you have not bidden me good night yet."

"Good night, madam."

I curtsied a little too profoundly, perhaps, at this quiet hint to begone, and went my way to my own room. How long Mrs. Kingsworth sat in that *crooning* attitude, alone in that great drawing-room, I cannot say; some one, at a very late hour—in the middle of the night—rustled by the corridor outside my room, and startled me from

the sleep into which I was trying to persuade myself. I thought it was she by her slow precise steps; she had a habit at times of sitting up and ruminating, I learned afterwards, and there was nothing more than commonly eccentric in her manner that night. She was a woman who thought deeply at times who, perhaps, felt deeply, despite her mask of equanimity. Mr. Stewart had said so; I should know in good time, when our acquaintance was of longer date.

I had not retired to my room at once, and closed the door upon my thoughts. Seated at my toilet-table, I had found Isabel awaiting my arrival.

"My aunt has not detained you long—I thought she would not," said she, upon my entrance.

"You are waiting for me?"

"Yes. I wish to know all about the party—whom you met—how you enjoyed yourself—what you said and did?"

"I met a great many strangers, and a few friends—I enjoyed myself very much, for I was received very kindly—I said little, and did less."

"What friends did you meet?" she asked.

"Faces that were not unfamiliar to me, rather than friends," I hastened to explain—"I met the curate and rector whom we saw last Sunday, and Mr. Stewart."

The handsome gentleman who sat in the free seats?—whom my aunt speaks against so much, and my father dislikes so heartily, and slanders with such extraordinary vehemence? Why are they all against him here?—what has he done?"

"Risen in the world very rapidly—that's all I believe."

"That's not fair," said the girl with extraordinary vehemence also; "but it's like pa and aunt. They are against everyone who are not born gentlefolk—I don't understand it yet. Well, what kind of party was it?—any dancing?"

"Not any."

"Nothing but eating and drinking, and you enjoyed yourself—that is, ate and drank a very great deal, I suppose?" she said, laughing: "and I was left at home to read English History with Miss Castle. It will soon be over, though,—one more finishing governess, if Miss Castle go away, and then a lady, Miss Casey! Poor Miss Castle, she'll never forgive me—not that I mean to ask her."

"I should, if I were you."

"Ah! you are the good young lady who can never do wrong—you're to mould me into an amiable statue, and to watch me step by step, and take care that I remain a credit to you for ever and ever! Miss Casey," said she, suddenly springing up, and bringing her dark face very close to me, "I have been trying very hard to hate you lately."

"I regret to hear it."

"It's true," she said, speaking very rapidly, "for you're against me, *one of the old lot*, companion, custodian, or anything that is equally objectionable to me. You are in my aunt's pay and will never let me have my own way."

"When it is a good way, I will never attempt to thwart it."

"Are you so wise a woman that you will always know what is best for me?"

"I am afraid not."

"I have been trying to hate you," she said again, looking quite malignantly at me whilst she spoke. "Don't say, when I have succeeded, that I have played a false part, and deceived you. I know well enough that my aunt cannot trust me, and you *are* a spy, and it is not very likely I am ever to grow fond of you—is it now?"

"Not whilst you think ungenerously of me—and give me credit for attempting to like *you*."

"You'll never succeed. No one likes me—no one ever will! When I am a woman, I shall be *abhorred!*" she exclaimed, with an expression of horror at her future prospects that elicited a smile from me.

She turned upon me for that smile.

"It is very well for you to laugh; you have a pretty face, and people will like you for it, and flatter you. Pretty women must be liked for a time—but I am short and plain, and dark as night. I'm a fright!"

"No more a fright than I am a pretty woman."

"How humble we are! I salute your modesty," she said, with a deep genuflection. "You're not half so truthful as my maid Em. Would not you call me very plain, Em?" I said to her this afternoon, and she said, 'Yes, I should, very!' That's the kind of girl for me!"

"Have you been waiting in my room to tell me this?"

"I have been waiting here for a little talk with you," she said; "the house has been like a vault all day, with one galvanized corpse in the shape of Miss Castle, crawling about the house with books under her arm. And now you, who have been pleasure-taking all the evening, begrudge me a few minutes. Yes, I *do* hate you—there!"

"I believe it not; you're not half so truthful as *your* maid," I answered, quoting her own words.

"Then she *did* speak the truth?"

"Not in my opinion; but you object to my opinions, Miss Mannington."

"Yes," was the answer, "and to you too!"

"Thank you."

"It's not very lady-like to strike you over the head with this hair-brush," she cried; "but if you aggravate me, I shall lose my

temper. My aunt aggravates me too much with her satire for me to endure any of yours. I shall go to my room now."

"Good night, Miss Mannington."

"If I have not been entertained much by your graphic descriptions, I have at least assured you of my frankness. I am going to hate you, to try and spite you in every way, to balk you in your wishes, and make you jealous and uncomfortable. You will bear this for a time, and then you'll go like all the rest."

"Yes—I shall certainly go when I am not happy."

"I took your maid away, because I thought you wanted her for yourself. I didn't like her, at first, but I fancied that it would put you out. Has it?"

"Not in the least. She is a faithful girl; if you treat her well, she will soon learn to love you."

"She loves me now."

"Then you are kind to her. I was sure long ago that your heart was sound enough. And now, good night."

"And I haven't put you out of temper with all this!" she said, looking wistfully at me. "Isn't there anything that would make you fly into a passion?"

"Oh! yes, many things."

"Do tell me! I will not take advantage of your confidence, but I should very much like to know what would turn you into a—*limb*."

"I never confide my secrets into the charge of one who has no trust in me."

"Very well. Keep them all to yourself, and much good may they do you. I have the honour, Miss Casey, to wish you—humbly—and respectfully—a—very—good—night!"

She sank lower and lower at every word, pausing between each, and spreading out her voluminous white muslin skirt as she descended. It was pleasant irony, and a contrast to her aunt's, and I was in a light-hearted mood, and imitated her. For some unaccountable reason I felt very happy that night—happy with the new world upon which I had now fairly entered. We were three minutes at least indulging in this elaborate salaam, broken short at last by her sudden spring towards me.

"There—I'll kiss you for this once, but I hate you just the same for all that. Good night, Miss Incomprehensibility."

"Good night, Miss Utter-Inconsistency."

We parted thus, and I locked the door upon her. Then I sat down to think of her, and of all the foolish things that she had said about herself and me. About me being a pretty woman in particular; a natural thing for me to dwell upon, after her half-angry, half-jealous assertion.

Pretty!—was that true? I knew that I was not a *very* ugly woman, but that I was pretty—really pretty!—or that people

would like me for it, as Bel Mannington had said, was not to be believed.

Besides, I should not care to be liked for my face alone—that would grow old and withered soon enough. And for my face, or for myself, who would like me, a poor dependent, acting a strange part in this quiet hemisphere? What association of ideas brought Mrs. Kingsworth's words into my mind again—suddenly and sharply enough to pain as well as startle me?

Thinking of her niece she had said, "There's only one man who would make her a good husband—only one man I have ever seen, who could subdue her wilfulness, without making her less happy."

Whom did she mean? Not the man at whom she had scoffed so bitterly—surely not Mr. Stewart?



CHAPTER IX.

BUSINESS MATTERS.

TIME went on steadily and quietly at Wilthorpe. Miss Castle and her pupil consented to an armistice, and I have reason to believe that Bel Mannington was the first to propose more amicable terms, and to excuse her conduct on that evening recorded in my last chapter. Mrs. Kingsworth was less severe upon society the following day, and Mr. Mannington less conversational, owing to a headache. Time went on then. Mr. Stewart still kept to his brother's cottage at Wilthorpe, and no rumour of his approaching departure reached our ears; Sunday came round again and found him once more in the free seats of Wilthorpe Church, outraging our sense of propriety by his questionable humility.

He waited for us outside the church this time, however, and left his brother to proceed home alone at the railway pace which he invariably adopted.

Mr. Stewart raised his hat to us as he advanced, then shook hands with Mr. Mannington and me, and would have shaken hands with Mrs. Kingsworth, had she allowed so great a liberty. My patroness bestowed upon him a very formal bow, drew her niece's arm within her own, and continued to move slowly on; he walked

by my side with his hands behind him, and his dark eyes intently studying the road at his feet.

"Still in Wiltthorpe, you perceive, Miss Casey."

"Yes. I suppose your holiday is drawing to a close?"

"Very nearly so. I am trying hard to make up my mind to beat a retreat."

"Does it require much effort, Mr. Stewart?" asked Mr. Mannington, looking round me to make the inquiry.

"More than I bargained for when I first came hither," he replied; "old attractions and new ones all asserting a claim upon my notice, and holding me back from hard work."

"Your business is in good hands, Mr. Stewart, no doubt," said Mr. Mannington; "who manages now, may I ask, such an extensive firm as yours?"

"Gentlemen I can trust. I am a good judge of honest men, and though it has taken time to form my staff to my mind, I do not regret it. Mine is a model warehouse."

"How many clerks have you now?"

"I'll send you the list when I get back again," said Mr. Stewart, drily; "it may amuse you. I don't like the subject of business when I have set myself apart from it--what a fine day, is it not, Miss Casey?"

"Very fine."

"I admire the even-time as the poets call it, in Wiltthorpe. Particularly the church at even-time, with the shadows stealing into the sacred edifice and the people quiet and drowsy, and the four candles in the pulpit flickering and guttering with the draught, and good Mr. Crease—your favourite curate preaches in the evening, Miss Casey—telling us of the comfort and blessing of a religious life. You were not at Church last Sunday evening?"

"We dined late," said Mr. Mannington.

"And were naturally drowsy after dinner. In the winter time, you have afternoon services here in lieu of evening—no enterprising gas-company having yet started in this village. I must come down at Christmas time, and note the effect."

Mr. Stewart was a little incomprehensible that morning. I could not understand at first his reasons for dilating on the benefits to be derived from attending evening service at Wiltthorpe Church. And when I had just a faint suspicion of his reasons, I *would* not understand them!

"You intend to be content with attending church once a-day, Miss Casey?" he asked.

"I have been used to a more regular and close attention to church duties," I answered.

"I would advise you not to neglect them," he said gravely; "it is always a step in the wrong direction to give up a good habit."

I looked at him after his praiseworthy sentiment had been

enunciated, but he was still studying the roadway, and kicking stray pebbles before him.

"I was not aware that you were an advocate for strict religious observances, Mr. Stewart," I said.

"See how easy it is to misjudge a person's character! We are strict people in Scotland, Miss Casey; we understand what is best for us very quickly."

At the great swing gate, leading to the Hall, he shook hands with Mr. Mannington and me again, raised his hat, and crossed to his brother's cottage. I fancied that he looked very strangely, even earnestly, at me as he bade me good morning—so earnestly, that I felt the colour mounting to my cheeks, despite my effort to subdue it. I went on down the drive quite thoughtfully; Mr. Stewart's manner was more eccentric than ever; at Sir Benjamin Prout's dinner-party he had almost scoffed at religion, to-day he had indirectly upbraided the general community at the Hall for their lax observance of religious duties. And that last intent look at me—almost an appealing look it was!—what did he mean by that?—what could he mean by that?—what could he mean?

I had no right to think; I tried to dismiss mundane matters from my thoughts, but he perplexed me still, and troubled me. Despite all efforts to the contrary, there mingled with my sober reasoning an intense desire to attend evening service at Wilthorpe Church, coupled with an odd reluctance to be seen there, because *he*, perhaps, had implied a wish that I should go. And yet he might not have implied anything of the kind, and it was all very foolish and inconsiderate and wrong of me to think he had. Why should I take credit to myself for occupying, even for one fleeting moment, the thoughts of a man so much more clever and so much higher in position than I was?

Well, I did not go to church that evening, after all. Dinner was not late, but Mrs. Kingsworth desired a companion in her walk through the park, and asked if I would accompany her. Miss Castle, who had not been to church, was going to evening service with Miss Mannington, and I could not gracefully refuse, *even if I had wished!* And when the old lady rested her hand upon my arm, and we both walked slowly and thoughtfully over the crisp dry grass, I was not sorry. I felt that curiosity would have taken me to church rather than a religious feeling, and that this Mr. Stewart—this fine, proud gentleman, who was fond of his own way—had no right to play the hypocrite, and invent for me reasons, which I did not require, for attending evening service. And there was beneath all a pleasurable feeling that he had not simply willed or wished a thing to make it law—that I had evinced no undue anxiety to meet his wish, follow his hint, or show myself in any way flattered by his interest.

I knew nothing of his character; I had not seen him very often—I could scarcely make out which was real and which was assumed in

him—I almost fancied myself into the belief that I was gradually beginning to dislike him.

The next morning I was convinced that he was gradually beginning to dislike *me*, for, returning from a mission to the village, I met him on the high road. My heart certainly fluttered at his approach, but that had imbibed a habit of fluttering at anything lately, which gave me the impression that something was the matter with it. I felt sure that he would stop me, enter into a variety of embarrassing subjects, and leave me more perplexed than ever; but, on the contrary, he raised his hat quite formally, said "Good morning, Miss Casey," and passed on, with his head very erect, and looking seven or eight feet high at least. This was the real Mr. Stewart, no doubt—the Edinburgh Mr. Stewart—whom nobody liked. I don't know why I should have felt indignant with him at his formality, but I certainly did, and went back to the Hall quite cross with all the world.

On the Thursday following, his brother Richard came to the Hall and offered me an opportunity of studying him in his turn. In his own way he was certainly quite as singular a being as his brother.

He came to the Hall on business, and was shown into the little room where Mrs. Kingsworth and I were seated. This apartment was Mrs. Kingsworth's favourite room before luncheon—a room whose French windows opened on to the green slopes at the back, where the flower garden began. A room with a certain business character about it, possessing a huge secretaire full of drawers and pigeon holes, and laden with various papers. Here Mrs. Kingsworth, a woman of business in her way, was accustomed to write her despatches, make up her accounts, check her steward and land-bailiff—the latter being Mr. Richard Stewart, as I have already informed my readers more than once.

Mrs. Kingsworth was writing, and I was at the open window at needlework, when Mr. Richard Stewart was ushered into the room. Miss Mannington was in the study with Miss Castle, and Mr. Mannington had gone out on horseback.

"Good morning, Stewart," said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Good morning."

He looked at me as if he had scarcely made up his mind to bestow a similar greeting upon myself, then jerked out "Good morning," in the same brusque fashion.

"Anything new, Stewart?"

"A little. Peters says he'll sell the land across the Entil for five thousand pounds."

"I don't believe it's worth it."

"I do."

"Why?"

"It will add to the completeness of the estate, and it's a pity to

see it pass into other hauds than ours. If we don't close with his offer, it will be put up to auction at the 'Saracen,' Woundell."

"Peters is growing tired of our county, theu?"

"He is off to London, I believe."

"Fortune-hunting, like the rest of them—as if everybody were a Mark Stewart, to find wealth and position at the journey's end."

"Mark has been lucky, certainly," said the brother, his voice softening immediately that particular topic was introduced.

"The race is to the most swift—and not yet over. In the times ahead of us, we'll talk of *his* luck."

"I don't fear him giving way. Lord bless you, Mrs. Kingsworth, he'll go on to the end a lucky man."

"Very likely. Now, we'll go on to the end of our business, Mr. Stewart."

"I didn't interrupt—it was you."

"Accept my apologies—you are in the right and I am in the wrong, as usual. Has that man Graves paid the rent due last Lady-day?"

"No."

"Some one holds a bill of sale upon his furniture?"

"Yes."

"He's a professional scamp, and we'll arrest his career, Stewart. Take a writ out against him."

"Wouldn't pay."

"Why not pay?"

"He's dead."

"Oh!"

Mrs. Kingsworth scribbled a few hieroglyphics upon the paper before her; Mr. Richard Stewart sat at a little distance, and watched the progress of her pen.

"One bad tenant the less!" she said after a short pause. "Let us get on with the business, Stewart. You are straugely prolix this morning."

"I prolix!" ejaculated Richard Stewart; "why, I was never prolix in my life."

"Not in your opinion, which is a very good one, so far as it concerns Mr. Richard Stewart," said she quietly; "*do* go on, please."

Mr. Richard Stewart, a trifle put out by Mrs. Kingsworth's assertion, darted into business with fresh decision, keeping himself stubbornly to facts and figures, and adding no remarks of his own on any of the subjects which he introduced. He spoke very rapidly, and in his usual abrupt fashion, and Mrs. Kingsworth listened attentively, and occasionally made a note of his assertions on the paper before her.

I had leisure to watch Mr. Richard Stewart, to admire his pre-

cision in business matters, to see pretty clearly that he was a clever man, who looked shrewdly after Mrs. Kingsworth's interests, and was to her an invaluable servant. He seemed a general factotum, adding to his duties of land-bailiff, those of general collector of the farm rents on the Kingsworth estate, and of an agent in all matters that affected the mundane interest of his mistress. Sitting at my post near the open window, I could study him and detect a likeness about the broad forehead and brown eyes to his younger brother—a fierce-looking resemblance, which his rough hair, wiry and rebellious, and his thick eyebrows, rendered a little comical. Had I heard nothing of his character, I could have pledged my life on that man's honesty of purpose; ignorant of all the details of the business concerning which they discoursed, yet I could frame a story from each fresh case, as it was tersely and sharply alluded to by Richard Stewart.

"I leave all these matters to you," said Mrs. Kingsworth at last; "you understand the best method of procedure, and we need not argue upon them. If you have made up your mind, I shall not be able to alter your decision."

"Well, you may alter that of course, but I don't fancy you'll shake my first opinion."

"When does your brother Mark leave Wilthorpe?"

"Next Monday."

"I shall be glad to hear that he is gone."

"Ah! if you only knew him better, madam," said Richard Stewart, almost deprecatingly.

"Still I should be glad," said she, packing up her papers as Richard Stewart rose from his seat; "he is out of place here now. He plays the poor man at your house—when I am a poor woman by comparison with him."

"Not the poor man. He's the same man as ever he was—riches, thank God, haven't warped his heart, or weakened his head."

"He is a very proud man."

"No, he is not."

"Not to you—I do not assert that he flaunts his airs and graces in your face. You are a man to whom they would be distasteful, and he has the good sense to see that. But——"

"Don't run him down, please," said Richard Stewart, holding up one hand, speaking very quickly, and with his eyes very round and distended; "you never understood him, madam, and you never will. He has an honest pride in his good fortune, but it has not turned his heart from one old friend, and it has gained him much esteem. Don't run Mark down, for I shan't stand it."

"I esteem him also, after my own fashion."

Richard Stewart laughed spasmodically, and said,

"What a queer fashion that must be!"

"Yes, it is peculiarly my own," she answered; "and you do not

understand it any more than I do your brother. What are you waiting for?"

"If there's no one in the library, I was thinking of asking permission to replace a few books I have left in the hall."

"And to borrow a few more, I presume?"

"If you please—not if you object," he said tetchily.

"When I object, I always say so," was the quick rejoinder.

"Then I may take the liberty?"

"It is an old privilege of the Stewarts', granted to them in the days before they grew self-sufficient. Your father, and your father's father, were both studious men."

"Ah! and good men, too, madam."

"Have I said anything to the contrary?"

"No."

"Then, good morning."

"Oh! good morning."

Mr. Richard Stewart departed, swinging his Scotch cap in his hand; Mrs. Kingsworth closed her secretaire and turned the key upon her papers.

"That man always does me good," commented Mrs. Kingsworth, "freshens me up for the day, and keeps my faculties from rusting. I cannot overpower him with my greatness or my condescension, and it is amusing, at times, to make him angry. That is the great difference between him and his brother—there's no disturbing that Mark Stewart's equanimity—a cooler wretch I never met with!"

Mrs. Kingsworth walked about the room for a few minutes, deliberating on the respective merits of the brothers Stewart. She had made half a dozen turns, and was rendering me very fidgety, when Richard Stewart's head appeared round the door.

"Oh! you *are* here still," he said, addressing Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes. To what new and brilliant idea are we indebted for your re-appearance?"

Mr. Richard Stewart continued to look at her without replying.

"Oh!" he said, at last, "about Peter's land. Shall we make him an offer?"

"I leave it to you. If you think it worth the money, close with him."

"Very well."

Mr. Richard Stewart withdrew again; Mrs. Kingsworth and I went into the garden. The library—a wing of this extensive mansion—overlooked the garden also, and as we passed, Mrs. Kingsworth glanced towards the windows curiously.

"He'll waste all day there over the books now, and he had better be attending to his business. That Peters will go from house to house hawking his wretched property—which some improvident Kingsworth sold to his progenitors. The world turns round and brings retribution with it. Peters takes the down-hill road, and it is

our turn to profit by his moral decadence. Miss Casey, fetch me a book from the library, I am in a studious mood."

"What book, madam?"

"Any book in the world will suit my purpose, and drive Richard Stewart away. He's as bashful as a baby, for all his bearishness, and he will fly like the wind at your approach. I must have that land!" she said, between her set teeth.

This was a woman of the world still, and one who coveted her neighbour's goods, despite her wealth, her age, even her generosity.

I objected to my task, though I had scarcely a reason to allege for it; I was a little afraid of these Stewarts, and I was doubtful if my presence in the library would be at all likely to have the effect Mrs. Kingsworth anticipated. She seemed even doubtful herself upon second thoughts.

"Tell him he had better see Peters at once," she called out after me, "and close with him, even for another five hundred pounds, if he holds out. I must not be thwarted in this, and he must do his best."



CHAPTER X.

SUDDEN DECISION.

I FOUND Mr. Richard Stewart walking up and down the great library, with his hands in his pockets, imitating the peripatetic habits of his mistress, only at a rate of progression which was peculiarly his own. He was a man who always walked at a rapid pace, and he was careering round the room now at his utmost speed, paying no attention to the books ranged in their costly bindings on all sides of him.

"Oh! here you are!" he said, as I entered. "I was just cudgelling my brains for an excuse to speak to you. If there's one thing which I abhor, it's an excuse. The man who can't tell the truth, and look you in the face, I have always said is a scamp. And now I'm a scamp—and I feel like one, and a devilish—beg pardon—rum feeling it is!"

"An excuse to speak to me?" I repeated.

"Yes—odd, isn't it that I should be running after a young woman, and sneaking about the passages like a confounded fool, ashamed to

speak out. Good God!"—with a stamp of his foot that shook the windows in their sashes—"ashamed to speak out!"

"What did you want to tell me, Mr. Stewart?"

"Wait a moment," he said, going to the library door, looking out, and returning, "they're curious servants here—take after their mistress's brother a little. Where is Mr. Mannington?"

"He is out riding."

"What brought you hither? I was coming back to you in a minute. Has Mrs. Kingsworth any idea that I'm prowling about on false pretences?"

"Not any. I was told to ask you to secure Mr. Peters's property at once."

"I secured it yesterday, only I would not tell her, she pretended to be so cool about it. As if she could deceive me!"

"At all events, you contrived to deceive her, Mr. Stewart."

"Thank you—that's a back-hander!" he said. "Oh! yes, I deceived her. And I have been trying to deceive her again, and get a few minutes' talk with you, all the morning. Will you put your bonnet on, and come down to my house as soon as possible?"

"For what reason?"

"Because you're wanted. Don't you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you, but—but is there any occasion for the mystery?"

"I don't think there is, a bit. My maxim is, out with the truth and shame the old one. You're not to be frightened, Miss Casey, I'm sure?"

"No, I think not."

"So I told Mark, who's an over-cautious fellow, all of a sudden. 'Don't blurt it out and alarm the girl unnecessarily,' he said, as if you were a doll to fall to pieces by a little news."

"I am not frightened, Mr. Stewart—will you kindly explain?"

"Don't think I shall after all. You've turned so pale."

"What is it, Sir?" I asked quite petulantly.

"Hollo!" he said, "You learned that of young spitfire—I beg pardon, I am alluding, *in confidence*, to Miss Mannington, who is eccentric in her way, just a little," he added drily; "but if you are about to fly into a passion, why, it's a pity!"

"Please be more explicit, Sir?"

"You are quite prepared, then?"

"Yes—quite."

"Your brother John is down at my house, waiting to see you."

"Is he ill?" I exclaimed; "oh! not ill?"

"Not particularly ill, I should think—seedy perhaps," he added thoughtfully; "but I have only had the pleasure of that gentleman's acquaintance an hour or two. He wants to see you—not Mrs. Kingsworth, on any account. There's my commission fulfilled, and now let me go out of this house."

He brushed by me and went out of the library, leaving me more astonished at his news than I had intended to show to him. My brother at Wilthorpe, so soon after my departure from the Cork-cutters' Hall!—my brother anxious to see me, and tell me that old sad story, which had ever so little change in it! I was sorry that he had come back yet awhile; I felt convinced that no good news had brought him hither—that some new scheme, which required Mrs. Kingsworth's assistance and my mediation, was to be communicated forthwith. And yet he had never sought her assistance, nor asked for my help before—why should I think so ungenerously of him? Had I, even at that hour, a fear of his lower estate, and how he would sink step by step away from self-respect, after the sad, stern rule governing lives weak and erring like his own?

I went to my room, put on my bonnet and shawl, and hurried out of the house towards Mr. Stewart's residence. Along the drive I encountered Mr. Mannington riding gaily home.

"Good morning, Miss Casey. Any news?" he said.

"Nothing particular."

"Nothing that concerns you," I was nearly saying in my haste and thoughtlessness.

"I met Master Dick Stewart at the gate. He has been here, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Business as usual. A capital business man—he has been here all the morning?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Did you hear anything about Peters' land? The man's hard up, and it may be got for a song, I'm told. He ought to see about it, and not idle his time here so much. Are you going to the village?"

"I am going for a walk."

"Rather late for a walk. Luncheon will be ready in half an hour," said he. "It's nothing very particular, I suppose?"

"No."

I hurried away. I was anxious to be gone, and Mr. Mannington's curiosity irritated me. I distrusted him, and the motives for his questioning; I was beginning at least to understand him, I thought. He was less a curious man than a suspicious one. And I felt sure that he looked suspiciously after me that bright morning.

I went on to Mr. Stewart's house. As I opened his little wicket gate, and went up the gravel path meandering through the flower-beds, I heard voices through the open window—one, the well-known deep voice of my brother.

I had been seen approaching, for Richard Stewart opened the door and admitted me into his parlour. Standing with his back to the empty fire-grate and with his hands behind him was my brother John—in the arm-chair, a little way from him, and looking up at him curiously and critically, was Mr. Mark Stewart of Edinburgh.

The two had been conversing or arguing. If arguing, John Kingsworth Casey had had the worst of it, which was natural, for a more woe-begone, utterly despondent expression I had never seen on his face before, and yet I thought that I had seen him at the worst.

But I saw him in the broad daylight, and we had met at night for many years; I saw then how sallow he was, how deeply lined, what dark shadings there were underneath his eyes; he looked even taller, thinner than his wont, with that shabby frock coat buttoned to his chin, and no vestige of collar visible about his neck. The picture of what he had become caused my heart to sink at the sight of him, and my woman's pride made me regret that the two men at his side should have been witnesses to such an interview as ours.

"Like the bad sixpence again, Bertie," he said, stooping to kiss me, "turning up more often and more often, this dire necessity of mine, as ill luck drives me onward."

"Bad news, then, John?"

"That depends."

I looked towards Mr. Mark Stewart, who had risen to bow politely to me, and then seemed inclined to relapse into his chair again. He took my hint readily enough, and looked in his turn at his brother.

"I propose, Dick, that we leave Miss Casey with her brother."

"No, don't go, you fellows," said John hastily, "there's no occasion—you have heard everything, and perhaps can help us with your advice, if my sister should fail in starting a new idea. Sharp chaps, you two—I wish I had only known you earlier."

"You have told these gentlemen——"

"Everything. Don't look amazed—they guessed part, and, as the whole of it is no mystery, why, I grew confidential, and they are both very fair fellows—jolly fellows, who will help a man at a pinch. I esteem the couple of them."

I looked at John again. He was not drunk—he might not have been drinking that morning—but he seemed to possess all the weakness of the drunkard, and was familiar, over-cunning and confidential. I was vexed with him, but I was powerless. I was vexed with these witnesses to his weakness, and vexed with myself.

"If these chaps don't object to hear a story twice, I should prefer their remaining. You'll see why presently, Bertie—it's as plain as noonday."

"Perhaps Miss Casey will allow me, for a reason of my own?" asked Mr. Stewart.

My silence gave consent. Mr. Stewart placed a chair for me, but I preferred to remain standing, facing John.

"The facts of the case, Bertie, are these," began my brother; "I have a chance of getting on in the world. There is no doubt of it—it's a scheme which I can't say much about, because it's a secret at present between four or five of us. The scheme requires capital which I haven't got—two hundred pounds each will be subscribed,

and we shall all go to work with a will and make our fortunes. Probably it will take me abroad—all the better for everybody that," he added with a short forced laugh, that must have pained him to utter.

"And the two hundred pounds?"

"Exactly—there's the great hitch in the proper working of that machinery which is to turn the affairs of John Kingsworth Casey, and lead him on to fortune. Now, look here, Bertie; I went to Corkeutters' Hall last week, and, for the first time, discovered the great change. I wanted your assistance in concocting a letter, that should explain all to Mrs. Kingsworth; but matters have turned out differently—good luck has placed you in the Kingsworth household, and you can talk to the old lady better than write to her."

"You will not see her yourself?"

"I could not face her for the world. Besides, you are the very girl to help me—Mrs. Kingsworth must have taken a fancy to you, or you would never have been here."

"Go on, John."

"And, after all, I want nothing of Mrs. Kingsworth—that is, nothing particular—only something in advance—two years in advance, and I'll give up four. There's a bargain, that's worth her consideration! I think, Bertie, it might be well argued between you and her, and you could tell her that the money will be profitably employed, and will do what money has never done yet—make a man of me."

"I will tell her all this if you wish it, but I think, John, that you have formed a false estimate of Mrs. Kingsworth, if you expect her to advance the money on so little proof of its being profitably used."

"These friends of mine—hangers-on to the Kingsworth estate in some shape or other, I'll swear!—think the very reverse—consider it a good investment of my god-mother's."

"Certainly a good investment for Mrs. Kingsworth," said Richard Stewart, who was standing with his back to the door; "and I think she'll advance the money. Whether Mr. Casey will make good use of it, is quite another thing."

"And that's my business, you know," said my brother; "I don't walk into your cottage and tell you everything. But you find out that I am a Casey somehow, and you give me shelter just in time from that prying old chap on horseback, and you are two fellows of a good sort. I can always tell a good sort with half an eye, gentlemen—and I trust fellows after my own heart."

I could have flown at my brother and shaken him almost, for his foolish conceit, his still more foolish talk. I felt that he had made himself ridiculous in these men's eyes, and showed to them what a dreamer and visionary he was. In all my life, I had never felt more angry with him.

"I can see, John, that you will lose this money," I said; "that it will be thrown away in idle speculation, and you no wiser, better for it."

"I can't go wrong," said John, decisively; "it's all arranged—the plans matured—the money's subscribed, all but my share—no one can get in advance of us, and steal our glorious idea."

"Then why keep the matter a secret?" asked Mr. Mark Stewart; "why not let us judge of the advantages to be derived from this speculation?"

"By George! you may if you like," cried my brother; "I hate keeping in the dark, and talking mystery. We are all friends here, and I am in good hands. It's to do with the Russian war—run the blockade at a Black Sea port, and make our fortunes."

"And only a thousand pounds subscribed?—whose ship is it?"

"I can't tell you that," said John, suddenly becoming sensitive again; "it's all under the rose, you see. Against the laws of the country, Sir."

"Setting aside the moral of the thing," said Mark Stewart, "it will not pay. With Prussia as the catspaw of dishonest traders, there is little to be gained by running the blockade. That's my opinion, only—yours is different. What are the names of the gentlemen who have persuaded you to join this hazardous enterprise?"

"Oh! you want to know a great deal too much?"

"I may have heard of these men."

"Not very likely!"

"The ship will start from the Clyde—the Glasgow people are adventurous—I am a Scotchman."

"Oh!" said my brother, looking dubiously at Mr. Stewart; "you're in it, perhaps?"

"No."

"You know something about it?"

"I know that there are a few wild schemes afloat like this in wartime, they answer sometimes, and they bring ruin very often."

"You don't live here, then?"

"This is my brother's house—I have a situation in Edinburgh."

"Ah! that accounts for it. Well," with a sudden burst of renewed confidence; "it *was* started in Glasgow, this idea. I sail from Glasgow—with the cargo—I keep my eye on the material till fairly disposed of."

"That is, you take the greatest risk. Who trusts you with this delicate mission?—an old acquaintance, or a new one?"

"One I have known some years."

"He must have confidence in you?"

"Anyone can trust John Kingsworth Casey," said my brother, proudly; "I have seen much and suffered much, tried many ways of living and fought hard at times to keep from starving, but I have

always been trusted, Sir. Next door to a beggar very often—but never a scamp!”

“And you prefer this life of vagabondage, successful or unsuccessful as the case may be, to a steady, honest endeavour to work your way in life?”

“I don’t say that,” was John’s quick answer.

“You come hither, full of a foolish, dangerous uncertain scheme—you would sacrifice four years of the salary allowed you by your godmother for two hundred pounds in hand?”

“It’s a chance that may never occur again.”

“Thank God for it!” growled Richard Stewart from the door.

“You don’t say that you prefer it,” said Mark Stewart, quoting my brother’s previous assertion; “you could settle down to desk work, regular task work and be happy.”

“No one would try me now,” said my brother, turning to him almost fiercely; “I have lost my chances in life—through my own fault, no one else’s, I own that!—I am a *mauvais sujet*, whom the world will turn its back upon, or thrust away, until my good genius sets me on a pedestal again. All gone, Sir,” he cried, spreading both hands in the air, and then letting them drop to his side; “and only out-of-the-way ventures left for such as I am. I went wrong of my own accord, and the world knows it, and, very properly, won’t trust me. I don’t complain—I have brought the consequences on my own head, and, what is more I don’t despair.”

“You are not a desperate man, then?”

“Ha! ha!—ask Bertie that!”

“I will ask her if she will allow me, what hope she has of the *mauvais sujet*?”

Mr. Stewart turned to me. I felt that he was not asking all these questions for mere curiosity, that some new idea—could it really be for my brother’s benefit?—was in his head; but I knew not how to answer truthfully. I had no confidence in my brother, or in any principle strong enough to keep *him* strong.

“I will hope and pray still for his better life,” I answered.

“You hear that,” said Mr. Stewart to my brother; “now listen to me, Mr. Casey, and take the advice of a man who has seen a little of the world. Give up this scheme dishonest to the State, and take a place of trust that I will offer you. The salary is not large, but will increase, as you increase in value to the firm. I have an idea that you are a clever man, who has gone wrong—if I set you right, and you retain cleverness, we shall get on together, and I shall be no loser by the offer. Supposing you sink again which is likely, at least do not accuse the Fates for keeping the doors of hope for ever shut in your face. Will you go through or turn back?”

The offer was singular as well as sudden. Had this Mr. Stewart, whom I had imagined a fair judge of character, been deceived by my

brother's stagey manner, and framed from it a false estimate? A kind and generous offer on the one hand, to be gratefully accepted on the other, to alter the whole tenor of my brother's life, or but help to prove once more his sad instability.

My brother turned red, shifted from one foot to the other, looked with more intentness, even more manliness, at Mr. Stewart.

"You mean it?" he said; "what are you, then?"

"A merchant—resident in Edinburgh."

"And you will trust me?—a man whose worst side you have only seen?—who has proved what a weak and babbling ass he is, and told you what he has been?"

"You attribute your present life to the want of chances in your favour. I offer you one more."

"I'll take it."

Was I glad or sorry? God knows! It was impossible for me to tell just then. My brother shook hands with Mr. Stewart, and murmured a hasty expression of thanks.

"When shall I go?"

"At once, please," said Mr. Stewart, quietly.

"Now, do you mean?"

"This moment. You are a man of impulse, and it will keep your energy alive to begin immediately. Am I too precipitate?"

"No—I will go now."

"You will catch the train at Peterborough for the North," Mr. Stewart said looking at his watch; there will be no difficulty in procuring a conveyance at the village—may I offer you your first week's salary in advance?"

"N—no, thank you," said my brother colouring; "I have money."

"You understand book-keeping and accounts?"

"Yes, pretty well, considering how little practice I have had lately."

"Wait one moment, then."

Mr. Stewart walked to a side table, opened his brother's desk, and dashed off a hasty note, which he sealed and then tendered to John, saying,

"The address on the envelope is the address of the chief clerk at your employer's—now, bid your sister good-bye, and let us see the back of you."

My brother appeared a little discomfited by this summary method of settling things, but he put the note in his pocket and turned to me.

"I will say good-bye, then, Bertie. This is a queer ending to my scheme, which *was* a little dangerous after all," said he; "now I am going to turn over a new leaf. You need not tell Mrs. Kingsworth that I have been as far as Wilthorpe, or what new change has come over the spirit of my dream. Wait till I write to you, girl. How's Em?"

"Well."

"And happy, I hope?"

"I think so."

"Poor Em! Keep the matter a secret altogether, then, from everybody here. Good-bye, once more."

At the door he paused, then turned back and stammered forth,

"Perhaps it would be as well, Mr. Stewart, if you were to advance me a little money on account. To tell the truth, I have been driven into a corner lately."

"I have money, John," I hastened to add.

He did not heed my remark, but took the money which Mr. Stewart placed in his hands, thanked him and departed. He went out into the sunshine with a lighter step, and started on his way to meet the new chance which had been offered him. I watched him very sadly and thoughtfully from the doorway, till Mr. Stewart's voice, close in my ear, startled me.

"You do not approve of my plans, Miss Casey?" he said.

"Oh! Sir," I said, turning to him, "I do not know how to thank you for your kindness to my brother. But I am bewildered—and if, like a selfish woman, I approve of your plans, at least, I do not understand them."

"Have I acted in so singular a manner?"

"Yes—I think so."

He laughed.

"I don't."

"Have you faith in my brother? You hope to make a good servant of him?"

"There is his chance before him," he answered evasively; "can I say more? I have, at least, turned him from a scheme, that would have unsettled him from any sober, practical calling, for ever. We consider this a secret, all of us?"

"Yes. He wishes it."

"What do you think of my 'eccentricity,' Dick?"

"I am trying to make it out," said Richard Stewart; "give me an hour's consideration, and I shall see your motive."

"No, don't try, Dick," said his brother, quickly; "sufficient for the day is the motive thereof. You had better see about our dinner."

"That's sensible advice, at any rate. Where are you going?"

"A little way back with Miss Casey—if she will allow me," he said, looking very humbly towards me.

"If you wish to go out of your way—how can I refuse you?"

"On the contrary, it is just in my way, and exactly to my taste," he said.

We went across the road together. He opened the great swing-gate for me, and then passed through after me, and took his place by my side. He seemed inclined to offer me his arm, thought better of it, and walked on for some moments in silence.

"You are very sad, Miss Casey," he said, suddenly.

"I am low-spirited—I cannot tell why," I answered. "Seeing my brother so suddenly has disturbed my equanimity. I shall be better presently."

He was silent again then suddenly spoke of my brother, and asked me many questions concerning him and his antecedents. I disguised nothing. I gave him to the best of my ability, a clue to my brother's character; he would be the master, and would understand John better, and be better able to act for the good of one whom he had so suddenly enlisted into his service. And again I thanked him, more heartily than I had done at first, for the helping hand which he had offered to a "ne'er do weel."

"I object to thanks in words," he said, when we were nearly at the end of the drive, "let me test your gratitude in another way."

"What way, Sir, will be most acceptable to you?"

"You were not at church last Sunday evening, although you knew well enough that I wished you to be there. Next Sunday evening—the last I shall spend in Wilthorpe—I hope to see you. If I have hoped too much, or said too much, don't come!"

He spoke very hurriedly, and I could not have stopped him, if I had wished; if I had seized as quickly the meaning of his words, as he had intended to convey it. I was confused, tremulous, and in dream-land, long after he had vanished away from me, and left me much to think about.

CHAPTER XI.

CROSS-EXAMINATION.

I WAS confused at luncheon that day; I was more confused at dinner, although I had had three or four hours to consider the sudden whirl of events which had brought my brother on the scene, offered him one more chance of rising in the world, shown Mr. Stewart in the new character of a benefactor, and finally in a character which I could not define, which I would not try to define, less foolish dreams or vain imaginings should make me unlike the staid woman I was pleased to think myself.

I made up my mind early in the afternoon not to think about it ; although making up my mind to impossibilities resulted in no good and added a head-ache to my heart-complaint. Making up my mind confused matters inextricably, and rendered me dull and stupid, even a subject for the observant eye of Mrs. Kingsworth to dwell upon. Every instant at dinner I expected an acrid comment on my embarrassment, a few sharp words to cut like steel through the reserve which engulfed me against my will.

But the dinner went off quietly, more quietly than usual, for even Mr. Mannington was inclined to study his plate intently. His daughter Isabel was the most conversational of the party ; she had become good friends again with Miss Castle, and nothing had occurred to disturb the even tenor of her way that afternoon. She was puzzled a little at the extra degree of thoughtfulness evident amongst her seniors ; but she treated the matter lightly, and "deared" Miss Castle every other minute. I was conscious of Mrs. Kingsworth directing her glances towards me more than once ; I knew that she was studying my new mood, and framing a reason for it, and I nearly dropped my fork into my plate upon suddenly meeting her steady, curious gaze directed across the table at me. But she spared me her remarks on a behaviour that vexed myself, for it betrayed me, and I was grateful for her silence.

She was more severe upon her brother Walter, who came in for all the acrimony which she had to spare that evening. After dinner we ladies went into the garden, bare-headed and unclashed, leaving Mr. Mannington to his extra glass of claret. The summer evenings had stolen upon us then, and we could venture forth without taking any precautions against treacherous East winds. It was a fair summer evening indeed ; fair as the hopes that might be brightening for me in life, and which I could but dwell upon, despite my efforts at composure. The garden full of flowers ; the deepening grey sky, serene and cloudless ; the evening star beginning to glimmer forth before all the daylight had stolen away westward.

I was certain that my mistress was anxious to engage me in conversation, to sift to the bottom of the mystery which lay between her and me. She possessed the inquiring spirit of her family, I was sure ; every day was giving me clearer evidence of her interest in all that moved and breathed around her, and which interest it was her pleasure and her eccentricity to ignore. But Isabel Mannington had passed her arm through mine and constituted herself my sole companion for that evening, leaving Miss Castle to the society of Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Don't suppose," she said saucily, "that I am getting any fonder of you by this manifest preference, Miss Casey. Only I am so dreadfully tired of 'the finisher'!"

I was glad of her society ; it was a refuge from the inquiring spirit of my mistress, whom I strangely feared that evening. We

wandered away from Mrs. Kingsworth and Miss Castle, and Bel gave vent to all her exuberance of spirits, and was more lightsome, winning, and lovable than I had hitherto known her. "If it were possible to stereotype that particular mood," I thought, "what a comfort to herself and a benefit to all her friends it would be!" I even implied as much, half jestingly, and she drew herself up at once with a mock pride that made me smile. She was not lovable after that.

"You would soon grow weary of this style," she said, "almost as soon as I should. I abhor people always alike!"

"When their one mood is of the disagreeable order, I am of your opinion."

"When their mood is of any order, or disorder, Ber—Miss Casey," she corrected, "it is all the same to me. Now, you are always alike."

"I am very sorry, for your sake."

"You need not be sorry for my sake," she said quickly, "although I should like you better, if you were not inclined to look good. Goody people are dreadfully monotonous!"

"Very trying to people who are not goody."

"Exactly. Therefore I should like to see you in a nice passion, flinging things around the room, stamping and scolding, or even looking sulky. You'll die early if you go on like this—you're much too good for this world, Miss Casey. I suppose that is the reason why you Caseys are so few and—"

"Take care!" I said, turning suddenly upon her. For the first time in our acquaintance together she had deeply wounded me.

She coloured and looked rebellious for an instant; then the force of her invidious comments, and how they might affect me, arrested her.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Casey," she said hastily; "mine were not fair words to fight with. You and I are at least alike in this particular—our mothers left us early. Talk of something else, please, or let us go indoors."

We went indoors; shortly afterwards I feigned an excuse to retire to my room. As I bade Mrs. Kingsworth "Good night," she said, in an under tone,

"I am coming to your room presently. Sit up for me."

I was about to reply, when she checked the impulse by that sharp, expressive look, which it was in her power to command, and I retired discomfited. I was disappointed likewise. I had been anxious to turn the key upon the world at Wilthorpe, and give up that resistance to thought which I had vainly attempted. In my narrow conceit—which the reader knows was my reigning foible—I had imagined that I could keep all thoughts in subjection to my powerful will, and that that which harassed or distressed me was as easy to lay aside as my Sunday silk. I had awakened to the consciousness of my weakness to resist thought—to let things take their course, and not disturb myself by hopes and fears of events which might ever occur. I had found that it was better for me to give way, and

fancy the future which was waiting for me, and which the hasty words of Mr. Stewart had already changed so much.

And now even this new step was denied me thoroughly; Mrs. Kingsworth wished to intrude upon my reverie, and harass me with questions that it might not be in my power to respond to.

I tried to snatch at thought in the time left me before my mistress's arrival; I sat myself down to think at the open window—my favourite place for reverie—looking out at the quiet landscape, and the star-sown sky. How long I thought, even what I thought about in detail, it would be difficult to determine; there was no marshalling my ideas into order, and letting them file one by one before that judgment which was to pass sentence at once, and so settle the matter. All was confusion—all was still confusion, when a hand was laid upon my shoulder as I sat there. I turned to confront Mrs. Kingsworth, and discovered Emma Eaves.

"Why did you not knock?" I asked, somewhat tetchily.

"I have knocked twice, and you would not answer. May I speak to you now?"

"Yes, Emma—what is it?"

"I want to tell you that I am tired of this life—that I am not happy here," she began at once, in that old excited, fretful way, which I had seen more than once—for the first time in her deserted home at Spitalfields, "and that I want to go away!"

I closed the window at once, and became all interest in her troubles.

"Sit down, Emma—let us talk quietly of this new folly together."

"It's not a new one—I've been thinking, oh! so long about it."

"I thought that you were happy here with your young mistress—that you had learned to love her"—did I add this a little jealously? God forgive me!—"more than anyone in the world."

"I love her because she is something like myself, unhappy, wild, and almost friendless; but we don't agree—she's contrary."

"We must not think too much of *others'* failings, Em."

"I know what you mean—no," she answered.

"Is this the reason why you are so quickly tired of Wilthorpe, Miss Mannington, and me?"

"I don't know what is the reason—I can't settle down—no one tells me anything as John used—I'm not trusted, I can see that as quickly as anybody can. So I've come to you to say that I shall go away from here, and that you mustn't be surprised if they can't find me one of these fine days!"

"I shall be surprised and grieved."

"I'm sorry, but it can't be helped."

"Have you any idea of another home?"

"His, if I can find it—if you will tell me?"

She had sat down at my request, but had risen and advanced

towards me, with her dark eyes aflame with excitement. What did she suspect?—what had she discovered?

“Tell you!” I answered, by way of taking time for further consideration as to the best course to adopt with this one-ided girl.

“You know where he is—you saw him this morning? He was here, and never asked to see me, and no one—not one of all this lot here!” she cried, vehemently, “thought of me, who took care of him so long!”

“Who told you he was here?”

“I heard Mr. Mannington tell Mrs. Kingsworth so when he came on horseback.”

“Mr. Mannington knows him, then?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“All this is very strange, Emma.”

“And all true. He *was* here—down at Mr. Stewart’s house!”

“Yes.”

“I passed you and Mr. Stewart at the back of the high laurels this morning and ran down to the cottage, but he had gone—gone away again without a word!”

“Let me explain, Emma. He came here on business, not with a wish to see us, I fear. He stayed but a little while, spoke but a few words to me, and then went away once more.”

“He is poor—wretched!”

“Not a rich man, certainly. But the chances of doing well are in his favour, if he will avail himself of them. You and I, Em, should be glad of that.”

“It doesn’t matter—it will come to nothing,” she said; and, though I had thought so too, her words made my heart sink.

“We will pray for the best.”

“He is alone—he hasn’t me with him—he must go wrong. Did he speak of me at all?”

“Yes—he hoped that you were well and happy.”

“He did not care to see for himself; if I could only hate him, as I thought I might do once, when he turned away from me; if I could only think as little of him as he does of me. Wasn’t he a father to me when mine died—a brother to me when I kept house for him—and now to turn away like this!”

She stamped upon the floor, and flung her arms wildly in the air. The girl was scarcely sane in her affection for my brother. I thought, with a shudder—she was a monomaniac, whose very gratitude was of a morbid character.

“You are unsettled by what you have overheard—you will be calmer in the morning. We must trust to time, Emma.”

“Easy to talk like that,” she said, “you, who are turning against me like he did!”

“You are mistaken, Emma.”

“Where has he gone? Did he not say? Don’t you know?”

I hesitated, and she cried :

“ You know—and you’ll not tell me ! I see it in your face ! ”

“ I know, but I cannot tell you yet awhile.”

“ You will not ! ”

“ I dare not.”

“ Then you are against me, and I’ll not think of you any more. I’ll be revenged for it, mark my words, Miss Casey!—I’ll turn against you ! ”

“ I hope not, Emma.”

“ You will not tell me what I wish—the only thing I wish to know, you hide away from me. You, who have pretended to do me good, and keep me good, and have brought me to this den ! Never ask me after this to tell you anything, remember that ! ”

She darted out of the room like a young Pythoness, and slammed the door behind her with a violence that echoed along the corridor, and shook every window in the wing. Truly this girl was hard to manage or to comprehend, and I had more charges than one at Wilthorpe. I must see her in the morning, and reason with her more dispassionately. To-night there was Mrs. Kingsworth to confront still—Mrs. Kingsworth, who, I had learned from Emma, was already acquainted with John’s visit to the cottage.

I became quite nervous waiting for Mrs. Kingsworth that night ; if she were aware of my brother’s coming to Wilthorpe, what did she wish to say to me?—what to discover? When would she come, and end this suspense, which preyed upon me, quickened the action of my heart, rendered my room so oppressive, that I once more threw up the window, and let in the cool night air into the place made feverish by my thoughts? There was mystery somewhere, and it was embracing me within its folds, and making actions that were common-place to others, part and parcel of some plot, concerning which I knew nothing, save that it existed.

The house was full of noises that night ; the servants would never tire of walking about the corridors ; the doors would close and open by restless hands, and no one would settle for the night, and leave a sense of quietness about the Hall. She came at last. As she tapped upon the panel of the door I looked at my watch instinctively. Half-past eleven—late for the Hall folk.

She came in at her orderly pace, as usual ; but it was not the grave, quiescent face which I had grown accustomed to, or even learned, with all its apathy to have some liking for. It was a disturbed face, for all the effort to maintain thereon that set, unnatural expression, she was proud of—the eyes were brighter, and the two red spots upon her cheeks were new to me.

“ I thought they were all sitting up to-night to spite me,” she said. “ I was forced to tell Walter how heartily tired I was of him, and how unbearable his presence had become.”

As she advanced, I noticed that she had lost her cap coming along

the passage, and a very weird-looking and Hecate-like head it was, with its grey hair somewhat dishevelled, and one stray lock, which I had not seen before, and which was as white as snow, trailing down her back.

She turned the key in the lock, and pushed a chair before her as far as the toilet-table, then sat down and laid her gold-headed stick across her lap.

"Shut that window, please," she said. "I am too old for these fresh-air whims!"

I complied with her request, and then sat down facing her.

"She looked me full in the face, and said:

"You know what I have come hither to talk about?"

"Yes."

"That scamp and knave who bears your name, and who has been hiding in Stewart's house to-day, away from me."

"My brother, madam."

"Call him what you please, and intimate as much as you please what amount of respect is due to him for your sake—your brother. What did he want?"

"In the first place, Mrs. Kingsworth, let me ask you how Mr. Mannington first became acquainted with my brother?"

"They are not acquainted—Mr. Mannington knows him by sight, that is all. I have pointed your brother out to him."

"He is aware——"

"Of nothing that I choose to keep in the dark concerning," she added; "do not be alarmed. Your brother wanted to see me—he called at the Stewarts—Richard Stewart delivered his message, and you went down to the cottage to receive your brother's statement. You have not been very anxious to communicate the message entrusted to you—I can compliment you upon your *sang froid*, Miss Casey."

"There is a little mistake, Mrs. Kingsworth," I said, "I have no message to deliver."

"He did not come to Wilthorpe with any intention of seeking my help—my money?"

"At least, he altered his mind, and went away entrusting me with no commands."

"You persuaded him?"

"No."

"What made him go to Richard Stewart's house?—he does not know the Stewarts—he has never seen them before."

"He intended to see me in secret, and he was afraid of being discovered. Mr. Mannington riding out this morning led him, I believe, to turn suddenly into the cottage."

"What did he want? If he altered his mind and there is no secret connected with his coming, I, as his godmother, and one who has shown fair evidence of interest in his career, claim my right not to be kept in the dark."

I allowed that right, and told her of the scheme which he had had in view.

"She shrugged her shoulders.

"Was ever man so weak and childish!—so open to receive a bad impression, and yet so hard and stubborn to set right! Go on. What made him change his mind before the attempt upon my purse was perpetrated?"

"Mr. Stewart thought the scheme for making a fortune not only impracticable, but full of risk."

"Mr. Richard Stewart?"

"No—his brother."

"And, contented with this verdict, the man goes back to London. I can't make that out."

Had I a right to tell her further?—to let my brother's future course be clearly indicated? I did not know, and my hesitation betrayed itself.

"Bertha Casey," she said, "you are keeping something back from me. God knows for what reason you consider it right to throw dust in the eyes of the only friend he has—or what suspicion has arisen in your mind against me. Do you doubt *me* being his friend?" she exclaimed with a fervour and passion that rendered her a true woman at last, "or that I would not serve in any way or at any cost the real interests of that unhappy man for whom I stood sponsor in his babyhood? Had he grown up true and honest he would have had my money; he has grown up weak, wilful, and false, but he has my interest still, and I would do my best for him. Concerning him there must be no secrets—your brother, but my godson, for whom I vowed and protested much—more than most time-servers mean when they ape a ceremony that should have weight with them. Woman, tell me all, or I shall curse you presently."

"Mrs. Kingsworth, I am sure that I can trust you," I said; "it is not from any want of confidence in you that I hesitated in the first place. After all it is scarcely a secret, and I am not bound to disguise anything from one who has been kind and generous to my family. He has gone to Edinburgh."

"To Edinburgh!—well?"

"He has accepted a clerkship in Mr. Stewart's firm there—Mr. Stewart has kindly offered him one more chance of living respectably and honestly."

The stick dropped from her lap to the floor with a rattling noise, that jarred upon my nerves; she pushed her grey hair back from her temples, which she held with both hands, and looked at me wildly! What did it mean?—whence this intensity of interest?

She remembered her old character suddenly, but it was too late, and the acting was clumsy this time.

"I—am—not—surprised!" she gasped; "strange things happen every day in a world where inconsistency of conduct is the rule. I am too old to be surprised at anything *now*!"

She picked up her stick, rested her thin, large-veined hands upon it, and forced herself, as it were, back into herself. A wonderful power of self-repression this woman possessed; it amazed me to sit there a witness to the rapidity with which she drifted back to her cold, unsympathetic, every-day demeanour. But her true self had been suddenly developed, and for ever after that night I saw her clearly through the veil.

"Nothing more to say, Miss Casey?"

"I have told you all."

"I believe you—a want of truthfulness has never been one of your failings," she said. "You and I understand each other pretty well, considering the shortness of our acquaintance. This Mr. Stewart—what reason did he allege for such a step so utterly at variance with common sense?"

"He gave no reason, madam."

"And you guessed none?"

"I guessed no reason either."

She leaned her chin upon the back of her hands, in her characteristic fashion, and looked at the window, through which the stars were shimmering still.

"This requires a little thought; Mr. Stewart not being Quixotic, renders the whole affair somewhat misty. I must think it over."

She never mentioned it again, and I, who learned the reason a few days afterwards, did not feel compelled to tell her *that*.

"Good night," she said, rising suddenly, "these are late hours for a woman seventy years of age. I am as weak and frivolous as the rest of my family."

She unlocked the door, looked back at me, nodded her head, and then went slowly and methodically along the dark landing to her room.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS ARE MORE EVIDENT.

WE had assumed our old characters the following day—once again orderly, matter-of-fact people, ignoring the existence of a little romance, or mystery about us. Quiet country people, vegetating in an out-of-the-way part of England, undisturbed by the stir and hum of cities, and apart from all the excitement which appertains to city life."

The next day, which was Friday, I commenced by thinking of yesternight's incidents—as the hours stole on, of yesterday's. Emma Baves's excitement belonged to the past, equally as much as her despair in Whiffen Street; and when I kept my promise of seeing her in the morning, I found her a trifle sullen in demeanour, and disinclined to dwell upon my brother's actions. That question dismissed, and Mrs. Kingsworth's new phase of character surmounted, what was left me to think about, save and except this Mr. Stewart, whose whims and fancies had disturbed more than me since he had honoured his brother's house by his presence?

Nothing to think about except Mr. Stewart, then; my task to revert to my first and greatest bewilderment, and wonder what he intended by his parting words—or whether he intended to convey anything save a request to see me next Sunday evening, and say good-bye for ever. Very likely it would be good-bye for ever; he had implied more than once that it had been a sacrifice of time, almost of inclination, to return to a place where he had been known as a poor, ambitious man; he had been out of his sphere at Wilthorpe, and in Edinburgh he was a great man, whom everybody sought. He had acted in a singular fashion since his stay here; I had failed to wholly comprehend him; he was pleased to be more than commonly eccentric—to distract me, just a little, by his notice, his satire, his odd remarks on men and things around him. It was more than “very likely” even, I thought, with a heart that swelled *not a little*, that he had been laughing at me in his sleeve—making my little knowledge of mankind the target for his superior worldliness. He had been hipped to death at Wilthorpe, and sought a mild excitement to sustain him. He meant nothing but a jest—and I would see it to the end like a pleasant play, and think no more of him, or his peculiar pleasantries, after the curtain had fallen between us.

Still, he had been kind to my brother; he had been earnest then—there was no jest in his brown eyes when he offered the prodigal a new position in life. My brother had awakened his interest, and Mr. Stewart had quickly, and with even too little consideration for results, taken him into his service. I was grateful for his kindness; if he had smiled at my simplicity, I would forgive him; if he wished to see me on Sunday evening at church, I would appear there, if it were possible.

Yes, I would go to church, at his wish. I might be a little curious to know if he would speak of John again, and a little anxious not to let him go away from Wilthorpe without saying good-bye—just the least degree in the world anxious about that, I began to fancy, when Saturday came round, and those troublesome palpitations set in again—caught me on the stairs, and made me stop—arrested my utterance in the middle of the talk about the weather—extemporized balls of immateriality in the middle of my throat, and

gave me a sense of suffocation, without any valid proof that I was choking.

Sunday came round, fair weather with it still. We all went to church that morning, Mrs. Kingsworth, Mr. Mannington, Isabel, Miss Castle, and I. Emma Eaves came in some minutes after us, with all the Kingsworth household that could be spared. The church was very full—the fine day lured out the old and weak, who had been nursing themselves all the winter and spring indoors. Mr. Richard Stewart was in his place, of course—Mr. Mark sat in the free seats, and exulted in his humility, as usual. Mr. Crease read the prayers, and delivered the sermon—Mr. Gapwing having been seized with gout late on Saturday afternoon, a calamity that was bad for him but beneficial to his congregation.

I had a hard struggle to keep my thoughts away from the one subject that had bewildered me all yesterday, but I succeeded, and if Mr. Stewart had had any intention of meeting my glance, and intimating his old wish by any pantomimic or facial expressions, he was disappointed. He went home arm-in-arm with his brother, waiting for no man or woman at the church porch. Mrs. Kingsworth, looking after them both hurrying indecorously from worship, said sarcastically:

“They have a pie for dinner in their oven, and are afraid of the crust catching, I’m sure. That pie was on Mr. Stewart’s mind all church-time.”

He had been thoughtful, perhaps abstracted—and, sinner that I was, I did not feel depressed at his irreverence.

Luncheon—a short walk in the afternoon across the park, Mrs. Kingsworth’s hand upon my arm—a dinner at half-past five—at six o’clock, *the rain!*

“Just the thing we have been waiting for, the last two weeks,” said Mr. Mannington, rubbing his hands together; “good for the crops, the grass-land, everything. This will cheer the hearts of the farmers like a legacy.”

“Will it last, Sir?” I asked, quite nervously.

“It will last four-and-twenty hours, or I am no prophet,” said he; “a small, steady, soaking rain. Beautiful!”

“I had made up my mind to go to church to-night,” said Isabel.

“Then I would advise you to calm your religious fervour, and do your best to amuse your aunt,” said Mrs. Kingsworth. “Men and women who risk all kinds of chest-complaints, and walk a mile in inclement weather to church, are hypocrites!”

Mrs. Kingsworth did not mean this, but she wished us all at home this evening. I saw her looking at me even as she spoke—me, who had made up my mind to go!

After dinner Mr. Mannington walked to the window, and stood with his hands behind him, rapt in admiration of the wet—Isabel and Miss Castle passed into the drawing-room with Mrs. Kingsworth

—I followed them, lingered for a few moments there, sitting on the sofa like a culprit, and trying to reason myself out of my palpitations.

I wonder why I was so anxious—so embarrassed—so conscious that I was going to church not for the church's sake—so positive that I was worthy of all the bitter words which Mrs. Kingsworth had lately said concerning church-folk. I did not wish to steal forth from the house like a thief—and yet I wished to escape the looks of surprise which would follow the announcement of my intention, escape the suspicions of one or two minds prone to leap to unreasonable conclusions. No, I had not the courage to say that I was going out that evening; the wind was rising, and the rain-drops began to hurl themselves fiercely against the glass.

“What a night!” exclaimed Mrs. Kingsworth; “ring for lights, Isabel, and shut that dreary landscape out of sight.”

I went from the room slowly, and then hastened to my own room, dressed myself with nervous hands, took the new silk umbrella to which I had treated myself on my last birthday out of its case, pinned my skirts together in a housewifely manner, and then went down-stairs—very much like a thief indeed!

At the bottom of the stairs I paused to consider whether I was acting decorously—whether I should not look anxious in Mr. Stewart's eyes—whether I had a right to go to church at all that night—whether it were maidenly or proper to wish in my heart to see him just once more! I went on again without solving the vexed question, passed the drawing-room door and heard Mr. Mannington's voice within, crossed the hall, opened the door, and tripped hastily and nervously down the steps, drawn by a spell for what I knew to the contrary, so irresistible it seemed, and so atrociously wicked and designing I considered myself.

The wind and rain met me on the gravelled drive at once, unceremoniously dashed in my face, sent my bonnet on to my shoulders, and turned my umbrella inside out. Then there ensued a struggle against the wind, the umbrella outside in again, and I running for the avenue, where the elements were less riotous. I remember looking back at the drawing-room windows, noting the drawn curtains and the lights behind them, and feeling grateful for those little advantages in my favour.

Then in the avenue, butting my way through the wind and rain, and doubtful which way they were coming at me; and convinced at last that they came all ways at once, and I had better keep to the high hedge side, lower my umbrella, and run for it. I drew the thick cloak over my bonnet and ran then; I was nervous and excited, and half-inclined to cry at last at my own folly which bore me onwards in spite of my reserve. At the gate I stopped and clung to it, and thought for the last time. Was I right in going?—what would he think? oh! what would he think?

The bell was ringing still in the wooden steeple, and one old man

was skittishly trotting in the middle of the road to church—yes, I would go, and they might think ill of me who chose! There was a light in the window of the Stewarts' house—so much the better if the brothers stopped away, I next thought. I should have done my best to make some little return in the way that had been wished. Then I went on once more, and tried very hard to compose myself for good.

Into the old church, looking very grey and misty that dull evening, despite an extra pair of candles on the clerk's desk, and two more in the organ loft. Looking also very cold and empty—half a dozen heads in the free seats, a dozen and a half in the rest of the church, certainly no greater number. Looking also very calm and still, bringing peace to me suddenly, and reminding me that it was God's house into which I had brought a beating heart and whirling brain, and thoughts so out of place there.

Leaving my wet cloak and umbrella on the little seat immediately within the doors, I walked at once to the Kingsworth pew and entered. Then away went my devoutness again, for coolly seated in Mrs. Kingsworth's place was Mr. Stewart—the Mr. Mark Stewart who had asked as a favour that I would come to church that evening.

Did he look his gratitude?—I thought he did in that one fleeting instant that our eyes met, and before I turned away from him. I was disconcerted; I was very troubled, and I sank on my knees in a corner of that stately pew and asked forgiveness for the motive which had lured me thither. I was sedate and self-possessed from that time, and I think that he understood my thoughts and respected them.

He sat some distance from me, and I looked away from him, too studiously perhaps, for I locked away with all my heart! I felt that once or twice he turned his grave handsome face towards me, and seemed to study me intently, as I fought hard to follow Mr. Crease's prayers, and succeeded, and submerged myself from *him*. He startled me a little by fiding the first hymn for me in my book, and passing it quietly across to me; but he stood apart from me when the hymn began, and I was thankful for it.

Mr. Crease looked down at us from his pulpit during the sermon, in which I was not so successful in keeping my old embarrassment away. It was not one of Mr. Crease's best sermons, or his scanty congregation rendered him less eloquent. The rain made a great noise against the glass too—as it had done in Mrs. Kingsworth's drawing-room—the wind came sighing through the doors into the church, and went moaning down the aisles; the candles sputtered in the damp air, the clerk fell asleep and knocked one over with his elbow, and in the impulse of the moment caused Mr. Crease to look over suddenly at his subordinate; the night came on apace, and it was dark when the curate said his last amen.

I was sorry when it was all over; my heart began to plunge so fitfully with the thoughts of the next few moments—which might be commonplace moments enough for both of us, a something at which I should laugh heartily to-morrow, but which were surcharged with perplexity at that time.

“Shall we go now, Miss Casey?” he whispered, so suddenly that I jumped in my seat; “I think that we are the last in the church.”

“I am ready,” I whispered back.

We went down the aisles to the entrance door—leaning forward towards my cloak, he intercepted me, took it from the seat, spread it forth, and placed it on my shoulders.

“This is yours,” he said, taking up the last umbrella left there, and opening it; “now let us brave these angry elements!”

He offered me his arm, and I laid my hand upon it timidly, yet trustfully. Did I understand him suddenly, or lose all doubts then, as we went out together in the rain?

“I have to thank you for coming, Miss Casey,” he said, when we were proceeding together down the road.

The wind had abated, and the rain was more steadily descending. It was a warm and sultry night for the beginning of June, I thought.

“You wished me to come—you have been kind to John,” I answered.

“Kind!—no, only politic.”

He was silent after that; he left me to deliberate upon that incomprehensible answer, or he was at a loss for words. At a loss for once in his life, I believe, and even a trifle put out at the sudden cessation of his powers of speech, for he began again with a wretch.

“Miss Casey,” he said, sharply and spasmodically, “has it struck you that I am a strange man? Indirectly, it has more than once come to my ears that public opinion has decided that I am a little eccentric. Do you think so?”

“N—no,” I answered.

“I have a habit of arriving at conclusions very rapidly, of seeing what is best for me more quickly than most people, and of deciding at once, no matter the venture, so that in my own opinion I am right. Cautious people do not understand this—now, you are a cautious woman.”

“Am I?”

“I fancy so—from all that I have heard, I should imagine so. You see that I have been making many inquiries concerning you—will you forgive me?”

“There is nothing to forgive, Mr. Stewart.”

“Patience, we shall judge better of that presently. Let me tell you that I have arrived at another conclusion—that my best chance of happiness in life, my only chance, is with *you*! On a very short

acquaintance I have been bold enough to tell you this—for on a very short acquaintance I have been able to perceive how amiable and good you are. This is not the conventional style of courtship, I believe, but it strikes me that I have simply to tell you the truth, and not let my chances float away from me, because some laws of courtship, which I do not comprehend, stand between me and my honest utterance. Miss Casey," he said, laying his hand upon my own—it was tremulous as mine, too—"is there anything to forgive now?"

"Oh! Sir," I could only gasp, "what made you think of me?"

"I might ask what made you cross my path, Miss Casey?" he said more lightly, "when I had made up my mind to eschew wedlock—when I had failed to discover a genuine woman, and had met with nothing but vanity, selfishness and deceit. There, I am hard upon your sex—I am a hard man—I make atonement. I have seen, for the first time in my life, the woman I could love and honour; will she have me—will she try to love me in good time?"

I knew that I loved him then, that I had loved him from the moment that he had seemed drawn to me, although I did my best to press the truth down—deep down in my heart, where all my little secrets were hidden. I knew that I had loved him long before—it seemed years to me—by the efforts which I had made not to think of him, and failing that, to think of him as a rich and proud man, whose sphere was not mine, and whose progress therein had nothing to do with a dependant like myself. If he had passed away without a sign, and we had not met again, I might have persuaded myself in time that I had never thought of him, that he had struck me as a handsome, clever man, nothing more. But *now!*—when he had owned that he could love me, that he did love me, what could I do but whisper a return, and show that his confession had made me very, very happy!

It was settled then between us—we were engaged to each other; Mr. Stewart had made known his intentions—far away for ever seemed all uncertainty of life, and I was a woman who had missed the proverbial ill-luck attendant on the Casey family. Yes, I was very happy after my first confusion had been somewhat recovered from; when I was sure that all had not been dream-land, and this was a reality which a fleeting hour would not dissipate.

We went on together towards the house, he speaking and I listening to that story of when he liked me first, and why he liked me—that old, old story, which takes its vivid colouring from the heart, and is the last to fade, no matter how the story ends!

"For a time, Bertie," he said—he pounced quickly upon the familiar home-name that had been dear to me through life, "we must be content to see little of each other, until the time comes when I can claim you. Why it has not come yet—I will tell you presently—for a while even, a few business secrets from *you!*"

"I can trust you."

"For a while too, and for your own sake, this engagement between us a secret from those whose business it is *not*. Seeing clearly enough that I am not liked at the Hall, and that your position there would be a painful one, I ask you to be silent. It is my wish, but it is not in opposition to your own, if you prefer that they should be acquainted with all that we have signed and sealed."

"And your brother?"

"I have no secrets from him. Dear old Dick, the best and heartiest of brothers, knows all. Like a good fellow as he always is, he stayed at home to give me a fair chance!"

"And he thinks—he thinks that you——"

"Have shown myself a wise man in my choice."

"And I so poor!"

"Don't pity yourself for that. Think of the horror of marrying a wife who would always be taunting me with the money she had brought into the family. What a handle for invective when we quarrelled."

"Shall you quarrel much?"

"Oh! I am a dreadful fellow to lose my temper!"

"I don't believe that."

"*Nous verrons*, Bertie—when I go courting, I turn my silver lining to the light."

"And my brother John?"

"Is not to be trusted just yet with the story. It will embarrass our relations together, and perhaps balk the one chance that I have thrown in his way. You see the reason now?"

"Because——"

He would not let me finish.

"Because I am a proud man," he said laughing, "and wish my family connections to be presentable."

"You are very kind!"

"No, politic, as I said before. I must polish up John Kingsworth—make a man of brother John in Edinburgh."

"And if he fail to realize your hopes concerning him?"

"I never like to think of failure, Bertie," he said boldly; "I work upwards, keeping down all thoughts of those who are sinking down to ruin—poor unfortunates—keeping down also the chances that may be against success, and which to enumerate is to feel afraid. You see that I am rather reckless in my ideas; that I am not the peerless and priceless man who makes the hero—merely a man of business, with an unbusiness way of going to work at times. And here in the midst of my first courtship, plunged into the romance which I have met at Wilthorpe, come the trade thoughts in an odd fashion. Why, Bertie, this is not love making *à la mode*!"

Was it real love making after that, or had it been real and fervent for our prosaic talk? At all events, a something that made my heart

throb with its deep sense of happiness, and is not—and never has been—put into words.

Life opened out anew, and I was changed. The girl who was growing old-fashioned before her time went forwards to the old fashion that is always new, and altered very rapidly—whether for better or worse, the future pages of this book must indicate.

Sufficient for this time the happiness thereof, when I walked in the summer rain with Mark Stewart of Edinburgh. Sufficient for all time left to me the remembrance of that night.

For ever standing alone amidst a crowd of retrospects, that picture. But yesterday the slanting rain, the shadowy avenue, the rustling trees, the dark clouds lowering above them, the tall figure of my love bending low and whispering in my ear, as we wound our way slowly towards Mrs. Kingsworth's home.

Even now I step back to that night, feeling no regret, uttering no complaint. The truth and purity of that time steal back still to me, and I judge not hastily of him or me. The shadow of the after-troubles no longer rests upon me. Yes, but yesterday!

Book III.

BEGINNING TROUBLE.

CHAPTER I.

ONE YEAR.

FOR one year after my engagement—for one long year—I was a happy woman! Happy with the world, content with myself, looking forward to a brighter, even a happier future—proud of my own strong heart, and trustful of strength in others.

I kept my secret close more for his sake—Mark's sake!—than my own. He had been fearful of rendering my position uncomfortable by the avowal, and I knew that it pleased him to think that all at the Hall remained unconscious of the troth plighted in the heavy rain, on a Sunday ever memorable to me. And it was pleasant to possess this secret; to feel that I could at any moment steal apart to my own world and submerge myself—that the little vexations which met me in every-day life were all the more readily surmounted by this process.

No one seemed to suspect me at the Hall—on that Sunday night wherein my life changed, I had gone at once to my room for good. On the Monday morning Isabel met me with reproaches at my “ill tempers,” as she termed them, which had led me to lock myself in

my room all the evening. "Who had offended me?" she had asked more than once, judging my motives by her own peculiar method of resenting actions she disliked in others.

Mrs. Kingsworth had herself gone early to her room, and Mr. Mannington had not evinced any curiosity concerning my absence, which, considering how curious a man he was, I took for a good sign. The first day over I was safe; and further and further back stole that Sunday night which had perplexed me to look forward to, and which thrilled my heart so strangely to look back at.

I received letters from Mr. Stewart now and then; not too frequently, for our secret's sake. The Edinburgh post-mark might have suggested a suspicion to an inquiring mind; but, in the first place, my brother was at Edinburgh, and, in the second, I was an earlier riser than Mrs. Kingsworth and Mr. Mannington, and had read and re-read my letter long before their appearance at the breakfast table.

In that year Miss Castle was considered to have completed the education of Isabel Mannington, and took her departure, much to her late pupil's satisfaction.

"If there be a chance of happiness from this time, I shall find it now," Bel said to me. "How I hated her, to be sure!"

"Haven't you got rid of that disagreeable assertion of hating everybody, Isabel?"

"I am of strong likes and dislikes," she answered, pertly. "I love and I hate—and I don't love you for one!"

And away flounced Miss Mannington—a young lady past sixteen then, her own mistress, and free from reports to her *gouvernante*.

What had a year done for her and me?—in twelve months' close association together, people understand each other's character, and learn to value, despise, or respect. Well, I had learned to value her—even to entertain a kind of pity for her, which it need scarcely be said, I carefully disguised. I valued her for her true nature—earnest and deep loving; and I pitied her for that impetuosity, I might call it wilfulness, which resisted control, and fought against her better thoughts—which stood ever the sad result of that ill training she had had before Mrs. Kingsworth or I had known her. That failing, almost approximate to a mental defect, was painfully apparent still—well for her, I often thought that hers was a quiet home, and that in dear Wilthorpe—I had learned to love the place with all my heart—there were not likely to approach trials and troubles to distress her much. Fortunate for her in more senses than one, that she was an heiress—that her future, so far as wealth could brighten it, would be made easy for her. There would be no hard fighting with the world.

Mrs. Kingsworth whom I had learned to love also, as I had learned to understand her better, seemed anxious, on more than one occasion, for my opinion of her niece. Was Bel improving?—was she all that

could be wished?—did I think that she would become a good and amiable woman?

I thought that Isabel would become so in good time; that with little to disturb her, there were no chances against the possibility.

“Her mother was an excitable woman, or a lazy, selfish one; and her father is a fidgety and narrow-minded man—the chances *are* against her, Miss Casey.”

Mrs. Kingsworth made but few inquiries about my brother. On the day his cheque was due, she had asked me if his address was still the same, and whether I had heard of him lately?

“He is doing well, I hear,” was my answer; “I have had one letter from him.”

“He can’t like Mr. Stewart,” she said, quickly.

“He does not mention his name.”

“Humph!—that’s a bad sign. Send him the cheque, and if he can make better use of it than of the others, it will be news worth communicating to me.”

But that news never came; and being a bad correspondent, the acknowledgment of the cheque arrived about six months afterwards. The cheque itself did not even speedily find its way back to Mrs. Kingsworth’s bankers—it was cashed in Edinburgh, three months after date.

“Your brother writes a fine hand,” Mrs. Kingsworth said, looking at the back of that cheque which had been made out “to the order” of John Kingsworth Casey, “there’s a dash about his capitals which a graphiologist would set down for vigour and perseverance. What a mistake!”

Mrs. Kingsworth took interest in another matter, to which I will now allude in this chapter of “summaries”—this was an interest founded on an error, and tended to embarrass me not a little.

Mr. Richard Stewart was the cause of this. In the year that had passed, I had also learned to understand him better, as I thought—to see the good in him which an austere and abrupt demeanour concealed, and concerning which his brother Mark had spoken to me.

He had no secrets from Dick, Mr. Stewart had told me, not even the secret of our engagement, and this knowledge rendered me a little embarrassed, when I met the land-bailiff for the first time after *my* Sunday. It was at the Hall, I remember; he had come to transact business with Mrs. Kingsworth, after the old fashion, and I had been sent to tell him that Mrs. Kingsworth was not quite ready to receive him.

He extended his hand to me immediately I entered the room, and wrung mine so warmly in his, that I drew in my breath a little.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, stammering and blushing like a girl; “I—I’ve hurt you, Miss Casey—that’s like my clumsiness. Where’s Mrs. Kingsworth?”

"She will be down presently."

"Not out of bed, I suppose?" he said, in a disparaging tone; "well, all the better for this once, though I am pressed for time. Do you mind sitting down, and keeping me company till she arrives?"

"No, sir."

So I sat down and faced him, conscious that I was reddening somewhat beneath his searching gaze.

I remember too that he leaned forward, touched my arm, and said under his breath, "*Mark's wife*," and that this assertion, of which he was almost unconscious, deepened the "colouring" considerably.

"Mark and you have made a match of it, then," he said, in a low tone; "you don't know Miss Casey, how glad I am to think that he will settle in life—how it has bothered me—he with a great business, a great house all to himself, and a great heart too—ah!" bursting into his usual sharp snapping sonorousness, "that's the best of it. He told me all about it when he came back that Sunday night."

"Did he?" I could only answer at the moment.

"Of course he did," replied my companion; "he and I together have nothing to conceal. If I were in trouble of any kind, I should go to Mark as I would have gone to my own father in his time; and I think—hang it, I know!—that Mark would come to me before all his world of grand acquaintances. He told me to be sure—and—shall I tell you what I told him?"

He almost shouted this last interrogative, with his eyes further out of his head than ever with excitement.

"If you will excuse my curiosity," I answered, becoming more at my ease in his presence. After all he was Mark's brother, and I must try my best to like him, for my Mark's sake.

"I told him that he could not have made a better choice," said he; "that he didn't want, and wasn't fit for, a fine lady-wife, with her niminy-piminy nonsense about all manner of things. What are you laughing at?"

"Why, may I not become a fine lady-wife, when my head is turned by that greatness to which he will raise me?" I asked.

"Your head turned!—get out!" he answered. "Why, I knew what a good wife you would make, as soon as he did. That's the girl for Mark, I said, when I had had a good look at you on the sly—she'll do at any rate, and she's the first I have ever come across. For you must understand, Miss Casey, that I have been looking out for a wife for Mark these three years. If I had seen one to my mind at Wilthorpe, I think that I should have telegraphed to Edinburgh, and said, 'Mark, come at once—I've found her!' And I'm sure that he would have understood me, for it has been a standing joke between us."

"He must thank you for your interest, by finding a wife for you in Edinburgh."

"Ah! a Scotch girl, all cheek bone—what a joke!" said he,

laughing. "No, that wouldn't suit me. I haven't seen the girl that will suit me—I never shall!"

"How is that?"

"Perhaps I should have said that I have not seen the girl whom I could suit. I'm ill-tempered, sulky, bearish. I've lived too long alone in my cottage, and grown too used to my own ways to care to have either my home or my old habits disturbed. I know that it hasn't improved me—I often think what disagreeable, miserable old humbugs those hermits must have been!"

"When I am your sister," I ventured to say, "I shall look out for you instead of Mark. You own that you are not happy in that cottage?"

"Happy in my way, which is not everybody's way," said he in reply; "and fast settling down to my own theory of what is good and proper for me. A man can get used to anything, you know."

"But why——"

"Don't draw me into argument, Miss Casey—when once I begin argument, I'm lost. I go on for hours like a steam engine. In my hermitage—Mark christened my home by that name, the rascal—I argue with myself on the drollest topics—and get up a quarrel with myself occasionally. Mrs. Kingsworth is late—I thought that she wouldn't be quite ready, but I did not build upon so long a conversation with you. She knows nothing of this?"

I understood his allusion, and responded in the negative.

"If it had not been for making you uncomfortable here, it would have been better to tell her," he said, thoughtfully; "but she don't like Mark, and perhaps it *is* as well. He thought so, and he's a man who always knows what is best. I shall enjoy her surprise very much, when the time comes."

"Can you surprise her?" I asked.

"Yes—I think it possible," he answered, "if old Mannington don't ferret the matter out for himself. By the way, while I think of it, take care of him. Trust him just as far as you can see him—not quite so far will be the better plan—and when he is more than usually kind and fatherly, then look out more sharply."

"You do not like Mr. Mannington?"

"Not much," was the dry answer; "but you're safe enough, and if he even drop on the truth, what harm can he do *us*! You and I can fight our battle together, if need require the alliance—and it may be necessary, for Mark's sake. You and I, too, must be good friends; it will make our future relationship more pleasant. I'm not going to keep up this, Miss Casey, for one thing. You'll not mind?"

"Why should I?"

"Exactly—why should you? I haven't quite made up *my* mind what I shall call you, though. Bertha's such an ugly name!"

"Do you think so?"

"I know so! What does your brother call you?"

"Bertie."

"Ah! that's better. But that won't do yet awhile—you might just as well call me 'Dicky' as that. I'll think about it, and give you my opinion!"

"Thank you," was my wicked reply; at which he laughed, and brought his hand down on his knee, in a manner I had already seen before. And whilst laughing thus, Mrs. Kingsworth entered, erect and vigilant as ever. She looked at Mr. Richard Stewart and said:

"Any extraordinary good news, Mr. Stewart?"

"No, madam."

"You're in so good a temper that I thought you must have heard of your brother doubling his capital, at all events."

"No, that news hasn't been communicated to me yet."

"You must wait patiently and have faith," said she with some acerbity; "with time before so fortunate a capitalist, your——"

"Shall we proceed to business?" asked her bailiff uncourteously.

"—Your brother's chance is a good one," she concluded; "now, let us look over the matter of that purchase, and pray don't diverge if you can help it."

"I never diverged from a business subject in my life!" cried Richard Stewart, whose feelings Mrs. Kingsworth had evidently contrived to wound.

"I would not believe you upon your oath, Sir," affirmed Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Upon my oath I wouldn't ask you."

After this smart interchange of remarks, mistress and man drew their chairs to the table more amicably.

When business was over, and Mr. Richard Stewart had departed, Mrs. Kingsworth turned upon me suddenly.

"What do you think of that man?"

"That he is a man to like very much when once understood."

"Honest and genuine—yes."

It was all she said at that time, but she was observant after that, and the interest to which I have alluded gathered strength, despite her wish to appear devoid of interest in anything.

Richard Stewart and I met once or twice a week by accident; and when he had received a letter from his brother, he found an opportunity to seek me out and read it to me line by line, laying stress on any part wherein my name was mentioned. Richard Stewart and I during that year became great friends—his love for Mark would have made us friends had he been less kind and considerate to me. I had almost feared, in the first moments of my engagement, what he would say; and it had opened my heart towards him to find that he had wished the match, and flattered me to think that he was not only proud of me for his brother's sake. He always called me Miss Bertie after our first explanation—Miss,—out of respect for his brother, he said; Bertie, for a fancy of his own that he had taken to that name.

He was a true and good friend, and I felt sure that when the time came I should be a good sister to him. After all, his was an eccentric friendship, despite its depth and truth; plain-spoken and earnest as he was, there reigned always throughout his manner towards me a courtly reserve or respect, as though I were in a position somewhat above his own. I was to be his brother's wife, and he was very proud of that brother—I knew the motive well enough, and I liked him none the less for it.

Once only during that year I saw Mark. It was a flying visit, made during a journey to London, from which he had deviated to see *me*. For only a few minutes walk with me, he broke his journey at Peterborough and came on to Wilthorpe.

That meeting reudered me content for months after the year had passed; he was a business man, with whom time was money, and, until I took his name and shared his home, I must rest content with his letters and a glimpse of him now and then. He was in good spirits; looking well and bright—he had been summoned to London on a mission that he hoped would bring him in ten thousand pounds.

"After this year, Bertie," he said almost exultingly, "I shall take things more easily. After this year, I shall ask you which particular day you think looks nicest in the almanack."

Happy and brief interview, in which I went with him a little way upon his homeward route, and in which our hearts were open. He would not talk of my brother, Mrs. Kingsworth, or of anything but ourselves that day; he put me off with a few monosyllables, and spoke of the future waiting for us. We walked into the country, where Richard Stewart, who was to drive his brother to Peterborough, waited with a horse and chaise about a mile from the Hall. He walked very slowly onwards, and if I could have loved him better, why, I did that day, I'm sure!

"Take it easy, young man, and—lose the train," said his brother Richard as we came up.

"Why?—do you begrudge me these fugitive moments, you villain?"

"I'm a business man," was the evasive answer, "and I'm a feeling man, who is not going to cut the horse in half to gratify your future anxiety to make up for lost time."

"Patience, Dick. We shall have plenty of time, and I shall have plenty of *your* company."

Dick tried to reach his brother's legs with the whip, but failed in his intention.

"Dick must have a great deal to tell me though, Bertie," he said; "he is my brother, and has a right to look after my interests. I hope you have kept your eyes on the curate especially, Richard!"

"I generally shut them when he preaches, Mark."

"As irreverent as I am, you see, Bertie," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "and so dull of comprehension!"

"Time!" called Richard Stewart.

"Ah! it waits for no man—God bless you, Bertie!"

He kissed me suddenly, or I might not have taken it so naturally, and pressed something in my hand.

"What is this, Mark?"

"Ring *number one*," he said, significantly. "Good-bye."

He sprang into the chaise, and was driven away. I watched him out of sight of the country road, and he waved his handkerchief towards me from the chaise, until we faded one from the other. This is another picture I see still at times, and the tears are in my eyes, gazing at it too intently.

I did not look at ring number one until I was at home; then I felt sorry that it was a costly hoop of diamonds—a something which I could not always wear for his sake, without attracting attention and surprise. A something that did not befit my present position, and so had to be locked away—another secret! I remember then that I intended to have asked him to allow me to confide in Mrs. Kingsworth, and I was sorry that his talk of our future had drove the subject out of my head. In my next letter I mentioned my wish, and he expressed an opinion in return that it was impolitic, but he left me free to act. What pleased me always pleased him, he wrote. But he had expressed a wish also, and it was my love that made it law. I submerged my better judgment, and kept silent. This story would not have been written had I spoken out, perhaps—or if written, with how different a purpose!

The year—that first happy year which I have chronicled—was passed, when Mrs. Kingsworth suddenly startled me with news. How long that lady brooded on a subject, or what time she took to make up her mind it is impossible to say—the result came on one with a precipitancy that gave it the appearance of an idea suddenly conceived, and this I know was wrong.

"Miss Casey," she said, "I am going to Edinburgh."

"Alone, madam?"

"No, with Isabel. The child is not well, and I am beginning to fancy that this place may be too dull for her. She is young, and must see society a little. It is natural enough."

"Do you think Edinburgh, in particular, the place best suited for her?"

"It is as good as any place; I have friends there, and I have a curiosity that leads me thither, and makes it worth the visiting."

"John!"

"No—Mr. Stewart. I am very anxious to see exactly what kind of position he holds in the modern Athens—what the world says of him there."

Every minute I anticipated her asking me to accompany her—me who held the position of guardian to Bel Mannington. But she re-

mained silent on the subject, and my heart, which had throbbed wildly with hope, became cold and chill at her reserve.

"Shall you make a long stay there, Mrs. Kingsworth?" I asked, after a time.

"I am not certain—I think not," she responded; "meanwhile, you——"

My heart throbbed again, but only for an instant.

"You must take my place here, keep down the unruly staff of servants, and be mistress of the Hall. I can trust you, and—you only!"

"Mr. Mannington accompanies you?"

"Oh! he goes with us, of course—he and the luggage!" was the severe addition here.

"And Emma?"

"Will stay behind—I cannot be troubled by too many anomalies."

I felt glad that I was not to be left entirely alone, although Emma and I were not the friends of old time. She had never forgiven me my past reserve—she had become Isabel's confidante rather than mine; in all things she sided with Mrs. Kingsworth's niece, and I was often grieved to think how soon she had grown tired of me. I had fancied once that she would always love me for John Casey's sake.

Later that night, Mrs. Kingsworth came to my room. An old habit of hers, it seemed now; when there was anything particular to ask or to relate, she came rustling along the corridor, after the house was still.

She knocked at my door and came in.

"Miss Casey," she said, taking her place by the mantelpiece, and retaining her hold of her stick, which she swung loosely between her fingers, "I am not going to keep you up to-night by an irrelevant discourse. I have only come to ask a question, and I am not anxious about the answer. You can reply, or refuse a reply, which you please."

I thought of Mr. Stewart—had she guessed the truth at last?

"I will do my best to answer," I said.

And I had intended to tell her all the truth then, if she wished it.

"What do you think of Mr. Stewart now?"

"Mr. Stewart—of Edinburgh?"

"That man!—why should I care for your opinion of that purple-proud fellow? No—his brother."

"I esteem him very much."

"It is a plain question—but I am an old woman, with but little breath to spare," she said; "are you likely to marry him?"

"Marry Mr. Richard Stewart?—oh, madam, no!"

"Are you quite certain?"

"Quite."

"If he asked you to be his wife, you would accept him?"

"No, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"I am mistaken then. More," she added, "I am sorry. When I am gathered,"—it was a strange phrase and thrilled me—"of course you would not leave me before—he would have made you a good husband, and I am sure that you would have been happy with him. I can see what a good match it might have been—no matter!"

She bade me good night, and went out of the room, waiting for no further conversation. There was a long journey before her the next day, and she had no time to waste on me.

The next day, in the bright morning, Bel Mannington sought me, flushed and excited. A year had not altered her in any way—she was still slight and girlish in figure—and it was a girl's face still, rather than a woman's. The dark eyes were aflame with delight.

"Off at last, Bertha!" she said; "the life of a city, instead of the vegetation of such a place as this! Off to learn manners, my aunt considers—I don't mind what I learn, so that the world moves a little faster round with me. It cannot go round too rapidly—I shall never be giddy—*viva!*"

She spun round my room, humming a waltz tune. I could but notice the grace and rapidity of her movements, and wondered whether she would ever be staid and womanly—I thought not.

"Do you know what I have been troubling my head about?" she said, coming suddenly to a full stop.

"How should I know?" was my rejoinder.

"I have been agitating for your companionship at Edinburgh," she said; "telling my aunt that with you to take care of me, I should go on more steadily and surely. What did I want with you? above every prim faced woman in the world!"

"My advice in times of difficulty or of distraction."

"I object to advice—and yours, I particularly dislike. No, I wanted to tease you—some one to worry into an early grave with my whims and caprices."

"But you will always be amiable and lovable now?"

"So long as I stop in Edinburgh—to be sure. But it is hard that my maid and you are both to be left behind, and that my aunt will always be companion, friend, and everything else. I told my aunt that I was afraid I should be a great trouble to her; and had it not been for papa harassing himself about the Hall being left entirely to servants, you would have accompanied us. Never mind, Bertha, I'll write to you by every post!"

"I daresay you will!"

"I'll become a regular correspondent, and you must excuse my spelling—Miss Castle never could keep my spelling in order. You shall have all the news—good, bad and indifferent. I hope I shall never come back here."

"Thank you for nothing, Isabel."

"I hope that the Hall will be sold off, and you sent for to take

care of me. By the way," looking very intelligent with a new idea, "if I make myself particularly unmanageable, they are sure to send for you. Pa I can worry into a nervous fever in one evening, and aunt will grow heartily tired of me, though she will never confess it, but telegraph quietly for you."

"Pray do not think of any wickedness of that character, Bel!"

"Ah! now Bertha Goodbody is going to deliver a sermon on the evils resulting from false appearances; and Bel Badbody is not going to listen to it at any price this morning—and so, *addio!*"

Isabel walked out of the room. Two hours afterwards she sought me again, flushed and passionate, with all her smiles quenched from her dark face.

"I can't pack those tiresome boxes, and Emma is an idiot, and only confuses everything! I shall leave half the things behind I wish to take—and spoil the other half!"

"Shall I help you?"

"There's a good soul—I'm sorry that I called you names—only my high spirits. Come along, dear."

I helped her to pack her boxes—so my last act was of service to her, and rendered her grateful.

They went away after luncheon in the travelling carriage, with the boxes heaped upon the roof. Mr. Mannington trotted in and out of the house about fifty times more often than there was any occasion, and worried the postilion and the servants with inquiries. He turned to me at last.

"You are left in charge, Miss Casey, and it's a great responsibility," he said. "Pray keep the servants as straight as you can—be hard with them, and all that. Keep them down, Miss Casey; nothing like it. Try and——"

"Perhaps you will leave the mistress of the house to give her last directions," said his sister. "I am not aware that I am a nonentity at present."

"I beg pardon," said Mr. Mannington, sinking into abject deference at once; "it only struck me that you might forget something."

"I have a retentive memory," she replied, "it will not betray me in this instance. Do you mind getting into the carriage—I am very sick of seeing you caper about the passages."

"I'll get in directly, Charlotte."

Mr. Mannington having withdrawn, she turned to me.

"You will have this house to take care of—that is all I need say to you," she said.

"I have been housekeeper before this, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Yes—and a good one too, I have been told. Any commands for Edinburgh?"

"If my brother——"

"I shall not see him," she interrupted.

"I have no commauds then, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Then good morning. Be prepared for me and mine at any hour of the day or night. I am not particular about the method of my flittings to and fro."

"A pleasant journey, Mrs. Kiugsworth—a pleasant holiday."

"*Holiday!*"

Her face changed I thought, and even her eyes flashed. It was momentary, and I might have been deceived, she turned away so quickly from me. I followed her to the carriage, kissed Isabel once more, and shook hands with Mr. Manningtou.

He held my hand in his longer than was necessary, and I looked up at him surprised. There was a new expression on that deeply lined countenance, and I could not fathom it. I even shrank away a little, as though it foreboded evil to me.

"I wish you had been going with us, Miss Casey—you would have liked to see all Ediuburgh friends," he said in a low tone.

He showed all his teeth at me from the carriage window, and that was the last impressiou left upon me of the departure from the Hall.

This is one year's chronicle.

CHAPTER II.

ALONE.

THE house was dull after their departurc. It reminded me of the Corkcutters' Hall in its extent and loneliness—its echoing passages and rooms yawning with the desolateness of their own position. The Corkcutters' Hall "with a difference," for in the old City house I had no servants to wait on me, no garden to escape into, or library to distract me, and in the first days of my new position I was not unhappy.

It was very dull at the Hall then, but I was not without friends in Wilthorpe; Richard Stewart I saw frequently, and Mr. Crease and Mr. Gapwing considered that they were taking pity on my loneliness by calling at the Hall, the latter by asking me to the Vicarage once

a week, where I took tea with Mrs. Gapwing, and heard the latest village news. At home I had still Emma for companion—she had never liked Mrs. Kingsworth's servants, and she sought my society more often now that Bel Mannington was away from her.

She sought it under protest, as it were, never stealing into the drawing or dining-room, but coming upon me in the morning in Mrs. Kingsworth's study, or at night in my room where I had had so many receptions in my time. I had never been able to comprehend the depth of Emma Eaves's affection for me, or whether she preferred me to her mistress. She was a girl who entered but little into the state of her feelings, unless violently distressed, and I had no wish to arouse in her any fresh excitement. I thought that there had been a falling off in her affection, and that a little more evidence of gratitude for past efforts in her cause might not have been out of place; but still I kept my interest in her, and watched her narrowly. I had not forgotten her old threat on the day my brother John had left for Edinburgh.

"It's like some one dead in this place," she said to me once; "I wish they would come back again, or send for me."

"I have received a letter from Mrs. Kingsworth this morning—she talks of coming home very shortly now."

"I wonder what kind of maid Miss Mannington has found in Scotland—whether she'll fancy her, and bring her back with her?"

"You like Miss Mannington?"

"Yes."

It was the second time that Emma Eaves had confessed to this. A more jealous woman than I, standing in my place—that is, a woman jealous about small things, and what a miserable specimen of humanity that is!—would have asked if Miss Mannington were liked better than herself, and striven hard for a satisfactory rather than a truthful answer. I did not put the question, although it suggested itself with wonderful force—I was possessed by the conviction of having lost her affection; and yet had there been nothing else in the way, my pride would have prevented me becoming inquisitor. And as the days passed by, weeks became months, and the autumn stole upon us, she began to fret for Isabel; I was assured that the wayward heiress stood first in her regard. Well Isabel was younger than I, and less inclined to stand upon her dignity, perhaps—why should I feel aggrieved about a change of mind in Emma Eaves? I had another love to keep, and estimate, and think about, and all troubles were made of snow, whilst that endured, and I was sure of *him*.

His letters came not quite so often to me after the first year of our engagement, but I knew that business increased at Edinburgh, and the letters that he *did* write were always like himself, frank, straightforward, and affectionate. He had a trust in me which

nothing was likely to shake, and he expected an unfailing confidence in return. He had it, surely!

His letters never troubled me, but after awhile Miss Mannington's did. They were as wild and incomprehensible as the writer. This in the autumn time, when I had begun to wish their return, and to look for it day after day. For the first time that I could remember, Bel expressed herself satisfied with everything in Edinburgh—she wished no further change, she was in love with the dear city, and she had made many friends there. "Mr. Stewart—my aunt's antipathy," she wrote, "I have met more than once. Such a great man in these parts, my dear—I am quite bewildered by the height of the pedestal on which he is standing. And—but keep this over a secret from my aunt—I like him very much, and only wish that I was old enough to fall in love with him!"

A *naïve* confession, and like her girlish self—a confession, only that once made to me, and to which I took an objection on the spot. Her letters were few and far between, but I waited for them very anxiously now; I heard of absent friends by their means, and I was not likely to be jealous because she saw Mr. Stewart frequently, and I remained at home, isolate and depressed.

Her next letter was wild and incoherent; she had been visiting again she was tired to death, but could not sleep. She had been to a ball—a grand public ball, for the first time, with her aunt as *chaperon*. She had "come out;" that was her legitimate *début*, she considered.

Only in a postscript was my lover's name mentioned.

"Think of my opening the ball with Mr. Stewart!—and he not too great and grand for me! I am getting quite used to him, Bertha. We are very gay here."

Mr. Stewart's next letter made no allusion to this ball—to his meeting with Mrs. Kingsworth, her niece, and Mr. Mannington. It was a very incomprehensible letter in its turn, and did not dwell so much upon the future as I could have desired. It was in reply to mine, and it responded to the questions I had put to him somewhat methodically. Concerning my brother John he spoke more hopefully—that was the brightest portion of his letter.

"Settling down to one pursuit has made him more happy, I fancy," he wrote; "but he may break away from desk-work and be a disreputable *brother* after all."

That was the only allusion to our future in those four pages, and I set myself to study them, and thought that there *was* something different in their midst, if I could only find it out.

Sitting down to study a letter intently is a disagreeable process, if you be not satisfied with the style of the writer. There are more things discovered than were ever intended, and one can build a story from the mere fragments of misty suppositions. After awhile the letter absolutely distressed me—I could see so much in it! He had written it hurriedly; therefore he had been in a hurry to finish it,

and shake me from his mind! He had written it absently; he who wrote so clearly and precisely had drawn his pen through several words which had no sense in them, I discovered, on careful disinterment; he had been struggling with other thoughts, which had beset him whilst he wrote. I was certain of it!

I put the letter away with a sigh, at last; I felt that my rigid scrutiny was not fair to him, and that I was in a captious mood, when a little disturbed me. Life alone in a great house did not suit me now—it rendered me peevish and uneasy; I had lived out but one old habit, and learned to feel restless and discontented in my new estate. But I looked at the diamond hoop upon my finger—I always wore it, now I had the house to myself—and forgot all my foolish thoughts at once. I went back to the real life which I believed in, and the bright retrospect chased away the shadows.

But things were altering for all that—and I felt that *something* was going to happen in one direction or another. I was getting superstitious gradually.



CHAPTER III.

MASTER RICHARD STEWART GETS MYSTERIOUS.

MASTER RICHARD STEWART transacted the greater part of his business with Mrs. Kingsworth by letter. The business which he conducted in Wilthorpe went on as well without my patroness as with her. Richard Stewart reigned absolutely, and there was no disputing his word. When he had first been land-bailiff it had been attempted once or twice, and refractory tenants, or gamekeepers, or land owners, had trudged to the Hall with their complaints. They had objected to Richard Stewart's decisive tone; his brusque air had not pleased everybody—to the last day of his life it never did—and they had appealed to the fountain-head, and been severely snubbed for their officiousness.

“What do you think I have engaged Mr. Stewart for, if I am to be annoyed by your frivolous maunderings? Take yourselves away, and do not trespass on my property any more, or I'll let the dogs loose.”

These people began to understand that they must give way to Richard Stewart; that there were no more chances of telling a good story, and "getting off" some rent or task, as there had been in the days of his father, who had been also land-bailiff to the Kingsworth estate.

Therefore business at Wilthorpe went on as usual—those who had to work and were in any remote degree connected with Richard Stewart's supervision, laboured as well as usual; the money which he collected, as agent to Mrs. Kingsworth, was paid regularly into the Woundell Bank to Mrs. Kingsworth's account; it never rusted more than twenty-four hours in that iron safe which was built in his cottage wall. He was proud of his accuracy in money matters, for he was a true Stewart. Had he gone fortune-hunting, like his brother, he would have made a fortune also; but he was a contented man, and one of the few true "countrymen" left who despise the life of cities.

He had always prophesied that city life would kill his brother, and though he had found a difference between Edinburgh and London, he was not quite reconciled to any new belief.

"Mark was country born and bred, and ought to have stopped here if he had preferred health to money," he said to me once; "and there's only one thing gives me any hope about him."

"What is that?"

"That he'll make money very fast, and come back to enjoy himself in a country house hereabouts. I think that I shall be Mark's land-bailiff some day—I'm looking forward to that time with all my heart."

I wonder what he was looking forward to when six months of the second year had passed and he had become suddenly grave and thoughtful. I asked him, and he laughed defiantly almost, and retorted.

"That's a snubterfuge, Miss Bertie—why, you have become grave and thoughtful yourself, and wish to distract attention by a counter-charge!"

"I grave and thoughtful, Mr. Richard!"

"For the last month you have not been yourself—you look worried."

"Nonsense," I replied, what should I have to worry me?"

"Oh! there are those confounded servants at the hall—they would worry the patience out of a Job. I never agreed with the lot there—male or female—and it always offered me inexpressible satisfaction to take them down a peg or two. I'll just tell you how I served your last London footman who came to Wilthorpe to astonish us. If I didn't astonish him, my name is not Stewart."

He dashed into an anecdote illustrative of the new subject which he had ingeniously contrived to introduce, and so ended the old topic that had aroused my curiosity. I only remembered that he had

become a little singular when I saw him in his pew at Wilthorpe Church on the following Sunday, and noted a something different yet indefinable in his looks.

He was not thoughtful, however, at this time—and he made me uncomfortable and inattentive by the watchful gaze he kept on me whenever the form of service brought my head above the pew. He waited for me outside the church, as he waited every Sunday now, morning and evening, much to the enjoyment of the village gossips, who built a story out of our meetings, and seized upon that idea which Mrs. Kingsworth had had long before them.

Every one in Wilthorpe thought Richard Stewart was going to marry Miss Casey! To have attempted a general denial of so popular an impression, would have been an impossible task; no one would have believed us out of our own immediate circle. Mr. Gapwing asked me once if the rumour was true, and I assured him to the contrary. Mrs. Gapwing was anxious about it, doubted my assurances, and thought in her heart that I was very sly upon the subject; Mr. Crease blushing like a peony, even stammered forth a similar inquiry, and was also balked of those congratulations which he had evidently prepared for me. Two out of the three probably believed my denial, but the villagers had their own opinions, and no efforts of mine would have had power to confute them.

Richard Stewart waited for me that Sunday evening as usual then, and we walked down the grass-bordered road, with the Wilthorpians looking after us. It was the last Sunday evening service we were to have, it had been announced—afternoon devotions were to be duly observed until the days “drew out” again.

“Have you heard from Mark lately?” he asked, before we were out of earshot of those good folk who had forgotten the sermon in their interest of us.

“A week ago, I had a letter.”

“He is well, I hope?”

“Have you not heard from him? I thought that you and he were regular correspondents.”

“He has found some one with whom it is more agreeable to correspond than a country brother.”

This was an evasion, I felt assured. He did not speak with his eyes looking straight into one’s own, fearless and unabashed. It was not even the voice of Richard Stewart, but a husky utterance unworthy of him.

“Then you have not heard from him?”

“Yes I have,” he said sharply at last.

We walked on together in silence for awhile, both full of thoughts unakin to anything we had heard at Wilthorpe Church, and therefore both no better than the congregation I have just blamed for mundane euriosity.

“I asked if he were well, because I don’t believe he is,” said

Richard; "because the last letter isn't like one of Mark's—there!"

"What was in it that disturbed you—may I see it?"

"No, you mayn't."

"Very well," I answered; "of course I have no right. But you know, best of all, that anything which concerns or affects him, is of more than common importance to me."

"Yes—I know," he said absently.

When our paths diverged, he said, "Good night," somewhat coldly, and I went more sorrowfully to Wiltorpe up the long shadowy walk towards the Hall. I was nearing home when he came after me at a rapid pace.

"Miss Bertha," he said, "I have brought the letter."

"I do not wish to read it, if you have any objection."

"You have the right—there it is," he answered; "you may make it out better than I—you have a quicker intellect."

"And I read it with your full consent?"

He paused again.

"No," he replied.

"Then I'll not look at it."

"I am glad that you have decided thus," he said, hastily tearing it to pieces, lest I should repent my decision, which I did the very instant the fragments were strewing the path; "there was no end to gain by its perusal—it was a mere business letter, in which your name was scarcely mentioned."

"Scarcely! Then he mentioned me?"

"To be sure—he always says, 'Love to Bertie,' in his usual free-and-easy way," he said, scattering the last pieces from his hand; nothing more. "Only you wished to see the letter—you were offended with me, and I came after you, despite——"

"Despite what?"

"Despite my common sense—that's all. Good night."

"Stay one moment—he asked you in that letter not to tell me of its contents."

"Confound——"

"I am sure he did, by your manner. Well, it was a business letter, and I am a woman with no interest in anything that affects his business world, he thinks—I am sorry for that thought! He does not understand me so well as I could wish."

"Yes he does," was the flat contradiction here.

"He cannot, Mr. Richard," I murmured.

"Don't say that. He understands everything too well—it would have been better for him if his perceptive faculties had been somewhat less acute. Better for you and me perhaps, who may have to suffer with him."

"Oh! is he ill?—has anything happened in business?—is it concerning money?"

“No—no—nothing of the kind, except that he may not be quite well. Good night—God bless you!”

He turned from me, and fairly ran away down the avenue—he was fearful, evidently, that I should question him too closely. I went home and commenced at once a long letter to my sweetheart; I told him, in the fulness of my heart, everything that had happened, and asked if I were justified in asking for an explanation? I feared that he was ill or unhappy, for his brother, a far-seeing man, whom trifles disturbed not, was evidently troubled also. Would he tell me?—would he give me some assurance that all was well with him at Edinburgh?

The answer came by the return post, and should have been satisfactory enough—nay, was so, on first reading. It was only the afterwards!

He wrote a long letter in return; he was not quite well; he had been working harder than usual, sitting up at nights, and struggling for more money in divers ways; but there was nothing to disturb either his brother, him, or me. In a few months he should see me and explain more fully; in a few months he hoped to come to Wiltthorpe, and carry me away for good to his Edinburgh home; he was heartily sick of single blessedness, and the fusty old housekeeper who tyrannized over him. There were shadows to scare away, and the brightness of my presence might do it, nothing else. He looked forward; he was happy in his future; I might take one assurance to my heart, that all was well, and that there was nothing could more greatly trouble him than my belief to the contrary.

Yes—what more could he say than that? I went rejoicing with my letter to Richard Stewart, and placed it in his hand. He leaned against the door-post of his cottage, and read the letter in the sunshine, whilst I stood and watched his face, and thought it should have brightened up as mine had.

But if there were any change in that determined face it was a slight contraction of the thick brows, and a slight compression of the lips; it was not the bright readable face that I had ever known.

When he had perused the letter he met my studious gaze, and *tried* to look pleased at the news.

“He cannot say more than that, Miss Bertie. What a brave fellow he is! How I wish that he were here!”

“We shall see him shortly.”

“Yes—oh! yes! Are you going into the village?”

“I am going district visiting. This is my mission-day.”

“Ah! they tell me—those old decrepit and unbearable old women—that there’s no one like the good young lady at the Hall. I should think not, if you can stand all their miserable whining and hypoerisy.”

“Is that quite a fair verdict on the poor?”

“On one-half of the Wiltthorpe poor, at any rate. They’re a

mean lot—and I object to poor people in any shape or form! But then I object to most things," he said with his old laugh; "even to Miss Casey, when she robs me of my time like this."

"Good morning."

He nodded his head to me, and went into his cottage. But when I had got a long way down the road, and had stopped for an instant to exchange a few words with Mr. Crease, I was aware that Richard Stewart was back again at his door, by the remark of the curate's, who stood with his face that way.

"There's Mr. Stewart at home, I see—and I wished to ask him not to press the rent at Dame Higgins'. Good morning, Miss Casey."

He raised his hat in his usual courteous, but embarrassed fashion, and we went our separate ways. Later in the day—close upon three in the afternoon—I returned to the Hall, repaired to my room, changed my dress, re-read and locked up Mark's last letter, and went down into the drawing-room, there to wait till dinner was announced to me.

I started very much upon entering, for lying full length upon the couch, with a white handkerchief over his head, was the unmistakable Mr. Mannington. The opening of the door aroused him, for I had scarcely entered when he twitched the handkerchief from his face, and sat up with his hand upon his chest.

"What a state you have thrown me into—just as I was trying to compose myself after that long, wearisome journey," he said in that nervous fretful manner which was characteristic of him when ill-pleased; "but I hope that you are well, Miss Casey?"

"Quite well, thank you, Sir."

He rose and shook hands with me, then dropped listlessly into his corner of the couch, and complained of his heart-burn and his head-ache.

"Mrs. Kingsworth and Isabel are well, I trust, Sir?"

"Very well indeed, thank you. Oh! dear! I wish I could say the same!"

"And when may we expect their return?"

"Heaven knows, my dear Miss Casey; I am in the dark! I am not the herald of their advent—I have merely run down here to make sure that all is going on as well as could be wished. I return to-morrow."

"Indeed!"

"Any news?"

"Nothing of importance."

"Joseph never found that bootjack of mine, I suppose?"

"I have not heard him mention an article of that description."

"I daresay not—it's like him! I told him when we went away, if he didn't find it, I would procure his discharge, and, by Gad! I will to. How's Richard Stewart?"

"Very well, Sir."

"Oh! he's always *well*—I didn't want to know if his face were as red or his eyes as protuberant as ever, Miss Casey. How is he getting on—as pushing and energetic, as *bumptious* as ever, I suppose?"

"I suppose so," I reiterated.

"I shall keep that man when anything happens," he said, in a lower tone, rubbing one thin hand over the other.

"I beg your pardon?" I said, interrogatively.

"I did not speak, Miss Casey," he answered, "I didn't say a word—I was thinking of some one in Edinburgh—thinking aloud, he! he! What hour is dinner fixed for?"

"Five, Sir."

"I should like to rest till then, if you will excuse me. I am really very much knocked up."

I excused Mr. Mannington, and withdrew. At five o'clock he entered the dining-room, with his usual exactitude, dressed with his usual regard for ceremony, and looking quite a dapper little gentleman, in his dress-coat and white neckcloth. Though I had more than once distrusted him, though I had been more than once warned of him, I was glad to see one home-face back in its place that night. It was something like the old times again.

He ate a very hearty dinner, saying but little during the meal. He had been travelling part of the night, and all the early morning, he took occasion to inform me. After dinner he quickly followed me into the drawing-room, bringing with him a decanter and glass.

"You will excuse this, Miss Casey?" he said; "but I have been recommended port wine, and my system has been shaken very much lately by escorting my daughter to a variety of places. They are gay folk in Edinburgh."

"Isabel does not complain, Sir."

"No, she is happy enough, and that makes amends for all. She is wonderfully improved, you will say, Miss Casey."

"When shall I have the opportunity of saying it, Sir?"

"I can't tell you, indeed; I said so before dinner, if you remember. I should not be very much surprised if Mrs. Kingsworth did not sell off here, and settle in Edinburgh for good. I have had the idea before this—haven't you?"

"No, Sir."

"Oh! you haven't?" he said, greatly relieved by my answer, which it struck me then that he had seemed anxious to elicit. "So much the better, for it's a pity to sell off family estates—there are an importance and character about them. You like Wilthorpe, Miss Casey?"

"Yes, Sir—very much."

"I thought so—you would like Edinburgh, though?"

I thought in my turn, of Mark Stewart's talk of Edinburgh, and

how he had puzzled me by taking it for granted that I should visit the city—he who had made up his mind then that some day I should go for good there!

“You are young, and would like more society than Wilthorpe affords. Our friend Mr. Stewart—the Mr. Stewart—lords it there, I can assure you.”

“He is respected in Edinburgh?”

“Riches are always respected, Miss Casey,” he said, with a shrug of his shoulders.

“It is not for his money that people like Mr. Stewart, Sir,” I said, a little too impetuously.

I was aware of that by his cunning eyes directed towards me on the instant.

“You are right there, Miss Casey,” he said, quietly enough, however, “it is not money that makes the man entirely—especially not a man as accomplished and genial as this merchant. I like him very much.”

“You have changed your opinion since I saw you last, Mr. Mannington.”

“Very likely,” he said, filling his wine-glass, and holding it to the light; “he is a dogmatic individual, who never alters his judgment. I have seen a great deal of Mr. Stewart—he calls at our place in Edinburgh—his merits dawn upon one, after awhile. There, is not that a fair statement?”

“Yes, Sir—and Mrs. Kingsworth, who——”

“Who did not like him any more than myself—oh! she and Mr. Stewart are the best of friends.”

This was surprising news indeed. I showed my astonishment plainly enough, and Mr. Mannington kept his twinkling eyes fixed in my direction.

“There is a rumour in Edinburgh that he is going to be married.”

I kept my blushes down better than my late astonishment.

“All the ladies who have set their caps at him so long are quite in a flutter of excitement. It’s a widow lady.”

“Have you seen her?” I asked, impulsively.

“Yes—but I can’t believe his taste lies in that direction—upon my honour, I do not place any faith in the assertion.”

He laid great stress upon his words, smiling sardonically, meanwhile. Had he solved the secret of our engagement, or was he attempting to discover it?

“He is what I call a gay man, one who pays every lady he meets considerable attention, and so raises expectations in the hearts of maidens silly enough to take every piece of flattery for gospel truth. That’s only his way. My belief is, that when Mr. Stewart marries, he is too much of a man of the world to neglect the main chance.”

“What do you call the main chance?”

“Money, to be sure.”

"You who profess to understand him so well now, think *that* of him? Oh! Mr. Mannington, how mistaken you are!"

Well, I had betrayed myself, perhaps, by that outburst. I could not have helped it had my life been the forfeit of the avowal; I could not sit still and tamely listen to this poor criticism of one I loved so well!

"I trust that you have not made a hero of Mr. Stewart?" he said.

"Why?—*trust?*"

"He is a dangerous man for a girl to think too much about. I have even told Mrs. Kingsworth that I am not quite satisfied with Isabel's manner lately. They meet too often—he is at every ball in the place, night after night, and Isabel's no better."

"Isabel!" I exclaimed; "she is too young and frivolous for him, even—" I stopped abruptly, but he did not observe—or affected not to observe—it.

"Most men admire frivolous women—it's an odd fact, but the wiser the man is, the greater probability of a simple woman securing him—that is, if she set her mind upon it. Which I should be sorry to say of Miss Mannington," he added, with one of his few-and-far-between spasms of pride.

The instant afterwards he leaned forward and looked at my hand with all that intense eagerness of curiosity in his gaze which was part and parcel of his nature.

"I beg pardon—I—I never remarked that ring before, and I'm sure it wouldn't have escaped me. Bless my soul, how very handsome!"

I was conscious of my mistake, but I made the best of the oversight.

"Yes, it is considered a handsome ring, Sir," I answered, with an affectation of coolness that was not done well. All my life I was a bad hand at disguise, and is that saying much to my discredit, after all?

"May I inspect it?"

I took it from my finger—my "engaged finger!"—and placed it in his hand. He turned the ring over and over several times, held it to the wax light nearest him on the table—held it at arms' length from him, shook it to and fro, and followed its flashes of flame with gleaming eyes. He returned it to me with quite a sigh.

"I am a great admirer of diamonds," he said; "and such diamonds as these we do not meet with every day. A precious gift, or an investment, or a family heir-loom—which?"

"You must decline my answering for the present, Sir," I replied.

"Of no consequence, Miss Casey—merely a friendly question. You are embarrassed?"

I bit my lip at this, and he desisted from further remark. After one or two more glasses of wine he said he thought that he should

go to his room, and rest from his long journey. He was conscious, he added, that he was not good company that evening. He left me, but he altered his mind about his room, and went down-stairs into the servants' hall, to learn the news of the neighbourhood for himself, and possibly to inquire if I gave general satisfaction. I fear that his information was not greatly extended, for he had never been a favourite at the Hall, and had worried and harassed too constantly all those with whom he had been brought in contact. Even that night he began his old charge at the backslidings of the domestics, and as I went to my room I heard his voice again raised on the boot-jack question, and Joseph's replies in angry self-defence.

The next morning he departed early from the Hall. He woke me up by tapping on the panels of the door before daylight.

"Good-bye, Miss Casey," he called outside. "I forgot to tell you last night that I had to go away very early—keep the place as straight as you can, and let us know at Edinburgh when anything goes wrong. I don't think the port wine is locked up from last night—I thought I'd mention it. It's a beautiful morning for early rising—so fresh."

I heard his teeth rattling as he went down the corridor. After he had gone away, I was at a loss to discover a sufficient reason for so long a journey and so unceremonious a departure.



CHAPTER IV.

I AM REPROVED AND ADVISED.

ONE remark of Mr. Mannington's came to me with a suddenness at breakfast-time, as though it had been uttered in my ears again. In the conversation I had had with Isabel's father, one startling remark had followed another so rapidly, and all had tended so much to confuse me, that I had been depressed by the general effect rather than one single statement. But after he had gone again, it was different. One thing remained on my memory like a brand, and it defaced all else, and made me miserable when I sat down with its grimness confronting me. Was it all true?—was it all false?—could

this man possess the power to sow one seed of suspicion between Mark Stewart and me?

"He is at every ball in the place, night after night. He is what I call a gay man!"

There was no ostensible object for asserting that which might easily be refuted; it was elucidated in the general run of conversation, and yet it seemed so false to me! False it must have been, I reasoned; had I not Mark's own words to the contrary?—his own letter implying that he was ill from over-application to the task work which he had set himself, and that business, and business alone, rendered him a slave. Had not Richard Stewart read that letter, and—then a second stab was made at my heart, and I could see that face, shadowed as it were by some doubt, as the letter was held between his sunburnt hands.

"No, no, I will not distrust Mark!" I exclaimed, running away with my fingers in my ears to deaden the voice which hissed the slander at me; "why should I doubt one so good, and true, and honest, as he has ever proved himself?"

I hated Mr. Mannington that day—I lived the slander down all that week, and kept to the business of the house; but the next week—oh! the next! There came another letter to me from Isabel Mannington, written in the same high-spirited, eccentric fashion, as characteristic of herself as of her letters.

"My aunt is growing tired of Edinburgh," she wrote; "I fear we shall all come hurrying back to Wilthorpe, and end the only brightness that my life has had. I have asked my aunt, but she wraps herself in her stolidity and says nothing. Try and find out for me—write to aunt, and ask her if there be any orders to prepare the Hall for her reception, there's a dear old Bertha."

Then followed a long list of her pleasure-seekings—whom she had met, and to whom she had taken a fancy, and the reverse. Mr. Stewart's name was constantly recurring—at all fashionable reunions, private and public balls, scientific meetings, starring engagements at the theatre—always Mr. Stewart.

After this, whom was I to believe, or what construction was I to put upon the several letters I had received?—there was a little mystery somewhere. I was unsettled, even unhappy, but I had every faith in Mark Stewart; I felt that he would not attempt in any way to play me false. And yet I wrote to him as though I doubted him. Despite my effort to the contrary, there was a woman's natural jealousy peering from the pages of my letter, as I told him of the news that I had received from other quarters, and how unsettled it made me to find people speaking of his existence as though it were a butterfly one, vapid and purposeless. I confessed that Mr. Mannington and his daughter had both alluded to him as a man who sought pleasure rather than shunned it; even in my pique—I see my error now, but he was my first love, and away from me, and I

was not quite twenty years of age!—I spoke of the rumours that were rife in Edinburgh concerning his approaching marriage. I tried to make it a sensible and cool letter, and but wrote as a woman distrustful of him—as any jealous woman might have written. In his presence I could have explained better; my anxiety would have shown more, and touched his heart, not aroused his pride. I was sorry when the letter had gone; I thought of so many better, truer words, by which I might have softened my suspicions—perhaps disguised them. I waited anxiously for the answer, which came at length, cold and cutting as a north-east wind. Here it is :

“DEAR BERTHA,

“I ask you to believe in me, not in the idle tattle of a gossip, or the folly of a school-girl. Had I time to enter into the explanations you think necessary to your peace of mind—so easily disturbed!—I have not the patience or the humility. Presently I shall be in Wilthorpe—I ask your confidence till then.

“Yours ever,

“MARK STEWART.”

I read this letter over twenty times, trying to discover within it some ring of that affection he had always professed for me. But I felt reprovèd—humiliated. There was the sternness of one who had received an insult to his pride, who turned upon me at once, cold and hard, at the mere semblance of a doubt of his integrity. I was sorry that I had met with this rebuff, which dashed the weapon from my hand, and then turned the point against myself. I was vexed that I had suspected him; that he had thought it his duty to ask for a respect which my own heart had seemed to deny him. I was vexed, above all, that he had not understood me better, and seen my woman's love amidst the nervous questions which had stung him. He had seen nothing but the error I had committed, and he had judged me unmercifully for that! I spread the letter before me, and held my head between my hands to stare at it, till the tears welled from my eyes upon the paper, and all was lost in rain.

Possibly I was never happy after that day; the cold stern letter lay between me and the brighter hopes I had had once. On my path in life rested ever that shadow which I could not set aside. His letter had reprovèd me, wounded me, but it had not strengthened my faith in his affection. If he had loved me as I thought, would he have written so cruel a letter, adding not one word to make the whole less bitter? Was it natural?—was it like him? All the past that had irritated me might have been as false as rumours are, but it did not soothe me to consider in what manner he had thought it necessary to check my womanly inquiry. Had he never loved me?—had it been a passing fancy born of inaction in a quiet English

village, to meet its natural death in the higher world wherein he moved, and was looked up to by so many?

I fell into this morbid train of thinking at last, and a month after the letter had been received—that I did not answer, had not the heart to answer—the wound which it had inflicted on me was none the less acute.

It was the end of October when that letter was a month old. I had seen but little of Richard Stewart during that month; it had already suggested itself to me that he was not so anxious as formerly to hold converse with me—that there was even a difference in *him*!

With my sadness had arisen a new wild spirit that had no name, but which kept me restless and ever on defence. When the impression deepened upon me that Richard Stewart had even altered, I resolved to seek him out, and at least clear away a part of the mystery which seemed thickening around me. For two Sundays he had not appeared at church, and on the third he sat in his old place, paler than his wont. He did not wait for me in the churehyard, but hurried away, and it was not till the middle of the week that I met him accidentally in the country-road whereon I had parted from his brother last. There was no escape, if he had wished for one, and he came towards me with a face somewhat flushed, I fancied. Heigho! I was very full of fancies just then.

“Well, Mr. Richard, I have been trying to think lately in what way I have offended you.”

“You might have thought long enough, then,” he answered with his usual abruptness.

“Might I? Why?”

“Because you have never offended me in my life, and are not likely to begin now.”

“Then you bear me no ill-will?”

“Ill—will—be—hanged!” he said after a struggle with a more formidable verb; “what made you think of this folly?”

“You have evaded me lately.”

“Have I?” said he colouring, despite his efforts to look cool and at his ease; “what nonsense!”

“Something that you have heard from Edinburgh stands between me and you—as it stands between me and *him*? What is it?”

“What have you heard?” he asked in a louder and more surprised tone.

“I have heard nothing from him that reminds me of his old self!”

“And so imagination steps in, and haunts you like an evil spirit—that’s womanly, at any rate.”

“Don’t run away from my question, Mr. Richard. Tell me instead why you have been running away—hiding away—from me?”

"I'll not own that I have done so," he said, sternly.

Until that time I had never seen him look so fierce and stern.

"I am sorry for that—I had hoped that you might have trusted me."

"I would trust you with my life, Miss Bertha!" he exclaimed energetically; "but I cannot explain, for all that. Try and think that my head is turned a little with a trouble I can't shake off, but that I shall be better in good time, if you will only wait, like me, patiently for the result."

"This is your own trouble, then?"

"Yes."

"I beg your pardon, Sir," I said, "I had believed that it was your brother's, and that perhaps I had a right to know it."

"No—you hadn't," he said, moodily.

"Troubles seem on their way to Wilthorpe, Mr. Stewart," I said. "I may be over-despondent, but they seem advancing towards me in my turn."

"Have you heard from Mark?"

"A month since."

"And his last letter has troubled you—oh! don't mind that," he said, with more earnestness than I could account for.

"You do not know its purport?" I asked, curiously.

"No—I—I cannot know anything of his love-letters," he stammered. "Don't ask me to explain anything—it's not in my way."

"Mr. Richard—I must tell you!" I exclaimed. "You are my only friend here—you are his brother, and know him so much better than I. Is it likely that he has repented of his hasty offer? Is he one of those whose great incentive to love or fame is the pursuit?"

"Miss Casey!" he cried more sternly and fiercely than ever. "The pride of the Stewarts resented the assertion, and I was always in the wrong!"

"Well—I am unhappy—I cannot understand his last letter—it is neither kind nor just to me."

"I did not know you were excitable," he said, looking at me very earnestly; "I read your character very differently, when we first became acquainted with each other."

"I was happy then."

"Not now?"

"Not now!"

"Poor girl!" he muttered.

"Oh! Sir, I do not want your pity!" I cried passionately; "I can pity myself, and learn to be strong without such sympathy as yours."

"Thank you," he said, "I am glad to hear that—I had no need to look in your face, and not be sure that you were a brave woman. You give me courage, too."

He spoke of courage, yet his voice began to falter strangely.

"I will go back with you—my business this way is not important,"

he said, turning and walking by my side; "and I have a little advice to offer you."

"Advice!"

"To be refused or taken, according to your pleasure—will you hear it?"

"Yes."

I glanced at him nervously. Was the clue to the far-off mystery in the North likely to be snatched at from his counsel? It appeared so from his embarrassment. He walked by my side for a long way in silence; he struggled very hard to arrive at a proper beginning to his speech. I could see his chest labouring and his lips moving nervously. And this man had seemed made of iron!

"Did you ever change your mind, Miss Casey?" he asked at last.

"Yes," I answered; "I am a woman."

"Pardon me," he said gravely, "but I am in no mood for irony, and I do not admire it in you. Listen to me as if you were my sister—as if I were a brother who loved you very dearly, and would set her happiness before his own in everything."

I bowed my head to the reproof. It was just enough, and his new manner was touching, and went home.

"I have changed my mind, then, not lightly, not in a hurry, upon one point," he said. "Can you guess it?"

"On my fitness to be your brother's wife. Don't hesitate—you mean that?"

I was deeply wounded, and I spoke out. This time he did not seem to heed my excited manner.

"No. On his fitness to be your husband. Keep quiet—give me a little time to breathe—will you?"

I was quiet. I walked on with trembling steps, waiting my monitor's further speech. When he spoke again it was in a new sad way, that brought the tears into my eyes.

"I am speaking of one with whom I never exchanged an angry word, whom I pray God to bless every night, just as my mother taught me to pray for him and her when I was a little boy. I am speaking against him, and it wrings my heart a little—for I don't think anything in the world would lead him to speak ill of me! But I see it all plainly enough, though I have tried to shut my eyes," he said, stretching out his hands as though to embrace the dark prospect that lay before him, "and I feel that you and he have made a great mistake in this engagement."

"On what grounds do you base so grave a doubt?"

"I cannot say. I cannot only see that he is not fit for you—I may see presently that you are not fit for him, I cannot tell—and I am sure that you and he will find no happiness together *now*!"

"What has altered us? Why keep the proof back by which I might be guided? Is that fair?"

"No, unfair—but I have no power to say more. I am neither a spy nor a traitor."

"You would be glad to hear that I had given your brother up?"

"I ask you for the sake of your own happiness, Miss Casey."

"Let him ask me himself—if his thoughts be yours, and his love has died out for me. He has only to ask, and he alone has the right!"

"He will never ask you."

"Then I will ask him what stands between him and the love he talked of once? Ask if he can explain the reason for this cruel advice of yours?"

"Betray the confidence that I have placed in you—and set him against me. Is that quite fair?"

"No—but let me ask you, Mr. Stewart, if you have thought so meanly of me as to believe that, without one explanation, I would follow this strange counsel?"

"I have hoped that you would. Better to give him up now, than six months hence to do so—or, worse still, to marry him. I ask you, Miss Bertie—let me go back to the name that has grown familiar to me—to remember that you have elicited this advice from my lips by your doubts of my brother's constancy. You stand on his defence now, but a little while since and it was an attack."

"Have I not said that I am uneasy concerning him—that his last letter was a cruel one—that his silence is more cruel still."

"I do not judge you—I can understand you," he said softly. "I was only offering an explanation of the reason for the advice that I have given."

"That advice you had intended to offer me at one time or another?"

"It might have died with me, before I should have mustered the courage, had it not been for your own happiness," he answered; "but I had thought of it, and I—well, I have not had the nerve to face you with it, that's the truth! My brother Mark is the soul of honour, but he is not fit for you—you may be fit for him, but the future must determine that. There, let me go. In trying to advise, I have made affairs more incomprehensible. I might have thought that when I began," he added, with an angry stamp of his foot.

"You have made me more unhappy still."

"I am sorry," he said suddenly; "try and think that away, then—go back to yesterday, and set all down as a dream. Why not? I asked you when we met first to wait for the result. After all——"

"Go on."

"After all, I am only a man with an opinion of my own, that is hard to shake, and I may change my mind again. I'll try my hardest—good-bye."

He turned, and went back along the country road whereon I had met him first. I went homewards with his words ringing in my ears,

becoming more of a warning to me with every minute fleeting by. Through the glass darkly loomed a something difficult to comprehend—its shadow on my way presaged the after-time, when face to face with it, I should live it down or sink. He had meant well, but he had only rendered matters worse. I could not doubt him—and his brother, who had asked me to be his wife, I tried hard not to doubt! From either brother a few words might have ended all for better, for worse; and both were silent and mysterious, and left me in uncertainty.

I felt that I had been wronged—that no one had a right to keep me in this suspense which had gathered round me—that I had not been fairly treated by Mark or Richard Stewart. I reasoned myself into this, went home and opened my desk impetuously. I would write to Mark again, and ask if he thought me a child to be kept in the dark, or a woman in whom he feared to place his confidence.

I began—then the letter he had written last, cold, defiant and unjust, rose up before me, and I could not brook another like it, and not cast him off. I would not risk a second reproof, but would wait for him, and judge by our first meeting what he thought of me.

I knew how much I loved him then, and how hard it would be to part with him, when I closed my desk like a coward, folded my arms upon it, and gave way!



CHAPTER V.

“AN OPEN CONFESSION.”

WHEN the winter had set in, when it was the end of November, they came back to the Hall. Without notice of arrival, and in the same eccentric fashion as they had departed, they arrived by a lumbering vehicle hired at Peterborough, Mrs. Kingsworth, her brother, and her niece.

From my window I had seen the fly heaped up with luggage, and my heart leaped again with joy at the prospect of home as it had been before they went away. Mrs. Kingsworth's studied immobility, her niece's variable and trying moods, and the fidgetiness of Mr.

Mannington, were all parts of home, to be welcomed after so long a seclusion. I ran into the hall to receive them, and to congratulate them upon their return, and I waited under the porch, as two years and a half since they had waited for me.

I can see their faces now, as they advanced towards me. I remember looking down upon aunt and niece, and thinking that Edinburgh had greatly aged them both. Mrs. Kingsworth was looking worn and haggard, scarcely like herself. Surely it was with a gait more feeble and a form far less erect that she toiled up the broad steps towards me? She was leaning on her niece's arm for support, and Isabel fatigued by her journey, might have represented a woman some four or five and twenty years of age, rather than a girl of seventeen.

A long journey began before daylight could not account for all this evidence of wear and tear. Aunt and niece had been living a gay life, and here was the result, and—the moral!

"Home again, Miss Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth, reaching out a hand to me; "the poet was right enough—there's no place like it!"

She pressed my hand, then took my arm instead of her niece's, changing her stick from her right hand to her left.

"You are taller, and suit me better," she said; "excuse my selfishness."

"I am glad to see you back again."

"Thank you. *You* would not say anything you did not mean, I know."

"And are you not glad to see me back again also?" cried Isabel, flinging her arms round my neck and kissing me; "to congratulate me on my better self, my better looks, and everything else!"

"Yes—very glad to see you."

"Oh! I am dreadfully tired—somebody tell the men to look after the boxes and my shawl in the carriage—and send the right things to the right rooms at once. Where's Emma?—how tiresome that she is never in the way when she's wanted!"

She darted up-stairs to her room; I looked back at Mr. Mannington, who was still burrowing in the fly with his back towards me, fishing up loose luggage. The servants by this time had assembled in the hall to bow and curtsy to their mistress, those down the steps, anxious to save Mr. Mannington trouble, were already being harassed by that gentleman's directions about the boxes.

Mrs. Kingsworth and I went at once into the drawing-room; she drew an easy chair to the fire, sat herself down, and dropped into the old attitude—her hand upon her stick, and chin upon her hands.

"I am glad enough to get back here!" she said.

"You will not adjourn to your room at present, madam?" I inquired.

"No. Give orders about the dinner, please, and come back to me."

I did so, and returned to find her still in the same position.

“Does it strike you that I am looking well?” she said, suddenly altering her position and sitting up erect and rigid before me.

“You are looking fatigued with your journey, madam.”

“I am not asking for an evasion—simply for the truth.”

She took off her bonnet, and sat grey-haired and capless, staring at me, as though she were sitting for her portrait.

“No,” I answered at her appeal, “you are not looking so well as when you left the Hall.”

“That is nearly a year ago, and I am a woman to whom a year is of consequence, and on whom a year tells. I am not so strong, Miss Casey, as when I left here.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“A matter to be expected, and I don’t complain,” she said; “I have a great deal of philosophy in me, and I shall not fret because my back grows weaker, or my steps more faltering. I have known many foolish old women who have taken as a personal affront the ills that flesh is heir to.”

She unfastened her shawl and handed that and her bonnet to me.

“Fling them into the hall, and let the next servant passing do as he likes with them. I shan’t want them again.”

“Madam!”

“Yet awhile,” she added; “don’t look so horror-stricken—I am not thinking of death. I never reflect upon that, if I can help it: there’s something disagreeable and depressing about it.”

She subsided into her old attitude, and said, apostrophizing the fire rather than me—

“I shouldn’t like to die yet, with everything so uncertain about me, and with so little knowledge of what would become of *him*, and *her*, and—*you*. I shall grow weaker as I become older, but I shall keep my senses to the last; and when the last comes, I shall meet it bravely enough, and put in my claim for forgiveness with the rest. I don’t think—that I—have been a wholly bad woman!”

“Wholly bad, Mrs. Kingsworth!—oh! no, rather——”

“Are you there?” she asked, without turning her head in my direction; “come and sit down here a moment, with an old woman who has some news for you.”

I drew my chair near hers at the request.

“I have seen your brother—at a distance. He may be better or steadier in his ways—he may not be. It is difficult to understand him. I would not have you build any hopes from the calmness that hangs about his life just now—the old storm may come to your ears again at any moment.”

“You do not think that he has settled down, then?” I said mournfully.

“Is it natural to expect it?”

“Perhaps not—but I *have* hoped lately.”

"He has done better than I thought he would—he has even been an honest servant, Mr. Stewart tells me—ah! Mr. Stewart!"

"I have heard that that gentleman and you are better friends."

"I forgave him for your sake, when he took Kingsworth into his service," she said quietly; "I bore him no malice, and therefore it was no great effort to be friends, though, for all that, there's a great deal I dislike in that young man."

After a pause she went on again—

"I do not blame him for not being communicative—I am not of a communicative disposition myself! I asked him once the reason for taking your brother into his service, and he only laughed and said that I should know in time."

He was thinking of me then!

"When was that?" I asked eagerly.

"Two months after I had left here."

My heart sank again. At that time he thought more of me. I was sure of it.

"Mr. Mannington tells me that Mr. Stewart is very gay in Edinburgh?"

How I detested the word "gay" by this time. What an inappropriate word it seemed to couple with a man whose energy and ability had made his fortune!

"He has risen to greatness, and seems now enjoying his high position. He is a man much sought after, and has many friends."

"You met him very frequently in company?"

"I have not been frequently in company, Miss Casey," she said; "I hope your imagination has not conceived me darting from place to place, waltzing with Mr. Stewart perhaps, with my gold-headed cane over his shoulder; or giving select balls on my account, and astonishing the *élite* by my dashing demeanour?"

"My imagination scarcely took so wide a range."

"I have been out a little—at my hotel a great deal, and I have certainly seen more life in Edinburgh during the last year than I have encountered in all my days at Wilthorpe, and that's not saying much. Perhaps I have enjoyed myself after my own fashion, and now I'm suffering for it. Have you any news for me?"

"No, madam."

"Then I'll try and doze away the rattle of the train. If you see my brother, present my compliments and ask him to be kind enough to keep his vexations to himself till dinner-time. You will go to Isabel, Miss Casey?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You may find some improvement in her since she was here last," she said.

"The change has done her good, then?"

"I say you *may* find some improvement in her. I hope you may, with all my heart—I can't! Shut the door, please."

I withdrew, and repaired to Isabel's room, not meeting Mr. Mannington by the way, and therefore spared the delivery of Mrs. Kingsworth's uncomplimentary message to him.

I found Isabel sitting before the large toilette glass dressing for dinner, with Emma Eaves attendant on her.

“Oh! you are creeping in at last!” she cried; “and I have been expecting you this half hour. A great hurry you have been in to hear the news of the last year. Now, Em—bundle, bundle, bundle—I want to talk to Miss Casey.”

Emma Eaves almost scowled at me for that intrusion, which had been the signal for her summary dismissal, but she withdrew as directed, taking with her a very handsome work-box, which Isabel had brought her from Scotland as a present.

“You are a good hand at back hair,” Bel said, composing herself in order again, “and I'm the biggest booby alive at plaits, and always get so cross over them. Did you ever see me cross?”

“Not for the last twelve months.”

“Indeed, Miss Pert!” she said, trying to strike me on the elbow with the back of the hair-brush, “how very remarkable! But I'm not going to be cross to-day—I haven't been irritable, capricious, or trouble to my friends for ever so long! How am I looking, Bertie?”

The echo of her aunt's question.

“Quite a woman.”

“I am a woman,” she answered sharply. “I kept my seventeenth birthday in Edinburgh, and that's the age of womanhood. Do you think that I am a child still, then?”

“No.”

“Then keep your patronage—your ‘quite a woman’—to your amiable self, dear,” she said; “and don't talk so much, please. I want to talk myself.”

“Pray go on.”

“I want to tell you what a happy—oh! my goodness! I was nearly saying ‘jolly’—year I have had in Edinburgh. What a many friends we made there—friends, too, of my own age, or thereabouts, that changed my life, and made it bright and new, and as a girl's life should be. If I be a bad temper, hard to please, and hard to humour, it has been the fault of those who would have shut me up, for life, in this house.”

“I cannot think that.”

“There's no need for your opinion—uncalled for, and therefore postponed till further notice,” she said; “that's my idea of the subject, and I have told pa so fifty times. Well, I have been happy, Bertie—for I have had my own way, very nearly.”

“I am glad that the return home has not dispirited you, Bel.”

“I have something to look forward to—give me something to look forward to, and I can live anywhere. Shut me out from any distant chance of happiness, and I should go mad!—mad!”

She glared at herself in the glass, and her face darkened with the excitement of the moment. For an instant it was a mad face, and its wild expression startled me.

"It is not everyone's lot in life to see happiness ahead," I said. "What will you do when your share of trouble comes?"

"What troubles am *I* going to have?"

"Not any, I hope. But is it possible to guarantee you their exemption?"

"I suppose I should get over them as well as other people—and I shall not worry myself about them yet awhile."

"Well—what have you to look forward to?"

"Next month, or thereabouts—on the fourth of January—the annual county ball is held at Woundell."

"You are going?"

"To be sure. Pa escorts me. Pa's fond of dancing, and of his daughter. Oh! you should see pa skip through a quadrille in the old-fashioned style, with a stont lady!"

She laughed merrily, if a little undutifully, at the reminiscence, and I could not refrain from joining her.

"What has put Woundell ball into your head so prematurely?"

"Mr. Stewart, to be sure."

"Mr. Stewart!"

My laughing was over for that day. I held my breath with suspense, and all the jealousy of my nature stole at once to my heart, and redoubled my interest in Bel Mauntington's frivolity.

"Mr. Stewart will be in Wilthorpe next month—he is my partner for the first quadrille after eleven."

"Nothing like securing your partners in advance, Miss Mauntington."

"Aren't you well, Bertie?" she said, looking round into my face.

"I am very well—why do you ask?"

"I thought it was a ghost's face over my head in the glass—fancy, perhaps. Fancy goes a great way! Well," settling herself again into her old position, "when he asked me if I were likely to be at the Woundell ball, I said 'Yes,' and he set me down for his partner on the spot. What a dear man he is, Bertie!"

"You like him, then?"

"Everybody likes him in Edinburgh—everybody will like him here when he comes back again. If you were going to marry now, Bertie," she said thoughtfully, "would you object to a man twelve years older than yourself?"

"Not too great a difference, when there is true love on both sides," I answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because there is only one man in the world whom I would care to marry," she said, "only one!"

"Mr. Stewart?"

"What made you think of that?" she exclaimed in astonishment.

She did not know how much she had betrayed, or how eagerly I had followed every word and every train of thought in her.

“Mr. Stewart is exactly twenty-nine.”

“See to the door, that no one is listening,” she said eagerly; “this is a secret between you and me for ever. I’ll tell you, Bertie.”

Almost unconsciously I went to the door, looked out and returned. Coming back towards her I could have shrieked out for her silence; that I was her enemy, her spy; that I was unworthy of her confidence. But I was a jealous woman, anxious to know all, and I took my place beside her. Her hair was dressed, and I had no excuse to remain longer in the background.

When I was seated near her, she put her small hands on my arms, and leaned forward, full of eagerness.

“This is a secret which no one guesses—I love that man! God knows that I am very young to think of him—scarcely more than a girl in his eyes, and that he may never have had one thought of me, and never, never will! But he is so noble, honourable, and handsome—so good to those beneath him, and so able to hold his own against those who would look down upon him for his origin—so different to everybody I have ever seen, or shall see.”

“Then—then—he has said nothing? Then you have not one word, one look of encouragement to sustain you in this foolish thought?”

“He has been always kind to me—more than once he has sought me out; but—no, no, no!” she cried impulsively, “he has never thought of falling in love with me. He is too noble to marry me for any fortune that I may eventually possess, and what else is there to be seen in a dark-faced dwarf like me! Oh! if I had only been a beautiful woman!—if I could have been like you—like anyone, anything but my wretched ugly self!”

She sprang from me, to dash her hands upon the table and send the toilette ware right and left; to turn again and fling herself upon me, sobbing in a passionate abandonment. I was moved by her excitability; but she was at an age when romance is struck out from real life, and heroes rise and fall, and rapidly succeed each other, till the “real one” comes upon the scene—above all, she was my rival; and my heart steeled itself against her weakness, and could not pity her.

“This Mr. Stewart has no idea of your thoughts towards him, Isabel?” I asked.

“No. That is not likely.”

“Unsought, you must not seek him, or the evil to follow may last for all your life. Think less of him and more of your self-respect—it will be better for you.”

“How cold and hard you are!” she moaned.

“There finish your dressing; let me call your maid and go away

I cannot sympathize with a girl so young as yourself making up her mind to love a man who will never care for her. You must live this down."

"I shall not try," was the defiant answer.

"You must."

"I would rather live single all my life and think of him, than marry a prince!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot.

"All rhodomontade," I said, almost too contemptuously; "if you nurse these thoughts, they will do you harm. This Mr. Stewart is engaged—do you hear?—engaged!"

"I don't believe it!"

I had meant to tell her all my story, and thus to save her from herself. To give her time to calmly reflect upon the current of events which had set her apart from him, and placed me at his side. For I was still his, until he told me of his great mistake. Then came her indignant reply, full of confidence as well as anger, and back with a rush followed all the old suspicions I had had of Mark.

"Why, do you not believe me?" I asked.

"His friends speak of his engagement; but he does not act like a man who has a thought of a wife—he is not a man who would be ashamed to tell the world of his future marriage. And he is coming three hundred miles to dance with me at Woundell."

"Ah! I had forgotten that," I said, recoiling from her as though she had offered to strike me; "I cannot reason with you—I do not understand the case. You know best what hopes you have to build upon."

I went out of the room, with my heart swelling and my lips trembling with anger. I might have been deceived by this man of whom she had spoken, or all might bear the sunlight on it yet. I must have patience and wait.

Then I thought—and the thought brought me to a full stop—that this weak-minded girl might be deceived by his fair words in her turn, and I knew that she had neither the strength nor the pride to bear up against a disappointment such as might be waiting for me.

I went back to her room, took her in my arms, and said,

"You are too young, Bel—try and think less of this, and of him. Don't, with your own rash thoughts, lay the foundation of a whole life's misery. He is not fit for you—nor you for him!"

Then I went away to my own room, and dressed for dinner.

CHAPTER VI.

PREPARATION.

ALL this while no letter from Mark Stewart—no fairer, kinder words to bring hope nearer to me, and keep the bitter thoughts away. I could take no warning from his letter; it stood between me and him, an evidence of his pride—nothing more.

And the bitter thoughts—they were manifold, and with me at all times and seasons. Thoughts of what had been said concerning him by Mr. Mannington, his daughter, and Mrs. Kingsworth—above all, by his own brother, who had offered me advice, too cruel and mysterious for my ignorance to profit by. Still, amidst this, the hope not utterly set aside—the belief that he would explain everything, and render my heart light again, flickering before me in the mist wherewith it had pleased him to enshroud his actions. And above all and before all, the remembrance of that Sunday night when he asked me if I loved him, and I knew that he was true and in earnest!

We spent our Christmas month at the Hall, in the old fashion; everyone dropped into place, and outwardly it was the old times back again. I do not know that we were duller than we had been before the Edinburgh expedition; I was not so happy in myself as on the first occasion I spent Christmas with them; but I was happier than if they had all kept away from me. My excitability preyed upon me in a large lone house now all my housekeeping habits, my *statu quo*, had vanished for ever; I had become a different woman.

Bel Mannington alluded no more to her “fancies;” she had met with little sympathy, and she held aloof from any further confession. Ostensibly she was the same Bel Mannington; her spirits were variable, and her manner as eccentric as ever; she was not unhappy, for she had sketched her story in her mind, and perhaps she had more hope than I, for hers was a nature far more sanguine whilst the hope lasted.

Besides, there was the country maiden’s great pleasure to look forward to—a county ball. All the talk about dress to sustain her, the selection, the fashion, the trimmings, the head-dress to match, and the ornaments wherewith to adorn it. She and her aunt held many conferences together concerning it, seeking my advice at times, and snubbing Mr. Mannington for his when unsolicited.

It had suggested itself to me that an invitation to accompany her from one of the family might have been made with good grace—I was Isabel's companion, guardiau, Mrs. Kingsworth said—and that I might have been included in the party. Was Mr. Mannington at the bottom of this also? I had heard it was due to his influence that I was left so long at the Hall, and I was not without the suspicion—how suspicious I had grown of everybody!—that he had not wished to escort me as well as his daughter. No matter, I should see Mark Stewart before or after the ball; and for the truth, the whole truth, I had not long to wait now.

Does the reader wonder why I waited so long? why I did not write another letter, in a fairer spirit than my last, to him whom I distrusted? Well, I was no heroine—I could not judge at that time right from wrong—the evil that lies in us all was uppermost, and I was sullen, jealous and discouraged. I would write no more—I had made up my mind, or my pride had made it up for me, and I held fast to the one idea, that my silence was the better plan. There was a dreamy hope—God knows how I built upon it day by day—that he would write to me, express some anxiety at my long silence, ask me for an explanation, or hint to his brother to that effect; but the days stole on without a line from him, and Richard Stewart had shunned me more pertinaciously than ever after my rejection of his advice.

The ball day came at last—the fourth of January—to which many fair ones scattered within reasonable distance of Woundell had looked forward to so long. To steady-going country families this was the one great event of the year—the one excitement to counter-balance three hundred and sixty-four days of vegetation. It was an assembly of pretension, requiring great influence to secure a voucher—the stewards were of the first water, and people of no “position” were not admitted on any pretence whatever.

Position!—what a grand thing it is after all—how serenely it carries one over the surface of things!—with that colour flying from the mast, one can skim lightly to greatness in a cockle-shell boat.

The day of the ball came at length, then, and with it no Mark Stewart. In the morning Richard Stewart appeared to transact his usual business with Mrs. Kingsworth, to discuss, in the first place, the sale of a large quantity of timber that had been hewn down in the plantation, and about the park-land, during the process of “thinning out;” and in the second, to take into consideration an offer for the purchase of some house-property held by Mrs. Kingsworth in the very town of Woundell, where the ball had been held in the January month of each year from ages remote.

I had evaded these business meetings lately—this day I had sought it, and met Richard Stewart on his own battle-ground. He looked towards me as I took my place at the window, and muttered

a gruff indistinct response to my "good day." I sat there, nervous and irritable, listening to the never-ending tune of money, which these two indulged in when they met—an incessant refrain, that was extra wearisome that morning.

Mrs. Kingsworth and Mr. Stewart debated both matters with some eagerness, growing somewhat quarrelsome over their facts and figures, in the usual fashion—Richard Stewart holding fast to his opinion, and Mrs. Kingsworth eventually giving way, after a few personalities conveyed under cover of business. Timber—lease of houses—money; money—lease of houses—timber, were bandied from one to the other, until the price was settled which Mrs. Kingsworth required.

Then Richard Stewart rose to go, and I went out of the room and waited for him in the hall.

"Your brother Mark is coming to Wilthorpe to-night?" I said when he came towards me.

"No—to-morrow morning."

"No matter, he will be at Woundell ball to-night—he has promised Miss Mannington."

"If he has promised anything he will keep his word, but——"

"How long does he stay at Wilthorpe?"

"Only a few hours, I believe, he will proceed thence to London."

"I ask you not to let him leave here until I have seen him—you who are still my friend?" I asked half doubtfully.

"Always your friend—Miss Casey."

He had hesitated whether to call me by my Christian name or not, and decided at last on the more formal appellation. I took it as a bad sign.

I went away in search of Isabel Mannington, and found her surrounded by lace, maize tulle, and flowers, in the centre of a whole army of dressmakers, who had arrived to try on, make alterations, and finish off—in fact, to be worried a very fair distance towards their graves by the heiress.

Bel Mannington, anxious to look her best, and excited about the result, brightened up at my appearance.

"Oh! I am so glad you have come, Bertie," she said; "where have you been all this morning? Do look here—see what a fit these people have made me," she added, with very little regard for the feelings of the young ladies present on the occasion; "I've no patience with them!"

"I'm sure, Miss, when it's all arranged, it will meet with your satisfaction," said the chief dressmaker, a tall spinster, with a hooked nose, and a hatchet aspect altogether; "the Honourable Miss Dudgeon has one exactly like it, and she expressed herself——"

"What!" screamed Bel Mannington, "you've dressed that ugly Dudgeon woman—that Life Guardswoman—like me! How dare

you suggest anything that I am going to wear to her, or allow her to copy it?"

"I don't mean, Miss Mannington, that the material is exactly the same, or that the style——"

"Shall I tear it up?" and Bel glanced from me to the mantua-maker, with her dark eyes flashing fire, and her hands clenching convulsively the gossamer material. The milliner gave a little scream; and one pale-faced assistant, who had worked herself to death's door over it, cried, "Oh! don't!" with the agony of a parent for its offspring.

"You'll have to take refuge in your blue silk then, Bel," I suggested.

"And I always look so odious in blue," she cried, her hands relaxing their tenacious grip; "we must go on with these rags. But the next time you dress me for Woundell ball, Miss Naston," looking daggers at the milliner, "remember it occurs on the fourth of January, or thereabouts, and not on *the fifth of November!*"

This was the family tartness uppermost, and I thought of Mrs. Kingsworth on the instant. Before I quitted the room, I left matters more peaceably progressing, and even received the thanks of the impatient heiress for the suggestions I had made. These thanks were at the expense of the poor milliners, so I made all haste to escape them.

"People who run in one groove are all for form, and have not an idea that is original in their composition—you, Bertie, untrained to the business have at least rendered me presentable."

Passing Mr. Mannington's room, I found the little gentleman fidgeting in a similar fashion, as though the success of the ball depended on his personal appearance. Through the open door I saw his dress-coat hanging before the fire to get the creases out, and Mr. Mannington standing close to the window, inspecting his varnished boots, which he held one in each hand to the light.

"Ah! Miss Casey," he said, catching sight of me before I could pass, "making preparations for conquest, you see—he! he! How is Bel progressing?"

"Satisfactorily, I think, Sir."

I joined Mrs. Kingsworth, whom I found in the garden, cold and frosty as the day was. I was glad of any escape into the fresh air—my head was aching terribly that day.

"Where's Bel?" asked Mrs. Kingsworth.

"With the dressmakers, madam."

"Ah! then she is very bad company. You are politic to escape her. Let us have a turn round the garden, whilst the time is left us. We shall have snow when the sun goes down."

"I see no sign of it."

"Old women like me grow wondrous weather-wise, Miss Casey. You will find that I am right."

She passed her arm through mine, and walked on tapping the ground lightly with her stick.

"The horses will be turned out to-night at the risk of their lives, to please the vanity of a girl, and a silly sexagenarian, and there will be no end of trouble to-morrow for servants of all degrees. I was never fond of dancing myself—they who brought me up had a soul above frivolities!"

She looked at me askance, and then said—

"You dance?"

"A little, madam."

"A strange freak of your mother's to add *that* to your accomplishments," said Mrs. Kingsworth. "When did you ever expect to exercise your saltatory abilities?"

"It is difficult to say."

"Would you have liked to attend this ball?"

"Yes."

"You, whom I thought so suitable as guardian to Bel, staid beyond your years, strong-minded and to all appearances far above the women of your age—why, you have changed!"

"Greatly madam—greatly!" I answered, with an inexpressible sigh.

"Ah! the world changes—so we change upon it," she said. "I am not surprised—I *am never surprised!* I suppose it is the old story of evil example, and all this bustle of preparation has turned your head a little?"

"I should have been glad to accompany her," I said thoughtfully.

"And you are Bel's guardian, legally. How far can you and I trust that nervous and irritable dandy? Give him a bag of money in trust," she said, between her closed lips, "and he would not lose sight of it for an instant—but his daughter?"

"Surely he——"

"I had forgotten," she corrected, "his daughter is money to him, and will be cared for. You look shocked at my unsisterly criticism, Miss Casey, but I always speak my mind. I do not love my younger brother with all my heart and soul; when we were children I hated him for his unchildlike ways—and now I am not full of admiration for him. When I read a person like a book, and know that his every thought is for my money, and every kindness to me a forced profession, estimated at its money's worth, I am not inclined to sing his virtues very loudly. You may tell him my opinion, if you will."

"No, madam."

"He would tell you in return, that he is aware of it himself."

She changed the conversation, and shortly afterwards returned to the house. The day trailed its way on sluggishly—what a long day it seemed to me! After dinner Mr. Mannington and his daughter

retired, Miss Mannington looking wistfully towards me as she went out at the door.

"She is afraid of taking away her aunt's sole companion," said Mrs. Kingsworth, "and anxious for your superintendence. Go to her, Miss Casey."

Whether I objected or not, I could scarcely tell. But I obeyed my mistress's behest.

I found Emma Eaves and another maid attending upon her; Bel before the looking-glass, and all the paraphernalia of finery spread about the room. Bel in difficulties was always Bel excitable and out of temper. There were two crimson spots upon her cheeks, that might have been burned there with an iron.

Emma Eaves, excited also by her young mistress's little persecutions, might have stood for her sister at that moment; she appeared so flushed and angry.

"I shall never look well, Miss Casey," said Bel, half inclined to cry. "I'm sick of that disgusting brimstone dress, before I have put it on my back. Emma, you tiresome girl, why don't you stand still for a moment?"

"How can I, Miss, with you ordering me about so much?"

"I'll order you out of the room, if you're pert," said Isabel. Then turning to me. "Miss Casey, are you going to stay here?"

"If you wish it."

"There's a dear good girl! I shall love you for ever afterwards. When I'm in trouble I'll run up a signal of distress. Meanwhile, look at the set of topazes my aunt has lent me."

Isabel Mannington prattled the greater part of the time her hand-maids were preparing her for the ball; when matters were progressing fairly, her spirits rose high, though her nervous system was evidently a trifle deranged.

The time-piece ticking on her mantel-shelf struck eight before she was ready. The carriage had been ordered for seven, and counter-manded twice.

"It's a ride of an hour and a half," she said; "and I wish very much to be early."

"Half-past nine will not be late."

"Country folk muster sooner than Loudon, and break up earlier. Now, how do I look?"

I had put on her jewelry, arranged the wreath about her head, given the finishing touches to her general appearance. She was a girl who did justice to "dressing"—who never looked better than when great pains had been bestowed upon her. Some people never look worse.

I thought that she was very pretty that night; the delicate maize colour of her fleecy dress consorted with her slight figure and dark skin, whilst the lustrous eyes and flushed cheeks added an animation to a face that was at any time far from unattractive. Every move-

ment of Bel Mannington was grace, and as she shook out her ample skirts, and swam to and fro before us, the old thought came upon me that she was a dangerous rival, of whom I should beware.

"Like a fairy—just like a fairy in a pantomine!" ejaculated Emma.

It was intended for a compliment, and Isabel was pleased with it. Admiration had its charms for Mr. Mannington's daughter.

"You don't say much, Bertie?"

"I can say that the dress is very becoming, and that to my eyes you never looked so well."

"Thank you—thank you, Bertie. It struck me that I was not looking my very worst to-night. And you who never flatter, too—how kind you are to say so! Bertie," in a low whisper, "is it so very impossible?"

"What—so very impossible?" I answered, that new feeling of aversion to her creeping over me.

"That he should take a fancy to me?"

"No—not impossible."

"Will he keep his word and come to-night?"

"I *hope so!*" I gasped forth.

"You do?—oh! if he come, I shall think there *is* a chance for poor little me!"

"Hush—hush! That is *not* right! Keep your heart whole Bel—just for a few days longer, when I will tell you something!"

"About him?"

"Yes—let us go down-stairs now to your aunt."

We went down-stairs to the drawing-room, and Isabel submitted herself to her aunt's critical inspection.

The old lady put on her spectacles, and gazed intently through them at her niece. I could see her features soften, the hard lines about her mouth relax; she was gratified at Isabel's appearance, and the love she had for her showed forth despite her stoicism.

"You will do—for a Mannington," she said; "don't get in the drafts this wintry night, and don't believe, at seventeen years of age, all the nonsense with which every addle-pated booby considers it etiquette to amuse you."

"Is it likely, aunt?"

"Very," was the dry answer. "Where's your father?"

"If you please, ma'am," said a servant entering, "Mr. Mannington says he is nearly ready now."

"I will wait till I see that gentleman before I order the carriage to the door. Where are the horses?"

"In the covered stable yard, madam."

"Then—we'll wait."

Mr. Mannington shortly afterwards made his appearance. He had gone to dress at the same time as his daughter, but his valet had been longer over him. He came down at last, and burst into conversation with his daughter, carefully evading Mrs. Kingsworth's eye.

"You are sure that you are quite ready, Walter?" asked his sister.

"Oh! yes, yes—quite ready, thank you."

"Then the carriage can come round to the front door. You are looking as well as one can expect for your age, Mr. Mannington."

"Ahem!—are you ready Isabel?"

"And it affords me no small gratification to perceive that your dancing days are not yet over. We come of a stock that lasts long, but if you brave late hours, cold nights, and these amusements, I shall see the end of you, depend upon it."

"God bless me! what a nice thought to start to a ball with!" said Mr. Mannington, turning as white as his tie; "really Charlotte, I wish you wouldn't. I'm not looking ill, am I?"

"Miss Casey should have taken your place."

"Two young women could not have proceeded to a ball—impossible!"

"Society at Woundell would have excused the etiquette for the sake of the agreeable change."

"He! he!—not so bad. But Miss Casey is not fond of balls."

"On the contrary," said Mrs. Kingsworth, answering for me, "she has expressed a regret at being overlooked."

"Bertie!" cried Isabel, turning suddenly towards me; "oh! I did not fancy for an instant that you——"

"Pray, do not apologise," I hastened to exclaim; "I have had no thought of the ball for itself—Mrs. Kingsworth has mistaken me."

"I am sure if I had only known it," said Mr. Mannington politely, "I should have been but too happy to escort Miss Casey, also."

"The carriage waits, Sir," was the announcement.

Adieux were exchanged, and Mr. Mannington bore his daughter away. When we were alone together, Mrs. Kingsworth walked across the room, unlocked a little ivory casket on a table between the windows, and returned with a large white ticket in her hands.

"What is this?" I asked as she tendered it towards me.

"Your ticket for the ball—I procured it with my niece's, but Mr. Mannington objected. He must have his way sometimes."

"Why do you show me this now?"

"In the first place, because you may explain why you are not a favourite of Mr. Mannington's."

"I cannot explain that."

"In the second, because it is as well to know your enemies. I have always found it profitable in life."

"No enemy of mine, I am sure," I answered, "I have done him no harm."

"And in the third, because you must make use of that ticket and go to the ball."

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOUNDELL BALL.

I LOOKED at the ticket, then at Mrs. Kingsworth, in bewilderment. Eccentric as she had ever proved herself, this was a surprise.

"I do not understand," I said at last.

"You wish for change," she replied; "for some reason or other, which it is not my place to attempt to discover, this particular ball has an attraction for you. Do you deny it?"

"No, Madam."

"This is the first wish that you have ever expressed here, and we must study your whims and caprices as well as other people's, whilst you remain one of the family. *They* must not have it all their own way, or we shall find ourselves thrust from the foremost rank, by-and-by."

"But——"

"There, it is all settled. Go and dress, and be quick about it. You are not anxious about the ball alone—I can see that—therefore any evening dress will suit you."

"Do you expect me to go alone, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"You will go with me—I shall be your *chaperon*—our carriage is ordered for nine o'clock."

She could not repress a smile at my further astonishment. And how the smile changed her, to be sure! It was the first time in my life that I had seen her look like that—kind, gentle, motherly—just as she whom I had lost at sixteen years of age would have looked at me had she lived. I could have flown towards her and kissed her—nestled in her arms then and sobbed my sorrows forth. I knew then—if I had not guessed it before by intuition—that there was much real goodness in her, and that want of love and sympathy, added to past troubles, which had aged and hardened her, had been the ruin of a disposition naturally generous. The tears were in my eyes as I replied,

"No, madam, I cannot accept the sacrifice of your comfort for my pleasure. I do not care about the ball now—I would rather sit here by your side and talk to you."

"A good young woman this," she said, laying her withered hand upon my hair; "I prayed God for such a daughter once."

She bent away her head from me and stood for a moment very still and motionless; then the old face, hard, angular and stern, was turned towards my own.

"I wish this too—I am in the mood for company to-night—I would

show all the good folk at Woundell that it is not time yet to count upon my funeral. Get ready, Miss Casey."

"You have no ticket," I suggested.

"It does not matter—they will not stop me."

I went to my room with a fluttering heart and dizzy brain. Was I sorry?—was I glad? Could I account in any way for this new eccentricity on the part of my mistress? Was it possible that she had guessed the truth? No—she did not know of my engagement, and it was the mere desire to gratify a wish that she had seen was an intense one, that led her to take part with me. Well from that night forth, I loved her better still—I took her closer to my heart, and felt myself her faithful handmaiden, ready to side with her against the world, if it ever turned against her.

I dressed hastily and nervously. If it were decreed that I should go to the ball, let me reach there in good time, and judge for myself—if it were possible to comprehend—the real meaning of Mr. Stewart's intentions! Would Mark be all that I wished, or all that I feared?—would he come at all?

I dressed myself in my last new silk—a blue glacé, that I had considered a little too bright for my taste, but had been talked into by a persuasive shopkeeper at Peterborough, whither I had been driven a few months back, less for my own convenience, perhaps, than for the sake of exercising the horses. And I had remembered that Mark Stewart's favourite colour for ladies was blue—I had worn blue at Sir Benjamin Prout's dinner-party, and he had liked me first of all there.

I wore no ornament or flower in my hair. My last action was to place the diamond hoop upon my finger, and then I joined Mrs. Kingsworth, who was already before me in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Kingsworth, in a high black velvet dress and scarlet cloak, sat waiting for me. She looked at her watch as I entered.

"Five minutes before time—I am obliged, Miss Casey. I have been hunting over my case for something for your hair, but we had better leave the well alone. People would have said at Woundell that you were only flaunting in Mrs. Kingsworth's jewels. You can have flowers from the greenhouse, if they be worth waiting for."

"No, thank you, madam."

"Then we will start at once. Don't put your gloves on yet—we have a long ride before us. You are pale—is there anything to distract your nervous system *en avance*?"

"I hope not, madam."

"If so, never show it to the enemy, or advantage is on his side—I have always found it so. Let me feel your pulse."

She placed her hand upon my wrist and looked down. The glitter of my ring arrested her attention, as it had done Mr. Mannington's. She did not question me concerning it, however; she released my hand and said,

“We shall have time to compose ourselves. After all, this is not a very eccentric freak on a ball night. They must not set us down for mad people in our old age,” she added, half absently, “that would be getting the game into their own hands in a new fashion.”

The carriage was announced, and we went from the drawing-room through the hall to the porch.

It was snowing fast, and I remembered Mrs. Kingsworth’s prophecy of the morning. It was a wild winter’s night to drive nine miles in search of pleasure. We drew our cloaks more closely round us as we descended the steps and entered a small brougham, that was seldom used by the family.

We rattled along the dark drive into the country road. I found the snow-flakes had settled too thickly on the window-glass to see Richard Stewart’s cottage very distinctly.

Mrs. Kingsworth noticed my glance in that direction, and said,

“He has gone to the ball, I suppose?”

“I should think not.”

“These Stewarts get into strange places when they make up their minds, but I fancy Woundell stands still too much upon its dignity to grant tickets to land-bailiffs. Yet his brother will be there—you know that?”

“Isabel thought he would.”

“Isabel thinks too much of him—at present.”

The old suspicion! I curled myself into the corner of the carriage and did not respond to this. I had not become used to the coupling of their names together yet awhile. She hinted indirectly at the future—but I would not make one effort to raise the curtain. She might wish—she might have schemed to bring Mr. Stewart and her niece together. Before she went to Ediuburgh she had spoken of one man as only fit for Isabel’s husband, and I had been suspicious then of whom she meant.

We said no more to each other the rest of the way to Woundell. My companion, sitting by my side—there were no seats facing us—dropped off to sleep, I think, or into a deeper current of thought, belonging to a time anterior to mine. Once she moved restlessly and murmured forth, as if in extenuation of a charge made against her by some dream-figure—

“It was for the best, I tell you!”

A long, cold, and depressing ride, with the snow falling more thickly on the carriage windows, and the lamp in the roof burning very dimly.

We reached Woundell at last—a large market town, that had always a fair degree of life in it, and where trade thrived, and men, contented with fair profits, saved money in good time. Ambitious people left discontented with its jog-trot way of doing business, and made fortunes or came to grief in the crowd which encountered them in larger towns, and fought harder for the prizes. But Woundell

held a high place in the county, and had a court of justice in its midst, a county court, a police station, a gaol, a town-hall, a market, a pump with two spouts, and a monument to George III., "erected by the grateful inhabitants of Woundell," the adjective in which sentence had been neatly altered to "graceful" by some wag without either reverence or loyalty.

There was not much air of business about the town that night as we drove through its deserted streets. It was not until we approached the Town-Hall that the hum of several voices assured us that there were loiterers about still, hanging round the entrance doors, and interested in the "arrivals."

"Here's another!" a voice shouted; "don't go yet, Jo;" and Jo, who had grown tired of waiting, and become disgusted with the snow, probably returned to see what *we* were like! There was a shuffling of feet upon the pavement, and an authoritative voice—belonging to one policeman out of six who did duty at Woundell—requesting people to stand back; then the carriage-door was opened, and the entrance doors, the awning across the pavement, the waifs and strays of the town, the gleam of light before us, and a waste of snow and darkness on each side, were things to be seen and afterwards remembered.

We passed from the carriage to the entrance, and went up a flight of steps towards the ball-room, whence the faint strains of music reached us as we advanced.

"Half-past ten," said Mrs. Kingsworth to me; "quite ball-room hours."

On the top of the stairs, two smirking young men, hired for the occasion from the undertaker's round the corner, met us with extended hands for tickets.

Mrs. Kingsworth put them aside with the end of her stick, poking at the white waistcoat of the more obtrusive.

"Tickets, please, ma'am," said one.

"Here is my friend's—I have no ticket," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "don't stand in the way in that ridiculous position, please—we are in a draught here."

"But, madam—you really can't, madam—Sir Benjamin's orders were, madam——"

"Tell Sir Benjamin that his orders are not of the slightest consequence. I am Mrs. Kingsworth, and if he objects to my appearance, there's a policeman in attendance and he can lock me up. Stand aside, menials!"

They gave way—one disappeared altogether for further orders, but before we were issued we were in the ball-room.

A bright scene enough, and one that did credit to the county. The warm room; the lights pendent from the ceiling; the decorations that had been extemporized for the occasion, and were graceful and appropriate; the music from the raised orchestra at the end of the

room, where George III. smiled again in oil colours; the crowd of guests, well-dressed, well-bred, spinning round the room, all constituted a county ball of the first magnitude.

It was the first ball-room into which I had ever set foot, and its novelty impressed me. I saw nothing to sneer at or to satirize, although the first words I heard were from a dandy simpering at the door, "These country hops are always deuced slow, Frank!" And Frank, another dandy, looked at the ceiling, and said, "Ya—as."

They were waltzing when we entered, and those who could not waltz, and those who objected thereto, occupied so many of the side-seats, that we had some difficulty in finding a place from which to watch the dancers. I felt giddy and "dazed" by the change from the shadowy carriage to the vortex of pleasure into which we had plunged.

I was glad to find a seat, and muster courage to look round me. *Courage* to look around me at that time and in that place! No, he was *not* there; he had not come yet. He was not amongst the knot of idlers at the door by which we had entered, or by the door facing it, which probably led into some refreshment room; he was not sitting on the cushioned seats ranged round the room, and if he had been waltzing I should have seen his head and shoulders above the rest of them. I was in good time to see the curtain rise upon the play!

Mr. Mannington and daughter were both indulging in the "round dance;" Mrs. Kingsworth's warning had had no effect on her brother, for there he was, spinning round and round with a rapidity and precision that did credit to his sixty years, and told of considerable practice. His partner was a lady in maize-coloured tulle—the identical and honourable Miss Dudgeon whom Bel had so uncourtously apostrophized in the morning of that day. A few couples distant from him revolved Miss Mannington and the eldest son of Sir Benjamin Prout, at whose house I had dined some time ago. Father and daughter spun by with their respective partners, oblivious of our presence, and Mrs. Kingsworth put on her spectacles to watch the scene more closely.

"I hope the shock of seeing us will not be too much for Mr. Mannington," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "here he comes again!"

Mr. Mannington and the Honourable Miss Dudgeon were close upon us, Mr. Mannington slightly fatigued, and leaning his chin on his partner's shoulder for support, in a familiar, fatherly way. He came towards us somewhat wearily, Miss Dudgeon having danced him out of time a little; I could see his thin legs moving with some effort as he spun round and round towards us. Facing us at last with the next revolution, his half-closed eyes blinked suddenly, and then were opened to their fullest extent, as though he had seen a ghost.

"Lord save us!" he ejaculated; and as Miss Dudgeon whirled him away, I could see with every turn his eyes becoming larger and

larger, as they were fixed in our direction. Miss Mannington, absorbed in her waltzing, passed on oblivious ever more.

The waltz was not quite over, when Mr. Mannington, having lauded the Honourable Miss Dudgeon by the side of her mamma, came towards us red and flurried, with a white handkerchief in his hand rolled into the semblance of a snow-ball.

"What—what—what's the matter, Charlotte?" he exclaimed; "and Miss Casey, too!—how very an—imating, to be sure!"

"If anything were the matter do you think I should be sitting calmly here?" said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"N—no, certainly not," he muttered, dabbing his forehead with the snowball; "but it's rather remarkable. Don't it strike you as just a little remarkable?"

"Not at all."

"Very well, Charlotte—you are the best judge, of course. I'm very glad to see you here, and to feel that you have the strength and energy to come. Shall I take you into the refreshment room?"

"You may take Miss Casey, if you will. She's not well, and I thought the change would do her good. Instead of which, it has robbed all the colour from her checks."

"Miss Casey—if you will favour me?"

Mr. Mannington offered his arm, and though loth to move for a while, I rose and accompanied him, keeping to the line of seats, and steering cautiously for the refreshment room.

"What made you come?" he asked me as we proceeded; "what ever made you come in this mysterious manner?"

"Mrs. Kingsworth wished it."

"Had you no idea this morning that you were coming to-night?"

"Not any idea at all."

"Dear me!—mad as a hatter!—bless my soul! what an odd freak!"

Through the curtained doorway to the refreshment room I was conducted by Mr. Mannington; the waltz had ceased then, and the tired and heated couples were coming in one stream after us.

Mr. Mannington hastened to procure me some wine; the excitement of the adventure had been too much for me, and I was feeling faint and ill. The horror of making a scene in that crowded refreshment room was besetting me also, and I was anxious to drink my wine, and to escape the mob of ice-hunters.

"Stop a minute, Miss Casey—I was going to ask——"

But I pushed my way through the crowd, not without some recognitions, to which I paid no heed, and entered the ball-room, where a few were left promenading. Crossing the ball-room, a young lady sprang upon me, and looked me full in the face—Isabel Mannington.

"It is you, then!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad, I'm astonished! But how did you get here, and who brought you?"

I replied to the last question only.

"Mrs. Kingsworth."

"Aunt!" ejaculated Miss Mannington, "*here!*" and her voice reached the alto pitch of amazement. "What for—?"

"Miss Mannington," said a voice behind us at this juncture, and a lank, pasty-faced youth suddenly merged upon the scene, "you will allow me to remind you that I have been favoured with the promise of your hand for the next dance."

"Oh! bother!"

And away Miss Mannington tore me in the direction of her aunt, leaving her promised partner with his lower jaw on his chest.

Miss Mannington, once by the side of her aunt, and reconciled to the appearance of her and me at the Woundell ball, became full of information in her turn. She was spending a very pleasant evening—there were plenty of Wilthorpe people there—she was engaged for almost every dance, except the quadrilles, she added in a lower tone to me.

"He's not come yet—but he'll not break his word," she whispered.

"You are looking better, Miss Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "your colour is all coming back again."

"Well it might come! Still I was better; I was growing accustomed to the scene; I was anxious to see the story of this night to the end; less faint and more stern; less hopeful and more assured that ever after that night a new life, and new thoughts connected therewith, would fall to my lot.

Yes, I was sure *he* would come too, and that he would not break his word.

The dance began again: the pasty-faced youth, who had fallen desperately in love with Miss Mannington early in the evening, and had been following her with his eyes through all the dances, and been jealous of each of her partners in succession, again asserted his claim, and this time bore her off. Sir Benjamin Prout suddenly rose up before us.

"Very pleased to see you here this evening, Mrs. Kingsworth and Miss Casey," he said, shaking hands with us. "I have been searching for the bold innovator of our rules."

"I owe you a guinea, Sir Benjamin—I shall not forget it."

The baronet coloured.

"I will refer you to the committee," he said with a forced laugh; "meanwhile, would you like to visit the card room?"

"I think of staying here if you will allow me," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "I am waiting for a friend who has not arrived yet."

"So late as this!"

"Yes."

"My friend Mr. Stewart, perhaps? He is a man of business and will not neglect profit for pleasure. Miss Casey," turning to me,

"I have a young friend who has pressed me very hard for an introduction to you. May I beg your assent to the same?"

"Please, no," I ejaculated, "I do not wish to dance to-night. I have——"

"Miss Casey must not sit by the side of an old scarecrow all the evening," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "bring forth the Adonis, if you please, Sir Benjamin. I admire the young man's perceptive powers, and think that he is deserving of Miss Casey for a partner."

Sir Benjamin departed.

"Oh! Mrs. Kingsworth," I exclaimed, "I have no wish to dance."

"Enjoy yourself whilst you are pretty and young, Miss Casey," she said, "time enough for sitting still and seeing others play the game of life out when you are married, or as old as I am. Strange events evolve from gay meetings of this character; a woman may meet her fate here, find her future husband or her future tyrant, date from to-night a life's happiness or misery. Neglect not a chance of finding a helpmate, Miss Casey."

"You advise me!"

"It is the fashion—no woman is in her proper sphere husbandless."

She spoke bitterly, and before I could reply Sir Benjamin advanced with his friend—a handsome rosy-faced man, with whiskers which he had evidently pinned his soul to—large "weepers," cultivated with care, and looked at fondly by their owner after every speech.

"Mr. Stalks—Miss Casey."

Mr. Stalks was anxious to engage me for the next dance, and looked at his left whisker—surprised that I had not a card, and looked at his right whisker, darted away in search of a steward, returned with my name inscribed on the vacant space under the next quadrille, bowed, smirked, looked at his whiskers again, and retired.

When the dance we were watching was over, Mr. Stalks appeared again, offered me his arm, and proceeded to promenade with me, discoursing volubly on a variety of subjects, and glancing at his one great object of attraction in an inane hypochondriacal manner, that made me long to scream at him.

The next dance was a quadrille; ladies and gentlemen were already taking their places, we took ours with the rest and faced the entrance doors, which I had been watching at every opportunity allowed me, and which place I had suggested as convenient.

"Tewible dwaught!" Mr. Stalks affirmed; "blows one's hair about so, I find. Don't you observe a tewible dwaught, Miss Casey?"

"No," I answered, "I prefer this situation."

"Vewy well, then."

The quadrille began; glancing towards Mrs. Kingsworth, I saw

that Miss Mannington had taken her place beside her—she had been disappointed in *her* partner.

The side couple on my left were glancing in the same direction, and talking scandal also. Oh! the scandal at the side scenes of society!

“Who *is* that girl in maize, William?” asked the lady.

“Mrs. Kingsworth’s niece, just come out. Do you think her pretty?”

“Not at all,” was the disparaging comment.

“Interesting, I think.”

“Oh! of course you do,” was the sharp answer; “you danced with her the very second dance.”

All this dialogue between an irritable Corydon and Chloe impossible to escape from in a crowded ball-room, where the figures could just be struggled through—nearly everybody in the room having been seized with a desire to *do* the first set.

Passing and repassing, I could not shut my ears against the dialogue.

“She’s the daughter of that old chap with the sharp nose,” I heard him say again; “Mrs. Kingsworth was a Mannington.”

“The Manningtons of Deeneby—what happened to them?—something.”

“The old lady, Mrs. Kingsworth’s mother, killed herself, I have heard my father say.”

“Oh! a mad lot!”

A mad lot! Did this account for Mrs. Kingsworth’s eccentricity, and the wildness of Bel Mannington, I thought, with a shudder I could not resist. Mr. Stalks detected my spasmodic contraction of the shoulders.

“Told you there was a tewible dwaught from that doorway, Miss Casey,” he said—“comes up the stairs somehow or other, and blows your hair about. Just look now how those curtains are slwaking to and fro, just as if—oh! that’s somebody coming in, I see! Gwacious, who is he?”

MR. STEWART! He came through the curtained doorway and stopped—the tall and handsome man I had seen last in the country lane; my heart leaped towards him, and my old faintness for a moment seemed to dash upon me irresistibly. Then I recovered, and looked anxiously in his direction, but his gaze was travelling down the room in search of other faces more likely to be seen there than my own.

So we met again.

CHAPTER VIII.

BERTIE AT BAY.

I WATCHED him narrowly, forgot my position, my place in the quadrille—everything. There was nothing in the world but Mr. Stewart that I could think of then.

He was paler than his wont—a second glance assured me of this: He was older-looking, and more stern. The lips were more compressed, and the eyes were shadowed by dark rings beneath the lids. But he was a very handsome man, and he had not stood many minutes in the doorway before glances were directed towards him from all parts of the room. He was well-known, too—more than one whisper of his name circulated amongst the visitors. Could it be possible, I thought, that he had ever asked me to become his wife, save in some dream, which had haunted me with its semblance of reality?

Our eyes met at last, and I noted a slight start, a sudden suffusion of colour to his face, and an elevation of his eyebrows; then his quick eyes wandered to my partner, whom he seemed to regard intently for a moment. He bowed to me very coldly, I thought, and then he moved away in the direction of my friends. An instant or two afterwards he was sitting by Miss Mannington's side, smiling for the first time at *her*.

The quadrille was a mockery, and I was glad when I had escaped it, declined further attention from my partner, and hurried at once, almost with undue haste, towards my strange lover. He was still sitting by Miss Mannington's side, entering his name on her engagement card as I came up with them.

"It is the first dance after supper," he said; "you will not leave very soon?"

"We shall all go home together in the *Clarence*," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "I have dismissed my own carriage, and I am not disposed to stay too long here."

"You did not come together, then?" he asked.

"No—Miss Casey and I took it into our heads at the last moment. Here is Miss Casey."

He jumped quite nervously at my propinquity, rose, and shook hands with me, looking into my face very intently.

"I hope you are well," he said, in a deeper voice than usual.

"Quite well, Sir, thank you."

"I had no idea that you would be here this evening."

“Nor I until eight o'clock.”

I took my seat by Mrs. Kingsworth's side, away from him; I was a weak woman, not adopting the best plan to show that I was hurt with him, or that I had been unhappy for many, many months. His eyes followed me to my seat, then he turned to Miss Mannington, and resumed his conversation with her. Mrs. Kingsworth addressed herself to me, and left them free to talk.

An animated dialogue, in which Bel Mannington took the leading part, and evinced too readily her pleasure at seeing her companion, and her interest in all he said. Impulsive, childlike, and free from any attempt to mask her feelings, she lowered herself—at least, in my eyes—by her anxiety. It was soon over, for her partner arrived to claim her for the next dance—the last before supper—and she rose to keep her engagement with no very amiable looks.

Mr. Stewart moved closer to Mrs. Kingsworth, and spoke of Edinburgh and the friends whom his companion made inquiry concerning; these two, who had stood flashing their daggers' points at Sir Benjamin Prout's dinner-party, seemed now the best of friends. Mrs. Kingsworth more than once deferred to his opinion with a courtesy quite new to me. Had she learned to know at least the real value of this gentleman, or had it struck her that he might marry Bel Mannington, and it was better to enact a different part.

Mr. Mannington, who, to the affected surprise of his sister, was not indulging in the last gallop, appeared upon the scene and shook hands with Mr. Stewart.

“Who's that dancing with Isabel?” he asked immediately afterwards.

“Young Roach of Newton—Squire Roach's son.”

“I thought so—he'll take her into supper now—that was his artfulness, no doubt. I don't like young Roach—he said I was a skipjack once—and his father is over head and ears in mortgages.”

“There is no occasion for alarm—do you escort me into supper Walter?”

“Ahem—yes—with pleasure.”

“I trust Mr. Mannington will waive his claim in my favour,” said Mr. Stewart politely.

“No, thank you,” said Mrs. Kingsworth quickly; “I will not weigh you down with the responsibility of being agreeable to an old woman. The young for the young, and the hideous,” taking her brother's arm and rising, “for the hideous! I leave Miss Casey, an old friend, to your care till after supper. Let us see, Walter, if we can find our way to the supper-room, and get a good place before the dancers hustle us to death. You and I, with a foot each in the grave, care very little about the unsubstantialities.”

“Just as you say—this way, Charlotte—you'll leave directly after supper, I suppose?”

“I have ordered the Clarence at two.”

"The Clarence!"

"We all go home together—two of the horses I sent back at once."

"Bless me!"

When they were out of hearing, when the dancers were whirling madly past us, Mr. Stewart rose and offered me his arm.

"Will you come with me?" he said.

I nodded in assent, took his arm, and went with him through the maze of dancers to the refreshment-room—empty of visitors now, even of waiters, who had been marshalled off to the banquet. We sat down side by side there, to begin the tragedy after all this comedy. I had waited for this a long while—it had come at last, and now I feared it!

"You are looking ill, Bertie," he said in his old tones, but my heart took no pleasure from them; "have you been unwell?"

"No," I murmured.

"I am surprised to find you here to-night—I was not aware that you were fond of public balls."

"I heard that you were coming—is that excuse enough for my presence here? I heard that you had engaged yourself to dance with Miss Mannington, and I was curious to see if you would keep your word."

"I never break it."

He was silent for awhile. A waiter came into the room, scoured a handful of spoons, glanced at us in a friendly way, and then passed out at a back door. When we were alone again, he said quietly, almost mockingly:

"You are jealous."

"I am unhappy," I answered quickly; "I have been treated like a child—and then reproved like one. You have stung me by your bitter words—and then by your more bitter silence, caring nothing for me, and thinking nothing of me, but going your own way in life, as though I existed not, or had no claim upon your consideration. Better to have honestly said at once that you were tired of me, and had repented of your folly, than have acted in this unmanly fashion."

He listened to me, watching every expression of my face, flushed and agitated; he struggled hard to maintain that demeanour which had carried him in life so well—but his face had become pale, and one white-gloved hand opened and closed absently upon his knee. I felt in the midst of my passion—for it was the long pent-up torrent of indignities leaping its bounds at last—that I was not acting for the best, or showing myself in the best light to him, and yet I went on to the end.

"I have been unhappy too—you make no consideration for that—and," he added very sharply, "I ask none. I am strong enough to bear my own troubles, and the sympathy of a woman with them would but add to the burden. Yet I came hither to explain them."

"Not here—you did not expect me here."

"I stand corrected—I was not speaking by the card," he answered; "here, I came to fulfil a silly promise; to-morrow, I should have been at Richard's house at Wilthorpe, to see you."

"And explain all?"

"And explain all."

"If it be simply that you are tired of me, it is easily explained, Mr. Stewart," I said.

"If I had only that to tell you, I should have said so long ago, Miss Casey," he replied more coldly; "it would not have been just or honourable on my part to have held *that* secret so tenaciously. You spoke of a letter that I sent you—you may remember, perhaps, that I asked therein for your confidence in me."

"You had it until——"

"Until it was lost," he added; "exactly so. Well, we stand upon very different ground now, divided by a gulph that must widen between us more and more, now confidence is lost. Your fault, not mine."

"If you are anxious for an excuse, Mr. Stewart, take that, and let me go free and forget you!"

I sprang to my feet, but he held my hand and drew me back to a place by his side.

"Pardon me, but I would not part in anger with you—I would ask you for more patience, and—more justice."

"What more can I do?" I pleaded; "what more is there to say? If I have been jealous of you, the reason has not been wanting; if I have lost my confidence, it is because you have feared to trust me."

"You do not understand me—and I have been mistaken in you."

"We are both in error—I see it now—I know it now!" I cried; "you stooped from your position to raise me, and brought me only this humiliation."

The hot tears had risen to my eyes, but I dashed them away with an angry hand. He turned paler still, and looked down thoughtfully at the carpeted floor, with his own hands clasped together. Beyond the doorway by which we had entered spun the mad dancers, a glare of light and colour, a whirl of life and gaiety, with which every thought of ours was utterly at variance.

"My position stands apart from the question," he said; "pray spare me any taunts to render this reminiscence more cruel. What I came for—with what thoughts or hopes—with what intentions, selfish or unselfish, matters not now—I see all very clearly in the distance, and it is best for both of us."

"I have been expecting this excuse——"

"Pardon me," he said proudly, after a moment, even fiercely, "you do not understand me. Some day you will judge me better, or I have been mistaken in you. You must not speak of my *excuses* I have always been above offering them, and let those who loved me

or despised me, think their best or worst of me. To my own conscience I have remained pure, at least. All this," with an impatient toss of his hand, "scarcely worth dwelling upon, save that I would stand well in your estimation after we have parted."

I did not answer. I did not comprehend him. I knew alone that there was a secret, with which he would not trust me, and that after that night all would be ended between us!

"I am sorry that we have exchanged one harsh word, Miss Casey," he said mournfully; "that at least was unnecessary. We sit here now, a man and woman of the world, who have dropped all sentiment, and awakened to the consciousness of our unfitness for each other. Is that the position?"

"If you wish it—yes. If you have ever thought that it was best for us to part—yes, a thousand times!"

"I have thought so!" he added, in the same mournful tone that had awakened such strange yearnings in my heart towards him; "I, who have prated of confidence in me, confess that. If for your sake more than my own, Bertie—forgive me, it is for the last time!—still the truth has asserted itself, and made me fearful of results. I have been a coward, perhaps—Dick thinks so—but to-night brings with it the sternest conviction of all, and withers every bud of promise with its frost. So much the better for you and me to part—is it not?"

"So much the better!"

My wounded pride said that rather than my heart, but he took it for my answer.

"Shall we say good-bye now, or play the farce out of idle companionship at the supper-table?"

"No—don't come—let me be alone," I cried.

"The better plan perhaps, although people may talk, and Mrs. Kingsworth may observe that we are separated."

"Sir, I will have no mockery of appearances!"

"You are right—it is not worthy of you. Then good-bye."

He held his hand towards me, and I put mine within it, after a struggle to resist the impulse.

"You will think worse of me than this," he murmured; "this decision brings about strange results, and makes me a more worldly man. Think the best of me that you can, and for all the past, God bless you!"

"Let me go now."

"You will meet with a better husband than ever I should have made—and I part here with the only woman who could have made me happy—and yet all is for the best, for me as well as you. Strange inconsistency of a life that breaks in mid-air like this! Good-bye."

He dropped my hand and walked rapidly away from me into the ball-room, where the dance was over and the promenaders waiting for the supper signal. I sat stunned, bewildered, conscious of

nothing save that he and I had severed our engagement, and were never again to have one hope in common. If I could have flung myself upon that cushioned seat and given way to all the grief within me, I should have felt less crushed by the weight upon my brain.

But there was no place of rest for me yet; the musicians came talking and laughing into the refreshment room, and I gathered my cloak round me and went away shivering. I remember one man hastening after me and presenting me with my fan, that I had left upon the seat; and I have a consciousness of passing with the stream of visitors across a stone landing-place to the supper-room, as a somnambulist might have done.

No one noticed my abstraction; no one spoke to me; I was alone with my thoughts, and I took my place companionless at the table with the rest, a white-faced phantom, that attracted no attention.

Everything connected with that supper I remember vaguely; that it was a spacious room, that there was a crowd of guests talking, laughing, and gesticulating, that the viands were costly, and the sparkling wines flowing freely, that every one seemed happy but myself, I knew that—nothing more. The waiter changed my plate at stolid intervals, taking away each untasted dainty—once my companion on my left looked at me, failed to recognise a friend, and turned her back—I remember her head-dress of turquoises so vividly that a turquoise ornament brings back that ghastly supper to this day—but all was dream-land, and I was in a trance.

This banquet after my great sorrow seemed at the time harder to bear than my parting with him; I was but conscious of one thing, that I must not give way or act a scene in that place. Are there any unfortunates amongst my readers who have had such feelings as these, and have masked them before society that has shut tragedy out of doors for the nonce? They will understand me—few else. They will remember in their turn the dreamlike character of the reality, and the real agony of that which has passed away like a dream. They will think how hollow and vapid was the jest that “set the table in a roar,” and how cruel and heartless everybody seemed on that night when the ship went down, with all hopes on board! Time may have healed the wound, and other hopes taken root and flowered since then, but the reminiscence is startling, and one shudders at it still.

I went out of the room with the rest of the ladies, Mrs. Kingsworth meeting me upon the stairs.

“Where is Mr. Stewart?” she asked.

“I have lost him!”

“I did not see him in the supper-room at all. Is he well? He was looking pale and lined.”

“Well, madam, I believe.”

“He has told you something of your brother that has distressed you,” said she.

I seized at this loop-hole of escape, and answered evasively,

"He is tired of Edinburgh, I believe."

"I hinted so before this. It was to be expected—why grieve at it?"

When we were in the ball-room, when the gentlemen had returned and the band had got back to the raised orchestra, I looked piteously at Mrs. Kingsworth.

"I am so very tired!" I could not refrain from ejaculating.

"Realization and expectation seldom agree with each other," said she; "you are not more weary of this ball than I am. I wish we had not sent away the carriage."

"How far is it to Wilthorpe?"

I had some wild idea cross my mind of walking thither in my opera-cloak and satin slippers. I could not reason soberly that night.

"Nine miles. We shall get home faster than we came. Where is Bel? She must dance her quadrille with Mr. Stewart."

Mr. Stewart had already discovered her; he was dancing with her a short while afterwards; I turned my head away and would not watch them—I had no right to have suspicions now!

At the end of the quadrille, Mr. Stewart brought Bel Mannington, smiling and radiant, towards us.

"You are a man of your word, Mr. Stewart," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "it is this firm ratification of all engagements that has made you so successful in life."

Mr. Stewart wineed, as though he suspected some hidden meaning in her words, which on this occasion was not intended.

"It was a promise," he said, "performed awkwardly and ungracefully after all these months of expectation. I have to wish you a good evening."

"Going?" said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"Yes."

"I regret more than ever that I sent back our carriage, if you think of proceeding to Wilthorpe at once."

"I am going to London."

"To-night?"

"Yes, to-night. I have important business there, and have only broken my journey at Woundell to start again by the two o'clock mail train."

"How I envy you your energy."

"In the world of commerce one must fight hard or drop. Good evening."

He shook hands with each of us. Was it fancy? or did he hold my hand with a lingering touch that troubled me again? Ah! all fancy.

He went out of the ball-room at once, never looking back at us; Mrs. Kingsworth addressed her thoughtful niece.

"Bel, I am anxious to get home. Are you tired of the ball?"

"Yes, *now*."

"Content to give up all those partners who have inscribed their autographs upon this fancy card?"

"They're a pack of ninnies, with no sense in them," she said pectulantly; "yes—let us get home."

"Your father is talking to Miss Dudgeon—you must beware of a mother-in-law in that direction, Isabel."

"Good heaven!" ejaculated her niece, "that woman!"

"Think of the eventual legacies, my child—not of a personal discomfort. Miss Dudgeon has a fortune, I am told."

"Let her keep it. Oh! aunt you are only in fun."

"I am always in fun when I talk of money, girl!"

We rose to leave the ball room; passing Miss Dudgeon, Mrs. Kingsworth, playfully disposed, dropped the gold knob of her stick on the back of her brother's head.

"Oh! dear!—what's that?"

"We are going, Walter."

Walter swallowed all affronts from Mrs. Kingsworth. Before we were at the bottom of the grand staircase, Mr. Mannington had joined us with his dress-coat collar turned up, and a shawl wound round his throat.

Through the last pair of heavy curtains, and the winter met us, searching and keen. Beyond the lighted lamps at the entry, stretched the black night, and athwart it the hurrying, flickering snow, was tossed confusedly by the wind.

"Mrs. Kingsworth's carriage."

Into the carriage one by one, and then away through the streets and into the country, lying still and cold in its wintry shroud. They fell asleep by degrees, and left me time to think. What a long, long wearisome journey, and oh! what a haven of rest in the distance seemed my own quiet room.

It was mine at last. I looked the door upon intruders, tore off my cloak and gloves, and with his ring still upon my finger—his engagement ring!—I sank down and spread my hands before my face, and cried a little—not much—not enough to take the weight away!

Then I prayed that he might be happy without me—for ever happy in the new estate from which he shook me off. That was not selfish at least, and I felt the better for it.

So the romanec ended—and my old life began again.

Book IV.

CHRONICLES THE FURTHER INTENTIONS OF MR. STEWART.

CHAPTER I.

ANOTHER MEETING.

It is some satisfaction to record here, that I surmounted my disappointment pretty well. That my own self-love, self-importance, pride or whatever it was—all three together, for what I know to the contrary—came to my rescue when the first bitterness of my sorrow was over.

I adopted the very uncommon course—more particularly in books, where the fair writer has to dilate upon her morbid sensations—of making the best of it. The objectionable truth had stepped into the foreground, and I had to face it, and put up with it. It was a skeleton at the feast, reminding me of the death of the fairest hope I had ever had; but I thought it down, and fought it down, coming out of the *mêlée* a little scarred, but none the worse. Nay all the better, for I was becoming vain and self-sufficient, and my head had turned just a little with the prospect of my future greatness. In the latter days—when Mr. Stewart's intentions had become very vague and misty—it had been a restless life with me; and now the worst was over, I could accept my lesson of resignation, and think that all *had* happened for the best.

All for the best! I should have been raised above my station, and set in a world to which I did not properly belong; I might have found afterwards, instead of before—God help those unfortunates who do!—that the lover's fancy had been a fugitive one, and the *mésalliance* a thing to be regretted. I had loved him very dearly; he had seemed all that was honourable and true to me, and it was not possible to forget him, even after the best of it had been made, and I considered myself the same contented, even old-fashioned woman—graver than my years warranted, certainly—that I had been in my housekeeping days at the Corkcutters' Hall.

I kept my secret to myself, for my own sake now. There was nothing to acknowledge that could give me pleasure, or which anyone living had a right to know. It was my own little sad romance, finished in one volume, and sealed up for ever!

But again let me say, it was not possible to forget him. I bore no malice in my heart against him; I believed that he had done his best to love me, and although I would have preferred less mystery about his reasons for resigning me, yet I was assured that there had been something of a struggle to break asunder the ties, or he was a better actor than I deemed him. I thought of him as a friend still; I believed that there would come a day when he would offer a clearer explanation of the motives which had separated us; I knew that he had been troubled like myself, and if he had fallen in love with Bel Mannington, why, I could forgive him, for Bel's sake as well as his own. He was no longer the hero of my day-dreams; he had not sacrificed position for my sake; the faults and failings of our poor humanity he was not exempt from—my love had raised him on too high a pedestal, and if he had descended to earth, he was still an honourable man, and had been kind to brother John.

Two months went by at Wilthorpe—it was near Lady-Day again, and John Kingsworth Casey still remained at Edinburgh. I received a letter from him a few days before the cheque was due.

"Keep the cheque till you hear from me again, dear Bertie," he had said—a request somewhat new for him, who was partial to cheques at once. Two months, and then Mr. Mark Stewart appeared once more in Wilthorpe. I met him one wintry afternoon in the drive, where he had told me that he had loved me, and the associations connected with that place struck us both as we came by chance face to face there.

London had not improved him, and the pale face, with its new anxious looks, was there still, I observed.

"Good morning, Miss Casey," he said, so abruptly, that he reminded me of his brother Richard at once; "I was coming to the Hall in search of you."

"In search of me, Sir!" I repeated, with unfeigned surprise.

"Yes," he answered—"is it so remarkable?"

"Not very remarkable, perhaps," I answered; "may I inquire

the object of that visit with which you would have favoured me?"

I had collected my powers of composure now. It had been a shock to meet him there so suddenly,—though I had been thinking of him going down the drive,—and my cheeks had crimsoned and my step faltered very much. Now I was in my woman's armour—capable of disguising all emotion, and able to meet him on his own ground, cool and self-possessed. For men do not have it all their own way, or see always too clearly to the bottom of our hearts, whilst we hold command over our features, and keep our lips from faltering. There are some brave women amongst us yet who have fought their battles well, and held fast in the face of despair. Our pride saves us very often from humiliation, and turns the tide in our favour now and then. That self-command is a glorious attribute of our womanhood, for which we should be thankful, albeit it leads us into grave mistakes at times. It led me then, but I did not know it till long afterwards.

Mr. Stewart did not like my cool demeanour, he would have preferred to see me more embarrassed in his presence, betray more surely the evidence of my remembrance of him. If I loved him then, he did not see it; I had thought that I had chased all love for him out of my heart, even in those early days, until he came, gaunt and haggard, on my path again. But he never saw through my disguise, although my part was over-acted, and he had been all his life a man of more than common observation.

His lips compressed somewhat at my last remark; then he turned and walked back towards the country road with me, keeping step, and keeping, for a longer period than I could account, silence also.

"Miss Casey," he said at last, "my appearance here must seem to you an unwarrantable intrusion, after all that has separated you and me."

"I am sorry that we have met so soon," I answered; "such meetings must naturally be painful."

"Naturally—yes."

"And your courtesy might have spared me this meeting," I added with no little dignity.

"It might—possibly I have been in the wrong," he said hurriedly; "you will excuse me—it shall not occur again. Miss Casey, it has struck me that neither you nor I need bear each other any great degree of ill-will?"

"And you came hither to tell me that?"

"Yes—partly," he added after a moment's consideration of his answer; "I would be your friend still—advance, if it be ever possible with me, your prospects in life?"

"I will ask you to leave my advancement to my own efforts, Mr. Stewart," I said; "I have a hope that I shall continue to make my

way in the world, without being indebted to your kind consideration of me."

"Is that satire?"

"No, Sir. And I will hope," I added more earnestly, "that you will not lose your interest in my brother John, to whom you have been more than kind."

"I will do my best, Miss Casey."

"By-and-bye, I will even hope that we shall be friends, when we chance to meet—that we shall be able in the future to laugh at the folly which for so short a period made us more than friends. It was a great folly—I see that now!"

"You are a singular woman," he replied; "I give up attempting to understand you. Most girls in your place would have avoided mooted a subject calculated to embarrass them."

"I am a plain woman, Mr. Stewart. And," drawing myself up to my full height, which was not very imposing after all, "I am not afraid of the truth."

"It was a folly, then," he said moodily, catching up the one word of my previous remark; "we will consider it so, and thus conclude that part of our argument. That being settled, *that* being considered a folly, let me ask you to dismiss it for ever from your thoughts—like a folly as it is!"

"Well, Sir?"

"You scarcely understand me in my turn, Miss Casey," he said, "or I have not made myself sufficiently explicit. This folly, I will ask you to consider as a something not worthy of entertaining our friends with."

"Why?"

"Because you will be exposed to the sneers of a few, and the idle curiosity of many. Because it is not well for you or me that the folly which brought us together, or which parted us, should be a matter for discussion amongst *these* people," he added, somewhat impetuously.

"I am not likely to make known my story here," I answered; "but I cannot think it your place, Mr. Stewart, to seek to exact a promise from me to that effect."

"I seek to exact nothing," he replied; "I was thinking of your own position here—you may believe to the contrary, if you will."

I did not answer. His irritable response rendered him more than ever like his brother, though they set upon him in an uncharacteristic fashion.

"Miss Casey," he said suddenly, "I told you at the Woundell ball that you would learn to think very strangely of me. The time is fast approaching—you will try to think your best?"

"I will try," I murmured.

"Thank you."

He turned to retrace his steps down the drive. He was going to

the Hall still; his meeting with me had not distracted him from that intention! Evidently this bad opinion which he feared would be entertained for him in the future, applied to his visits to the Hall—his courtship of Bel Mannington. Well, that was no business of mine, and if he liked her—if he liked her!—why, let him marry her, and make her happy.

He was proceeding slowly down the drive, when I said quickly, “Mr. Stewart.”

He came back and stood before me, with his hands behind him, looking very thoughtfully into my face, whilst I struggled to withdraw the diamond ring from my hand which I had ungloved.

“I have been wearing this every day, in the hope of seeing you—if I had not heard from your brother that you were in London, I should have sent it to Edinburgh—will you take it back, please?”

“If I might express one wish——”

“You may not, Sir!” I cried angrily.

“Very well.”

He took the ring from me, turned it over and over in his hand, seemed, even to my fertile imagination, to be struggling with an impulse to fling it away from him over the high hedge. I left him standing thus, and went on to the great gate at the end whereat two men were loitering. As I approached I recognized in one Mr. Richard Stewart, who was talking energetically to a gentleman whom I had not seen before in Wilthorpe.

“I’ll give you three days, Mr. Stewart, and then beware of me. I have had enough of this fighting in the dark.”

“In three days do your worst, if I fail to keep my word.”

“Yon Stewarts are——”

“That will do. In three minutes I’ll shake the life out of you, if you dare say another word. Your place is to go now and keep quiet. I’m sick of you!”

And, in turning to give an angry shake at the gate against which he was leaning, Richard Stewart became aware of my approach. He started and opened the gate for me; the stranger moved away, and went at a leisurely pace down the road towards the village.

Richard Stewart laid his hand upon my arm as I gave him good morning, and looked into my face all eagerness.

“Well?” he said.

“Well,” I rejoined, “what is the matter?”

“You have seen Mark?—he has been waiting all the day for you.”

“Yes, I have seen him. How long does he stay here, are you aware?”

“I am not aware—exactly,” he answered.

His voice changed to a low set tone, and he also went hastily up the drive, without another word. I went on to the village, passing in my way the stranger who had been conversing with Richard Stewart. He was a middle-aged man, with sharp eyes and great grey whiskers, dressed in deep mourning. He glanced furtively at me from under his hat as I passed him on the country road.



CHAPTER II.

EAVES-DROPPING.

IT was nightfall before I returned to the Hall. I had been visiting on a large scale amongst my dependants—humble friends whom I had left in arrear during the last two months. Summoning courage to begin my old habits, I had met with a stern check at the outset; but I shook off all sad impressions and went through my business steadily. I had made up my mind to begin afresh, and even my unlooked-for meeting with Mr. Stewart failed to turn me from my course.

I came back along the dark road between the village and the Hall, all the better for my entry into life again. The night was cold and bracing, and the frost-bound road sounded metallic under my feet. I had been gone four hours on my mission, and was wondering if the Hall folk would be surprised at the absence of one who had become so great a stay-at-home.

I had reached the gate of the Hall, and had turned almost instinctively to look towards the cottage of Richard Stewart, when a figure standing between me and the lighted window gave me my first surprise that night.

I stood by the gate considering the reasons that had set an eaves-dropper there, and that eaves-dropper, as I saw by the outline of dress against the light, a woman. What could take a woman there at that hour?—what motive, unallied to a purpose antagonistic to my good friend Richard Stewart, could have placed a listener in that position? Here was a new mystery, and I, who had grown tired of mysteries, resolved at least to end this one, and question the intruder.

I crossed the road, and passed through the open wicket of Mr. Stewart's fence, without warning the stranger of my approach. She had grown too absorbed in her task to notice events passing beside her; she was crouching down lower than the window-sill now, as though a face turned in her direction had scared her from her earnest gaze within. But she was listening still, and my advance towards her was unheeded.

Until I was at her side, I was unaware of the intruder's identity. I thought that it might be one of the servants at the Hall, but I was unprepared for Emma Eaves. My hand touched her lightly on the shoulder, and she sprang aside with a faint cry of surprise, and then looked up at me, still in her crouching position, through the shawl that was strained over her head in lieu of a bonnet.

"What are you doing here, Emma?"

"Listening," she answered.

"I am sorry for it."

"I have a right to listen here," she said, sullenly; "here they keep a secret from me."

"Come with me."

We went out of the garden together, crossed the road, and proceeded along the drive. Emma Eaves offered no resistance to the command I had urged, but asserted, after a short silence, her defence once more.

"I listen here sometimes—whenever I can get a chance, and those two men are together. They know where your brother is, I am sure, although they did not speak of him, but were quarrelling when I first came."

"Quarrelling!" I exclaimed in my surprise.

"Ah! they quarrelled dreadfully," said Emma, "as though they mightn't have found another time to call each other names than this. And I thought that they would speak of Jack—your brother, just for an instant. He's in Scotland with Mr. Stewart—I thought he was all along. I knew this yesterday, by listening. You knew before, Miss?"

"Well?"

"And he will not stay there. He has given warning to leave, that I know. He gave warning last Christmas—oh! where will he go now?"

"We shall know shortly, Emma."

"We!"

"Yes. If you are interested in him still—still are grateful to him for that past kindness which saved *you*, I will tell you all the news I hear, on one condition."

"What is that?"

"That you will abide by my advice, and commit no extravagance of conduct that may embarrass him and you, and lead to harm. That you will not listen at doors and windows again, Em."

"I was anxious to know about John, and I felt that that Scotch Mr. Stewart was at the bottom of it. He meant well for John, but he never understood him. It is only I, knowing him better than you all, who could alter him, Miss Casey."

"I fear not."

"Oh! I could—I could indeed!" she said persistently; "when I was a child I could persuade him to come home early, not to spend his money too fast, and when he was at home he was always so different! And now I am a woman," cried this girl not seventeen yet, "I can study him much better, and be always true to him, and think the best of him, which no one here does—which no one ever will!"

"You have more gratitude in your heart than most people, Em," I said; "if we could curb your impetuosity, a good woman might be made yet. But you must not think too much of my brother John—that is a bad thought to grow with your growth."

"No, a good one—for it keeps me good sometimes."

"How is that?"

"When I feel very wicked—dissatisfied with all here, even with Miss Isabel, who understands me best, because she is most like me—I try and fancy what John would think of me, and so steady down, Miss, by degrees."

"Would he have admired this night's actions?"

"I don't know—it was for his sake; I wanted to hear if he was in Edinburgh, and then to write to him, and ask if he would mind my coming back to keep his house."

"Emma, this is madness. This must never be."

"He would do me no harm. He would—marry me rather than anyone should think harm of us."

"This is a great folly, which you and I, Emma, will talk more concerning—hark!"

Emma, who was nervous as well as excitable, came close to my side.

"What is it?"

"Some one coming down the path after us—some one running."

We waited; the first surprise over, there was no cause for alarm. Wilthorpe was a quiet homely place, in which there was nothing to fear. They were all good people in Wilthorpe, for directly a man went wrong he started for London, where there was more scope for his evil inclinations. So the village kept itself sweet and pure, and went a little behind the age, perhaps, but that we could put up with.

"They've found me out," said Emma; "if it's Richard Stewart, who did stare once or twice at the window, I'd rather not face his hard words. He can be very hard when he likes—you should have heard him to-night—oh! my goodness! He—" she leaned her head forward into the darkness, and added, "yes, it is Mrs. Kingsworth's man! I can't stay!" and away ran the girl at her topmost speed towards the Hall, leaving me to bear the whole brunt of the attack.

Richard Stewart, in an instant more, came running towards me, bare-headed and excited.

"So I have caught you!" he exclaimed, fiercely; "what have you heard or seen? Speak out!"

"Mr. Stewart!"

"Miss Casey!" he exclaimed, "I beg pardon. Where's that girl Eaves?"

"She has just left me. What do you want with her?"

"She has been listening at my window—I caught sight of her face a minute or two since—I must see her!"

"She was listening, Mr. Stewart—I drew her away from her position with a reprimand that I think will put an end to her bad habits. You must forgive her, wild and ill-trained as she is, for the sake of the motive which brought her to your house."

"What motive was that?"

"My brother, John Kingsworth, was her first friend; she believes that you and your brother are both acquainted with his present position—she is as anxious about it as if she were my brother's daughter."

"And she came thither with no other motive?"

"No."

"But she has been listening—the walls are thin, the curtains were not drawn before the window—I must know what she has heard!"

"Nothing that is worthy of your alarm, Mr. Stewart, I am sure."

"Has she told you, then——"

"She has only told me that you and your brother were quarrelling when she arrived, and that she had been disappointed in hearing no news of John."

"Quarrelling *when* she arrived," mused Richard Stewart—"that's well, then. That's bad enough, but it's well in one sense of the word. If she listen again, I shall wring her neck! If there's one thing more unfair and dishonest than another, it's this habit of Emma Eaves's; I would rather that she should break open my safe, and run away with the Lady-Day rents."

"I will ask you to forgive her for once, Mr. Stewart."

"I'll never forgive her!" he said, bluntly. "I am an unforgiving man."

"I am sorry to hear it."

"You will be sorry to hear news that more closely concerns you in less than an hour's time, Miss Casey."

"What news is that?" I asked, alarmed at his sudden change of tone.

"Let them tell you in there," he said, with an impatient gesture of his hand towards the Hall; "I do not go about croaking evil tidings—I will not be always the first to fling a shadow on your way."

"My brother!" I gasped.

"Confound your brother!" he said, rudely; "I was not thinking

of him. How that man is always in your thoughts, and he's a fellow who had better be out of them, perhaps."

"Pray do not keep me in suspense, Mr. Stewart. If any accident has happened in my absence—and yet Emma would have known that—oh! what is it?"

"After all, it's nothing," he said, with an affected lightness of demeanour; "do not go on like this—you, who were always strong and brave, and yet so womanly. I am wrong—I don't see why anything should distress you much now—I'm a fool, Miss Casey, that's all?"

"I will ask you to tell me, Mr. Stewart," I said more firmly.

"No—I am an unlucky beggar—I'll tell you nothing," he cried; "I have prepared you for a little news, and now you'll not give way before *those people*, and let them think a hundred things against you, or worry you to death with their detestable pity."

I guessed the truth, and it seemed to shiver against my heart like a lance against a suit of mail. I was on guard then, and I stood my ground bravely, even in the early days with the truth suddenly risen before me like a monster. Through the mist wherein I had groped, I saw all then, I thought—and though my hero sank still more to earth, I did not show my sorrow at his fall.

"I understand now. Your brother has proposed to Miss Mannington?"

"How quick you are!" he gasped; "yes, that's it. *You* don't mind this, I'm sure?"

"It's no business of mine to mind it," I replied coldly; "I am interested to a friend's extent, and I will wish them both, like a friend, every happiness in life."

"That's well—that's kind of you, Miss Casey," he said.

"I found out long ago that I was not suited for your brother—and long ago, Sir, the fancy seized me that he was growing fond of Mrs. Kingsworth's niece."

"You are mistaken," he said sharply.

"Have the events of to-day proved that I was wrong, then?"

"The events of to-day are not to be reconciled with anything," said he moodily; "do not ask me for my opinion of them—how they will end—or whose happiness they will affect? From to-day I give up every hope of understanding my fellow-creatures, for I find they do not understand themselves."

Emma Eaves's assertion flashed to me here.

"You have quarrelled with your brother about this engagement—you are sorry that it has occurred?"

"I am so sorry," he cried angrily, "that if the choice had been offered me this afternoon between Mark's engagement to Miss Mannington, and Mark lying in his coffin, I would have chosen the latter."

"Oh! Mr. Richard—this is shameful and wrong!"

"I have told him what I would have done," said he; "I faced him with those words, and saw the colour die out of his face, as though I had killed him with them. But he believed me—for he has never known me tell a lie."

"You have taken a false view of all this, Mr. Stewart."

"He says so too—and you and he should know best," he said; "but neither he nor you possess the power to alter my opinion. I have an unpleasant habit of sticking to it," he added with a bitter laugh.

"Neither this engagement nor my own was right in that opinion which you profess to think so good a one," I said a little bitterly in my turn.

"Ah! you are dwelling on that past advice which you extorted from me, and then blamed me for offering," he said; "well, if you had taken it, would there have been much harm done?"

"I could have taken no advice without a reason; if you had given me one then—which would have been more fair and honourable on your part—I might have thanked you more graciously."

I could see his eyes flashing at me in the dark like a wild beast's. But his answer came, steady though suppressed.

"I had not a reason to offer you, Miss Casey," he said; "therefore it was beyond my power to turn you against my brother in this fashion. If I knew that there was a thought in his heart of Miss Mannington, and kept it back, why, then I am the dishonourable knave you think me."

"No—I do not think you that, Richard Stewart."

"I knew what was for the best—at least, I thought so in my shallow knowledge then," he answered moodily; "now, I am in doubt—I am in despair of ever knowing true from false—the glitter of pure gold from base metal. There, you do not understand me," he said tetchily; "you never will—I don't understand myself! But I know this—that if Mark had died this morning——"

"No, no, no—don't say that again!" I implored.

"Why not? I should have looked down upon his dead handsome face and said, he was an honest fellow, who tried to do his best in man's sight and in God's. And now what can I say?—I who have thought that there was not such another man in all the world!"

He dashed his hands before his face and sobbed so violently, that my own heart felt breaking with his own. I had never stood a witness to a man wholly giving way to those emotions which are more natural to us women; least of all, had I anticipated standing a witness to this man's prostration—a man whose nerves had seemed of iron. I was shocked—alarmed—and yet full of sympathy for him in his distress. Those old sisterly feelings that I had had when I was likely to be allied to him some day, stole back and took me to his side.

"You have thought too seriously of this—you have taken to heart

a false idea, I am sure of it. Courage—think of me, a weak woman, asking Richard Stewart to be courageous!”

My words roused him. Before I had finished, and withdrawn my hand from his arm, he was almost himself again, standing erect and away from me, abjuring in his pride all help and sympathy.

“I’m a bit of a fool,” he said; “don’t think that I ever made a girl of myself before—it’s the first and the last time, damned if it isn’t! I’ve been worried, and a man can’t settle down all of a sudden, can he?”

“No.”

“And I have thought so much of Mark, you see,” he said, apologetically; “he was always such a gentleman to me,” with a great gulp; “though he was my younger brother, and I ought to have looked after him more. Instead of which, I looked up to him until now, and there’s the failure!—I’m going home,” he added brusquely.

“You and Mark have quarrelled, then?”

“Yes, and all the more fiercely for never having had a wry word before.”

“You will be friends again in the morning. Neither he nor you are likely to bear malice.”

“Malice, no!” said Richard Stewart; “but we are Stewarts, and are not likely to forget the hard words which we have exchanged. I keep mine, and they are iron bars and chains between Mark and me. After all he *is* my dead brother,” he said, gloomily reverting to the old simile; “the brother I knew and esteemed is in his grave—this man has nothing in common with me. Good night.”

He turned, and went back towards his cottage. It had been a bitter quarrel between the brothers, or I should have never been a witness to this new phase in Richard Stewart’s character. Across the old love between the two had swept the whirlwind; and how it would affect the after lives, the after affection of men both singular in their habits, it was beyond me to conjecture.

I went on to the Hall revolving this in my mind, wondering whether it would ever be in my power to make them friends again, and thinking, far less than might have been imagined, of the engagement between Bel Mannington and the man who had tired so soon of me.

CHAPTER III.

CONGRATULATION.

It was quite a picture of home happiness upon which I intruded in the drawing-room that night. I had dined alone, and then repaired thither, where I found Mrs. Kingsworth, Mr. Mannington and daughter. Mrs. Kingsworth sitting before the fire, with Bel Mannington at her feet, and her brother, smiling and complaisant, facing her.

The hand of the old lady was resting on the dark tresses of her niece, and the niece, with her chin supported by her hand, was looking steadily into the blazing coals after her future there, as many have looked before and since her time. But they were all bright faces, despite the thought upon them, and I was glad to find no shadow here, at least. There were animation and interest in that face of my mistress even—she had lost that immobility of expression which had tired my patience with its vain pretension. She had not lived down the world yet, or her interest in it; she had struggled hard to do so, but there was evidence of her defeat in her looks that night, and I had seen it once or twice before. She was of the world yet, and had to play her part therein for the little time remaining. She could not see unto the end, or guess what next her part would be, ere the silver cord was loosed.

“Here is Miss Casey,” she said as I entered, “what a time this visiting has taken you!—and we over-running with good news, too.”

“News that will very much surprise Miss Casey also,” said Mr. Mannington, rubbing one hand over the other; “come to the fire and hear the full particulars.”

Thus adjured, I took my place between them, and Bel Mannington looked up into my face, and laughed, and blushed, and almost cried for joy.

“Bertie can guess it now, I’m sure,” she said, “but we will not allow her, aunt. We will have the luxury of telling this fine story all to ourselves. Pray do not speak, please.”

She turned and faced me—crossing her hands in her lap and looking up at me. I could but smile back at her—the effort was not a hard one—and, thank God, I felt no envy at her happiness. Better for me, that he whom I had loved went wholly back, than hovered in the foreground, a misty figure that I could not grasp, to wring

my heart with its ever-haunting presence. I could almost see him fade away now, and feel myself becoming stronger and lighter by the retrogression.

"This silly girl, then," said Mrs. Kingsworth once more, resting her hand on her niece's head for an instant, "before she has reached the mature age of eighteen years, has been sought in marriage by a man twelve years her senior. What is more remarkable, she has been pleased to accept him, jumping at the first lover, as though she had no other chance, or her fortune would not bring her one, or she had grown very tired of old friends."

The satire flickering still about Mrs. Kingsworth's altered mood but scathing no one with its summer lightning.

"Neither tired of old friends, nor liking Mr. Stewart because he is the first man who says that he likes *me*," Bel added; "but choosing him before you all, because I am sure of happiness with him. Not loving you less—but him more!"

I was surprised at her boldness in asserting this, with a little heightened colour, but with no further evidence of embarrassment. Had she been a year older, she would have *acted* with more propriety.

"We are content to play minor parts now, Bel," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "I am pleased that he has made his choice here—a clever, earnest man, who is not likely to have chosen rashly, and who is the very man for you."

Not likely to have chosen rashly! How strange her word sounded to me!

"Worth fifty thousand pounds, if he's worth a farthing!" said Mr. Mannington, beginning to rub his hands together again.

"If he had been a beggar he should have had her," said Mrs. Kingsworth, quietly putting down the more sordid satisfaction of her brother, "for he is a man who can take care of her, shield her with his strength from all that the world might do in its intensity of scorn for a weak, impassioned, and unreasonable girl. He is a shield to save her from herself, and I am thankful for his coming!"

"What a poor weak thing you are making of me, aunt!" Bel whimpered; "and what will Mr. Stewart think of me if he ever hear you going on like this?"

"With Mr. Stewart to take care of you, you will become a different woman. You have a very delightful fear of him and his firmness, and, if I know Mr. Stewart, that will not wear off upon acquaintance with him. I never could manage you—but he will!"

Bel laughed saucily.

"With his love—in the good time, aunt."

"It's an odd fancy of his, and an odd fancy of yours, considering all things," mused Mrs. Kingsworth; "but it has brought you two together, and I had an odd fancy too, long ago, that it might come

to pass. When Mr. Stewart bore down my patronage, asserted his own independence, and set me almost against him, I used to think what a husband he would make for Bel. There's tigress-taming in his eyes!"

"Annt, I shall not like him—I shall try and tame him if you go on like that, just to show you *my* power!"

"I would not advise the attempt," said Mrs. Kingsworth, and Bel laughed at her aunt's dry response.

"Miss Casey knows that it was not an odd fancy of mine," said Bel; "it was a spell under which I felt myself powerless. I own that—I am not ashamed of him, or of my love for him. I know that I am not worthy of him yet, but I will try, and he will not love me less for the efforts I will make."

"Pray be more rational and womanly now, Bel," said Mrs. Kingsworth, almost in entreaty; "you are worth coming in search of, and it may not be well to estimate—even at too high a rate—Mr. Stewart's intentions! Be dignified even in your happiness, my child."

And with this peroration dignified in itself, Mrs. Kingsworth rose to withdraw.

"I am going to my study now," she said, in answer to Mr. Mammington's inquiring look.

"Can I be of any service?" was the quick question of her brother.

"No. It is Lady-Day, and I have my rents to estimate, and a host of material business to consider. Good night."

She withdrew, and Bel Mammington resumed her old recumbent position, after first finding a comfortable rest for her head against my knees. Mr. Mammington asked a few questions about the friends I had met, and the general state of village affairs, biting his nails meanwhile, and fidgeting uneasily in his seat. Finally, he rose, and, muttering something about the library, went out of the room.

Bel, relieved of her father's presence, immediately dashed into her one engrossing subject. How happy she was, how happy she should ever be from that day!—how she had hoped against hope when she met Mark Stewart first in Edinburgh, and yet how she had tried her best to interest him and to win him by every modest effort which was in her power, and yet should not betray her interest or eagerness. It was a *naïve* confession, and I sat and listened patiently. Once the thought crossed me with a stiletto keenness as to what share this girl had had in the downfall of my love-dream; but I dismissed it, and did my best to second Bel in all her present thoughts. To see her bright face, her sparkling eyes, her cheeks flushed with the excitement which her happiness had brought her, was to wish that she might find a husband worthy of the love she betrayed by every word that night.

I offered my congratulations with no cold heart—I was proud of my own composure, my wishes for her lasting happiness.

She would have rambled on all night, had not Mr. Mannington returned. Then preferring her own thoughts to her father's remarks on matters foreign to her one engrossing theme, she darted away to her room and left Mr. Mannington standing by the fireside looking at me.

I did not admire his looks that night; I felt an antagonistic feeling rising against him, and a difficulty in subduing it which I could not resist. It was a look of self-satisfied cunning, that for once aroused my indignation and set me on defence. I was standing also, I remember, and I returned his gaze until his eyelids drooped.

"What have you done with your diamond ring, Miss Casey?"

"Given it back to the donor when I had no further use for it, Mr. Mannington."

"It was not a gift, then?"

"Yes, Sir—it was."

"I thought that you told me——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Mannington I told you nothing concerning the ring that I deny at this time."

"I am sorry for your own sake that you ever received this gift from Mr. Stewart."

He said it in a whisper, as though it were still a secret that I might wish to keep.

"I have erred from want of judgment; we may all regret that, Sir. Who told you this?"

"I have known it from the day you went to Wilthorpe church in the rain," he replied; "I generally am pretty correct in my information. I was very sorry then to think that you should have allowed yourself to be misled by a few specious phrases. I had a better opinion of your shrewdness."

"Thank you for your opinion, Sir—I have not asked for it."

It was a pert answer, but he winced at it. I was vexed at his contemptuous manner—his new and probably his real manner which it pleased him to adopt that evening. He was cowed at once, for he was far from a bold man—in the way of his bravery, or his insolence, stood ever his nervousness.

"I—I beg pardon, Miss Casey. This is only a friendly remark of mine—I really was very sorry, though it was not my place to interfere, of course. Mrs. Kingsworth was very sorry too."

"She knew this?"

"Yes—and went to Edinburgh to stop it, I am inclined to think."

"And your daughter Isabel?"

"Knew nothing. For her sake, I hope is to know nothing. We cannot alter the by-gones," he added quite philosophically.

"For her sake, I may be silent. I am not certain if Mr. Stewart will be, however," said I; "he is a man of honour, and will tell your daughter."

"He may—I don't think he will. There is nothing dishonourable in keeping back a folly like this."

"A folly—or a mistake, I do not assert anything to the contrary."

I went out of the room with my blood a little heated. I went direct to Mrs. Kingsworth's study, full of one thought besetting me. Mr. Mannington had not calculated on my rapidity of action. It was my new plan for dissipating mysteries, and had answered well at present.

"Come in," said Mrs. Kingsworth to my knock. I entered, and found her bending over her library table, writing busily—the table lamp close against her face, lighting up the thought and intensity thereon. As I entered, and advanced, she spread a large sheet of blotting-paper over that which she had been writing, and then, pen in hand, looked up impatiently.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I am sorry to intrude—I have a question to ask which you will excuse, Mrs. Kingsworth. You went first to Edinburgh with the thought of making up a match between Mr. Stewart and your niece?"

"Yes."

"You had heard that—that Mr. Stewart was likely to be married to another lady?"

"There were rumours of a widow somewhere—I did not believe them. Why?"

"You thought that he was free?"

"Yes."

"I believe you, madam—I am glad to hear it. Good night."

She looked after me inquiringly, but made no effort to stop me until I was at the door. Then she arrested my progress with a different purpose.

"Miss Casey," she said, "you may as well take your brother's cheque—I have written it out this evening."

She held it towards me, and I returned and took it from her, thanking her, for John Casey's sake.

"This is a memorable Lady-day," she said; "good-night to *you*, Miss Casey."

I went to my room with my brother John's cheque in my hand, thankful that I had proved Mrs. Kingsworth innocent of plotting against me. It might have pleased Mr. Mannington to sow dissension between my mistress and me, but he had failed in his effort, and I was glad that she had not guessed my secret as her brother had. I had more faith in her and less in her brother from that night.

It was later that night when I went down-stairs again. Approaching her study, though the hour was late, I saw the gleam of light athwart the corridor; passing it, I was aware of the butler and

Mr. Mannington's valet and factotum standing in the room watching her signature. They were looking perplexed and out of place with their hands behind them, and their stolid gaze directed to the document.

“You see this—now sign here as witnesses.”

I passed on unobserved. Mrs. Kingsworth had been re-writing her will that night.



CHAPTER IV.

“GIVING WAY.”

FAIR reader, have you ever sat quietly in a corner and seen the man who should have been courting you, or the man whose fancies you would have wished in your heart had strayed towards you, paying his attentions or developing his intentions in another direction? It is a singular sensation, and I pray that you may have been spared it. It is sitting apart from life with a thorn in your side, watching the course of actions flowing away from you, and interested in spite of yourself with all the deeds and doings which make others happy and you so miserable.

It was my lot to feel this, or something like this. I had played my part out in the little life drama—the curtain was down for good, the musicians who had piped such happy music had gone home, and I was alone without an audience in empty space. It was dreary work to sit still in my loneliness; more dreary when the time came to see Bel act my part to the old lover, and the music steal back again to make *her* heart light, and bewilder her with the bright world from which I was shut out.

It was dreary work, but I was not jealous of Bel Mannington. Now and then an ugly spasm shot through me, as a chance word or look reminded me of my share in the past drama; but it left no wound, and disturbed but for a moment the even tenor of my way. I taught myself to consider that everything had been for the best, and that I should not have been happy with Mr. Stewart. I was not “a lady born;” I was sure that I was prim and methodical; I was always alike; therefore his interest would have diminished and died out in time, leaving me a spiritless and neglected wife. It was

different with Bel; she was capricious, variable, and always winning, whether in her good tempers or her bad ones. She was weak and impulsive, and required a strong man's love to keep her strong; she aroused a man's desire to protect her by her childlike innocence and trust—one could see that if she were left alone in the world, or placed side by side with one who had been tempted by her money, she would die. Consequently an object of interest to all right-thinking men.

The fair reader, whom I conjured at the opening of the chapter, may possibly think that I forgave too readily my run-away lover in my heart. I was of a forgiving disposition, perhaps, or I made due allowance for extenuating circumstances, for I treasured up no wrougs against Mark Stewart. I should have been considered a strong-minded woman, and more of a heroine, had I vowed revenge for his duplicity, and stalked through the remainder of these pages with a dagger and bow, and my hair down my back.

I settled the matter in my own mind somewhat after this fashion. He had been too quick to love me; coming from the stir of business to a country life, the change had unsettled him, and he had rashly offered me his hand. Going back to Edinburgh, the first impression had weakened somewhat; he had put off—yes, *put off* was the word now!—our marriage for two years. He wanted time to consider whether he were justified in keeping his word, and whilst considering, he met Bel Mannington, and fell in love with her. She was different to most women, and I was like the general pattern, neither better nor worse. She was original and I was commonplace; hence the odious comparison, becoming more suggestive, as Bel showed too plainly her interest in him. So the *coup d'état* at the Woundell ball, and Bertie Casey *solus*!

Mr. Stewart came twice courting to the Hall. On the second day he told us that he was compelled to return to Edinburgh on the morning of the third. In a few weeks he should come back to Wilthorpe, and take away his bride; he objected to long engagements, they were very unlucky, he whispered to Bel, who communicated his assertion to me shortly afterwards—a burst of confidence, that brought on one of those spasms before alluded to, for it showed a vivid contrast, that was humiliating to me.

It was strange to see Mr. Stewart at the Hall—sitting quite at home in the drawing-room by Bel Mannington's side, talking with Mrs. Kingsworth in an easy, friendly way, so greatly at variance with the past satirical converse, and even paying deference to the opinions of his future father-in-law, on matters political or social. Strange, perhaps, to witness how completely Mrs. Kingsworth could bury the hatchet, and smoke the calumet of peace at her own fireside; it seemed as if she restrained the natural acrimony of her disposition, out of pure gratitude for Mr. Stewart relieving her of her great responsibility. She made up for her complaisance to Mr.

Stewart by an extra degree of invective against her brother, who bore Mrs. Kingsworth's attacks with wonderful equanimity, laughing whenever there was a chance, and but betraying his nervous temperament when his sister was particularly persistent.

Mr. Stewart seldom spoke to me. He had not become accustomed to our new positions yet, and he did not look at me, or address me, even with that old frankness, characteristic of his ante-courting days. He was not looking well either; his face seemed a troubled and a thoughtful one to me—at least, I had known it very different.

The good folk at the Hall were all content with him, and it was not my place to remark upon the change. I was behind the scenes, and knew that he had quarrelled with his brother, and was staying at Wilthorpe Inn, instead of at the cottage; and I believe that a difference with the brother, whom he had always highly valued, would affect him, despite his pride and self-command. It must affect him, for Richard Stewart had been as near to his heart as he had been to his brother's; through all the hardening process of a business life, that affection had kept pure and strong, I knew.

On the morning of the third day he came to the Hall to inform us that he had made up his mind to remain one day longer in Wilthorpe; it did not seem so easy a task to leave Bel as it had been to leave me, and stab No. 3 or No. 4 ensued in consequence. That was my last stitch in the heart; I remember no more unpleasant sensations caused by the changes that had followed my first love's disruption.

He and Bel Mannington went for a long stroll together that morning—the first lover's walk in which they had indulged—the last until his return in the summer-time. Bel went out rejoicing; her hand was on his arm when they were in the Hall, and had come face to face with Richard Stewart, who had arrived on business.

Crossing the Hall, I was a witness to their meeting; the stiff inclination of the head, the brusque "Good morning, Miss Mannington," of Richard Stewart, as he bustled past them in the direction of Mrs. Kingsworth's study. I noticed that Mark Stewart looked for an instant after his brother, then, with an inch or two added to his height, went out into the sunshine with his betrothed.

They did not return together, somewhat to Mrs. Kingsworth's surprise.

"Where is the gay cavalier, Bel?" asked the aunt.

"He has a little business to complete; he will not be here till the evening."

Mrs. Kingsworth was completing *her* business with Richard Stewart, who was still in her study deep in accounts. Bel Mannington would not have intruded upon her aunt had the study door not been open, and Mrs. Kingsworth not too absorbed in facts and figures to forget passing events.

"Business in Wilthorpe—how's that, Stewart?" said Mrs. Kingsworth.

"It's no business of mine, at any rate," growled Richard Stewart. "Will you see that the money's right, please? Three thousand, seven hundred pounds."

"I have already counted it. Take it to my bankers this afternoon—I do not like so much money in my house or yours."

"Safer than in the banker's hands, sometimes!" he said, sententiously.

Bel Mauntingou and I went up-stairs together, Bel very silent and ruminative.

"You are sorry that Mr. Stewart is going away, Bel?" I said.

"Sorry, naturally," she answered, "for he has made me happy in Wilthorpe until now."

"Has anything happened, Bel? You have not quarrelled?"

"Quarrelled! no. I hope we love each other too much ever to quarrel—too much ever to have any secrets from each other that can tend in any way to the exchange of one harsh word. Bertie, he has told me—oh! I daren't tell you, I daren't tell anybody—forget I have said one word. But I am going mad, I think, with a new horror that has sprung up like a serpent in the midst of my path. I must crush it, for his sake!"

I looked at her, bewildered. Her outburst was so sudden and vehement, and, above all, so utterly incomprehensible. Had he told her, despite his request to me to hold my peace, his story of our fleeting engagement, and what it had ended in?

"Has he said anything that shakes your faith in him—or others?" I could not refrain from asking.

"Everything that strengthens it!" she cried proudly. "Everything that leads me to love him better, and make every sacrifice for him. There, don't tempt me with those great wistful eyes of yours to tell you anything, for I am as firm as a rock, and not to be led from my allegiance. Go away, please—say nothing of this—I shall come down-stairs again as light as a lark, with no one the wiser for this nonsense. Oh! what a foolish girl I am!"

She flung herself upon her knees at her bedside, and hid her face there; in that position—thinking, praying, or weeping—I left her. It was possible that Mark Stewart had made an open confession of his past attachment, and that it had unsettled her, as everything apart from the placid current of events was destined to unsettle her through life, for good or evil. Presently she would steal to my side, and I might tell her my own version of the story. She came down-stairs the old Bel Mauntingou, and I gave her more credit for the art of disguising her thoughts than I had ever done before. After luncheon I went to my own room, and being in a thoughtful mood myself, opened my window and looked across the fair landscape of

park-land towards the village. A bright afternoon for the end of March—quite a spring day, with the sun shining, the birds singing, the lawn in front of the great house a vivid green that was pleasant to look upon. The deer were basking in the sunshine again, there seemed light and life beyond my room—on such a bright day as this I had first come to the Hall. I was not sorry for the change even now; if I had met with trouble, it had not done me harm, and I was not unhappy—far from it! Presently—very shortly—I should be myself again—jogging on in life as though nothing had happened. Presently I should be away from Wilthorpe, I thought—when Bel Mannington had married Mr. Stewart, Mrs. Kingsworth would have found a better guardian for her niece, and then an end to all my services! What a poor guardian I had been—I thought! of more use as friend and companion to Mrs. Kingsworth than to Bel; and yet my mistress had implied more than once that with Bel's marriage my term of office would expire at Wilthorpe, and I should retire on my pension. More than once, too, I had fancied that she was testing my affection for Wilthorpe, by these means, but time would show, and I would not let the future harass me. The past and present were enough to occupy my thoughts just then.

Sitting at my window watching, I became conscious of a distant figure coming towards the house—lost to me now and then by the circuitous turns of the carriage-drive. A figure that in the distance had made me start with its resemblance to my brother—which I thought, judging from past actions, and his last letter, was more likely than not to be his. I should be sorry to find John Kingsworth Casey on his way towards me again; I should read therefrom an ill augury of his new career. Turning away from life with Mr. Stewart, he would turn away from one more friend he had been fortunate enough to find, and wilful enough to give up.

I watched very anxiously for the next appearance of the stranger. There were gaps of trees and hedge-rows on the park side of the drive, and through the apertures I should see him presently. He came much nearer, and, as if to assist me in my effort at identification, the stranger paused, and went to the edge of the path to survey more clearly the landscape which opened to his view there. Yes, it was my brother John!

I watched him for a while, irresolved whether to meet him in the drive or to let him come to the Hall and face Mrs. Kingsworth. I sprang from my post of observation with the instinct to adopt the former method, when the idea seized me that he might not be coming to pay a visit to me.

Had he wished to see me alone he would scarcely have walked in the sunshine towards the Hall; he might have business with my mistress, and she might require a little preparation before his advent. I remember one occasion when his coming to Wilthorpe had very much disturbed her.

Fraught with this new idea, I went down-stairs in search of Mrs. Kingsworth. I found her in the drawing-room alone, standing by the window and shading her eyes with her thin hands. As I entered the room she turned round almost impatiently.

"Oh! it is you!" she said. "Come here, Miss Casey, and tell me who this is coming up the drive?"

"I have seen him from the window of my room."

"Your brother Kingsworth?"

"Yes."

"One need not be very much surprised at his presence here to-day—he is eccentric in his actions, and erratic in his progress. Poor fool! it is his inheritance, and you and I, sober women interested in him, can make due allowance for his eccentricity."

"If he wish to see you, madam——"

"Oh! he will not wish to see me," she interrupted; "he is coming for his cheque as usual."

"Shall I go to him, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"Oblige me by sitting still and curbing your natural affection for a time. Three years ago, or thereabouts, Bertha Casey, I met him at the Corkcutters' Hall—that was the last meeting I ever cared to have with him."

The door opened and a servant entered.

"Mr. Casey wishes to see Mrs. Kingsworth for a few moments."

"Admit him," replied this inconsistent woman immediately.

Mrs. Kingsworth waited very patiently, I very nervously, until he was ushered into the drawing-room. When he entered I ran to him and kissed him, and he held me at arm's length to more critically survey me.

"You have altered, Bertie—you are not looking so well and strong as usual. How is this?"

"I am very well, John. And you?"

"Oh! I was never better in my life."

He turned to address Mrs. Kingsworth, and I had more opportunity to survey him. He was looking better and stronger than I had ever seen him. There was a new look upon his face—something expressive of less irresolution than I had been a witness hitherto. It was not alone that he was better dressed, I felt assured.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Kingsworth," he said, bowing quite gracefully towards us. "I hope that my presence here has not taken you very much by surprise."

"I am never surprised!" was the cold answer; "you should know that by this time?"

"I wish I could make the same assertion, dear madam," he replied; "my life has been one series of surprises."

"What have you seen or heard to be surprised at in your profitless career?"

"Not quite profitless in the latter days," he answered; "but we

will not argue that. And as for my surprises—well, considering what a scamp I have been all my life, my greatest astonishment is that I have one friend left.”

“Have you come from Edinburgh to tell me this?” asked Mrs. Kingsworth, caustically.

“Scarcely.”

“Then sit down and let me hear, in the first place, what you want with me?”

He sat down, thus adjured, turning to me with a bright and confident smile, so very new and strange, that my heart thrilled with a hope of hearing good news from him, and of him, for the first time. Mrs. Kingsworth, to my watchful eyes, too, seemed interested in his more manly bearing.

“I am here, Mrs. Kingsworth, to surprise you with my audacity,” he said frankly; “to thank you more heartily than I have hitherto done for all past favours, and to ask you for one more.”

“I admire your boldness, or presumption.”

“And you will hear me out, at all events. Bertie, come a little closer, girl, and sustain my courage, which begins to flag. By Jove!” he cried, more to himself than to his company, “I thought that I should have got through this appeal swimmingly, but I’m giving way already.”

“You have given way all your life, Kingsworth,” said his godmother.

“Ah! so I have. I acknowledge the justice of the reproof.”

He seemed to grow more nervous, and to drop into his old ways by degrees. The past habit of twitching nervously at the end of his moustache began to creep upon him, till he shook it off with an effort.

“Mrs. Kingsworth,” he said, rapidly and clearly, never shrinking from the steady gaze directed at him, but meeting it with one as unflinching and earnest, “I have been troubling my head lately with thoughts of what a kind and liberal godmother you have been to me, and what an unthankful brute I have proved myself in return. My post at Mr. Stewart’s—Mr. Stewart’s interest in me—my new life, with an example ever before me of how much can be done by industry and perseverance, have all tended to these new thoughts of mine. Mr. Stewart has been to me a good friend rather than a master—keeping me to my work, and showing an interest in me more unaccountable than yours. I think that he has made a man of me.”

“This is good news to begin with, Kingsworth,” said my mistress; “now the proofs.”

“My proofs are in Mr. Stewart’s testimony to the change in me—I am sure that he will give me a good turn by offering his evidence, if necessary.”

“Say that we take all this flourish of trumpets for the proclamation of a gospel truth, what then?”

“Simply this,” he said, slightly hesitating again, “that I have an

idea of leaving Mr. Stewart, and setting up in the wholesale business on my own account. In a small way at first, of course—and in Glasgow instead of Edinburgh. I understand the workings of his business well enough—I was always naturally quick, if you remember, and I'm sure of doing well in time. I have the courage to work, and the patience to wait."

"Is Mr. Stewart aware of this?"

"Yes."

"When do you leave his service?"

"I left it on Lady-Day, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"At your own request?"

He coloured at this cross-examination.

"N—o," he said, hesitating a second time, "at his own."

"I see," was the dry comment.

"No, pardon me, but you do not see, Mrs. Kingsworth," he replied; "you are completely in the dark."

"I have been too deep a woman all my life to remain hoodwinked long," she said, conceitedly, even a little angrily. "Go on. This is a long story."

"I communicated my idea to Mr. Stewart, and though candidly he expressed a few objections, he said that in my place he would attempt it. If he had wholly disapproved of my plan, or had had his doubts of my success, he would not have scrupled to have said so, and advised me to a different course."

"If he had nothing else to think about, save your chimeras."

"Granted, madam, that possibility. Now we come to the favour—to the means of rising in the world."

"Ah!"

Mrs. Kingsworth clutched her stick more firmly.

"With two thousand pounds in hand, I can make a start. If I start well, and give proof of going on well, my bankers will advance two thousand more at the end of the year. Thence to fortune!"

"This is the dream of Alnaschar over again!" said Mrs. Kingsworth, contemptuously.

"I hope not. You do not know what a different man I am, madam."

"No, I do not," she said; "and now, Sir, is it possible that you are sanguine enough to expect me to advance two thousand pounds?"

"I will repay you the money in five years——"

"I shall be in my grave!"

"I will resign at once my annual income," he continued, taking no heed of her interpolation; "God knows, that I am anxious to surrender that now. I feel the burthen of my dependence heavily enough, whatever proof I am offering now to the contrary."

"Mr. Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth, "it does not take me long to make up *my* mind in this matter. You are dismissed from Mr. Stewart's service——"

“With a good character,” he added.

“And you, with the old maia for change, think of a new life and talk of a large fortune rewarding you in the future. I have no more faith in this new scheme than I have ever had in you. I will not assist it with one penny of my money.”

“Very well, madam; I scarcely expected it. You have shown so much interest in me that I thought I would not lose the chance.”

“Go back to Mr. Stewart’s and be content.”

“No, I shall not go back there,” was the firm answer.

“Ask him to lend you the two thousand pounds—he should know more of this great transition than I.”

“No, I shall not ask Mr. Stewart.”

“If it be not an impertinent question, may I ask what you will do, now?”

“Turn clerk again, somewhere in Scotland. I like Scotland and the Scotch people, madam. I know,” he added, “that I do not deserve any help, any assistance—that now, in my future efforts to keep straight, I shall feel the clog of my backward years for ever retarding my progress. But for all this, I shall not go back again to the old life—I have outlived it!”

“You have learned to talk very neatly,” said Mrs. Kingsworth, “and possibly to add hypocrisy to your other accomplishments—I cannot say—you are made up of inconsistencies, like other people. Miss Casey, give your brother his cheque, and let him go.”

“It is the last cheque I shall ever receive from you, Mrs. Kingsworth. Some day, I may repay all that I am indebted to you. I am not very disappointed at your decision, despite my sanguine nature; I knew that I was unworthy of your assistance. You will allow me to withdraw?”

“With pleasure, Sir.”

“Allow me also to see one more friend, whom I left for her own good, cruelly and unceremoniously. Em is still with you, Bertie?”

“Yes.”

“Has she forgotten me?—been taught to despise my weakness, my want of moral strength, the easiness with which I was always deceived?” he asked quite bitterly.

“No, you are always first in her thoughts,” I answered.

“Then, by heaven, I will ask her to be my wife to-day!” he cried; “I have never forgiven myself stealing away from her like a thief—and worse than a thief, for I went away with a lie in my mouth. I turned off the only one in all the world who saw the little good in me, and shut her eyes to all the evil. If she will wait for me a year, I’ll come and fetch her.”

“If you dare!” said Mrs. Kingsworth, pointing her stick at him with a hand that shook despite her efforts to keep cool and firm—“if you dare to think of so base an alliance—you, my godson,

to ask a servant in my household to become your wife! Begone, Sir!"

"I'll see Emma Eaves."

"Miss Casey, if you give your brother that cheque I wrote out, it will be felony! Tear it up—where is it?"

"Tear it up if you will," said my brother, doggedly, "I'll see Emma Eaves."

"Do you know, Sir, that I detest that girl!" cried Mrs. Kingsworth.

"She was a good friend to me when she was a child. I saved her from the workhouse," said he, "and if she be not happy here, why, I must save her from her high estate and take her down to mine. Mrs. Kingsworth, you will not interfere with me in this—you must not!"

"I am a proud woman—do not disgrace the second name I gave you. Go away now, and come back in a year's time to tell me this."

"Meanwhile, you will trust to my variable nature to work a change in me. Mrs. Kingsworth, this was my idea before I ever knew you."

"Was it?—was it?" she echoed; "go then with your base thoughts, your childish dreams, your weakness, and your folly, away from me, never to come into my presence again without my cursing you for a man who has balked every hope I ever had of him. Go, if you please, most chivalrous gentleman!"

She struggled hard not to give way—to be the Mrs. Kingsworth who had ever preserved a bold front to the world and the world's attacks upon her. At what cost she succeeded I could not tell, but the effort was successful, and the last words rang out hard and vibratory, as though struck upon an anvil. She reached a book from the table with a hand that trembled no more with the agitation at her heart, and then, by an ingenious twist to herself and her chair, turned her back upon her godson.

It was better for all that the interview should end thus, and I signed to Kingsworth to withdraw with me. He murmured a good afternoon, to which there was no response, and followed me into the hall, where a pale and large-eyed girl was waiting to spring upon his neck.

"What! Em!"

"Jack—John—Mr. Casey!" cried Emma, correcting one appellative after another, as she rushed into his arms. "Oh! why did you leave me all this time?"

"I'll tell you. Walk a little way with me down the avenue, Em. Bertie," turning to me, "I shall not leave till to-morrow morning—come to me at Mr. Stewart's cottage to-morrow, before ten o'clock."

"I will come to-night."

"I may not be at home to-night. I have so much to tell you. Can you trust me with this wild Irish girl?" he asked, in a lighter tone.

"You are your own master," I answered, sadly.

They went out together, and I returned to the drawing-room, heated, perplexed, and full of excitement. Mrs. Kingsworth was at the window again, watching his departure.

"Your brother is mad, Miss Casey," she said, without turning round to me; "we shall have to lock him up in an asylum."

"Not so bad as that, I hope."

"To have grown so weak and foolish!"

"Madam, I don't know—I can't say," I said, excitedly; "but may not this be as wise a step as it is generous?"

"Are you mad too?" she said, turning round at this.

"I hope not. But the only woman who has ever understood John Kingsworth Casey may be the one most fitting to be his helpmate."

"She will drag him lower still. But"—with a little tap of her stick on the floor—"it is no business of mine. However he acts will not *surprise* me now. I have done with him."

"You have been his best friend, madam—you will remain so!"

"I have been his enemy—I have supplied him with the means to his own ruin year by year—and now I have done with him. Where is that cheque?"

I had brought it down with me from my room to give to John. I tendered it unwillingly to her.

She snatched it from me, dropped her stick, and held it between her two hands tightly.

"He will do better without it," she muttered.

The instant afterwards she forced it back into my hands, dropped into her chair, picked up her stick, and tapped the floor with it.

"Give it him before he goes away, the profligate! Tell him that I have done with him, mind, now—and that it is the last cheque he will ever have from me!"

She was right.

CHAPTER V.

MR. STEWART'S LAST NIGHT IN WILTHORPE.

WHEN Emma Eaves returned, she sought me at once in my own room. She came in with a face beaming with delight.

"I am to tell you everything—to conceal nothing from you!" she cried.

"What is the news, Emma?"

"Your brother John has promised to make me his wife in a year's time—if I do not see any one better, meanwhile. As if that were likely!"

"You will be a strange couple."

"You will say nothing to turn him from me? Oh! I am so happy!—I shall be for ever after this so very happy!"

She clapped her hands in her enthusiasm, as Bel Mannington might have done under similar circumstances.

"If this marriage ever take place, Emma, you will remember that with you rests my brother's future happiness?"

"Yes. I shall remember it—I have never forgotten it. I always understood him, Miss Bertha," she added, proudly. "I always knew the exact moment when the money or the drink was troubling him; and though I was but a child, I could persuade him very often to his good."

"Ah! a child could always persuade him," I added, somewhat sadly.

"And now I am a woman, with the child's love stronger and better, I know that I shall be of help to him. There's no one loves him like me—not you."

"No—you first, Emma, now," I said.

"And yet you would have set him against me!—I knew it all along—and that turned me against you sometimes, though I tried hard not, because you were his sister."

"I set him against you, Emma! Never!"

"You kept him from me—you never told me where he was!"

"For your sake!"

"And when you wrote to him, you always had a word to say against me. He was sure of it."

"He!—who?"

She coloured and hesitated.

"Was it Mr. Mannington?" I cried.

"Hush!—yes—after he had found out somehow that I was fond of John, and fretting about him, he told me that you stood in the way between him and me; and that—that you were jealous of me."

"He is a man with whom it is best to have no confidence," said I; "he has not told you the truth."

"I hoped he had not very often."

"Let me think of this quietly, now—before the dinner-bell rings, Emma. I must consider Mr. Mannington's reasons for this."

When she had gone, I marshalled the reasons before me. They were quickly arrived at—I think I saw then clearly to the end. Mr. Mannington was conscious of his sister's liberality—jealous of it. He knew too well his sister's pride, also, and he thought that if he set Emma against me, Emma, who was unsettled and unhappy, would seek out John, and disgrace herself and my brother in Mrs. Kingsworth's eyes. Then the money would stop, and he, as future heir, perhaps, would be so many hundred pounds the richer man. Had he known at that time—which he did not—my brother's address in Edinburgh, he might have succeeded better in his scheme. He was jealous of me, too—and of Mrs. Kingsworth's kindness. He would have made Emma a spy upon me, and worked my own disgrace, had it been possible—but that had ever been beyond his power to effect.

I thought of the discovery he had made of my engagement to Mr. Stewart, and how he had scrupulously kept back that secret with me, not for my sake, but against it. I saw then, perhaps, my own mistake, and how Mrs. Kingsworth's sense of right might have broken through the web of circumstance, and found a different husband for her niece. My own mistake—after all, was it a mistake, or had it all happened for the best—for Bel Mannington and me?

Mr. Stewart did not dine with us that night. After dinner we were scattered again; and it was not till nine o'clock that Mr. Mark Stewart arrived, and we met together in the drawing-room, and set our varied thoughts aside to give him welcome. I was glad that he had come, for I had been very anxious to ask him one question about my brother.

The difficulty was to find an opportunity. He sought Bel's company, and took his place by her side as his legal right. He was in a thoughtful mood, despite his attention to passing events; I knew his moods by intuition, as well as most people. Though he never lost the thread of discourse, I felt assured that thoughts foreign to the hour were crossing and recrossing his mind. It was his last night in Wilthorpe; he was going back to business in Edinburgh once more; in his last campaign he had been the gainer of Bel Mannington's love, and the loser of his brother's reverence—he might be thinking of both victory and loss in that hour.

Bel Mannington was in high spirits—forced spirits to a certain extent. I was assured that she was sorry to think of this conclusion

to her brief courting days—that the lover was going away for awhile to his old world. Still she seemed to do her best to resist the thoughts of separation; her cheeks were flushed, and her dark eyes were aflame with excitement. Looking at her, and watching her efforts to appear the same Bel Mannington, I thought of that madness, which, it had been whispered at the Woundell ball, was a part of her inheritance. Mrs. Kingsworth, who was not inclined for conversation, glanced frequently in her niece's direction, when the laugh was wilder than usual; once I saw Mr. Stewart regarding her attentively, even sorrowfully.

Mrs. Kingsworth called her niece to her side after a time, and spoke at some length to her; taking advantage of this opportunity, I crossed to Mr. Stewart, conscious of Mr. Mannington objecting to the proceeding by his nervous writhe upon his chair. The little man's sordid mind saw only an effort on my part to regain my lost position; and he kept a watch upon us over the newspaper that he affected to peruse.

"You leave to-morrow morning, Mr. Stewart?"

"At two to-morrow, Miss Casey, probably. Short time for rest before I depart from this eventful village."

"So early as that!—I am glad that I have taken this opportunity to speak to you about my brother John."

"What of him?"

"He is in Wilthorpe—you are aware of this?"

"No—I was not aware of it. It is likely enough," he replied; "he left my service on Lady-Day."

"For what reason?"

"Miss Casey," he said, flinching a little at my impetuous question, "there were many reasons, which I cannot afford time to explain just now."

"You distrusted him, Mr. Stewart, and you fear to wound me by the declaration."

"I assure you that a want of confidence in your brother was not the cause of our separation. He was anxious to do better for one reason—will you think that sufficient?"

"I must think that, if you fear to trust me."

"To trust you!" he exclaimed, quite impetuously. "Miss Casey, I only wish that I had trusted——"

He stopped abruptly, and I did not press him for the sequel to his speech. I was afraid of it, and I distrusted *him* just then.

"You were speaking of your brother," he said, reverting to the old topic; "you are anxious about him, Miss Casey?"

"Yes."

"Two years ago, you were anxious about him, and I set myself to study him, as though he had been a brother of mine;" he went on hurriedly after this, for he had detected my colour rising somewhat. "I saw what was good in him, and what was weak, and I did my

best to follow him step by step, teaching him, by the force of example, the best precepts that I knew, and checking him—without his suspicion of my interest—in any step which directed him, however slightly, into the old channel. I was an egotist, Miss Casey, and I thought that I was clever enough and had power enough to cure him. I had been always vain of my knowledge of character, and of my influence over my fellow men, and here was a case in which I exulted. He was my patient, and I was his physician; and whether I failed or succeeded, the future must determine—I cannot.”

He rose as if he were tired of the subject—as if he had been led to say more than he had intended. It was a new gratitude, unakin to the old love in every respect, that led me to thank him.

“I did not know that you had taken so much trouble with my brother,” I said, rising also; “how can I thank you?”

“It was no trouble—in those days it was a duty of mine. Please say no more, Miss Casey.”

“I will say that your efforts have not been unrewarded—he has changed for the better, Sir.”

“You see a change in him?—I am glad of that,” he said; “you who know him so much better than I, have been able to detect it more easily. Still I would not have you build too much upon his better ways—he may continue in them, but he may break down. With an earnest friend at his side, he might succeed in life; but without a friend, he may sink back to his past estate.”

“You consider that my duty lies in his direction now?”

“You must think for yourself, Miss Casey, not for him. A brother has a claim upon us to a certain extent—but we cannot have our lives, and all the actions of our lives, regulated by a brother’s fantasies.”

He was thinking of Richard Stewart then. I saw his brow contract, and his dark eyes seek the carpeted floor.

“I am sorry—very sorry—to hear of a difference between you and *your* brother!”

“It was of his own seeking,” said Mr. Stewart, gloomily; “he, with his dreamy ideas, would have taught me what was best in a world of which he knew nothing. It was like a man full of book-lore offering his advice to one whose knowledge had been gained by practical experience.”

“He was wrong, then?”

He looked up at me, then evaded my glance again.

“Time must prove that. I am working the problem now, which he would have solved after his own Utopian theory. But we are diverging to strange topics, Miss Casey,” he added; “topics which I would not have dwelt upon with any other *friend*. We are still friends, I trust?”

He did not glance towards me at this question, and before I could reply thereto Mr. Mannington was with us.

"Sorry to interrupt this interesting *tête-à-tête*," he said, blinking at us from his half-shut eyes; "but I haven't had a chance of exchanging a word with you to-night, my dear Mark. First my daughter, then Miss Casey. See what it is to be a lady's man!"

The ladies' man smiled very faintly at the *facetiæ* of his future father-in-law, to whose company I left him. I thought better of Mr. Stewart again from that night; I forgave him his trespasses against me, his love-making and his love-breaking, for the interest he had shown in my brother's welfare. He had done his best for John—for my sake, in the first instance, I was sure of that—and I thought that the time would come when I should be his friend. He wished it; he was sorry for all the past, and the pain that he had caused me therein; he regretted that past in his heart, for my sake, and I should be able to forgive him, for his true penitence.

Mrs. Kingsworth beckoned me to her, as Bel Mannington went back to her lover's side. My mistress was looking paler and older, too, that night—the events of the day were still in her thoughts, I saw.

"You have been speaking to Mr. Stewart about your brother?"

"Yes."

"Well—what did Kingsworth leave for?"

"Mr. Stewart has not told me the reasons for John leaving his service, but he has assured me of his belief in my brother's improvement."

"Does he believe in your brother's powers of endurance?"

"With a friend at his side to keep him hopeful of the future, and strong and patient in the present."

"Emma Eaves!" said Mrs. Kingsworth, grimly.

"She might be of value to him—she professes to know him better than all his friends—she is deeply attached to him; but I was not thinking of Emma Eaves at his side in the first instance—rather of my place there."

"We will talk of your duties some other time," she said, curtly.

"I am too tired to start a fresh topic to-night. I will wish Mr. Stewart *bon voyage*, and go to my room. This has been somewhat of a stormy day for you and me—thank Heaven it is over! According to proverbial philosophy, we should have a calm in store for us."

She crossed to Mr. Stewart, bade him good night, wished him a safe journey, and went from the room, Mr. Mannington opening the door for her in a courteous manner, and bowing her into the corridor. A few minutes afterwards I imitated her example; I was tired and unsettled, glad of an opportunity to indulge in my old habits of reverie.

I found Emma Eaves waiting for me in my room, and was balked for awhile in my project. I was glad to see her anxious for my society again—eager to speak of John, to detail her reminiscences concerning him, many of which spoke of a good heart, if of a too

generous hand. I studied Emma that night very intently, and I thought, setting aside her impulsiveness, and taking for granted that her cavesdropping propensities were matters of the past, that she might make my brother a good wife. There was a year to wait, and I might effect much good in a year; she thought so herself; she was anxious now to submit herself to me, to strive to imitate me, to become my maid instead of Bel's. John had told her to love me, and obey me, and she, with greater confidence, was beginning her task at once.

We were still talking when Wiltorpe church struck twelve. We paused, and counted the hours, and looked at one another in surprise.

"I had no idea it was so late," said Emma; "twelve o'clock! If John should make up his mind to go back by the mail train at two, he would be on his way by this time."

"He did not speak to me of leaving by that train."

"He is anxious to begin life for himself—to get to work again, now Mrs. Kingsworth has refused to help him. I should have told you that he said you were to forgive him if he went away in haste. But he had not made up his mind, and I hope myself to see him once more before he goes. Oh! Miss, if he grows rich suddenly—and becomes too grand for me, what shall I ever do?"

"And if he keep poor——"

"I hope he will!—just *comfortably poor*, you know, Miss Casey."

Emma and I looked at the subject in this light, and I learned that Emma was glad, for her own sake, that Mrs. Kingsworth had refused John the loan.

"I would not have him make his fortune like that Mr. Stewart, for the world, Miss!" said Emma.

We were talking of this, and I was even laughing at this, when it struck one. What an inexhaustible subject was this John Kingsworth Casey! And how much more interesting Emma Eaves had become in my eyes since John had offered her his hand. I gave scarcely a thought to that idea of the *mésalliance* which had even "surprised" Mrs. Kingsworth.

"There, I will have no more talk, Emma, to-night," I said, springing from my chair; "get to your room and leave me to the possession of mine."

She was bidding me good night, when we both stopped with hands uplifted and looked into each other's face. A strange sharp noise like the crack of a whip arrested us.

"What's that?" whispered Emma.

Before we could arrive at a solution it was repeated.

"Some one is flinging stones against the window-glass," I said, looking in that direction; "what can it mean?"

"Jack!" cried Emma, "he has seen the light in the room, and has come to say good-bye to us."

"Too late for the train at two," I said; "one has already struck and it is ten miles to Peterborough."

"*Then something has happened to him!*"

Filled with this sudden thought, we both dashed to the window, drew up the blind and opened the casement. A still dark night, with the sky sombre and starless, and nothing to be distinguished below as I leaned forward and peered as it were into an abyss.

"Who is there?"

"It is I—Richard Stewart," said a deep voice beneath the window.

"What—what has happened?"

"Hush!—not so loud. Who is that with you?"

"Emma Eaves."

"Come to the door alone and let me in. I must see you at once, Miss Casey."

CHAPTER VI.

"DANGER."

LIKE a thief in the night I stole out of the room, along the corridor, and down the broad stairs to the hall. Emma, with her hands crossed upon her breast, followed me, breathing short and quick with nervous agitation—my own breath seemed suspended for awhile. How the whole place, that had been hitherto so dark and noiseless, seemed to echo again with our stealthy footfalls, and the aggravating rustle of our dresses! They who slept in the rooms we passed would hear us, and open their doors to ask the meaning of our flitting there. They were all light sleepers—Mrs. Kingsworth, her brother and niece. And it was necessary—I felt already that it was necessary—to keep this coming conference a secret; that disgrace and ruin might overtake some one who was dear to us, if there were other watchers in the house at that hour.

Into the broad hall, the light I held in my hand casting fitful shadows on the marble pavement as we advanced to the entrance-door, barred and chained for the night.

Standing on the great hall mat with my hands upon the fastenings, my courage seemed to give way,—Emma’s suddenly and strangely to revive.

“Let me open the door,” said Emma, “your hand shakes too much. You will drop the bar and alarm the whole house.”

In an emergency she was the stronger woman—therefore, I thought even then, the better companion for my brother John.

Emma unfastened the door, and Richard Stewart entered and closed the door immediately behind him. He looked angrily at Emma Eaves, and said,

“You can go.”

“No—I shall not go,” said Emma, flashing back as angry a glance at the land-bailiff; “I stay here till *you* go!”

“This is no time for squeamishness,” said Richard Stewart misinterpreting her reasons; “Miss Casey, tell this girl to go to her room.”

“Miss Casey will do no such thing,” said Emma, defiantly, “I must hear all that has happened to her brother. Oh! Mr. Stewart,” she added, suddenly softening, “you mustn’t hide anything from me concerning *him*—he’s the best and most generous of men, and I am his friend from whom no secrets should be kept. Ask Miss Casey, Sir.”

“What does she mean?” he said, turning to me.

“She will be my brother’s wife in all probability, Mr. Stewart.”

Richard Stewart shook his head.

“Never that!”

“He is not dead!” I screamed.

“Miss Casey, this way, please. I thought you would have been better able to stand up against bad news. No—he’s not dead—he’s not ill.”

He crossed the hall to the library, which we entered. I followed him, and Emma brought up the rear. He made no effort to induce her to withdraw again, but motioned her to close the door softly behind her. He walked at once to a long table in the centre of the room, and leaned against it; we two women stood before him, anxious for his revelation. A strange group in that large shadowy room, shut in by the books around us. I held the light in my hand still, and it brought into strong relief the stern, almost haggard face of Richard Stewart. In a few short hours he had altered very much!

“I do not think that this is likely to be a secret of many hours’ duration,” he said; “so it matters little who is listener here. Put that light down please—it dazzles me!”

I placed it on the table behind him at his abrupt request, and he went on very rapidly with the news he had to communicate, as if to make up for the time he had already wasted.

“Your brother has left suddenly for Glasgow; my iron safe

has been opened, and money taken therefrom—money of Mrs. Kingsworth's."

"My God!"

"Mrs. Kingsworth must be woke up directly for instructions. It is necessary, I think, for me to ride to Peterborough, and telegraph to Edinburgh and Glasgow. He may not have gone to either city—if he be as cunning as I think him, probably not. There, that's the news, Miss Casey—and you'll hate me all the days of your life for bringing it to you!"

"You suspect him at once—you lose money, and turn at once upon my brother—my brother, who, with all his faults, has been ever an honest man. Sir, I do not—I cannot believe this yet!"

"Why should he be suspected more than you?" cried Emma, now more excited than I; "you have had this money in trust, and your word is no better than his word Richard Stewart. Send after him, you will find him innocent of all this, and Mrs. Kingsworth must look further for the thief. You have no right to come here and steal away a man's good name. Miss Bertha, don't listen to him any more!"

"You were always a fool!" said Richard Stewart, sharply; "you are acting foolishly in screaming out in this fashion. I knew what it would be when you came in with us."

"Mr. Stewart," I said, "you believe that my brother took this money—oh! you are sure of it!"

"I did not see him; but he slept in the room where my safe was kept, and it was unlocked when I went down an hour ago."

"And the money taken?"

"No, not all the money—that's the oddest part of it. Two thousand pounds in Bank of England notes were taken, and one thousand, four hundred left untouched."

"Two thousand pounds!"

I thought of the sum my brother had begged of Mrs. Kingsworth only a few hours since, and my heart sank wofully. Had he given way?—had he, whom I had at least believed an honest man, been tempted by the knowledge of the money near him, opened the safe, and taken that which he had coveted? No common thief, whose only wish was gain, would have acted in so strange a fashion. Yet I would not let the facts sink into my heart yet. Whilst there was doubt there was hope, and my brother John had seemed so different a man, altering so rapidly for the better, only yesterday!

"I cannot believe this," I murmured; "oh! what shall I do?"

"Miss Casey, it is hard news to bring to this house—harder still to bring to you. It seems as if it were my fate to be ever crushing out your good thoughts of others. When I saw the light in your window, I thought it best to attract your attention, and ask you to communicate quietly with Mrs. Kingsworth. She may not wish this matter

carried further—or you might possess influence enough to induce her to consider seriously before taking the first step. I am her servant, and await her orders. I have on my own part a proposition to make to her, by which at least this loss will not be wholly hers.”

“I must wake her, then. Do you not think the morning——”

“Mrs. Kingsworth is a just woman, and may wish justice done rather than mercy,” said Richard Stewart.

Seeing me draw in my breath quickly, he said—

“I am sorry to pain you—pray forgive me. Will you go to Mrs. Kingsworth now?”

I left the light burning on the table and went out of the room, Emma following me. The darkness beyond the library met us like a pall, but we knew the house well, and went across the hall to the stairs. On the stairs Emma put her arm round me in a fond caressing manner, new to her. She had a greater faith in John, and she was stronger in that time of trial than I.

“We will not believe this,” she said, “you and I who know him so much better than these people. I would sooner believe that Richard Stewart has taken this money for himself. It is more likely—it is a hundred times more likely.”

“Emma, it is impossible.”

“He has wanted money lately—I have heard him and a stranger about here—a grey man with big whiskers—talking about money once. Miss Bertha,” in a whisper, “it’s a plot!”

My blood seemed to freeze at this new suggestion hissed into my ear—this horrible thought which added to my weakness, rather than gave me strength to hope for John.

We went along the corridor in the darkness, to Mrs. Kingsworth’s bed-room. Here I stopped, and made one last effort to collect my strength. This was to be a night of trouble to me, and more than me, and I must not give way. The end might be far off, or waiting but the daylight; but I must see it to the end, and nerve myself to meet the worst.

“I am ready now,” I said, after a pause and a struggle to concentrate my strength, “I can brave all now!”

I tried the door but it was locked on the inner side. Then I tapped gently with my knuckles on the panels, and the hollow sound along the corridor seemed to echo in my heart.

My summons had scarcely been delivered, when Mrs. Kingsworth’s voice, deep and resonant from within, said:

“Who is there?”

“It is I—Bertha Casey.”

“Bertha Casey brings bad news, or she would not be wandering here at this time of the night. I have been expecting it—I have had dreams concerning it. Wait one instant.”

We waited a short while in the corridor, then the door was opened softly, and Mrs. Kingsworth, holding a small night-lamp in her hand,

stood in the doorway, in a dark dressing-gown and shawl. Her face was pale, but it betrayed no alarm at my summons.

"Something about your brother?" she said, looking hard into my face, and holding her lamp close thereto.

"Yes, madam."

"Something against him?"

"Something that they say against him," corrected Emma from the background.

"You here too, Emma Eaves—woman of evil omen? Go to your room."

"No," was the firm reply.

Mrs. Kingsworth seemed inclined to resent this disobedience, then said:

"No matter. Stay if you will—you should be interested in this case. Come in."

"Richard Stewart is down-stairs, Mrs. Kingsworth, and waiting to see you."

"Waiting to see me!—waiting to see me!" she repeated, and the light began to tremble in her hand.

"Madam, you will not believe all that he has to say against my brother without fair proof?—you will not act hastily?" I said—"you will be calm!"

"I am always calm—I have outlived emotion at man's duplicity," she said; "it is for me to warn you, Miss Casey, or your ghost-like face belies your courage."

"I have courage to hope yet."

"Where is Mr. Stewart?"

"In the library."

"Tell him I will be with him in a moment. Go down quietly," she added in a whisper not free from excitement; "no noise, for your life's sake."

Emma and I went down-stairs again, and found Richard Stewart in the same position, leaning against the library table with his arms folded, and his thoughtful face bent downwards. Glancing askance at that face as I advanced, I thought of Emma Eaves' suggestion and of its improbability. Never a face that told more truly its possessor's frank and honest nature.

He looked up as we entered for an instant.

"Is she coming?"

"Yes—in an instant."

We three waited silently for her approach, I standing at a little distance from the land-bailiff, Emma Eaves receding back into the deep shadow of a recess near the mantelpiece, where only a slight movement now and then told us of her presence.

A long weary watch it seemed; Mrs. Kingsworth making no haste to join us. We could hear the sepulchral ticking of a clock in some distant part of the house, as we kept our vigils there.

“She is coming,” I said, at last, and her slow progress down the stairs towards us was at last distinctly audible.

She came into the room, and closed the door behind her—even taking the precaution to remove the key from the outside to the inside, and turning it within the lock.

I thought that she had been dressing until she came in, in her dressing-gown and shawl, as I had seen her last. She held the night-lamp before her, and leaned upon her stick more heavily as she advanced—I was sure, more heavily!

“A very early hour for visiting, Stewart,” she said; “give me a chair, and make yourself of use, man.”

He leaned across the table and reached the back of a chair, which, by a dexterous movement, he brought to the side of his mistress. She set the night-lamp by the side of my candlestick, and then dropped into the easy-chair, and turned her face away from the light.

“Now—the news?”

“Miss Casey has not told you——”

“Miss Casey has told me nothing—be brief, and spare your remarks upon the misfortune which has come to us.”

“You have been robbed of two thousand pounds, madam. My iron safe has been opened, and that sum abstracted from the rest. Mr. Casey accepted my offer of a night’s lodging yesterday, but left at eleven o’clock, without giving me fair notice of his change of mind.”

“These are the facts from which we draw our own conclusion,” she said in a low tone—“well, well, I am not surprised!”

She fought hard till the last to maintain her character for equanimity, but what a fight it was! I, who knew her best, was sure of that, despite her unwavering voice and settled attitude.

“Two thousand pounds!—it is a large sum to lose,” she continued, “and there is little doubt who took that money. Miss Casey, do you guess the thief?”

“I will not try to guess it yet awhile.”

“You are a prudent and a just woman. We will be fair and honourable in our judgments for her sake, Mr. Stewart.”

“For her sake, madam—yes,” he answered.

“My money was not banked to-day at Woundell. How was that?”

“I was too late. The bank was closed when I reached Woundell this afternoon.”

“He knew that you returned with that money?”

“Yes—he was staying with me.”

“Where was your brother?”

“At the Inn. He was *not* staying with me.”

“And this man Casey leaves you abruptly at eleven in the evening. What made you suspect him after that hour?”

"I do not know. A sudden suspicion led me to go down-stairs, and make sure that all was right. The first time in my life that I ever suspected evil at work in my house."

"It was presentiment," she said; "go on."

"And I found the iron safe unlocked, and two thousand pounds gone."

"Unlocked!—not broken into?"

"Unlocked, Mrs. Kingsworth."

"You and I have only keys of that safe. Has it not struck you that I might have been to the cottage in search of you, and finding you absent, tried that safe? You were not at home all the evening."

He started, and his two hands clenched spasmodically.

"Not all the evening."

"Was the safe unlocked when you returned?"

"I did not try it. The key was in my pocket, and the safe I knew was a good one. I can swear to locking it."

"When I ordered that safe to be fixed in your cottage, as a handy receptacle for monies, with which I did not care to be worried at unseasonable hours, I did not bargain for thousands of pounds being kept therein. You, a punctual man, priding yourself upon exactitude, were foolish enough to miscalculate your time, and reach Womdell after the bank was closed!—you returned to lead a weak man into temptation, and are not wholly free from blame."

"I calculated my time well, but was detained upon my road."

"Supposing that you had lost this money on your road, what better excuse could be invented than that of a robbery? You are a man whose word would be taken before my godson's."

"Madam!" shouted Richard Stewart.

He forgot his caution, the deference due to his mistress at her words. His face purpled for an instant with rage, and he glared at Mrs. Kingsworth with horror and astonishment.

"You think this?"

"God forbid!" she murmured, "for you are the one man on earth in whom I have learned to trust. I wouldn't lose my faith in you for all the world!"

"No, no, you don't think this—this is your way," he said; "coming hither the thought did cross me that those who knew little of me might set the blame upon me, or at least have their suspicions that I might be the thief. That girl there thought so."

"I think so still," said Emma, who was leaning forward listening intently; "I am sure of it!"

"Silence!" said Mrs. Kingsworth hollowly, "the thief is John Kingsworth Casey, my godson—I do not spare him, let no one else in this room. Miss Casey, take the lamp and go into my study—here are my keys—this key opens *my* safe, at the bottom of which

you will find the duplicate key of Mr. Stewart's safe. If there—your brother is the guilty man.”

I took the lamp and hastened from the room to Mrs. Kingsworth's study. I opened the safe door and took a key therefrom which I carried to the library, and gave to Mrs. Kingsworth.

“Yes—it has been there five years—since the safe was made. I have had no use for it. Now, Mr. Stewart, what is to be done?”

“Stop the notes. I have all the numbers.”

“That does not look like the guilty man,” she said; “well, what else?”

“Telegraph for Mr. Casey's arrest, if you think of prosecuting. Telegraph to all the leading towns, to every station, in fact, that is connected with the Great Northern and North Western lines. I will saddle horse and start at once for Peterborough.”

“A merciful man this!” said Mrs. Kingsworth with a shudder.

“Madam, I came hither to ask your mercy for John Casey—to ask you to leave to me, after my own fashion, the man who has robbed us. But I see now that this would be to cast suspicion upon myself—I see already the slander creeping towards me, and sullyng the good name I am very jealous of. Miss Casey,” turning to me suddenly and eagerly, “you will give me leave to be just instead of merciful.”

“I can say nothing. If my brother John has taken this money he deserves no mercy, and—and I will not sue for it. But, oh! Mrs. Kingsworth, I have a hope yet that he can explain this mystery.”

“Two thousand pounds,” murmured Mrs. Kingsworth, “the sum he asked for this afternoon. Well—let him have it!”

Two out of the three listeners turned to her at once. She looked from Richard Stewart to me defiantly, and then rose from her chair to close the interview.

“Let him have this money. I will not stir one step to regain it. Let him go his way with these ill-gotten gains and prosper, as some bad men have done before him, despite the laws moral and divine they break. Mr. Stewart,” she said proudly and sternly, “I will have no interference with my rights; this man is my godson, and bears a name which I ask you to respect. We have all done with him—let him sink away in the endless night which must engulf him; I am an old woman powerless to act—too proud to act—and too indifferent to the value of the gold he has stolen from me to resent the injury. I am powerless, Sir—powerless!” she added with strange reiteration.

“Madam, this is my loss. By this act you fling the whole loss on me, and offer no chance of my retrieving it,” said Richard Stewart; “you render me your debtor to the extent of two thousand pounds—too large a sum for me to make up yet awhile.”

"Have I asked you for a penny?"

"You make this story by your silence hard to prove in my favour."

"This story we consign to the grave, and on the gravestone we will inscribe—'Sacred to the memory of an awful theft!'—I am the only mourner there."

"I owe you two thousand pounds," said Richard Stewart.

"You owe me nothing. Go home, and take my curse with you!"

She flung her arms forward as she spoke, and the loose sleeve dropped away from the long gaunt limb. In that attitude, with that wild expression on her face, she looked weird-like and prophetic. Even Richard Stewart winced at her denunciation.

"Your curse, Mrs. Kingsworth!" he said; "surely I have not deserved it."

"You have brought me anxiety and grief. You have dashed down the one faint hope that has lasted until now, and left me in the darkness. But—I will not curse you. You are only the evil messenger whom God has sent to mortify me in my miserable old age. Go!"

He went at once from the room, rapidly and silently. We followed him to the outer door, where he waited till we reached him.

"I shall leave the rest of this mystery to Miss Casey," said Mrs. Kingsworth more composedly; "I rely on your good faith, Sir."

"I will respect your wish, at any cost to me," he answered.

He went out into the cold black landscape beyond the Hall, and Mrs. Kingsworth stood looking after him, till I warned her that there was danger to her health in lingering there.

She turned at last—a strange woman, whom I had never seen before, and tightly grasped my arm.

"Take me up-stairs—I am very ill!" she whispered.

CHAPTER VII.

BROKEN DOWN.

THERE were other wanderers about the house—people who could not sleep, or who had been disturbed from sleep by us, despite the caution we had used. On the first landing, as we toiled up-stairs with our new grief—to us three women no greater grief could have come—Mr. Mannington met us.

His face was white, and his hair rough and tangled, as though he had just awakened; but I noticed then, and I remembered afterwards, that he wore the dress in which I had seen him last at dinner. Possibly he had been up all night, restless and nervous himself; part of the Mannington eccentricity was his inheritance.

“Is anything the matter?” he asked; “who’s that left the house just now?”

“I’m not well,” murmured Mrs. Kingsworth—“can’t you see that?”

Her illness offered an opportune excuse, and Mr. Mannington, to my surprise, did not press his inquiries. He was satisfied with them, or his thoughts were suddenly directed into a new channel by the wild and seared face advancing to him.

“Bless me, you *are* ill, Charlotte! Shall I send for a doctor?—shall I go for anyone, or anything? Shall I wake Isabel?”

“You can go to your room and lock yourself in,” said Mrs. Kingsworth, with a flash of her old acerbity—“that is all that I require of you yet awhile.”

“But I think a doctor——”

“I will have a doctor later in the day if I want one,” said Mrs. Kingsworth feebly; “I shall not die in a hurry. I have too much to think about. I am strong and hearty yet!”

“If she’s any worse you will call me, Miss Casey,” he said, unnecessarily loud, and then withdrew to his own room.

At the door of Mrs. Kingsworth’s room, my mistress motioned Emma to approach.

“What do you think of all this, girl? Your opinion should be worth something.”

“Madam, he never took the money.”

“The worst man can find a champion in a woman—you are a child of great faith.”

“I know him best of all—there is not one, not his own sister, who understands him.”

"In the morning will you come to my room? I have much to say to you—remember."

Emma Eaves made a gesture of assent, and then went slowly and thoughtfully along the corridor, leaving Mrs. Kingsworth and me together. When she had reached the extremity, and disappeared, Mrs. Kingsworth turned to me.

"In the morning I should like to see you again. At an early hour, no matter how early, I shall be waiting for you."

"Madam, I cannot leave you to-night. You are unwell, unlike yourself—you may want assistance."

"It is easily obtained if I require it," she said; "I could rouse all Wilthorpe with the alarm-bell for that matter. I shall want no one to-night—I am much stronger than I was a moment since—I wish to be alone."

She took her hand from my arm, and stood erect before me, as though to assert her strength. Her face of sorrow, disappointment, or whatever it was, was very sad to gaze on still.

"Give me my lamp, Miss Casey, and leave me to myself," she said; "has Emma the other light?—we should be careful with the lights in a dry old house like this."

"Emma has the light."

She spoke again of the precaution necessary, and of the carelessness of servants, as though to prove to me how cool and self-possessed she was. But it was a poor struggle, and deceived no one.

"Madam, I will ask you as a favour to let me sit with you to-night. This news has unnerved you."

"If you be strong enough to resist such news and bear such disgrace as has fallen on you to-night, why should I not take things philosophically? Miss Casey," she said very firmly, "if you have any respect for me—which I doubt—go to your room!"

I could urge my request no further, and yet I lingered. The remembrance of her efforts to ascend the stairs, the consciousness of her changed looks,—intense, full of eagerness and life as they were—warned me of danger; I felt that my duty was at her side, protecting and solacing her. Her pride, that despised all help, and held her aloof from human sympathy, did not restrain me, and when she had passed into her room, I remained where she had left me, spell-bound and expectant. Her trouble seemed before mine—my own mother in trouble had never distressed my girlhood more.

She left me in the darkness of that corridor—the door of her room ajar, and one faint streak of light stealing across the landing-place. I stood there a still and patient sentinel, knowing by instinct that I should be wanted presently. The stillness within the room seemed even more apparent—if I may use the word—than without. It alarmed me more, for it suggested more thoughts of danger.

What could she be doing? Had she passed into the room and then stood motionless, a figure stone-stricken?—had she fallen asleep?—was she dead? The silence was unearthly; it had followed so quickly upon her departure from me; not the rustle of a dress, a sigh of regret, the faintest movement broke upon the stillness. My noisy throbbing heart seemed the only living thing within twenty paces of me—down-stairs the clock was ticking, but it belonged to another world and I was listening for signs from this.

I never knew how long I waited there; minutes and hours are of equal length when one's heart is in suspense. I had not a thought of abandoning that position until I was assured that she was at rest, and required no help—until some sign was made for good or evil from that room. It came at last with a long quivering cry, suppressed at first as though she had been conscious of my watch, and then increasing in intensity till it rang through the house like a death-wail. My heart stood still a moment with the horror for which I had thought myself prepared, and then I ran into the room with arms outstretched, to fold that woman to my bosom, and try to comfort her.

My deep love and pity were strong enough to comfort one whose actions had been incomprehensible to me. She had been standing a few paces from me all this while, rigid and statuesque as myself, and the re-action had come at last and broken down restraint. She had fallen forwards towards the bed-side at last, with her arms spread in advance across the coverlet, and the night-lamp and stick still in her hands—the flame of the former licking at the heavy drapery of the bed.

I snatched the lamp away and set it aside on the marble wash-stand, without her knowledge or her heed of my presence. I knelt beside her and passed my arm round her withered neck, to assure her that I was there whilst she continued that long, tremulous wail of despair.

“Madam—madam—will you let me help you—stay with you? Are you worse than I fear?”

She continued to moan, and disregard me. I made a movement as though to rise, for I was becoming afraid of this prostration, and anxious for medical assistance, when the hand that had held the lamp caught mine.

“Don't go yet,” she cried; “this will—pass—away! Oh! for some one in the world to trust!”

“Madam, trust in me,” I said; “trust in one to love you, help you, comfort you, be the friend to you in your distress that you have been to me and mine.”

“No, no, no. Not you, of all the world!”

“Think what you have been to me—you my dead mother's friend—yon whose real nature I have seen, through the veil that you would have cast over it—you whom I have learned to love as a

daughter—to feel towards you as a daughter anxious to tell all my troubles to, and hear all yours.”

“Then you would hate me?”

“No.”

“Woman, you must hate me!” she said, raising her head for a moment, and then burying it once more in the bed-clothes; “would you have more mercy than I on my misdeeds—I who hate myself. Judge me, my God, if this be true or not!”

“Trust in your old friend’s daughter, as you might have trusted in your own. Oh! madam, I feel that I can be of help to you.”

“After all my years of struggling I have broken down at last. I am a weak old woman, to whom retribution has come—I—I only wish to die! Bertha,” she said, suddenly—it was the first time that she had addressed me thus—“I *will* trust you; and if you will try not to hate me afterwards, if you will tell me what is best, and teach me—ignorant as a child—what can be best in this humiliation, I will thank God for the day I ever saw you! Closer to me, and let me whisper in your ear a secret that I thought would last my life out. That man who robbed me is—my son!”

“My brother John?”

“Not your brother—having no claim upon you—bound to you by no tie of relationship whatever. Thank heaven for that mercy in this day of shame to me!”

“I am in a dream!”

“See to the door—there may be listeners—lock the door, and come back to me.”

I went to the door, looked out on the landing, turned the key in the lock, and returned. She was kneeling still, her face still buried in the coverlet, her arms outspread before her. I knelt beside her again, and passed my arm once more round this stricken woman.

“You do not shrink away—you will not hate me after this?”

“Ever your friend, madam—ever one to take your part, and fight your battles—loving you to the last. Oh! madam, I have wanted one to love and help so much!”

“God bless you!”

She was silent for a long while; I asked her at length if she would defer that confession which was on her lips, till she was stronger, better.

“No; I will tell you now,” she said—“I may have no other chance. I am a woman giving up all old resolves, and the new life or strength is not for me. I grew old before my time, and the long struggle to keep firm has worn me out. I do not complain—I shall be happier in my coffin than ever I have been in life. From a girl of your age till now, that life has been a tragedy!”

“It may brighten yet, God willing.”

“Never. Listen, and judge if that be possible.”

She spoke in a low tone, but every word was clear and precise,

deepening at times with the agitation of the speaker, and only faltering at the last.

"I married late in life; I was a woman who had been enriched by more than one legacy, and they who scent money, as vultures scent the dead, did their best to make a prize of me. One succeeded, despite all my caution, all that knowledge of the world, in which I had already begun to pride myself. He was a rich man also, owner of this estate at Wilthorpe, and I could not understand a wealthy man burdening his life with a woman he loved not for herself. That character had not crossed my path, and so he tricked me into marriage. That is the preface."

"Well?" I asked, breathlessly.

"It was the most unhappy marriage upon earth. We both hated each other; we had no consideration for each other; we did our worst at last to cross each other's wishes in every way that lay in our power. We were both afflicted with a devilish pride that hurled us apart with greater strength whenever friends would have made peace between us. Before two years of my marriage had expired, I, a watchful, jealous woman, found that he was utterly false to me—that in a gay house in London was hidden the woman who had all his smiles and love. What would you have done?"

"Denounced him!" I ejaculated.

"I was a dishonest, crafty woman, and kept quiet," she said; "I wanted revenge, and I studied it, and waited for it. When I knew that his greatest wish in life was for an heir to his estate and name, and when the truth forced itself upon me that I was likely to gratify that wish, that revenge was in my power. Ah! you start now at me—the truth is drawing on you, and you shrink away."

"No, madam—I pity you. I see the struggle coming between this revenge and love."

"It was a struggle between my good and evil angels, and the good one died," she continued. "I resolved to keep my secret from him; he was absent from the Hall for months together with his mistress; he travelled with her on the Continent, caring nothing for me, never writing to me, never for one instant burdening his conscience with one merciful thought of his poor wife. Some people," she said more excitedly, "called me his mad wife, and that alarmed him, for in my family had happened strange occurrences. I might have been mad in my desertion—mad to think of a revenge which stabbed me more deeply than himself, and yet from which I never swerved. I left the Hall, and came to London; the child was born in your mother's house—she and your father were my only confidantes; your father was a spendthrift, and money gained his confidence and bought his secrecy. I thought that I could exult in my child at all times and seasons, and keep my husband in ignorance of his birth; it was my madness, perhaps, that concealed ever the truth from him. When he came back once more to the Hall, I met him in the

lowliness of this great house, and held my peace. He came back a hardened villain, who had grown as tired of the woman he had beguiled as he had doue of me; he settled down at the Hall, an irritable morose man, who would have ruled me, as he ruled his servants, with a rod of iron. He never left Wilthorpe again; he boud me to Wilthorpe, away from my boy, and he kept his own happiness back by his ill-treatment of me. His oue theme was my money; it had been settled on me by my father, and I refused my signature to any deed which conveyed it to my covetous husband. He fawued for it, cursed me for it, and we went on, year after year, increasing in our hate, having our separate rooms and separate servants, and only once or twice a year in society, presentiu a fair appearance to the world. Thus for fifteen years, during which I never saw my child, and only heard concerning him from your mother; and then that man died suddenly in his library chair, with uo oue to pity him, or mourn for him. Thus he left me free."

"And then you did not claim your son?"

"Theu I had altered very much—I was an aged and hardened woman, whom the devil had steeled against all love and sympathy. My pride exulted in my superiority to human weakness; I tried as hard to become a heartless woman, as earnest people strive for goodness sometimes. But I went in search of my sou once more—your father had died theu, and your mother was a housekeeper—you were nine years of age. At fifteen years of age my sou had thrown himself upon the streets, I had heard, become a reckless youth, careless of home and home-ties—had already tried to the uttermost the heart of one who had learned to love him as her child. I did not see my son, I was heart-sick with disappointment; my morbid fears saw my old life over again, with a man who would know uo gratitude for his position, or ever entertain one spark of love towards me. I went away hard and cold, content to wait for better times in him, and finding that year after year he grew more callous. My pride held him ever from my arms; I tried to teach myself to hate him like his father, so that my desolation should sit more easily upou me. So year after year, until uow—when the truth faces me of what is, and my wrung soul assures me of what might have been!"

"Madam, it is not too late——"

"Too late for everything! Too late even to see him, and ask pardon for the wrong I have done him—too late to make atouement! All before me impenetrable and vague, and the door of fate barred in my face as mercilessly as the gates of heaven!"

She began to moan again, and I to whisper in her ear of the better life that might be hers—of the better days even on earth which might fall to her share. For the past in which she had played so strange a part there might be reparation yet. Would she only pray for pardou, and trust in him who ordereth all things rightly?

"No—no," she said, shaking her head passionately to and fro,

"there is no mercy for *me*! I have worked evil to others as well as to myself—I have more than my own soul to answer for—my son is a robber!"

"We have no proof yet," I cried; "we *may* hope!"

"I could have saved him from the devil years ago, and my pride would not allow it—I was content to fling my money at him, to watch him whenever the chance was offered me—my God! to watch him sinking step by step away from right, and never stirring hand or foot to save him! When he was a baby, and my mother's heart yearned for him, I placed him in the hands of a weak woman and an unprincipled man—your parents—and he grew up ill-trained and dissolute. I set my brother's child before my own, and went on sowing seeds of evil in my path of life—and now, the harvest, oh! the deadly harvest!"

"Madam, you must rest now—you have suffered too much to-night—will you lie down and let me watch here till the morning?"

"If you like."

She gave assent in a weak voice. Had I done right in listening so long, in making no effort to restrain her sad confession, in allowing her to pour forth this story, after my knowledge of how the night's news had struck her down? I had been eager and curious, and my own interest had carried me along, absorbing my prudence until then. Then my heart accused me!

When she was in her bed she stretched out her wasted hand to me, saying:

"You do not hate me, then?"

"No madam. I see your desperate conflict through life—that firm resolve to keep this secret, struggling with the mother's love which never lessened, which accounts for much that has been so long a mystery to me!"

"You are a good young woman—your life should be a happy one. I wish it were in my power to make it so."

"We must leave that to God."

"Strange it seems to lie hear and trust in you. Years ago I loved your mother for her gentleness and faithfulness—now the daughter at my side as gentle, faithful, and more strong!"

I thought that she had fallen asleep after this, she closed her eyes and lay so still.

"Bertha," she said, suddenly, and startled me, "are you there?"

"Here, madam, at your side."

"Ah! yes—my head was wandering somewhat, and I had gone back many years before your time. Bertha," in an excited whisper, "I must see this man!"

"Your son?" I exclaimed.

"My guilty son—yes, I must see him! Perhaps this one last

effort—this one first effort—to turn him from his evil ways may work some good, coming from his mother.”

“We will think to-morrow if it be possible to find him.”

“We will sally forth to-morrow in search of him. You and I together.”

“You are faint, Mrs. Kingsworth.”

“A little faint—it will pass away presently—give me some water.”

I filled a glass with water, and held it to her lips. When she had drunk she lay back and closed her eyes.

“Don't speak any more now. Try and sleep here by my side. If I am restless in my sleep, wake me. I must not live this night over again, even in my dreams.”

She fell off to sleep at last, and I sat by her bedside, thinking how much more lined her face had become, and how a few hours had altered it. So I kept my watch there till the grey light began to show behind the window blind, and the birds to twitter in their nests without. Looking at that wan face, so ghastly in the day-dawn, I prayed that she might live to see her son once more, and doubted as I prayed!

CHAPTER VIII.

BOUND NORTH.

Mrs. KINGSWORTH'S first words on awakening were methodical and commandatory.

“Draw up the blind, and—send for a doctor.”

“You do not feel worse?” I asked, bending over her.

“No—better. But I am very weak and the doctor must do his best to make me strong again. If he fail, so much the worse for me!”

She was looking very ill. When I drew the blind up at her request, I saw how greatly she had changed and feared the worst.

“Bertha,” she said, “Say nothing of all that I have told you, yet awhile. There will be time enough to act, I hope. With time left

me, what may not ensue? There, send the groom for Dr. Edmonds, of Woundell, and then lie down and rest. *You must hold firm.*"

Later in the day, after Dr. Edmonds had seen her and reported favourably, she gave way more. Bel Mannington had been sitting at her bedside, striving her best to amuse her by a recapitulation of all the kind words that Mr. Stewart had said to her, and all the talk that she had had with Mr. Stewart—matters that pleased Bel, and made her heart light, but which had no interest for Mrs. Kingsworth—when my mistress started up in bed, and bade her fetch me on the instant.

She had been brooding on the great question which kept her brain disturbed, paying no heed to her niece's conversation, and her sudden animation scared the girl from her rhapsody.

"Aunt wants to see you, Bertie," she said. "Oh! what is the matter?—what has happened to change the house like this!"

I went to Mrs. Kingsworth's room, where I found my mistress with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes.

"Stay without, Bel," she said, "I wish to speak with Miss Casey alone. Bertha," turning to me before the door had scarcely closed, "I shall die here, I am sure of it."

"Pray do not entertain those fears, madam. This is the natural result of a night's excitement, and will pass away."

"I have no fear of death," she said, with her old scornful look; "life has not been so happy with me that I should care to lose it. But I have an awful fear of dying without seeing *him*—a keen regret that you and I cannot undertake that journey we spoke of hours ago. Bertha, you profess to love and pity an old woman—will you do her a great service?"

"Any service she wishes."

"Start at once for Scotland, and try and find the man you have called your brother."

"Madam, gladly."

I sprang to my feet; the desire for action had been strong upon me all day. When I had attempted rest for a short while in my room, the desire to be stirring, to promote her wish and mine, had kept me restless. There might be little chance of finding him—slight probability of a clue to his discovery, but sitting there was worse than death to John.

"Bend your head down," she whispered, "we have plenty of listeners in this house, and must proceed with caution. They must spread no evil report about my son. Let him have one more fair chance in life. I have been planning your course the last three hours—I who have planned so badly for myself and all connected with me!" she added with a sigh.

"We shall be more fortunate this time," I said, cheerfully.

"Do you think so?" she asked, catching at my assuring words, and looking the brighter for them. This confidence in others, and

want of reliance in herself, was singular to witness in a woman who had lived so long alone.

"I will do my best, and leave no stone unturned, madam."

"I am sure of it," she said, "and I will live on hope till you come back again. This is my plan. Seek Richard Stewart at once, and ask him about Kingsworth—everything that Kingsworth said and did whilst he was staying at his house. If *he* should not be guilty—if he should have had no thought of guilt till the last moment," she added, with a sigh that went to my heart, "and then have fallen into temptation, he may have left a clue by which to find him. He never inherited his mother or father's cunning, poor fellow—and he will have left a clue—Richard Stewart has a clue to find him—I saw it in his face last night! Thence from Stewart's cottage to Peterborough—my carriage shall take you thither. From Peterborough to Edinburgh, where you will find Mr. Stewart in High Street."

"Why, Mr. Stewart?"

"Mr. Stewart left for Edinburgh by the two A.M. train—they may have met at Peterborough. Mr. Stewart may afford valuable information as to the whereabouts of Kingsworth. I rely much on Mr. Stewart—tell him that you are anxious concerning your brother, and wish very much to find him."

"Yes."

"Should all prove futile," she continued, speaking in feverish haste, and with one hand picking at the counterpane—I remembered my mother's saying that sick people who fidgeted thus would surely die!—"go to Glasgow, and seek him for yourself by any means in your power. Meanwhile he may write to you; if not, and you be unsuccessful, and hear nothing from me, come back in a week. I will live till your return."

"Oh! madam!"

"I promise it," she went on, more wildly, "I will not die like this, in the uncertainty oppressing me. God will be merciful and let me live till he comes back, or you come to tell me what he is! If—you find him, tell him all at once. Ask him, for his mother's sake—remember, his mother's!—to come at any expense, and in all haste to me. Twice a day telegraph from Scotland. Now, go at once. Go to the hotel, and mention my name; they will remember it. In my study safe you will find a hundred pounds in notes and gold—take them."

I hesitated, but she made an impatient gesture with both hands, and I thought it best not to reason with her. She was anxious to see me depart upon my journey; and every minute that I lingered there was dangerous to her peace.

"When you return, all in this house will have heard of the existence of a son; if—if I *should* die and never see you again, keep the secret of that money's loss with Richard Stewart and Emma Eaves, for my sake. Tell Stewart that it is my wish, and that honest

servant will respect it. Let me see you again when you are ready to go. There are my keys on the dressing-table—and now send Emma Eaves to me.”

“You wish to see her?” I said doubtfully.

“Yes—I wish to make a friend of her, if I can.”

I went out of the room to my own, and made hasty preparations for departure. I was excited and feverish—unwilling at one moment to leave that lone woman there with so many unappreciative minds; and then in another instant fretful at all the hindrances to my departure rising in my path. Emma found her way to my room, and looked on, amazed at my preparations—heard with greater amazement still the story of my journey.

“I will go with you!” she cried impetuously; “I can’t stay here!”

“Till my return, for the sake of him and me, I hope you will.”

“I shall never see him again; and you are all against him, except me.”

“He will come back with me, if I can find him, Emma. Mrs. Kingsworth is anxious to see him, and be his friend still. That money, spirited away no matter by whom, you and I and Mr. Stewart are never to mention again. You will stay, take my place, and be Mrs. Kingsworth’s friend, if she need one.”

“She can never be my friend!”

“She will, I think. She has been Kingsworth’s and mine. You will learn to love her before I return.”

“I will stay. I will wait here till John comes to prove his innocence. You don’t doubt him now?”

“I hope, Emma. I remember what great temptations he has had in life, and how he has resisted them. No, I do *not* believe it!” I exclaimed.

It was the impulse of the moment; and then the crushing truth came back that he had asked for two thousand pounds of Mrs. Kingsworth, had been refused that sum, and gone away disheartened at his future—gone away, I thought, to Richard Stewart’s house, from which two thousand pounds were afterwards abstracted! I did not retract my last words, but I bent my head over a small portmanteau that I had hastily packed, to hide my face from the woman who would hear no harm of him. I sent her away to Mrs. Kingsworth’s room, and went down-stairs to the study, where the safe was. I unlocked the safe, and was taking the money therefrom, when Mr. Mannington skipped into the room.

“What are you doing there, Miss Casey?” he asked, somewhat sharply.

“Obeying Mrs. Kingsworth’s wishes, Sir,” I quietly replied.

“Mrs. Kingsworth might have asked me to supply you with money, if you had wanted any. Be careful with the keys, Miss Casey—we can’t be too careful in times like these. Give them into Mrs. Kingsworth’s hands or mine.”

"I will do so, Sir."

"Mrs. Kingsworth has just sent down orders for the carriage to take you up at Mr. Stewart's in an hour's time. Are you going to Woundell again?—is my sister worse?"

"She is not worse, I hope, Mr. Mannington. She will tell you the reasons for my departure."

"Perhaps I can guess them," he said.

I did not look up—I knew what expression was on his face—I feared he knew too much of the secret I had been enjoined to keep. I locked the safe, and went from the room without another word—he and I were scarcely friends now; and that night I dreaded him. I was in Mrs. Kingsworth's room soon afterwards, and my mistress gave a sigh of relief as I came in, cloaked and bonneted for my journey, and put her keys back in their place.

"You are ready, then?"

"Yes—quite ready now."

"Emma is already here as nurse, you see," she said with a faint smile.

I looked at Emma, whose eyes were red and swollen, as though she had been crying.

"She will be of infinite service to me," said Mrs. Kingsworth; "this girl will be a new friend soon. How the friends are gathering round me in the latter days!—that is a good augury."

"Where is Isabel?" I asked of Emma.

"Asleep on her bed," said Emma.

"Poor girl!—easily tired by new duties. I shall kill her in a week with my fretfulness," Mrs. Kingsworth said. "Do not wake her—let her rest awhile—delay not any longer," she added irritably.

"Remember me to her, then; tell her it is your wish that I leave thus, or she will never forgive me."

"I will tell her. Now, good-bye."

She stretched out her hand to me, and I took it in my own, and leaned over to kiss her.

"You will do your best for me?" she pleaded.

"My very best."

She sighed heavily beneath my kiss. Poor proud lady, who had hewn out her own misfortunes, I knew what thoughts were passing through her brain, so troubled still! Ever before her, her loneliness—the consciousness of the opportunities she had wasted, and the ties that she had sundered by her wilfulness.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye!"

She called me back to reiterate the major portion of her past instructions, speaking with that rapidity more characteristic of the new manner than the old. I heard all and departed, wondering if I should look upon her ever again, and praying that I might bring her good news—if even at the last, bring back Kingsworth, to call her mother for the first time in his life.

I hurried away then ; Mr. Mannington shook hands with me in the hall, and wished me a pleasant journey, wherever it was, in quite a frank and cordial manner—then I went down the drive on foot towards the house of Richard Stewart. I perplexed myself as to the better course to pursue supposing Richard Stewart were from home, and in what way I should word the hasty letter to be left with the old housekeeper till his return—taking for granted that the woman who charred for the land-bailiff had not gone back to the village. The charwoman gone, and Richard Stewart absent, what then ?

Harassing myself with these surmises—people *will* harass themselves unnecessarily at times—I reached the gate and looked eagerly across the road towards the cottage. He was out. There was no steady light within the cottage parlour, only the uncertain flicker of the fire, which had been banked up and left till his return. The house was deserted, then, and I must proceed to the village in search of him, or go on my way without him.

I went up the path, however, and knocked at the door. I would not lose one faint chance of seeing him. To my surprise I heard his footsteps crossing the room, and immediately afterwards the door opened, and I could see the outline of his figure against the fitful firelight within.

“Miss Casey,” he said in a hollow voice, “what brings you hither at this time of night ?”

“Business of importance—may I come in ?”

“If you don’t mind people talking about you in the village—this village full of lying and slandering—yes.”

“I am not afraid.”

“Stay, then, I will get a light.”

He had been sitting in the dark ; planted in front of the fire was the chair he had recently vacated. For a man who valued time, and professed never to have wasted it, it was a strange position. But all things were strange and new in Wilthorpe—and that little world of mine was changing rapidly.

He lighted his table-lamp, and I entered the parlour. The iron safe in the wall seemed to lean towards me ominously. He noted my glance towards it.

“Ay, it’s an ugly ornament, that will ever be a reproof to me,” he said. “Well, has Mrs. Kingsworth changed her mind ?”

“Mrs. Kingsworth is very ill.”

“I am sorry to hear it. The loss of the money is troubling her.”

“Or the manner of its loss—yes.”

“How must it trouble me, then, left in trust of it,” he said impetuously ; “and what share of blame will fall to me when Wilthorpe has heard the story ?”

“Wilthorpe knows Richard Stewart.”

“Wilthorpe is like other worlds, large and sterner in their

character—it will believe in the shadow of a proof, and in the worst of any man.”

“It is an unjust world, then, and need not trouble the few honest people in it.”

“Miss Casey, I have been brooding before that fire—heaven knows how long!—taking the place of Wilthorpe, and passing judgment on a land-bailiff. I have examined all the evidence carefully; sifted weighed, and made allowance for extenuating circumstances; heard all the witnesses before and against; asked the prisoner for his defence, and listened to a rambling statement of how he went to bank the money, was detained by a circumstance which he refuses to explain, because if explained it would make him look more guilty, reached Woundell bank too late, returned and locked up the money, found in the night the safe unlocked and two thousand pounds abstracted from a larger sum. I put on the black cap for that man, and say: ‘If there be a law in England to hang a man for an ungrateful theft—hang that fellow high as Haman!’”

He spoke with fierceness and energy—the result of his long brooding on the subject. He saw himself suspected, the guilty thief rejoicing in the spoil, and his heart was full of bitterness.

“You have no doubt of my brother’s duplicity?”

“No doubt of it.”

“I am going in search of him—going at once to Scotland, to beg him to tell us all that he knows of this case, and to return with me to Mrs. Kingsworth’s house.”

“He is her god-son,” he said; “she would screen him at the cost of my honour.”

“Your honour is safe, I am sure,” I answered; “the story is not known yet——”

“Known to Mrs. Kingsworth, yourself, and a lady’s-maid, to begin with,” he said, abruptly. “Well, you are going to Scotland on a profitless errand; what do you want with me?”

“To ask you to tell me all that my brother said concerning his future course—his plans.”

“All that was said was to throw me off my guard.”

“I will not believe it yet awhile.”

“You are his sister—you would no more believe that he had acted dishonestly, than I would believe that Mark had. Well, that is natural and right; but surely it is folly to proceed North in search of your brother.”

“Will you tell me?”

“He was going to Edinburgh, he said, to his old lodgings for his luggage. Thence to Glasgow, where a clerkship awaited him.”

“To Edinburgh!—what address?”

“He did not say.”

“Your brother would know John’s late address?”

“Yes.”

“I must go thither in the first instance—Mrs. Kingsworth was right.”

“You had better go to London.”

“No, I hope not,” I replied; “did he say anything before this?”

“Oh! he was full of confidence, boasting of the different man that he had become, and of the chances of a fortune that a little capital would offer him. In the old style—looking forward sanguinely, till he came back from the Hall, saddened somewhat at his godmother’s refusal to assist him, but cheered by some new resolutions, by the way, which his fertile brain had conceived. He would be content with a clerkship that had been offered to him before he left Edinburgh—he would marry and settle down for good, and be satisfied with his lower position in society. But all this——”

“All this was not acting, Mr. Stewart,” I said in this place; “all that he said, I believe that he intended. If he took this money—spare me the hope that all may be explained yet!—if he took it, it was in a sudden moment of temptation, finding money to his hand, and the tempter whispering in his ear.”

“This must be a great trouble to you,” he said. “You must feel this more than any of us. You are a woman unaccustomed to think ill of your fellow-men—attributing the best motives to acts the most unworthy. You have had faith in a brother, and lost it—well, that’s hard!”

I thought of his own brother, but the subject was foreign to my mission, and the carriage was on its way towards me. I could hear the roll of the wheels and the clatter of the horses’ hoofs approaching.

“This is a long journey,” he added, “for a young woman to make alone to a strange city. You will go to a principal hotel at once, thence to Mark’s house. Ask Mark to give you information as to the best place for you to stay at, whatever part of Scotland this wild-goose chase may lead you. Is there anything that I can do?”

“Nothing more, thank you.”

“Here is a list of the missing notes—is it worth anything?”

“I think not—I will take it, if you like.”

“It may be of service—put it in your purse.”

The carriage stopped before the cottage fence, and the coachman left his horses to run up the path to apprise me that he was ready.

“I don’t like this journey,” said Richard Stewart, peevishly; “it answers no end, and you had no right to go. Why does Mrs. Kingsworth send a woman on such a quest as this? I was wronged—this should have been my task.”

"She is anxious to see her—godson. Under any circumstances his presence at the Hall is needed very much."

"I don't like this fashion of going to work. You should have stayed at home."

"Good-bye."

He shook my hand, but did not respond to my adieu; he closed the door after him, and went along the path with me, his Scotch cap on his head. He assisted me into the carriage, and shut me rather unceremoniously within; then the door was slammed upon me, and the carriage driven away from Wilthorpe.

Should I return with John? I thought—how should I return? and what would await my coming in the great mansion where so much had happened to affect my life?

It was a long, dreary ride to Peterborough; the night was cold, and the keen air stole into the carriage and chilled me. It was the same carriage which had taken Mrs. Kingsworth and me to the Woundell ball. I was unhappy then, and yet how far away seemed all those thoughts which had lain at my heart in that time? And yet only a few weeks ago!

At Peterborough Station at last, and to my astonishment Richard Stewart opening the door and assisting me to alight.

"I will see you start on your journey, Miss Casey. If you had given me an hour's notice, I would have come North with you. They had no right to send you alone like this. They have no consideration!"

"I am in no danger, Mr. Stewart."

He went on with his reproofs. It was the one refrain with which all his conversation ended.

"No; but they should have sent me—you are young, and know nothing of the North. You are not fit to be made a catspaw of in this fashion. I shall tell Mrs. Kingsworth so."

"I am the right woman in the right place, Mr. Stewart," I said, unable to suppress a smile at his vehemence.

"I don't know that."

Richard Stewart saw me into a waiting-room, and made inquiries concerning the next train. There was one due in half an hour, and he spent the intermediate time in walking in and out of the waiting-room, to make sure that I had not escaped him. He had given orders that Mrs. Kingsworth's carriage should wait for his return, and he was of sufficient importance to be attended to. Before the half hour had expired, he had procured me a ticket, and found a place for me in a first-class carriage of the train that had arrived from London, and was taking fifteen minutes' rest. He chose a carriage already occupied by two ladies and two gentlemen, and stood at the door talking to me through the open window.

"One compartment is reserved for ladies travelling alone, but it is

full, and the guard is too independent to find another. I'll report the beggar before I leave here."

"This will do very well, thank you, Mr. Stewart."

"There'll be room at the next station, I'm told," said he; "I would get in then if I were you."

"We are going as far as Edinburgh, Sir," said the lady facing me.

Richard Stewart nodded his head familiarly at her in return.

"Oh! thank you—that will do, then. They had no business to send you this long journey alone, mind you," he added, for about the twentieth time; "it can't end in any good. If you had only had that wild girl Eaves with you, it would have been better than starting off like this. Good-bye."

He shook hands with me again, and the last reminiscence of Peterborough was Richard Stewart's anxious face upon the platform, watching the train move upon its way.

CHAPTER IX.

IN EDINBURGH.

WHEN the train was rattling along upon its journey, I composed myself for thought. There was little to interest me in the four occupants of my carriage, had I been disposed for conversation or observation. The whole four fell asleep almost immediately after the train had started—the ladies with their heads on one side, and their bonnets crushed against the back cushions; the gentlemen with their hands in their pockets, and their hats tilted forwards on the bridge of the nose.

Ladies in furs and railway-rugs, thorough travellers, habituated to long journeys; gentlemen comfortably wrapped in rugs also, one a very stout man, the other thin, cadaverous, and lank, who writhed in his sleep, as though dreaming of the rack and thumb-screw. One glance at these four sleepers, and then I went back to the events of the day—that long, long day, beginning from one A.M., and not ended till I was many miles upon my journey, embracing within it

much of mystery, suspicion, and fear, and altering all the future! There was much to think of, and I submerged myself into the deep well of my meditations, and forgot the outer world. I played my part over again with Emma Eaves; I heard the sharp crack of the pebble against my window-glass, that first signal of distress beyond my little room; I stole down to admit Richard Stewart into the house; I woke up Mrs. Kingsworth, and noted how the impression came to her; I was in the library listening to the story; I was watching on the dark landing, and rushing into Mrs. Kingsworth's room when she gave way again. Then the confession of the stricken woman, and that inner life bared at which I had never guessed. Thinking of all these things at once, and trying in their midst to piece my future projects with them, till my head felt heavy with my weight of thought.

The stout man woke up suddenly, and with little ceremony began to remove the long legs of his *vis-à-vis* from their encroachment on his space. The thin man opened his eyes and blinked at his companion.

"The lion's share of everything, upon my soul!" said the stout man; "what a man you are!"

"What! have you not got over it yet?" said the thin man, breaking into a rusty, cackling laugh, that frightened the next lady's eyes open for a fleeting instant.

"No, I haven't," was the surly answer.

"But yours was a Scotch debt, mine an English."

"You should have come up with the rest of us."

"And have got ten shillings in the pound for my two thousand. No, I went a different way to work!"

Two thousand pounds! That sum again, mentioned in the very carriage of which I sat an occupant. It was a singular coincidence, and I let my old thoughts drift away from me.

"I wish I had understood the way—for my debt's ten thousand."

"He could not have managed ten," was the reply; "it was a hard fight to get this, and I went to work in a way entirely my own. Johnson was paid too, by his brother, I believe."

"Who's his brother?"

"Oh! a land-bailiff—a fellow who has feathered his nest pretty well, or he would not flash about so much with *his* thousands. Those sorts of fellows are always sharp, and have an eye to their own interests as well as their master's."

"Well, it's a shame," said the stout man, "it's not treating us all alike. By George! this will make me extra hard to-morrow; and if I see a sign of shuffling, I'll sell him up."

"My dear fellow, there's no shuffling; I would not mind laying an even wager that you'll find everything square and open as the day—it's only a panic, or a pressure that has driven him into a corner for awhile. Give that man time, Sir, to turn round, and he

will pay every penny that he owes in two years. The man's a genius—the man's the soul of honour!"

"Oh! it's very fine for you to talk," said the stout man, giving himself an extra twist into his railway rug, "I could talk like this—better than this—if I were in your shoes. I hate a genius—and as for honour, there isn't such a thing to be found, Sir—damme!"

If I had tried to escape this dialogue, I could not. It was forced upon me, and I accepted it; it spoke of a great trouble to one whom I had loved—it seemed to throw a faint light upon actions which had been ever in the mist. An impulse that I could not restrain caused me to surprise the speakers by leaning suddenly towards them.

"Are you speaking of Mr. Stewart of Edinburgh?" I asked.

The stout man started, the thin man shrank back and looked askance at me. There was a pause, then the former said:

"No, ma'am—certainly not."

"I beg your pardon."

I relapsed into my old position, and the stout man, after one long stare at me, sat facing his companion, dumb and stolid. Once his lips twitched as though in response to a gesture from the gentleman opposite, but I saw no more to arouse my interest, and presently both men went off to sleep again.

At Newcastle-on-Tyne the train stopped again, and the thin man nodded his head to the stout one, and said, "Good night—sorry that I am not going with you all the way!" a remark which the other took as an affront, and responded with an emphatic grunt.

Then I thought no more of the dialogue, but went back to my own reverie on things past and to come. Night stole on with time, and stage after stage of my journey was arrived at, passed. It was six in the morning, and the daylight was upon us when we reached Edinburgh, and I and my portmanteau were in a cab making for Princes Street. I looked out of my cab window at the city, scarcely stirring yet, and thought what a grand city it was, in that clear morning light, hemmed in by the great hills, and protected by the fortalice towering from its midst.

"You will like Edinburgh!" I thought of those words with which Mr. Stewart had puzzled me in the far-away times when my heart was younger. In his vain conceit he had pictured me his wife, sitting by his side in the future Edinburgh days—he thought that he made up his mind then, and he was right in thinking that I should not reject him! All that appertained to love between us had been swept away by the great tide, yet there I was in Edinburgh, to make true a portion of his prophecy! I tried to rest in the hotel Mrs. Kingsworth had recommended me, and failed utterly. For the present sleep was denied me—there was no rest for me; I had not the peace of mind which bringeth rest. For two days and nights I

had attempted to snatch at repose fitfully, and had failed—I was not tired; I was anxious to be stirring in search of Mrs. Kingsworth's son. I had an early breakfast, and then, after leaving orders whither any telegraphic message might be forwarded, I went across the street and railway bridge, and up the steps into High Street, Edinburgh.

I was conscious of being too early for business; the clocks had not struck nine yet, and though I found more bustle in the older part of the town, yet it was the stir and confusion of a poor neighbourhood. I had no difficulty in discovering Mr. Stewart's place of business—a gaunt, old-fashioned house of many storics, having on its basement floor two swing glass doors, through which I passed into a large counting-house, where two or three clerks were flitting to and fro.

Was Mr. Stewart within?

No; he was not expected till ten, and then he would be engaged till twelve or one—would I leave my name?

No, I would not leave my name. What was Mr. Stewart's private address?

Mr. Stewart's private address was Charlotte Square, in the new town; but Mr. Stewart was probably not in Edinburgh at present, and if he were it was doubtful whether he could be seen.

I did not ask for surmises—I thanked the clerk and retraced my steps across Waverley Bridge, and went along George Street, to Charlotte Square. I had no difficulty in finding Mr. Stewart's house—a mansion of imposing exterior, the shutters of which were still barring out the day-light.

I knocked, and a footman responded to the summons.

“I wish to see Mr. Stewart, if you please,” I said.

“Beg pardon, Miss; but Mr. Stewart only arrived from London by the six o'clock train, and went to his room at once. He left orders that he was not to be disturbed till ten.”

“At ten I will call at his business house.”

I left my card with the servant, and retired. I went away to wonder at my propinquity to Mr. Stewart all the last night's journey—of the chances I had had of saving time, and lost through ignorance.

Till ten wandering about Edinburgh, and loving it more upon further acquaintance—at ten o'clock at Mr. Stewart's house in High Street. Entering through the swing glass-doors again, I found the business interior changed: clerks moving about with alacrity from their desks to inner rooms; strange gentlemen standing in groups about the place, arguing and talking with some warmth; a man of forty, with a pen behind his ear, endeavouring to assemble the scattered atoms, and talking every moment of “the room on the first floor, gentlemen—the room on the first floor;” the stout gentleman who had travelled to Edinburgh with me passing from group to group, and gesticulating violently. I stopped at the sight of this

confusion, and the stout gentleman, whose sharp eyes nothing seemed to escape, caught sight of me at once.

"What, you a creditor, Miss, also!" he said in a rough voice, that turned all faces in my direction; "by George! I did not bargain for that!"

"The room on the first floor, if you please, gentlemen. If you please, the room on the first floor!"

"Has Mr. Stewart arrived?"

"Not yet."

"It's past ten—two minutes past ten," grumbled one.

"Not by Edinburgh time, gentlemen," said the chief clerk; "it wants exactly one minute and a half—oh! here's Mr. Stewart."

The swing glass-doors parted, and in he came, tall, erect and handsome as ever, with that look which ever commanded respect towards him, and cowed, as it were, resistance.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said, half raising his hat from his head, and then turning at once to me.

"You have chosen a strange time, Miss Casey," he said; "and I have not an instant to spare. I have promised to meet these people at ten, and I cannot even stay to ask if all be well. Mr. Gilvay, show this lady to my room—or will you come again?"

"I will stay."

He passed from me, with a "This way, gentlemen—the rest of our friends are up-stairs, I presume;" and then merchant and creditors flowed through a side passage, to which the head clerk had been pointing ever since my entrance. This head clerk was Mr. Gilvay, who led me into a room on the right of the passage—a handsomely-furnished office in itself, with three windows looking upon the High Street. When he had turned and left me, I sat down to think of the trouble that had swooped upon this merchant also, disarranging all his life-long schemes, and affecting more lives than his own. Here seemed a clue to the past demeanour of Richard Stewart too; and here for the first time came a far-off, dreamy suspicion, which I could not put in shape yet.

Little as I knew of commercial matters, I could, from the past conversation in the railway carriage, and from the present aspect of affairs, judge that this was a meeting of creditors to hear the reasons for Mr. Stewart's summons, to judge the merchant upon his own version of affairs, to give him time to retrieve his losses, or to hurl him from his high estate, according to the verdict. He stood on the brink of ruin; he had been standing there defiant to the last, fighting his battle to the last, but the enemy had been too strong for him, and it was death or surrender now. He had deceived me and all past friends by his demeanour, but figures had been against him. They who lived by figures had seen the wreck battling with wind and tide, and were making for it before all chance was lost—not to save him but their property at stake in the goodly vessel he had once com-

manded. Let him sink with other unprosperous traders like him— and afford another moral to the world of commerce!

I waited for him patiently. His business was more urgent than mine, so far as himself was concerned at least, and I could not intrude upon it, or feel impatient at the time I waited there. Eleven and twelve struck, and still I could hear the shuffling of feet and the hum of voices in the room above my head.

It was striking one when the door opened, and Mr. Gilvay entered, followed by a page bearing some wine and biscuits on a tray.

“Mr. Stewart has desired me to see that you are not starved,” he said quite facetiously; “he has sent me down from above stairs to request that you will accept of some slight refreshment after your long journey.”

Could he think of me at such a time?

“He hopes to be with you in another hour. The meeting is going off admirably—how beautifully he has explained everything, to be sure! God bless him!” said he dashing at a snuff-box and taking refuge in a Brobdignagian pinch that went all over his shirt and waistcoat, “I knew he had only but to talk and convince the most pig-headed of the lot of them. I knew—I beg your pardon.”

He seemed ashamed at his outburst, and shut his snuff-box hastily.

“I am sorry to see——” I began.

“My dear young lady—we are not sorry. We made no concealment of this, when we saw things must come to the wall. We had done our best as honest traders, and when the danger came, we called our creditors together, manfully and openly, instead of in a corner as some people would have done, and we told them exactly how positions stood. Our books are as open as the day, and as full of honest facts as him I serve.”

“It has been a hard trial for him.”

“It has been harder, young lady, but he surmounted it. All last winter how he worked to stem the torrent!—if he went out into society to show he feared nothing, or to seem like himself in everything, he came back here at all hours of the night, to work and slave in secret. There’s not so clever a man in all the world, or one who will do better yet. Such a man as Mr. Stewart can’t sink, Miss, it’s impossible—it’s—bless me! how forgetful I am! He may want me at his elbow yet.”

The clerk bustled away, and I was left alone once more. Left alone for a short while only, for there was a renewed bustle in the room above, and then a hasty pattering of feet down-stairs and along the passage without the door; voices talking and laughing, everything betokening a pleasant end to a meeting which had given signs of storm. The voices died away, and then the door opened and Mr. Stewart appeared.

His face was flushed somewhat, but there was no sternness in his looks.

"Good morning, Miss Casey," he said; "did I say good morning before?—in the hurry of business I nearly forgot."

"May I ask the result of this meeting, Mr. Stewart?"

"This meeting of the wolf-hounds to hunt down a man who has acknowledged himself not quite so rich and clever as people believed him?" he said with a laugh; "yes, it is settled. Not guilty."

"Not guilty," I repeated vaguely.

"Not guilty of embezzling my creditors' money to my own advantage—letting my bankers in for a heap of bills, carrying on my trade in a rash and foolish manner, driving by a hundred roads to ruin," said he; "I told the assembled community my position, my chances, and my power to pay every farthing that I owed if time were given me. I even told them of my fight to keep my name from this exposure—such as it is—but after all, when the day came which I could not ward off, I was rather proud of it. What had I to fear from money grubbers like these, whose own sordid actions I would blush to imitate? But this is rather stagey," he added, the scornful look dying out of his face; "let me help you to some sherry. You have been too proud to assist yourself in my house!"

He passed me a glass of sherry, and filled one himself. It was not meant for mockery; it implied his welcome, his desire to be friends with me, it was attributable in some degree to the favourable sequence to the creditors' meeting, that bowing to me over his wine-glass when I was raising mine to my lips. A strange time and place to be taking wine with Mark Stewart, but not without its grace on his part.

"Some day, when you and I are old folk—respectable old people, with grey hair and red eyes—I will tell you a story about my past battles; you may guess now why I came to Woundell Ball, or why, before that time, I was a man not easy to make out; you may guess wide of the truth, and do me still an injustice, but if I am not forestalled I will relate you that story, from the preface to the Latin word at the end of the third volume. Now—egotism set aside—what has happened at the Hall?"

"A great deal since last night, Mr. Stewart," I answered, glad that he had changed a subject which had troubled me not a little; "more than I can explain, or have a right to explain. I am here to see my brother."

"Your brother John has left my service."

"Here to ask again if you will tell me the reason which separated you and him."

"There is no mystery in the matter now. I was on the verge of bankruptcy, and it was necessary to reduce my establishment by one-half. There was a vacancy in the firm of a Glasgow friend, and I thought that it would suit your brother. His chance of rising rapidly in the world was lost with mine."

"Then there was nothing against him, Sir?"

"Nothing in the world—what should there be?" he answered. "Did I not tell you two nights since that he had altered for the better?"

"Why not have told me all?"

"My lips were sealed till to-day," he said; "until to-day I was not free to say a word. To-day the light streams in upon my past iniquity, and I am at your service. As it was, the Shylocks followed me to Wilthorpe, and would have no mercy, or hear no reason."

"Your brother Richard knew of this?"

"Yes—what made you guess that?"

"It matters not now; I cannot explain. I am bewildered and heart-sick. I have been distressed at home by Mrs. Kingsworth's illness—more than distressed by a wish to see and speak to my brother. Will you give me his late address?—you have that."

"Yes. My clerk shall copy it for you in one instant."

He touched the bell, and gave the requisite order. When we were alone again, he said, somewhat reluctantly:

"I am sorry to ask the question, but are there any fresh doubts in your mind concerning your brother?"

"I have said that I am bewildered, Mr. Stewart."

"You are a stranger here, and I may be of service to you. Business of very urgent need must have brought you alone to Edinburgh."

"You are right, Sir, but I—cannot—explain."

"I have no right to intrude upon your confidence," he answered.

"Let me withdraw my question. If your brother be not at his old apartments—a very probable supposition—you will proceed to Glasgow. I will write out the address of my friend, to whom I recommended a good and faithful servant."

The clerk entered with two letters in his hand—one of which he laid upon the desk, saying,

"Here is Mr. Casey's address, Sir—are *you* Miss Casey?" he asked, turning to me.

"Yes. That—that is a telegram, sent to my hotel!"

"And brought here at once at your request, Miss," he answered. I snatched it from him, and tore open the letter.

"Come back at once—Mrs. Kingsworth is worse!"

"I must go back to Wilthorpe," I said, "Mrs. Kingsworth is dying—I left her dying. I knew it—I knew it!"

"Calm yourself, Miss Casey," Mr. Stewart said, "this may be a needless alarm—an exaggerated report, that your return home will dissipate."

"I will go at once."

"There is no up train for an hour—let me walk with you quietly to your hotel, and thence to the railway station."

"If I could only see him—find him! How long will it take me to reach that place?" I said, pointing to the address.

“Five minutes.”

“I will go at once.”

The messenger entered again, looking a little worried with his oscillatory movements.

“If you please, Sir, Mr. Casey has just entered the counting-house, and gone to his old desk.”

“To his old desk!” said Mr. Stewart, amazed in his turn; “I have given no orders to that effect.”

“I must see him——”

“Patience, Miss Casey. We have time before us. Mr. Brill, be kind enough to ask Mr. Casey to step this way?”



CHAPTER X.

CALLED BACK.

It seemed a long while before John came from the outer office into Mr. Stewart's room. It was a terrible ordeal to wait patiently now, knowing how near he was to me. I should be able to judge by his reception of me, by his new demeanour, whether all that had been spoken down at Wilthorpe were false or not. In his face I should read his guilt or innocence.

And in Mr. Stewart's presence all must be disguised still; I had promised Mrs. Kingsworth; I had promised myself. Whatever I feared or hoped must be kept a secret until John and I were alone together. John came along the passage at last; it was a free, bold tread, which echoed there—not the faltering step of guilt. An instant afterwards his hand rapped lightly on the door.

“Come in,” said Mr. Stewart, and my brother—I call him brother still!—entered and stopped, finding his old employer not alone.

“Your pardon—I did not know——”

Mr. Stewart waved his hand towards me.

“Your sister, Casey—where are your eyes this morning?”

“My sister Bertha?—here!” he cried, turning to me with unfeigned astonishment; “why, whatever reason has brought you to Edinburgh?”

"I have come in search of you—Mrs. Kingsworth is anxious to see you, John."

"Ah! too late," he said, with a hasty shake of his head; "I will not have her money now. Affairs have changed—I have changed with them—I should have only thrown her money away, after all."

He was not guilty. No guilty man had ever spoken thus, or looked thus; his eyes flinched not from my earnest gaze; his face expressed a certain amount of curiosity in my demeanour, or my reasons for following him to Edinburgh, but he was no thief, and I whispered "Thank God!" to myself at once.

"Still you must come back with me, John," I urged; "Mrs. Kingsworth is ill, and very anxiously wishes to see you. I have come to Edinburgh for you."

He looked thoughtfully at the ground, and shook his head.

"She will not care to see me—she will only believe that my anxiety for her money, for a place in her will, has brought me to the Hall. She and I have been apart too long to care for each other much—even her money, offered in good faith on her side, only tended to my moral ruin. I shall stop here, Bertie."

"Not when I have told you all."

"Patience!" said he; "Mr. Stewart, I wish a few words with you."

"You may speak before your sister, Casey."

"But——"

"Go on—go on!" he said, impatiently.

"Well, if you wish it. When we parted you told me that I could do better away from you, that there were chances before me in the world not to be hastily neglected, and you gave me a recommendation to a Glasgow house. In fact, your interest in me made a berth in that house a certainty, if I applied for it. Sir, I had my doubts then of the reasons for your removal of me, and I resented them by an effort to strike out a new path for myself. You and I spoke of that path together, and you would not advise me, but wrote me out a letter of introduction to your Glasgow friends, and said I could make use of it, or destroy it, as I pleased. I destroyed it."

"I am sorry."

"Because inadvertently your brother Richard turned my thoughts in a new direction; by a chance word offered me the clue to that which had been somewhat mysterious—the probability of your bankruptcy. I guessed all then—I saw where the trouble had been, and that it was a question of expense that had separated me from my best friend."

"Your best friend, Sir, is nearer you than I am?"

"She is a good woman," said he, looking in my direction, "but we have not seen very much of each other in life—my own past

wilfulness led me utterly away from her. I was a bad brother, a bad son, a bad friend, until I met with you. I went on to ruin because no strong thoughtful mind set itself the task of trying to make good out of me. I was thoughtless and improvident. I did not believe in my own power to amend, until you trusted me when I was at my worst. You have been more like a brother to me than a master—I see all that now, very clearly; though the reason which led you to interest yourself in me still remains a mystery.” (Mr. Stewart and I both winced at this.) “You set me a good example, and I followed it as well as I could, considering the bad examples I had always imitated. I did my best—and now you are in trouble, I have come back to do my best again, to take my place at my old desk and work for you, as, ’pon my soul, I don’t think any man has worked yet! I couldn’t sleep for thinking of this—I got up in the night at your brother’s house and came away full of it—yesterday I called, but you were not expected home till to-day; and to-day I am here again, to manage the whole business if you like—free of all expense till we set you on the top of the tree again!”

It was his old sanguine nature leading him into a little extravagance, but it was leading him in the right direction at last, and making him a better man. Yes, I forgave this Mr. Stewart his past trespasses against me with all my heart—I had cause even to be grateful to him.

“Things have taken a turn for the better, Casey,” said Mr. Stewart, laughing, “and I hope that we shall get on without making a slave of you. The panic is subsiding, my creditors have seen my books, heard my story, had clear evidence that I have been borne down by adverse circumstances and not by my own rash speculations, and we start afresh from this hour. Miss Casey, I cannot spare your brother now.”

“You must,” I said passionately, “at once, before the next train to London starts!”

He read my agitation and suspense, and saw at once that I had more to say to Kingsworth.

“I will leave you to your sister’s persuasion, Casey—take what leave of absence you may require, and come back when you please to your old post here.”

He went out of the room, and closed the door behind him. I was at John’s side, with my hands upon his arm and my face eagerly upturned to his.

“You must come, John—there is much to explain. She is unhappy—dying!”

“Dying!” he said; “poor old lady, I am sorry to hear that. And my letter to her, as well as to you, reaches the Hall to-day.”

“What have you said to her?”

“I have given up my pension—it hampers me—I am going to live without it, and shake off this shame. I told her so.”

"Not unkindly, John?" I asked.

"No—I think not. I did my best to show that I was grateful for all the money she had wasted on me."

"That's well; now come and ask pardon for your past life, and for her blessing on your future. Come and tell her that you did not rob her of two thousand pounds!"

"WHAT!"

"I do not believe this now—but oh! John, the proofs were very strong against you. The money was in Richard Stewart's house, and only missed after you had left there in the night—it has broken her heart."

"She and you believe that!" he cried; "I must have been a thorough villain in your estimation, then. Let her think her worst I will not move a step to assert that which is false. I have been my own enemy, no one else's. With all her wealth, she has ever been uncharitable, and now that she has taught you——"

"Hush—hush!" I screamed; "for mercy's sake be silent. *Your own mother!*"

"Bertha!"

He held me at arm's length to see if trouble or excitement had not turned my brain. So wild a truth as that was not to be realized at once.

"Your own mother, John—a woman who has suffered much, and is now heavily afflicted. A woman bitterly repentant for all the past which separated you from her, and who sees now the error which shut you from her heart. I have come in search of you to tell you this—I have come at her request to bring you to her bedside. John, you do not hesitate now!"

"My own mother!" he murmured, letting his arms fall to his side. "Poor woman! And you?"

"Are not your sister—only in heart, John."

"I will come with you—I am ready," he said.

We went together from the room into the office, where Mr. Stewart was waiting for us.

"You have made a convert of this stubborn fellow," he said, smiling for an instant, before the gravity on our faces brought its shadow to his own. "Miss Casey," he added, "there is no worse news kept back from me—no news which affects me more directly?"

"No, Sir."

"I shall hear some account of Mrs. Kingsworth's illness from Isabel by next post—I trust it will be a good report. You are going now?"

"Yes, at once."

He looked at his watch.

"You have twenty minutes to spare—good-bye."

He shook hands with John and me, and we went hastily out of

his office. John had become very grave and stern; there were many thoughts to distress him in that hour—he saw now what he had lost by his sad life, and whose heart he had nearly broken, perhaps; how his own wild actions had kept the secret of his parentage away from him.

“If we were only nearer home, Bertie!” he said, when a cab was taking us to my hotel.

The portmanteau, that had never been opened, received back into my custody, my small bill settled with the proprietor of the hotel, and then the railway station, and five minutes to spare before the train started Londonwards.

John was not a strong man; he had never been strong of purpose, or capable of much resistance to adversity; it was not natural to expect him to change suddenly, or find him prepared at all points to meet trouble bravely. He was not a man for sudden shocks; they unnerved him. When we were in the railway carriage he broke into a shivering fit that alarmed me.

“Let me get some brandy?”

“Keep still,” he said, “I shall be better presently. I am subject to these attacks—the drink did it years ago. It will pass away; but this has unsettled me again, just as I was turning to a more honourable life.”

“You will lead an honourable life from this day forth—for her sake, who must not die without a hope of you.”

“Will she die, do you think?” he asked eagerly; “is there no hope?”

“She is in God’s hand’s—I cannot say.”

“But you have hope yourself?”

“Scarcely.”

“If she could only live, Bertie, to trust in me!—to see that it was not all empty profession on my part! But she will die unhappy, with my wasted life before her, and no words of mine can give her any comfort.”

He covered his face with his hands, and sat motionless for awhile. Long after the train had clanked from beneath the Edinburgh terminus he retained that position, thinking of the end. Suddenly he lowered his hands, and looked at me.

“What is this about the missing money? What does it mean?—whose money is it?”

Whilst the express train dashed its way from the North country, and it seemed from the speed that we must soon be home at Wilthorpe, I told him the story of the two thousand pounds, the chain of evidence that was against him, and that Fate seemed to have forged for him. I told him all that had followed this robbery, of the revelation it had brought about in the home of his mother at the charge against him. I assured him of the anxiety she felt to hear the truth, and of the happiness in store for her to know that he was

innocent. And I expressed a faint hope that the news would change her for the better, and give her strength again with the peace of mind that it would bring.

"It's a story that might have come out of a book," he said; "and it may end worse than any tragedy. If I could be sure that I might see her for a moment before she died, or hear her call me son for once in life! But it will not be—it can never be!"

"Courage—and faith!"

But my courage had deserted me, and my words did not assure him. He dreaded the future meeting; his cheek had paled already with the thoughts besetting him.

When the train stopped for the first time at Newcastle, a new thought struck me, and I hastily lowered the window.

"Guard, how long does this train remain here?"

"Five minutes, ma'am."

"The telegraph office—quick!"

The man was seized with the same wish to hasten; my impetuosity carried him away, and we both hurried to the office.

"Paper and ink!" I cried; "a message! There's the money—quick, Sir, quick!"

I beat my hand upon the counter till the form was before me. In an instant I had dashed off the following:

"Kingsworth is with me. He is innocent."

I gave the clerk in attendance Mrs. Kingsworth's address; he was seized also with the wish to help me, and wrote it down at once. I passed some money to him—I am ignorant of the amount to this day—and hurried back to my train the doors of which the guard was locking once more.

Again by Kingsworth's side, and telling him what I had done. His lip quivered, and he murmured some indistinct thanks. A third person had taken his place in the carriage, and we spoke no more of the hopes and fears we had in concert. John leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes; but he did not sleep. He wished to shut himself away in his own world, and the prospect made him moan and wring his hands together. Now and then he glanced through the window, as if with a faint hope of recognizing a locality nearer his journey's end; then he looked at his watch, and leaned back again impatiently.

"It will never end—this day!" he muttered.

The journey was not done yet; the night met us on the way, and shut out the landscape, and still there were hours before us of this weary travelling. They who have travelled like us in hot haste, can judge our feelings best; there is no sense of suspense equal to that time—thinking, waiting, and, despite all rapid progress, journeying so slowly to the end!

Ours was a long journey, and it was not till one in the morning of the following day that we reached Peterborough.

"At last!" John exclaimed, and leaped from the carriage to the platform. The portmanteau disinterred from the luggage-van, and we were ready to proceed upon the last stage of our return.

"We shall be delayed here," said John, impatiently; "at this hour of the night there will be no one to help us. Bertie, she's dead—that is as surely impressed upon my mind as though I had seen her die an hour ago!"

In the bustle of the crowd fighting for the refreshment-room before the last start was made for London—that crowd through which we forced our way, I came upon a face I knew—Richard Stewart's.

"Mr. Stewart—say she lives?" I entreated.

"I cannot say, Miss Casey," he replied; "I have been away from the Hall three hours, and I left her sinking."

"Quick, then!" cried my brother; "why do we waste time here?"

Richard Stewart met him with a fierce frown, that told of a new enmity between those I esteemed; but John did not appear to notice it. He was like a man walking in his sleep.

"I have Mr. Mannington's trap outside, and the fastest horse in the stables. You are not afraid of rapid driving, Miss Casey?"

"No."

We three hastened from the station—the same conveyance which took me first to Wilthorpe was awaiting us. Richard Stewart assisted me to a seat beside him; my brother took his place at the back, and we drove off.

"Then there is no hope, Sir?" I asked.

"No hope, Miss Casey. Do not build on that."

"You have seen her?"

"Yes—it was her wish. She has been strangely considerate of us all, in her last moments. A good mistress, who deserved a better fate."

"What do you mean?"

He did not answer. We were already recklessly dashing along the dark country road; the horse plunging forwards at its greatest speed, and the dog-cart swaying to and fro. But I knew no fear that night, and I was only anxious to reach home.

After awhile I asked Mr. Richard Stewart again what fate he indicated by his speech; and in the darkness I could see his lips compress with the effort to restrain his answer. He gave a hasty glance over his shoulder, at my brother sitting with his arms folded on the seat behind us. I knew his answer then!

"It's all a mistake—he is innocent," I answered, quickly.

"It is best to think so now."

"You will think so, Mr. Stewart, when he explains the truth. I hope you will."

"Is it capable of explanation?"

I did not reply. I was aggrieved at his persistence, and indisposed, like himself, to dwell upon the subject. My brother might have been an automaton, for the interest he took in our conversation; he heard us not, or he cared not to defend himself just then.

We were all silent the remainder of the way, save when it was necessary to wake the keepers of the toll-gates from their dreams, and then Richard Stewart aroused the echoes of the night with his deep voice.

"This is your third night of restless action," he added, once. "I suppose they will kill you in the end!"

Then we were driving madly along once more, the black line of hedgerows flying past us, Richard Stewart at times making for the grass paths by the side, in his eagerness to cut off the curves of the road. To those few people on our route that night he seemed a mad driver, reckless of all consequences; but he knew the road thoroughly, the capacity of the horse he drove, and he had been urged to hasten with us homewards. So we swept along in the darkness and wintriness of that March night, and reached Wilthorpe at two o'clock.

When we had passed along the carriage drive, and were before the lawn fronting the great mansion, my brother leaped out suddenly, and fell.

Richard Stewart reined in his horse.

"Are you mad, man?" he shouted.

But my brother had staggered to his feet, and was already making his way towards the porch. We were before him despite his eagerness, and we three went up the steps together.

They had heard us coming within the house—the door was opened, and the light from the great hall lamp was full upon us.

"Dead?" said Kingsworth, looking from one to another of the servants who were standing about the hall, male and female, unsettled by the calamity hovering in their midst.

"N—no, Sir, we don't think so!"

"Let me pass—make way—which room?"

"Show Mr. Kingsworth to the room," one servant said.

The news had spread then—the whole story had welled its way to the ears of the servants of the place. She had said that all should be known before I came back there!

"Let me go first, John," I said, "we must not kill her with your haste."

I ran up-stairs, he following me. There were more servants on the stairs, standing with their backs against the banisters, whispering of the news, waiting for the end. All was confusion and uncertainty.

Mrs. Kingsworth's son, was whispered once more amongst them,

and they made way for his progress, some bowing and curtsying as he followed me.

On the landing place and proceeding down the corridor, where Mr. Mannington, trembling as with palsy, came towards us. He had not faced death since his wife's decease, and he feared to face it then. He was standing outside the rich woman's door, with his back against the wall, a haggard old man, not unlike his sister in the face at that time. The doctor with his stick to his lips, was conversing with him as we approached.

"Living yet?" I gasped.

"Yes, just living."

"Conscious?"

"No," said the doctor, "she has not been conscious these last two hours."

"Oh! don't say that?"

I passed into the room, and Kingsworth followed me. Behind us came the doctor; Mr. Mannington approached the door, and then went shivering back again.

She lay in her bed still as the grave that was so close upon her; her dark-haired niece sitting near her, with her hands clasped, watching every feeble respiration of the dying woman. In the background, a silent watcher also, Emma Eaves. Beyond her, nodding in an easy chair, the nurse hired from the village. On the table the iamp that my mistress had held in her hand the night she stole down-stairs to meet her death.

"Too late!" whispered Bel.

"Not too late! It can't be too late!" cried Kingsworth, rushing to the bed-side, and tearing aside the curtains. "*Mother*, you will speak to me. MOTHER, I say!"

"*Here!*"

The nerveless hand seemed making an effort to stretch itself towards him; he clasped it in his own and bent over her to listen.

"She spoke to me!" he said looking wildly round at us, as though we had asserted to the contrary. "Oh! say forgiven to your guilty son!"

The grey eyes opened, and her voice, deep and resonant, startled us all with its new power.

"Not guilty—of *that*, John?"

"God be my judge—no!"

"I—I have prayed—for—this!" she murmured, "I——"

He bent his head to listen to her dying words, but they passed away with her, and all was peace and rest.

"Dead!" whispered the physician.

It was caught up by the listener at the door; it passed from the servants on the stairs to the servants huddled together in the hall—it stole forth in the darkness of the night and went on its way to

Wilthorpe village; it was told in Woundell with the early news. The rich woman dead—the woman who had made few friends, and been eccentric to the last, and scoffed at those who would have fawned and flattered her. For ever after that day to be missed in Wilthorpe church—to leave a blank in that little world wherein she had moved, and yet had ever stood apart from. She did not die unmourned at least, and she did not die unhappy!

END OF THE FOURTH BOOK.

Book V.

“TWO THOUSAND POUNDS.”

CHAPTER I.

CHANGE AT WILTHORPE.

Was there ever a will written which satisfied those who anticipated benefits from it? A just will in itself, with the exception of that one clause affecting each of us in particular, and *that* might have been altered with so much more fairness, good feeling, honesty!

Let the will include more than one member of a family, and more than one member will record their protest, and find fault with the way in which the money has been left.

Mrs. Kingsworth had left a long will and a just will behind her, had added more than one codicil, had studied carefully everything connected with her property, had striven at the last to do justice to all. I had seen her busy with her will and the witnesses thereto on the day Mr. Stewart proposed to Bel Mannington—that was the last date on the parchment scroll—the last codicil which reversed much that had been written in the body of the document.

At one period she had left the whole of her property to Isabel Mannington, at another period she had modified that decree. There

were money, houses, and land to bequeath—much money, many houses, and the land of half a county—it had been a study to dispose of these, and this was the result.

We heard her will read in the great drawing-room on the day of the funeral, and Mr. Mannington sat and breathed hard as the lawyer went from beginning to end of the parchment folios. The codicils were less satisfactory than the will itself, and disturbed his nervous system more.

The Hall, the estate which appertain to it, all the house property in Wilthorpe and Woundell not included in the estate, the money at her banker's, the money in the funds, after payment of all legacies, legal expenses, &c., to her son John Kingsworth, only fruit of her union with Matthew Kingsworth, formerly of Wilthorpe. Her son, born in London on March 23rd, 18—, and brought up by Mrs. Casey, deceased. Inside the will was the register of her son's birth, copied from the parish book of St. Botolph.

To her brother, Walter Mannington; the sum of thirty-five thousand pounds in trust for his daughter Isabel; the said Walter Mannington to have use of such monies until his daughter's marriage or attainment of her twenty-first year. Also, to the said Walter Mannington a legacy of five thousand pounds.

To Bertha Casey a legacy of five thousand pounds, together with a house at Wilthorpe called Meadow House, adjacent to the vicarage.

To Richard Stewart five thousand pounds—Richard Stewart, *sole executor to her last will and testament.*

To every servant of the household a legacy of greater or less amount, according to his or her time of service, and to Emma Eaves two hundred pounds.

These the main points of the will which there was no disputing. A clear, precise will, that had been carefully thought of, still more carefully revised, the joint production of a thoughtful woman and a clever lawyer.

John Kingsworth, who had anticipated no legacy, was the most surprised; Richard Stewart, who had not been consulted as to the executorship, the next in degree of astonishment.

"You are not compelled legally to take all this trouble, if your consent has not been obtained," Mr. Mannington explained; "you can—"

"I know," said Richard Stewart, "and Mrs. Kingsworth knew also that I should not care for trouble in her service. Until the will is carried out, I am her servant still."

Mr. Mannington did not offer any further suggestions; hazarded no remarks upon his own small legacy, or the banishment of himself and daughter from the chief estate.

He was a disappointed man, but he only showed his disappointment by a reserved manner, and was even less nervous than usual after the result was known. He started for London the next day,

and was a week absent from the Hall. When he returned he professed to have been looking after a house in town for himself and daughter; and if he had been searching for some proof to render the will invalid, it had been a nugatory effort, and scarcely worth alluding to in this place.

He did not go to London, but took a house for a year in Wilthorpe village, until such time as he had settled what to do. He was very unsettled, he told everybody—only forty thousand pounds out of the estate for him and his, after all his study of his sister's eccentricities! He uttered his complaints into the ears of every listener—more complaints than of his sister, as will presently appear. He would not believe in faithful promises and honourable intentions after this; he had lost faith in the uprightness of human nature. He had loved his sister very dearly, and she had professed to love him, and then left him a legacy no larger than her land-bailiff's. He had wasted many years of his life in waiting upon her, and this was his reward! Thank God, he had not wanted money; he was not a poor man. He bore no malice, and he forgave his sister from the bottom of his heart. He had been advised, he told his friends, in confidential moments, to throw over the will and prove his sister's insanity from earliest times, before her marriage, if it were necessary; but then, unless he could prove false identity on the part of John Kingsworth, all the money—his daughter's legacy included—might fall to John's share instead of his own. He would put up with the loss, then, and occupy his leisure moments on thoughts concerning the unprofitableness of putting faith in women's promises.

Meanwhile the great change began in Wilthorpe—before three months were over Richard Stewart had fulfilled his trust. He was a man who worked hard, and was never happy till his task was done. Never in the history of executorship had a will been proved, an estate valued, and all things finally arranged in so short a time. The Hall was in possession of John Kingsworth—the forty thousand pounds had been paid to Mr. Mannington—I was in my new home at Meadow House, and my five thousand pounds in the three per cents, in the early days of July.

John Kingsworth, gentleman, came to see me very often. We were brother and sister still—we could not live away the old days, or forget our past relations to each other. He was dull at the great house which had been bequeathed him, and came to mine, where Emma Eaves was living with me as companion and friend.

Was it for my sake alone that he came to Meadow House? I did not think so after awhile. He was a gentleman now, and Emma Eaves had been a lady's-maid; but they were old friends, and Emma had loved him dearly in his past estate. They never spoke of love together—they were very unlike lovers. Emma Eaves sought every pretext to avoid his company, until I reprimanded her for that, and then she sat, grave and almost sullen, in the room with John and me.

She could speak of him eloquently after he had gone—of his rise in life, and how glad she was to have been a witness to it—of the change for the better in him since he had inherited his mother's property—of the gentleman he looked now! Once I asked her in confidence, when her heart seemed more full of him than usual, if she loved him the better for all this, and was prepared to be his wife still, and she broke away from the discussion with her old impulsiveness.

"I cannot speak of it—I will not speak of it—time enough, when he wishes to take me to that house—time enough when he shows that he can think of a poor girl like me."

"Is he likely to forget you?"

"Don't ask me, please—he is not happy, and you and I should think a little more of *that*."

No, he was not happy. Emma Eaves was right. Whether the shock of the meeting with his mother had been too sudden and unprepared for, or whether his rise to greatness had proved that even riches fail to bring happiness and peace, it was certain that he was not happy.

He was a steady and grave man—a man very different to his old self. He was a good master to his servants; they even began to whisper in the village that he was a very charitable man; but he seemed to have inherited, with his mother's money, a portion of his mother's eccentricity. When I glanced at him sitting in the pew at Wilthorpe, in his deep mourning, I could scarcely reconcile that thoughtful-looking man with the reckless being who had come for Mrs. Kingsworth's money, when I was housekeeper to a City company. In his new estate, all the old traits of character had vanished.

It was the end of July, when I asked him if he would place confidence in me; when I reminded him that I was still his sister, ever troubled by cares affecting *him*.

"What makes you think that I am altered?"

"I miss the sanguine nature that saw hope in everything, and laughed at present difficulties, John."

We were walking together along the country road when this dialogue took place.

"Are not my hopes more than realized, and are there any difficulties to encounter now? See what a gentleman I am; heir to a large estate, and with a fortune ready to my hand."

"You are not happy."

"Not yet. These are early times," he said; "I have not forgotten my mother yet—I have still before me the remembrance of what a bad son I was, and I read her life of trouble and anxiety concerning me."

"But there is something more?"

"Well, there is."

"Will you confide in me, the old friend to whom you used to tell your troubles once?"

"The old friend, and the only friend left. I must tell my troubles to some one before I go away from here."

"Go away!"

"I am tired of Wilthorpe—I am suspected here. People hold themselves aloof from me; the story of my old life, bad and improbable as it was, has reached here in an exaggerated form, and is already gossip for the village. Every boy I meet knows my past life—it is a fair return for all the evil I have done, to see it shadowed forth again."

"You will live that old life down, John."

"That is not all," he continued; "if it were truth told concerning me, I would take the raking up of my old faults as a natural consequence of their commitment. But they are whispering about here that I was a thief before I came into the property; that I robbed my own mother, and broke her heart. That story of the two thousand pounds is circulated also in the county—honest men believe it—Richard Stewart believes it."

"We will show them all how deceived they are, in time," I said assuringly.

"I shall not wait for their better opinion," said my brother, proudly; "why should I waste years of my life in trying to redeem my character in the eyes of these people? I am alone, Bertie; the country gentlemen hold themselves aloof from me; I was a disgrace to my mother, and unacknowledged by her in her lifetime; the exaggerated reasons for that act are themes for every clodhopper in the parish. I shall sell the Hall."

"Would she have wished that, John?—she who was proud of her name, and her position in the county?"

"It was her husband's property—not her own. She would wish my happiness, at least."

"You will do nothing hastily?"

"No; I can bear my solitude a little longer. I have not matured my plans; I am thinking of my future, and when the result is arrived at, I will come to the old friend for her opinion."

"Truly?"

"Truly," he answered.

We had approached my little villa by this time; at the door, evidently awaiting our arrival, was Richard Stewart.

"I have been to the Hall after you, Mr. Kingsworth," he said shortly; "finding you absent, I came hither."

"Anything of importance, Mr. Stewart?"

"I think so—probably you may be of the same opinion."

"Shall we adjourn to the Hall?"

"I would prefer stating all that I have to communicate in the presence of witnesses."

"In that case," said my brother, reddening somewhat at Richard Stewart's manner, "we will adjourn to Miss Casey's parlour."

"With Miss Casey for a witness?" I asked.

"If you please," said Richard Stewart, gravely.

I did not like this odd preface to business matters; I liked less the grave, determined aspect of Richard Stewart. He resembled a man who had made up his mind to one course, and was resolved to follow it, however painful to himself or others.

We went into my little front room, three people bent on business. John and I remained standing, whilst Mr. Stewart drew forth a pocket-book, opened it upon the table, and proceeded to draw forth sundry bank notes.

"Will you please to count them, Mr. Kingsworth?"

Mr. Kingsworth took them up mechanically, and counted them at Richard Stewart's request. When he had finished, I noted that his hand trembled, and his face coloured; he was a man of no self-command.

"Two thousand pounds," John said, in a hoarse voice. "Well, what is it for?"

"It is compensation money, paid by me, your mother's bailiff, to you, that mother's heir. Will you give me my receipt, and then we will talk of something else that I have upon my mind?"

"Pardon me," said my brother, with some dignity, "but we will speak of this in the first place. I am at a loss to understand."

"You had better give me the receipt, Sir."

"Why do *you* pay me this?"

"Some money was left in charge to me, and my want of proper caution caused two thousand pounds to be stolen from my house. When it was in my power, I intended to repay that sum to Mrs. Kingsworth—you stand her representative, Sir—take up the money."

"No."

"It is a debt due to the estate—you have been robbed of it as heir."

"Let the robber pay me, not Richard Stewart."

Richard Stewart looked up with an intention of replying hastily, perhaps unwisely, to this; encountered my glance, which asked for his consideration; paused, and said, in a less fierce voice than might have been anticipated:

"The robber may repent some day, and pay Richard Stewart in *his* turn. I will abide my time, and trust in his repentance."

"I shall not take this money," said my brother firmly. "I would as soon take your life."

"I shall pay it into your bankers', if you refuse it now," said Stewart.

"I refuse it now—I refuse it for good. Stewart, you do this to humiliate me," cried John; "you come here in your arrogance of

uprightness to taunt me with that old suspicion. Man, why do you think so badly of me?"

"I say nothing," was the reply; "I acknowledge myself in the wrong by this offer of payment—the estate, through my means, has become two thousand pounds the poorer."

"Put away that money."

"No."

And Richard Stewart thrust his hands to the depths of his pockets, and looked defiantly at Kingsworth.

"Bertie," said John Kingsworth, turning to me for assistance in his distress, "ask this man to be less foolish?"

"No, don't speak," said Richard Stewart, "I am reason-proof. Mr. Kingsworth, will you give me my receipt?"

"I tell you that I would sooner die than take that money."

"Mr. Kingsworth, the world says it was either you or I that took the money on that night, and you deny it?"

"Neither you nor I, Sir."

"One or another it must have been, and I am unhappy concerning it."

"Will my taking this money make you less unhappy?"

"Yes."

"I deny touching this money. Do you hear, man, that if it be necessary to vindicate my honesty to you in this fashion, I will swear it."

Stewart seemed moved by this impetuosity.

"Then the loss is mine, and I have a right to make it good. Your mother would have taken this money, Mr. Kingsworth."

"I do not believe it."

John swept the notes towards Richard Stewart with an impatient hand; the land-bailiff's persistence irritated him.

"If you have so much money to spare, lend it to your brother, Mr. Stewart. Don't pain me with this obtrusive honesty."

"For my brother I have done my best in life. When he requires aid, I will not flinch to offer it. As for this two thousand pounds," he said, seizing the notes, and thrusting them into his pocket, "I will adopt another means to restore it to its owner."

John seemed relieved at the removal of the money from his sight; he looked uneasily towards his tormentor, when Stewart said:

"Now for the next business."

"I am pressed for time, Mr. Stewart."

"I will be brief, Sir. I have very little to say," Richard Stewart continued; "I have fulfilled my task as executor to your mother's will. I believe that there is nothing left undone;—whilst in her service I have at least *tried* to do my duty. Affairs have changed; the office which I took upon myself has become irksome; I ask leave to remind you of a letter which I wrote to you three months ago."

"Informing me of your intention to resign the post of land-bailiff to my estate. I had hoped that you had changed your mind."

"No, Sir."

"I am very sorry—I can but accept your resignation. You leave me hampered by an estate of which I know little; you, like the rest of the people about here, will turn away from me. When am I to expect your resignation?"

"In one week from this date."

"Very well."

And John Kingsworth walked moodily out of the house, leaving Richard Stewart with me.

With Richard Stewart I felt offended. I considered that he had too sternly assumed the part of judge, and had had too little consideration for one who was innocent in my eyes, and would some day prove his innocence before the world.

"Ever a stern judge, Mr. Stewart—having no mercy upon those whom no power can prove guilty. It is scarcely to be wondered at that you are a lonely and unhappy man."

"Lonely I am—it is my choice, or fate, what you will. But who dares to say that I am unhappy?"

"I have no right to assert it, at least."

"I judge not your brother," he said roughly; "or if I judge him," he corrected, "I am ready to atone for any misconception when the time comes to show him in the right. Possibly I am a suspicious man—if my suspicions have wounded you, I am sorry."

"They must naturally wound me."

"Miss Casey, I know little of your brother—candidly, I have not seen a great deal in his character to respect."

"On the night he left your house, you found your safe open and money extracted. But he left the house in haste, not with the money, but with the intention of offering his services to your brother, who was then in trouble. Your brother had been his friend, and John was grateful."

Richard Stewart looked down and considered this.

"Miss Casey," he said at last, "if you believe that your brother never took this money—if you think that he is innocent of that crime, say so."

"I say so, without a doubt."

"Then you must think me a thundering thief!—good day!"

"Come back, Sir."

He was at the door, but he stopped at my imperious demand.

"Will you hear me out? Will you hear my belief that during the absence of John Kingsworth and yourself that money was taken—there were strange people that week in Wilthorpe."

"I have endeavoured to think of this in every way," said Stewart;

“there is not one theory, possible or impossible, which I have not studied. Sometimes I try to think that Mrs. Kingsworth was eccentric enough to come to my lodge and take the money, and then weak enough to forget it afterwards. But the effort is vain, and I return to the old stern thought there is no shaking off.”

“I cannot hope to alter that thought,” I said, sadly, “it is beyond my power. But let me ask you—you who are full of trust in your own judgment—have you not before this wronged your own brother?”

“No.”

“Are you quite certain that he has not been misjudged—remember all the past, and what you said in it?”

“All that I have said, I can repeat word for word.”

“You are not friends with your brother yet, then? You, bearing such deep enmity against one who should be dearest to you, I cannot hope to move.”

“Miss Casey speaks in a hurry,” he replied.

“Indeed!” I said.

“Of course you do—women always do,” he said, brusquely. “I bear no enmity against Mark—I would cut my right hand off to-morrow for him, if it would be of any use.”

“But——”

“But, Miss Casey, if you ask me whether I have lost my confidence in him, I answer ‘yes.’ Not my confidence in his genius, his capacity for business, his honourable method of conducting that business, but in the depth of his heart which set money next to it, and valued that and his name in the market before myself or—you.”

“Hush!—what are you saying?”

“I may explain now. When you and he talked of marrying each other, his first great business loss occurred. That hampered him; then the bank, in which he kept a heavy account, failed; and, rich as he was, there lay before him an uphill struggle. All this Mr. Kingsworth knows, for he has hinted as much—all this you know.”

“Your brother told me—there was a meeting of his creditors whilst I was at Edinburgh.”

“He wrote to me about his losses, and I did my best to help him in my way—but his pride, or his reluctance to confiscate the little money that I had, led him to refuse. Matters became worse, and he drew towards the verge of bankruptcy. On one dark day for him and me, there seemed no escape from ruin, and his strong heart gave way.”

“Go on.”

“I am going on as fast as I can,” he said irritably. “On that day he thought of you. On that day he wrote to me confessing that he could not share poverty with you, or drag you down to poverty

with him; that he had ensnared you by false pretences, and I was to prepare you for that which he had not the courage to attempt yet. That was my brother's first mistake."

"Yes—I did not want his money!"

"I went to Edinburgh to see him and reason with him. I found that the tide was strong against him, and that he must eventually give way. I found him solicitous to keep his perilous position a secret, although but a miracle could save him from the shipwreck. To keep this secret and yet to bid you be prepared, was still his cry, and I came back with it ringing in my ears."

"At that time I added to his trouble by my jealousy—I see that now."

"Well, I tried to prepare you and failed—perhaps that was my mistake. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"This may not interest you much now," he said; "all the better—I am glad of that! And I am telling you this in order to explain why I bear such *enmity* against my brother Mark."

"I cannot see that yet."

"Because you will not wait till I have finished," he said; "it's a bad habit of yours. If you remember, I have spoken of it once or twice before. It's no business of mine, but I don't like it any the better for that."

Though I was still angry with him for his dogged obstinacy, I could not restrain a smile at this flying personality.

"This is not a laughing matter we are coming to," he said gravely; "it made a child of me once, and I have never forgiven myself that blubbering day! Now—the sequel. My brother came to Wiltorpe in the ball week—to tell you all. To confess to you that his position as a merchant was grievously imperilled, and that in fact he must sink down to ruin. Before him he saw a long uphill fight for the old position; but he and I had met again, and I bade him consider well how he flung his whole life's happiness away after the riches that were escaping him. I told him that you—but never mind what I told him you were!—but I thought that I had made him ashamed of his old fears. He went to Woundell ball to fulfil a foolish promise that he had made, and to keep up the delusion, even to people who were not concerned in the matter, that he was the same light-hearted, wealthy Mr. Stewart. You and he met then—he made a fool of his explanations, and you were not particularly wise in yours, and hence the quarrel which parted both of you for ever."

"Yes, for ever."

"You regret this?"

"No, Sir—it was best. This is your version of the story."

"Only mine," he said drily; "you need not believe anything I say—I don't ask you to believe it! I scarcely care about saying

any more—the rest is easily guessed—the rest which set my brother and me apart, as well as you two simpletons.”

“You have been a long while preparing me for that which now you endeavour to evade. It is the quarrel between you and him in which I am interested—which I would have cease.”

“A little while after all his professions of attachment to you, he proposes to Miss Mannington. My brother does this—whom I would as soon have suspected of an ungenerous act, as—as—I would you.”

He made me start at this, but he took no heed of the compliment in his excitement. He was scarcely aware that he had uttered it.

“When he lost you, he lost much of his better nature. Miss Mannington was in his way; she was the daughter of a rich man, likely to be the sole heiress of a rich woman—her money, the promise of her money, might save him at the last. He was reckless, and disheartened, and he debased himself to that.”

“There, you are wrong.”

“I accused him of it when it was too late,” he said, vehemently; “I told him that he had better have gone down to ruin honestly, than have sought to save his credit, and position, by marrying Miss Mannington. And by the way that he defended himself, I knew how intense had been his struggle to sink his better nature.”

“You are wrong, wrong, wrong! He loved Miss Mannington in Edinburgh, when he first saw her—it was love for her that turned him away from me, and took him to her side. There’s the injustice you have done your brother—the same petty spirit jumping hastily at conclusions, and condemning without evidence.”

“When he called his creditors together at Edinburgh, it was the story of his engagement—of his coming marriage—which appeased them.”

“That did not prove his want of affection for her.”

“I am glad he has a champion still—I wish that I could think of him like you,” sighed Richard Stewart; “my trouble began, my unhappiness began, when he set his soul on money.”

“If I believed this, I would not let Miss Mannington remain in ignorance; but utterly discrediting your fancies, I ask you, for her sake, not to sow one suspicion in her mind.”

“I will respect your wish, and she will never guess it before or after marriage. Mark will be a good husband to her; Mark will learn to love her as his wife, and they will be as true a couple as most pairs it has been my lot to meet with. If he could have married you instead of——”

“Is it fair to harp upon that supposition?—I say it was for the best, Richard Stewart!”

“Say what you like, but I say it wasn’t!” And snatching up his hat, he darted from the room.

When he was gone I remembered that I had forgotten something

by which I might have strengthened the evidence in my brother's favour. But I should see him again before he went away from Wilthorpe for good. Wilthorpe would be scarcely Wilthorpe without Richard Stewart, I thought. That would be another friend the less in the place; he was bad-tempered, obstinate, and rash in his judgments, but I considered him a friend. Not very long ago I had looked upon him as a brother, and been won to like him by his brotherly-respect for me, and I could not wholly shake the old liking from my heart for all his dogmatism. I could think more of my new evidence to disturb his conviction of John Kingsworth's guilt, than of the story he had told me of my lost love. It was a good sign that the old love was troubling me no longer; I had fought my battle, and the wars were over! In my new hermitage at Meadow House, I could rest content—ay, even when my heart was lighter, dance gaily at Mark Stewart's wedding feast!

Well, she is no true woman who cannot get over her trouble when the lover turns away from pursuit of her. To mourn for the man who thought it better to break his engagement, is to mourn in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, for a scamp. (Mark Stewart was the exception to the rule, but I gave way to no morbid sorrowing, for all that.) She who mourns makes a hero out of unworthy materials, and scares honest folk with her morbidity. Better to shake him off from one's mind like a dew-drop, and turn at once to the sunshine, than let his "ugly black presence" mar the natural rejoicing of a heart that is young, pure, and true.

CHAPTER II.

CONSCIENCE MONEY.

EARLY the next morning I saw Richard Stewart once more. From my window, which commanded an extensive view of the high road, I saw him approaching in the distance. He was coming towards me at a great pace, walking in the middle of the road, oblivious to the shady side of the way that hot sunny morning in July.

He encountered Emma Eaves in the garden; through my open

window I heard him peremptorily address her. Emma Eaves and Richard Stewart had never been good friends.

"Where's Miss Casey?"

"In her room. What do you want here again?"

"A cool question that. What's that to do with you?"

"Have you anything more to say against Mr. Kingsworth?" asked Emma, with far from amiable glances in her eyes.

"More. What! have you been at your old listening tricks again?"

"No. But you shout so loudly, and you are one of the many who hate him and speak ill of him everywhere."

"Am I?"

He passed her, and came through the open door to my room.

"Come in," I called in response to his summons, and he turned the door handle and entered.

"Is your brother here?" he inquired, taking a rapid survey of the room—"your brother that was, I should say."

"My brother that is—and always will be, Mr. Stewart."

"Oh! very good," he replied; "but I wish you would not be in such a hurry to fire up in his defence. 'Pon my soul he *is* a sneak! Now, here's a roundabout way to go to work, instead of manfully saying that he was wrong, and trying to clear *me*. Perhaps you'll be kind enough to offer me your opinion upon *that*."

He placed upon the table a green slip of paper, which, taking up, I found to be a cheque signed by A. Z. and filled in thus—

"Pay to Richard Stewart, or bearer, the sum of two thousand pounds."

"This is mysterious," I murmured.

"Not a bit of it," affirmed Richard Stewart, "it's humbug, nothing more. Don't you see what this is done for?"

"It is the money sent back at last."

"Oh! yes, it's the money sent back at last," he said, with most uncourteous mimicry of my accent; "and in case I should make a mistake, the party sending it has written *conscience-money* on the inside of the envelope. And of all the damned roundabout nonsensical ways of doing things, this beats all!"

"For shame, Sir! You believe that John Kingsworth sent you this."

"Of course I do. He sends a cheque to London to some friend of his, who writes out another cheque for the amount and posts on to me. He thinks that I shall fancy the repentant thief—I don't believe in repentant thieves, the age has grown too callous—has taken pity on my share of suspicion. It's an odd idea," he added with a short laugh; "I pay Mr. Kingsworth the two thousand pounds with his own money, and there's an end of the mystery!"

Taking the cheque from me, he appeared to hesitate about tearing it asunder, altered his mind and replaced it in his pocket.

"In the first place, Mr. Stewart, my brother has no friend in London with whom he could trust two thousand pounds."

"He chanced it."

"In the second, this must have been posted—"

"Oh! we know all about that, Miss Casey. And in the third place——"

"In the third place, I have another proof which tends to clear my brother's innocence, and if you, after this, still assert his guilt to me, I never wish to see or speak to you again."

"Now you're getting in a passion!"

"You are unjust—and injustice always angers me."

"Very right of it indeed," he said coolly; "now for the third and last conclusive evidence."

I related the particulars of my journey to Edinburgh, and the conversation that I had heard and intruded upon in the railway carriage—a story of two thousand pounds again.

"A coincidence," he remarked, but he assumed an extra degree of thought notwithstanding.

"One of the men I saw at your brother's house on the following morning."

"Miss Casey, if you must know the whole truth of that matter, it was three thousand, one hundred and twenty pounds which that man received; it was a debt of my brothers, pressed for with many threats of arresting him and hindering all explanation with his creditors, and I paid *that* myself."

"You did not recognise the man in the carriage?"

"No, I did not," he said blankly; "how the deuce was that now?"

"He was a second creditor, perhaps—I heard them speak of two creditors having been paid that day."

"In that case I must have paid the second man in my sleep—I see now," he said, ironically, "your brother is blameless, and I am the guilty man! But then, Miss Casey, if the money were paid as a fair and honest debt of my brother Mark's why is it sent back to me as conscience-money? Do you think that creditor would be very much cut up by the complications of the story?"

I could have cried with vexation at his getting the better of the argument; the real facts became a greater mystery by the return of the money, and I gave up reasoning with him.

"Think what you please, Mr. Stewart," I said; "but give me leave to believe my own version of the story."

"Miss Casey, I am glad that you believe in Mr. Kingsworth's word—I admire your fidelity. It's what I would do for Mark."

"Whom you mistrust also."

His face darkened at this.

"Whose policy I disapprove, would have been the kinder way of putting it," he corrected. "I don't mistrust him. But you are

hard upon me since I cannot see every virtue under the sun in Mr. Kingsworth."

Richard Stewart took an unceremonious departure; he went back in the direction of the Hall. I knew that he was going in search of my brother, to rake up the ashes of the old fire, in the vain attempt to discover the secret.

I was sure of it, before John Kingsworth came in the evening to my house, and threw himself wearily into a chair facing me.

"I wish I had a woman's patience—a woman's trust."

"You have seen Richard Stewart again?"

"Yes. He will have no mercy on me. He is a stern doubter, and believes only in facts—or he is a great schemer."

"No—no."

"His persistence makes me doubt him in my turn. He has invented another story to palm off that two thousand pounds upon me. If he be all that is honest and true, why invent so palpable a lie?"

"You do not believe that he has received this cheque?"

"Not for an instant. He is anxious to pay me two thousand pounds in some way or other. Yesterday's attempt proving a failure, he invents these out-of-the-way means."

"You have not taken the money, then?"

"No—I have declined to accept it, or a portion of it. If he pay it to my banker's account, I must remit it once more to him by letter. If he attempt the same a second time, my bankers will receive orders not to accept further monies from Richard Stewart. I am tired of this trickery."

He stayed with me all the evening, detailing his new plans, when he had sold the Hall, and was quit of a place wherein he had been unhappy. He would go abroad, and double his fortune he thought. He asked Emma Eaves, sitting with us, what she thought of his plans; but she would not speak of them, although she had been listening eagerly with her hands clasped, and her work lying idly in her lap. She started up when questioned closely on the subject, and ran out of the room.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"I can't tell," said Kingsworth, gloomily; "even the old friends are beginning to turn against me in this cursed village."

He went home dissatisfied; the next day he was at my house again.

"Come with me to Richard Stewart's," he said; "I want you as a witness, to mark that man's demeanour very narrowly, and see if you can believe in the new idea which I have formed concerning him."

"Has anything fresh happened?"

"More child's play. Great heaven! what a fool Richard Stewart must think I am!"

These two thousand pounds, which had verged once on tragedy,

seemed approaching fast to comedy. Here was another phase of it. Kingsworth did not attempt any explanation.

"Wait till we see this Stewart," he said; "it will save telling a story twice over."

We found this Stewart sitting at his own cottage window, writing busily. His books were out, and his hand was travelling rapidly over the paper. He was making out the final account of his stewardship, preparative to going away for good. Possibly he was not prosecuting his task without a pang, for he had grown attached to the place, and to a few within it; his was not a roving disposition, that took pleasure in change. His stern face turned towards the garden as the click of the wicket-gate announced our approach to him. Seeing Mr. Kingsworth with me, he rewarded our visit with a scowl of more than extra significance.

"May we come in?" asked my brother.

"The door is not shut—come in if you have any business with me."

We entered. Richard Stewart rose and placed a chair for me. He left Mr. Kingsworth to find one for himself; but John remained standing with his bailiff.

"Mr. Stewart," John said, petulantly, "I am tired of this folly. I am even astonished that a man of your acuteness should be full of these petty shallow tricks."

"Confound it, man!" exclaimed Stewart, "do you expect me to keep two thousand pounds that don't belong to me?"

"Do you expect me?"

"Your estate was robbed of that amount by my carelessness—how many more times am I to assert that as the basis of my argument?" shouted Richard Stewart. "You refused the money yesterday—even the money which you sent me yourself!—and I paid that sum into your bankers at Woundell yesterday afternoon. If I take it back, may I——"

"Paid money into *my* bankers!" exclaimed my brother. "How much?"

"Two thousand pounds."

"Oh! then, *this* is the first two thousand pounds with which you worried me, that I found upon my breakfast-table this morning?"

"What?" asked Richard Stewart, dreamily.

"That makes four thousand pounds lavished upon me by your liberal hand. Two thousand that I did *not* send you, placed to my credit yesterday—two thousand pounds at my elbow this morning."

"Sit down, will you," said Stewart, dropping into a chair, leaning his elbows on the table, and holding his head between his hands, to more intently study my brother's countenance. "Now, what the devil do you mean? Pardon, Miss Casey," he said, without turning his head in my direction, "but I am very interested in this new variation of *my master's*."

Kingsworth reddened at the contemptuous tone of Stewart's last words, but he sat down and faced the bailiff as adjured. The two men looked fiercely at each other now; each despising the other for the simple nature of his plans.

"I find two thousand pounds—four five hundred-pound notes—on my breakfast-table this morning, in a sealed envelope, bearing no superscription," said John.

"Very good—it pleases you to tell me so."

"It pleases you to ignore all knowledge of the money placed there."

"Certainly—the two thousand pounds are in your bankers' hands—this, I presume, is your plan to invent an excuse to foist the amount back on me. Very ingenious, but a trifle too transparent, to my taste."

"Richard Stewart, as a man of honour, or professing honour, will you tell me that you never put those notes on my table this morning?"

"As a man professing honour also," rejoined the land-bailiff, "will you tell me that all this is not pure invention?"

"On my soul, I found the money there this morning!"

"Then, on my soul, I never put it there!"

Richard Stewart and John Kingsworth continued to stare dreamily, each impressed by the other's decision, and yet each bewildered by this new phase of the old perplexity.

"Two men could not have stolen one amount, and been each resolved to pay back the whole sum," said Kingsworth. "I am lost now, if—if I can believe this statement."

"I think we had better not attempt to believe it," said Richard Stewart, in reply, "but try our best to find it out. You deny knowledge of this—so do I—suppose, for an instant, just for an instant, Mr. Kingsworth, that neither you nor I took this money. That the guilty man is so overwhelmed with his wickedness that he sends the amount twice over, as you say—once to me and once to you—to make sure of affording satisfactory reparation to all parties concerned. Who is the fellow?"

John Kingsworth shook his head; it was past all guessing at.

"Have you made any inquiry of your servants?"

"Yes—only you have been seen about the estate this morning."

"Confound!—why, it must be myself!" exclaimed Richard Stewart, "everything conspires against me, and the long chain of circumstantial evidence drags me down to earth."

"And this money?" asked my brother, taking out his pocket-book. "Will you—"

"Keep it back!" cried Stewart, jumping up, and brandishing his clenched fists in the air; "play this trick on a greater fool than I, Mr. Kingsworth, and begone!"

"I have not convinced you, then?"

"No."

"And you have not convinced me!"

"Possibly not. I am very busy just now, Mr. Kingsworth, if you will excuse me."

So we separated, and Richard Stewart, looking more ferocious than ever, was deep in his books when we went along the country road together.

"There is no making out that man," said John; "I must give it up. But what to do with the money, I cannot hazard a conjecture. In one way or another it must get back into his hands. And yet I cannot look into that man's face and consider him a liar."

"He would not tell a lie to save his life, John."

"You have a very good opinion of this Mr. Stewart, Bertie," he said, regarding me intently.

"Yes. I have known him some years, now—I have always found him honest and true. To your mother he was ever a faithful servant."

"Is it not possible that, distressed by his brother's losses in business, he might have drawn on my mother's account, and considered it a debt?"

"No—impossible."

"You are the best judge. I must leave to time the solution of the mystery. Let me speak of my old grievance."

"Life in Wilthorpe?"

"Yes. I said that I would come to the old friend, when I had matured my plans—they ripened suddenly last night, in that dreary house of mine. I shall leave at once for Edinburgh, and ask Mr. Stewart's advice."

"The life of a country gentleman is not to your taste—I see that," I remarked; "I do not fancy anyone towu-bred, town-born, can make a true country gentleman."

"I cannot, at all events," said John; "therefore I shall marry Emma Eaves, at once, and go away from here."

"I cannot say that you would act unwisely."

"Poor Em!" he said reflectively; "I think she must be doubtful whether I intend to keep my promise to her—even she in her heart cannot believe in my word. I see her changing day by day, becoming more reserved and strange. The girl who called me father when she was a child, the girl I could not see handed over to the parish assassins—or parish authorities, it's all the same—even she has lost her faith."

"No—you are wrong."

"Wrong again—and again Bertie Casey the better judge. Well, I put this to the test at once—I am going home with you to settle this case. Have you any objection to urge?"

"Not any," I replied; "she is a girl who understands you, who

has been faithful to you all her life. I do not think your higher station should deter her from this chance of happiness."

Home together, we found Emma Eaves arranging some flowers in a vase on my centre table.

John Kingsworth and I entered, and glancing askance at the former, Emma's colour changed. She read the coming revelation on John's face at once, like a true woman, whose instinct in these matters is always akin to the miraculous.

"You must be fairly tired of seeing me crawl in and out here, Em," he remarked; "but I have been telling Bertie that I am going away, and shall not trouble Meadow House much longer."

"Going away!"

"Yes; and I have come hither to-day to have a long talk about my way of going, and with whom."

I was at the door, trying to steal forth unobserved, and leave this odd pair of lovers to themselves, when Emma Eaves made a rush at me and held me back.

"No, don't leave me with him, please," she cried; "I have not the strength or the courage to hear what he has to say alone. I cannot tell him anything if you go away!"

It was not the natural timidity of the maiden anxious for the truth to escape, and yet nervous at its revelation; it was a frightened woman, to whom my presence would be a relief. I looked towards Kingsworth, who said,

"Stay, Bertie, if she wishes it."

"I knew that this would come some day—I thought that it might happen to-day, when I saw you two coming together up the road—and I have been trying to keep strong! But you will stay, Miss Bertie?—I have only hope in you, now."

Strange for this girl to assert so much—she who had turned from me at one period, thanks to Mr. Mannington.

"You and I are old friends, Em," said John; "you and I only a little while ago promised to take each other for better, for worse."

"Yes," she murmured; "but things were different then. You—you were not a gentleman!"

"I was John Kingsworth Casey, in whose good intentions you had implicit faith. When I was a fool you trusted me; when you were a child, and I a reckless man, you tried to keep me strong, and did your best to make me better, succeeding now and then, and failing very often, Em."

"Oh! the old days!—the old days!" wailed Emma.

"You have been true to me—the only one who has had confidence in me throughout—and you are the only one fit to be my wife. When I left you to my sister's care, years ago, I had made up my mind to come back some day and marry you. Four months since you promised to be my wife—I claim that promise now."

"Four months ago I did not know that you were Mrs. Kingsworth's son."

"What difference does that make?"

"Every difference," said Emma. "I see it now—*she* saw it too before she died. She knew how poor, ill-born and ignorant I was, and what grand people you would know when you were rich. She saw that I should be a disgrace to you, and that you would tire of me and of the shame that I should bring you very soon. The thought of any marriage between us was making her unhappy, and I promised her, on her death-bed, never to be your wife!"

"You made that promise?" said Kingsworth.

"Yes, God help me, I knew that it was best, at last. That your world was not mine, and that I dared not share it with you, for your own sake. You, John, will marry a lady now, and I will stay with your sister till she marries, or we grow old together here. I am very—happy—as it is; I am not grieving at my promise to a dying woman, and for good or evil I will keep my word!"

John Kingsworth set a hand on each knee, and stared hard at the carpet.

"Very well," he muttered.

We were silent for awhile—we three. The shadow of the dead woman's pride—or the pride itself that had lived after her—seemed to fall upon us in that little room. Was this true wisdom of her who had been gathered to her rest, or want of judgment even at the last? Through the glass darkly we were gazing at the future as well as at the past, and all was indistinct and blurred. The Kingsworths' pride had been my poor mistress's bane through life—was it to outlast her? In her narrow view of what was best for him, of whose character she knew so little, had she acted wrongly, and was this last act for her sou's sake, and in that son's interest, only to bear its bitter fruit after the old fashion?

He was looking at the carpet still, when Emma left my side to go to him. His trouble touched her, as no one else's ever could or would.

"John," she said, leaning over him, with her hands upon his shoulder, "if it had been different, no power on earth could have kept me from you. A life of trouble with you, poor and weak, and with me to care for you, would have never cost a sigh, but have made me—oh! so happy! I have always dreamed of that life, and looked forward to it—prayed for it, as a means of showing you my gratitude for all that past, wherein I was at least content, until you broke my heart by going away. John, I loved you very much!"

"Better than I deserved," he murmured.

"I will love you to the end," she said; "but now there is no chance of making *you* happy; now people would laugh at your ignorant, low-born wife; and women of a different kind to those I

have ever known would taunt and despise me. *You* would share this humiliation, and wish some day that you had done better. Don't ask me to break my promise to your mother."

"Had she a right to set this interdict upon my happiness?"

"I think so."

"You would be unhappy with me, Em?"

"Yes," was the mournful answer. "I should be suspicious every day of your tiring of me."

"*She* thought it best for me—I will try to think so too," he said, rising. "It is a very dull world, where no one comprehends what is best for me, or what is my place in it. Bertie, see to the girl, and try to comfort her. I have no power now!"

He went out of the house gloomy and stern—he had been balked in everything since his rise to greatness; the new world's friendship, honest men's belief in him, now this woman's love! Would he go back in desperation to his old life—he who was never strong, and whom a little always turned away from right? I feared the impulse—the nature of the new thoughts with which he quitted us.

"Emma," I said, "if you have done wrong—if this be a false step, of which you and I may bitterly repent!"

"No, no," she said, "it is right. For many reasons it is right. It is not as if he loved me!"

"Would he have asked you to become his wife?"

"He asked me out of gratitude for thinking well of him, for keeping true to him!" she cried, rocking herself to and fro upon the couch. "Not on account of any love for me. I could not expect that."

"Wrong there, Emma!"

"When he thinks calmly of this," she said, "he will be glad and grateful for my answer. I don't believe," she added, dashing her rebellious tears away, "that the right people ever marry each other—the woman loves the wrong man, or the man the wrong woman, and there's no real truth in both at once."

"Possibly," I added with a sigh.

"When you liked Mr. Stewart—he tired of you. Did he not?" she said eagerly.

"You knew—you knew that I liked *him*!"

"I found out—I was a listener, and the habit grew upon me till you broke me of it. I was doubtful who loved me and him I loved, and I watched for both our sakes. I was more ignorant than thou I am now; I was a spy, and I found out that Mr. Stewart was courting you. I kept your secret well—forgive me."

"I do not know that I have anything to forgive, Emma."

"Let me talk of this—let me try and think of something that will keep my thoughts of Jack away, or I shall go mad!" she cried impetuously.

"Courage, Emma—you have shown yourself a brave woman to-day."

"Have I not?" she replied; "you who gave up the man you loved, know that, and though he might have loved you after all——"

"No—don't tell me so!"

"He might. When his brother—that fierce man—and he quarrelled about you, and one taunted the other with seeking Miss Mannington only for her money——"

"*When was that?*"

A slight figure in deep mourning was standing in the doorway left open since Kingsworth's departure—she had halted on the threshold, where the shaft had struck her home, to gasp forth that anxious question which had startled both of us.

"Isabel!" I cried.

"Don't move, Bertha—let me join you two gossips there," she said, speaking very hastily as she advanced; "when was it, Emma Eaves, that the brothers Stewart quarrelled about Miss Casey and me? I am very anxious to know!"

CHAPTER III.

APPROACHING THE TRUTH.

EMMA EAVES and I remained staring at Bel Mannington as at an apparition. It was the first time that she had visited Meadow House; and on that day in particular I had not dreamed of seeing her. When she and her father left the Hall for good, I found that we were set apart from each other more than I had anticipated—living but a mile away, she was still strangely sundered from me.

When I was thoroughly "settled" in my new home, I had resolved to alter this; to do all in my power, until she married and went away for good, to keep alive that affection that had existed between us since her love engagement. It had been an affection before that time, despite her rebellious "airs and graces" for the matter of that; she was a wild lovable girl, in whom I had been always interested. When I was "settled," then, I had resolved to pay more frequent visits to Mr. Mannington's new house, despite Mr. Mannington's dislike to me, rather more apparent since Mrs. Kingsworth's death. I should go for Bel's sake, not her father's;

and whilst Bel's heart was true, the frowns or slights of Bel's protector would not keep me at arm's length from her.

We met at Wilthorpe Church, whence Mr. Mannington hurried his daughter away: he stood between her and me whenever the opportunity presented itself; in his cunning face I read, despite its blandness, an eternal opposition. There remained no more hope or fear; his sister who had had confidence in me was dead, and he could offend her no more by his true colours. Yet those colours were not flaunted in my face; he was naturally reticent, and when there was no avoiding me, he still put on his set smile, and expressed the pleasure that he felt at meeting me. But he seemed anxious to keep his daughter to himself; possibly I was beneath him now, and this was one more trait of the pride which appertained to the family.

Still I knew that unless Bel Mannington was strangely altered, we should meet, despite all opposition; Bel had a will of her own, that was stronger than her father's, and a determined attempt to assert it bore down all hindrance in her way. Her father's nervous organization was the weak point in his character; had he been a man more physically strong, he would have made an excellent villain for a story-book. He possessed a plotting brain, no sympathy with others, and a very small amount of principle—if those confounded nerves had only been less in his way!

And here, at last, was Bel Mannington in the flesh before me. Fate was against her—good fortune was against her, when she crossed the threshold that day.

"Please tell me this story," she said—"I will listen very patiently."

Bel Mannington took no heed of my outstretched hands, but passed me and dropped into a chair by Emma's side, assuming, suddenly and unnaturally, that patient deportment she had promised us. This girl, whom I had known so wayward and impetuous in her time, clasping her hands in her lap, and becoming quiescent, almost statuesque, was a novel sight to witness. But for the two red spots upon her cheeks, and the intense eagerness in her dark eyes, one might have thought her as patient as she wished to seem.

"What is this about Mr. Stewart quarrelling with his brother?—of what did Richard Stewart accuse his brother?—what about *me*?"

"Oh! don't ask," cried Emma, wringing her hands; "I never thought of telling that! I never thought until a little while ago that it was true, for I don't like Richard Stewart."

"He is a man to be trusted," said Bel Mannington; "he is a man in whom his brother has always trusted. Tell me all."

Emma looked at me, and I could but signify my assent. The secret, such as it was, had escaped. If I had not believed in it when Richard Stewart first tore down the screen between me and the light—I who had been deceived!—it was more than possible that Isabel

Mannington, she who had been loved by Mr. Stewart, would, in her proud assertion of faith, reject a thought of his unworthiness. I would have done so under similar circumstances, I thought—forgetting what a weak and jealous woman I had once proved myself. Emma Eaves thus adjured stated the few facts of which she was cognizant, anxious, for the sake of the girl whom she had loved for her very resemblance to herself, to put them in their best light. Isabel heard her to the end in the same patient manner, only once interrupting her by a quick “You are extenuating,” when Emma hesitated to dwell too minutely upon the angry words between the brothers Stewart. I broke in here with,

“These are words, Bel, not worth receiving as evidence. Heard as they were, feloniously, I protest against their acceptance.”

“They were spoken,” said Isabel; “it is too late for Emma and me to be delicate in this matter. My future depends upon the truth, Miss Casey.”

Long ago Isabel Mannington had abjured that formal designation, and it sounded ominously at that time. But I was awaiting my explanation afterwards, and hoping for the best with it.

“Go on, Emma,” said Bel, impatiently.

“Richard Stewart was very angry; he swore that whilst the engagement lasted between you and Mr. Stewart, he would never speak to Mark again, or consider him his brother. He called him a villain to leave Miss Bertha and take up with you so suddenly. I heard no more, and I have always thought that it did not matter much what Richard Stewart said. You who know his brother Mark so well need not——”

“Silence! Do you think I want consolation from you!” cried Bel, with her old impetuosity, “or that I cannot judge for myself what is true or false? Oh! Bertie!” she cried, with a sudden resumption of her past affection, “you will help me in this, which can’t be true—not wholly true!”

“I do not believe it is truth—it is all a mistake, Bel.”

“I am very glad to hear you speak thus confidently. Mark never—never thought of *you*, then?”

“Not in his heart, perhaps.”

“But he never asked you to love him, did he?” she exclaimed, vehemently.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“When—when was that?”

“Bel, you must listen as patiently to me as you have done to Emma Eaves, and I will tell you *my* story. May I entreat your patience?”

“I am learning to be patient! I thought that I had lived down all my old ways, but find I am mistaken. Are the old habits coming back with the old life?” she asked, with a perceptible shudder at the thought.

“No—you are safe.”

My emphatic assertion conveyed no fresh assurance to her heart; her dark face was turned more anxiously towards me, that was all. She was restless still; the presence of Emma Eaves was a restraint upon her, and before I had commenced she had waved her hand imperiously towards her to withdraw, as though Emma were still the maid from whom obedience was expected.

Emma went away on the instant; she was anxious to be alone in her room, despite her past assertion that thinking of her own troubles would drive her mad.

When we were alone together, I told Bel Mannington the history of my past engagement; how it had begun, and even ended, before she was a woman—with that slight figure fronting me, she looked scarcely a woman even yet!—how it had been a hasty step on Mr. Stewart's part, a foolish step on mine; how I had grown jealous of him when he was back in Edinburgh, and she saw him so frequently; how the dream had ended in the ball-room at Woundell, and I had stepped back from dream-land to reality.

“And you and he have both studiously concealed this from me!” she said, reproachfully. “Have both kept in the dark one entitled to know all. You, too, above all others, Bertie Casey!”

“Pardon me if I have been wrong,” I urged, touched by this reproach, “but—but it was the story of my humiliation, my ambition thrust upon my baffled self. I was ashamed to speak of it—to own to you who had gained his love, how I had lost it!”

“He should have told me, then—it would have been more honourable,” she said, thoughtfully.

“He—he might have wished to respect my wish to keep this secret—it was an avowal that could do no good, and from which might evolve much harm.”

“Much harm!—ah! that's true.”

She wrung her hands together, and then turned upon me again that gloomy, perplexed face. The truth was distracting her; thoughts at which I could but guess were stealing to her mind, and stabbing her with the reminiscences they conjured up.

“Lately,” she said, in a husky whisper, “my father has spoken, or tried to speak, disparagingly of him to whom I am engaged. He has discovered something about Mark's business that is not satisfactory, and would set between me and Mark money-considerations. As if I cared for money, or thought of money, with the man I have loved from a child! Oh! Bertie,” flinging herself suddenly at my feet, and burying her face in my lap, “you don't know how I have loved that man, how he, and he alone, has been in my heart before all on earth—myself, my God, everything! I have made an idol of him, and am justly punished. I see the retribution coming at me step by step, to strike me down!”

“Hush!—hush!” I said; “there, now you are giving way and

becoming the old Bel Mannington, who used to trouble me so much. You who should be ever strong with this strong man's love."

"As *you* would have been?"

"Yes."

"Without it you can live—and I should die!"

She was the old Bel Mannington, indeed, now—extravagant, passionate, and uncontrollable. They came back again, all those past days when she was younger, and I was a more hopeful woman—in my ears there seemed to ring again Mrs. Kingsworth's warning to be careful of her, the wish that I should study her and live for her—back to my heart came the old affection to which her very wilfulness seemed to give new birth.

I bent over her and clasped my hands about her neck assuringly.

"Bel, this is folly in you, who should be happy."

"No, no, don't tell me so! I am trying to escape a great truth, and you are bnoying me up with fallacies. I see it now—he loved you!"

"Never!"

"You thought so once—the first thought was the truer of the two. His brother, that terrible man who is never deceived was sure of it, and I—I am sure of it now. He loved you, but he never loved me—never! never! never!"

"If now, thinking soberly of this, with my heart free, and my judgment unwarped by passion, I can believe that his love for you was the reason of our separation, why should you despair like this?"

"Bertie, you are a woman to be loved," she cried, "and I am a dark-faced, plain-featured child, perverse, fretful, discontented, with not one attribute that can attract a soul towards me but—my money! I have shut my eyes to this till now—I have been led along contented to believe in what my hopes gave birth to—and all is over with me for my blindness!"

"I will believe that your brightest days are yet in store—your brightest days with *him*."

She shook her head as she rose from her despairing posture with a sigh. I who had suffered like her, and understood her every heart pang, yearned to fold her in my arms again—to tell her how every thought antagonistic to her happiness, was likely to be false, and should not be fostered for an instant until the truth beset her, or made all things light. And yet I had been so weak myself!

"Bertie," she said, "I am not a coward. No," with a poor attempt to manifest the pride she did not feel, and assert a fact in direct opposition to that cry of despair which had recently escaped her, "I am not afraid of the truth, and I will bear it like a true woman. Face to face with it, I will accept the separation, and

demand justice for *her* whom alone he has a right to marry. I see ahead my proper course in life—I—I shall follow it un—flinchingly to the end!”

“Ask for no justice to me,” I said proudly in my turn—so very proudly, that she shrank a step or two away; “he has no claim to my love. I have ceased to love him—I have long understood how right it was that he and I should part. Say no more concerning him.”

“He has loved you—in his heart, he——”

“In his heart,” I interrupted, “you will find him true to you, and this is idle folly, which your cold sense of justice might convert to tragedy. You who love him should have more confidence in his honour.”

“You had—and found your confidence misplaced,” she said, quickly; “this is the tale over again, to end in the same fashion. The truth—how can I find the truth?”

“Waiting for it with hope and patience—or searching for it, if you will, calmly and trustfully, believing in right, till the wrong is inevitable.”

“How easy it is to advise others,” she said, wearily.

I did not answer, it was a just reproof, and in my place deserved.

The variable nature, disturbed by the truth looming before her, led her to my side again, flushed and excitable.

“A little while ago I should have hated you for this!” she said between her set teeth—“for keeping this secret from me, listening to my rhapsodies of how I loved that man, how I would die for him—I prating of my happiness to you, holding in your heart a secret that could prove how false and intangible my hopes were. A little while ago I would not have believed in your motives for keeping this secret back—I would have stamped you after its avowal as my enemy, who, exulting in a rival’s future discomfiture, had let me go on smiling to my disappointment. But—but I have been tried—I know how weak and wicked my thoughts are, and to what ends they lead me—I read you as my friend still!”

She held both her hands out to me, and I clasped them in my own. Her face softened again and tears were in her big black eyes.

“I am a selfish woman. I see that I shall be presently alone in the world, and have need of you—that one by one, each man and woman will turn away, and there will be only you to pity and support me. Will you?”

“With all my heart and strength!”

“Then I will be a brave woman—I will fight this out!” she said with an impatient movement of the hands she disengaged from mine. “It will be a short battle. In a fortnight he will be in Wilthorpe—perhaps before that time if my letter rouse him to defend himself.”

"*Don't write!*" I said, hastily.

I remembered my own foolish letter and its result. I knew how impossible it had been not to betray my sense of mortification, my anger, my want of faith in him, and I feared all that might be recorded by her whose will was less governable than mine. There are no rightful explanations of love-troubles by letter—ye who see the storm coming up and clouding the sky, think of this warning, and bide your time hopefully in the sunshine still left you.

I was repeating my injunction to her, when Mr. Manington, in a small four-wheel chaise, drove up to the door. It was the first time that he had honoured my humble villa since Mrs. Kingsworth's death had parted us. He came in his old jaunty manner up the garden-path, leaving a small boy in buttons and with a cockade on his hat to attend to the horse.

"Say nothing to him," said Bel, casting a half-frightened, half-defiant look towards her father; "he would too readily believe this; and though I—I believe it already, yet it is hard to have no one to give you hope. Bertie, I will wait the fortnight before I write; but I must——"

Mr. Manington was announced—Mr. Manington looking, spruce and dapper in his glossy mourning. He came in and shook hands with me in a demonstrative manner. Was I well?—Had I recovered the shock of his poor sister's death?—Was I quite sure that I was well?

I was more certain of my own health than of his own. His light step had only deceived me until his face was towards me and the window—then it struck me that it was very fallow, and the innumerable lines therein scored more deeply still.

"Anything wrong?" he asked, looking from his daughter to me with his usual quickness of perception.

"No—nothing wrong."

"You have been walking fast, Isabel; you should have waited for me, and not have—have flounced, I may call it, out of the house. Why, where are you going now?"

"Only a little way. Will you wait here till I come back?"

"Just as you please, my dear. It's a long while since I have had the pleasure of a little talk with Miss Casey."

Bel hurried out of the house; Mr. Manington went at once to the window and watched her progress along the garden-path to the wicket.

"Why, she's going towards the Hall," he said.

I guessed then for the first time whither she was going. Richard Stewart, if still at work over his accounts, was doomed to further interruptions.

"Whatever can she want that way, now? You—you haven't heard that Mr. Stewart has come to Wilthorpe again?"

"I believe that he is still in Ediuburgh."

"I have been distressed a great deal about this engagement, lately, Miss Casey," he said, as if in a seeming burst of confidence not to be withstood; "you cannot conceive how it is disturbing me."

"Why?"

He did not admire my dry rejoinder; and he did not reply at once. I was on my guard against him; I had long since learned to distrust him; he had done evil to me and mine; my brother's bad name in Wilthorpe was his doing, I was certain; and how much of my old troubles might be attributed to him?

After all, he was an over-cunning man, possessing great faith in his own ability to deceive, and in the gullibility of those on whom it was his pleasure to work. This is the attribute of cunning men, more shallow or more deep than he. Mr. Mannington did not believe for an instant that I was not to be impressed by any manner he might assume; he was confident in his own powers, and a fair actor—nothing more.

"My daughter has told you doubtless how troubled I have been by this engagement?"

"She may have mentioned it."

"Mr. Stewart scarcely treated us as I could have wished," he said; "no man has a right to disguise his position in life, more especially to over-estimate it, when seeking an alliance with an old and respectable house. And we all know very well now, that he was struggling to keep his head above water."

"A struggle that has at least ended satisfactorily."

"I don't know that—I don't see how it is possible to know that," he answered; "I have written once or twice for a full explanation of his position; he hasn't answered my second letter, which is discourteous, to say the least of it. I never liked that man."

"And yet——"

I stopped. I would not allow myself to be led into any argument with Mr. Mannington.

"And yet, I agreed with my poor sister. Exactly—I always agreed with her, or she would have made my life a misery. She had set her heart upon this marriage—she had been always fearful of Isabel being impressed by a fortune-hunter or a fool; and, by George! she took him into the net herself, and I grinned at him through the meshes, and thought what a fine catch it was! Now Miss Casey, do you believe for an instant that Mr. Stewart cares anything for *her*?"

"Yes."

"He cared for you once, you know?"

"Never in his heart."

"You thought so at the time I came express from Edinburgh to make sure that it wasn't anything more than a flirtation; to sound you, if I could, concerning him who did not treat you well—now,

did he? Well, I have thought of asking you to tell Bel all the old news and the new, quietly and confidentially. She will not believe anything I say against him—she's the most undutiful girl that ever worried a man to death."

"Why do you wish to stop Mr. Stewart's marriage with your daughter?"

"I don't wish it—if the marriage is for the best."

"Mrs. Kingsworth was right—it is for the best."

"Not if he don't love her—why do you, Miss Casey, take the unromantic side of the case? It's so unlike your sex, and, above all, so unworthy of you. And, besides, if he were disengaged now—"

"Please say no more. This is a distasteful subject; if you wish me to aid you in any way or shape against your daughter's happiness, you are mistaken in me."

"I am thinking only of her happiness, Miss Casey," he said, with a dignity that would have deceived me had I not known him so well; "but you mistrust me. You have always distrusted me," he added; "in the early days of our acquaintance some one sowed the seeds of suspicion in your heart against me, and they have brought forth seed after their kind. It was to be expected."

He turned his back upon me, and looked out of the window as though he were offended with me, or with my want of appreciation of his merits. He was in that position when his daughter returned swiftly and suddenly into the room. He must have stood there quietly watching her approach, and studying her troubled face for several minutes.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes—ready now."

"Let us be going, then. Good day, Miss Casey."

He went out of the room and house towards his chaise. Bel Mannington, who had accompanied him, turned suddenly, and ran back to me, forcing me by my arms into the parlour.

"I have seen Richard Stewart—I have asked him for the truth—I have demanded, as my right, the truth, Bertie."

"Not from him but from his brother you must expect that."

"Why, is *he* false too?—would he deceive me?"

"No. But he has misjudged his brother—ignorant of all the facts of the case, he has leaped too readily to a conclusion."

Her lip quivered.

"You are kind to say so, but you do not give me hope *now*. There was a quarrel between you and Mark, and he sought me out of pique—out of pity, perhaps, if he guessed my love for him—or," with a shudder, "out of consideration for my future wealth. But I will be very strong, and very patient, Bertie, through it all. Let me lean upon your arm, or I shall never reach the chaise?"

We went out together, she leaning heavily upon me, as her aunt had

done in the old days for ever away from us, Mr. Mannington watching our approach. She was very weak to bear the whole truth—if truth it were approaching her. By-and-bye, I felt then, by intuition, it would be my task to stand at her side again, and do my best to help her.

In Wilthorpe there might be trouble yet for both of us.



CHAPTER IV.

OTHER ATTENTIONS.

I WAS not aware until the next day that Mr. Mannington had started with his daughter to the seaside; that he had been solicitous about her health, and thought that change would do her good; that Bel Mannington had called to say good-bye to me, when Emma Eaves' unguarded word had fired the train which exploded love's security.

Love troubles were gathering thickly round me then; Emma Eaves had declined to marry my brother, for the world's sake or his own—it was doubtful which; Mr. Stewart's past intentions were still misty; I alone stood in the midst of these perplexities heart free. I had begun and ended early in life, I thought, and was not to be deluded any more. I should drop into quiet old maidism, take shortly to spectacles and a large tabby cat, and settle for ever in my little freehold. I had no ambition to tempt me away from Wilthorpe, where there were many fair associations and some sweet memories. I found the interest on my five thousand pounds sufficient for all my wants, leaving me something to spare. All that I loved was in Wilthorpe yet, and if all I loved had been happy, I should have felt happiness in seeing theirs.

My brother John, as I may call him to the end of the story, went away next day; he sent me a letter, stating that he had departed for Edinburgh, but should shortly return, when he had sought advice from Mr. Stewart. He was unsettled again, and I feared somewhat when I learned from his letter that he had drifted from my sight. There was left me the task of consoling Emma Eaves,

who tried hard to fly from consolation, and feared now all mention of my brother's name. After my own way—of which I was still vain, the reader perceives—I kept her from her old sorrowful wilfulness.

A few days after my brother's departure, Mr. Crease called. The reader still remembers the curate of Wilthorpe, a gentleman concerning whom I have a little more to say ere I write FINIS to my love-story. Once again he steps upon the scene, to play the short part allotted him, and then go away for ever.

Though I have not intruded Mr. Crease upon my reader's attention, he was one of my most intimate friends in Wilthorpe; one whose good life, unselfish and pure, I had always admired, even endeavoured at a distance to imitate, failing miserably, after the rule governing all imitations. I believed, even before I was convinced of it by the after facts now to be narrated, that he had known of my past engagement to Mr. Stewart, been aware of its disruption, pitied me without embarrassing me, or bringing the colour to my cheeks—a rare and comfortable pity that!

He was still curate of Wilthorpe; he was an unambitious man, content with the stipend paid him by Mr. Gapwing, content—nay, glad to do the lion's share of work, and satisfied with the gratitude of those whom he benefited! a satisfaction in which he was occasionally balked by that perversity of human nature, common to Wilthorpe as to greater places. Like myself, he had settled down to the village, and craved no further change. Great preachers, making the world ring with their oratory, did not raise his envy; to read of the livings flying from one to another, and of the salaries attached to them, suggested, perhaps, a thought of the good he might have done with the money—nothing else, I am sure. The old college friends, whom he had known once, and who might, on application, have thought of him and advanced him, his natural reserve held him aloof from; his father had died a bankrupt, and he had helped his mother with his income until she had followed her husband. After his mother had died he was absent for three weeks, and returned, looking aged and worn, as though grief had wrung his heart more acutely than it would have done most folk of small salaries with a poor mother off-hand.

He and I had become good friends enough then, and I mention his calling a few days after my brother's departure for the reason that he was talking of the parishioners to me, and of one parishioner in particular—who was very refractory, as well as unfortunate, who wanted more attention paid to him in his distress, more money for his needs, and less talk about the church, in which he had not been seen since his christening—when Richard Stewart walked up to my open window, and coolly put his head through the fuschias and fancy geraniums. Mr. Crease, who had been nursing his hat on his knees, gave a little leap in his chair at this sudden intrusion.

“Oh! I didn't know that you were engaged,” Richard Stewart

said, jerking his head back again with too much precipitancy, and bringing the back of it against the window-frame.

"Pray come in, Mr. Stewart."

"Any time will do for me," he said, without looking back in my direction, as he stalked down the garden path, "it's nothing particular—sorry to disturb you and the parson."

He appeared to have his brother's objections to the clergy that morning. Mr. Crease heard the remark, and when I turned round I found him quite scarlet in the face.

He gave a feeble little laugh, however.

"Very abrupt I have always found Mr. Richard Stewart, Miss Casey."

"Yes, he is abrupt at times."

"Very unlike his brother in that way, but I—I don't know whether I admire his brother more than he, for that matter. We shall all be sorry when Richard Stewart goes away."

"Has he spoken of going away?"

"He leaves your brother's service shortly, I believe. I think there is no doubt that he will go to Edinburgh, and make a fortune after his brother's fashion. He has been lost in Wilthorpe—his energy takes my breath away completely at times. By the way, did you ever understand him thoroughly?"

"I think I understand him—not always, perhaps."

"The villagers don't understand him—some call him hard and unsympathetic; others, and they are the best sort, speak well of him and of the help he has been to them in real trouble, for all his scoldings of them—and in real trouble we find our best friends, Miss Casey."

"Yes."

"Therefore, for many reasons, I shall be sorry to see the back of Richard Stewart, despite the contempt with which he treats me out of the pulpit. I shall call at his cottage to-night, and have a long talk with him. I fancy he has grown more serious of late, and something may be troubling him which I may be able to set right."

I doubted Mr. Crease's power to set right any troubles of Richard Stewart; but I did not damp his hopes upon the subject. Next day I anticipated a visit from the latter, but he did not call upon me. In the evening, and in the village, I met, not Mr. Stewart, but Mr. Crease again. Mr. Crease was walking in the middle of the road, with his hands behind him, and his face bent downwards—a fashion in walking which he had adopted from his first coming to Wilthorpe. Meeting suddenly with the curate was always to confuse him; my "Good evening" causing a scuffling of his feet in the roadway, an elevation of his hat, a suffusion of colour to his cheeks.

"Goo—goo—good evening, Miss Casey," he said; "what an exceedingly fine evening, to be sure. Are you going home?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I—I really should like to go with you a little way, if you don't mind *much*," he added.

I did not mind; and though I was surprised at his offering me his arm, I had no suspicion of a truth advancing towards me until the silence following upon his polite attention suggested one disturbing thought. That thought with me and before me, kept me silent in turn, revolving what was best, most prudent, and most kind!

Mr. Crease began suddenly clearing his throat with great vehemence.

"Miss Casey," he said, "I am going simply and straightforwardly to trust you with a little secret of mine. It's very foolish of me, you'll say—but it's as well to put myself out of suspense concerning such a matter, and be the same as usual, or—or something dearer. Miss Casey, I'm really going to ask you to take me for a husband?"

"Oh! dear—I am very sorry," I replied.

"Yes, yes—ahem! I thought you would be. I'm sorry now that I have asked you, or that I did not ask you before Mrs. Kingsworth left that money to you; but you—you will not think I had *that* in my head?"

"No, Sir—not for an instant."

"I—I don't think that I am very mercenary at least, the idea has not struck me before, though a man is naturally a bad judge of his own character. You must forgive me, Miss Casey; but I fear that I have taken you by surprise with my avowal—and, perhaps—*oh! dear!*—you may want time to just think of this a little more. I don't know when I began to love you—I fancy it was the day I saw you at the dinner-party; but then—then, some one else was in the way, a more clever man than I, and one more suited to you, and I saw how little hope there was for me. But when something parted you two—although I was very sorry to see your altered looks—I did hope that you would be free from regrets in time, and perhaps some day think of *me*; or, pardon me for thinking too much about you. God forgive me, I fear it was too much at times!"

"I am sorry that——"

"Yes, yes—you said so before," he hastened to add; "pray don't say it again—it makes my heart sink to hear it. I know how presumptuous all this is on my part, I who haven't a friend in the world who would assist me to rise in it, and still have the impudence to ask you to marry me, and be always poor for my sake. It's not only presumptuous, but preposterous! Still, I did think very often of what a good wife you would make me—how happy at least I would have tried to make you, if you had ever married me. I—I haven't offended you, Miss Casey?"

"No, Sir. A woman is never offended by an honest profession of attachment. But—forgive me saying it, Mr. Crease—I am very sorry to find that you have thought of me in connection with your future. I could not have made you happy—I could not have done

my duty as a minister's wife—I could not—forgive me again—have loved you as you deserved!”

“I would have chanced that. I would have waited, prayed for your love; and I think that in good time, and with God's grace, it would have come.”

“It can never be, Sir,” I murmured. “I am not the woman whom your fancy has depicted. I am an irritable and jealous woman, disguising my discontent by forced composure, and living within myself a life of unrest which it is beyond my power to subdue.”

“You are unhappy—you love Mr. Stewart still. Oh! pray forgive me, I did not think that!”

“Do not think it now, Sir, if you have any esteem for me. It is not true.”

“I will not think so, then. But *you* unhappy!”

“Not unhappy—learning to be content even—looking forward to my own better life; but still irritable and always unworthy.”

“If——” he began, when I checked him.

“You will consider my answer final, Mr. Crease—you will think it best that we should be friends, commonplace acquaintances.”

“I suppose we never shall be really friends after this again,” he said, ruefully.

“I hope we shall. I will forget that you have ever given a thought to me.”

“Thank you—you are very kind—you will forget more easily than I shall. It is natural,” he added with a little sigh.

He did not press his suit further; he read the hopelessness of its nature in my answer to him, and he changed the topic of conversation. But it was an ill attempt that night to drift into another channel; on his part it was a miserable failure. The depth of his voice, the embarrassment of his manner, all betrayed his disappointment, and when we were near Meadow House he darted at a tangent back to the interdicted subject.

“You *will* try and not think the worst of me for all that I have said to-night,” he stammered. “I was rash in alarming you—I should have considered the matter a few years longer—or made more evident the state of my feelings as regarded you. It should have been my place to judge from your demeanour whether it were politic on my part to attempt a confession. But I was never a wise man; you *will* forget all this, Miss Casey.”

“I am only sorry that you should not have thought of some one——”

“There, please don't say anything about being sorry again,” he said, hastily; “we'll forget it, both of us, and be friends. Good evening.”

“Good evening, Mr. Crease.”

He held my hand in his, and hoped once more that I should not think the worst of him for betraying the secret of his love to me;

then he went away, strangely humble and downcast. It was but a few paces from my house now, and I went forwards very thoughtfully towards it; the evening had deepened, and the crescent moon was shimmering above me—all was peaceful and still—a strange contrast to that night when Mr. Stewart made known *his* intentions, and won my heart, only to disregard its love.

I was depressed in spirit; I regretted the power that I had to disappoint so good a man as he who had just quitted me, and the want of foresight that had not detected the warmth of his attachment and checked it in its early days. But he had been always grave, matter-of-fact, and kind; earnest in his duties, and neglecting nothing for them; the smile and soft words that he had had for me, he had had for all with whom he had come in contact. He had been ever to my knowledge a true gentleman and a good christian, and I had not associated him with my past worldliness.

I told him the truth when I had spoken of being an irritable and jealous woman; the reader has seen me at my best. My heart's despondency, or its rebellion, I have not always set upon paper to him who has followed this biography. I had tried to feel content, and I was very sure of being content presently, but there was not peace within me yet. They with whom my life had been lately spent were separating one from another, and there was mystery in their midst still.

Looking up at last as I reached my garden fence, I was a little startled to find Richard Stewart standing with his back against the wicket, his cap tilted forwards over his eyes, his arms folded in bravo fashion on his broad chest. He quite made me jump to come thus suddenly upon him.

"I had no idea that you were so close at hand, Mr. Stewart."

"No, I suppose not. Probably you thought that I had left Wilthorpe without saying good-bye to you—that was more like me and my ways."

"You haven't come to say good-bye now?" I asked.

"Yes, I have," he said, bluntly. "I've kept my word, and given up my post. I'm as free as air to-night!"

He did not say it in an exultant manner; but in a deep angry voice, that told of the change affecting him.

"Then you leave Wilthorpe as well as my brother's service?"

"Of course. What have I to stay here for?"

"Nothing."

"Mark will be here to-morrow or the next day. And I don't care," he added, moodily, "to see *him*."

"You bear malice against him yet?"

"If to pray for his success in life, his health, his happiness, is malice—yes."

"But——"

"But I have disowned him for a brother, whilst he acts a part at

variance with his nature. The end is approaching, now Miss Mannington has even cause for suspicion. Mark and I will be good friends again, perhaps; I may come back here to bid him welcome to his old self—I hope so. What's that parson had to say to you?"

This question followed so rapidly upon his remarks on Mark, and was put so suddenly, that I coloured, and lost my composure for an instant.

"Don't let him follow you about, and talk his smooth nonsense to you, Bertha Casey," he said, sternly; "he dogs your steps; he is like all priests, Protestant or Roman Catholic, sly, quiet, and insidious, stealing his way towards a woman like a fox!"

"Sir!"

"Oh! you may fire up if you like!" he said, elevating his voice at my remonstrance, "but I won't have this black-frocked fellow marrying you—this inane old-fashioned beggarly curate, who is imposed upon by every man and woman that chooses to whine forth a complaint. He should have been born a girl, and worn frilled trousers!"

"Have you been waiting here to tell me this?" I asked, in the most cold and cutting manner I could assume.

"No. But waiting here, I find you coming up the road together, arm-in-arm, quite a pretty picture in the moonlight. And it must not be!"

"Good night, Mr. Stewart."

"I say it must not be!" he vociferated, catching at my arm as I attempted to pass him; "you must not be flattered by the attentions of a good man; these good men who preach in pulpits are as selfish and inconsistent as ourselves, and you would be miserable and unhappy with a man like Crease. Besides—besides," he repeated, "you have not forgotten my brother, and he may not have forgotten you. On his side an earnest repentance, and on yours the old love which he did not understand, or understood too well. Miss Casey, I must speak for him yet, whilst there is time. Do you hear?"

"I hear that you insult me. Let me go."

"I would sacrifice all for Mark's happiness," he said, not heeding my reproof, or my demand, "and I have been picturing a brighter time for all of us than this. But if you don't like Mark now, why, all the vivid colouring dies away, and I have no power to stop it."

"Your brother must marry Miss Mannington—if you attempt to sow dissension between those two, you are a villain!"

"I stand apart from both of them; I have been asked one question by Miss Mannington, and have given her the truth in reply—that is villainy, I have committed it."

"Will you leave go my wrist now, Mr. Stewart?"

"Yes—but don't run away without saying good-bye," he said, releasing his hold. "I am not here to exchange angry words, in a parting that may be very long between us both—I came here in all sorrowfulness of heart to say good-bye, and then that creeping Crease skulks up the road with you, and I feel full of hatred and uncharitableness. I'm cooling down now!"

"If you had cooled down before, you would have spared me thinking less of you from this night."

"What do you think of me now, then?"

"That you are always unjust, vain of those opinions which in your own estimation can never be faulty, which lead you to suspect men better than yourself, and insult women who have not the strength or power to defend themselves."

"*Whew!*" said Richard Stewart, letting his arms fall to his side with the weight of my bitter words—I did not know how bitter they were, until I had thought them over again, and repented them; "It is time I went away from here! Now the worst is over, I can look back and see the road I should have taken long ago. I am unjust—I am a villain—I insult a woman, and am a coward, deserving of such womanly scorn as yours! With that last greeting for my farewell words, I bid you good-bye, Miss Casey."

He raised his cap from his head, and turned away leaving me rooted to the spot, and watching him, despite of me. He went on, never looking back in my direction—never, perhaps, to think of me again. In a parting that he had thought would be very long between us, both had had no mercy, but had hacked and hewn at each other's best thoughts, as though we would deface all gentler memories before we went our separate ways. If he had been ungenerous, I had been cruel; he was excited and had spoken hastily; and though I was not to see him any more, I could not forgive him or restrain my harshness. I was an irritable and jealous woman—I had told Mr. Crease so that night. It was a true verdict on myself, and I accepted it, in shame and in tears.

CHAPTER V.

AMENDE HONORABLE.

I WAS more sorry the next morning that I had parted ill friends with Richard Stewart, than on the night preceding. We had been both in the wrong; but I, a woman whose mission was to forgive and to think before I spoke hastily, was more to blame than he. In the morning, with the bright sunlight on my thoughts I felt this as acutely as in the night-time when I had held counsel with my conscience, and judged myself unsparingly.

Setting aside his foolish, hasty criticism on a good man—a criticism that in his better mood he would heartily repent himself—what had he done? He had shown once more his love for his brother, his anxiety for his happiness; he had come to bid me hope of Mark again, believing that I valued my old love still, and that time, at the expense of poor Bel Mannington, would bring us once more together, and end all happily for me! It was just possible that this persistence in setting down Mark Stewart for me, had engendered more anger than his fierce attack on the Curate of Wilthorpe; that this belief in his brother's power to make my heart leap, had rendered my tongue unruly and unmerciful. I had been given up for good, when Mark Stewart cancelled our engagement; I had been strengthened by my woman's pride to think no more of him, when his new love for Isabel had set a barrier irrevocable between us. After that he grew out of my liking, and all the powers in the world, and all the love-philtres of old story-books, could not have brought him back again.

Then to think of all this in the sober morning, was to pain me very much; to think of Richard Stewart going away "for good," with such last words as mine ringing in his ears, was to cancel every fair remembrance that he had had of me. Long ago he had been like a dear brother—kind, considerate, and watchful, and I did not care to forfeit his respect by words of which in less angry moments I repented.

I was sorry, and I resolved on the difficult, even humiliating task of telling him so, if he had not already left the village. I would simply inform him that I had not spoken from the heart last night; that I regretted his departure from Wilthorpe, and wished him well in his new life. I would shake hands with him, and bid him farewell decorously. Over my breakfast I was beset with the fear that

he had already left Wilthorpe, and that the chance was lost to me; he would not have come to say good-bye last night, had he not purposed leaving at a very early hour that morning. Still I would proceed to his cottage, and not lose a chance. Making the attempt to bury the war-hatchet, was better than sitting idly there, staring at my distorted face in the tea-pot. I dressed myself hastily, and set forth alone upon my journey. It was another fair, sunshiny day, giving promise of heat and drought very shortly. I went along the road towards the Hall quite nervously; I had never proceeded on so exceptional a mission as that of begging pardon for past offences, and promising never to do so again! I did not know how proud I really was until that day. Had it not been for the consciousness of little time to spare, of the probability of Richard Stewart's departure, I should have turned back even at the last, and trusted to the future to soften all bad impressions left with the land-bailiff. The bend of the road brought the cottage in sight—when I saw the shutters closed upon the lower windows, my heart sank very much—until it leaped into my throat by a voice very close to my ears!

“Where are you going, Miss Casey?”

It was Richard Stewart, who had been following me, or striving to overtake me, for the last five minutes.

“I have been in the village—then I came back to your house, and Emma Eaves told me that you had gone out, which I did not believe, until I caught sight of you along this road.”

“What did you want with me?” I asked.

I forgot my first resolve—my good and amiable intentions. I was far more curious to know for what reason he had called at Meadow House that morning—rather vexed that I had not stayed at home a little longer, and not been caught hurrying as for my life towards his cottage.

“I'll tell you!”

We continued to walk towards the Hall; he was at my side now, and looking at me.

“When I got home last night,” he began, “I did not feel any the happier for your last words, or any the more satisfied with my behaviour. I had intended to reach Peterborough at an early hour, but yesternight's parting stopped me, and one day, after all, made little difference. I had done wrong, and whenever I do wrong I try to make all the atonement in my power. That's fair, isn't it?”

“Yes—that is fair,” I echoed.

“I found this morning that I could not go away leaving you impressed with my viciousness, and rudeness. I was a country clown, who had taken offence at something which did not concern me; and I had offended you, and behaved altogether like—like a beast as I am!”

“Mr. Stewart, I forgive you every word that you uttered last night.”

I was a hypocrite. I was very glad that it was in my power to offer forgiveness and not to ask for it—glad that it had all ended so satisfactorily for me. But I was exultant too soon, as his next words proved.

“And you, who were angry with me for my insolence, did not exactly mean all that you said? I shall never forget those words—they are hissing in my ears now, horribly! You did not mean them?”

I made the *amende honorable* then. It was my duty, and I had gone forth that morning to fulfil it. The task had become more easy than I fancied.

“No, I did not mean them! But you were ill-tempered, and I was cross and vixenish; you must not think anything more of last night.”

“Thank you, Miss Casey, for saying this; I don’t care how soon I go now—*this* was worth stopping for!”

I almost wished that he would leave me now; we were better friends, and there was nothing more to say. Presently, I should have to turn round and confess that I was walking along that country road without a single object in view!

“May I speak about Mr. Crease again?” he asked, quite humbly.

“If you will spare me any harsh comments upon a man who is good, honest and pure-minded.”

“He’s a good fellow,” said Richard Stewart, rapidly; “too mild and simple for this world. I regret that I said one word against him; but he—he put me out of temper last night.”

“Because he walked home with me?”

“Exactly. You were absent, and I waited at the gate till your return, thinking of my parting with you, wondering if you would be sorry at my going, if I could speak a word for Mark, if you ever thought of Mark now, and I could only find out that before I went away—half a hundred such thoughts as these all distracting me, making me feel very miserable and unsettled when *that*—that friend of yours came up the road with you!”

“And you dislike him?”

“I did not feel very much inclined to love him last night. Only a few days since I found him quite at home in your parlour; yesterday he was with you once more, and I could see which way affairs were going with *him* at least.”

I did not answer. He had seen more clearly than myself, and that was not pleasant to acknowledge.

“He finished me! He gave me the horrors. I knew that you had always respected him and his goodness, and that if he fell in love with you, pity, if nothing else, might take you into his arms. And watching him I thought of you and Mark, and of what I had done for Mark, and felt savage to think that all was to end after

another fashion! Miss Casey are you going to marry Mr. Crease? Have you a thought that way? I have no right to put this question to you, save as the brother I was *once*."

"I have no intention of marrying Mr. Crease."

"He has asked you?"

"I cannot answer that."

"I will not press the question—I am too curious, and you are right to rebuke me. I talk to you, and seek to brow-beat you, as though you were one of poor Mrs. Kingsworth's tenants. You and Mark some day will ——"

"I will not hear this!" I cried, losing my composure once more; "I will not have this coupling of our names together!"

"I shall return some day and find you man and wife," he said, paying no heed to my remonstrance. "Coming from abroad—perhaps, quite a traveller in my way—I shall open the door and offer a hand to each of you, and you will laugh at me and say, 'After all, brother Richard, you were the true prophet!'"

"It will never be," I affirmed, "and you wound me very much by this constant reiteration of a painful subject."

"Miss Casey, it must be," he said, very firmly; "pardon me a few more words, but I think it *will* be some day. Miss Mannington is not fit for him, and his true self will come back—there is too much nobility of soul in him to keep it down. His is a transition state. When long ago I advised you to give him up, I meant in my heart only for a while, till he had less to trouble him. For that reason, when you were parted, I hoped on, even when he was engaged to Miss Mannington, and we had quarrelled. Before all, I saw that you and he would meet again—that you had not forgotten him. When I discovered—don't be very much alarmed at this, for I am going to vanish away from you in a minute—that I thought too much of you myself, and that you were the only woman in the world with whom I could have known happiness, I fought hard for Mark's sake still, and still more for yours. I saw where the real happiness lay in wait for you both, and I drove your image out of my heart, and stamped down in its grave the temptation to affront you with my rashness. I was a man unfit for woman's society, harsh and abrupt at my best. I had lived long alone, and my own will had grown upon me. In a year I should have broken your heart, if by any miracle I could have persuaded you to take my name. I knew what was best for you, and I fought hard with that love which you won from me unconsciously."

"Pray say no more," I urged feebly.

"I won my battle," he continued; "I set you apart from any thought of mine, and I taught myself to believe in that future which I have just tried—very vainly—to sketch forth. But in that belief let me go away still—don't assure me at the last that every chance of your happiness with Mark has passed away for ever."

"It has passed away and I do not regret it."

"No, no; let me take away one hope—let me come back to see that hope fulfilled. Try and think of what he was in the old time; and the past love you had for him *must* return. It returns with me for him; and he was dearer to you than he has ever been to me, or you are no true woman."

"You are his brother—I was a stranger to him till we met at Wilthorpe. When he tired of me, I thought my heart was broken; but that was long ago, and I have acted like a true woman in forgetting him."

"Yes. But when——"

"You will say no more," I interrupted. "Richard Stewart, I ask you as a favour to be silent, now."

"I am too much your friend not to obey you," he said; "possess too much knowledge of life not to have that hope of your bright future which you, scarcely knowing yourself, deny so earnestly. God bless you, and good-bye!"

He extended his hand, and I placed mine within it. He shook it long and heartily in his, and then turned back, and left me at last to pursue my purposeless journey. Once I looked behind, and he was watching me; he waved his cap in the distance, and I fluttered my handkerchief as a farewell signal. So we parted better friends than last night warranted.

But I was troubled—more than ever troubled by his revelation. From the rapid confession of his hopes and fears—those of the past and the future, strangely commingled as they had been—loomed one great truth that I had not owned to my heart before that time.

I went out of the high-road to think of it—striking off into a right-of-way through the woodland and parkland of John Kingsworth's large estate. I was glad to feel myself alone there—to be able to sit down under the great-leaved trees, and wonder at the revelation Richard Stewart had made. It had been my fortune—or misfortune, which?—to have aroused his interest in me—that pity from which had evolved, after the old rule, the love akin to it.

And he had outlived it—stamped it down in its grave, were his words! In his estimation of himself he had not considered it possible to be loved, and he had read, he thought, day after day, sure evidence of a passion for his brother, and that had taught him to say nothing. Going away the secret had escaped him for the first time, and confirmed the suspicions that I would not own, until he had betrayed himself. Then I could look back and remember many slight evidences of an interest which had startled me at times. And looking back, I did not feel so sorry that he had loved me in his day, as I had done in Mr. Crease's case.

I did not pity Richard Stewart; neither did I try to account for that new, inexplicable feeling that brought the tears into my eyes that morning.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE LEES.

I WAS surprised the next day by a visit from Mr. Mannington, a gentleman whom I had believed was many miles away from me. He came in looking so grave that I exclaimed at once,

"Has anything happened? Is Bel ill?"

"I am sorry to say she is. Not so ill as to render her confinement to the house necessary, but excitable and nervous, and strange in her ways. Miss Casey, she is wearing me to death!"

"Where is she?"

"She is at Folkestone. We went by easy stages to the Kentish coast. I had intended to cross the Channel with her, and see if change on the Continent would do her good; but she was taken seriously ill at the hotel, or became seriously opposed to any change; and there she is—at the Pavilion. She will not go forward; she will not come back; she's driving me mad, Miss Casey. It's all the old, variable eccentricities over again."

"She wishes to see me?"

"Yes. I wanted to telegraph to you, but she insisted upon my fetching you; she was not satisfied with any message, and she told me very plainly, that I made her nervous. Good God! why, she has made me so nervous watching her that I cannot keep a limb of me still!"

"Her mind is not disturbed, Mr. Mannington?"

"It's not very settled just at present," he replied. "The fact is, Miss Casey, that it is useless to beat about the bush in this matter, she has began to distrust the genuineness of Mr. Stewart's intentions. She asserts to the contrary, but she could never hide a trouble, and it escapes her at every moment. Best for her that she and Mr. Stewart should meet at once and explain these things. I—I have written to Mr. Stewart, on my own responsibility."

"You have not said anything to wound his pride?"

"I have asserted my own in a quiet gentlemanly manner," he said, confidently, "and have merely asked him for an explanation, or to run over to Folkestone and offer that explanation for himself. I have spoken like a father to him."

"You have done wrong I fear."

"Suspense is worrying my child to death—she is not strong-minded, and the sooner the matter is settled, for better for worse,

the sooner will Isabel be composed. Don't you think so, Miss Casey?"

"Mr. Stewart is expected in Wilthorpe in the course of next week."

"Why should we wait a week for Mr. Stewart's pleasure?" said Mr. Mannington.

"Perhaps it is best. I am at your command—when shall we start for Folkestone?"

"My dear Miss Casey, I—I don't think of going back with you. The fact is, I must have rest—I'm completely shattered, body and mind, by Bel's vagaries—I never could stand them—and I have come to you, the one friend of the family in whom I can trust, to beg you as a favour to undertake the guardianship of Isabel until Mr. Stewart has seen her, or you return hither. I always objected to scenes, and if there's to be one, I would so much rather be out of the way—I would, indeed!"

Mr. Mannington was never cunning enough to hide his selfishness and cowardice—in his flattery of me, he but betrayed his weakness—in his anxiety to shift the care of his daughter into my hands, he betrayed it more. Still I offered no resistance; I was glad of an excuse to be away in search of adventure again; I felt that I might be of service to Isabel in this crisis of her life approaching; I remembered that I had promised Mrs. Kingsworth ever to be at hand, her friend and counsellor, in the emergencies that might arise.

"I will go at once. I will take Emma with me."

"Thank you, Miss Casey. I am for ever indebted to you!"

And Mr. Mannington was really grateful for once in his life.

"You will find," he added, "that she is not alone. I have left her in charge of a very nice family for to-day—she expects you this evening. I am sure she will be as glad to see your face as she was—my back," he added, drily.

He thanked me again for my willingness to expedite my departure—I have no doubt that he congratulated himself upon his persuasive powers, and gave me little credit for my affection for his daughter. I left him to return to his own home, to the "peace and quietness" he sought there, and went away to Peterborough that very morning, with my faithful *aide-de-camp*.

Before Mr. Mannington bade me adieu, he asked another favour of me; it was a very slight one and I granted it.

"If, as I hope and trust," he said, "Mr. Stewart really can clear himself of any attempt to win my daughter for her money—I am generous, and do not seek to interfere in this matter, it rests entirely between Bel and him—let me beg of you to telegraph at once to me. I shall be very anxious to know the result, and welcome all three of you at Wilthorpe as soon as possible. You will remember this?"

"I will."

With this promise I went away in search of my ward once more, and on the evening of that day I stepped, for the first time in my life, on Kentish ground.

Emma Eaves and I found no difficulty in discovering the Pavilion Hotel. One step from the Harbour Station brought it into view, bright with its lights and life that dull grey evening. We passed to the lawn stretching before the hotel, intending a short cut across it to our destination, when a lady, sauntering there with her companion, broke away and ran towards us, calling out my name.

"Oh! I am so glad that you have come—I was afraid that something would stop you—he has not come back with you—I am glad of that too!"

"Don't say that, Bel."

"You and Emma Eaves, two friends at once! why, these are the old days coming back again! And I *am* glad he has not come—I told him if he dared to return, I would run away from him."

"Patience, Bel—where is the patience that you promised?"

"Oh! I am patient; I will tell you presently all that has disturbed me, just a little. Emma, ask somebody to show you Miss Casey's room, and get it ready for her, will you?"

Emma took the hint, and went away at once. Bel was drawing me away from the Pavilion to a second strip of garden-lawn running behind the great hotel, when her companion advanced towards me.

"Miss Casey, I presume?"

I bowed.

"Miss Mannington has been expecting you all day, and becoming somewhat excited lest you should delay your departure from Peterborough. Miss M., you will introduce me to your friend."

"Oh! Miss Casey—Mrs. De Burgh—*there!* Come on, Bertie!"

I did not withdraw at once, and Bel somewhat impatiently released her hand from my arm and walked away.

Mrs. De Burgh took that opportunity to speak her mind with an energy and volubility that I could scarcely follow.

"You will excuse me, Miss Dasey; but if you be a friend of Mr. Mannington's you must allow me to express my feelings—my wounded feelings—on this most remarkable occasion. Mr. Mannington has taken advantage of my presence at this hotel to place his mad daughter in my charge, without my consent, or without any consideration for me in any manner whatever. I don't know much of Mr. Mannington—I was introduced to him eight years ago, and his memory has been more tenacious than mine. I have been staying here with my daughter for the benefit of my health. I have been recommended by the best physicians perfect abstinence from all excitement; and yet he takes an opportunity of sending into my private room a note that he has been compelled to leave suddenly for some out-of-the-way place or other, and that if I would take charge

of his daughter until the arrival of a Miss Basey—Casey—Irish, I presume?—he would esteem it as a considerable favour; and before I could expostulate, or rise from my bed, Mr. Mannington was gone. Mr. Mannington knew well enough that I was a woman of principle, and that my duty would compel me to take charge of the poor child. I have been all my life trying to do my duty in that state of life in which I have been placed by a merciful Providence; and the charge was forced upon me, without my consent, as I said before; for Miss Mannington in less than five minutes insulted my daughter, who refused to have anything more to say to her, and, besides, was engaged at a picnic party. So I have had the whole responsibility thrust upon me; and Miss Mannington is far from well, and eccentric, and subject to fits of crying, that makes one cry to hear her, which is bad for me—very, very bad! And if you will kindly favour me with Mr. Mannington's address, I will take the liberty, when I am more composed, of writing to that gentleman, and expressing my surprise at his discourteous conduct."

I gave her the address, and she was retiring when I stopped her.

"This girl you call mad? Madam, you do not mean that?"

"She is eccentric, and terribly obstinate. There is evidently something on her mind, though I have found it impossible to get at it myself. Good evening."

Bel Mannington, who had been walking up and down the lawn, observant of our dialogue, came swiftly to me as Mrs. De Burgh and I parted.

"What has she been saying?"

"Merely expressing a little surprise at your father leaving you in charge to her."

"Well she might," answered Bel; *it was* a liberty. I know nothing of the woman—I never want to know her or see her again. Why could I not have been left to myself for a few hours, instead of having these strangers thrust upon me? I am best alone."

"You are in trouble, Bel—has anything new transpired since I saw you last?"

"I will tell you. I have been indignant at a few shallow attempts to deceive me. I have resisted that indignity, proffered though it was by my own father. Oh! Bertie, I am very miserable!"

"The old promise once more, Bel. Patience!"

"I have now and then a hope; for my father is too anxious to strengthen my fears, and that renders me suspicious of foul play. Is it not hard to say this of one I am told to love and honour?"

"He may mean well."

It was a trite remark, and failed to re-assure her.

"He would have taken me for a long journey on the Continent, to separate me from Mr. Stewart—to rouse his anger, perhaps, at my departure without an explanation. That scheme failing—for I would not stir hence—I was very miserable waiting for the truth; my

father wrote to Mr. Stewart without my knowledge, and insulted him. I know he did, by the answer which reached us, and which I would read for myself. Mr. Stewart would come to Folkestone at once, and see Mr. Mannington, he said; by letter, he declined on principle all explanation. That letter came last night—last night my father ran away to Wilthorpe, leaving a note for me that he had left me in charge of Mrs. De Burgh, and would send you immediately to take his place.”

“At least he keeps his word, Bel.”

“He was afraid of meeting the truth.”

“He was not well—he had found the task of taking care of you too much for him.”

“I have been very quiet. More than once I have remembered that he was my father, and that perhaps I was not loving or dutiful enough for him. Trying to please him, and ever baffled by a manner showing little love for me—trying, Bertie, to be patient too, and abide by your advice—trying to believe that my happiness was coming towards me, not fading in the distance—trying and failing in that last belief, and giving way more and more; for I was never strong!”

“We will hope for the best; until the worst faces us, we have time enough to ignore its advance.”

“Is that policy?”

“The worst may never come—I am very hopeful, Bertie.”

“Hopeful!—the only one hopeful of all who know Mark Stewart!”

I was hopeful *then*. In Mark Stewart seeking Isabel Mannington for anything save love, was beyond my comprehension.

“When will Mr. Stewart arrive?”

“In a day or two,” he said; “he wrote to me, also, a line apprising me of his coming hither—a cold, brief letter enough for him—presaging the future. Never mind when it is all over, I shall be strong enough to bear it. It is only this uncertainty that worries me!”

Fragile and excitable, I wondered what strength would be left her if the worst she feared should come upon her then. She had lost confidence in her father already—if, after all, the lover were unfaithful, she would be left with only a weak woman like herself to trust in and to take her part.

“Bertie, if I had never had this money, or if my aunt had lived a few years longer, and seen my marriage-day, my father would have loved me better.”

“Pray do not entertain these morbid thoughts concerning him!”

“Here and there, some poor woman is doomed to an unsympathizing father,” she said with a sigh; “I fear it is my lot, though I will be hopeful yet of him. But he is fond of money—before we came to

Wiltorpe Hall he was a miser, and my aunt knew that—in my aunt's will he has been bitterly disappointed."

"Through John Kingsworth?"

"Yes. He had built upon the Hall being left to him, or me. The interest of the money that was bequeathed to me is his, if I remain single for three more years."

"Ah! you are not nineteen years of age yet!—you are a girl sorrowing about your future," I said in a lighter tone; "why, Bel, even if there be a disappointment, it will come so early, like my own, that you will be scarcely a woman when the heart is free again!"

"Like your own disappointment!" she said, catching at those words, of which I had already repented. "Yes, you were deceived in him. He was false to you."

I could not confess to her that his brother had made that falsity assume colours less dark to me; I gave my own old version of the story, and I believed in it still.

"He was bewitched by one more fitted for him, Bel. A light-hearted, happy girl, who would have made his home bright after business hours were over."

"Don't speak of that. I know what might have been, and what will be. I am prepared."

"Shall we go in now?"

"Ah! you are tired with your journey, and I am selfish to keep you here. Let us come into my private room. I am more happy and content now you are here—you, the rival! Poor Mrs. De Burgh!—perhaps I did worry her a little too much to-day. I'll beg her pardon in the morning."

In the morning Mrs. De Burgh had escaped the proposed apology by leaving for Boulogne, with her daughter, by an early boat. In the morning we took our usual places by Bel's side—the old home-places, that made even an hotel look home-like.

Emma Eaves begged to be her maid; and the maid in office was deposed, but kept upon full wages. The deposed one put up with the slight for the sake of the extra liberty, and would have grown confidential with Emma about the "young missus's tantrums," had not Emma snubbed her for her confidence.

Forgetting everything but my desire to assist Bel Mannington, I began the old times with her. I did my best to keep her strong, to chase those thoughts away which, besetting her, could do no good. She showed no excitability with me, but was a staid young woman for her years. All that day we spent in wandering along the Lower Sandgate Road, with the bright smooth sea asleep in the sunshine on our left. It was another day in which to rejoice and have no fear of evil—all so fair beyond, and yet so treacherous in its fairness.

There were little groups of pleasure-seekers on the beach, a band of music playing, happy children dancing to and fro, all the bright confusion of a watering place in its season. Bel was too restless to

remain with the crowd; we passed them and went on, pausing now and then to rest upon the green cliffs that sloped towards the sea-beach. In the afternoon we were out again. A military band was braying its loudest on our lawn, and all the rank and fashion in Folkestone came in their finest feathers to parade, after the custom of the English—and a pleasant custom, too, if one is full of spirits, and fond of company.

But our spirits were at zero, and the music jarred upon our nerves. We were two women waiting a sentence, so we were glad to escape, and leave lighter hearts to this high holiday.

"I would not have him come to find me in that crowd of people for the world!" said Bel, as she hurried me away.

In the evening we waited for him, but he did not appear. The air was hot and stifling in the house that night, and as the clock struck eight Bel said:

"Let us go out on the cliffs—he will not come till to-morrow now."

When we were toiling up the steep hill leading to the Lees—as the high ground is termed at Folkestone—Bel said:

"He is in no hurry to take pity on my natural suspense!"

"It is a long journey from Edinburgh; he has to travel by two railways."

"If he had good news, with which to make my heart light, he would have been here before this, Bertie."

"You cannot say that. Till he is with you, at your side, do not prejudge him."

It had been my own mistake, I thought—if Richard Stewart were right—and it had left me there, a single woman to support my friend. Reaching the Lees, we found the very crowd of loiterers whom we had been all day studying to shun. We went through them to the end of the Lees, the grass worn into ruts and hollows by the feet of fashion there, and strolled a little way along the cliff. The evening was very still, the stars were already out, the night was coming on. Across the still, mirror-like sea, was banked a mass of cloud, which looked ominous for the morrow's fairness. As we stood and gazed at it, the lightning flashed from its depths, and startled us.

"There will be a storm to-night, Bel; you were afraid of lightning when I knew you first."

"I have got over that fear."

The cloud-bank gathered height and width, and deepened in blackness as it spread; the stars became misty and obscure; there was a strange murmur over the broad fields where the corn had been cut, and the harvest gathered in.

"We will get nearer home, at all events, Bel," I suggested.

A return to the Lees proved that the same idea had seized the visitors; people were hurrying away homewards. A few whose houses were adjacent lingered still, and dared the coming storm like

us. Bel and I chose the first seat towards the town, and sat watching the lightning, still far away, and flickering at sea, troubling, perhaps, the fishermen, who had started earlier with their nets.

We were almost left alone, at last; when the thunder-mutterings were audible, and every star had disappeared, the Lees were still enough. Occasionally the foot-fall of a straggler passed behind us, or a dress rustled by; the sparks of a cigar, blown by the light breeze that had arisen, I can see now, part of that picture, scurrying along in the night, in advance of a man coming up the slope towards us.

"Mark!" said Isabel, suddenly, leaning forwards and looking down the white chalk road that led from the town.

"I should think not; pray keep still, and if it be he, courage!"

I knew that it was he the next instant, dark and indistinct as his figure was presented to us. I knew it by foreknowledge and went on:

"And if it be Mark Stewart, we will meet him boldly, and bear boldly all our disappointments. Only a man, not a demigod, Bel Mannington!"

Her hand stole through my arm, and it trembled very much upon it. My own heart bled for the weakness of this child, and feared for her defence—feared for that, at least, in vain! As he came nearer her hand steadied itself wondrously; and turning to glance into her face, I noticed, even through the murkiness of that night, how set it was, and how well its firmness became her. As I looked, the lightning, blue, and more vivid, flashed across it, and showed it almost marble in its new rigidity.

He was unconscious of our waiting there, waiting as if for him. He stood at the summit of the hill, with his hand upon the iron railing, and looked out to sea; then he moved on, and would have passed, had not Bel called him by his Christian name.

He turned and came towards us at once.

"I have just arrived," he said; "I did not anticipate calling upon you till the morning—I came up here for a little rest and thought, not dreaming that we should meet to-night."

He seemed surprised at my appearance there; but did not allude to it in any way. He took his cigar from his mouth, and tossed it over the cliff, then added,

"I will ask you, Isabel, to allow me to leave any explanation I have to make until the morning?"

"I have waited long for it," she answered; "I am prepared for it; and if you are merciful, you will answer me to-night."

"I am in your hands," he said moodily; "I have not a will of my own in this, if you persist."

I half rose to leave these lovers to themselves, but Bel said hastily,

"No, you must not go. You are my witness, Bertie, and must support my charge."

"I did not expect to be confronted with Miss Casey," he said, in a deeper tone; "but I am not displeased to meet her here. I am here to confess to the whole truth, and a witness for or against me does not matter much."

"Confess!" gasped Bel.

The word was ominous enough, and the lightning which flashed again as she spoke, seemed to wither every hope I had had for her. He sat down by Bel's side, and looked down at the ground, with his gloved hands clasped. I had never seen him with his head bent as if with shame before; and for an instant I sorrowed for him more than for Bel. It was a strange humiliation to be sitting there with the two women to whom he had spoken of love, and who had both been won by his professions.

"What do you want to ask of me?" he said.

"Only one or two questions, Mark, that will draw us closer together for all time, or sunder us for ever. You will answer truthfully?"

"I will."

"I have heard lately many things against you—many things that I have tried very hard to disbelieve. I have found out a few truths that require no denial on your part, and that at least speak of a desire to keep me in the dark concerning all that I had a right to know. You were engaged once to Miss Casey?"

"Yes. That you would have known before my marriage, had I not been forestalled in the avowal."

"Whilst that engagement was in force, you met with business losses that brought you to the verge of bankruptcy. You were a poor man—you confessed that to me afterwards—when you asked my aunt for her consent to my engagement with you, and told me of your love. Mark, was it—oh! was it—for my fortune?"

"God forgive me—yes!"

She drew herself away from him, and came shrinking and trembling, closer to me. She folded her hands upon my arms, and held me fast; the whole truth had come to her, and she cared to hear no more. There was no explanation that she wished to listen to after that confession.

"It was a plain question, and I have answered plainly," he said after a pause. "I have no excuse to offer—in my rashness, my pride, my anxiety to save myself, I offered you my hand. It was a grave fault, and the shame of it recoils upon my head."

"Justly," she moaned.

"I was ashamed, though I would not own it, when the impulse had rendered the act irrevocable," he said; "it was my first step away from truth, and I was troubled. At my brother's house I heard the opinion of an honest, clear-sighted man, and could not

brook it. I quarrelled with him, and he has hated me ever since. But there is one extenuating fact to this story—will you hear it?”

The lightning flashed again across our faces, closer and more vividly, and the thunder at last began to warn us of the storm's proximity.

“Let us get home, Bertie, before the storm breaks out,” Bel whispered.”

Mr. Stewart took her silence towards him for consent, and went on—

“I did my best to keep my faith with you—my honour had been pledged to love you, and there was no effort after the early days in my attempt to prove that you were nearest to my heart of all the world. Bel, I loved you! For your confidence in me, your belief in my sincerity, that trust which under all circumstances you showed for me—above all, for *yourself*, I loved you afterwards—I pledge my honour to it.”

Bel Mannington released her hold of me, and sprang to her feet before him. Her bonnet had fallen back on her shoulders, and her dark hair hung about her face. She was at bay now and ready to denounce him. Had the Lees been swarming with the crowd which the threatening night had dispersed, she would have accused him as readily. She had forgotten time and place, and she stood there the woman wronged in her affections, juggled out of them by a few fair words, to demonstrate her sense of injury.

“Sir, you have no honour!” she exclaimed; “it is an empty title with you, and I dispute it! I believe in no love like yours; I see the lust for money through it all, flashing like this lightning about us! You sought me out with love for another in your heart, and deceived me! I will have no more falsehood thrust upon my pride—I cancel the engagement—I never wish in all my life to see or hear of you again! Pass from my sight, a coward, who fell in love with my inheritance, and lied and fawned for it, as cowards always do! *You* offer me your love now as reparation; it is but a further insult, and I cast it back, and will have none of it! Let us get home, Bertie.”

She went at once away from him, down the slanting road towards the town. I followed her—I felt for her and not for him who had deceived her, dearly as I had loved him once. From the pedestal on which I had placed him in my thoughts he fell, devoid of that rare honour with which I had endowed him, and believed in.

The lightning struck the idol that night, and cast it in the dust; and in the days advancing I might mourn for what it had been, not for what it then was!

We left him sitting on the bench, with his hands still clasped and his head bent towards the ground; the storm burst over him, and the heavy rain began to fall, and he remained there, baffled and ashamed. He had come with the fair story of his future; and she

whom he had professed to love had met him with the past, and shivered like glass every fragile excuse he had desired to offer. He had expected a weak girl, ever swayed by a word, and he had encountered an indignant woman, firm and unforgiving as Nemesis.

In the storm and rain and lightning we went home together, she strong yet; in her room she faced me with that new rigid look of hers.

“Was it just?”

“Yes.”

“Were you right, or I?”

“You were right, and I was deceived in him, Bel,” I answered.

“And yet I loved him better!” she cried, wringing her hands; “I would have died for him if he had asked me. I knew that he was poor when he came to Mrs. Kingsworth’s; and I would not shame him with the thought, even then, of seeking me for money. I trusted in him, and am thus rewarded. Oh! if I could die to-night—if the lightning had struck me dead upon the Lees—at the feet of him I thought so noble and so true!”

She sank forwards then, and I caught her in my arms. The battle was over, the victory had been won, and it was the conqueror whom I pressed to my bosom, and whispered of better days than these!

Book VI.

TRUE COLOURS.

CHAPTER I.

TIME FLIES.

TIME went on at its old rate of progression for all the love troubles in Wilthorpe. Twenty-four hours in every day, and sixty minutes in each hour of sorrow, anxiety or mystery for my little world—joy and content for people more fortunate, spinning round somewhere as a counterpoise, in a bright little world of their own. Presently, by the law of change, it might happen that *our* turn for brightness would arrive. I hoped so; I had faith, and I was not weak of heart, or cast down at the shadows on the path of those I loved. I believed in better times, and waited for them. I spoke of better times to two women, who seemed despondent concerning them—two women set apart from their old lovers, neither one-and-twenty years of age, looking at life after fashions of their own, and inclined to think no change was ever likely to bring back hope to them again.

Yes, I was of stouter heart, for I could laugh at their morbidity—albeit the laugh was a little affected, at times, and had not the

true ring about it. I could tell them my own story, and how I had outlived it, and I could charge at their follies, which piled regret on regret, until their own hearts ached with the burden.

They were two young women hard enough to manage, Bel Mannington and Emma Eaves. They were exceptional young women, and required careful treatment; both had been ill-trained, but, fortunately, the mistrust which I had engendered in both minds against me had long since gone the way of evil things. Two years passed over our heads at Wilthorpe without recording much change in us. Emma Eaves became more like her old, irritable self, as no John Kingsworth crossed her path again. She was discontented with his silence, though she had given him up of her own free will, and turned away from a happiness that had been the dream of her whole life; she professed contentment, and yet showed discontent; she was strong always in her resolve to keep her promise to the dead, and yet ever anxious to hear of Kingsworth, troubled when he wrote but seldom to me, and answered but evasively my hopes as to his prospects. He had gone abroad at last, and now and then a letter reached us, always from a fresh part of the colony, telling us that he was well, and travelling about a new world, in the hope of finding a place to suit him exactly!

In all his letters he mentioned Emma Eaves, and made inquiry concerning her—was she well too?—was she married yet? In all his letters he called me his dear sister, and signed himself my brother. The tie of kindred that had been dissolved between us did not weaken the affection we had had as boy and girl together.

“If he should come back some day, and marry *you*,” said Emma Eaves, “I would not mind so much. But I should be very sorry to hear that he had taken a wife abroad.”

“I would not marry John Kingsworth for the world, Em.”

“Ah! you say so now!”

Emma Eaves could not understand any woman not loving John Kingsworth well enough to share her life with him. The hero of her love-story was the only man who had kept his colours bright from beginning to end. Bel and I had given up hero-worship, but this girl, with her wild, earnest, faulty love, held firmly to first convictions!

And Bel Mannington? Well, Bel had borne her disappointment better than I had anticipated; she had given way utterly for a few weeks, had fallen seriously ill, and been nursed by me after her return to Wilthorpe, and then she had sobered wondrously. It was an unnatural soberness, for her nature was against it; it was a staidness that rendered me nervous—a want of power to take interest in passing events, which, in one so young, seemed ominous.

All the variability of her first nature—the light step, the quick repartee, the pleasant aggravating sauciness, the little fits of petu-

lance, and the great fits of passion—generally in resentment of a wrong to others—the self-will which resisted authority, and bore down opposition, all were gone! She was a grave and thoughtful woman at twenty years of age, and when her gravity or her reveries were disturbed, she repaid most intruders on her thoughts by a cool, almost mocking satire, that painfully reminded me of the old lady resting in her grave, oblivious to all the changes since her time.

Bel seemed to imitate the worst traits of her aunt's character; that studied effort to take no interest in outward things, and be ever unimpressed by them, was the old habit of the mistress of the Hall. Would she age like that poor, disappointed woman?—was it a phase of family weakness, developing itself anew in this young life, and calculated to do irreparable harm to it? I would not have it; I would struggle against it with all my power, and make her life a different one! It was my duty still to one who had had great faith in me, and it should not work evil with Bel Mannington for want of weapons to attack it.

Bel had felt a terrible disappointment, and it had changed her. She bore up well, certainly, but I would have preferred her more weak and variable—more like her old self before she fell in love with Mr. Stewart. I should have been able to judge her correctly then; now she puzzled me.

She professed to have got over her disappointment—even to be prepared for any truer, better lover who might take her for herself; she spoke of that old self as though she had returned to it, and it was only my delusion, which looked at her through a distorting medium, and made troubles out of nothing. But she was grateful for my interest in her—only with me would she soften, and show now and then a glimpse of the affection that she had for me; we were staunch friends, and I went two or three times a week with excuses for dragging her into the sunshine, for taking her on a shopping excursion to Woundell, or for a walk over the fields, or a stroll through Wilthorpe Park.

Whether Mr. Mannington cared for my frequent visits or not, I did not attempt to study. I was a young lady of private property, with time on my hands, and a will of my own. He never made me unwelcome, at least; and I have an idea that he was glad to be free of his daughter's gloomy presence. I cannot say; for he had become gloomy himself, and had long since given up any effort to render himself companionable. It was a dull house upon which I intruded now—with Mr. Mannington in one part of it, and Bel in another. He sought change himself, when too much oppressed with the horrors; but he offered no change to his daughter. A more wretched specimen of a father, I never hope to meet again in life. He wandered about the house like an evil spirit, gloomy and distraught; his nerves had given way more with advancing years, and

there was a tremulous motion of his hands like incipient palsy, which it offended him to notice.

Here was another descendant of a family that had always been odd in its way, and invariably unsettled and unhappy. Like his sister, he had made an unhappy match; in many hopes of his life, like his sister still, he had been disappointed. He had loved money for itself, and sacrificed his comforts for the chance of a fortune that had failed him at the last; he had bent his own will to his sister's, and cringed before it like a slave, only to awaken a scorn of him in lieu of gratitude; he had striven very hard, and schemed hard in various ways of life; he had little heart, and less sympathy; but he had been burdened with unmanageable nerves, that rendered petty things of moment to him, and wore him rapidly away. He was becoming a very old man, in outward appearance, when it was summer again, and two years had drifted by since he had sent me on special service into Kent.

In that summer, for the first time, one afternoon in July, Bel Mannington's apathy was suddenly disturbed. I was glad to see the change, and took hope in better times from it. Surely those times would come?—not always, as if by some stern rule, to which no exception was allowed, apart from her and me.

We were sitting at the open French window of her house—the garden lay beyond us—and Mr. Mannington, with his hands in his pockets, was walking up and down the path, light and agile enough still. His slight figure constantly passing and re-passing the window fidgeted me, and reminded me of a wild beast's restlessness. Bel was listlessly turning over the pages of the county paper, searching for an interesting paragraph—a pile of fancy-work in which she had tried to help me was lying neglected at her feet.

Suddenly her voice, sharp and quick as the voice of the old times, arrested my attention.

“Bertie, your brother has made up his mind at last. The Hall is to be sold by order of the proprietor.”

She passed the paper across to me, and I read the announcement in large type—an advertisement of great length, expatiating on the advantages to be derived from the possession of so desirable a mansion and estate. I was glad to see it; the house looked very dull and lonely from the high road, and depressed the village now. There was little life at Wilthorpe, and trade was worse now no great folk were living there. Mrs. Kingsworth, who loved the Hall, would have sorrowed to see its slow decay.

“Bertie, I must have that place!” she said.

“Have the Hall!”

“Yes; by any means in my power. It is the old home; and though I hated it once, when I was a foolish girl, anxious to see the world, I feel now that I should like to live in it again.”

It was a satisfaction to see her interested in any idea; but the

possession of a mansion like that, for a lonely woman, did not appear to me a valuable acquisition, or the most reasonable of thoughts to suggest itself.

Mr. Mannington was arrested in his perambulations by his daughter's voice. He came in looking quite scared at her appeal to him.

"What is it?—what is it?—nothing happened?"

"No. Sit down, please—here's news for you!"

"Not bad news, I hope?"

"No."

He sat down in a capacious arm-chair by the window, and crossed his hands together round his knees, taking a firm hold to keep the signs of palsy down.

"The Hall is to be sold."

"I know it—it's in the papers, Isabel."

"We will buy this place," she said, speaking very clearly and decisively; "it is our natural home, and I am not happy out of it."

"Why, it will fetch fifty thousand pounds!"

"I am twenty-one in a few months—three-fourths of the amount may remain on mortgage, I read—I can afford the first instalment. If I attend the sale, I must have that place! Why did not Mr. Kingsworth offer it to us?" she said, with the first exhibition of her old petulance and inconsistency.

"He did not think we could afford it, or would be ever mad enough to think of an ugly place like that. I always hated it, and I have no money to spare to help you towards completing the purchase."

"The estate is a productive one—I shall be very careful—I shall save! Pa, you will attend this sale for me? The money is no use in my hands—I will spend it."

"We—we'll talk of this to-morrow. Lord have mercy on us, you don't mean to decide in a minute upon sinking all your money! How will you keep up the place, the servants and all that? I—I wouldn't have the responsibility of that house on my shoulders, at my time of life, for double its value. I don't think that I should ever like to go back there. She died there, you know, and it's an unpleasant recollection."

"I have made up my mind!"

"It should have been yours or mine without purchase—she almost promised us that it should," grumbled Mr. Mannington; "we were not treated well."

"She should have disinherited her only son to please you and me, who did so much to embitter her whole life!"

"I did nothing, Bel."

"We might have made her more happy if we had tried a little. Oh! what could I have done, if I had tried, in lieu of being wicked and ungrateful!"

"She thought everybody ungrateful—I did not see it myself," said her father.

"Think about this sale—and that I have made up my mind to try all in my power to become the purchaser."

"You—you can do what you like with your own money—but it's very foolish. It's as mad an action as any of our family ever thought of—throat-cutting and all. But I'll consider it."

He went into the garden again to think of it; incidents out of the common track affected him, and he was more palsy-stricken from that time. He had never been strong-minded to oppose a firm will—he would wind round it, and plot against it, but he never had had the courage to defy it, and in this instance he deferred the topic. There was a month to ensue before the sale, and in that month many things might happen—the owner change his mind, his daughter go mad in earnest, or fifty other less probable events. But the time went by, and Bel wavered not. In this purchase of the Hall a new interest was awakened, and she came often to my house to relate her plans, and to take me with her up the avenue and into the rooms of the place, from which no custodian ever warned us. Bel was of the old family, and seemed to have a right there; I was related, or they thought that I was related, to the new owner in some way, and had a right there also. We were free to wander to and fro about the deserted rooms, unwatched by housekeeper or steward. It seemed home already!

"When I get it, Bertie," she said, "I shall ask you to let Meadow House, and settle here with me. I will constitute Em my maid again, if she be not too proud for the office; and here, as if nothing had happened, will come back a great deal of the old life. As I grow older I should like to become more like my aunt, the proud and grave gentlewoman who ruled this house with dignity!"

"And was unhappy, Bel," I said; "that is a dark thought to settle down with. You have been studying your aunt's character—I know it now!"

"I am a Mannington!"

"Bel, I would give up the thought of purchasing this place," I urged; "you must not settle down here—you so young still. It shadowed your early days—it will oppress your later ones. You will find peace elsewhere—never in this grand and lonely home."

"I have made up my mind—you can hold aloof from me, and make it lonely if you will."

"Always with you whilst you will have me, Bel!"

"That's right," she said. "Why, you are the Dame Goodbody that I used to call you!"

She turned to smile at me, and pleased to see that smile light up her face once more, I clasped her in my arms to kiss her for it.

It was getting brighter, after all, I thought. That ideal scene I called my landscape did not seem so far away from that day.

CHAPTER II.

A SLIGHT ECCENTRICITY.

As the days passed on, and the time of the sale approached, Bel Mannington's decision underwent no change. She was anxious to purchase that house and estate for a sum far in excess of her own fortune; content to saddle herself with a heavy mortgage, the interest of which would be a large sum in itself to pay; satisfied with the chance of obtaining a good agent—as if there were hundreds of Richard Stewarts wanting employment about Wiltthorpe—not daunted by the dismal picture which her father drew of the mortgage foreclosing, demanding the rest of the money, selling up the estate at last, and ruining perhaps her and him.

She must have the Hall; she did not believe that Mr. Kingsworth or his solicitors would ever be hard upon her; she had faith in making the property pay; it was her aunt's house, and Mrs. Kingsworth had never anticipated it going out of the family.

On the day before the sale I received a visit from Mr. Mannington. A private and confidential visit he requested, therefore Em was excluded from my sitting-room; whilst Mr. Mannington sat in a chair facing me, and frightened me with his grimaces, and his shaking hands and knees.

“Miss Casey, I have come to ask you to use your very utmost exertions to-night to turn Bel's mind from this idea. She's really mad—madness is in our family—my mother cut her throat with a razor, and Mrs. Kingsworth was no saner—not a bit. Miss Casey, you have been so long a friend of the family, and I am sure she'll listen to you.”

“I am afraid that you value my persuasive powers at too high a rate, Sir.”

“N—no, I think not,” said he, in reply; “she'll always listen to you, you know. You've got round her somehow—it's a knack you have. It really is a preposterous idea, now, isn't it?”

“It has done her good, at least. Since the adoption of it, she has been a different woman.”

“Oh! yes—certainly different; but it's a question as to whether it's a change for the better—I don't think so.”

“Indeed!”

“It can't be a better change that sets her mind on this ridiculous

scheme. In the first place, it's a whim, and she will repent it. It's a place beyond her means, in the second. And in the third, it's ungrateful of her, I consider it ungrateful of her, after all that I have done."

"I cannot see exactly where the ingratitude lies."

"Mrs. Kingsworth left Bel's money in trust to me—not to the sole executor, Richard Stewart. That was singular, and showed her confidence in me. I have been living on the interest of that money, one thousand and fifty pounds per annum, and it's a great deal to give up. She's not of age for some months yet, and I have no right to give it up—though I will, of course, if she insists upon it."

"And the ingratitude on her part?" I inquired again.

"Is in this. While she remains unmarried, or has no valid reason for expending it, she—she might leave it in my hands to manage for her. I'm not a rich man myself, and it's a large income to give up; for many years I have been at the expense of her board and education, pocket-money, and all manner of things—and it *is* hard!"

"Have you reasoned with her?"

"She's perfectly unreasonable; she always has been an undutiful daughter," he whimpered; "and I can't stand argument. I'm old and shattered—going to pieces fast. I can't live very long, and she might leave me and the money in peace for the little while that I have to live."

"He looked going to pieces whilst he sat there; his chest fell in, his neck was craned forward in a singular manner, and his whole frame shook with nervous agitation. He fought hard for the use of the money a few months longer; he clung to the hope of holding fast to it with a tenacity worthy of his stronger and more money-getting days.

"I will tell her what you have said if you wish it, Mr. Mannington."

"Thank you. How kind you have always been to me and mine!"

"I will tell her the more readily, because I think that this scheme has not been sufficiently considered, and that this large estate, in the hands of a young girl, and encumbered as it will be by a heavy mortgage, may be a source of trouble to her."

"Ah! you see it in my own light. If Bel had only been born as sensible as you, Miss Casey!"

I shivered at the compliment, through the transparency of which I fancied I could read the exultant satisfaction of the gentleman addressing me.

"But you must not build upon my success with her. She is set upon this scheme, and I am sure it is beyond my power to turn her from it."

He hoped not; he prayed not; I must not be too despondent, and mar my persuasions that way. He shook more than ever after my

last assertion; I could see his small eyes looking dreamily over my head, as at an apparition there which haunted him. He gave me a hundred directions as to my best course to pursue, and listening, or affecting to listen, to them, I could almost imagine myself a conspirator plotting against Bel's happiness in my turn.

In the evening I went in search of Isabel Mannington; in the evening, for her own sake, and not in the least for her father's, I endeavoured to depicture the trouble that the establishment would bring her; and I repeated the objections which her father had urged that afternoon.

Bel listened very patiently, then replied,

"I have told you my reasons, Bertie, for obtaining possession of that house. I have made up my mind—I should like trouble with it, when I am in possession—trouble will keep me from stagnating!"

Mr. Mannington came in, and looked askance at his daughter from beneath his shaggy grey eyebrows.

She faced him at once with her resolve.

"Miss Casey has been telling me of your objections, pa," she said; "they are but light ones, and half of them imaginative. I think we shall be more at home in the old Hall—that we *shall* be happy there! It will be like going back to the old life and beginning afresh. You must not try to damp my pleasure by drawing a gloomy picture of my responsibility. I am looking forward to that responsibility with no small satisfaction. Work for my hands, and my brain; and the thoughts which have almost desolated me, dying away in the stirring action of making the estate pay. I shall be quite a business woman, like Aunt Kingsworth, presently!"

The thoughts which had desolated her! For the first time there was the acknowledgment of the grief from which she suffered still; an incentive to turn her thoughts away from one distracting subject for contemplation was sought for now, not shunned. She would be the old Bel Mannington in heart again, and something better than the old Bel Mannington in her riper, steadier womanhood. The Hall might not be the worst investment for her money and time, after all. I had been wrong before in my conclusion as to what was best—I might be so in this.

Mr. Mannington accepted his daughter's resolve as final. He had only suggested the expediency of further consideration of the subject; he would not say another word concerning it; he would attend the sale to-morrow, and bid for it to the last farthing of his daughter's money—to stand as a quarter of the amount paid down for the estate.

It would not require so large a sum as Bel's inheritance to represent that amount; but if there were a competitor "sweet upon the property—an honest competitor," he added with a sigh, "there would be ducks and drakes made of all the cash!"

"You will accompany me to Woundell to-morrow," said Bel; "we will have an afternoon's shopping, and be the first to hear the news when father comes from the 'Black Bear.' I don't see why you and I, Bertie, should not invade the 'Black Bear's' den, and watch the bidding for ourselves."

"Ladies never do such a thing," said Mr. Mannington; "it's quite indelicate. Why, gentlemen and gentlemen's agents will fill the room; and they'll be given sherry and port before the sale begins—it's country fashion—and then they will get stupid, and make stupid remarks. I wouldn't have you there at any cost."

"Well, I may trust you," said Isabel, almost doubtfully; "you must not come to me and say the bidding was too high. I shall know the price in the *Woundell Herald* on Saturday."

"I'll do anything you wish—I have said so. It's *your* money that you are going to fool away, not mine!"

He darted from the subject—presently, from the room, to begin his garden perambulations before the night set in too deeply. We sat in the shadows, "between the lights," and talked of the future. How we planned that future out, and mapped our places therein! I accepted office again as "companion;" there was real pleasure for me to think of going back to the Hall, for I had always loved it. Every turn of the park lane, every dell and glade and bosky thicket were familiar to me—and to any of the great rooms of the mansion I could have found my way blindfolded. I caught the enthusiasm of the speaker, and forgot her rashness, and my own advice. I was a business woman, quick at figures, and could help her to sift business complications with the agent—"if we could but find out Richard Stewart!" said Bel—I was to have my own room again, looking over the front sweep of the lawn, where the deer were fond of basking when the house was quiet, and hurrying down the dip of land into the park when carriages came up the avenue.

The night stole on us before we were aware that the lights had been rung for, and Mr. Mannington had not come in from the garden. Bel, good friends with her father and every one, went out with me in search of him, and found him screwed in a corner of the summer-house, with his fingers to his mouth.

He jumped up at perceiving our approach, and thought he must have fallen asleep there—what time was it? Did anybody want him? He returned with us to the parlour and proposed a hand of whist; he would take dummy, "open dummy," against his daughter and me, and we should play for sixpence a corner.

It was so seldom that he was inclined to be companionable, that we fell in with his views, and commenced the game, with the great oil lamp lighted, the French windows open, and only the muslin curtains drawn, through which filtered the light summer breeze astir that night. Mr. Mannington was an excellent whist-player—whist was his *forte*—and he was at his best that night. His hand

hook a little more with the excitement of the game, and once he dropped his cards face uppermost upon the table, and cursed his own stupidity; but, these minor affairs excepted, he played well, and won our sixpences quite easily.

He was the quick-witted, agreeable host and father, that night—none could judge how pleasant he might have made his own existence, as well as those with whom he had lived, had he been always like that. Perhaps the thought suggested itself to him, for when the last game was over, he looked at Bel Mannington, and sighed heavily.

I went away that night with a better opinion of him—perhaps he was not so selfish and irritable a man; perhaps he had never set the story going of the stolen money, and damaged the good name of John Kingsworth.

He and his daughter called for me the next day in the pony-chaise; he was in the same excellent spirits, suave and agreeable. He reminded me of the day when he drove Emma Eaves and me from Peterborough to Wiltorpe. He spoke of the game at which that we had had last night, and of his easy victory. He would give us our revenge when we got back again—he should not have too many sixpences to spare after all that money had been sunk on Mr. Kingsworth's estate, and he must earn them when he could!

He was attentive to me, and afraid that I was too lightly clad; it might be dark before the sale was over—there were other sales before the one that interested us—and the nights were chilly yet for sitting in an open chaise. He had brought a great-coat himself, and a woollen comforter—he had learned to be very careful of himself, now that he was going to pieces.

It was the second time he had used that phrase since yesterday, and he laughed at it as at a good joke. I remembered the time when any allusion to his state of health excited and irritated him.

We drove into Woundell, and went at once to the "Black Bear," a large hotel that, before the railway days, had done a rare profitable trade in post-horses, and was thriving yet. A respectable hotel, patronized by the gentry—the head-quarters where all great sales by auction came off—a place where public dinners were given in election times, and committees sat on county matters—where the judges put up when they were out in assize times on hanging business.

Round the doors were many old faces—Sir Benjamin Prout's for one. Here were the county magnates at whose dinner-tables we had sat, and whose soirées we had attended in times when our hearts were lighter. Since Mrs. Kingsworth's death I had received only invitations from Mr. Gapwing, and Bel had let her father go alone to all the feasts. Her story had become known, too, and been extensively circulated; Mr. Stewart and she had had a desperate quarrel, and she was dying of a broken heart—"Poor, silly child, what could she expect with that dark face of hers?" it was

whispered was the Honourable Miss Gudgeon's comment upon these facts.

Sir Benjamin Prout came up to the chaise and shook hands with each of us.

"You are better, I am glad to see," he said to Bel.

"I have not been ill, Sir Benjamin," was the quick reply.

"Oh! I beg pardon," he said, colouring; then turning to Mr. Mannington, said,

"You haven't set your heart on having the old place back again, I hope?"

"I should think not," Mr. Mannington replied, winking at us to keep silence; "do you intend making a bid for the Hall?"

"No—I am after Christopher's farm. I would not have the Hall at a gift, without Richard Stewart as manager."

"Who is likely to bid for it?"

"Very few, I think. We're all afraid of it. It'll go for a song."

"I should not be surprised."

Mr. Mannington assisted us to alight, and looked at his watch. A groom of the "Black Bear" led the horse round to the stable.

"Twelve o'clock, and the sale is not till one," Mr. Mannington said; "whatever will you do all the time of the sale?"

"Divide our time equally between the linendraper's and the pastry-cook's," said Bel, saucily.

She was in high spirits that day. The old times *were* coming back!

"Where shall I meet you—say at four?"

"At Huxley's."

"And at five?"

"At Brill's."

"From five wait there till I come. Miss Casey, you'll lose your brooch—allow me—I'm an old man, and the attention don't look peculiar."

Before I could object, or smile at this new pleasantry, or be surprised at his attention, a little miniature brooch—Bel's present to me with her likeness in it—was in his hand.

"The pin's loose—I'd better take care of it till we get back again," he said; "which way are you going?"

"Townwards."

"I have an hour to spare—I'll see you into the town," he said, and offered each an arm.

He escorted us politely into the linendraper's, and then left us, with a jest to the proprietor in attendance not to tempt us with too expensive articles. Half-an-hour afterwards, he made me hold my breath a moment, to find him looking at us through the swing glass-door of the shop. When he saw me he disappeared; but it was a

strange action on the part of Mr. Mannington, and set me wondering at his eccentricity.

We made our purchases, and strolled through the busy little town; noted its architectural adornments before alluded to in this history; wandered about the principal streets, and turned away, both with a shudder, from the reminiscences which a sudden proximity to the town-hall conjured up.

For an instant it was winter time, and the snow was thick in Woundell streets. The lights were brilliant in the upstairs windows, and the guests were dancing in the ball-room once more. Once again there rang in my ears the mad gallop music which had played its accompaniment to the waking from my love-dream. I was glad to dash away from my reverie, and seek to arouse Bel Mannington from hers.

We spent the afternoon shopping after that. Bel seemed inclined to waste her money that day; she would have made her first investment on behalf of the household properties of the Hall, had I not suggested that a disappointment might ensue, and some capitalist at any price outbid her father's modest offers.

At four we were at Huxley's, the lincndraper's, awaiting Mr. Mannington, who came not. At five o'clock we were ensconced at Brill's, the pastry-cook's, sipping our coffee, and expecting good news every instant. At half-past five, Bel looked anxiously at the clock in the private room where we were sitting, and said,

"What a late sale, Bertie!"

At six she rose and said,

"I can't remain in suspense here. Let us leave word for Mr. Mannington to wait till we return. I am anxious to know the result, and the 'Black Bear' will not eat us up, Bertie."

We sallied forth into the street again. The sun was going down behind the market-place, and rendering the top windows on the opposite side of the way aflame with flame; the workmen who lodged at Woundell were coming home; some early tradesmen, wholesale and independent, were putting up the shutters.

Before the "Black Bear" we found a crowd of equipages still; knots of coachmen, and groups discussing their master's business; a Woundell policeman with white Berlin gloves and a cane; several dogs who had turned out to see a coach-dog—ill-tempered and aristocratic—and insult him; and no end of boys. There were stir and bustle before the "Black Bear;" but gentlemen were thinning in the hotel; to all appearances the sale was over, and the attendants thereat were only lingering for a few more words, or a few more glasses.

Sir Benjamin Prout was coming down the two broad steps when Bel broke from my arm, and ran towards him.

"Miss Mannington!" he said, in some surprise.

"The sale is over?"

"Oh! yes—this hour and a half."

"Are we successful—have we got the Hall, Sir Benjamin?"

"You did not bid for it, that I am aware. Your father was not present. It went for an old song, as I thought it would."

"My father—not there!"

"He has not been all day."

"Treachery, Bertie! I ought not to have trusted him. I knew that I was wrong," she said; "I will never forgive him!"

She was hurrying away, when a new thought suggested itself.

"Who has bought the Hall?"

"Oh! you haven't heard? Why, *Richard Stewart!*"

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST APPEAL.

THE reader who has before this divined the grim truth awaiting us—readers who are so quick now-a-days, and *not* to be entrapped—must make due allowance for our dulness. We had not yet seen all the truth; every minute brought it nearer to us, but till we were face to face with it, we could not believe the very worst.

The worst came in due course, and I need not follow our progress to it step by step. Mr. Mannington had decamped with the trust money—and with his own money, if he had ever possessed any—and left his daughter alone in the world. He had shown one bit of sentiment at the last, by taking away her portrait from me; at home we found one evidence of a little thought for her he had abandoned, in five one hundred pound notes spread out on her desk. He had even begun a letter to her, which his trembling hand had not been able to finish. We could make out, from the almost illegible scrawl, that he was sorry; that he was compelled to go; that he had been injured by his sister—always that old grievance with him!—and that he could not account for all the money left in trust, and so had taken the rest to make matters more clearly comprehensible!

Bel was afflicted by her father's abandonment; the loss of the money she did not appear to regret, even though the Hall, by a process not explainable yet, had become the property of Richard Stewart. She felt alone then, despite my friendship; she suffered from the thought that not one of her kith and kin remained; she did not accuse that poor selfish father of hers, but sorrowed for him, and reproached herself for having set him the first example of ingratitude and duplicity.

The ill-news flew apace through this acoustic country, where sound of evil doings travelled with wonderful rapidity. Mr. Mannington's name was registered on the list of black sheep, and the virtuous community, and that portion of the community that had not been found out, cast up their eyes to heaven, and sighed forth—"Who would have thought it!"

Bel Mannington relapsed into her old staid manner after her disappointment and her father's treachery; drew herself into that objectionable moodiness against which I had already protested.

"When you betray me, Bertie, I shall have lost faith in everybody in the world!" she said, one day.

"Do you think I shall?"

"I hope not—you were not frank and open with me concerning that engagement," she said, doubtfully.

"It was *his* wish, Bel—and my fault. But will you taunt me with that past wherein we both have suffered?"

"Forgive me—no," she said, casting her arms round me, "I am only unsettled, and not like myself. You will lose faith in me, not I in you—for I am a wicked woman, undeserving of your love!"

"Let me dismiss the subject, and propose another. When will you come and live with me in my house?"

"Never!"

"You must not live alone in this one any longer. It is altering and aging you. I am your guardian, bound by a promise to your aunt, paid by your aunt five thousand pounds to watch you, whilst you are single in the world—above all, compelled, by my liking for your refractory self, to take you home with me!"

"I shall go forth into the world," she answered, sadly, "try to earn my own living as companion, governess, maid-of-all-work—anything!"

"Not whilst I am alive!"

She smiled faintly at my warmth; taking the smile as a fair sign of a milder mood, I did my best to persuade her that day to keep "house and home" with me. I spoke of my own loneliness—of the comfort we might be to each other—of my wondrous humility, which would have shared her grand home at the Hall for her sake, and her unreasonable pride, that would not share Meadow House for mine.

She was not a firm woman in all things, and the loneliness of her home had oppressed her more than she had imagined—she wavered, and finally gave way. She would stay with me, and share house-keeping expenses with me until her five hundred pounds were gone—*then* she would go forth into the world. I was compelled to agree to these conditions, trusting to my own ability to think of something new when the time came to talk of change.

So she settled down in Meadow House with Em and me. We were three women who had been crossed in love! We three seemed to settle down “for good and all!” What new incident from the misty beyond was to step forth and separate us now? We were not likely to find any fresh lovers, or to wish for them; we should grow formal, old-fashioned, and grey-haired in time; and the little boys of Wilthorpe would point us out as the three old maids, who lived together at the house with the green verandah, and kept “themselves to themselves” so much!

And whilst I was drawing this fancy-picture, the elements of change were brewing round us.

It was a month after the sale, and Mr. Richard Stewart had not appeared to claim the estate yet. Mr. Stewart, it was rumoured, was expected every day; the bargain had been concluded, and people on the estate waited the good pleasure of the *ci-devant* bailiff.

One morning Emma Eaves and I were gardening in the front of our house, training, clipping, and regulating those plants inclined to grow luxuriant and straggling towards the autumn mouths—on the same principle that we human plants grow garrulous and prosy as we verge towards *our* autumn—whilst Bel Mannington sat at the open window, affecting to watch the proceedings, and becoming full of dreamy thought, as was her wont in those sunshineless latter days.

We were busily gardening, then, when some one approached our oaken fence, stopped, and attentively watched our proceedings.

Looking up, expecting to see Mr. Crease, or a friendly face from Wilthorpe, I saw a long-bearded, huge-whiskered being, indifferently attired, studying our movements. A tramp on his way, undoubtedly; and a very rude tramp also, who, unabashed by finding himself detected, continued to stare down upon us, with his hands in his pockets, and a felt hat cocked over his eye-brows.

Emma Eaves, a shrewder observer than I, looked up in her turn, somewhat indignant at this persistent shadow thrown across the garden-beds, and gave a scream of recognition.

“John!”

“Well, I thought you might have known me before,” he said, unlatching the wicket, and coming forwards to greet us; “two years ought not to change a fellow so abominably!”

Two years had changed him very much now—changed him in

outward appearance for the worst, my sinking heart assured me. He was more like the brother of old time, who had been devoid of every sober thought, and let the tide of circumstance drift him where it willed. It was a reflex of the man of the Corkcutters' Hall days—indifferent to present and future, and heedless of past warnings; his very slouching step assured me of it as he advanced towards us. After all this time, all the old efforts, all the improvement that had come to him and made him a better man, this moral and deplorable decadence!

"Oh! John," I murmured as he advanced, "you have very bad news to tell me—you are not the man with whom I parted last here—the man of whom I have had such hopes!"

"Don't look so frightened, Bertie," he said; "I'm all right enough. I haven't spent all my money, and there's the world before me. Well, Em, *you* will not turn your face away from me, because I have come a few thousand miles to say 'Good morning?'"

"I am very glad to see you, John," she said, letting him take both her hands in his and shake them—one with a garden trowel in it.

"And I am very glad, too, John," I said, greeting him in turn; "in your good or ill estate, I shall never turn away from *you*."

"Who's that at the window there?"

"Miss Mannington."

"Ah! no friend of mine; therefore I'll stay here in the garden, and give you a true and particular account of my adventures before my flying visit here is ended. I have only three hours to stay."

"Three hours! Come into the house, then, and——"

"No—I'll stay here. I was up late last night at a card-party, and the fresh air is more pleasant. I walked from Peterborough this morning, but I have not got rid of the head-ache yet. But I'm all right, Bertie—steady enough in my way, and trustworthy still, for all that robbery of the money—you remember?" he added, with a short, husky laugh, that was intended to convey an ironical significance.

He leaned his back against the garden fence, set one thick, crab-shell pattern boot upon my Tom Thumbs, and proceeded to afford us a glimpse of his late life. I sat on a garden-stool with my weed-basket at my feet, looking up at him; Emma kneeling on the turf, affected to be still busy with her trowel, loosening the mould round a favourite rose-tree.

"I have not a great deal of news for you," he said; "I have been knocking about the world, looking for a good investment in a country less worn to death than this one. I have been to Australia, speculating in a few things that have *not* made my fortune; and I have lost money, as people must lose money, before the trump card turns up."

"What reason had you for speculating, John?" I asked.

"I wanted a little excitement—I am not the man to sit down in a new or old country, and do nothing. And to sit down all alone, too, with no one to care for me, is the hardest work I know."

"You have sold the Hall?"

"Yes; I owed a great deal of money, and was obliged to sell, Bertie. The Hall was no good to me. Have you heard who is the purchaser?"

"Richard Stewart."

"Exactly. These Stewarts come of a lucky race—misfortunes are surmounted, and the tide is seized at the turn, and away they go to fortune. Richard Stewart went to Australia also, and found the prizes which never came within sight of me. Everything he touched he turned to gold at once in Midas fashion."

"He has returned?"

"Yes; he came back in the same ship with me."

"And your next step in life, Kingsworth?"

"Oh! don't ask me," he said carelessly; "I shall return to Australia, for I have still faith in the place—and here I am under suspicion. But I do not believe that I shall be thoroughly happy until all the money is spent, and I am plain, penniless John Kingsworth once again."

"You must not talk like this—this is going back to the old life of my City days. You don't wish that?" I cried.

"I was happy after a fashion then."

"Why not seek a clerkship——"

"I'm too great a man at present. Clerks with private fortunes are always a nuisance to their employers."

"Why not start in business for yourself—in Edinburgh—Glasgow? Only a little while ago you said——"

"Only a little while ago," he interrupted. Ah! there's the reason why I should not start. Only a little while ago I was in training under Mr. Stewart of Edinburgh, and learning to be a steady business man; then my mother's money fell to my share, and has been more a curse than a blessing, as I thought it would, if there were any retributive justice this side of eternity."

"This is the old improvident brother, who cared for nothing, and took false views of life and its duties."

"Don't lecture me, Bertie," he said; "I can't help it. I have tried hard enough. But I never did care for money much, and there's nobody to care much for me—yourself excepted."

Emma Eaves dropped her trowel, picked it up again, and worked away with renewed vigour.

He glanced towards Emma, then said—

"I come back here for my last chance—to make my last appeal. I'm miserable in mind, unsettled, and want some one to take care of

me. There's the rock ahead in the future—no one to take care of me! You can't, Bertie, now the sister drops into the friend; and you will not, Emma, because a promise to my mother has cancelled an old promise made to me. So I drift on alone, with only myself to please!"

"Don't tempt me, John," Emma murmured. "I cannot break that promise to your dying mother. It was her first thought after Miss Casey had left, and she was not happy in her mind till I had promised her."

"I wonder, if she knew the result of that poor promise, whether she would rest quietly in her grave," he said gloomily. "Well, well, I did not come here with any hope of fair results. You were always hard to turn from an idea, Em, and that's the reason why for good and evil you remained my champion so long. I deserted you for your good name's sake, when you were a child; you desert me now, and I must make the best of single blessedness. I daresay it is all for the best; for I should make you a bad husband, and bring you to beggary."

He looked at his watch again, then said,

"That business disposed of, Bertie, I will have a little talk with you; and will now avail myself of your past offer to adjourn within doors."

We went into the house together; as we entered the front sitting-room Miss Mannington rose and almost shrank away from him into a corner. He reddened at her impulse to avoid him; he saw in the act the shadow of that old suspicion of his honesty lying between himself and polite society at Wilthorpe.

"Good morning, Miss Mannington," he said.

"Good morning, Mr. Kingsworth," she murmured, without looking towards him, as she passed round the room and hastened out of the house to the lawn, where I saw her a few minutes afterwards talking energetically to Emma Eaves.

John Kingsworth proceeded at once to business.

"Before I spend all my money—and there is a spell upon me that urges me to get rid of it, as money that can never do me any good—let me think of the two friends I possess still. In Woundell Bank—whenever you like to draw upon it for a marriage portion, or have any idea of speculating on your own account in any way that seems best for you—you will find to your account six thousand pounds."

"I'll not have it."

"There it will be in your name—you my sister, who tried so hard in the old days to keep me walking soberly through life. I must not forget you, Bertie, whilst the chance lies in my power."

"I am well provided for."

"That subject is dismissed for good," he said, emphatically.

I did not intrude upon it again. The money was better there

than in his hands, perhaps—in some future day it might be of service to him.

“There is a like sum for Emma Eaves,” he said; “four thousand pounds of it mysteriously contributed as conscience money, and a thousand pounds added thereto. Keep that in trust for her when she marries—keep it a secret from her until then. She was a good friend when she was younger, and I must not forget her, though she turns away from me.”

“Only for one reason, John.”

“No matter the reason, she turns away. Now these minor matters settled, I am ready to return to Australia, or anywhere else.”

“Go to Edinburgh, and see Mr. Mark Stewart, John.”

“Ah! he was a good friend, was he not? But he is a rich man now, I hear, and I have no doubt his brother has poisoned his mind against me. That Richard Stewart has always been my *bête noire!*”

“If you would only ask Mr. Stewart’s advice!”

“No. I am past advice now,” he said. “I shall go my own way, and see to what end it will lead!”

He and I retraced our steps into the garden. He was going away for ever now; I should never see him again. A man in whom so many good attributes remained still, and yet who had been so easily influenced through life! With a woman to love him and influence him for good, I would not even yet despair of him. But alone with that weak spirit, proceeding his own way, which had ever been the wrong one, unless a stronger mind than his regulated his movements. Poor John!

“I think I’ll go now,” he said, in a hesitating manner. “I have to meet some Woundell lawyers, and then—then I shall start at once. This part of the country always gives me the horrors!”

He stooped and kissed me, wished me every success in life, tried to laugh away the tears in my eyes, and then crossed to Emma Eaves. Miss Mannington moved away as he approached, and vexed me not a little by her studied reserve. I felt always inclined to be John Kingsworth’s champion.

“Good-bye, Em,” said John; “I’m going now for good. I shall never trouble you again after this!”

“Where are you going?”

“To Woundell.”

“Presently, I mean—when everything is settled here?”

“Abroad again. I am tired of England.”

“Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Em.”

He stooped and kissed her also, as though he had a right, remembering their past relationship. Em did not shrink away from him, but turned very white as his face came close to hers.

Bel Mannington stood watching them very intently from the distance.

"She will let him go," Bel said, advancing to me, "and I have told her that my aunt repented at the last of the promise which she had exacted from her. Still he may sink her life as well as his—only hers is a love I cannot exactly understand."

They had parted, Emma Eaves and John Kingsworth; John was at the gate, fidgeting nervously with the lock, and Em was watching him. When the gate was open she gave a little scream and ran towards him, flinging her arms round his neck, and sobbing on his breast, more like the wild girl of the past days than the quiet woman she had sobered down to.

"Don't go abroad—unless you take me too!"

So one strange courtship came to an end after the truest and best fashion—if after a fashion somewhat odd. But they were as odd a couple then as they had ever been in the past, and they remained an odd couple all their lives.

"I shall stay three weeks instead of three hours here," John Kingsworth said; "and we'll put up the banns in Wilthorpe Church, and Bertie Casey shall stand the breakfast!"

"With all my heart!"



CHAPTER IV.

JOHN KINGSWORTH'S MARRIAGE.

AFTER the renewal of engagement between Emma Eaves and John Kingsworth, I took upon myself the task of lecturing John, and giving him the best advice in my power. I bade him think of the happiness of the girl who had clung to him through good and evil, who had been ever his champion, and had now resolved to share his life with him. I begged him to remember that he would shortly have a wife to think of, work for, and keep steady for, and that in submerging himself in a sea of trouble, he sank her with him.

"Trust me," he said; and I fancied, even in those early days, I

saw on his face the new responsibility adding a gravity and earnestness that belonged to his best time—when he served his apprenticeship to steadiness with Mark Stewart of Edinburgh.

Then like a talkative and officious woman as I was becoming, I lectured Emma Eaves in turn. I told her of the power that she might exercise for good with Kingsworth; and of the harm she might do if her old impulsiveness and excitability carried her too far away from sober thought. Emma had improved wonderfully of late days—she received my lecture with all humility, too, and said upon conclusion,

“I have great faith, Miss Bertha. I only understood him even now, and I am sure that Jack and I—John and I,” she corrected, “will be very happy, faithful, and content. I wish he had been the poor man I knew once, though—I could have managed him better then. But he has lost a great deal of his money, and he don't look the great gentleman that he was—that's a comfort!”

Emma was in high spirits now *her* love troubles were over. Never was a girl who stood less upon “proprieties,” and showed a greater anxiety to be married before anything should happen to prevent it. She was very happy, very proud of John Kingsworth, and her bright face and cheerful voice had its effect upon two more sober women, and rendered us akin to “the frivolous young things” we had been once.

Still I daresay there were a few grave thoughts in our midst. We were all at work at wedding garments, doing our own dress-making in an economical spirit; and there passed a sharp reminiscence or two in our midst—just a “stitch” in our memories, not to be alluded to at that time.

The wedding day came at length; and we walked quietly to Wilthorpe Church, John Kingsworth, in defiance of all rules of etiquette, calling for Emma Eaves at our cottage, and taking her away on his arm, leaving Bel and me to bring up the rear.

For a man of property, as John Kingsworth was still, there never was so humble a wedding *cortège*; the publication of the banns in Wilthorpe Church had led the villagers to expect great doings and high holidays. Mr. Kingsworth, late of the Hall, was a substantial fact, and likely “to do” the thing well. In expectation of a fair spectacle, the villagers had mustered pretty thickly in the churchyard, and inside the church; and upon our arrival they stared dreamily, and in some instances indignantly at us, as though they had been victims of an imposition, and this was a marriage on false pretences.

Marriages were few in Wilthorpe, and this might have been a cotter's wedding, for all evidence to the contrary. That girl in the sober grey silk, with the plain white bonnet, was the bride. Well, of all the brides the Wilthorpians saw in their lives, this beat them all for quietness! Why, last year the grave-digger's daughter had a blue silk flounced dress, and a green bonnet with primrose ribbons,

and looked smarter "by a long chalk;" and the haberdasher's daughter, at the corner shop, who was engaged to young Larkins from London, had declared that she would sooner die at the altar, saying "No," rather than not be married in a veil like the *élite*.

"I hope we have not disappointed these good people in a show," said John to me, when we were in the church; "but there are some old women in the corner looking daggers at us!"

"We are a very quiet wedding-party, certainly."

"Em wanted it quiet, like a sensible woman," he said; "she was always a sensible girl in her way—which is the best of ways. To think of saying 'Yes' to me, at a time when I *seemed* to be going down-hill again. To prefer the scamp to the gentleman!"

"Was it all acting, theu, Johu Kingsworth?"

"Oh! no. I had lost a great deal of money, and come down two or three steps from my high estate. Not head-first to the bottom of the flight, though. I made the worst of it—will you forgive me?"

"Yes."

"And we'll not say anything to Em till the ceremony is over. There is no telling in what manner she may appreciate the joke."

He crossed to Em's side; at the same time Mr. Crease appeared at the altar to conduct the marriage ceremony. He was very red and very trembling; he looked nervously over his book at me for an instant, and guessing what thought had crossed his mind, I blushed for an instant also. Was I unfeeling enough also to smile a little to myself at a fancy picture of Mr. Crease—how stout he began to look in full canonicals!—standing at the altar with me, and Mr. Gapwing facing us as officiating priest? When the feelings are not touched by the sentiment at the heart of another, how easy it is to smile, and see the ludicrous side of things! Yet he would have made me a good husband, this poor, unpretending simple-minded curate; and I should have been a dutiful and affectionate wife, if I had ever made up my mind to take him for better for worse. I felt ashamed of my smile the instant afterwards; I might have missed my one chance of happiness in this world; and that was not a pleasant fact to smile at, even on a day when my heart was lighter than its wont.

The marriage was perfected between Johu Kingsworth and Emma Eaves; never were responses on either side uttered so honestly and firmly. They answered to their promises as though they meant to keep them all their lives, and I felt certain then that "the best" had happened for them both.

Emma had not refinement enough to disguise her sense of happiness. People of well-trained minds would have been disgusted at her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

In the vestry, leaning over the great parish book, to sign her name therein, she looked up, pen in hand, at her husband, laughingly.

"Do you remember, Jack, teaching me to write, and scolding me for not keeping the lines, in Whiffen Street?" she said.

"Yes—and you're going down-hill now. Look at you!"

Out of the vestry, after bride and bridegroom had received the congratulations of the curate, through the village folk, who had given themselves a holiday to see the wedding, and regretted the waste of time exceedingly—but what *style* could have been expected from an unequal match of this character!—along the aisle of the old church to the front doors, which opened almost in our faces, and brought a new comer upon the scene—Richard Stewart!

"Whose wedding is this?" he asked, abruptly.

"Whose wedding!—mine, to be sure!" replied John Kingsworth, "I am just in time for your congratulation."

"Oh! with—Emma Eaves!" he said, looking at the bride by his side. "I wish you joy, you two. I thought it might have been—*you* Miss Casey."

"Oh! no."

He turned and walked out with us—keeping by my side, after exchanging greetings with Miss Mannington, who had changed colour at the sight of him, for he was more like his brother than ever.

Bel Mannington shrank back, despite my efforts to keep her at my side, and include her in the conversation; she appeared to be as much afraid of Richard Stewart as of John Kingsworth. Had her awakening to the true character of Mr. Stewart's intentions given her a distaste for the whole male sex; or did she shrink away from those who had known of her past engagement, and now returned upon the scene to pity her?

Mr. Richard Stewart was evidently well and strong—his face more bronzed by sojourning in a new land, and his eyes more round and staring, perhaps, with looking about him at the wonders he had seen there.

"So they have made a match of it at last," said Richard Stewart, pointing to the married couple in advance of us; "they have been a long while learning to understand one another?"

"Yes."

"To thoroughly understand one another takes time," said Richard Stewart, thoughtfully. "This Miss Mannington, who is so scared by my presence—is she happy?" he asked, in a low voice.

"She has met with trouble lately."

"She has lost her fortune—is that a trouble to her?"

"Not the money's loss—but the loss of faith in him who should have protected her through life!"

"You mean her father, of course?"

"Yes."

I did not mean his brother, of whom he had been thinking also, I knew by his next words.

"Twice disappointed, poor girl!" he said; "and yet not wholly broken down!—she whom a straw would turn!"

"She has altered, I think, for the better."

"She has been in good hands."

He did not intend it as a compliment wherewith to embarrass me; he quite started when my cheeks reddened a little at his last remark.

"My brother you have not seen in Wilthorpe since the breaking off of his engagement with Miss Mannington?" he said, hastening to change the subject.

"No. Have you——"

"I have not seen him for some years," said Richard Stewart, a little mournfully; "that first and last quarrel parted us irrevocably."

"I hope not. It is not natural."

"I told him that whilst the engagement existed between him and Miss Mannington I would never be his friend," said Richard Stewart. "Perhaps I said more than I meant, for I was excited and angry—and yet the engagement is over, and he makes no sign."

"You are the elder brother—it is your place."

"I am the brother in the right—he in the wrong. And yet it was his first weakness; and he had been before that time all that was noble and true. Why, Miss Casey," he burst forth, with his old appreciation of his brother's virtues, "once there was not such a fellow in the world as Mark—he would have gone twenty miles out of his way to serve a stranger, or help a man that was unfortunate; he was the soul of everything that was honourable; he had the gift—what a rare gift it is!—of winning everybody's heart towards him; making friends—good ones, too—as easily as other men make enemies. There was only one verdict upon him, and that was in everybody's mouth, 'What a good fellow that Mark Stewart is!'"

"You and he will be the true friends again you once were. You are brothers, and should bear no malice. Seek him out."

"I could not bear to see him turn away from me," said Richard Stewart; "I haven't the courage to face him; and he—he hasn't the humility to come to me, and say that I judged him correctly in the past, and saw whither his great fault would lead him."

"A great fault; but one which the world ever readily excuses."

"Seeking a wife for her fortune's sake? Oh! yes, the world excuses that very readily, Miss Casey, and admires the ingenuity of the fortune-hunter who is successful enough to secure the money-bags. The man is a clever fellow, with a soul above the sickly sentimentalities which poets tire us with! But what does the wife think afterwards, I wonder—the wife which this matter-of-fact world never dreams of pitying?"

"We will not discuss the question," I said; "the time and circumstance will not allow it."

"Right. And before us is a hero, who marries for love."

"Is he *quite* a hero in your estimation, Mr. Stewart?"

Richard Stewart looked grave for an instant, and then laughed.

"Why, you are thinking of that cheque still!" he said. "Oh! I have got rid of that subject pretty well. He sent me two thousand pounds as conscience-money, and he tries very hard to make me believe that another two thousand pounds flies into the window; and if he took all that trouble, why he was sorry enough for the past temptation."

"Then you still believe——"

"I am not going to argue any more about it," he said firmly; "and I haven't come a long journey to rake up the hygons and set you against me. I wish Miss Mannington would not keep away from us. Perhaps I'm not acting well in monopolizing your attention."

"I will step back to her."

But Bel Mannington had already passed on in advance, and we could see her crossing the lawn of Meadow House, which we were now approaching.

"She was very fond of Mark—she *must* have been fond of him," said Richard Stewart, reflectively; "I wonder what she thinks of my brother now, or whether in her heart she has forgiven him. You know, perhaps?"

"No."

Later in the day I could not have answered that question in the negative.

"But we'll not talk of anything dismal on a wedding morning," said Richard Stewart, wrenching himself away from the subject; "I shall have to say good-bye to you in a minute. You know the last news?—you have heard of my investment?"

"Yes—I should have congratulated you on your success in life."

"You are very kind—I have been somewhat fortunate abroad, if not so fortunate as most people think. I came to Woundell out of curiosity, just to see what the old place would fetch, and with no more intention of purchasing the estate than you had. But when I saw that it was likely to be knocked down at a price beneath its value—I who knew the value of it to a farthing;—and when it was at the option of the purchaser to buy it right out, or allow three-fourths of the purchase-money to remain on mortgage, I sank the whole of my savings in the speculation, agreed to pay a quarter of the money down, and so bound myself to Wilthorpe again for good and all. And how tired you will get of me, to be sure!"

"I must try and bear with you," I said, caustically.

"This is a business speculation," he said; "and I fancy—it may be all fancy—that I shall find the venture profitable. The Hall and

Park I shall let to any great folk who may fancy the dwelling-place; and the farm land, and the property attached thereto, I shall work on my own account, in lieu of *hers*. And if I don't succeed, why there's no one to regret the circumstance but—Richard Stewart.”

We were at the gate of my house, where John Kingsworth waited for us. Emma Eaves had left him, and flown after Bel Mannington to tell her how happy she was.

“I haven't had time to ask you to join us at our small wedding breakfast, Mr. Stewart,” said John. “I am beginning a new life from to-day, and you are an old enemy of whom I would make a friend.”

“Why?”

“Well, that's inexplicable,” replied my brother; “possibly because you are a friend of the girl whom I thought my sister for so many years, and she has always taken your part when I have expressed an opinion against you.”

“Has she?”

I never saw a face change more suddenly than Richard Stewart's. It was quite a beaming face on the instant.

“I couldn't make you out, and possibly I misjudged you. But that confounded two thousand pounds, and all those clumsy tricks of yours——”

“If you are going to talk about that affair,” said Richard Stewart, “let us take a seat here for awhile, and have the matter out. Perhaps looking more soberly at it from a distance, I may see that you were not entirely to blame.”

“Confound it, Stewart!—you don't mean to say now that——”

“Will Mr. Richard Stewart accept your invitation or decline it?” I asked, breaking in upon their old topic of dissension.

“I am not in wedding costume, and shall be intruding,” he said, blushing and stammering in a way very unusual for him.

“You are my sister's friend.”

“Am I?” he said, looking wistfully towards me; “in that capacity, I'll stay. Is he correct, Miss Casey?”

“We were never enemies, Mr. Stewart.”

“No—then I'll join you. I have been very much alone the last two years,” he added, quite apologetically; “very lonely and very dull; that's confessing a great deal for a man who always tried hard to make the best of it. I'm coming to your wedding feast firmly convinced that I shall be very much in the way; and yet, I'd rather come. It's curious!”

CHAPTER V.

CONFESSION.

RICHARD STEWART joined us at our humble wedding breakfast, then. For the first time in my life he sat down side by side with me—a guest at my table.

The position was novel—the character he assumed that day was novel also. Travel had improved Richard Stewart; the world of Wilthorpe had narrowed his ideas somewhat, and rendered him dogmatic; in a wider sphere they had expanded, and he was even less brusque in his way than in the old days.

Finding the company somewhat thoughtful, he put on his best manners, and I was a witness to *them* also for the first time. His pleasant smile, his new impulse to be agreeable and courteous, reminded me once more of his brother—reminded more forcibly Bel Mannington, whose face at times assumed a scared, almost an alarmed, look at the similitude.

Richard Stewart was in good spirits that day—he owned that fact himself.

“I am glad to get back to the old place,” he said. “Wilthorpe is home, and I have not been happy away from it.”

They were going away in the afternoon, Emma and John Kingsworth. Everything had been arranged beforehand for that separation. John had been twice to London since the first publication of the banns, arranging matters with the solicitors about his property, about receipts of money and further transmissions of money to him; he was going to Australia with his wife, to begin life again after a bran new fashion—a fashion that I thought would succeed, with an earnest loving woman to take care of him.

For the first time in her life, also, Emma Eaves smiled at Richard Stewart. In the sunshine wherein she stood, she would not have one figure in the shadow. She was anxious, too, to part friends with him, and to hear his better opinion of one whom he had long mistrusted. She was ignorant of the interdict that I had set upon a topic concerning which there was never to be agreement, it seemed, and, leaning forward, she called him by his name.

Richard Stewart was talking to Bel Mannington then, using his best exertions to set her at her ease, and to reconcile her to his presence there. On his face I could read an interest in the girl who might have been his brother's wife, and whom that brother had deceived by a profession of attachment; it was the same look with which he

had regarded me once. He felt for all those who had loved his brother, and been, like himself, disappointed in him.

"Mr. Stewart, before I go away," Emma Eaves said, "I hope you will grant me a favour."

"I will do my best to grant it," he said, with a reserve. "What is it, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"Confess you were mistaken in John—and that your old suspicious thoughts of him were unjust."

Richard Stewart coloured, looked from her to John Kingsworth, who was colouring also. Why could not this subject be forgotten—sunk to the depths of oblivion, without analyzing the truth or falsehood in it ever again?

"Mrs. Kingsworth must excuse me," he said. "I consider myself under a promise not to speak of this any more."

"Once more," demanded Emma Eaves, with flashing eyes, "if you are honest!"

"Ah! if I be honest!" said Richard Stewart. "You did not think so once, Mrs. Kingsworth!"

"Em, the subject is dropped for ever," said her husband. "Mr. Stewart and I cannot agree upon that old grievance—he may think I took the money, and I may think that he took it—and there is just a chance that we may both be wrong. If this mystery had been cleared up two years since, I might have been a happier man."

"It was cleared up!" cried Bel Mannington, with an emphasis that brought all looks towards her; "my father cleared it up to you, John Kingsworth. Why talk of having been unhappy by it?"

"Your father?—no!"

John shook his head in a very decided manner at this assertion.

"He told you nothing—then?"

"Nothing!"

"And you are still under suspicion—you two men who were in the house on the night that money was stolen—and my father never kept his promise to me. Well—God forgive me!—*I took that money!*"

We looked at her in dismay.

"Ah! Bertie, you will turn from me now!" she said, looking towards me with a beseeching, even bewildering expression. "I could not own to you all my madness, my wickedness, or bear to see you give me up. It has been a secret which has oppressed me very much—of which I thought only John Kingsworth—and, possibly, you, sir,"—addressing Richard Stewart,—"*were aware. And the innocent has suffered for my guilty self!*"

"What was it for?" I gasped.

"I will tell you, if—if I be strong enough," she said.

"No—no—I see it all now," said Richard Stewart. "I will explain presently!"

"You are very kind to spare me," said Bel, gathering firmness as

she proceeded, "but we will attempt the truth, whatever may be the result. I did not shrink to perpetrate the act, and I must not fear to face you with the avowal, now that I learn, for the first time, that I have sown dissension in your midst. "Yes, I took that money!"

It seemed scarcely possible even yet. Looking forward to that face—so childlike yet in its expression—one could not imagine its possessor to have been a thief in the night, coveting and scheming for other men's goods.

"I found out by an accident that your brother—he to whom I was engaged to be married then—was beset by creditors, in danger of arrest for a debt contracted in London. That arrest would have beggared him at that time, and hindered all chance of a compromise. One night he confided to me the secret of his embarrassments——"

"Mark did? That was more like him!" said Mark's brother.

"He told me all, and offered to resign me—as if, believing in his love, I would not have clung to him all the more for his misfortunes! But by those misfortunes I was troubled very much."

She wrung her hands silently together, then went on again:

"They were waiting for him in the village—the greediest and sharpest of his creditors—English creditors, with the power to arrest him on English ground. For my sake and for his, to keep down opposition to our marriage from my father and Mrs. Kingsworth—both of whom believed him at that time to be a wealthy man—I held that secret close, watched over it with all the vigilance of a jealous woman. He was in more danger than he believed; one creditor had been appeased by Richard Stewart paying him his demand unknown to his brother; but there was a second, a cunning man, who by some means or other was aware of our engagement, and Mrs. Kingsworth's character. That man sought me out, believing me the heiress, which I was not, and threatened me with Mark Stewart's ruin, if I did not pay his claim. He would give me twenty-four hours to find the money, or go to Mrs. Kingsworth, or my father, and tell all."

"We guess the rest," said Richard Stewart, still anxious to curtail the explanation, and save Bel further pain.

Bel took no heed; she was impelled forwards to avow the whole truth; I see her dark face a-glow with excitement now, and her wild eyes fixed only upon me, as if to read those looks of horror and shame for which she waited then.

"I was mad that day; I dared not confide that secret to a living soul, and I had never been strong enough to bear one of such weight. I was a child, with no thought of right or wrong—simply beset by the one wish to save my lover, and regardless of all consequences. The devil whispered to me that Richard Stewart was in possession of a large sum of money, proceeds of the quarter's rents, &c.—he had been to the Hall that day; he had returned too late

for the banker's at Woundell—in the dusk of the evening came the last temptation. Mrs. Kingsworth gave me her keys to fetch some papers from her desk, and the one chance of doing evil—I thought it good at that time!—suggested itself. I knew where the duplicate key of Mr. Stewart's safe was kept, and I secured it. I stole down in half-an-hour's time to the lodge; John Kingsworth was asleep before the fire, and Mr. Stewart was absent. I took two thousand pounds from the safe, and went in search of the man who had threatened ruin if he were not paid in full within four-and-twenty hours. I paid him, and went back to the Hall. I knew my guilt then—I felt that it was madness by which I had been possessed, and I dreaded the consequence of my unwomanly act. I found means to return the key to the safe, and then I was left to play the hypocrite, and struggle with my weight of thought."

I remembered then her excited demeanour on that memorable night.

"Mr. Stewart added to my trouble by telling me how he had encountered this man, and what threats had been held over him also; all that night he feared—alas! not for my sake—the coming of that man to the Hall to denounce him. I knew that he was safe, and at what cost to me! I had begun to think then of the result, of whose character it might affect, of how soon it would be possible to pay back that two thousand pounds to my aunt, or to confess my inability to pay it and ask her pardon. We were to be married, Mark Stewart and I, at a very early date, then—when we were married, I would tell all to Mark and her, and pay back that money from my wedding portion. All these foolish thoughts added to the torture of how the loss would be received—whether the mystery, as I hoped, would remain inexplicable, or set suspicion on a guilty head. You know what followed too well—I could not tell my aunt that secret, tortured as I was by my duplicity—I felt that I dared not own how guilty I had been to her who had such power to mar my whole life's happiness, until the last—the very, very last; I had resolved, rather than that she should die believing in her son's guilt, to confess the whole truth; but I hoped in John Kingsworth's presence at her bedside, and that his assurance of his honesty would save me my confession. Then came the telegram, and Mrs. Kingsworth's mind was at rest. She was very happy, and I could not mar her dying hours by breaking down her love and hopes in me. She died, Bertie, believing in my truth—in mine!"

She wailed forth the last words with a touching earnestness that went to all our hearts; I saw her guilt, but I knew her woman's weakness—ever the mental weakness of her family, which in her father, aunt, and herself, had assumed such wild phases of moral perversity—and there did not fade away from me one jot of that love which long ago I had entertained towards her. She was my weak sister, who had sinned; who had let one worldly passion blind

her to the consequences of crime, and had fallen very much—but I could not turn away from her, nor do anything but press her to my side and draw her head down to my bosom. It had been a terrible confession for a wedding feast, where peace, love, and harmony should have presided; but Bel Mannington had been deceived in her turn, and from her impulse had evolved the sad story to its entirety. She had believed that reparation had been made; that not only had the money been paid back, but that John Kingsworth had been informed by Bel's father, to whom the story had been told, of all those sad details which had been hurled from her lips that day.

"You—you do not turn away from me, Bertie?" she murmured, passing her arms round my neck.

"Is it likely?" I whispered. "And—and Mr. Stewart?"

"Has never known this secret. I dared not tell him," she answered, "I—I did it all for love of him, and I—I could accuse him of want of principle in my anger and conceit. Oh! Bertie," in a voice inaudible to all but me, "I loved him very, very much!"



CHAPTER VI.

PARTING.

ALL this was a skeleton at the wedding feast—a *memento mori*! Before those who had plighted troth, and were hopeful of their future, rose the evidence of her who had seen her best hopes die, and brought evil upon her own head. It was no pleasant sequel to the morning's brightness, and yet I felt that from this confession of Bel Mannington would evolve better and purer feelings in her, and a faith and friendship between the two men who had regarded each other as untrustworthy.

Already, at that early hour, with Bel still clinging to me, I noted that John Kingsworth drew a deep breath of relief, and that Richard Stewart looked across the table at him, and finally held forth his hand.

"I am sorry that I suspected you, Kingsworth," Stewart said, in his deep, and not unmoved voice.

"And I am sorry that I could not shake off the impression of what a hypocrite you were, Stewart. But——"

"But——"

The two words were spoken at once, and both turned towards Bel Mannington again. I held my hand above her dark hair for silence. More revelations were not for that day, I thought, and this suffering woman had been tried too much.

"Bel," I whispered, "I would not stay here any longer. Let us leave the room with Emma; it is time she put on her travelling dress."

"Yes—yes, directly," she said, feverishly. Then she struggled from my arms and sat up again. "I did my best to make atonement," she said, dashing, to my surprise, into the old subject, which I had considered at an end for that day. "When suspicion fastened itself upon you, Mr. Kingsworth, I told all to my father, and bade him pay you from my money the sum of which I had defrauded you. I bade him tell you of my sorrow for my guilt, of my wish that you should keep my secret, except when it was necessary to defend your honour from the imputations that might be levelled at you. And my father never told you?"

"No."

"He paid you the money. He took his oath to me that the money was in your hands—he showed me the entry in his banker's book, proving that two thousand pounds had been drawn from his account in your favour."

"He put the money on my breakfast table. He kept his word to that extent at least."

"Then who sent me the two thousand pounds conscience money?" ejaculated Richard Stewart.

"It was not a *ruse*, then, to satisfy your own scruples as to your want of care of my poor mother's money?" asked John, eagerly.

"Now, by George! if you begin that again!" exclaimed Richard Stewart, bringing his fist down on the table, "I'll think all this a dream, and you the thief still!"

"I have it!" cried John Kingsworth; "it was your brother Mark!"

"I think you are right," said Richard Stewart, thoughtfully; "yes, he guessed Miss Mannington's dilemma, and mine, and sent that cheque."

"No, no—he would know all then!" cried Bel, becoming again wild and excited; "oh! don't say that!"

But Richard Stewart was right.

"We'll not say anything more about it, please," said Emma. "I must not go away and leave you unhappy like this, Miss Mannington

—you the young mistress, who was kind to me when I thought that I had only one friend in the world. If you have done wrong—I'm sure that you are sorry for it. I would have done the same for Johu!”

We looked a little surprised at this criminal sentiment, but Emma stood her ground for her own opinion's sake, or Bel Mannington's, it was doubtful which. She and Bel had resembled each other in more than one particular—once upon a time I had termed them kindred spirits. In Bel's place Emma Kingsworth might have been hurled away from right as easily—the temptation had not come to her, and the subject was not worth considering. Suffice it that neither she nor poor penitent Bel was a heroine, and that being far from a heroine myself, the story lacks one interesting quality, at least.

In the short time left to us we did our best to sink the shadows; succeeding pretty well in our endeavours, and leaving to future days a grave consideration of the truth. We three women who had lived together, and been friends, almost sisters together, were never to sit down in friendly communion again; one of us was going a long journey, to face a future wherein trials might be waiting for her—we must consider her a little!

Richard Stewart and Kingsworth were true friends in thought from that day. I have sometimes fancied that perhaps Bel's confession was the last feather in the scale turning already in John's favour, to make him a different man.

John and Emma Kingsworth I can afford to dismiss here from my pages. The hour is late and the end is at hand. Stealing from the distance is the mist of coming evening, and one by one my figures are vanishing away; with them, and in good time, this faulty record of my life's experience. I seek no better fate than that, content with the passing interest of those good friends who have borne me company so long. Books are born and die every day; if I be not of the immortal few I at least escape a good deal of that hatred and uncharitableness by which they are assailed. I count more friends than enemies—I am of no party, and I envy no one's triumph. I shall beg no favour from the crowd, and I shall stir up nobody's bile by my untoward success. I am simply Bertha Casey—though I write as if I were one of those fledglings who have their livings to get by their novels, poor things!

And I am forgetting John Kingsworth and his wife. Well, they went abroad and lived “happy ever afterwards.” Can I say more?

They were happy in good fortune and in bad. They had bad fortune, inasmuch as they lost much money in their early days abroad; but the little skiff in which they had embarked together righted itself before all the money was gone; and Johu worked on

patiently, lost no prudence, and was kept ever strong and persevering by his helpmate.

Not so rich a man as when his mother left him a large fortune, but a better one. And being never ambitious he took his losses philosophically, and found his peace and happiness in his wife and children round him.

Thus he fades away; and I turn to my last record.

END OF BOOK THE SIXTH.

Book VII.

CLEAR UP ALL INTENTIONS.

CHAPTER I.

BROUGHT BACK.

ONCE more “settling down!” Once more endeavouring to take our places by the waters that had seethed round us, and were so still and glassy now! Here, soberly sitting on the bank, we settled down for good!

Yes, surely for good now? All was over; all had been satisfactorily explained; Emma had gone away; Mr. Mark Stewart was in Edinburgh, and Mr. Richard Stewart was oscillating between his new property and Woundell, between Wilthorpe and London, and settling by degrees—not fairly settled like ourselves! By-and-bye, he would be Richard Stewart of old times, business-like and brusque even; watchful of the interests of the estate in which he had invested; making his fortune by degrees, after the fashion which best pleased him, and growing old and weather-beaten; not much liked by those with whom he had but a passing acquaintance, and only understood by one or two.

When he was in Wilthorpe, he called twice to see us—once upon the day of his arrival, once upon the day of his departure to settle some business from home. He took his place in our parlour as a friend, and no one gainsaid his claim; he seemed like a brother, in whose good advice we two women could trust, and whose interest in us we knew to be sincere. If there were one thing to object to in his visits, it was his *watchfulness* of us; he seemed to sit and study us intently, as though he were trying to guess our thoughts; he wished to make sure that we were quite happy in our minds, and that there was nothing in his power that he could do. I think that he would have been grateful for some small calamity, from which he might have rescued us. The calamity not coming at that period he sat and stared, taking five minutes at a time for each of us, and not particular about too much conversation.

In October he said that he should be at his old post; even at the old Lodge, in three weeks time. Foreign matters had been cleared up; he had arranged, at Kingsworth's request, a plan for the transmission of money to him—John Kingsworth had given him, the man whom he had so long suspected, a power of attorney, to act for him in all monetary affairs not settled before his departure for Australia—he had paid the fourth part of the purchase money, completed the mortgage, and he was, as I have before remarked, nearly ready to settle down also!

In three weeks to the day—he kept his time with his old punctuality—Richard Stewart was at the Lodge again. The new tenant had been found for the Hall; he was content with a limited estate, and his landlord living in a small cottage thereon—one of the strangest pictures for a large landowner that the county could produce; but then these Stewarts were uncommonly strange, the neighbours said to one another, and there was no making them out.

Had I even made them out, or their intentions, after a knowledge that, judging by events, seemed life-long? Had Bel Mannington? I was sorry to see that Bel Mannington had settled down too deeply into her own train of thoughts, and that the young, variable life which I had pictured on its way to the surface, seemed now irrevocably submerged. After that confession at the wedding-breakfast, she had sunk "deeper and deeper" still. She had hoped that the secret and myself would have never come in contact—for she had feared that even I would give her up then.

Well, I held the more firmly to her. I did not preach at her; I took the penitent to my heart; I believed in her repentance, and I made due allowance for what juries term "extenuating circumstances." She had done it all for love—"everything is fair in love," says the proverb—and she had acted in a reckless way worthy of "the family."

Still, beneath this gravity of Bel Mannington ran an under-current of restlessness—she would soon be dependent upon me, she

considered ; presently it would be her duty to seek her own living, when she had fairly considered what that living should be, and when she was quite sure that she was strong enough to seek it.

I was glad at last to encourage this restless feeling—anything was better than her unnatural gravity. I never intended to part with her ; when it came to a struggle between her will and mine, I would hold her to my heart and keep her there, telling her of the loneliness to which she would reduce me. But it was as well just then to let her speculate upon her future course—it drew the thoughts away from the disappointments of her life, and the evil that had accompanied them. I trusted to time—and for once in my life, though in a different way to that which I had conceived, I was not disappointed.

It was a bleak morning I remember, when I went one day marketing to Wilthorpe. Bel had been unwell all the week, suffering from a cold that she had caught through her usual indifference to dry weather or wet, if I kept not a careful watch upon her. It was with some difficulty that I persuaded her to remain at home that raw November morning, and to nurse herself during my absence.

“Don’t be long!” was her invariable injunction to me, when I started upon a mission without her ; and “Don’t be long!” was echoed after me that day, telling of her objection to loneliness and the company of her own thoughts.

I reached Wilthorpe, transacted my domestic business, met a few friendly faces, gossiped about the weather and the coming winter, and turned to retrace my way, when a gentleman approached me.

His step behind me, his shadow at my side, impressed me with a vague consciousness of the truth, before one word was uttered. We make such strange guesses occasionally, and this was one of them.

“Miss Casey, may I beg the favour of a few words with you?”

“Mr. Stewart!”

I stopped to shake hands with Mark Stewart, the man whose vague “intentions” had worked such mischief in my little world. He coloured as I extended my hand towards him ; it seemed an act of courtesy which he had scarcely expected on my part.

“I am glad to see you, Miss Casey,” he said. “I have been waiting about the village for an hour, praying for a face I knew. You will not think me intrusive if I accompany you a little distance upon your way?”

I bowed assent, and he walked on with me, away from the village. In the time that had intervened since our last meeting, he did not appear to have altered very much ; there was the same handsome face, the same outspoken look which won men’s hearts towards him ; here and there might have been a faint line that I had not seen before, and which was indicative of hard thought rather than of any mark that time had set upon him at three-and-thirty years of age.

It was, upon the whole, a stern face, as though, in fighting his new battles for his old position, that indomitable resolution which had kept him strug had found some reflex in his countenance.

"It must seem strange to you, Miss Casey, to meet me once again in Wilthorpe."

"Not at all."

He had given me my cue by that suggestion, and the opportunity was not to be lost.

"Not at all!" he echoed, wondering; "why, the few who remember me in Wilthorpe have marvelled wondrously this morning."

"I do not wonder, Mr. Stewart," I said; "you have a brother here, and it is your duty to show that you have not forgotten him."

"Yes, I know that," he answered, "and I need not come here to keep my memory fresh concerning him. But he and I are never likely to be friends again, Miss Casey."

"For shame, Sir!" I exclaimed; "he is your brother, and you professed to love him much at one time. It is a cruel enmity that keeps you apart from one another."

"You will pardon me, but it is no enmity—rather let me say, my brother's scorn at the folly which led me wrong and took him from my side. Have you known Dick so long, and not already have seen his unforgiving nature?"

"Have *you* been so long deceived in him?"

"My brother always keeps his word—it was my pride as well as his to assert once that the promise of a Stewart had never been broken. His word stands ever between him and me."

"A word spoken in the heat of anger, and of which he has repented, I am sure."

"I cannot ask him if that version be correct," said Mr. Stewart, with a coldness that was badly assumed; "he is the elder brother, and must seek me out. If he care no longer for me, or take no longer an interest in me, I must accept that evidence as proof of our division, till he breaks it down himself."

"You are a proud man—and stand in your own light."

"I have very little to be proud of!" was his answer. "In my life I have made more than one mistake; and once I have been verily ashamed and punished. I *was* a proud man, Miss Casey!"

"You have not come to see your brother, then?"

"No. I have a money debt to pay him through his agent—I have been anxious to pay him for some time, but his absence abroad has baffled me. He is in Wilthorpe?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope?"

"Quite well, Mr. Stewart."

"Has travelling altered him?—I used to fancy that he always looked older than he was; and Dick's not five-and-thirty till next

year. Dick five-and-thirty!—why, I can't believe it. But," correcting himself as he detected an effort in me to repress a smile, "I have not intruded upon you to make inquiries about my brother—the questions which I feel inclined to ask, I would have preferred to put to those less likely to be embarrassed by my curiosity; and yet you are the only friend in whom I can trust to tell me the whole truth concerning *her*."

"Concerning Miss Mannington?"

"Yes."

He walked on a few steps by my side in silence, with his hands behind him, and his gaze directed to the wintry-looking ground. What did he want to ask me about her?—what were his intentions *now*?

"Miss Casey," he began, very suddenly and quickly, "I have heard very lately, and by a mere accident, a story that I can scarcely credit. Is it true that Miss Mannington has been left alone in the world?"

"Not true, Sir. She is with me, a friend and sister."

"You are always thoughtful—I might have guessed that," he said; "but she has been deserted by her father—robbed by him of that large fortune bequeathed to her by Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"She had hoped to keep this a secret for her name's sake—she had no wish that her father's duplicity should reach the outer world. How did you hear this?"

"Secrets like these are impossible to keep, Miss Casey. This is a busy world, where rumours, well or ill-founded, spread their course along for good or evil—we can scarcely tell which at the outset. It is true, then?"

"Yes—it is true."

"I am very sorry to hear it; she is dependent upon you, then?"

"No, Sir—her father did not leave her penniless."

"That is bad news!"

"Sir!"

I turned upon him rather a surprised face, and he stammered forth,

"Good news, I should have said. I was afraid that she had been left entirely destitute. I did not understand her position, and—and I came to Wilthorpe to discover it for myself. I can be of no help here, then, and I may turn my back upon this place for ever."

We were passing Meadow House, but I did not pause before it. He was unaware of my new locality, and full of his own thoughts, proceeded mechanically by my side, step by step. I glanced towards my parlour window, but the curtains were draped thickly behind the glass, and the day was misty. I could see nothing, and hoped that Bel had not been at her old post watching for my return, as a child

for its mother's. He went on with me unconsciously; he did not seem to be aware that he was approaching the Hall, and his brother's cottage; or else he did not dream for an instant that Richard Stewart had returned to the old home with the old life.

"If she had been very poor, very friendless and cast down, I might have offered her—my purse," he added, after a pause; "that her pride would have refused, and the mission would still have been as profitless and vain. I may ask one favour of an old friend?"

"What is it?"

"That you will keep from her this meeting with me. The mention of my name must give her pain still."

"Naturally."

"Miss Casey," he said suddenly, "I wonder what you think of me?—you of all friends, old or new, treasured once or lost! I wonder what you *can* think of me, judging my character by what you have seen and heard, and meeting me again in sober after-years, when the judgment has been matured, and the fair verdict arrived at!"

I was a little alarmed at his manner, and he saw it. I did not like this strong man to lose his self-command, and address me wildly—plead, as it were, indirectly for a better opinion of him than his fears assured him that I had. Still I answered:

"You have been mistaken once or twice in life," I said in reply, "but you have meant well in all instances but one. In that one you were tempted by your business losses to win Bel Manning's heart, and thus shadow her young life after the dream was over."

"You think ill of me for that—and yet you knew it in the days when Mrs. Kingsworth lived, and called me friend."

"I did not know it. I had more faith in your honesty of purpose, and believed that——"

I would not say more. I made an angry gesture with my hand, implying all the rest, and he understood me and my disjointed sentence, and did not press the sequel. I believed that he had loved Bel Manning and tired of me; but I could not tell him so, knowing that he had loved me, and that his life and mine, but for a few hasty words, would have been so different.

He would have been a poor man, and I should have been his wife; his life might not have been happy with me, for he was ambitious and proud of the position to which he had attained—the time might have come when he would have repented of the match. I was glad then in my heart—very, very glad!—that all was over with him and me for ever. The thoughts I have recorded made me glad, I fancied; I had not the courage to analyze too deeply, and on that country road, with Mark Stewart at my side, there was no fitting opportunity.

"I shall tell no one of my reasons for coming hither," he said, "even if any one were disposed to believe them. I have your promise to regard this visit as a secret."

"You have, Sir."

"When I have paid my brother the money that I owe him, I shall have shown to the world—this little-minded world of Wilthorpe," he added somewhat scornfully, "a fair reason for my presence. You, Miss Casey, might accept that money for him, and spare us both the embarrassment of meeting."

"You have only to meet to be friends," I said.

"I think not," was his doubtful answer.

"Then I will take the money, if you wish it."

I would take it if he wished it, when I had led him to his brother's presence; I felt a strong desire to see those two men shake hands and forget the bitterness of their one quarrel. I would see this "little-minded world" of mine at peace, and I had faith in the result of the meeting for which I schemed. If I could only lead him to his brother's cottage and be a mediator between them, I felt I should be happier.

I spoke about this money to keep his thoughts employed and his keen observant sense from noticing too much the route that I had chosen; and he told me of the money his brother had paid an obnoxious creditor, in his anxiety to afford him, Mark Stewart, time to turn and escape the doom of bankruptcy.

"The creditors frightened Dick," said Mark Stewart, warming with his subject; "he knew that I only wanted time to call my friends together and explain, and this man threatened my arrest. This man had no trust in me either, Miss Casey," he added bitterly, "and Dick paid him off, against my knowledge, for we had quarrelled then. Only a little while ago that honest fellow," he said, warming again to his subject, "had told me that he had saved nearly five thousand pounds from the liberal salary Mrs. Kingsworth, who knew his value, had allowed him—and after we had quarrelled he paid it all away to keep the clutch of a bailiff from my shoulder. Can you understand how a man could open his purse to aid a man against whom he had shut his heart—for if so, you understand my brother."

"I think I understand him—I hope so."

My hand was on the wicket of his brother's fence. We were before the Hall again. It was the old home scene, at which he recoiled a step.

"The cottage!—you living here!" he murmured.

"Mrs. Kingsworth left me a house upon the estate," I said, feeling quite wicked at my evasion; and yet terribly anxious to lead him on still.

"Time makes many changes," he said; "I—I will leave you here, if you will kindly take my cheque for the debt I owe my brother."

"I must write you a receipt at least—I am a business woman, Mr. Stewart. Will you step inside?"

"Thank you, but I—I would rather not enter that house. My brother will send the acknowledgment of this cheque, which I have already drawn out."

"I cannot take the money without a receipt," was my persistent answer. "I must refer you to your brother, Mr. Stewart, for a settlement of this debt, then."

"I give in to you, Miss Casey," he said, a little irritably. "I am in your hands, if you will not let me trust your honesty."

He came along the garden path with a quick step after me; my heart beat faster as I went towards the door, praying that Richard Stewart might be at home. I did not knock at the door in the first instance; I tried the primitive latch, and the door gave to my touch—sure sign that Richard Stewart was in the parlour.

As I opened the door and stepped at once into the room, Richard Stewart, round-eyed and wondering, rose from his early dinner, knife and fork in hand, and stared at me.

"What has happened now?" he said.

"Your brother Mark—be friends with him—*I wish it!*"

I do not know why I should have added that last inducement to make friends. I was excited, and scarcely knew what I was saying then.

The tall man following me stooped his head at the low doorway, and came in, halting aghast at the figure that confronted him there.

"Two children of one mother, left alone in the world to love and help each other—shake hands, you two!" I cried.

Richard Stewart dropped his knife and fork, and stretched out both his hands towards his brother.

"Mark!"

"Dick—old—fellow!"

As their hands met, I ran out of the house, and closed the door behind me, leaving them together. I ran all the way home like a wild thing, and cried part of the way, for what reason I have scarcely ever been able to make out!

CHAPTER II.

NOT SETTLED YET.

I FOUND Bel Maunington anxious for my return—feverish as well as anxious. I guessed that the secret of Mr. Stewart's presence in Wilthorpe would not require much care in keeping, by my first glance towards her. Well, here was somebody to calm, and some wild thoughts to distract; something in *my* way! The reader perceives that I was becoming conceited again; well, that is my great failing, and it is no use disguising the fact any longer. Perhaps the reader has a suspiciou that I have a wonderful idea of my own cleverness; so have you, dear reader, though you don't print the admission, or tell *every one* of your friends!

"Bertie," cried Bel, the old excited, impetuous Bel Mannington, and how glad I was to catch her in my arms, "was it—was it *he!*"

"Yes, it was Mr. Stewart. In Wilthorpe here, on business with his brother."

"They are friends, then?"

"Yes—they are friends again, I am glad to say!"

"I saw you pass the window, too absorbed to notice the house, or my figure in the background watching you. Oh! Bertie, I am really glad that he has come back again. I thought he would."

"My dear Bel, you don't think——"

"Yes, yes, I do," she interrupted, becoming more feverish still, "I have thought it all along. You are his first love, and he has loved no one else. I felt that some day he would make all the reparatiou in his power, and restore your faithful heart to happiness. For he was never a bad man—only led away, in a time of trouble, to a temptation which he regrets now. He——"

I interrupted her in my turn.

"And you think that I love Mark Stewart still! On my honour, Bel,—by my woman's pride, Bel, if he were to ask me to-morrow to become his wife, I could but tell him 'No!'—a thousand times 'No!' You cannot conceive how well aud thoroughly I have dismissed all tender recollection here."

I touched my heart lightly as I spoke, and she murmured:

"I can scarcely think that."

I was sorry for that thought of hers—uot for my sake, but for her own. I saw then more clearly the confirmation of an old suspicion that she had not forgotten him, that she could not have repeated my

answer word for word without her lip quivering and her looks betraying her. She had given him up; I could not see or believe in a power that would bring her to his side again, or him to hers; but I could see more clearly than the truth, and I knew there was no peace of mind for her whilst she treasured up the past, and brooded on her passion in it. Knowing that disease, I could cure it in good time, I thought; change would do it—absence from home would do it; I had chained her too selfishly to past memories at this home in Wilthorpe.

Hers was a mind, weak and unstable, and yet clinging to one fact, which shadowed everything; I must do my best with it; I had not done it yet. I accused myself even in that moment of neglecting her, and I knew that for a while it was best to quit Wilthorpe, where every turn of the place had its grim retrospect.

Later that very day, I commenced my task of paving the way for a temporary absence from Wilthorpe. I spoke of "change" to Bel—change even at that season of the year, with the winter coming on! Bel looked at me in wonderment; was I afraid of meeting Mr. Stewart?—had I not the courage to meet him now? were her first thoughts, perhaps.

But Mr. Stewart would go away before we left our quiet village; I did not speak of a hasty departure; but when Bel herself was better, and I, like a careful housewife, had left my place properly in order. There were no ties to keep us single women bound to Wilthorpe; no one cared *much* about us, and the best friend we had had was sleeping in her vault in Wilthorpe church. Bel and I would travel in a humble way from place to place, until we yearned for home again!

Was I restless too at that period?—and was there even some selfish pleasure at the bottom of my project for Bel's good? It was more than possible. I knew what was best for Bel, but I understood that I was becoming depressed in Wilthorpe also, and there was a morbid satisfaction in thinking of one, or *two*, perhaps, who would be sorry to hear of my departure, and glad when I came back again.

The day passed without a sign from either Stewart; I do not know why I should have anticipated a visit from the elder brother—a formal vote of thanks for having been the means of dissipating an old grievance. If I had hoped for such a visit, I was disappointed, till one morning, when Bel, sitting at the breakfast table with her face to the window, changed colour, and looked towards me.

"Richard Stewart is coming in," she said. "And—and his his brother has passed on towards the village!"

"A mere friendly call—you must not become alarmed about small trifles, Bel."

"I am a little nervous now," she said, endeavouring to assume a calm demeanour, "it is my inheritance."

My maid admitted Mr. Richard Stewart into our presence. He came at once towards me, and wrung my hands heartily in his.

"Blessed is the peacemaker, Miss Casey."

He turned to Bel, and said—

"I hope you appreciate your friend, Miss Mannington? I don't know a woman like her in the world—I wish I did," he added in a lower tone, that made me start, though the last assertion was not meant for me.

"I think we all love and appreciate her, Mr. Stewart," said Bel; "a true friend in the sunshine—and the shade."

"Yes, and an artful one, too," he added, with his old abruptness. "By George! that was a trick you played on Mark, telling him that the Lodge was your house."

"I never told him so."

"You implied that fact, but we have both forgiven the evasion. Why it don't seem possible now that I should have ever quarrelled with Mark—sulked with him for years, when he was in trouble, too. I begin to think that I was in the wrong a little—I was always so pig-headed!"

"Yes," I said.

His eyes widened at my assent to that proposition; I felt in an impudent mood that day. I was very glad that the brothers had become friends, and a little proud of my own assistance to the good work. He laughed after a moment, pleasantly and heartily.

"I am glad to see that we have the old Miss Casey back again this morning."

"Don't taunt me with my age!—*old Miss Casey*, indeed!"

"You know what I mean," he said; "I shan't attempt any explanation or apology."

"Thank you!"

"And the old times with old Miss Casey, too," he said more gravely; "are we stepping back to them?—the best of times, when we had no ill-feeling in our midst. I almost think so!"

He relapsed into silence, and began twirling his hat round in his hands. He had something more to say; he was looking wistfully, almost sorrowfully at Bel Mannington. For an instant he had forgotten her, and her share in the old times to which he had alluded. Her happiest period, however, belonged to times of a later date, when Richard Stewart and I were troubled in our minds.

"You have a message for Miss Casey?" said Bel quickly.

"Yes, I have," he answered; "it's a very simple one, but I have found some difficulty in delivering it, —because—because—*confound* it, why can't I speak out to-day?"

"Mr. Stewart wishes to speak with me, perhaps?" I said, as calmly and as coldly as I could. I did not wish this interview to drift out of the matter-of-fact element pervading it.

"That's it, exactly. He's going back to Edinburgh, and desirous

of bidding you good-bye. I—I told him that he ought not to go away like a bear, after all that you have done.”

“But for you, then, he *would* have gone away like a bear?” I said.

I was somewhat embarrassed at his altered tone, but I would jest on to the end.

“N—no, he would not have done that, because he is anxious—that is, he wishes to see you for an instant. How long are you going to keep him kicking his heels in the churchyard?”

“In the churchyard!” I exclaimed.

“He could not come here,” muttered Richard Stewart; “and the church is at the corner. I don’t know that he is in the churchyard—he went that way, that’s all.”

Somewhat confused, Mr. Richard Stewart, having delivered his message, departed. I kept my place, almost resolved not to sally forth at the bidding of this eccentric visitor to meet his brother when he pleased. Bel sat and looked at me for awhile, then dropped to a footstool near me, and gazed up into my face.

“You will go, Bertie?”

“Why should I go?”

“Because—because you have a right to hear him and forgive him. If he be sorry for all the harm that he has done, and unhappy at this long separation from you—you should forgive in *your* turn.”

“No, no, Bel; he does not wish me to renew the old engagement—I would not renew it for the world! I could not bring my heart back to its past thoughts of him. I said so yesterday!”

“It is natural that you and he should marry—I hope you will!”

“Bel, you don’t know what you are saying!” I exclaimed.

“You have promised to go.”

“It will look as if I were afraid of him—as if I had thought of him throughout all these years, if I stay,” I said indignantly; “yes, I will go!”

“And when you come back I will say——”

“Nothing that can pain me, I am sure, Bel. Once again, and once for all, let me repeat that I shall never marry Mark Stewart!”

Bel did not believe me for all my stern assurance. She could not understand my firm denial, for I had loved this man as she had done, and time *had* softened all harsh memories. He had at least sought me for myself, and only her for money!

I put on my bonnet and shawl and went out of the house, eager to keep this appointment, and close the interview. I had no fear of any proposal from Mark Stewart; the suggestions of Bel had not frightened me—I had no cause to think of my answer, or prepare for it.

Outside the house Richard Stewart was waiting for me—an attention for which I was not prepared.

“What, are you here still?” I asked.

"I thought you might not feel inclined to come, and in another five minutes I should have knocked again, and begged you, as a favour, to reconsider your decision."

"You are strangely anxious," I said, suspiciously.

"I am—it is natural."

We went on together down the road. His manner began to perplex me; I was becoming nervous about the meeting myself, even inclined to wonder if its purport were really what Bel Mannington had thought, whether I should turn back and send my answer by this man."

"What am I wanted for?" I asked. "Was it so great an ordeal to pass through that your brother could not call at my house?"

"Miss Mannington was there—you would not have *them* meet again?"

"It would give unnecessary pain to both—well, no!"

"He wishes to see you—he appears very anxious to see you, Miss Bertie; and I am sure that he will appreciate this kindness in meeting him at his request."

Miss Bertie! What did he imply by that designation? Years ago he had called me by that name when I was to have been his brother's wife; he had spoken of it at that time as the title by which, as *my* future brother, he had a right to call me. Did he think—could he of all men think—that he would ever have that right again? My cheeks flushed, and something rose in my throat and checked my utterance—my blood flowed more quickly in my veins, and I felt vexed with him and all the world for the poor thoughts entertained towards me!

"Do you know—do you know what your brother wants of me?"

"He has not said a word to me concerning his intentions," answered Richard Stewart, who had turned pale at my question.

"Do you *know*, I ask? Why prevaricate like this?"

"I can guess, I think. The difficulty in guessing is not great, Miss Bertie."

"If you call me by that name again, I'll—I'll go back!" I hissed between my teeth.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "it was a liberty, and I have no right to take it. I—I hoped I might some day though, for the same reason as in the past."

"You *hoped* that!"

I turned upon him with my bated breath and flashing eyes—I faced him, and would have the truth from him. He could not dissemble, and I might trust in his reply.

"If you—you remember him with the old feelings—and you are a true-hearted woman!—I hoped it," he answered.

We went on together more peaceably after that. I felt a load from my heart, and my step was lighter, though my feelings were disturbed still, and the vixen in my nature uppermost.

"A true-hearted woman, then, is one that puts up with every humiliation for the sake of the man who coolly tells her that it is best to part with him—who keeps her old love pure and true, whilst his goes wandering?"

"If he loved truly also, and yet his weak judgment decided in an evil hour against the union—if he comes back to say——"

"He never comes back to say that here; and if he do, he comes too late," I answered. "I have heard this silly argument, or something like it, before, and the sooner it is closed the better."

"Miss Casey," he said, very humbly, but so earnestly, that I could but listen to him patiently. "I do not wish to argue on this matter, but I do not wish you, in a hasty moment, to throw away a chance that may make you and my brother very happy. You must pardon me if I offend you, but you are not happy—I have known it for some time. And I have thought—pardon me again—that it was almost destined that you should wait for Mark and he for you; and that the bitter feelings which had risen up between you would give place to that affection that you had had for one another. Why should it not? Why go on to the end apart—you two whose lives together would aid, strengthen and purify? You know how much of misconception a few words will dissipate—and I ask you to think seriously of the coming interview."

"And yet your brother may not wish to say one word to pain me—why foist upon me your version of a meeting which has not occurred, and seek to prompt me as to my proper course?"

"I thought you might be hasty in your answer," he said, submissively.

"I will be truthful."

"Yes, I know that, but you will not consider all things. Why, you are not even aware that he came to ask you to be his wife again—a poor man's wife—two months after he and you had quarrelled at Woundell, and you turned him aside from his intention by your harshness."

"And yet he proposed to Bel Mannington that day."

"Ah! that was what *we* quarrelled about—that was Mark's great mistake."

"And to-day would witness mine, if I followed such advice as yours!"

I wonder why I was anxious to offend him that morning—I, a woman peaceably disposed now? Why his interest in his brother's happiness and in mine should have irritated me so exceedingly? Was it that his belief in the strength of my affection for Mark Stewart, following closely on Bel Mannington's belief, exceeded the bounds of all patient endurance on my part? Was it that this man's estimation of his brother's greatness and goodness, revived thus suddenly, was too demonstrative, and galled me? Or was it, that possessed with one idea of my "true-heartedness," as he might

have phrased it, there was no guessing at other truths which might have given a different character to all this?

"Mr. Stewart," I said to him, when we were at the church-yard gate, "I am sorry to be rebellious, and to assert my right to disobey your wishes. I am sorry to add my disbelief in the motives which have induced your brother to send for me."

"But if you are wrong and I am right?"

"Then I shall hate you!"

And with this fierce assertion, I shut the gate in his amazed face, and left him staring after me through the iron railings.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST INTENTIONS.

MR. STEWART was waiting for me. In the distance I could see him pacing up and down beyond the church porch. He was walking very rapidly to and fro; not too absorbed to forget passing events, for he detected the flutter of my dress amongst the trees bordering the church path, and advanced to meet me at once.

If his brother and Bel Mannington were true in their ideas, I should soon dispel one delusion, I thought, as I steeled my nerves to meet even that emergency.

"Miss Casey, I am very glad that you have granted me this interview," he said; "it was not my right to appoint a time and place, and expect you to obey my mandate. But I was troubled— anxious to see you, and yet withheld by very shame from calling. I hope you will excuse the liberty that I have taken in bringing you to this place."

"What do you want with me, Mr. Stewart?" I inquired.

"I have been speaking to my brother Richard about you and Miss Mannington. I have heard—so far as I *can* hear from his lips, the story of your friendship, of her present position, of everything connected with you both. After all, I discover that she is poor."

"Poor, by comparison with the fortune that she has lost—granted."

"You are aware, perhaps, that I have retrieved a position which was nearly lost to me by the sole mention of her name?"

"I was not aware of it—I thought it might be probable."

"I told my creditors who met me at Edinburgh when you were there, that I required but time to make good my losses; and that if they doubted *that* assertion, and had lost confidence in me, there was a second chance for them; that I was about to marry a lady of great expectations—a lady on whose marriage-day Mrs. Kingsworth would endow with many thousand pounds. Not a sum that would pay off all my debts, but that would at least make a great difference in my position. My creditors were appeased, granted me time, accepted my bills, and I breathed again."

"What is this to do with Isabel?"

"I will explain. The panic in my trade subsided—I realized—I stood no longer on the quicksands. Though that marriage never occurred, I regained my position—time was in my favour. Then I had Mr. Kingsworth as a friend to help me with his money for awhile, to force its acceptance upon me, in return for what he called my past interest in him."

"Dear John! And he never told me this—never told your brother of an act which would at once have ended all suspicions between them."

I thought of other generous acts that he had done since then, and lost all fear of his future, thinking of them.

"You will perceive that I was indebted to Miss Mannington's name for my escape from bankruptcy. Miss Mannington is poor, and I must help to place her in a better position, in return."

"Can you really think that she would accept *your* money?"

"With your assistance—yes."

"And you sent for me to tell me this—to ask me to aid you in this foolish scheme?"

"Why—foolish?"

"Because she is above all charity—because you should understand her better!"

"She may be induced to look at the subject in the light which I have placed it to you. With your help——"

"Sir—I cannot help you in a scheme of such a nature," I said; "it is unworthy of you!"

He appeared troubled by my refusal to assist him. He essayed to speak twice before he offered further explanation.

"Miss Casey, I *must* help her. Do you know what she has done for me, at the risk of her name, and what the world might say of her? She is a weak woman; when you are married she will be left alone in the world to fight her battles against a crowd that will have no mercy on her weakness, and I *must* help her! If you see a better

way—if in any way there seem one chance of aiding her on my part—I will ask you, as her friend, to point it out.”

“Leave her to herself and me, Sir. It is more merciful.”

He paused again, then said :

“Do you remember what she said at Folkestone to me ?”

“Every word !”

“What I said in defence—what I came hundreds of miles to say, in the hope of making expiation, and saving her peace of mind from shipwreck ?”

“Yes.”

“I told her that I loved her—that I had learned to love her. It was true !”

“Well ?”

“She did not believe it—had I sworn it on the Bible she would have shrunk from me with no less horror. Yet I loved her then—forgive me, this is a painful assertion to make to you of all women—but I loved her, for her very trust in me !”

“I see my way more clearly for this avowal, Mr. Stewart. What can be done ?”

“May I ask if she ever mentions my name now ?”

“Very seldom.”

“She believes me an unscrupulous and selfish villain ?”

“No—not that.”

“Is it possible, then, that she might believe I love her now ?” he said, with more excitement ; “would she forgive the past, and believe in my true self ? She perilled her soul for my sake, to save my pride—and I am ever her debtor. You must not let me go away believing in her poor estate, and her low estimation of me. You will redeem my character in her eyes—even *you* will !”

“It is beyond my power, Mr. Stewart.”

“I hope not. I hope that you will not think that presently. I have built so much on you.”

“I cannot persuade her into the belief that you have ever loved her. Between her and you falls ever the shadow of the money !”

“Am I seeking her for her money now ?—this self-willed, warm-hearted woman, who will surely die without protection.”

“I will protect her, Mr. Stewart.”

“You will marry, and other ties will separate you from her,” he replied ; “ever in the future I see her desolate.”

“This is pity for her new distress—not love !”

“No—you are wrong. It was love for her that brought me to this place ; and now I have not the courage to face her, and meet her scorn once more.”

“You have changed very much to be so fearful of her.”

“What would you do ?”

“I cannot advise—be ruled by the dictates of your own heart, and follow them.”

"What do you think of me, Miss Casey? I have been to blame—more than once in life I have committed irreparable errors—but I am not a bad man. A few years ago I thought my character stronger than my brother's—stronger than all men with whom I had come in contact. I judged myself and fell."

"We have all acted wrongly and hastily in our time, and have lived to repent the steps which took us away from right. We erring men and women can afford to forgive one another when the hour for penitence arrives. You have not sinned very deeply, Mr. Stewart."

"And yet your words imply that she would not forgive me."

"That she would not believe you," I corrected.

"Right," he answered mournfully. "Why should the woman who has been once deceived, have trust in any specious words of mine? And yet, Miss Casey, I look forward to no happiness without her. My duty lies in protecting this fatherless girl from danger, and I feel that it is not honourable to abandon her without an effort."

"Make that effort for yourself, then. She is poor, and at least you will escape the taunt that you seek her for the worldly goods of which she stands possessed. You love her—and you were never a coward. Why bring me here to beg my mediation like one?"

"I would have known if there were hopes for me, before I sought to pain her by an interview—Miss Casey, you have almost answered me."

"No, do not take my answer," I urged; "I am a weak woman, whose judgment may be wrong. You have not been wont to rely upon others, or to find that weakness profitable. Seek her yourself, Sir—it will be one more trouble to her, or one great joy. God knows!"

"Miss Casey—I will go to her."

I hesitated. She was weak, but she was wilful. If she loved him still, yet she possessed a pride that would disown that love. Between her and him would stand ever their past quarrel, his past motive for seeking her hand, unless the newer, purer reason, backed by his eloquence, should break through all disguise, and set them side by side again. It seemed the fitter ending to their love-story; he was strong and she was a child who needed strength; she had sinned for him, and it was his place to take her to his heart and teach her better by his love. I let him go upon his love-chase with all my wishes for his success unspoken, fearing the worst, and yet hoping for the best. One more trial to my ward, and if the end were separation between this man and woman, then my theory of travel to work a cure.

I went slowly out of the churchyard, revolving this in my mind, and came face to face with Richard Stewart. He was standing with his two large hands clutching the iron railings of the gate, and looking through at me in wild-beast fashion.

"Where's Mark?" he asked.

"Gone through the wicket into the lane."

"What has he gone that way for?"

"When he returns he will inform you."

"But—but, Miss Casey," he said, opening the gate for me, and letting me pass into the country road again, "you don't mean to say that——"

"That you're a big, blundering, short-sighted blockhead—yes, I do!"

And overwhelming Richard Stewart with this torrent of invective, I flew past him towards Meadow House, leaving him clinging to the church-gates for support.



CHAPTER IV.

"SET TO PARTNERS."

WHEN I was out of sight of the gentleman whom I had so soundly abused, I walked more slowly homewards. I must give time to Mr. Stewart to state his intentions—to Bel Mannington to think of them.

Journeying deliberately upon my homeward road, I prayed for an end of Bel's trouble in this fashion: I felt they would be happy all their lives together, and miserable all their lives apart; and it was better to end all misconceptions now.

His strong mind, strong thoughts and will, would keep her strong. I saw it now; through the mists of the future, Mrs. Kingsworth had seen it, and plotted for it, oblivious to the thoughts that I had had at that time. She had wished it, and died believing that the truth was close upon her; might her hopes come true even yet, I wondered!

I was wondering how it had all ended when I went up the garden-path.

In the hall of my small house I was still considering the matter, oblivious to the fact of my maid tugging at my sleeve.

"Oh! if you please, Miss Casey, there's a gentleman with Miss Isabel!"

“Still with her? I am glad of that.”

“And there’s been such goings on, and she’s been crying so—it’s torn me into *sreds* to listen to ’em.”

“At this key-hole, Martha?”

“Y—yes, if you please, m’m. I—I was obliged to listen, in case his—his *intentions* weren’t quite square, m’m. But, I think, now, m’m, it’s the taxes gone out of his mind, and thinks he isn’t paid, he’s been talking so much about the money.”

“You don’t mind getting to work again, Martha?”

“Not in the least, m’m.”

And unabashed by my irony, she curtsied and departed to her proper sphere.

There were no high words now within that little room—no cry of money to keep back the love which had followed it. Should I knock, or leave them to themselves to explain, confess and pardon? I thought that I might not be forgiven for entrance yet; so I went upstairs, took off my bonnet, smoothed my hair, thought awhile of the last bewildered expression on the face of Richard Stewart, and then went down again.

I had given these lovers—or these separate atoms of dissension, which?—time enough to end their quarrel, or begin again, and I must now wish Bel joy, or take her part as champion. I knocked at the door and entered.

In an instant Bel Mannington was in my arms, trying her hardest to cry again upon my shoulder. Mr. Stewart, no longer the gloomy Byronic being of the churchyard, stood by the fireside watching us.

“Friends?” I asked looking towards him.

“Friends for ever!” was his exultant answer.

“Oh! Bertie, I did wrong him after all,” she whispered. “You—*you* are not sorry that he loved me, when we quarrelled on the Lees at Folkestone, or that he has come here to tell me so, woked and wilful as I have been through life.”

“Sorry, Bel! This is a very happy day for me.”

It was a happy day for each of us—my dream was coming true. The brightness of a new life was dawning once again—a life better than the old, for it had been purified by affliction, and had less of earthly dross in it. I thought so then—I think so now!

Mr. Stewart’s intentions were very clearly understood that day. He did not intend to leave us until nightfall, no matter what small joint we had for dinner, or how short we were of comestibles to do honour to his coming. He was the past Mr. Stewart, frank and clear-spoken, who showed you his mind at once, and the difficulty of changing it.

“This is my last day at Wilthorpe,” he said to me. “Edinburgh must receive me to-morrow for a week or two, and then I come back here for Bel. You will not send me away, Miss Casey?”

"Not if you wish to stay," I answered; "and this foolish girl here asks me as her guardian to let you."

"I shall not ask in vain, at least, dear Bertie."

So Mr. Stewart stayed with us, dined with us at an early hour, proposed a walk after dinner before the sun went down, and did not ask me to join him and Bel. The east wind had not left Wilthorpe yet, but Bel had no objection to accompany him, and my feeble protest was not of much avail.

"I shall call at the Lodge, Miss Casey," he said laughing, "and frighten honest Dick by re-introducing my future wife to him. May I bring him back with me?"

"I don't think that he will care to come," I answered evasively; and, full of their own thoughts, they did not press me for an answer more direct.

They went away together bright and young again, and I sat down to dream of the results of this to Bel and me. It implied separation—loneliness. I saw myself aging in this little house alone—and two young women, who were to have been old maids with me, happy in their husbands' love, away from here. I did not repine. I accepted my share of solitude with composure, doubtful, even in my own heart, if there would not come, in due time, a hope for me! I did not despond, sitting alone in my room enjoying a foretaste of the solitude in store; once or twice the smile came to my lips to think of my coolness and stoicism after what had happened, the joy I felt and shared with Bel to feel that she was going to marry the man whom I had once "taken a fancy" to myself. Yes, a fancy; let me think so now without one pang of regret to make me wince at the retrospect of passion—its fire burned out and all its ashes grey! I had loved a hero—and this was not one. I had met with men more staunch of faith, and imbued with greater nobleness than he—at least I had met with *one*, I thought!

And that one I had reviled this morning. I had lost my temper with him, and, like a scold as I was, abused him. But then he was so aggravating in his nobleness—and in his faith. He had drawn his fancy picture of my love for his brother, of his brother's love for me, and sitting down before it had submerged himself. He could see my happiness with Mark, and, for a reason he did not care to explain, he harassed me about that theoretical bliss. He knew that Mark and I had loved each other once, and his faith in us stepped in to assure him that we could not change, whatever might have happened. He would have never changed himself, had he been Mark—but then he was only *Richard Stewart*.

Drifting along thus, in the current of my day-dreams, this Richard Stewart nearly frightened me out of my life by coming to the window, and tapping energetically against the glass. He was a hero with bad habits, and this was not the least of them. Good Mr. Crease had been once scared by him after this fashion,

I went to the window and raised it. I was still inclined to snub him for his rudeness, and I said,

“Why did you not knock at the door, like a rational being?”

“It saves trouble, and I’m in a hurry. I can’t find Mark anywhere—he has never come back to the Lodge—whatever did you say to him this morning to make him run away like this?”

“Have you come from the Lodge?”

“Yes.”

“Along the road?”

“No—across the fields—the short cut at the back here.”

“You have missed him, then. He and Miss Mannington have gone together from this house to yours.”

“He and Miss—Mannington—together!”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see how that can be,” he said, passing his hands through his bushy hair, tilting his cap from his head, and putting it on again hindside before; “will you explain? May I come in?”

Ere I had made up my mind as to the propriety of giving my assent to this, he had stepped through the window in his excitement, and was looking almost sternly at me.

“You wouldn’t play me a trick,” he said; “but how can this be?”

He closed the window after him—and then we two stood looking at each other like strange cats!

“Your brother loved Miss Mannington and wished to marry her. What is there remarkable in him coming here to tell her so?”

“He loved Miss Mannington!—he told you *that* in the churchyard?”

“Yes.”

“He hasn’t done all this in a hurry, because you have declined——”

“I have declined nothing,” I answered hastily; “I haven’t had the chance.”

“You knew this all along, and that was why I was ‘a big, blundering, shortsighted blockhead’ not to see it. I’m pretty quick at seeing the truth, too—at least, I thought so until to-day. Oh! yes, I was a blockhead—it’s as plain as possible!”

He stood there with his Scotch cap on his head, revolving this new trouble in his mind. He took his cap off when conscious of his rudeness, to twirl it round nervously in his hands. His brow was furrowed with the intensity of that thought which had struck him full front and staggered him.

“Perhaps it is best,” he murmured, after a long, and a very embarrassing silence; “I shall think so when I have more fully considered it. You saw this long ago, and were prepared for it—I understand that now—I’m not the blundering blockhead that I was.”

"Don't repeat those words, please—you vexed me, and I did not mean to say them!"

"Then you apologize humbly for your impudence," he said, with a laughing glance towards me.

"No—I don't!"

"I'm glad to hear that, because I don't like people who are always bowing and scraping, and saying how sorry they are. And I *do* like you, Miss Casey."

"Thank you."

He seemed quite at his ease, and I must not betray that I was not. But my heart was thumping very terribly, and trying to get out of my left side.

"You saw this long ago," he repeated in a grave tone, and my heart went at its battering process harder than ever for it, "and you wished it long ago. Can you look me in the face and say that?"

"Yes."

"But you are not looking me in the face! What a girl you are!"

"There, then!"

I looked him in the face and uttered "Yes" again to his assertion. What a noble earnest face it was!

"Bertie," he said, and I lowered my eyes at that name and dared *not* look at him again, "I have a habit—bad or good as the case may turn out—of remembering all you say. You asked me to-day if I *hoped* that you might be my sister again—Mark's wife?"

I nodded to that question—I could not answer him just then.

"And I replied that I hoped it if you remembered him with the old feeling—which you did *not*? Oh! Bertie, against my own conviction, I prayed that you might not think so—against my brother, I prayed that morning in my heart. For he had many chances of happiness, and I but one—and it was in his power to snatch mine and go away again. I feared that you might not have forgotten him, but I did not—could not hope it. Will you forgive me?"

I could not answer any more for the time that he allowed me. The tears were in my eyes, his hand had stolen to mine, his arm was drawing me closer to him. He knew the truth at last.

"Something more you said," he whispered, "that if I were right in my belief of my brother seeking you again, you would hate me."

"Well?"

"And I am **WRONG!**—will you try to love me for my great mistake?"

"*I'll—try!*"

* * * * *

I told him, when I had found my voice again, when my eyes were dry, and he and I were sitting by the firelight, that the effort to love him would not be a great one—considering that I had loved him

long ago, when I had learned first to understand him. We were very happy side by side thus—confessing all the doubts that had perplexed us, and all the reticence which could not leap the barrier that kept the truth away.

The twilight deepened in the room, and our shadows danced upon the wall; the rain that had been threatening all day came with a rush and clatter against the window glass, and I thought of Bel Mannington once more.

“They are caught in the rain, Richard,” I said, “and poor Bel’s cough will be none the better for this.”

“Where’s her cloak?” he said; “I’ll——”

But before the words had escaped him they came running beneath the porch, Mark and his betrothed, and I heard the musical laugh of Bel at her escape—that laugh which had not rung in my ears since Mrs. Kingsworth’s death.

We kept our places side by side, with our faces turned towards the door, awaiting their entrance; the maid admitted them, and they came into the room lurid with the firelight, and paused together, looking dreamily towards us.

“Dick—*is* it Dick?” exclaimed Mark Stewart, leaning more forward, and staring at his brother.

“Yes. Don’t be frightened.”

As they came towards us Richard Stewart rose and held forth one hand to his brother, the other to Miss Mannington.

“Not going?” said his brother, mistaking the action for farewell.

“Going to be married—that’s all. You two will wish me joy, I’m sure.”

They could understand our happiness, and they congratulated us with all their hearts.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAST CLOUD.

I FEAR that we scarcely studied the "proprieties" that evening, that two young women like Bel and me,—even with a maid-servant in the house, and one policeman on duty in the village after dark,—were scarcely following the strict codes of etiquette in having our two lovers to tea that night.

Truly there were extenuating circumstances. They were lovers whom we could trust—one was going a long journey in the morning, and wished to be with Bel that evening, and surely I had not the heart to part Richard Stewart from his brother!

We four spent the evening together, talking of the future and the past, mingling with the latter no harsh memories—a quiet, even a common-place evening, sitting before the fire with the curtains drawn, and stopping now and then to listen to the rain. Taking no lesson from past disappointments—who takes that, in the first flush of a new success?—we sketched the future out. How Mark Stewart was to make a large fortune in a few more years, and come back with his wife from Edinburgh, and settle at the Hall; and how Dick and I, less ambitious people, would keep to Meadow House, or build a villa of our own pattern on the estate, not too far away from the dear friends we should have about us then. We were not dreamers, for there were facts to base our hopes upon, and we were not bad prophets. Mr. Stewart *did* come to the Hall, and start in life as gentleman and land-owner—and his children play with ours in the great park to this day.

The rough outline of our plans came true at least, though on that night we drew more vivid pictures than time has brought to us, for we were as over-sanguine as our hearts were over-full. After much of misunderstanding, the reaction turned our brains a little, and we could not look soberly at life just then.

And yet even at that hour the last cloud upon our rejoicing was coming with the rain. I could think of the rain one Sunday evening long ago, and laugh at it and its associations, for I was a girl then, with no experience of what was best for me! The rain was pattering against the glass when Mr. Stewart made up his mind to go, and his brother to accompany him. It was nine o'clock, a time for lovers' partings.

"Soon to come again, Bel," said Mark Stewart, assuringly; "a few weeks, and then our happiness begins."

"It has begun now, Mark, I hope!"

"True."

"If I could only meet my father again—assure him of my forgiveness—see him as penitent for a past sin as myself, I should not have one sorrow left."

"*What's that?*"

Some one had stumbled against the outer door—we heard the fall, the sliding forwards to the ground, the beat or scratch of nails against the porch.

"A stray dog," said Richard Stewart; "one of the hounds, perhaps, attracted by the lights."

He took the table-lamp in his hand, and went into our little hall with it. The noise was over now, but it had roused the maid-servant, who was coming from her room with a scared face, and her cap awry.

"Keep back!" said Richard Stewart, "if it's a dog from the Hall it will know me, and may fly at you."

"Dogs don't say '*Isabel!*'" gasped the servant.

Bel screamed.

"Open that door—open it at once!"

Richard Stewart wrenched open the door, and the rain came swooping in upon us, and would have quenched the light, had not he passed it to his brother, who held it above all our heads. Richard stooped, and bent over a tangled mass lying on the wet stone without.

"A beggar!" he muttered.

A beggar, face foremost on the ground, with his two hands outspread, and his rags already dank with rain.

"Take Miss Mannington away," Richard Stewart said a moment afterwards, as he raised the figure and looked into its face, "take her away!"

"No—let me be!" she said; "I am prepared."

"For God's will, I hope, sister," were his solemn words; "he's dead."

* * * * *

Not prepared in the first moments of surprise for that truth—not prepared, any of us, for a shadow so dense and dark upon the first flush of our rejoicing. Afterwards, there came to Bel a time for less grief, even for satisfaction that he had not died wholly away from her, or wholly unregenerate.

What Mr. Mannington had done with the money, or by what strange chain of circumstances he had been drawn to Wilthorpe, we never knew. He had come back in rags, a weak old man, to beg for mercy from his daughter; he had felt it hard to die without her pardon, and had struggled hard to reach her. Want of money had not brought him back a penitent; there were bank-notes in his

pocket-book, and that daughter's miniature, which he had stolen from me.

He had seen poverty approaching and become greedy of his latest store; but when he had seen death, more relentless and exacting, on its way, he had tottered back to die. We could be thankful afterwards that in his last moments he had had better thoughts—when the shadow left us, we were grateful for them.

In the good time Bel could speak of him as one who was not wholly bad, who might have sinned like her and her aunt from a perverted judgment that was akin to madness. In the good time, then, Bel found happiness and strength. She is happy still—happy as I am, and as proud of her husband.

So the shadow steals away upon the grass; the cloud between the earthlings and the sun is impelled by God's hand, and will pass upon its course, if we have faith and—wait.

THE END.

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