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JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY,” “OLIVE,”

&c. &c.

“ And thus he bore, without abuse,
The grand old name of Gentleman.”

TENNYSON'S “IN MEMORIAM.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
SUCCESSORS TO HENRY COLBURN,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1856.

JOHN HALIFAX, GENTLEMAN.

CHAPTER I.

“GET out o’ Mr. Fletcher’s road, ye idle, lounging, little—”

“Vagabond,” I think the woman, (Sally Watkins, once my nurse,) was going to say, but she changed her mind.

My father and I both glanced round, surprised at her unusual reticence of epithets: but when the lad addressed turned, fixed his eyes on each of us for a moment, and made way for us, we ceased to wonder. Ragged, muddy, and miserable as he appeared, the poor boy looked anything but a “vagabond.”

“Thee need not go out into the wet, my lad. Keep close to the wall, and there will be shelter enough both for us and thee,” said my father, as

he pulled my little hand-carriage into the alley, under cover, from the pelting rain. The lad, with a grateful look, put out a hand likewise, and pushed me further in. A strong hand it was—roughened and browned with labour—though he was scarcely as old as I. What would I not have given to have been so stalwart and so tall!

Sally called from her house-door, “Wouldn’t Master Phineas come in and sit by the fire a bit?”—But it was always a trouble to me to move, or walk; and I liked staying at the mouth of the alley, watching the autumnal shower come sweeping down the street; besides, I wanted to look again at the stranger-lad.

He had scarcely stirred, but remained leaning against the wall—either through weariness, or in order to be out of our way. He took little or no notice of us, but remained with his eyes fixed on the pavement—for we actually boasted pavement in the High Street of our town of Norton Bury—watching the eddying rain-drops, which, each as it fell, threw up a little mist of spray. It was a serious, haggard face for a boy of only fourteen or so. Let me call it up before me—I can easily, even after more than fifty years.

Brown eyes, deep-sunken, with strongly marked brows, a nose like most other Saxon

noses, nothing particular ; lips well-shaped, lying one upon the other, firm and close ; a square, sharply-outlined, resolute chin, of that type which gives character and determination to the whole physiognomy, and without which in the fairest features, as in the best dispositions, one is always conscious of a certain want.

As I have stated, in person the lad was tall, and strongly-built ; and I, poor puny wretch ! so revered physical strength. Everything in him seemed to indicate that which I had not ; his muscular limbs, his square, broad shoulders, his healthy cheek, though it was sharp and thin—even to his crisp curls of bright thick hair.

Thus he stood, principal figure in a picture which is even yet as clear to me as yesterday—the narrow, dirty alley leading out of the High Street, yet shewing a glimmer of green field at the farther end ; the open house-doors on either side, through which came the drowsy burr of many a stocking-loom, the prattle of children paddling in the gutter, and sailing thereon a fleet of potato parings. In front—the High Street, with the mayor's house opposite, porticoed and grand ; and beyond, just where the rain-clouds were breaking, rose up out of a nest

of trees, the square tower of our ancient abbey—Norton Bury's boast and pride. On it there came a sudden stream of light—I saw the stranger-lad lift up his head and look at it.

“The rain will be over soon,” I said, but doubted if he heard me. What could he be thinking of so intently?—a poor working lad, whom few would have given credit for thinking at all.

I do not suppose my father gave a second glance or thought to the boy, whom, from a common sense of justice, he had made take shelter beside us. In truth, worthy man, he had no lack of subjects to occupy his mind, being sole architect of a long uphill but now thriving trade. I saw, by the hardening of his features, and the restless way in which he poked his stick into the little water-pools, that he was longing to be in his tan-yard close by.

He pulled out his great silver watch, the dread of our house—for it was a watch which seemed to have imbibed something of its master's character; remorseless as justice or fate, it never erred a moment.

“Twenty-three minutes lost by this shower. Phineas, my son, how am I to get thee safe home? unless thee wilt go with me to the tan-yard—”

I shook my head. It was very hard for Abel Fletcher to have for his only child such a sickly creature as I, now, at sixteen, as helpless and useless to him as a baby.

“Well, well, I must find some one to go home with thee.” For though, with some skill, my father had invented a sort of carriage, in which, with a little external aid, I could propel myself, so as to be his companion occasionally in his walks between our house, the tan-yard, and the Friends’ meeting-house—still, he never trusted me anywhere alone. “Here, Sally—Sally Watkins! do any o’ thy lads want to earn an honest penny?”

Sally was out of earshot; but I noticed that as the lad near us heard my father’s words, the colour rushed over his face, and he started forward involuntarily. I had not before perceived how wasted and hungry-looking he was.

“Father!” I whispered. But here the boy had mustered up his courage and voice.

“Sir, I want work; may I earn the penny?”

He spoke in tolerably good English—different from our coarse, broad, G——shire drawl; and taking off his tattered old cap, looked in manly, fearless fashion right up into my father’s face. The old man scanned him closely.

“What is thy name, lad?”

“John Halifax.”

“Where dost thee come from?”

“Cornwall.”

“Hast thee any parents living?”

“No.”

I wished my father would not question thus; but possibly he had his own motives, which were rarely harsh, though his actions often appeared so.

“How old might thee be, John Halifax?”

“Fourteen, sir.”

“Thee art used to work?”

“Yes.”

“What sort of work?”

“Anything I can get to do.”

I listened nervously to this catechism, which went on behind my back.

“Well,” said my father, after a pause, “thee shall take my son home, and I’ll give thee a groat. Let me see;—art thee a lad to be trusted?” And holding him at arm’s length, regarding him meanwhile with eyes that were the terror of all the rogues in Norton Bury, Abel Fletcher jingled temptingly the silver money in the pockets of his long-flapped brown waistcoat. “I say, art thee a lad to be trusted?”

John Halifax neither answered nor declined his eyes. He seemed to feel that this was a critical moment, and to have gathered all his mental forces into a serried square, to meet the attack. He met it, and conquered.

“Lad, shall I give thee the groat now?”

And the old man relaxed into a half-smile.

“Not till I’ve earned it, sir.”

So, drawing his hand back, my father slipped the money into mine, and left us.

I followed him with my eyes, as he went sturdily plashing down the street; his broad, comfortable back, which owned a coat of true Quaker cut, but spotless, warm, and fine; his ribbed hose and leathern gaiters, and the wide-brimmed hat, set over a fringe of grey hairs, that crowned the whole with respectable dignity. He looked precisely what he was,—an honest, honourable, prosperous tradesman. I watched him down the street—my good father, whom I respected perhaps even more than I loved him. The Cornish lad watched him likewise.

It still rained slightly, so we remained under cover. John Halifax leaned in his old place, and did not attempt to talk. Once only, when the draught through the alley made me shiver, he pulled my cloak round me carefully.

“ You’re not very strong, I’m afraid ?”

“ No.”

Then he stood, idly looking up at the opposite house—the mayor’s house,—with its steps and portico, and its fourteen windows, one of which was open, and a cluster of little heads visible there.

The mayor’s children—I knew them all by sight, though nothing more ; for their father was a lawyer, and mine a tanner ; they belonged to Abbey folk and orthodoxy,—I to the Society of Friends — the mayor’s rosy children seemed greatly amused in watching us shivering shelterers from the rain. Doubtless our position made their own appear all the pleasanter. For myself, it mattered little ; but for this poor, desolate, homeless, way-faring lad to stand in sight of their merry nursery-window, and hear the clatter of voices, and of not unwelcome dinner-sounds—I wondered how he felt it.

Just at this minute another head came to the window, a somewhat older child ; I had met her with the rest ; she was only a visitor. She looked at us, then disappeared. Soon after, we saw the front door half opened, and an evident struggle taking place behind it ; we even heard loud words across the narrow street.

“ I will—I say I will.”

“ You shan’t, Miss Ursula.”

“ But I will !”

And there stood the little girl, with a loaf in one hand, and a carving-knife in the other. She succeeded in cutting off a large slice, and holding it out.

“ Take it, poor boy !—you look so hungry. Do take it.” But the servant forced her in, and the door was shut upon a sharp cry.

It made John Halifax start, and look up at the nursery window, which was likewise closed. We heard nothing more. After a minute, he crossed the street, and picked up the slice of bread. Now, in those days bread was precious, exceedingly. The poor folk rarely got it ; they lived on rye or meal. John Halifax had probably not tasted wheaten bread like this for months ; it appeared not, he eyed it so ravenously ;—then, glancing towards the shut door, his mind seemed to change. He was a long time before he ate a morsel ; when he did so, it was quietly and slowly ; looking very thoughtful all the while.

As soon as the rain ceased, we took our way home, down the High Street, toward the abbey church—he guiding my carriage along in silence.

I wished he would talk, and let me hear again his pleasant Cornish accent.

“How strong you are!” said I, half sighing, when, with a sudden pull, he had saved me from being overturned by a horseman riding past—young Mr. Brithwood of the Mythe House, who never cared where he galloped or whom he hurt—“So tall and so strong.”

“Am I? Well, I shall want my strength.”

“How?”

“To earn my living.”

He drew up his broad shoulders, and planted on the pavement a firmer foot, as if he knew he had the world before him—would meet it single-handed, and without fear.

“What have you worked at lately?”

“Anything I could get, for I have never learned a trade.”

“Would you like to learn one?”

He hesitated a minute, as if weighing his speech. “Once, I thought I should like to be what my father was.”

“What was he?”

“A scholar and a gentleman.”

This was news, though it did not much surprise me. My father, tanner as he was, and

pertinaciously jealous of the dignity of trade, yet held strongly the common-sense doctrine of the advantages of good descent; at least, in degree. For since it is a law of nature, admitting only rare exceptions, that the qualities of the ancestors should be transmitted to the race,—the fact seems patent enough, that even allowing equal advantages, a gentleman's son has more chances of growing up a gentleman than the son of a working man. And though he himself, and his father before him, had both been working men, still, I think Abel Fletcher never forgot that we came of a good old honourable stock, and that it pleased him to call me, his only son, after one of our forefathers, not unknown—Phineas Fletcher, who wrote the “Purple Island.”

Thus it seemed to me, and I doubted not it would to my father, much more reasonable and natural, that a boy like John Halifax—in whom from every word he said I detected a mind and breeding above his outward condition—should come of gentle rather than of boorish blood.

“Then, perhaps,” I said, resuming the conversation, “you would not like to follow a trade?”

“Yes, I should. What would it matter to me? My father was a gentleman.”

“And your mother?”

He turned suddenly round; his cheeks hot, his lips quivering: “She is dead. I do not like to hear strangers speak about my mother.”

I asked his pardon. It was plain he had loved and mourned her; and that circumstances had smothered down his quick boyish feelings into a man’s tenacity of betraying where he had loved and mourned.—I only, a few minutes after, said something about wishing we were not “strangers.”

“Do you?” The lad’s bright, half-amazed, half-grateful smile went right to my heart.

“Have you been up and down the country much?”

“A great deal—these last three years; doing a hand’s turn, as I best could, in hop-picking, apple-gathering, harvesting; only this summer I had typhus fever, and could not work.”

“What did you do then?”

“I lay in a barn till I got well.—I’m quite well now; you need not be afraid.”

“No, indeed; I had never thought of that.”

We soon became quite sociable together. He guided me carefully out of the town, into the abbey walk, flecked with sunshine through

overhanging trees. Once he stopped to pick up for me the large brown fan of a horse-chestnut leaf.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it? only it shows that autumn is come.”

“And how shall you live in the winter, when there is no out-of-door work to be had?”

“I don’t know.”

The lad’s countenance fell, and that hungry, weary look, which had vanished while we talked, came back more painfully than ever. I reproached myself for having, under the influence of his merry talk, temporarily forgotten it.

“Ah!” I cried eagerly, when we left the shade of the abbey trees, and crossed the street: “here we are, at home!”

“Are you!” The homeless lad just glanced at it—the flight of spotless stone-steps, guarded by ponderous railings, which led to my father’s respectable and handsome door. “Good day, then—which means good bye.”

I started. The word pained me. On my sad, lonely life, brief indeed, though ill-health seemed to have doubled and trebled my sixteen years into a mournful maturity—this lad’s face had come like a flash of sunshine—a reflection

of the merry boyhood, the youth and strength that never were, never could be mine. To let it go from me, was like going back into the dark.

“Not good-bye just yet!” said I, trying painfully to disengage myself from my little carriage, and mount the steps. John Halifax came to my aid.

“Suppose you let me carry you. I could—and—and—it would be great fun, you know.”

He tried to turn it into a jest, so as not to hurt me; but the tremble in his voice was as tender as any woman’s—tenderer than any woman’s I ever was used to hear. I put my arms round his neck; he lifted me safely and carefully, and set me at my own door. Then, with another good-bye, he again turned to go.

My heart cried after him with an irrepresible cry. What I said I do not remember, but it caused him to return.

“Is there anything more I can do for you, sir?”

“Don’t call me ‘sir;’ I am only a boy like yourself. I want you;—don’t go yet. Ah! here comes my father!”

John Halifax stood aside, and touched his cap with a respectful deference, as the old man passed.

“So here thee be—hast thee taken care of my son? Did he give thee thy groat, my lad?”

We had neither of us once thought of the money.

When I acknowledged this, my father laughed, called John an honest lad, and began searching in his pockets for some larger coin. I ventured to draw his ear down and whisper something—but I got no answer; meanwhile, John Halifax for the third time was going away.

“Stop, lad—I forget thy name—here is thy groat, and a shilling added, for being kind to my son.”

“Thank you, but I only want payment for work.”

He took the groat, and put back the shilling into my father’s hand.

“Eh!” said the old man, much astonished, “thee’rt an odd lad; but I can’t stay talking with thee. Come in to dinner, Phineas.—I say,” turning back to John Halifax with a sudden thought, “art thee hungry?”

“Very hungry.” Nature gave way at last, and great tears came into the poor lad’s eyes. “Nearly starving.”

“Bless me! then get in, and have thy dinner. But first——” and my inexorable father held

him by the shoulder; "thee art a decent lad, come of decent parents?"

"Yes," almost indignantly.

"Thee works for thy living?"

"I do, whenever I can get it."

"Thee hast never been in gaol?"

"No!" thundered out the lad, with a furious look. "I don't want your dinner, sir; I would have stayed, because your son asked me, and he was kind to me, and I liked him. Now, I think, I had better go. Good day, sir."

There is a verse in a very old Book—even in its human histories the most pathetic of all books—which runs thus:

"And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit unto the soul of David; and Jonathan loved him as his own soul."

And this day, I, a poorer and more helpless Jonathan, had found my David.

I caught him by the hand, and would not let him go.

"There, get in, lads—make no more ado," said Abel Fletcher, sharply, as he disappeared.

So, still holding my David fast, I brought him into my father's house.

CHAPTER II.

DINNER was over; my father and I took ours in the large parlour, where the stiff, high-backed chairs eyed one another in opposite rows across the wide oaken floor, shiny and hard as marble, and slippery as glass. Except the table, the side-board, and the cuckoo clock, there was no other furniture.

I dared not bring the poor wandering lad into this, my father's especial domain; but as soon as he was away to the tan-yard, I sent for John.

Jael brought him in; Jael, the only woman-kind we ever had about us, and who, save to me when I happened to be very ill, certainly gave no indication of her sex in its softness and tenderness. There had evidently been wrath in the kitchen.

“Phineas, the lad ha' got his dinner, and you mustn't keep 'un long. I bean't going to let

you knock yourself up with looking after a beggar-boy."

A beggar-boy! The idea seemed so ludicrous, that I could not help smiling at it as I regarded him. He had washed his face and combed out his fair curls; though his clothes were threadbare, all but ragged, they were not unclean; and there was a rosy, healthy freshness in his tanned skin, which showed he loved and delighted in what poor folk generally abominate—water. And now the sickness of hunger had gone from his face, the lad, if not actually what our scriptural Saxon terms "well-favoured," was certainly "well-liking." A beggar-boy, indeed! I hoped he had not heard Jael's remark. But he had.

"Madam," said he, with a bow of perfect good-humour, and even some sly drollery, "you mistake; I never begged in my life: I'm a person of independent property, which consists of my head and my two hands, out of which I hope to realize a large capital some day."

I laughed to see him so merry. Jael retired, abundantly mystified, and rather cross. John Halifax came to my easy chair, and in an altered tone asked me how I felt, and if he could do any thing for me before he went away.

“ You’ll not go away ; not till my father comes home, at least ?” For I had been revolving many plans, which had one sole aim and object, to keep near me this lad, whose companionship and help seemed to me, brotherless, sisterless, and friendless as I was, the very thing that would give me an interest in life, or, at least, make it drag on less wearily. To say that what I projected was done out of charity or pity, would not be true ; it was simple selfishness, if that be selfishness which makes one leap towards, and cling to, a possible strength and good, which I conclude to be the secret of all those sudden likings that spring more from instinct than reason. I do not attempt to account for mine : I know not why “ the soul of Jonathan clave to the soul of David.” I only knew that it was so, and that the first day I beheld the lad John Halifax, I, Phineas Fletcher, “ loved him as my own soul.”

Thus, my entreaty, “ you’ll not go away ?” was so earnest, that it apparently touched the friendless boy to the core.

“ Thank you,” he said, in an unsteady voice, as leaning against the fire-place, he drew his hand backwards and forwards across his face ;

“you are very kind ; I’ll stay an hour or so, if you wish it.”

“Then come and sit down here, and let us have a talk.”

What this talk was, I cannot now recall, save that it ranged over many and wide themes, such as boys delight in—chiefly of life and adventure. He knew nothing of my only world—books.

“Can you read ?” he asked me at last, suddenly.

“I should rather think so.” And I could not help smiling, being somewhat proud of my erudition.

“And write ?”

“Oh, yes ; certainly.”

He thought a minute, and then said, in a low tone, “I can’t write, and I don’t know when I shall be able to learn ; I wish you would put down something in a book for me.”

“That I will.”

He took out of his pocket a little case of leather, with an under-one of black silk ; within this, again, was a book. He would not let it go out of his hands, but held it so that I could see the leaves. It was a Greek and English Testament.

“Look here.”

He pointed to the fly leaf, and I read—

“*Guy Halifax, his Book.*”

“*Guy Halifax, gentleman, married Muriel Joyce, spinster, May 17, in the year of our Lord 1779.*”

“*John Halifax, their son, born June 18th, 1780.*”

There was one more entry, in a feeble, illiterate female hand :

“*Guy Halifax, died January 4, 1781.*”

“What shall I write, John?” said I, after a minute or so of silence.

“I’ll tell you presently. Can I get you a pen?”

He leaned on my shoulder with his left hand, but his right never once let go of the precious book.

“Write—‘*Muriel Halifax, died January 1st, 1791.*’”

“Nothing more?”

“Nothing more.”

He looked at the writing for a minute or two, dried it carefully by the fire, replaced the book in its two cases, and put it into his pocket. He said no other word but “Thank you,” and I asked him no questions.

This was all I ever heard of the boy’s parent-

age: nor do I believe he knew more himself. He was indebted to no forefathers for a family history: the chronicle commenced with himself, and was altogether his own making. No romantic antecedents ever turned up: his lineage remained uninvestigated, and his pedigree began and ended with his own honest name—John Halifax.

Jael kept coming in and out of the parlour on divers excuses, eyeing very suspiciously John Halifax and me; especially when she heard me laughing—a rare and notable fact—for mirth was not the fashion in our house, nor the tendency of my own nature. Now this young lad, hardly as the world had knocked him about even already, had an overflowing spirit of quiet drollery and healthy humour, which was to me an inexpressible relief. It gave me something I did not possess—something entirely new. I could not look at the dancing brown eyes, at the quaint dimples of lurking fun that played hide-and-seek under the gravity of the firm-set mouth, without feeling my heart cheered and delighted, like one brought out of a murky chamber into the open day.

But all this was highly objectionable to Jael.

“Phineas!”—and she planted herself before

me at the end of the table—"it's a fine, sunshiny day: thee ought to get out."

"I have been out, thank you, Jael." And John and I went on talking.

"Phineas!"—a second and more determined attack—"too much laughing beant good for thee; and it's time this lad were going about his own business."

"Hush!—nonsense, Jael."

"No—she's right," said John Halifax, rising, while that look of premature gravity, learned doubtless out of hard experience, chased all the boyish fun from his face. "I've had a merry day—thank you kindly for it! and now I'll be gone."

Gone! It was not to be thought of—at least, not till my father came home. For now, more determinedly than ever, the plan which I had just ventured to hint at to my father, fixed itself on my mind. Surely, he would not refuse me—me, his sickly boy, whose life had in it so little pleasure.

"Why do you want to go? You have not any work?"

"No; I wish I had. But I'll get some."

"How?"

"Just by trying everything that comes to

hand. That's the only way. I never wanted bread, nor begged it, yet—though I've often been rather hungry. And as for clothes"—he looked down on his own, light and threadbare, here and there almost burst into holes by the stout muscles of the big, growing boy—looked rather disconsolately. "I'm afraid *she* would be sorry—that's all! She always kept me so tidy."

By the way he spoke, "*she*" must have meant his mother. There the orphan lad had an advantage over me; alas! I did not remember mine.

"Come," I said, for now I had quite made up my mind to take no denial, and fear no rebuff from my father; "cheer up. Who knows what may turn up?"

"Oh yes, something always does; I'm not afraid!" He tossed back his curls, and looked smiling out through the window at the blue sky; that steady, brave, honest smile, which will meet Fate in every turn, and fairly coax the jade into good humour.

"John, do you know you're uncommonly like a childish hero of mine—Dick Whittington? Did you ever hear of him?"

"No."

"Come into the garden then"—for I caught

another ominous vision of Jael in the doorway, and I did not want to vex my good old nurse; besides, unlike John, I was anything but brave. "You'll hear the Abbey bells chime presently—not unlike Bow bells, I used to fancy sometimes; and we'll lie on the grass, and I'll tell you the whole true and particular story of Sir Richard Whittington."

I lifted myself, and began looking for my crutches. John found and put them into my hand, with a grave, pitiful look.

"You don't need these sort of things," I said, making pretence to laugh, for I had not grown used to them, and felt often ashamed.

"I hope you will not need them always."

"Perhaps not—Dr. Jessop isn't sure. But it doesn't matter much; most likely I shan't live long." For this was, God forgive me, always the last and greatest comfort I had.

John looked at me—surprised, troubled, compassionate—but he did not say a word. I hobbled past him; he following through the long passage to the garden door. There I paused—tired out. John Halifax took gentle hold of my shoulder.

"I think, if you did not mind, I'm sure I

could carry you. I carried a meal-sack once, weighing eight stone."

I burst out laughing, which may be was what he wanted ;—and forthwith consented to assume the place of the meal-sack. He took me on his back—what a strong fellow he was !—and fairly trotted with me down the garden-walk. We were very merry both ; and though I was his senior, I seemed with him, out of my great weakness and infirmity, to feel almost like a child.

" Please take me to that clematis arbour ; it looks over the Avon. Now, how do you like our garden ?"

" It's a nice place."

He did not go into ecstacies, as I had half expected ; but gazed about him observantly, while a quiet, intense satisfaction grew and diffused itself over his whole countenance.

" It's a *very* nice place."

Certainly it was. A large square, chiefly grass, level as a bowling-green, with borders round. Beyond, divided by a low hedge, was the kitchen and fruit-garden—my father's pride, as this old-fashioned pleasaunce was mine. When, years ago, I was too weak to walk, I knew, by crawling, every inch of the soft, green,

mossy, daisy-patterned carpet, bounded by its broad gravel walk ; and above that, apparently shut in as with an impassable barrier from the outer world, by a three-sided fence, the high wall, the yew-hedge, and the river.

John Halifax's comprehensive gaze seemed to take in all.

“ Have you lived here long ? ” he asked me.

“ Ever since I was born. ”

“ Ah !—well, it's a nice place, ” he repeated, somewhat sadly. “ This grass-plot is very even—thirty yards square, I should guess. I'd get up and pace it, only I'm rather tired. ”

“ Are you ? Yet you would carry— ”

“ Oh—that's nothing. I've often walked farther than to-day. But still it's a good step across the country since morning. ”

“ How far have you come ? ”

“ From the foot of those hills—I forget what they call them—over there. I have seen bigger ones—but they're steep enough—bleak and cold too, especially when one is lying out among the sheep. At a distance they look pleasant. This is a very pretty view. ”

Ay, so I had always thought it ; more so than ever now, when I had some one to say to how “ very pretty ” it was. Let me describe it

—this first landscape, the sole picture of my boyish days, and vivid as all such pictures are.

At the end of the harbour the wall which enclosed us on the riverward side was cut down—my father had done it at my asking—so as to make a seat, something after the fashion of Queen Mary's seat at Stirling, of which I had read. Thence, one could see a goodly sweep of country. First, close below, flowed the Avon—Shakspeare's Avon—here a narrow, sluggish stream, but capable, as we at Norton Bury sometimes knew to our cost, of being roused into fierceness and foam. Now it slipped on, quietly enough, contenting itself with turning a flour-mill hard by, the lazy whirr of which made a sleepy, incessant monotone which I was fond of hearing.

From the opposite bank stretched a wide green level; called the Ham—dotted with pasturing cattle of all sorts. Beyond it was a second river, forming an arc of a circle round the verdant flat. But the stream itself lay so low as to be invisible from where we sat; you could only trace the line of its course by the small white sails that glided in and out, oddly enough, from behind clumps of trees and across meadow-lands.

They attracted John's attention. "Those can't be boats, surely. Is there water there?"

"To be sure—or you would not see the sails. It is the Severn river—though at this distance you can't perceive it; yet it is deep enough too, as you may see by the boats it carries. You would hardly believe so, to look at it here—but I believe it gets steadily broader and broader, and turns out a noble river by the time it reaches the King's Roads, and forms the Bristol Channel."

"I've seen that!" cried John, with a bright look. "Ah, I like the Severn."

He stood gazing at it a good while—a new expression dawning in his eyes. Eyes in which then, for the first time, I watched a thought grow, and grow, till out of them was shining a beauty absolutely divine.

All of a sudden the Abbey chimes burst out, and made the lad start.

"What's that?"

"Turn again, Whittington, Lord Mayor of London," I sang to the bells; and then it seemed such a common-place history, and such a very low degree of honour to arrive at, that I was really glad I had forgotten to tell John the story. So I merely showed him where, beyond

our garden-wall, and the invisible high road that interposed, rose up the grim old Abbey tower.

“Probably this garden belonged to the Abbey in ancient time—our orchard is so fine. The monks may have planted it; they liked fruit, those old fellows.”

“Oh! did they?” He evidently did not quite comprehend, but was trying—without asking—to find out what I referred to. I was almost ashamed, lest he might think I wanted to show off my superior knowledge.

“The monks were parsons, John, you know. Very good men, I dare say, but rather idle.”

“Oh, indeed. Do you think they planted that yew hedge?” And he went to examine it.

Now, far and near, our yew-hedge was noted. There was not its like in the whole country. It was about fifteen feet high, and as many thick. Century after century of growth, with careful clipping and training, had compacted it into a massive green barrier, as close and impervious as a wall.

John poked in and about it—peering through every interstice—leaning his breast against the solid depth of branches—but their close shield resisted all his strength.

At length he came back to me, his face glowing with the vain efforts he had made.

“What were you about? Did you want to get through?”

“I wanted just to see if it were possible.”

I shook my head. “What would you do, John, if you were shut up here, and had to get over the yew-hedge? You could not climb it?”

“I know that, and therefore I should not waste time in trying.”

“Would you give up, then?”

He smiled—there was no “giving up,” in that smile of his. “I’ll tell you what I’d do—I’d begin and break it, twig by twig, till I forced my way through, and got out safe at the other side.”

“Well done, lad!—but if it’s all the same to thee, I would rather thee did not try that experiment upon *my* hedge at present.”

My father had come behind and overheard us, unobserved. We were both somewhat confounded, though a certain grim kindliness of aspect showed that he was not displeased—nay, even a good deal amused.

“Is that thy usual fashion of getting over a difficulty, friend—what’s thy name?”

I supplied the answer. For the minute Abel

Fletcher appeared, John seemed to lose all his boyish fun, and go back to that premature gravity and hardness of demeanour which I supposed his harsh experience of the world of men had necessarily taught him, but which was very sad to see in a lad so young.

My father sat down beside me on the bench—pushed aside an intrusive branch of clematis—finally, because it would come back and tickle his bald pate, broke it off and threw it into the river;—then leaning on his stick with both hands, eyed John Halifax sharply, all over, from top to toe.

“Didn’t thee say thee wanted work? It looks rather like it.”

His glance upon the shabby clothes made the boy colour violently.

“Oh, thee need’st not be ashamed; better men than thee have been in rags. Hast thee any money?”

“The groat you gave, that is, paid me; I never take what I don’t earn,” said the lad, sticking a hand in either poor empty pocket.

“Don’t be afraid—I was not going to give thee anything—except, maybe—Would thee like some work?”

“O, sir!”

“ O, father !”

I hardly know which was the most grateful cry.

Abel Fletcher looked surprised, but on the whole not ill-pleased. Putting on and pulling down his broad-brimmed hat, he sat meditatively for a minute or so ; making circles in the gravel walk with the end of his stick.—People said—nay, Jael herself, once, in a passion, had thrown the fact at me,—that the wealthy Friend himself had come to Norton Bury without a shilling in his pocket.

“ Well, what work canst thee do, lad ?”

“ Anything,” was the eager answer.

“ Anything generally means nothing,” sharply said my father ; “ what hast thee been at all this year ?—The truth, mind !”

John’s eyes flashed, but a look from mine seemed to set him right again. He said quietly and respectfully, “ Let me think a minute, and I’ll tell you. All spring I was at a farmer’s, riding the plough-horses, hoeing turnips ; then I went up the hills with some sheep ; in June I tried hay-making, and caught a fever—you needn’t start, sir, I’ve been well these six weeks, or I wouldn’t have come near your son—then—”

“ That will do, lad—I’m satisfied.”

“ Thank you, sir.”

“Thee need not say ‘sir’—it is folly. I am Abel Fletcher.” For my father retained scrupulously the Friends’ mode of speech, though he was practically but a lax member of the Society, and had married out of its pale. In this announcement of his plain name appeared, I fancy, more pride than humility.

“Very well, I will remember,” answered the boy fearlessly, though with an amused twist of his mouth, speedily restrained. “And now, Abel Fletcher, I shall be willing and thankful for any work you can give me.”

“We’ll see about it.”

I looked gratefully and hopefully at my father—but his next words rather modified my pleasure.

“Phineas, one of my men at the tan-yard has gone and ’listed this day—left an honest livelihood to be a paid cut-throat. Now if I could get a lad—one too young to be caught hold of at every pot-house by that man of blood, the recruiting-sergeant—Dost thee think this lad is fit to take the place?”

“Whose place, father?”

“Bill Watkins’.”

I was dumb-founded! I had occasionally seen the said Bill Watkins, whose business it was to

collect the skins which my father had bought from the farmers round about. A distinct vision presented itself to me of Bill and his cart, from which dangled the sanguinary exuviæ of defunct animals,—while in front the said Bill sat enthroned, dirty-clad and dirty-handed, with his pipe in his mouth. The idea of John Halifax in such a position was not agreeable.

“But, father—”

He read deprecation in my looks—alas! he knew too well how I disliked the tan-yard and all belonging to it. “Thee’rt a fool, and the lad’s another. He may go about his business for me.”

“But, father,—isn’t there anything else?”

“I have nothing else, or if I had, I wouldn’t give it. ‘He that will not work, neither shall he eat.’”

“I will work,” said John, sturdily—he had listened, scarcely comprehending, to my father and me. “I don’t care what it is, if only it’s honest work.”

Abel Fletcher was mollified. He turned his back on me—but that I little minded,—and addressed himself solely to John Halifax.

“Canst thee drive?”

“That I can!” and his eyes brightened with boyish delight.

“Tut! it’s only a cart—the cart with the skins. Dost thee know anything of tanning?”

“No, but I can learn.”

“Hey, not so fast! still, better be fast than slow. In the meantime, thee can drive the cart.”

“Thank you, sir—Abel Fletcher, I mean—I’ll do it well. That is, as well as I can.”

“And mind! no stopping on the road. No drinking, to find the King’s cursed shilling at the bottom of the glass—like poor Bill—for thy mother to come crying and pestering.—Thee hasn’t got one, eh?—So much the better,—all women are born fools—especially mothers.”

“Sir!” The lad’s face was all crimson and quivering; his voice choked; it was with difficulty he smothered down a burst of tears. Perhaps this self-control was more moving than if he had wept—at least, it answered better with my father.

After a few minutes more, during which, his stick had made a little grave in the middle of the walk, and buried something there—I think something besides the pebble—Abel Fletcher said, not unkindly,

“Well, I take thee; though it isn’t often I

take a lad without a character of some sort—I suppose thee hast none?”

“None,” was the answer, while the straightforward, steady gaze which accompanied it unconsciously contradicted the statement; his own honest face was the lad’s best witness—at all events, I thought so.

“’Tis done then,” said my father, concluding the business more quickly than I had ever before known his cautious temper settle even such a seemingly trifling matter.—I say *seemingly*—how blindly we talk when we talk of “trifles.”

Carelessly rising, he from some kindly impulse, or else to mark the closing of the bargain, shook the boy’s hand, and left in it a shilling.

“What is this for?”

“To show I have hired thee as my servant.”

“Servant!” John repeated hastily and rather proudly. “Oh yes, I understand—well, I will try and serve you well.”

My father did not notice that manly, self-dependent smile. He was too busy calculating how many more of those said shillings would be a fair equivalent for such labour as a lad, ever so much the junior of Bill Watkins, could supply. After some cogitation, he hit upon the right sum. I forget how much—be sure it was not over-

much; for money was scarce enough in this war-time; and besides, there was a belief afloat, so widely that it tainted even my worthy father, that plenty was not good for the working classes: they required to be kept low.

Having settled the question of wages, which John Halifax did not debate at all, my father left us, but turned back when half-way across the green-turfed square.

“Thee said thee had no money; there’s a week in advance, my son being witness I pay it thee; and I can pay thee a shilling less every Saturday till we get straight.”

“Very well, sir; good afternoon, and thank you.”

John took off his cap as he spoke,—Abel Fletcher, involuntarily almost, touched his hat in return of the salutation. Then he walked away, and we had the garden all to ourselves—we, Jonathan and his new-found David.

I did not “fall upon his neck,” like the princely Hebrew, to whom I have likened myself, but whom, alas! I resembled in nothing save my loving. But I grasped his hand, for the first time, and looking up at him, as he stood thoughtfully by me, whispered, “that I was very glad.”

“Thank you,—so am I,” said he, in a low tone. Then all his old manner returned—he threw his battered cap high up in the air, and shouted out, “Hurrah!”—a thorough boy.

And I, in my poor, quavering voice, shouted too.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN I was young, and long after then, at intervals, I had the very useless, sometimes harmful, and invariably foolish habit of keeping a diary. To me, at least, it has been less foolish and harmful than to most; and out of it, together with much drawn out of the stores of a memory, made preternaturally vivid by a long introverted life, which, colourless itself, had nothing to do but to reflect and retain clear images of the lives around it—out of these two sources I have compiled the present history.

Therein, necessarily, many blank epochs occur. These I shall not try to fill up, but merely resume the thread of narration as recollection serves.

Thus, after this first day, many days came and went before I again saw John Halifax; almost before I again thought of him. For it was one of my seasons of excessive pain; when I found it difficult to think of anything beyond

those four grey-painted walls ; where morning, noon, and night slipped wearily away, marked by no changes, save from daylight to candlelight, from candlelight to dawn.

Afterwards, as my pain abated, I began to be haunted by occasional memories of something pleasant that had crossed my dreary life ; I got fading visions of a brave, bright young face, ready alike to battle with and enjoy the world. I could hear the voice, that, speaking to me, was always tender with pity—yet not pity enough to wound : I could see the peculiar smile just creeping round his grave mouth—that irrepressible smile, indicating the atmosphere of thorough heart-cheerfulness, which ripens all the fruits of a noble nature, and without which the very noblest has about it something unwholesome, blank, and cold.

I wondered if John had ever asked for me. At length I put the question.

Jael “ thought he had—but wasn’t sure. Didn’t bother her head about such folk.”

“ If he asked again, might he come upstairs ?”

“ No.”

I was too weak to combat, and Jael was too strong an adversary ; so I lay for days and days in my sick room, often thinking, but never speak-

ing, about the lad. Never once asking for him to come to me. Not though it would have been life to me to see his merry face—I longed after him so.

At last I broke the bonds of sickness—which Jael always riveted as long and as tightly as she could—and plunged into the outer world again.

It was one market-day, Jael being absent—that I came down stairs. A soft, bright, autumn morning, mild as spring, coaxing a wandering robin to come and sing to me, loud as a quire of birds, out of the thinned trees of the Abbey yard. I opened the window to hear him, though all the while in mortal fear of Jael. I listened, but caught no tone of her sharp voice, which usually came painfully from the back regions of the house; it would ill have harmonised with the sweet autumn day and the robin's song. I sat, idly thinking so, and wondering whether it were a necessary and universal fact that human beings, unlike the year, should become harsh and unlovely as they grow old.

My robin had done singing, and I amused myself with watching a spot of scarlet winding down the rural road, our house being on the

verge where Norton Bury melted into "the country." It turned out to be the cloak of a well-to-do young farmer's wife, riding to market in her cart beside her jolly-looking spouse. Very spruce and self-satisfied she appeared, and the market-people turned to stare after her, for her costume was a novelty then. Doubtless, many thought as I did, how much prettier was scarlet than duffle gray.

Behind the farmer's cart came another, which at first I scarcely noticed, being engrossed by the ruddy face under the red cloak. The farmer himself nodded good-humouredly, but Mrs. Scarlet-cloak turned up her nose. "Oh pride, pride!" I thought, amused, and watched the two carts, the second of which was with difficulty passing the farmer's, on the opposite side of the narrow road. At last it succeeded in getting in advance, to the young woman's evident annoyance, until the driver, turning, lifted his hat to her with such a merry, frank, pleasant smile.

Surely I knew that smile, and the well-set head with its light curly hair. Also, alas! I knew the cart with relics of departed sheep dangling out behind. It was our cart of skins, and John Halifax was driving it.

"John! John!" I called out, but he did not

hear, for his horse had taken fright at the red cloak, and required a steady hand. Very steady the boy's hand was, so that the farmer clapped his two great fists, and shouted "Bray-vo!"

But John—my John Halifax! he sat in his cart, and drove. His appearance was much as when I first saw him—shabbier, perhaps, as if through repeated drenchings; this had been a wet autumn, Jael had told me. Poor John!—well might he look gratefully up at the clear blue sky to-day; ay, and the sky never looked down on a brighter, cheerier face—the same face, which, whatever rags it surmounted, would, I believe, have ennobled them all.

I leaned out, watching him approach our house; watching him with so great pleasure, that I forgot to wonder whether or no he would notice me. He did not at first, being busy over his horse; until, just as the notion flashed across my mind that he was passing by our house—and how keenly his doing so would pain me—the lad looked up.

A beaming smile of surprise and pleasure, a friendly nod, then all at once his manner changed; he took off his cap, and bowed ceremoniously to his master's son.

For the moment, I was hurt; then I could not

but respect the honest pride which thus intimated that he knew his own position, and wished neither to ignore nor to alter it; all advances between us must evidently come from my side. So, having made his salutation, he was driving on, when I called after him—

“John! John!”

“Yes, sir. I’m so glad you’re better again.”

“Stop one minute till I come out to you.”

And I crawled on my crutches to the front door, forgetting every thing but the pleasure of meeting him, forgetting even my terror of Jael. What would she say? even though she held nominally the Friends’ doctrine—obeyed in the letter at least, “Call no man your master.”—what would Jael say if she found me, Phineas Fletcher, talking in front of my father’s respectable mansion with the vagabond lad who drove my father’s cart of skins?

But I braved her, and opened the door.

“John, where are you?”

“Here,”—he stood at the foot of our steps, with the reins on his arm,—“did you want me?”

“Yes. Come up here; never mind the cart.”

But that was not John’s way. He led the refractory horse, settled him comfortably under a tree, and gave him in charge to a small boy.

Then he bounded back across the road, and was up the steps to my side in a single leap.

“I had no notion of seeing you. They said you were in bed yesterday.” (Then he *had* been enquiring for me!) “Ought you to be standing at the door this cold day?”

“It’s quite warm,” I said, looking up at the sunshine, and shivering.

“Please, go in.”

“If you’ll come too.”

He nodded, then put his arm around mine, and helped me in, as if he had been a big elder brother, and I a little ailing child. Well nursed and carefully guarded as I had always been, it was the first time in my life I ever knew the meaning of that rare thing—tenderness. A quality different from kindness, affectionateness, or benevolence; a quality which can exist only in strong, deep, and undemonstrative natures, and therefore in its perfection is seldomer found in women than in men. John Halifax had it, more than any one, woman or man, that I ever knew.

“I’m glad you’re better,” he said, and said no more. But one look of his expressed as much as half-a-dozen sympathetic sentences of other people.

“And how have you been, John? How do you like the tan-yard? Tell me, frankly.”

He pulled a wry face, though comical withal, and said cheerily—“Everybody must like what brings them their daily bread. It’s a grand thing for me not to have been hungry for nearly thirty days.”

“Poor John!” I put my hand on his wrist—his strong, brawny wrist. Perhaps the contrast involuntarily struck us both with the truth—good for both to learn—that Heaven’s ways are not so unequal as we sometimes fancy they seem.

“I have so often wanted to see you, John. Couldn’t you come in now?”

He shook his head, and pointed to the cart. That minute, through the open hall-door, I perceived Jael sauntering leisurely home from market.

Now, if I was a coward, it was not for myself this time. The avalanche of ill words I knew must fall—but it should not fall on him, if I could help it.

“Jump up on your cart, John. Let me see how well you can drive. There—good-bye, for the present. Are you going to the tan-yard?”

“Yes—for the rest of the day.” And he

made a face as if he did not quite revel in that delightful prospect.—No wonder!

“I’ll come and see you there this afternoon.”

“No?”—with a look of delighted surprise.
“But you must not,—you ought not.”

“But *I will!*”—And I laughed to hear myself actually using that phrase. What would Jael have said?

What—as she arrived just in time to receive a half-malicious, half-cérimonious bow from John as he drove off—what that excellent woman did say, I have not the slightest recollection. I only remember that it did not frighten and grieve me as such attacks used to do; that, in her own vernacular, it all “went in at one ear, and out at the other.” That I persisted in looking out until the last glimmer of the bright curls had disappeared down the sunshiny road—then shut the front door, and crept in, content.

Between that time and dinner, I sat quiet enough even to please Jael. I was thinking over the beautiful old Bible story, which latterly had so vividly impressed itself on my mind; thinking of Jonathan, as he walked “by the stone Ezel,” with the shepherd-lad, who was to be king of Israel. I wondered whether he would have loved him, and seen the same

future perfection in him, had Jonathan the king's son met the poor David keeping his sheep among the folds of Bethlehem.

When my father came home, he found me waiting in my place at table. He only said, "Thee art better then, my son?"—But I knew how glad he was to see me. He gave token of this by being remarkably conversible over our meal—though, as usual, his conversation had a sternly moral tone, adapted to the improvement of what he persisted in considering my "infant" mind. It had reference to an anecdote Dr. Jessop had just been telling him—about a little girl, one of our doctor's patients, who, in some passionate struggle, had hurt herself very much with a knife.

"Let this be a warning to thee, my son, not to give way to violent passions."—(My good father, thought I, there is little fear.)—"For, this child—I remember her father well, for he lived at Kingswell here; he was violent too, and much given to evil ways before he went abroad—Phineas, this child, this miserable child, will bear the mark of the wound all her life."

"Poor thing!" said I, absently.

"No need to pity her; her spirit is not half

broken yet. Thomas Jessop said to me, 'That little Ursula —'

"Is her name Ursula?" And I called to mind the little girl who had tried to give some bread to the hungry John Halifax, and whose cry of pain we had heard as the door shut upon her. Poor little lady!—how sorry I was; and I knew John would be so infinitely sorry too—and all to no purpose,—that I determined not to tell him anything about it. The next time I saw Dr. Jessop I asked him after the child, and learned she had been taken away somewhere,—I forget where; and then the whole affair slipped from my memory.

"Father," said I, when he ceased talking—and Jael, who always ate her dinner at the same time and table as ourselves, but "below the salt," had ceased nodding a respectful running comment on all he said—"Father?"

"Well, my son."

"I should like to go with thee to the tan-yard this afternoon."

Here Jael, who had been busy pulling back the table, re-placing the long row of chairs, and re-sanding the broad centre Sahara of the room to its dreary, pristine aridness, stopped, fairly aghast with amazement.

“ Abel—Abel Fletcher!—the lad’s just out of his bed; he is no more fit to ——”

“ Pshaw, woman!” was the sharp answer.—
“ So, Phineas, thee art really strong enough to go out?”

“ If thou wilt take me, father.”

He looked pleased, as he always did when I used the Friends’ mode of phraseology,—for I had not been brought up in the Society; this having been the last request of my mother, rigidly observed by her husband. The more so, people said, as while she lived they had not been quite happy together. But whatever he was to her, in their brief union, he was a good father to me, and for his sake I have always loved and honoured the Society of Friends.

“ Phineas,” said he, (after having stopped a volley of poor Jael’s indignations, beseechings, threats, and prognostications, by a resolute “ Get the lad ready to go”)—“ Phineas, my son, I rejoice to see thy mind turning towards business. I trust, should better health be vouchsafed thee, that some day soon——”

“ Not just yet, father,” said I, sadly—for I knew what he referred to, and that it would never be. Mentally and physically, I alike re-

volted from my father's trade. I held the tan-yard in abhorrence—to enter it made me ill for days ; sometimes for months and months I never went near it. That I should ever be, what was my poor father's one desire, his assistant and successor in his business, was, I knew, a thing totally impossible.

It hurt me a little, that my project of going with him to-day should in any way have deceived him ; and rather silently and drearily we set out together ; progressing through Norton Bury streets, in our old way, my father marching along in his grave fashion, I steering my little carriage, and keeping as close as I could beside him. Many a person looked at us as we passed ; almost everybody knew us, but few, even of our own neighbours, saluted us ; we were Nonconformists and Quakers.

I had never been in the town since the day I came through it with John Halifax. The season was much later now, but it was quite warm still in the sunshine, and very pleasant looked the streets, even the close, narrow streets of Norton Bury.—I beg its pardon ; antiquaries hold it a most “ interesting and remarkable ” place : and I myself have sometimes admired its quaint, over-

hanging, ornamented, house-fronts—blackened, and wonderfully old. But one rarely notices what has been familiar all one's life; and now I was less struck by the beauty of the picturesque old town, than by the muddiness of its pathways, and the mingled noises of murmuring looms, scolding women, and squabbling children, that came up from the alleys which lay between High Street and the Avon. In those alleys hundreds of our poor folk lived, huddled together in misery, rags, and dirt. Was John Halifax living there too?

My father's tan-yard was in an alley a little further on. Already I perceived the familiar odour—sometimes a not unpleasant barky smell—at other times borne in horrible wafts, as if from a lately-forsaken battle-field. I wondered how anybody could endure it—yet some did; and among the workmen, as we entered, I looked round for the lad I knew.

He was sitting in a corner of one of the sheds, helping two or three women to split bark, very busy at work; yet he found time to stop now and then, and administer a wisp of sweet hay to the old blind mare, as she went slowly round and round, turning the bark-mill. Nobody seemed to notice him, and he did not speak to anybody.

As we passed, John did not even look. I asked my father, in a whisper, how he liked the boy.

“What boy?—Eh, him?—Oh, well enough—there’s no harm in him that I know of. Dost thee want him to wheel thee about the yard? Here, I say, lad—bless me! I’ve forgot thy name.”

John Halifax started up at the sharp tone of command; but when he saw me, he smiled. My father walked on to some pits where he had told me he was trying an important experiment, how a hide might be tanned completely in five months instead of eight. I stayed behind.

“John, I want you.”

John shook himself free of the bark-heap, and came, rather hesitatingly at first.

“Anything I can do for you, sir?”

“Don’t call me ‘sir;’ if I say ‘John,’ why don’t you say ‘Phineas?’”

And I held out my hand—his was all grimed with bark-dust.

“Are you not ashamed to shake hands with me?”

“Nonsense, John.”

So we settled that point entirely. And though he never failed to maintain externally a

certain gentle respectfulness of demeanour towards me, yet it was more the natural deference of the younger to the elder, of the strong to the weak, than the duty paid by a serving lad to his master's son. And this was how I best liked it to be.

He guided me carefully among the tan-pits—those deep fosses of abomination, with a slender network of pathways thrown between—until we reached the lower end of the yard. It was bounded by the Avon only, and by a great heap of refuse bark.

“This is not a bad place to rest in; if you liked to get out of the carriage, I'd make you comfortable here in no time.”

I was quite willing; so he ran off and fetched an old horse-rug, which he laid upon the soft, dry mass. Then he helped me thither, and covered me with my cloak. Lying thus, with my hat over my eyes, just distinguishing the shiny glimmer of the Avon running below, and beyond that the green, level Ham, dotted with cows, my position was anything but unpleasant. In fact, positively agreeable—ay, even though the tan-yard was close behind; but here it would offend none of my senses.

“Are you comfortable, Phineas?”

“Very, if you would come and sit down too.”

“That I will.”

And then we began to talk. I asked him if he often patronized the bark-heap, he seemed so very much at home there.

“So I am,” he answered, smiling; “it is my castle, my house.”

“And not unpleasant to live at, either.”

“Except when it rains. Does it always rain at Norton Bury?”

“For shame, John!” and I pointed to the bluest of autumn skies, though in the distance an afternoon mist was slowly creeping on.

“All very fine now, but there’s a fog coming over Severn; and it is sure to rain at nightfall. I shall not get my nice little bit of October evening.”

“You must spend it within doors, then.” John shook his head. “You ought; it must be dreadfully cold on this bark-heap after sunset.”

“Rather, sometimes. Are you cold now? Shall I fetch—but I haven’t anything fit to wrap you in, only this rug.”

He muffled it closer round me; infinitely light and tender was his rough-looking boy’s hand.

“ I never saw anybody so thin as you ; thinner much since I saw you. Have you been very, very ill, Phineas ? What ailed you ? ”

His anxiety was so earnest, that I explained to him what I may as well explain here, and dismiss, once for all, the useless topic, that from my birth I had been puny and diseased, that my life had been a succession of sicknesses, and that I could hope for little else until the end.

“ Put don't think I mind it, John,” for I was grieved to see his shocked and troubled look. “ I am very content ; I have a quiet home, a good father, and now I think and believe I have found the one thing I wanted—a friend.”

He smiled, but only because I did. I saw he did not understand me. In him, as in most strong and self-contained temperaments, was a certain slowness to receive impressions, which however, being once received, are indelible. Though I, being in so many things his opposite, had none of this peculiarity, but felt at once quickly and keenly, yet I rather liked the contrary in him, as, I think, we almost always do like in another those peculiarities which are most different from our own. Therefore I was neither vexed nor hurt because the lad was slow to perceive all that he had so soon become, and

all that I meant him to become, to me. I knew from every tone of his voice, every chance expression of his honest eyes, that he was one of those characters in which we may be sure that for each feeling they express, lies a countless wealth of the same, unexpressed, below ; a character, the keystone of which was that whereon is built all liking and all love—*dependableness*. He was one whom you may be long in knowing, but whom the more you know, the more you trust ; and once trusting, you trust for ever.

Perhaps I may be supposed imaginative, or, at least, premature, in discovering all these characteristics in a boy of fourteen ; and possibly in thus writing of him, I may unwittingly be drawing a little from after-experience ;—however, being the truth, let it stand.

“Come,” said I, changing the conversation, “we have had enough of me ; how goes the world with you ? Have you taken kindly to the tan-yard ? Answer frankly.”

He looked at me hard, put both his hands in his pockets, and began to whistle a tune.

“Don’t shirk the question, please, John. I want to know the real truth.”

“Well, then, I hate the tan-yard.”

Having relieved his mind by this ebullition,

and by kicking a small heap of tan right down into the river, he became composed.

“But, Phineas, don’t imagine I intend to hate it always; I intend to get used to it, as many a better fellow than I, has got used to many a worse thing. It’s wicked to hate what wins one’s bread, and is the only thing one is likely to get on in the world with, merely because it’s disagreeable.”

“You’re a wise lad of your age, John.”

“Now don’t you be laughing at me.” (But I was not, I was in solemn earnest.) “And don’t think I’m worse than I am; and especially that I’m not thankful to your good father for giving me a lift in the world—the first I ever really had. If I get one foot on the ladder, perhaps I may climb.”

“I should rather believe so,” answered I, very confidently. “But you seem to have thought a good deal about these sort of things?”

“Oh yes, I’ve plenty of time for thinking, and one’s thoughts go fast enough, lying on this bark-heap—faster than in-doors. I often wish I could read—that is, read easily. As it is, I have nothing to do but to think, and nothing to think of but myself, and what I should like to be.”

“Suppose, after Dick Whittington’s fashion,

you succeeded to your master's business, should you like to be a tanner?"

He paused—his truthful face betraying him. Then he said, resolutely, "I would like to be anything that was honest and honourable. It's a notion of mine, that whatever a man may be, his trade does not make him—he makes his trade. That is—but I know I can't put the subject clear, for I have not got it clear in my own head yet—I'm only a lad. However, it all comes to this—that whether I like it or not, I'll stick to the tanning as long as I can."

"That's right; I'm so glad. Nevertheless"—and I watched him as he stood, his foot planted firmly, no easy feat on the shifting bark-heap, his head erect, and his mouth close, but smiling—"Nevertheless, John, it's my opinion that you might be anything you liked."

He laughed. "Questionable that—at least at present. Whatever I may be, I am just now the lad that drives your father's cart, and works in your father's tan-yard—John Halifax, and very much at your service, Mr. Phineas Fletcher."

Half in fun, half earnest, he uncovered his fair locks, with a bow so contradictory to the rest of his appearance, that I involuntarily recalled the Greek testament and "Guy Halifax, Gentleman."

However, that could be no matter to me, or to him either, now. The lad, like many another, owed nothing to his father but his mere existence—heaven knows whether that gift is oftenest a curse or a boon.

The afternoon had waned during our talk; but I was very loth to part with my friend. Suddenly, I thought of asking where his home was.

“How do you mean?”

“Where do you live? where do you take your meals and sleep?”

“Why, as to that, I have not much time for eating and drinking. Generally, I eat my dinner as I go along the roads, where there’s lots of blackberries by way of pudding—which is grand! Supper, when I do get it, I like best on this bark-heap, after the men are away, and the tanyard’s clear. Your father lets me stay.”

“And where is your lodging, then? Where do you sleep?”

He hesitated—coloured a little. “To tell the truth—anywhere I can. Generally, here.”

“What, out-of-doors?”

“Just so.”

I was much shocked. To sleep out-of-doors seemed to me the very lowest ebb of human

misery : so degrading, too — like a common tramp or vagabond, instead of a decent lad.

“ John—how can you—why do you—do such a thing ?”

“ I’ll tell you,” said he, sitting down beside me in a dogged way, as if he had read my thoughts, guessed at my suspicions, and was determined to shew that he feared neither—that he would use his own judgment, and follow his own will, in spite of anybody. “ Look here. I get three shillings a week, which is about five-pence a day ; out of that, I eat threepence—I’m a big, growing lad, and it’s hard to be hungry. There’s twopence left to pay for lodging. I tried it once—twice—at the decentest places I could find, but—” here an expression of intolerable disgust came over the boy’s face—“ I don’t intend to try that again. I was never used to it. Better keep my own company and the open air. Now, you see.”

“ Oh, John !” I clasped his hand. If I had been a girl, I should certainly have cried.

“ Nay—there’s no need to be sorry. You don’t know how comfortable it is to sleep out of doors ; and so nice to wake in the middle of the night, and see the stars shining over your head.”

“ But isn’t it very cold ?”

“No—not often. I scoop out a snug little nest in the bark, and curl up in it like a dormouse, wrapped in this rug, which one of the men gave me. Besides, every morning early I take a plunge and a swim in the stream, and that makes me warm all day.”

I shivered—I who feared the touch of cold water. Yet there, with all his hardships, he stood before me, the model of healthy boyhood. Alas ! I envied him.

But this trying life, which he made so light of, could not go on. “What shall you do when winter comes?”

John looked grave. “I don’t know : I suppose I shall manage somehow—like the sparrows,” he answered, perceiving not how apposite his illustration was. For truly he seemed as destitute as the birds of the air, whom ONE feedeth, when they cry to Him.

My question had evidently made him thoughtful ; he remained silent a good while.

At last I said, “John, do you remember the woman who spoke so sharply to you in the alley that day?”

“Yes. I shall never forget anything which happened that day,” he answered, softly.

“She was my nurse once. She is not such

a bad woman, though trouble has sharpened her temper. Her biggest boy, Bill, who is gone off for a soldier, used to drive your cart, you know."

"Yes?" said John, interrogatively; for I was slow in putting forth my plans—that is, as much of them as it was needful he should know.

"Sally is poor—not so very poor, though. Your twopence a night would help her; and I dare say, if you'll let me speak to her, you might have Bill's attic all to yourself. She has but one other lad at home: it's worth trying for."

"It is indeed. You are very kind, Phineas." He said no more words than these—but their tone spoke volumes.

I got into my little carriage again, for I was most anxious not to lose a day in this matter. I persuaded John to go at once with me to Sally Watkins. My father was not to be seen; but I ventured to leave word for him that I was gone home, and had taken John Halifax with me: it was astonishing how bold I felt myself growing, now that there was another besides myself to think and act for.

We reached Widow Watkins' door. It was a poor place—poorer than I had imagined; but I remembered what agonies of cleanliness had

been inflicted on me in nursery days, and took hope for John.

Sally sat in her kitchen, tidy and subdued, mending an old jacket that had once been Bill's, until, being supplanted by the grand red coat, it descended upon Jem, the second lad. But Bill still engrossed the poor mother's heart—she could do nothing but weep over him, and curse "Bonyparty." Her mind was so full of this, that she apparently failed to recognize in the decent young workman John Halifax, the half-starved lad she had belaboured with her tongue in the alley. She consented at once to his lodging with her—though she looked up with an odd stare when I said he was "a friend" of mine.

So we settled our business, first all together, then Sally and I alone, while John went up to look at his room. I knew I could trust Sally, whom I was glad enough to help, poor woman! She promised to make him extra-comfortable, and keep my secret too. When John came down, she was quite civil to him—even friendly. She said it would really be a comfort to her, that another fine, strapping lad should sleep in Bill's bed, and be coming in and out of the house just like her poor dear boy.

I felt rather doubtful of the resemblance, and indeed half-angry, but John only smiled.

“And if, maybe, he’d do a hand’s turn now and then about the kitchen—I s’pose he bean’t above it?”

“Not a bit!” said John Halifax, pleasantly.

Before we left, I wanted to see his room; he carried me up, and we both sat down on the bed that had been poor Bill’s. It was nothing to boast of, being a mere sacking stuffed with hay, —a blanket below, and another at top; I had to beg from Jael the only pair of sheets John owned for a long time. The attic was very low and small, hardly big enough “to whip a cat round,” or even a kitten—yet John gazed about it with an air of proud possession.

“I declare I shall be as happy as a king. Only look out of the window!”

Ay, the window was the grand advantage; out of it one could crawl on to the roof, and from the roof was the finest view in all Norton Bury. On one side,—the town, the Abbey, and beyond it a wide stretch of meadow and woodland as far as you could see; on the other, the broad Ham, the glittering curve of Severn, and the distant country, sloping up into “the blue hills far away.” A picture, which in its in-

cessant variety, its quiet beauty, and its inexpressibly soothing charm, was likely to make the simple, every-day act of "looking out o' window," unconsciously influence the mind as much as a world of books.

"Do you like your 'castle,' John?" said I, when I had silently watched his beaming face; "will it suit you?"

"I rather think it will!" he cried, in hearty delight. And my heart likewise was very glad.

Dear little attic room! close against the sky—so close, that many a time the rain came pattering in, or the sun beating down upon the roof, made it like a furnace, or the snow on the leads drifted so high as to obscure the window—yet how merry, how happy, we have been there! How often have we both looked back upon it in after-days!

CHAPTER IV.

WINTER came early and sudden that year.

It was to me a long, dreary season, worse even than my winters inevitably were. I never stirred from my room, and never saw anybody but my father, Dr. Jessop, and Jael. At last I took courage to say to the former, that I wished he would send John Halifax up some day.

“What dost thee want the lad for?”

“Only to see him.”

“Pshaw! a lad out o’ the tan-yard is not fit company for thee. Let him alone; he’ll do well enough, if thee doesn’t try to lift him out of his place.”

Lift John Halifax out of his “place!” I agreed with my father that that was impossible; but then we evidently differed widely in our definition of what the “place” might be. So, afraid of doing him harm, and feeling how much his future depended on his favour with his

master, I did not discuss the matter. Only at every possible opportunity—and they were rare—I managed to send John a little note, written carefully in printed letters, for I knew he could read but very little; also a book or two, out of which he might teach himself a little more.

Then I waited, eagerly but patiently, until spring came, when, without making any more fruitless efforts, I should be sure to see him. I knew enough of himself, and was too jealous over his dignity, to wish either to force him by entreaties, or bring him by stratagem, into a house where he was not welcome, even though it were the house of my own father.

One February day, when the frost had at last broken up, and soft, plentiful rain had half melted the great snow-drifts, which, Jael told me, lay about the country everywhere—I thought I would just put my head out of doors, to see how long the blessed spring would be in coming. So I crawled down into the parlour, and out of the parlour into the garden; Jael scolding, my father roughly encouraging. My poor father! he always had the belief that people need not be ill unless they chose, and that I could do a great deal if I would.

I felt very strong to-day. It was delicious to

see again the green grass, which had been hidden for weeks ; delicious to walk up and down in the sunshine, under the shelter of the yew hedge. I amused myself by watching a pale line of snow-drops which had come up one by one, like prisoners of war to their execution.

But the next minute I felt ashamed of the heartless simile, for it reminded me of poor Bill Watkins, who, taken after the battle of Mentz, last December, had been shot by the French as a spy. Poor, rosy, burly Bill ! better had he still been ingloriously driving our cart of skins.

“ Have you been to see Sally lately ? ” said I to Jael, who was cutting winter cabbages hard by ; “ is she getting over her trouble ? ”

“ She bean’t rich, to afford fretting. There’s Jem and three little ’uns yet to feed, to say nought of another big lad as lives there, and eats a deal more than he pays, I’m sure.”

I took the insinuation quietly, for I knew that my father had lately raised John’s wages, and he his rent to Sally. This, together with a few other facts which lay between Sally and me, made me quite easy in my mind as to his being no burthen, but rather a help to the widow—so I let Jael have her say ; it did no harm to me or anybody.

“What bold little things snowdrops are—stop, Jael, you are setting your foot on them.”

But I was too late; she had crushed them under the high-heeled shoe. She even was near pulling me down, as she stepped back in great hurry and consternation.

“Look at that young gentleman coming down the garden; and here I be in my dirty gown, and my apron full o’ cabbages.”

And she dropped the said vegetables all over the path, as the “gentleman” came towards us.

I smiled—for, in spite of his transformation, I, at least, had no difficulty in recognizing John Halifax.

He had on new clothes—let me give the credit due to that wonderful civilizer, the tailor—clothes neat, decent, and plain, such as any ’prentice lad might wear. They fitted well his figure, which had increased both in height, compactness, and grace. Round his neck was a coarse but white shirt frill; and over it fell, carefully arranged, the bright curls of his bonny hair. Easily might Jael or any one else have “mistaken” him, as she cuttingly said, for a young gentleman.

She looked very indignant, though, when she found out the aforesaid “mistake.”

“What may be thy business here?” she said, roughly.

“Abel Fletcher sent me on a message.”

“Out with it then—don’t be stopping with Phineas here. Thee bean’t company for him, and his father don’t choose it.”

“Jael!” I cried, indignantly. John never spoke, but his cheek burnt furiously. I took his hand, and told him how glad I was to see him—but, for the minute, I doubt if he heard me.

“Abel Fletcher sent me here,” he repeated, in a steady and well-controlled voice, “that I might go out with Phineas; if *he* objects to my company, it’s easy to say so.”

And he turned to me.—I think he must have been satisfied then.

Jael retired discomfited, and in her wrath again dropped half of her cabbages. John picked them up and restored them; but got for thanks only a parting thrust.

“Thee art mighty civil in thy new clothes—Be off, and be back again sharp; and, I say, don’t thee be leaving the cart o’ skins again under the parlour windows.”

“I don’t drive the cart now,” was all he replied.

“Not drive the cart?” I asked, eagerly, when Jael had disappeared, for I was afraid some ill chance had happened.

“Only, that this winter I’ve managed to teach myself to read and add up, out of your books, you know; and your father found it out, and he says I shall go round collecting money instead of skins, and it’s much better wages, and—I like it better, that’s all.”

But, little as he said, his whole face beamed with pride and pleasure. It was, in truth, a great step forward.

“He must trust you very much, John,” said I, at last, knowing how exceedingly particular my father was in his collectors.

“That’s it—that’s what pleases me so. He is very good to me, Phineas, and he gave me a special holiday, that I might go out with you. Isn’t that grand?”

“Grand, indeed. What fun we’ll have! I almost think I could take a walk myself.”

For the lad’s company invariably gave me new life, and strength, and hope. The very sight of him was as good as the coming of spring.

“Where shall we go?” said he, when we were fairly off, and he was guiding my carriage down Norton Bury streets.

“ I think to the Mythe.” The Mythe was a little hill on the outskirts of the town, breezy and fresh, where 'Squire Brithwood had built himself a fine house, ten years ago.

“ Ay, that will do ; and as we go, you will see the floods out—a wonderful sight, isn't it? The river is rising still, I hear ; at the tan-yard they are busy making a dam against it. How high are the floods here, generally, Phineas?”

“ I'm sure I can't remember. But don't look so serious. Let us enjoy ourselves.”

And I did enjoy, intensely, that pleasant stroll. The mere sunshine was delicious ; delicious, too, to pause on the bridge at the other end of the town, and feel the breeze brought in by the rising waters, and hear the loud sound of them, as they poured in a cataract over the flood-gates hard by.

“ Your lazy, muddy, Avon looks quite splendid now. What masses of white foam it makes, and what wreaths of spray ; and see ! ever so much of the Ham is under water. How it sparkles in the sun !”

“ John, you like looking at anything pretty.”

“ Ah ! don't I !” cried he, with his whole heart. My heart leaped too, to see him so happy.

“ You can't think how fine this is from my window ; I have watched it for a week. Every morning the water seems to have made itself a fresh channel. Look at that one, by the willow-tree—how savagely it pours !”

“ Oh, we at Norton Bury are used to floods.”

“ Are they ever very serious ?”

“ Have been—but not in my time. Now, John, tell me what you have been doing all winter.”

It was a brief and simple chronicle—of hard work, all day over, and from the Monday to the Saturday—too hard work to do anything of nights, save to drop into the sound, dreamless sleep of youth and labour.

“ But how did you teach yourself to read and add-up, then ?”

“ Generally, at odd minutes going along the road. It's astonishing what a lot of odd minutes one can catch during the day, if one really sets about it. And then I had Sunday afternoons besides.—I did not think it wrong—”

“ No,” said I, decisively. “ What books have you got through ?”

“ All you sent.—Pilgrim's Progress, Robinson

Crusoe, and the Arabian Nights. That's fine, isn't it?" and his eyes sparkled.

"Any more?"

"Also the one you gave me at Christmas. I have read it a great deal."

I liked the tone of quiet reverence in which he spoke. I liked to hear him own, nor be ashamed to own—that he read "a great deal" in that rare book for a boy to read—the Bible.

But on this subject I did not ask him any more questions; indeed, it seemed to me, and seems still, that no more were needed.

"And you can read quite easily now, John?"

"Pretty well, considering." Then, turning suddenly to me: "You read a great deal, don't you? I overheard your father say you were very clever. How much do you know?"

"Oh—nonsense!" But he pressed me, and I told him. The list was short enough; I almost wished it were shorter, when I saw John's face.

"For me—I can only just read, and I shall be fifteen directly!"

The accent of shame, despondency, even despair, went to my very heart.

"Don't mind," I said, laying my feeble, useless hand upon that which guided me on, so

steady and so strong; "how could you have had time, working as hard as you do?"

"But I ought to learn; I must learn."

"You shall. It's little I can teach; but, if you like, I'll teach you all I know."

"O Phineas!" One flash of those bright, moist eyes, and he walked hastily across the road.—Thence he came back, in a minute or two, armed with the tallest, straightest of briar-rose shoots.

"You like a rose-switch, don't you?—I do. Nay, stop till I've cut off the thorns." And he walked on beside me, working at it with his knife, in silence.

I was silent, too, but I stole a glance at his mouth, as seen in profile. I could almost always guess at his thoughts by that mouth, so flexible, sensitive, and, at times, so infinitely—infininitely sweet. It wore that expression now. I was satisfied, for I knew the lad was happy.

We reached the Mythe. "David," I said, (I had got into a habit of calling him "David;") and now he had read a certain history in that Book, I suppose he guessed why, for he liked the name)—"I don't think I can go any further up the hill."

"Oh! but you shall!—I'll push behind; and

when we come to the stile, I'll carry you. It's lovely on the top of the Mythe,—look at the sunset. You cannot have seen a sunset for ever so long."

No—that was true. I let John do as he would with me,—he who brought into my pale life the only brightness it had ever known.

Ere long, we stood on the top of the steep mound. I know not if it be a natural hill, or one of those old Roman or British remains, plentiful enough hereabouts, but it was always called the Mythe. Close below it, at the foot of a precipitous slope, ran the Severn, there broad and deep enough, and gradually growing broader and deeper as it flowed on through a wide plain of level country, towards the line of hills that bounded the horizon. Severn looks beautiful here; neither grand nor striking, but certainly beautiful; a calm, gracious, generous river, bearing strength in its tide and plenty on its bosom, rolling on through the land slowly and surely, like a good man's life, and fertilizing wherever it flows.

"Do you like Severn still, John?"

"I love it."

I wondered if his thoughts had been anything like mine.

“What is that?” he cried, suddenly, pointing to a new sight, which even I had not often seen on our river. It was a mass of water, three or four feet high, which came surging along the mid-stream, upright as a wall.

“It is the *eger*; I’ve often seen it on Severn, where the swift seaward current meets the spring-tide. Look what a crest of foam it has, like a wild boar’s mane. We often call it the river-boar.”

“But it is only a big wave.”

“Big enough to swamp a boat, though.”

And while I spoke, I saw, to my horror, that there actually was a boat, with two men in it, trying to get out of the way of the *eger*.

“They never can! they’ll assuredly be drowned! O, John!”

But he had already slipped from my side, and swung himself by furze-bushes and grass down the steep slope to the water’s edge.

It was a breathless moment. The *eger* travelled slowly in its passage, changing the smooth, sparkling river to a whirl of conflicting currents, in which no boat could live—least of all, that clumsy pleasure-boat, with its toppling sail. In it was one I knew by sight, young Mr. Brith-

wood of the Mythe House, and another gentleman.

They both pulled hard—they got out of the mid-stream, but not close enough to land; and already there was but two oars' length between them and the "boar."

"Swim for it!" I heard one cry to the other; but swimming would not have saved them.

"Hold there!" shouted John at the top of his voice; "throw that rope out, and I'll pull you in!"

It was a hard tug: I shuddered to see him wade, knee-deep, in the stream—but he succeeded. Both gentlemen leaped safe on shore. The younger tried desperately to save his boat, but it was too late. Already the "water-boar" had clutched it—the rope broke like a gossamer-thread—the trim, white sail was dragged down—rose up once, broken and torn, like a butterfly caught in a mill-stream—then disappeared.

"So it's all over with her, poor thing!"

"Who cares?—We might have lost our lives," sharply said the other, an older and sickly-looking gentleman, dressed in mourning, to whom life did not seem a particularly pleasant thing, though he appeared to value it so highly.

They both scrambled up the Mythe, without noticing John Halifax : then the elder turned.

“But who pulled us ashore?—Was it you, my young friend?”

John Halifax, emptying his soaked boots, answered, “I suppose so.”

“Indeed, we owe you much.”

“Not more than a crown will pay,” said young Brithwood, gruffly ; “I know him, Cousin March. He works in Fletcher the Quaker’s tan-yard.”

“Nonsense!” cried Mr. March, who had stood looking at the boy with a kindly, even half-sad air. “Impossible! Young man, will you tell me to whom I am so much obliged?”

“My name is John Halifax.”

“Yes; but *what* are you?”

“What he said. Mr. Brithwood knows me well enough: I work in the tan-yard.”

“Oh!”—Mr. March turned away with a resumption of dignity, though evidently both surprised and disappointed. Young Brithwood laughed.

“I told you so, cousin. Hey, lad!” eyeing John over, “you’ve been out at grass, and changed your coat for the better; but you’re

certainly the same lad that my curricie nearly ran over one day; you were driving a cart of skins—pah! I remember.”

“So do I,” said John, fiercely; but when the youth’s insolent laughter broke out again, he controlled himself. The laughter ceased.

“Well, you’ve done me a good turn for an ill one, young — what’s-your-name, so here’s a guinea for you.” He threw it towards him; it fell on the ground, and lay there.

“Nay, nay, Richard,” expostulated the sickly gentleman, who after all *was* a gentleman. He stood, apparently struggling with conflicting intentions, and not very easy in his mind. “My good fellow,” he said at last, in a constrained voice, “I won’t forget your bravery. If I could do anything for you—and meanwhile, if a trifle like this”—and he slipped something into John’s hand.

John returned it with a bow, merely saying, “that he would rather not take any money.”

The gentleman looked very much astonished. There was a little more of persistence on one side, and resistance on the other; and then Mr. March put the guineas irresolutely back into his pocket, looking the while lingeringly at the boy

—at his brave, tall figure, and flushed, proud face.

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen, nearly.”

“Ah!” it was almost a sigh. He turned away, and turned back again. “My name is March—Henry March; if you should ever——”

“Thank you, sir. Good-day.”

“Good-day.” I fancied he was half-inclined to shake hands—but John did not, or would not, see it, so the thing was not done. Mr. March walked on, following young Brithwood; but at the stile he turned round once more, and glanced at John. Then they disappeared.

“I’m glad they’re gone: now we can be comfortable.” He flung himself down, wrung out his wet stockings, laughed at me for being so afraid he would take cold, and so angry at young Brithwood’s insults. I sat wrapped in my cloak, and watched him making idle circles in the sandy path with the rose-switch he had cut.

A thought struck me. “John, hand me the stick, and I’ll give you your first writing lesson.”

So there, on the smooth gravel, and with the rose-stem for a pen, I taught him how to form

the letters of the alphabet and join them together. He learned very quickly—so quickly, that in a little while the simple copy-book that Mother Earth obliged us with, was covered in all directions with “J, O, H, N—John.”

“Bravo!” he cried, as we turned homeward, he flourishing his gigantic pen, which had done such good service; “bravo! I have gained something to-day!”

Crossing the bridge over the Avon, we stood once more to look at the waters that were “out.” They had risen considerably, even in that short time, and were now pouring in several new channels, one of which was alongside of the high road: we stopped a good while, watching it. The current was harmless enough, merely flooding a part of the Ham; but it awed us to see the fierce power of waters let loose. An old willow-tree, about whose roots I had often watched the king-cups growing, was now in the centre of a stream as broad as the Avon by our tan-yard, and thrice as rapid. The torrent rushed round it—impatient of the divisions its great roots caused—eager to undermine and tear it up. Inevitably, if the flood did not abate, within a few hours more there would be nothing left of the fine old tree.

“I don’t quite like this,” said John, meditatively, as his quick eye swept down the course of the river, with the houses and wharves that abutted on it, all along one bank. “Did you ever see the waters thus high before?”

“Yes, I believe I have; nobody minds it at Norton Bury: it is only the sudden thaw, my father says, and he ought to know, for he has had plenty of experience, the tan-yard being so close to the river.”

“I was thinking of that; but come, it’s getting cold.”

He took me safe home, and we parted cordially—nay, affectionately—at my own door.

“When will you come again, David?”

“When your father sends me.”

And I felt that *he* felt that our intercourse was always to be limited to this. Nothing clandestine, nothing obtrusive, was possible, even for friendship’s sake, to John Halifax.

My father came in late that evening; he looked tired and uneasy, and instead of going to bed, though it was after nine o’clock, sat down to his pipe in the chimney-corner.

“Is the river rising still, father? Will it do any harm to the tan-yard?”

“What dost thee know about the tan-yard?”

“Only, John Halifax was saying—”

“John Halifax had better hold his tongue.”

I held mine.

My father puffed away in silence till I came to bid him good-night. I think the sound of my crutches on the floor stirred him out of a long meditation, in which his ill-humour had ebbed away.

“Where didst thee go out to-day, Phineas?—thee and the lad I sent.”

“To the Mythe,”—and I told him the incident that had happened there. He listened without reply.

“Wasn’t it a brave thing to do, father?”

“Um!” and a few meditative puffs. “Phineas, the lad thee hast such a hankering after, is a good lad—a very decent lad—if thee doesn’t make too much of him. Remember, he is but my servant; thee’rt my son—my only son.”

Alas! my poor father, it was hard enough for him to have such an “only son” as I.

In the middle of the night—or else to me, lying awake, it seemed so—there was a knocking at our hall-door. I slept on the ground-flat, in a little room opposite the parlour. Ere I could well collect my thoughts, I saw my father pass,

fully dressed, with a light in his hand. And, man of peace though he was, I was very sure I saw in the other—what always lay near his strong box, at his bed's-head at night. Because, ten years ago, a large sum had been stolen from him, and the burglar had gone free of punishment. The law refused Abel Fletcher's testimony—he was “only a Quaker.”

The knocking grew louder, as if the person had no time to be cautious of noise.

“Who's there?” called out my father; and at the answer he opened the front door, first shutting mine.

A minute afterwards, I heard some one in my room. “Phineas, are you here?—don't be frightened.”

I was not—as soon as his voice reached me, John's own familiar voice. “It's something about the tan-yard?”

“Yes; the waters are rising, and I have come to fetch your father; he may save a good deal yet.—I'm ready, sir,”—in answer to a loud call.—“Now, Phineas, lie you down again—the night's bitter cold. Don't stir—you'll promise?—I'll see after your father.”

They went out of the house together, and did not return the whole night.

That night, February 5, 1795, was one long remembered at Norton Bury. Bridges were destroyed — boats carried away — houses inundated, or sapped at their foundations. The loss of life was small, but that of property was very great. Six hours did the work of ruin, and then the flood began to turn.

It was a long waiting until they came home—my father and John. At daybreak, I saw them standing on the door-step. A blessed sight!

“O father! my dear father!” and I drew him in, holding fast his hands—faster and closer than I had done since I was a child. He did not repel me.

“Thee’rt up early, and it’s a cold morning for thee, my son. Go back to the fire.”

His voice was gentle; his ruddy countenance pale; two strange things in Abel Fletcher.

“Father, tell me what has befallen thee?”

“Nothing, my son, save that the Giver of all worldly goods has seen fit to take back a portion of mine. I, like many another in this town, am poorer by some thousands than I was last night.”

He sat down. I knew he loved his money, for it had been hardly earned. I had not thought he would have borne its loss so quietly.

“Father, never mind ; it might have been worse.”

“Of a surety. I should have lost everything I had in the world—save for—Where is the lad ? What art thee standing outside for ? Come in, John, and shut the door.”

John obeyed, though without advancing. He was cold and wet. I wanted him to sit down by the fireside.

“Ay ! do, lad,” said my father, kindly.

John came.

I stood between the two—afraid to ask what they had undergone ; but sure, from the old man’s grave face, and the lad’s bright one—flushed all over with that excitement of danger so delicious to the young—that the peril had not been small.

“Jael,” cried my father, rousing himself, “give us some breakfast, the lad and me—we have had a hard night’s work together.”

Jael brought the mug of ale and the bread and cheese ; but either did not or could not notice that the meal had been ordered for more than one.

“Another plate,” said my father, sharply.

“The lad can go into the kitchen, Abel Fletcher : his breakfast is waiting there.”

My father winced—even her master was sometimes rather afraid of Jael. But conscience, or his will, conquered.

“Woman, do as I desired. Bring another plate, and another mug of ale.”

And so, to Jael’s great wrath, and to my great joy, John Halifax was bidden, and sat down to the same board as his master. The fact made an ineffaceable impression on our household.

After breakfast, as we sat by the fire, in the pale haze of that February morning, my father, contrary to his wont, explained to me all his losses; and how, but for the timely warning he had received, the flood might have nearly ruined him.

“So it was well John came,” I said, half afraid to say more.

“Ay, and the lad has been useful, too: it is an old head on young shoulders.”

John looked very proud of this praise, though it was grimly given. But directly after it, some ill or suspicious thought seemed to come into Abel Fletcher’s mind.

“Lad,” suddenly turning round on John Halifax, “thee told me thee saw the river rising, by the light of the moon. What wast *thee*

doing, then, out o' thy honest bed and thy quiet sleep, at eleven o'clock at night?"

John coloured violently; the quick young blood was always ready enough to rise in his face. It spoke ill for him with my father.

"Answer. I will not be hard upon thee—to-night, at least."

"As you like, Abel Fletcher," answered the boy, sturdily. "I was doing no harm. I was in the tanyard."

"Thy business there?"

"None at all. I was with the men—they were watching, and had a candle; and I wanted to sit up, and had no light."

"What didst thee want to sit up for?" pursued my father, keen and sharp as a ferret at a field-rat's hole, or a barrister hunting a witness, in those courts of law that were never used by, though often used against, us Quakers.

John hesitated, and again his painful, falsely-accusing blushes tried him sore. "Sir, I'll tell you; it's no disgrace. Though I'm such a big fellow, I can't write; and your son was good enough to try and teach me. I was afraid of forgetting the letters; so I tried to make them all over again, with a bit of chalk, on the bark-

shed wall. It did nobody any harm, that I know of."

The boy's tone, even though it was rather quick and angry, won no reproof. At last, my father said, gently enough,—

"Is that all, lad?"

"Yes."

Again Abel Fletcher fell into a brown study. We two lads talked softly to each other—afraid to interrupt. He smoked through a whole pipe—his great and almost his only luxury, and then again called out—

"John Halifax."

"I'm here."

"It's time thee went away to thy work."

"I'm going this minute. Good bye, Phineas. Good day, sir—is there anything you want done?"

He stood before his master, cap in hand, with an honest manliness pleasant to see. Any master might have been proud of such a servant—any father of such a son. My poor father—no, he did not once look from John Halifax to me. He would not have owned for the world that half-smothered sigh, or murmured because heaven had kept back from him—as, heaven knows why, it often does from us all!—the one desire of his heart.

“John Halifax—thee hast been of great service to me this night. What reward shall I give thee?”

And instinctively his hand dived down into his pocket. John turned away.

“Thank you—I’d rather not. It is quite enough reward that I have been useful to my master, and that he acknowledges it.”

My father thought a minute, and then offered his hand. “Thee’rt in the right, lad. I am very much obliged to thee, and I will not forget it.”

And John—blushing brightly once more—went away looking as proud as an emperor, and as happy as a poor man with a bag of gold.

“Is there nothing thou canst think of, Phineas, that would pleasure the lad?” said my father, after we had been talking some time—though not about John.

I had thought of something—something I had long desired, but which seemed then all but an impossibility. Even now, it was with some doubt and hesitation that I made the suggestion that he should spend every Sunday at our house.

“Nonsense!—thee know’st nought of Norton Bury lads. He would not care. He had rather lounge about all First-day at street-corners with his acquaintance.”

“ John has none, father. He knows nobody, cares for nobody—but me. Do let him come.”

“ We’ll see about it.”

My father never broke or retracted his word. So after that, John Halifax came to us every Sunday: and for one day of the week at least, was received in his master’s household as our equal and my friend.

CHAPTER V.

SUMMERS and winters slipped by, lazily enough, as the years seemed always to crawl round at Norton Bury. How things went in the outside world, I little knew or cared. My father lived his life, mechanical and steady as clock-work, and we two, John Halifax and Phineas Fletcher, lived our lives—the one so active and busy, the other so useless and dull. Neither of us counted the days, nor looked backwards or forwards.

One June morning I woke to the consciousness that I was twenty years old, and that John Halifax was—a man: the difference between us being precisely as I have expressed it.

Our birth-days fell within a week of each other, and it was in remembering his—the one which advanced him to the dignity of eighteen—that I called to mind my own. I say, “advanced him to the dignity,”—but, in truth, that is an idle speech, for any dignity which the matu-

rity of eighteen may be supposed to confer, he had already in possession. Manhood had come to him, both in character and demeanour, not as it comes to most young lads, an eagerly-desired and presumptuously-asserted claim, but as a rightful inheritance, gradually descending, to be received humbly, and worn simply and naturally. So naturally, that I never seemed to think of him as anything but a boy, until this one June Sunday, when, as before stated, I myself became twenty years old.

I was talking over that last fact, in a rather dreamy mood, as he and I sat in our long-familiar summer seat, the clematis arbour by the garden wall.

“It seems very strange, John, but so it is—I am actually twenty years old.”

“Well, and what of that?”

I sat looking down into the river, which flowed on, as my years were flowing, monotonous, dark, and slow;—as they must flow on for ever. John asked me what I was thinking of.

“Of myself: what a fine specimen of the noble *genus homo* I am, at twenty years old.”

I spoke bitterly, but John knew how to meet that mood. Very patient he was, with it and with every ill mood of mine. And I was grate-

ful, with that deep gratitude we feel to those who bear with us, and forgive us, and laugh at us, and correct us;—all alike for love.

“Self-investigation is good on birthdays Phineas; here goes for a catalogue of your qualities, internal and external.”

“John, don’t be foolish.”

“I will, if I like; though perhaps not quite so foolish as some other people; so listen:—‘*Imprimis*,’ as saith Shakspeare—*Imprimis*, height full five feet four; a stature historically appertaining to great men, including Alexander of Macedon and the First Consul.”

“Oh, oh!” said I, reproachfully; for this was our chief bone of contention—I hating, he rather admiring, the great ogre of the day, Napoleon Bonaparte.

“*Imprimis*, of a slight, delicate person, but not lame, as once was.”

“No; thank God!”

“Thin, rather—”

“Very—a mere skeleton!”

“Face, elongated and pale—”

“Sallow, John, decidedly sallow.”

“Be it so, sallow. Big eyes, much given to observation, which means hard staring—Take them off me, Phineas, or I’ll not lie on the grass

a minute longer.—Thank you. To return : *Imprimis* and *finis*—(I'm grand at Latin now, you see)—long hair, which, since the powder-tax, has resumed its original blackness, and is—any young damsel would say, only we count not a single one among our acquaintance—exceedingly bewitching.”

I smiled, feeling myself colour a little too, weak invalid as I was. I was, nevertheless, twenty years old ; and although Jael and Sally were the only specimens of the other sex which had risen on my horizon, yet once or twice, since I had read Shakspeare, I had had a boy's lovely dreams of the divinity of womanhood. They began, and ended—mere dreams. Soon dawned the bare, hard truth, that my character was too feeble and womanish to be likely to win any woman's reverence or love. Or, even had this been possible, one sickly as I was, stricken with hereditary disease, ought never to seek to perpetuate it by marriage. I therefore put from me, at once and for ever, every feeling of that kind ; and during my whole life—I thank God !—have never faltered in my resolution. Friendship was given me for love—duty for happiness. So best, and I was satisfied.

This conviction, and the struggle succeeding

it—for, though brief, it was but natural that it should have been a hard struggle—was the only secret I had kept from John. It had happened some months now, and was quite over and gone, so that I could smile at his fun, and shake at him my “bewitching” black locks, calling him a foolish boy. And while I said it, the notion slowly dawning during the long gaze he had complained of, forced itself upon me clear as day-light, that he was not a “boy” any longer.

“Now let me turn the tables. How old are you, John?”

“You know. Eighteen next week.”

“And how tall?”

“Five feet eleven inches and a half.” And, rising, he exhibited to its full advantage that very creditable altitude, more tall perhaps than graceful, at present; since, like most youths, he did not as yet quite know what to do with his legs and arms. But he was—

I cannot describe what he was. I could not then. I only remember that when I looked at him, and began jocularly “*Imprimis*,” my heart came up into my throat and choked me.

It was almost with sadness that I said, “Ah! David, you are quite a young man now.”

He smiled, of course only with pleasure, looking forward to the new world into which he was going forth; the world into which, as I knew well, I could never follow him.

“I am glad I look rather old for my years,” said he, when, after a pause, he had again flung himself down on the grass. “It tells well in the tan-yard. People would be slow to trust a clerk who looked a mere boy. Still, your father trusts me.”

“He does indeed. You need never have any doubt of that. It was only yesterday he said to me that now he was no longer dissatisfied with your working at all sorts of studies, in leisure hours, since it made you none the worse man of business.”

“No, I hope not, or I should be much ashamed. It would not be doing my duty to myself any more than to my master, if I shirked his work for my own. I am glad he does not complain now, Phineas.”

“On the contrary; I think he intends to give you a rise this Midsummer. But oh!” I cried, recurring to a thought which would often come when I looked at the lad, though he always combatted it so strongly, that I often owned my prejudices were unjust: “how I

wish you were something better than a clerk in a tan-yard. I have a plan, John."

But what that plan was, was fated to remain unrevealed. Jael came to us in the garden, looking very serious. She had been summoned, I knew, to a long conference with her master the day before—the subject of which she would not tell me, though she acknowledged it concerned myself. Ever since she had followed me about, very softly, for her, and called me more than once, as when I was a child, "poor Phineas." She now came with half-dolorous, half-angry looks, to summon me to an interview with my father and Doctor Jessop.

I caught her parting mutterings, as she marched behind me: "Kill or cure, indeed,"—"No more fit than a baby,"—"Abel Fletcher be clean mad,"—"Hope Thomas Jessop will speak outplain and tell him so," and the like. From these, and from her strange fit of tenderness, I guessed what was looming in the distance—a future which my father constantly held *in terrorem* over me, though successive illnesses had kept it in abeyance. Alas! I knew that my poor father's hopes and plans were vain! I went into his presence with a heavy heart.

There is no need to detail that interview.

Enough, that after it he set aside for ever his last lingering hope of having a son able to assist and finally succeed him in his business, and that I set aside every dream of growing up to be a help and comfort to my father. It cost something on both our parts; but after that day's discussion, we tacitly covered over the pain, and counted it openly no more.

I came back into the garden, and told John Halifax all. He listened, with his hand on my shoulder, and his grave, sweet look—dearer sympathy than any words! Though he added thereto a few, in his own wise way, then he and I also drew the curtain over an inevitable grief, and laid it in the peaceful chamber of silence.

When my father, Dr. Jessop, John Halifax, and I, met at dinner, the subject had passed into seeming oblivion, and was never afterwards revived.

But dinner being over, and the chatty little doctor gone, while Abel Fletcher sat mutely smoking his pipe, and we two at the window maintained that respectful and decorous silence which in my young days was rigidly exacted by elders and superiors, I noticed my father's eyes frequently resting with keen observance upon John Halifax. Could it be that there had recurred

to him a hint of mine, given faintly that morning, as faintly as if it had only just entered my mind, instead of having for months continually dwelt there, until a fitting moment should arrive?—Could it be that this hint, which he had indignantly scouted at the time, was germinating in his acute brain, and might bear fruit in future days? I hoped so—I earnestly prayed so. And to that end I took no notice, but let it silently grow.

The June evening came and went. The service-bell rang out and ceased. First, deep shadows, and then a bright star, appeared over the abbey-tower. We watched it from the garden, where Sunday after Sunday, in fine weather, we used to lounge and talk over all manner of things in heaven and in earth, chiefly ending with the former, as on Sunday nights with stars over our head, was natural and fit we should do.

“Phineas,” said John, sitting on the grass with his hands upon his knees, and the one star, I think it was Jupiter, shining down into his eyes, deepening them into that peculiar look, worth any so called ‘handsome eyes;’—“Phineas, I wonder how soon we shall have to rise up from this quiet, easy life, and fight our battles in the world. Also, I wonder if we are ready for it.”

“I think you are.”

“I don’t know. I’m not clear how far I could resist doing anything wrong, if it were pleasant. So many wrong things are pleasant— Just now, instead of rising to-morrow and going into the little dark counting-house, and scratching paper from eight till six, shouldn’t I like to break away!—dash out into the world, take to all sorts of wild freaks, do all sorts of grand things, and perhaps, never come back to the tanning any more.”

“Never any more?”

“No! no! I spoke hastily. I did not mean I ever should do such a wrong thing; but merely that I sometimes feel the wish to do it. I can’t help it; it’s my Apollyon that I have to fight with—everybody keeps a private Apollyon, I fancy. Now, Phineas, be content; Apollyon is beaten down.”

He rose up, but I thought that in the red glow of the twilight, he looked rather pale. He stretched his hand to help me up from the grass. We went into the house together, silently.

After supper, when the chimes struck half-past nine, John prepared to leave as usual. He went to bid good-night to my father, who was sitting meditatively over the fire-less hearth-place, sometimes poking the great bow-pot of

fennel and asparagus, as in winter he did the coals; an instance of obliviousness, which, in my sensible and acute father, argued very deep cogitation on some subject or other.

“Good night,” said John, twice over, before his master heard him.

“Eh?—Oh, good night, good night, lad.—Stay! Halifax, what hast thee got to do to-morrow?”

“Not much, unless the Russian hides should come in; I cleared off the week’s accounts last night, as usual.”

“Ay, to-morrow I shall look over all thy books, and see how thee stand’st, and what further work thou art fit for. Therefore, take a day’s holiday, if thee likes.”

We thanked him warmly. “There, John,” whispered I, “you may have your wish, and run wild to-morrow.”

He said, “the wish had gone out of him.” So we planned a sweet lazy day under the Midsummer sky, in some fields about a mile off, called the Vineyards.

The morning came, and we took our way thither, under the Abbey walls, and along a lane, shaded on one side by the “willows in the water-courses.” We came out in those quiet hay-

fields, which, tradition says, had once grown wine for the rosy monks close by, and history avers, were afterwards watered by a darker stream than the blood of grapes. The Vineyards had been a battle-field; and under the long wavy grass and the roots of the wild apple-trees, slept many a Yorkist and Lancastrian. Sometimes an unusually deep furrow turned out a white bone—but more often the relics were undisturbed, and the meadows used as pastures or hay-fields.

John and I lay down on some wind-rows, and sunned ourselves in the warm and delicious air. How beautiful everything was! so very still! with the Abbey tower—always the most picturesque point in our Norton Bury views—showing so near, that it almost seemed to rise up out of the fields and hedge-rows.

“Well, David,” and I turned to the long, lazy figure beside me, which had considerably flattened the hay; “are you satisfied?”

“Ay.”

Thus we lounged all the summer morning, recurring to a few of the infinitude of subjects we used to compare notes upon; though we were neither of us given to wordiness, and never talked but when we had something to

say. Often—as on this day—we sat for hours in a pleasant dreaminess, scarcely exchanging a word ; nevertheless I could generally track John's thoughts, as they went wandering on, ay, as clearly as one might track a stream through a wood ; sometimes—like to-day—I failed.

In the afternoon, when we had finished our bread and cheese—eaten slowly and with graceful dignity, in order to make dinner a more important and lengthy affair—he said abruptly—

“ Phineas, don't you think this field is rather dull ? Shall we go somewhere else ? Not if it tires you, though.”

I protested the contrary, my health being much above the average this summer. But just as we were quitting the field, we met two rather odd-looking persons entering it, young-old persons they seemed, who might own to any age or any occupation. Their dress, especially that of the younger, amused us by its queer mixture of fashionableness and homeliness, such as grey ribbed stockings and shining paste shoe-buckles, rusty velvet small-clothes and a coatee of blue cloth. But the wearer carried off these anomalies with an easy, condescending air, full of pleasantness, humour, and grace.

“ Sir,” said he, approaching John Halifax

with a bow that I feel sure the “first gentleman of his day,” as loyal folk then entitled the Prince Regent, could not have surpassed—“Sir, will you favour me by informing us how far it is to Coltham?”

“Ten miles, and the stage will pass here in three hours.”

“Thank you; at present I have little to do with the—at least with *that* stage. Young gentlemen, excuse our continuing our dessert, in fact, I may say our dinner. Are you connoisseurs in turnips?”

He offered us—with a polite gesture—one of the “swedes” he was munching. I declined; but John, out of a deeper delicacy than I could boast, accepted it.

“One might dine worse,” he said; “I have done, sometimes.”

“It was a whim of mine, sir. But I am not the first remarkable person who has eaten turnips in your Norton Bury fields—ay, and turned field-preacher afterwards—the celebrated John Philip—”

Here the elder and less agreeable of the two wayfarers interposed with a nudge, indicating silence.

“My companion is right, sir,” he continued. “I will not betray our illustrious friend by

mentioning his surname ; he is a great man now, and might not wish it generally known that he had ever dined off turnips. May I give you instead my own humble name ?”

He gave it ; but I, Phineas Fletcher, shall copy his reticence, and not indulge the world therewith. It was a name wholly out of my sphere, both then and now ; but I know it has since risen into note among people of the world. I believe, too, its owner has carried up to the topmost height of celebrity, always the gay, gentlemanly spirit, and kindly heart, which he showed when sitting with us and eating swedes. Still, I will not mention his name—I shall only call him Mr. Charles.”

“ Now, having satisfactorily ‘ munched and munched, and munched,’ like the sailor’s wife who had chestnuts in her lap—are you acquainted with my friend Mr. William Shakspeare, young gentlemen?—I must try to fulfil the other duties of existence. You said the Coltham mail passed here in three hours? Very well. I have the honour of wishing you a good day, Mr.—”

“ Halifax.”

“ And yours ?”

“ Fletcher.”

“Any connection of him who went partnership with the worthy Beaumont?”

“My father has no partner, sir,” said I. But John, whose reading had latterly surpassed mine, and whom nothing ever puzzled, explained that I came from the same old stock as the brothers Phineas and Giles Fletcher. Upon which Mr. Charles, who till now had somewhat overlooked me, took off his hat, and congratulated me on my illustrious descent.

“That man has evidently seen a good deal of the world,” said John, smiling; “I wonder what the world is like!”

“Did you not see something of it as a child?”

“Only the worst and lowest side; not the one I want to see now. What business do you think that Mr. Charles is? A clever man, anyhow; I should like to see him again.”

“So should I.”

Thus talking at intervals and speculating upon our new acquaintance, we strolled along till we came to a spot called by the country people “the Bloody Meadow,” from being, like several other places in the neighbourhood, the scene of one of those terrible slaughters chronicled in the wars of the Roses. It was a sloping field, through the middle of which ran a little stream

down to the meadow's end, where, fringed and hidden by a plantation of trees, the Avon flowed. Here, too, in all directions, the hay-fields lay, either in green swathes, or tedded, or in the luxuriously-scented quiles. The lane was quite populous with waggons and hay-makers—the men in their corduroys and blue hose—the women in their trim jackets and bright calamanco petticoats. There were more women than men, by far, for the flower of the peasant youth of England had been drafted off to fight against “Bonyparty.” Still hay-time was a glorious season, when half our little town turned out, and made holiday in the sunshine.

“ I think we will go to a quieter place, John. There seems a crowd down in the meadow ; and who is that man standing on the hay-cart, on the other side the stream ? ”

“ Don't you remember the bright blue coat ? 'Tis Mr. Charles. How he is talking and gesticulating ! What can he be at ? ”

Without more ado, John leaped the low hedge, and ran down the slope of the Bloody Meadow. I followed less quickly.

There, of a surety, stood our new friend, on one of the simple-fashioned hay-carts that we used about Norton-Bury, a low frame-work

on wheels, with a pole stuck at either of the four corners. He was bare-headed, and his hair hung in graceful curls, well powdered. I only hope he had honestly paid the tax, which we were all then exclaiming against—so fondly does custom cling to deformity. Despite the powder, the blue coat, and the shabby velvet breeches, Mr. Charles was a very handsome and striking-looking man. No wonder the poor hay-makers had collected from all parts to hear him harangue.

What was he haranguing upon? Could it be, that like his friend, "John Philip," whoever that personage might be, his vocation was that of a field preacher? It seemed like it, especially judging from the sanctified demeanour of the elder and inferior person, who accompanied him; and who now sat in the front of the cart, and folded his hands and groaned, after the most approved fashion of a methodistical "revival."

We listened, expecting every minute to be disgusted and shocked: but no! I must say this for Mr. Charles, that in no way did he trespass the bounds of reverence or decorum. His harangue, though given as a sermon, was strictly and simply a moral essay, such as might have

emanated from any Professor's chair. In fact, as I afterwards learnt, he had given for his text one which the simple rustics received in all respect, as coming from a higher and holier volume than Shakspeare—

“Mercy is twice blessed :

It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.

’Tis mightiest in the mightiest.”

And on that text did he dilate ; gradually warming with his subject, till his gestures—which at first had seemed burthened with a queer constraint, that now and then resulted in an irrepressible twitch of the corners of his flexible mouth—became those of a man beguiled into real earnestness. We of Norton Bury had never heard such eloquence.

“Who *can* he be, John ? Isn't it wonderful ?”

But John never heard me. His whole attention was riveted on the speaker. Such oratory—a compound of graceful action, polished language, and brilliant imagination, came to him as a positive revelation—a revelation from the world of intellect, the world which he longed after with all the ardour of youth.

What that harangue would have seemed like, could we have heard it with maturer ears, I know not; but us, at eighteen and twenty, it literally dazzled. No wonder it affected the rest of the audience. Feeble men, leaning on forks and rakes, shook their old heads sagely, as if they understood it all. And when the speaker alluded to the horrors of war—a subject which then came so bitterly home to every heart in Britain—many women melted into sobs and tears. At last, when the orator himself moved by the pictures he had conjured up, paused suddenly, quite exhausted, and asked for a slight contribution “to help a deed of charity,” there was a general rush towards him.

“No—no, my good people,” said Mr. Charles, recovering his natural manner, though a little clouded, I thought, by a faint shade of remorse.—“No, I will not take from any one more than a penny; and then only if they are quite sure they can spare it. Thank you, my worthy man. Thanks, my bonny young lass—I hope your sweetheart will soon be back from the wars. Thank you all, my ‘very worthy and approved good masters,’ and a fair harvest to you!”

He bowed them away, in a dignified and graceful manner, still standing on the hay-cart.

The honest folk trooped off, having no more time to waste, and left the field in possession of Mr. Charles, his co-mate, and ourselves; whom I do not think he had as yet noticed.

He descended from the cart. His companion burst into roars of laughter; but Mr. Charles looked grave.

“Poor, honest souls!” said he, wiping his brows—I am not sure that it was only his brows—“Hang me if I’ll be at this trick again, Yates.”

“It was a trick then, sir,” said John, advancing. “I am sorry for it.”

“So am I, young man,” returned the other, no way disconcerted; indeed, he seemed a person whose frank temper nothing could disconcert. “But starvation is—excuse me—unpleasant: and necessity has no law. It is of vital consequence that I should reach Coltham to-night; and after walking twenty miles, one cannot easily walk ten more, and afterwards appear as Macbeth to an admiring audience.”

“You are an actor?”

“I am, please your worship—

“ ‘A poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is seen no more.’ ”

There was inexpressible pathos in his tone, and his fine face looked thin and worn—it did not take much to soften both John’s feelings and mine towards the “poor player.” Besides, we had lately been studying Shakespere, who, for the first time of reading, generally sends all young people tragedy-mad.

“You acted well to-day,” said John; “all the folk here took you for a methodist preacher.”

“Yet I never meddled with theology—only common morality. You cannot say I did.”

John thought a moment, and then answered, “No.—But what put the scheme into your head?”

“The fact, that, under a like necessity, the same amusing play was played out here years ago, as I told you, by John Philip—No, I will not conceal his name, the greatest actor and the truest gentleman our English stage has ever seen—John Philip Kemble.”

And he raised his hat, with sincere reverence. We too had heard—at least John had—of this wonderful man.

I saw the fascination of Mr. Charles’ society was strongly upon him. It was no wonder. More brilliant, more versatile talent, I never saw. He turned “from grave to gay, from lively

to severe"—appearing in all phases alike the gentleman, the scholar, and the man of the world. And neither John nor I had ever met any one of these characters, all so irresistibly alluring at our age.

I say *our*, because though I followed where he led, I always did it of my own will likewise.

The afternoon began to wane, while we, with our two companions, yet sat talking by the brook-side. Mr. Charles had washed his face, and his travel-sore, blistered feet, and we had induced him, and the man he called Yates, to share our remnants of bread and cheese.

“Now,” he said, starting up, “I am ready to do battle again, even with the Thane of Fife—who, to night, is one Johnson, a fellow of six feet and twelve stone. What is the hour, Mr. Halifax?”

“Mr. Halifax”—(I felt pleased to hear him, for the first time, so entitled)—had, unfortunately, no watch among his worldly possessions, and candidly owned the fact. But he made a near guess, by calculating the position of his un-failing time-piece, the sun.—It was four o'clock.

“Then I must go. Will you not retract, young gentlemen? Surely you would not lose

such a rare treat as ‘Macbeth,’ with—I will not say my humble self—but with that divine Siddons. Such a woman! Shakspeare himself might lean out of Elysium to watch her. You will join us?”

John made a silent, dolorous negative; as he had done once or twice before, when the actor urged us to accompany him to Coltham, for a few hours only—we might be back by midnight, easily.

“What do you think, Phineas?” said John, when we stood in the high road, waiting for the coach; “I have money—and—we have so little pleasure—we could send word to your father. Do you think it would be wrong?”

I could not say; and to this minute, viewing the question nakedly in a strict moral sense, I cannot say either, whether or no it was an absolute crime; therefore, being so accustomed to read my wrong or right in ‘David’s’ eyes, I remained perfectly passive.

We waited by the hedge-side for several minutes—Mr. Charles ceased his urging, half in dudgeon, save that he was too pleasant a man really to take offence at anything. His conversation was chiefly directed to me. John

took no part therein, but strolled about, plucking at the hedge.

When the stage appeared down the winding of the road, I was utterly ignorant of what he meant us to do, if he had any definite purpose at all.

It came—the coachman was hailed. Mr. Charles shook hands with us and mounted—paying his own fare and that of Yates, with their handful of charity-pennies, which caused a few minutes' delay in counting, and a great deal of good-humoured joking, as good-humouredly borne.

Meanwhile, John put his two hands on my shoulders, and looked hard in my face—his was slightly flushed and excited, I thought.

“Phineas, are you tired?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you feel strong enough to go to Coltham? Would it do you no harm? Would you *like* to go?”

To all these hurried questions I answered with as hurried an affirmative. It was sufficient to me that he evidently liked to go.

“It is only for once—your father would not grudge us the pleasure, and he is too busy to be out of the tan-yard before midnight. We

will be home soon after then, if I carry you on my back all the ten miles. Come, mount, we'll go."

"Bravo!" cried Mr. Charles, and leaned over, to help me up the coach's side. John followed, and the crisis was past.

But I noticed that for several miles he hardly spoke one word.

CHAPTER VI.

NEAR as we lived to Coltham, I had only been there once in my life; but John Halifax knew the town pretty well, having latterly, in addition to his clerkship, been employed by my father in going about the neighbourhood buying bark. I was amused when the coach stopped at an inn, which bore the ominous sign of the "Fleece," to see how well accustomed he seemed to be to the ways of the place. He departed himself with perfect self-possession; the waiter served him respectfully. He had evidently taken his position in the world—at least, our little world—he was no longer a boy, but a man. I was glad to see it; leaving everything in his hands, I lay down where he placed me in the inn parlour, and watched him giving his orders and walking about. Sometimes I thought his eyes were restless and un-

quiet, but his manner was as composed as usual.

Mr. Charles had left us, appointing a meeting at Coffee-house Yard, where the theatre then was.

“A poor barn-like place, I believe,” said John, stopping in his walk up and down the room, to place my cushions more easy; “they should build a new one, now Coltham is growing up into such a fashionable town. I wish I could take you to see the ‘Well-walk,’ with all the fine people promenading. But you must rest, Phineas.”

I consented, being indeed rather weary.

“You will like to see Mrs. Siddons, whom we have so often talked about?—She is not young now, Mr. Charles says, but magnificent still. She first came out in this same theatre, more than twenty years ago. Yates saw her. I wonder, Phineas, if your father ever did?”

“Oh, no! my father would not enter a play-house for the world.”

“What!”

“Nay, John, you need not look so troubled. You know he did not bring me up in the Society, and its restrictions are not binding upon me.”

“True, true.” And he resumed his walk, but not his cheerfulness. “If it were myself alone now, of course, what I myself hold to be a lawful pleasure, I have a right to enjoy; or, if not, being yet a lad and under a master—well, I will bear the consequences,” added he, rather proudly; “but to share them—Phineas,” turning suddenly to me, “would you like to go home?—I’ll take you.”

I protested earnestly against any such thing; told him I was sure we were doing nothing wrong—which was, indeed, my belief; entreated him to be merry and enjoy himself, and succeeded so well, that in a few minutes we had started in a flutter of gaiety and excitement for Coffee-house Yard.

It was a poor place—little better than a barn, as Mr. Charles had said—built in a lane leading out of the principal street. This lane was almost blocked up with play-goers of all ranks and in all sorts of equipages, from the coach-and six to the sedan-chair, mingled with a motley crowd on foot, all jostling, fighting, and screaming, till the place became a complete bear-garden.

“Oh, John! take care!” and I clung to his arm.

“Never mind! I’m big enough and strong enough for any crowd. Hold on, Phineas.” If I had been a woman, and the woman that he loved, he could not have been more tender over my weakness. The physical weakness—that however humiliating to myself, and doubtless contemptible in most men’s eyes—was yet dealt by the hand of Heaven, and, as such, regarded by John with no scorn, only with compassion.

The crowd grew denser and more formidable. I looked beyond it, up towards the low hills that rose in various directions round the town; how green and quiet they looked, in the still June evening. I only wished we were safe back again at Norton Bury.

But now there came a slight swaying in the crowd, as a sedan-chair was borne through—or attempted to be—for the effort failed. There was a scuffle, and one of the bearers was knocked down and hurt. Some cried “shame!” others seemed to think this incident only added to the frolic. At last, in the midst of the confusion, a lady put her head out of the sedan, and looked around her.

It was a remarkable countenance; once seen, you could never forget it. Pale, rather large and hard in outline, an aquiline nose—full,

passionate, yet sensitive lips—and very dark eyes. She spoke, and the voice belonged naturally to such a face. “Good people, let me pass—I am Sarah Siddons.”

The crowd divided instantaneously, and in moving, set up a cheer that must have rang through all the town. There was a minute’s pause, while she bowed and smiled—such a smile! and then the sedan curtain closed.

“Now’s the time—only hold fast to me!” whispered John, as he sprang forward, dragging me after him. In another second he had caught up the pole dropped by the man who was hurt; and before I well knew what we were about, we both stood safe inside the entrance of the theatre.

Mrs. Siddons stepped out, and turned to pay her bearers—a most simple duty—but so elevated in the doing, that even it, I thought, could not bring her to the level of common humanity. The tall, cloaked, and hooded figure, and the tones that issued thence, made her, even in that narrow passage, under the one flaring tallow-candle, a veritable Queen of Tragedy—at least, so she seemed to us two—who stood by, eagerly gazing.

The one man was paid—over-paid, apparently,

from his thankfulness—and she turned to John Halifax.

“I regret, young man, that you should have had so much trouble. Here is some requital.”

He took the money, selected from it one silver coin, and returned the rest.

“I will keep this, madam, if you please, as a memento that I once had the honour of being useful to Mrs. Siddons.”

She looked at him keenly, out of her wonderful dark eyes, then curtsied with grave dignity—“I thank you, sir,” she said, and passed on.

A few minutes after, some underling of the theatre found us out, and brought us, “by Mrs. Siddons’ desire,” to the best places the house could afford.

It was a glorious night. At this distance of time, when I look back upon it, my old blood leaps and burns. I repeat, it was a glorious night!

Before the curtain rose, we had time to glance about us on that scene, to both entirely new—the inside of a theatre. Shabby and small as the place was, it was filled with all the *beau monde* of Coltham, which then, patronized by royalty, rivalled even Bath in its fashion and folly. Such a dazzle of diamonds, and spangled

turbans, and Prince-of-Wales' plumes! Such an odd mingling of costume, which was then in a transition state, the old ladies clinging tenaciously to the stately silken petticoats and long bodices, surmounted by the prim and decent *bouffantes*, while the younger belles had begun to flaunt in the French fashions of flimsy muslins, short-waisted—narrow-skirted. These we had already heard Jael furiously inveighing against: for Jael, Quakeress as she was, could not quite smother her original propensity towards the decoration of "the flesh," and betrayed a suppressed but profound interest in the same.

John and I quite agreed with her, that it was very horrible to see gentle English girls clad, or rather un-clad, after the fashion of our enemies across the Channel; now, unhappy nation! held to be at zero, in politics, religion, and morals—where high-bred ladies went about dressed as heathen goddesses, with bare arms and bare sandalled feet, gaining none of the pure simplicity of the ancient world, and losing all the decorous dignity of our modern times.

We two, who had all a boy's mysterious reverence for womanhood, in its most ideal, most beautiful form, and who, I believe, were, in our

ignorance, expecting to behold in every woman an Imogen, a Juliet, or a Desdemona, felt no particular attraction towards the ungracefully attired, flaunting, simpering belles of Coltham.

But—the play began.

I am not going to follow it: all the world has heard of the *Lady Macbeth* of Mrs. Siddons. This, the first and last play I ever witnessed, stands out to my memory, after more than half a century, as clear as on that night. Still I can see her in her first scene, “reading a letter”—that wondrous woman, who, in spite of her modern black velvet and point lace, did not act, but *was*, Lady Macbeth: still I hear the awe-struck, questioning, weird-like tone, that sent an involuntary shudder through the house, as if supernatural things were abroad—“*They made themselves—air!*” And still there quivers through the silence that piteous cry of a strong heart broken—“*All the perfumes of Arabia will never sweeten this little hand!*”

Well, she is gone, like the brief three hours when we hung on her every breath, as if it could stay even the wheels of time. But they have whirled on—whirled her away with them into the infinite, and into earthly oblivion! People

tell me that a new generation only smiles at the traditional glory of Sarah Siddons. They never saw her. For me, I shall go down to the grave, worshipping her still.

Of him whom I call Mr. Charles, I have little to say. John and I both smiled when we saw his fine, frank face and manly bearing subdued into that poor, whining, sentimental craven, the stage *Macbeth*. Yet I believe he acted it well. But we irresistibly associated his idea with that-of turnip-munching and hay-cart oratory. And when, during the first colloquy of Banquo with the witches, Macbeth took the opportunity of winking privately at us over the foot-lights, all the paraphernalia of the stage failed to make the murderous Thane of Cawdor aught else than our humorous and good-natured Mr. Charles. I never saw him after that night. He is still living—may his old age have been as peaceful as his youth was kind and gay!

The play ended. There was some buffoonery still to come, but we would not stay for that. We staggered, half-blind and dazzled, both in eyes and brain, out into the dark streets, John almost carrying me. Then we paused, and leaning against a post which was surmounted by one of

the half-dozen oil lamps which illumined the town, tried to regain our mental equilibrium.

John was the first to do it. Passing his hand over his brow, he bared it to the fresh night-air, and drew a deep, hard breath. He was very pale, I saw.

“John?”

He turned, and laid a hand on my shoulder. “What did you say? Are you cold?”

“No.” He put his arm so as to shield the wind from me, nevertheless.

“Well,” said he, after a pause, “we have had our pleasure, and it is over. Now, we must go back to the old ways again. I wonder what o’clock it is?”

He was answered by a church clock striking, heard clearly over the silent town. I counted the strokes—*eleven!*

Horrified, we looked at one another by the light of the lamp. Until this minute we had taken no note of time. Eleven o’clock! How should we get home to Norton Bury that night!

For, now the excitement was over, I turned sick and faint; my limbs almost sank under me.

“What must we do, John?”

“Do! Oh! ’tis quite easy. You cannot walk—you *shall* not walk—we must hire a gig,

and drive home. I have money enough—all my month's wages—see!" He felt in his pockets one after the other; his countenance grew blank. "Why! where is my money gone to?"

Where, indeed! But that it was gone, and irretrievably—most likely stolen when we were so wedged in the crowd—there could be no manner of doubt. And I had not a groat. I had little use for money, and rarely carried any.

"Would not somebody trust us?" suggested I.

"I never asked anybody for credit in my life—and for a horse and gig—they'd laugh at me. Still—yes—stay here a minute, and I'll try."

He came back, though not immediately, and took my arm with a sort of reckless fun.

"It's of no use, Phineas—I'm not so respectable as I thought. What's to be done?"

Ay! what indeed! Here we were, two friendless youths, with not a penny in our pockets, and ten miles away from home. How to get there, and at midnight too, was a very serious question. We consulted a minute, and then John said firmly:

"We must make the best of it, and start. Every instant is precious. Your father will

think we have fallen into some harm. Come, Phineas, I'll help you on."

His strong, cheery voice, added to the necessity of the circumstances, braced up my nerves. I took hold of his arm, and we marched on bravely through the shut-up town, and for a mile or two along the high road leading to Norton Bury. There was a cool, fresh breeze: and I often think one can walk so much further by night than by day. For some time, listening to John's talk about the stars—he had lately added astronomy to the many things he tried to learn—and recalling with him all that we had heard and seen this day, I hardly felt my weariness.

But gradually it grew upon me; my pace lagged slower and slower—even the scented air of the midsummer-night imparted no freshness. John wound his young arm, strong and firm as iron, round my waist, and we got on a while in that way.

"Keep up, Phineas. There's a hay-rick near. I'll wrap you in my coat, and you shall rest there; an hour or two will not matter now—we shall get home by day-break."

I feebly assented; but it seemed to me that we never should get home—at least, I never should. For a short way more, I dragged my-

self—or rather, was dragged, along; then the stars the, shadowy fields, and the winding, white high-road mingled and faded from me. I lost all consciousness.

When I came to myself, I was lying by a tiny brook at the road-side, my head resting on John's knees. He was bathing my forehead; I could not see him, but I heard his smothered moan.

“David, don't mind. I shall be well directly.”

“Oh! Phineas—Phineas! I thought I had killed you.”

He said no more; but I fancied that under cover of the night he yielded to what his manhood might have been ashamed of—yet need not—a few tears.

I tried to rise. There was a faint streak in the east. “Why, it is day-break! How far are we from Norton Bury?”

“Not very far. Don't stir a step. I shall carry you.”

“Impossible!”

“Nonsense; I have done it for half-a-mile already. Come, mount! I am not going to have Jonathan's death laid at David's door.”

And so, masking command with a jest, he had his way. What strength supported him I

cannot tell, but he certainly carried me—with many rests between, and pauses, during which I walked a quarter-of-a-mile or so—the whole way to Norton Bury.

The light broadened and broadened; when we reached my father's door, haggard and miserable; it was in the pale sunshine of a summer morning.

“Thank God!” murmured John, as he set me down at the foot of the steps. “You are safe at home.”

“And you. You will come in—you would not leave me now?”

He thought a moment—then said “No!”

We looked up doubtfully at the house; there were no watchers there. All the windows were closed as if the whole peaceful establishment were taking its sleep, prior to the early stirring of Norton Bury households. Even John's loud knocking was some time before it was answered.

I was too exhausted to feel much; but I know those five awful minutes seemed interminable. I could not have borne them, save for John's voice in my ear.

“Courage! I'll bear all the blame. We have

done no absolute sin, and have paid dearly for any folly. Courage!"

At the five minutes' end my father opened the door. He was dressed as usual, looked as usual. Whether he had sat up watching, or had suffered any anxiety, I never found out.

He said nothing; merely opened the door, admitted us, and closed it behind us. But we were certain, from his face, that he knew all. It was so; some neighbour driving home from Coltham, had taken pains to tell Abel Fletcher where he had seen his son—at the very last place a Friend's son ought to be seen—the play-house. We knew that it was by no means to learn the truth, but to confront us with it, that my father—reaching the parlour, and opening the shutters, that the hard day-light should shame us more and more—asked the stern question:

“Phineas, where hast thee been?”

John answered for me. “At the theatre at Coltham. It was my fault. He went because I wished to go.”

“And wherefore didst thee wish to go?”

“Wherefore?” the answer seemed hard to find. “Oh! Mr. Fletcher, were you never young like me?”

My father made no reply; John gathered courage.

“It was, as I say, all my fault. It might have been wrong—I think now that it was—but the temptation was hard. My life here is dull; I long sometimes for a little amusement—a little change.”

“Thee shall have it.”

That voice, slow and quiet as it was, struck us both dumb.

“And how long hast thee planned this, John Halifax?”

“Not a day—not an hour! It was a sudden freak of mine.” (My father shook his head with contemptuous incredulity.) “Sir!—Abel Fletcher—did I ever tell you a lie? If you will not believe me, believe your own son. Ask Phineas—No, no, ask him nothing!” And he came in great distress to the sofa where I had fallen. “Oh, Phineas! how cruel I have been to you!”

I tried to smile at him, being past speaking—but my father put John aside.

“Young man, *I* can take care of my son. Thee shalt not lead him into harm’s way any more. Go—I have been mistaken in thee!”

If my father had gone into a passion, had

accused us, reproached us, stormed at us with all the ill-language that men of the world use ; but that quiet, cold, irrevocable, "I have been mistaken in thee !" It was ten times worse.

John lifted to him a mute look, from which all pride had ebbed away.

"I repeat, I have been mistaken in thee ! Thee seemed a lad to my mind ; I trusted thee. This day, by my son's wish, I meant to have bound thee 'prentice to me, and in good time to have taken thee into the business. Now—"

There was silence. At last John muttered, in a low broken-hearted voice, "I deserve it all. I can go away. I might perhaps earn my living elsewhere ; shall I ?"

Abel Fletcher hesitated, looked at the poor lad before him (oh, David ! how unlike to thee), then said, "No—I do not wish that. At least, not at present."

I cried out in the joy and relief of my heart. John came over to me, and we clasped hands.

"John, you will not go ?"

"No, I will stay to redeem myself with your father. Be content, Phineas—I won't part with you."

"Young man, thou must," said my father, turning round.

“But—”

“I have said it, Phineas. I accuse him of no dishonesty, no crime, but of weakly yielding, and selfishly causing another to yield, to the temptations of the world. Therefore, as my clerk I retain him; as my son’s companion—never!”

We felt that “never” was irrevocable.

Yet I tried, blindly and despairingly, to wrestle with it; I might as well have flung myself against a stone wall.

John stood perfectly silent.

“Don’t Phineas,” he whispered at last; “never mind me. Your father is right—at least so far as he sees. Let me go—perhaps I may come back to you some time. If not—”

I moaned out bitter words—I hardly knew what I was saying. My father took no notice of them, only went to the door and called Jael.

Then, before the woman came, I had strength enough to bid John go.

“Good-bye—don’t forget me, don’t!”

“I will not,” he said; “and if I live, we shall be friends again. Good-bye, Phineas.” He was gone.

After that day, though he kept his word, and remained in the tan-yard, and though from time to time I heard of him, always accidentally—after that day, for two long years I never once saw the face of John Halifax.

CHAPTER VII.

IT was the year 1800, long known in English households as "the dear year." The present generation can have no conception of what a terrible time that was—War, Famine, and Tumult stalking hand-in-hand, and no one to stay them. For between the upper and lower classes there was a great gulf fixed; the rich ground the faces of the poor, the poor hated, yet meanly succumbed to the rich. Neither had Christianity enough boldly to cross the line of demarcation, and prove, the humbler, that they were men—the higher and wiser, that they were gentlemen.

These troubles, which were everywhere abroad, reached us even in our quiet town of Norton Bury. For myself, personally, they touched me not, or, at least, only kept fluttering like evil birds outside the dear home-tabernacle, where I and Patience sat, keeping our solemn counsel

together—for these two years had with me been very hard.

Though I had to bear so much bodily suffering that I was seldom told of any worldly cares, still I often fancied things were going ill both within and without our doors. Jael complained in an under-key of stinted housekeeping, or boasted aloud of her own ingenuity in making ends meet: and my father's brow grew continually heavier, graver, sterner—sometimes so stern that I dared not wage, what was, openly or secretly, the quiet but incessant crusade of my existence—the bringing back of John Halifax.

He still remained my father's clerk—nay, I sometimes thought he was even advancing in duties and trusts, for I heard of his being sent long journies up and down England to buy grain—Abel Fletcher having added to his tanning business the flour mill hard by, whose lazy whirr was so familiar to John and me in our boyhood. But of these journies my father never spoke; indeed he rarely mentioned John at all. However he might employ and even trust him in business relations, I knew that in every other way he was inexorable.

And John Halifax was as inexorable as he. No underhand or clandestine friendship would

he admit—no, not even for my sake. I knew quite well, that until he could walk in openly, honourably, proudly, he never would re-enter my father's doors. Twice only he had written to me—on my two birthdays—my father himself giving me in silence the unsealed letters. They told me what I already was sure of—that I held, and always should hold, my stedfast place in his friendship. Nothing more.

One other fact I noticed: that a little lad, afterward discovered to be Jem Watkins, to whom had fallen the hard-working lot of the lost Bill, had somehow crept into our household as errand-boy, or gardener's boy; and being "cute," and a "scholard," was greatly patronized by Jael. I noticed, too, that the said Jem, whenever he came in my way, in house or garden, was the most capital "little foot-page" that ever invalid had; knowing intuitively all my needs, and serving me with an unfailing devotion, which quite surprised and puzzled me at the time. It did not afterwards.

Summer was passing. People began to watch with anxious looks the thin harvest-fields—as Jael often told me, when she came home from her afternoon walks. "It was piteous to see them," she said; "only July, and the quartern

loaf at nearly three shillings, and meal four shillings a peck."

And then she would glance at our flour-mill, where for several days a week the water-wheel was as quiet as on Sundays; for my father kept his grain locked up, waiting for what, he wisely judged, might be a worst harvest than the last. But Jael, though she said nothing, often looked at the flour-mill, and shook her head. And after one market-day — when she came in rather "flustered," saying, there had been a mob outside the mill, until "that young man Halifax" had gone out and spoken to them—she never once allowed me to take my rare walk under the trees in the Abbey yard; nor, if she could help it, would she even let me sit watching the lazy Avon from the garden-wall.

One Sunday—it was the 1st of August, for my father had just come back from meeting, very much later than usual; and Jael said he had gone, as was his annual custom on that his wedding-day, to the Friends' burial-ground in St. Mary's Lane, where, far away from her own kindred and people, my poor young mother had been laid;—on this one Sunday, I began to see that things were going wrong. Abel Fletcher sat at dinner, wearing the heavy, hard-lined look

which had grown upon his face, not unmingled with the wrinkles planted by physical pain. For, with all his temperance, he could not quite keep down his hereditary enemy, gout; and this week it had clutched him pretty hard.

Dr. Jessop came in, and I stole away gladly enough, and sat for an hour in my old place in the garden, idly watching the stretch of meadow, pasture, and harvest land. Noticing too, more as a pretty bit in the landscape, than as a fact of vital importance, in how many places the half-ripe corn was already cut, and piled in thinly-scattered sheaves over the fields.

After the Doctor left, my father sent for me and all his household; in the which, creeping humbly after the women-kind, was now numbered the lad Jem. That Abel Fletcher was not quite himself, was proved by the fact that his unlighted pipe lay on the table, and his afternoon tankard of ale sank from foam to flatness, untouched.

He first addressed Jael. "Woman, was it thee who cooked the dinner to-day?"

She gave a dignified affirmative.

"Thee must give us no more such dinners. No cakes, no pastry kickshaws, and only wheaten bread enough for absolute necessity. Our neighbours shall not say that Abel Fletcher has

flour in his mill, and plenty in his house, while there is famine abroad in the land. So take heed."

"I do take heed," answered Jael, staunchly. "Thee canst not say I waste a penny of thine. And for myself, do I not pity the poor? On First-day a woman cried after me about wasting good flour in starch—to-day, behold."

And with a spasmodic bridling-up, she pointed to the *bouffante* which used to stand up stiffly round her withered old throat, and stick out in front like a pouter pigeon. Alas! its glory and starch were alike departed; it now appeared nothing but a heap of crumpled and yellowish muslin. Poor Jael! I knew this was the most heroic personal sacrifice she could have made, yet I could not help smiling; even my father did the same.

"Dost thee mock me, Abel Fletcher?" cried she, angrily. "Preach not to others, while the sin lies on thy own head."

And I am sure poor Jael was innocent of any jocular intention, as, advancing sternly, she pointed to her master's pate, where his long-worn powder was scarcely distinguishable from the snows of age. He bore the assault

gravely and unshrinkingly, merely saying, "Woman, peace!"

"Nor while"—pursued Jael, driven apparently to the last and most poisoned arrow in her quiver of wrath—"while the poor folk be starving in scores about Norton Bury, and the rich folk there will not sell their wheat under famine price. 'Take heed to thyself, Abel Fletcher.'"

My father winced, either from a twinge of gout or conscience; and then Jael suddenly ceased the attack, sent the other servants out of the room, and tended her master as carefully as if she had not insulted him. In his fits of gout, my father, unlike most men, became the quieter and easier to manage, the more he suffered. He had a long fit of pain, which left him considerably exhausted. When, being at last relieved, he and I were sitting in the room alone, he said to me—

"Phineas, the tan-yard has thriven ill of late, and I thought the mill would make up for it. But if it will not, it will not. Wouldst thee mind, my son, being left a little poorer when I am gone?"

"Father!"

"Well, then, in a few days I will begin selling my wheat, as that lad has advised and begged

me to do these weeks past. He is a sharp lad, and I am getting old. Perhaps he is right."

"Who, father?" I asked, rather hypocritically.

"Thee knowest well enough—John Halifax."

I thought it best to say no more; but I never let go one thread of hope which could draw me nearer to my heart's desire.

On the Monday morning my father went to the tan-yard as usual. I spent the day in my bed-room, which looked over the garden, where I saw nothing but the waving of the trees and the birds hopping over the smooth grass; heard nothing but the soft chime, hour after hour, of the abbey bells. What was passing in the world, in the town, or even in the next street, was to me faint as dreams.

At dinner-time I rose, went down stairs, and waited for my father; waited one, two, three hours. It was very strange. He never by any chance overstayed his time, without sending a message home. So, after some consideration as to whether I dared encroach upon his formal habits so much, and after much advice from Jael, who betrayed more anxiety than was at all warranted by the cause she assigned, viz. the

spoiled dinner, I despatched Jem Watkins to the tan-yard, to see after his master.

He came back with ill news. The lane leading to the tan-yard was blocked up with a wild mob. Even the stolid, starved patience of our Norton Bury poor had come to an end at last—they had followed the example of many others. There was a bread-riot in the town.

God only knows how terrible those “riots” were; when the people rose in desperation, not from some delusion of crazy, blood-thirsty “patriotism,” but to get food for themselves, their wives, and children. God only knows what madness was in each individual heart of that concourse of poor wretches, styled “the mob,” when every man took up arms, certain that there were before him but two alternatives, starving or—hanging.

The riot here was scarcely universal. Norton Bury was not a large place, and had always abundance of small-pox and fevers to keep the poor down numerically. Jem said it was chiefly about our mill and our tan-yard that the disturbance lay.

“And where is my father?”

Jem “didn’t know,” and looked very much as if he didn’t care.

“Jael, somebody must go at once, and find my father.”

“I am going,” said Jael, who had already put on her cloak and hood. Of course, despite all her opposition, I went too.

The tan-yard was deserted; the mob had divided, and gone, one-half to our mill, the rest to another that was lower down the river. I asked of a poor frightened bark-cutter if she knew where my father was? She thought he was gone for the “millintary;” but Mr. Halifax was at the mill now—she hoped no harm would come to Mr. Halifax.

Even in that moment of alarm I felt a sense of pleasure. I had not been in the tan-yard for nearly three years. I did not know John had come already to be called “Mr. Halifax.”

There was nothing for me but to wait here till my father returned. He could not surely be so insane as to go to the mill—and John was there. Terribly was my heart divided, but my duty lay with my father.

Jael sat down in the shed, or marched restlessly between the tanpits. I went to the end of the yard, and looked down towards the mill. What a half-hour it was!

At last, exhausted, I sat down on the bark-

heap where John and I had once sat as lads. He must now be more than twenty; I wondered if he were altered.

“ Oh, David! David!” I thought, as I listened eagerly for any sounds abroad in the town; “ what should I do if any harm came to thee?”

This minute I heard a footstep crossing the yard. No, it was not my father’s—it was firmer, quicker, younger. I sprang from the bark-heap.

“ Phineas!”

“ John!”

What a grasp that was—both hands! and how fondly and proudly I looked up in his face—the still boyish face. But the figure was quite that of a man, now.

For a minute we forgot ourselves in our joy, and then he let go my hands, saying hurriedly—

“ Where is your father?”

“ I wish I knew!—Gone for the soldiers, they say.”

“ No, not that—he would never do that. I must go and look for him. Good-bye.”

“ Nay, dear John!”

“ Can’t—can’t”—said he, firmly, “ not while your father forbids. I must go.” And he was gone.

Though my heart rebelled, my conscience defended him ; marvelling how it was that he who had never known his father, should uphold so sternly the duty of filial obedience. I think it ought to act as a solemn warning to those who exact so much from the mere fact and name of parenthood, without having in any way fulfilled its duties, that orphans from birth often revere the ideal of that bond far more than those who have known it in reality. Always excepting those children to whose blessed lot it has fallen to have the ideal realized.

In a few minutes I saw him and my father enter the tan-yard together. He was talking earnestly, and my father was listening—ay, listening—and to John Halifax ! But whatever the argument was, it failed to move him. Greatly troubled, but staunch as a rock, my old father stood, resting his lame foot on a heap of hides. I went to meet him.

“ Phineas,” said John, anxiously, “ come and help me. No, Abel Fletcher,” he added, rather proudly, in reply to a sharp suspicious glance at us both ; “ your son and I only met ten minutes ago, and have scarcely exchanged a word. But we cannot waste time over that question now.

Phineas, help me to persuade your father to save his property. He will not call for the aid of the law, seeing he is a Friend. Besides, for the same reason, it might be useless asking."

"Verily!" said my father, with a bitter and meaning smile.

"But he might get his own men to defend his property, and need not do what he is bent on doing—go to the mill himself."

"Surely," was all Abel Fletcher said, planting his oaken stick firmly, as firmly as his will, and taking his way to the river-side, in the direction of the mill.

I caught his arm—"Father, do not go."

"My son," said he, turning on me one of his "iron looks," as I used to call them—tokens of a nature that might have ran molten once, and had settled into a hard, moulded mass, of which nothing could afterwards alter one form, or erase one line—"My son, no opposition. Any who try that with me, fail. If those fellows had waited two days more, I would have sold all my wheat at a hundred shillings the quarter; now, they shall have nothing. It will teach them wisdom another time. Get thee safe home, Phineas, my son; Jael, go thou likewise."

But neither went. John held me back as I was following my father.

“He will do it, Phineas, and I suppose he must. Please God, I’ll take care no harm touches him—but go you home.”

That was not to be thought of. Fortunately, the time was too brief for argument, so the discussion soon ended. He followed my father, and I followed him. For Jael, she disappeared.

There was a private path from the tan-yard to the mill, along the river side; by this we went, in silence. When we reached the spot, it was deserted; but farther down the river we heard a scuffling, and saw a number of men breaking down our garden wall.

“They think he is gone home,” whispered John; “we’ll get in here the safer. Quick, Phineas.”

We crossed the little bridge; John took a key out of his pocket, and let us in to the mill by a small door—the only entrance, and that was barred and trebly barred within. It had good need to be, in such times.

The mill was a queer, musty, silent place, especially the machinery room, the sole flooring of which was the dark, dangerous stream. We stood there a good while—it was the safest

place, having no windows. Then we followed my father to the top story, where he kept his bags of grain. There were very many ; enough, in these times, to make a large fortune by—a cursed fortune, wrung out of human lives.

“ Oh ! how could my father—”

“ Hush !” whispered John, “ he has *a son*, you know.”

But while we stood, and with a meaning, but rather grim smile, Abel Fletcher counted his bags, worth almost as much as bags of gold—we heard a hammering at the door below. The rioters were come.

Miserable rioters ! — A handful of weak, starved men—pelting us with stones and words. One pistol-shot might have routed them all—but my father was a man of peace. Small as their force seemed, there was something at once formidable and pitiful in the low howl that reached us at times.

“ Bring out the bags !—Us mun have bread !”
—“ Throw down thy corn, Abel Fletcher !”

“ Abel Fletcher *will* throw it down to ye, ye knaves,” said my father, leaning out of the upper window ; while a sound, half curses, half cheers of triumph, answered him from below.

“ That is well,” exclaimed John, eagerly.

“Thank you—thank you, Mr. Fletcher—I knew you would yield at last.”

“Didst thee, lad?” said my father, stopping short.

“Not because they forced you—not to save your life—but because it was right.”

“Help me with this bag,” was all the reply.

It was a great weight, but not too great for John’s young arm, nervous and strong. He hauled it up.

“Now, open the window—dash the panes through—it matters not. On to the window, I tell thee.”

“But if I do, the bag will fall into the river. You cannot—oh, no!—you cannot mean that.”

“Haul it up to the window, John Halifax.”

But John remained immovable.

“I must do it myself, then;” and, in the desperate effort he made, somehow the bag of grain fell, and fell on his lame foot. Tortured into frenzy with the pain—or else, I will still believe, my old father would not have done such a deed—his failing strength seemed doubled and trebled. In an instant more he had got the bag half through the window, and the next sound we heard was its heavy splash in the river below.

Flung into the river, the precious wheat, and in the very sight of the famished rioters! A howl of fury and despair arose. Some plunged into the water, ere the eddies left by the falling mass had ceased—but it was too late. A sharp substance in the river's bed had cut the bag, and we saw thrown up to the surface, and whirled down the Avon, thousands of dancing grains. A few of the men swam, or waded after them, clutching a handful here or there—but by the mill-pool the river ran swift, and the wheat had all soon disappeared, except what remained in the bag when it was drawn on shore. Over even that they fought like demons.

We could not look at them—John and I. He put his hand over his eyes, muttering the Name that—young man as he was—I had never yet heard irreverently and thoughtlessly on his lips. It was a sight that would move any one to cry for pity unto the Great Father of the human family.

Abel Fletcher sat on his remaining bags, in an exhaustion that I think was not all physical pain. The paroxysm of anger past, he, ever a just man, could not fail to be struck with what he had done. He seemed subdued, even to something like remorse.

John looked at him, and looked away. For a minute he listened in silence to the shouting outside, and then turned to my father.

“Sir, you must come now. Not a second to lose—they will fire the mill next.”

“Let them.”

“Let them?—and Phineas is here!”

My poor father! He rose at once.

We got him down stairs—he was very lame—his ruddy face all drawn and white with pain; but he did not speak one word of opposition, or utter a groan of complaint.

The flour-mill was built on piles, in the centre of the narrow river. It was only a few steps of bridge-work to either bank. The little door was on the Norton Bury side, and was hid from the opposite shore, where the rioters had now collected. In a minute we had crept forth, and dashed out of sight, in the narrow path which had been made from the mill to the tan-yard.

“Will you take my arm? we must get on fast.”

“Home?” said my father, in a strangely quiet tone, as John led him passively along.

“No, sir, not home; they are there before you. Your life’s not safe an hour—unless, indeed, you get soldiers to guard it.”

Abel Fletcher made a decisive negative gesture. The stern old Quaker held to his principles still.

“Then you must hide for a time—both of you. Come to my room. You will be secure there. Urge him, Phineas—for your sake and his own.”

But my poor broken-down father needed no urging. Grasping more tightly both John’s arm and mine, which for the first time in his life he leaned upon, he submitted to be led whither we chose. So, after this long interval of time, I once more stood in Sally Watkins’ small attic; where, ever since I first brought him there, John Halifax had lived.

Sally knew not of our entrance; she was out, watching the rioters. No one saw us but Jem, and Jem’s honour was safe as a rock. I knew that, in the smile with which he pulled off his cap to “Mr. Halifax.”

“Now,” said John, hastily smoothing his bed so that my father might lie down, and wrapping his cloak round me — “you must both be very still. You will likely have to spend the night here. Jem shall bring you a light and supper. You will make yourself easy, Abel Fletcher?”

“Ay.” It was strange to see how decidedly, yet respectfully, John spoke, and how quietly my father answered.

“And Phineas”—he put his arm round my shoulder in his old way—“you will take care of yourself. Are you any stronger than you were?”

I clasped his hand, without reply. My heart melted to hear that tender accent, so familiar once. All was happening for the best, if it only gave me back David.

“Now good bye—I must be off.”

“Whither?” said my father, rousing himself.

“To try and save the house and the tanyard—I fear we must give up the mill. No, don’t hold me, Phineas. I run no risk: everybody knows me. Besides, I am young. There! see after your father. I shall come back in good time.”

He grasped my hands warmly—then unloosed them; and I heard his step descending the staircase. The room seemed to darken when he went away.

The evening passed very slowly. My father, exhausted with pain, lay on the bed and dozed. I sat watching the sky over the housetops, which met in the old angles, with the same blue peeps between. I half forgot all the day’s events—it

seemed but two weeks, instead of two years ago, that John and I had sat in this attic-window, conning our Shakspeare for the first time.

Ere twilight, I examined John's room. It was a good deal changed; the furniture was improved; a score of ingenious little contrivances made the tiny attic into a cosy bed-chamber. One corner was full of shelves, laden with books, chiefly of a scientific and practical nature. John's taste did not lead him into the current literature of the day: Cowper, Akenside, and Peter Pindar were alike indifferent to him. I found among his books no poet but Shakspeare.

He evidently still practised his old mechanical arts. There was lying in the window a telescope—the cylinder made of pasteboard—into which the lenses were ingeniously fitted. A rough telescope-stand of common deal stood on the ledge of the roof, from which the field of view must have been satisfactory enough to the young astronomer. Other fragments of skilful handiwork, chiefly meant for machinery on a Lilliputian scale, were strewn about the floor; and on a chair, just as he had left it that morning, stood a loom, very small in size, but perfect in its neat workmanship, with a few threads already woven, making some fabric not so very unlike cloth.

I had gone over all these things, without noticing that my father was awake, and that his sharp eye had observed them likewise.

“The lad works hard,” said he, half to himself. “He has useful hands, and a clear head.” I smiled, but took no notice whatever.

Evening began to close in—less peacefully than usual—over Norton Bury; for whenever I ventured to open the window, we heard unusual and ominous sounds abroad in the town. I trembled inwardly. But John was prudent, as well as brave: besides, “everybody knew him.” Surely he was safe.

Faithfully, at supper-time, Jem entered. But he could tell us no news; he had kept watch all the time on the staircase, by desire of “Mr. Halifax”—so he informed me. My father asked no questions—not even about his mill. From his look, sometimes I fancied he yet beheld in fancy these starving men fighting over the precious food, destroyed so wilfully, nay wickedly. Heaven forgive me, his son, if I too harshly use the word; for I think, till the day of his death, that cruel sight never wholly vanished from the eyes of my poor father.

Jem seemed talkatively inclined. He ob-

served, that "master was looking sprack agin; and warn't this a tidy room, like?"

I praised it; and supposed his mother was better off now?

"Ay, she be. Mr. Halifax pays her a good rent; and she sees 'un made comfortable. Not that he wants much, being out pretty much all day."

"What is he busy about of nights?"

"Larning," said Jem, with an awed look. "He's terrible wise. But for all that, sometimes he'll teach Charley and me a bit out o' the Readamadeasy." (Reading - made - easy, I suppose, John's hopeful pupil meant.) "He's very kind to we, and to mother too. Her says, that her do, Mr. Halifax—"

"Send the fellow away, Phineas," muttered my father, turning his face to the wall.

I obeyed. But first I asked, in a whisper, if Jem had any idea when "Mr. Halifax" would be back?

"He said, may be not till morning. Them's bad folk about. He were going to stop all night, either at your house or at the tan-yard, for fear of a *blaze*."

The word made my father start; for in these

times, well we knew what poor folk meant by “a blaze.”

“My house—my tan-yard—I must get up this instant—help me. He ought to come back—that lad Halifax. There’s a score of my men at hand—Wilkes, and Johnson, and Jacob Baines—I say, Phineas—But thee know’st nothing.”

He tried to dress, and to drag on his heavy shoes; but fell back, sick with exhaustion and pain. I made him lie down again on the bed.

“Phineas, lad,” said he, brokenly, “thy old father is getting as helpless as thee.”

So we kept watch together, all the night through; sometimes dozing, sometimes waking up at some slight noise below, or at the flicker of the long-wicked candle, which fear converted into the glare of some incendiary fire—doubtless our own home. Now and then, I heard my father mutter something about “the lad being safe.” I said nothing. I only prayed.

Thus the night wore away.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER midnight—I know not how long, for I lost count of the hours by the Abbey chimes, and our light had gone out—after midnight I heard by my father's breathing, that he was asleep. I was thankful to see it for his sake, and also for another reason.

I could not sleep—all my faculties were preternaturally alive; my weak body and timid soul became strong and active, able to compass anything. For that one night, at least, I felt myself a man.

My father was a very sound sleeper. I knew nothing would disturb him till daylight; therefore my divided duty was at an end. I left him, and crept down stairs into Sally Watkins' kitchen. It was silent, only the faithful warder Jem dozed over the dull fire. I touched him on the shoulder—at which he collared me and nearly knocked me down.

“ Beg pardon, Mr. Phineas—hope I didn’t hurt ’ee, sir ?” cried he, all but whimpering ; for Jem, a big lad of fifteen, was the most tender-hearted fellow imaginable. “ I thought it were some of them folk that Mr. Halifax ha’ gone among.”

“ Where is Mr. Halifax ?”

“ Doan’t know, sir—wish I did ! wouldn’t be long a finding out, though—on’y he says : ‘ Jem, you stop ’ere wi they,’ ” (pointing his thumb up the staircase). “ So, Master Phineas, I stop.”

And Jem settled himself, with a doggedly obedient but most dissatisfied air, down by the fire-place. It was evident nothing would move him thence : so he was as safe a guard over my poor old father’s slumber as the mastiff in the tanyard, who was as brave as a lion and as docile as a child. My last lingering hesitation ended.

“ Jem, lend me your coat and hat—I’m going out into the town.”

Jem was so astonished, that he stood with open mouth while I took the said garments from him, and unbolted the door. At last it seemed to occur to him that he ought to intercept me.

“ But, sir, Mr. Halifax said—”

“ I am going to look for Mr. Halifax.”

And I escaped outside. Anything beyond

his literal duty did not strike the faithful Jem. He stood on the door-sill, and gazed after me with a hopeless expression.

“ I spose you mun have your way, sir ; but Mr. Halifax said, ‘ Jem, you stop y’ere,’ —and y’ere I stop.”

He went in, and I heard him bolting the door, with a sullen determination, as if he would have kept guard behind it—waiting for John—until doomsday.

I stole along the dark alley into the street. It was very silent—I need not have borrowed Jem’s exterior, in order to creep through a throng of maddened rioters. There was no sign of any such, except that under one of the three oil-lamps that lit the night-darkness of Norton Bury, lay a few smouldering hanks of hemp, well resined. They, then, had thought of that dreadful engine of destruction—fire. Had my terrors been true? Our house—and perhaps John within it!

On I ran, speeded by a dull murmur, which I fancied I heard; but still there was no one in the street—no one except the Abbey-watchman lounging in his box. I roused him, and asked if all was safe?—where were the rioters?

“ What rioters?”

“ At Abel Fletcher’s mill ; they may be at his house now—”

“ Ay, I think they be.”

“ And will not one man in the town help him ; no constables—no law ?”

“ Oh ! he’s a Quaker ; the law don’t help Quakers.”

That was the truth—the hard, grinding truth, in those days. Liberty, justice, were idle names to Nonconformists of every kind ; and all they knew of the glorious constitution of English law, was when its iron hand was turned against them.

I had forgotten this ; bitterly I remembered it now. So, wasting no more words, I flew along the church-yard, until I saw, shining against the boles of the chestnut-trees, a red light. It was one of the hempen torches. Now, at last, I had got in the midst of that small body of men “ the rioters.”

A mere handful they were—not above two score—apparently the relics of the band which had attacked the mill, joined with a few plough-lads from the country round. But they were desperate ; they had come up the Coltham road so quietly, that except this faint murmur, neither I nor any one in the town could have told they

were near. Wherever they had been ransacking, as yet they had not attacked my father's house ; it stood up on the other side the road—barred, black, silent.

I heard a muttering : “Th' old man bean't there,”—“Nobody knows where he be.” No, thank God !

“Be us all y'ere ?” said the man with the torch, holding it up so as to see round him. It was well then that I appeared as Jem Watkins. But no one noticed me, except one man, who skulked behind a tree, and of whom I was rather afraid, as he was apparently intent on watching.

“Ready, lads? Now for the rosin! Blaze 'un out.”

But in the eager scuffle, the torch, the only one alight, was knocked down and trodden out. A volley of oaths arose, though whose fault it was no one seemed to know ; but I missed my man from behind the tree—nor found him till after the angry throng had rushed on to the nearest lamp. One of them was left behind, standing close to our own railings. He looked round to see if none were by, and then sprang over the gate. Dark as it was, I thought I recognized him.

“ John ?”

“ Phineas ?” He was beside me in a bound.
“ How could you do—”

“ I could do anything to-night. But you are safe, no one has harmed you. Oh, thank God, you are not hurt !”

And I clung to his arm—my friend, whom I had missed so long, so sorely.

He held me tight—his heart felt as mine, only most silently ; and silent hearts are strong.

“ Now, Phineas, we have not a minute’s time. I must have you safe—we must get into the house.”

“ Who is there ?”

“ Jael ; she is as good as a staff of constables ; she has braved them once to-night, but they’re back again, or will be directly.”

“ And the mill ?”

“ Safe, as yet ; I have had three of the tanyard men there since yesterday morning, though your father did not know. I have been going to and fro all night, between there and here, waiting till the rioters should come back from the Severn mills. Hist ! there they are—I say, Jael !”

He tapped at the window. In a few seconds Jael had unbarred the door, let us in, and closed

it again securely, mounting guard behind it with something that looked very like my father's pistols, though I would not discredit her among our peaceful Society, by positively stating the fact.

"Bravo!" said John, when we stood all together in the barricaded house, and heard the threatening murmur of voices and feet outside. "Bravo, Jael! The wife of Heber the Kenite was no braver woman than you."

She looked gratified, and followed John obediently from room to room.

"I have done all as thee bade me—thee art a sensible lad, John Halifax. We are secure, I think."

Secure? bolts and bars secure against fire? For that was threatening us now.

"They can't mean it—surely they can't mean it," repeated John, as the cry of "Burn 'un out!" rose louder and louder.

But they did mean it. From the attic window we watched them light torch after torch, sometimes throwing one at the house,—but it fell harmless against the staunch oaken door, and blazed itself out on our stone steps. All it did was to show, more plainly than even daylight

had shown, the gaunt, ragged forms and pinched faces, furious with famine.

John, as well as I, recoiled at that miserable sight.

“I’ll speak to them,” he said. “Unbar the window, Jael;” and before I could hinder, he was leaning right out. “Holloa, there!”

At his loud and commanding voice a wave of up-turned faces surged forward, expectant.

“My men, do you know what you are about? To burn down a gentleman’s house is—hanging.”

There was a hush, and then a shout of derision.

“Not a Quaker’s! nobody’ll get hanged for burning out a Quaker!”

“That be true enough,” muttered Jael, between her teeth. “We must e’en fight, as Mordecai’s people fought, hand to hand, until they slew their enemies.”

“Fight!” repeated John, half to himself, as he stood at the now-closed window, against which more than one blazing torch began to rattle. “Fight—with these?—What are you doing, Jael?”

For she had taken down a large Book—the last Book in the house she would have taken

under less critical circumstances, and with it was trying to stop up a broken pane.

“No, my good Jael, not this;” and he carefully put back the volume in its place; that volume, in which he might have read, as day after day, and year after year, we Christians generally do read, such plain words as these—*“Love your enemies;” “bless them that curse you;” “pray for them that despitefully use you and persecute you.”*

A minute or two John stood by the bookshelves, thinking. Then he touched me on the shoulder.

“Phineas, I’m going to try a new plan—at least, one so old, that it’s almost new. Whether it succeeds or no, you’ll bear me witness to your father that I did it for the best, and did it because I thought it right. Now for it.”

To my horror, he threw up the window wide, and leant out.

“My men, I want to speak to you.”

He might as well have spoken to the roaring sea. The only answer was a shower of missiles, which missed their aim. The rioters were too far off—our spiked iron railings, eight feet high or more, being a barrier, which none had

yet ventured to climb. But at length one random stone hit John on the chest.

I pulled him in, but he declared he was not hurt. Terrified, I implored him not to risk his life.

“Life is not always the first thing to be thought of,” said he, gently. “Don’t be afraid—I shall come to no harm. But I *must* do what I think right, if it is to be done.”

While he spoke, I could hardly hear him for the bellowings outside. More savage still grew the cry—

“Burn ’em out! burn ’em out! they be only Quakers!”

“There’s not a minute to lose—stop—let me think—Jael, is that a pistol?”

“Loaded,” she said, handing it over to him with a kind of stern delight. Certainly, Jael was not born to be a Friend.

John ran down stairs, and before I guessed his purpose, had unbolted the hall door, and stood on the top of the flight of steps, in full view of the mob.

There was no bringing him back, so of course I followed. A pillar sheltered me—I do not think he saw me, though I stood close behind him.

So sudden had been his act, that even the rioters did not seem to have noticed, or clearly understood it, till the next lighted torch showed them the young man standing there, with his back to the door—*outside* the door.

The sight fairly confounded them. Even I felt that for the moment he was safe. They were awed—nay, paralyzed, by his daring.

But the storm raged too fiercely to be lulled, except for one brief minute. A confusion of voices burst out afresh—

“Who be thee?”—“It’s one o’ the Quakers.”—
—“No, he bean’t.”—“Burn ’un, anyhow.”—
“Touch ’un, if ye dare.”

There was evidently a division rising. One big man, who had made himself very prominent all along, seemed trying to calm the tumult.

John stood his ground. Once a torch was flung at him—he stooped and picked it up. I thought he was going to hurl it back again, but he did not; he only threw it down, and stamped it out safely with his foot. This simple action had a wonderful effect on the crowd.

The big fellow advanced to the gate, and called John by his name.

“Is that you, Jacob Baines? I am sorry to see you here.”

“Be ye, sir?”

“What do you want?”

“Nought wi’ thee. We wants Abel Fletcher. Where is ’un?”

“I shall certainly not tell you.”

As John said this, again the noise arose, and again Jacob Baines seemed to have power to quiet the rest.

John Halifax never stirred. Evidently he was pretty well known. I caught many a stray sentence, such as “Don’t hurt the lad.”—“He were kind to my lad, he were.”—“He be a real gentleman.”—“No, he comed here as poor as us,” and the like. At length, one voice, sharp and shrill, was heard above the rest.

“I zay, young man, didst ever know what it was to be pretty nigh vamished?”

“Ay, many a time.”

The answer, so brief, so unexpected, struck a great hush into the throng. Then the same voice cried—

“Speak up, man! we won’t hurt ’ee! You be one o’ we!”

“No, I am not one of you. I’d be ashamed

to come in the night and burn my master's house down."

I expected an outbreak, but none came. They listened, as it were by compulsion, to the clear, manly voice that had not in it one shade of fear.

"What do you do it for?" John continued. "All because he would not sell you, or give you, his wheat. Even so—it was *his* wheat, not yours. May not a man do what he likes with his own?"

That argument seemed to strike home. There is always a lurking sense of rude justice in a mob—at least, a British mob.

"Don't you see how foolish you were?—You tried threats, too. Now you all know Mr. Fletcher; you are his men—some of you. He is not a man to be threatened."

This seemed to be taken rather angrily; but John went on speaking, as if he did not observe the fact.

"Nor am I one to be threatened, neither. Look here—the first one of you who attempted to break into Mr. Fletcher's house, I should most certainly have shot. But I'd rather not shoot you, poor, starving fellows! I know what

it is to be hungry. I'm sorry for you—sorry from the bottom of my heart."

There was no mistaking that compassionate accent, nor the murmur which followed it.

"But what must us do, Mr. Halifax?" cried Jacob Baines: "us be starved a' most. What's the good o' talking to we?"

John's countenance relaxed. I saw him lift his head and shake his hair back, with that pleased gesture I remembered so well of old. He went down to the locked gate.

"Suppose I gave you something to eat, would you listen to me afterwards?"

There rose up a frenzied shout of assent. Poor wretches! they were fighting for no principle, true or false, only for bare life. They would have bartered their very souls for a mouthful of bread.

"You must promise to be peaceable," said John, again, very resolutely, as soon as he could obtain a hearing. "You are Norton Bury folk, I know you. I could get every one of you hanged, even though Abel Fletcher is a Quaker. Mind, you'll be peaceable?"

"Ay—ay! Some'at to eat; give us some'at to eat."

John Halifax called out to Jael; bade her bring all the food of every kind that there was in the house, and give it to him out of the parlour-window. She obeyed—I marvel now to think of it—but she implicitly obeyed. Only I heard her fix the bar to the closed front-door, and go back, with a strange, sharp sob, to her station at the hall-window.

“Now, my lads, come in!” and he unlocked the gate.

They came thronging up the steps, not more than two score, I imagined, in spite of the noise they had made. But two score of such famished, desperate men, God grant I may never again see!

John divided the food as well as he could among them; they fell to it like wild beasts. Meat, cooked or raw, loaves, vegetables, meal; all came alike, and were clutched, gnawed, and scrambled for, in the fierce selfishness of hunger. Afterwards, there was a call for drink.

“Water, Jael; bring them water.”

“Beer!” shouted some.

“Water,” repeated John. “Nothing but water. I’ll have no drunkards rioting at my master’s door.”

And either by chance or design, he let them

hear the click of his pistol. But it was hardly needed. They were all cowed by a mightier weapon still;—the best weapon a man can use—his own firm, indomitable will.

At length all the food we had in the house was consumed. John told them so; and they believed him. Little enough, indeed, was sufficient for some of them; wasted with long famine, they turned sick and faint, and dropped down even with bread in their mouths, unable to swallow it. Others gorged themselves to the full, and then lay along the steps, supine as satisfied brutes. Only a few sat and ate like rational human beings; and there was but one, the little, shrill-voiced man, who asked me if he might “tak a bit o’ bread to the old wench at home?”

John, hearing, turned, and for the first time noticed me.

“Phineas, it was very wrong of you; but there is no danger now.”

No, there was none,—not even for Abel Fletcher’s son. I stood safe by John’s side, very happy, very proud.

“Well, my men,” he said, looking round with a smile, “have you had enough to eat?”

“Oh, ay!” they all cried.

And one man added—“Thank the Lord!”

“That’s right, Jacob Baines. And another time, *trust* the Lord. You wouldn’t then have been abroad this summer morning,”—and he pointed to the dawn just reddening in the sky—“this quiet, blessed summer-morning, burning and rioting, bringing yourselves to the gallows, and your children to starvation.”

“They be nigh that a’ready,” said Jacob, sullenly. “Us men ha’ gotten a meal, thankee for it; but what’ll become o’ the little ’uns at home? I say, Mr. Halifax,” and he seemed waxing desperate again, “we must get food somehow.”

John turned away, his countenance very sad. Another of the men plucked at him from behind.

“Sir, when thee was a poor lad, I lent thee a rug to sleep on; I doan’t grudge’ee getting on; you was born for a gentleman, sure-ly. But Master Fletcher be a hard man.”

“And a just one,” persisted John. “You that work for him, did he ever stint you of a halfpenny? If you had come to him and said, ‘Master, times are hard, we can’t live upon our wages,’ he might—I don’t say that he would—

but he *might* even have given you the food you tried to steal."

"D'ye think he'd give it us now?" And Jacob Baines, the big, gaunt, savage fellow, who had been the ringleader—the same, too, who had spoken of his "little 'uns"—came and looked steadily in John's face.

"I knew thee as a lad; thee'rt a young man now, as will be a father some o' these days. Oh! Mr. Halifax, may'ee ne'er want a meal o' good meat for the missus and the babbies at home, if ee'll get a bit o' bread for our'n this day."

"My man, I'll try."

He called me aside, explained to me, and asked my advice and consent, as Abel Fletcher's son, to a plan that had come into his mind. It was to write orders, which each man presenting at our mill, should receive a certain amount of flour.

"Do you think your father would agree?"

"I think he would."

"Yes," John added, pondering—"I am sure he would. And besides, if he does not give some, he may lose all. But he would not do it for fear of that. No, he is a just man—I am not afraid. Give me some paper, Jael."

He sat down as composedly as if he had been

alone in the counting-house, and wrote. I looked over his shoulder, admiring his clear, firm handwriting; the precision, concentrativeness, and quickness, with which he first seemed to arrange, and then execute his ideas. He possessed to the full, that "business" faculty, so frequently despised, but which, out of very ordinary material, often makes a clever man; and without which the cleverest man alive can never be altogether a great man.

When about to sign the orders, John suddenly stopped. "No; I had better not."

"Why so?"

"I have no right; your father might think it presumption."

"Presumption? after to-night!"

"Oh, that's nothing! Take the pen. It is your part to sign them, Phineas."

I obeyed.

"Isn't this better than hanging?" said John, to the men, when he had distributed the little bits of paper—precious as pound-notes—and made them all fully understand the same. "Why, there isn't another gentleman in Norton Bury, who, if you had come to burn *his* house down, would not have had the constables or the soldiers, have shot down one-half of you like

mad dogs, and sent the other half to the county gaol. Now, for all your misdoings, we let you go quietly home, well fed, and with food for children, too. *Why*, think you?"

"I doan't know," said Jacob Baines, humbly.

"I'll tell you. Because Abel Fletcher is a Quaker, and a Christian."

"Hurrah for Abel Fletcher! hurrah for the Quakers!" shouted they, waking up the echoes down Norton Bury streets; which, of a surety, had never echoed to *that* shout before. And so the riot was over.

John Halifax closed the hall-door and came in—unsteadily—all but staggering. Jael placed a chair for him—worthy soul! she was wiping her old eyes. He sat down, shivering, speechless. I put my hand on his shoulder; he took it, and pressed it hard.

"Oh! Phineas, lad, I'm glad; glad it's safe over."

"Yes, thank God!"

"Ay, indeed; thank God!"

He covered his eyes for a minute or two, and then rose up pale, but quite himself again.

"Now let us go and fetch your father home."

We found him on John's bed, still asleep. But as we entered he woke. The day-light

shone on his face—it looked ten years older since yesterday. He stared, bewildered and angry, at John Halifax.

“Eh, young man—oh! I remember. Where is my son—where’s my Phineas?”

I fell on his neck as if I had been a child. And almost as if it had been a child’s feeble head, mechanically he smoothed and patted mine.

“Thee art not hurt? Nor any one?”

“No,” John answered; “nor is either the house or the tan-yard injured.”

He looked amazed. “How has that been?”

“Phineas will tell you. Or, stay—better wait till you are at home.”

But my father insisted on hearing. I told the whole, without any comments on John’s behaviour; he would not have liked it, and, besides, the facts spoke for themselves. I told the simple, plain story—nothing more.

Abel Fletcher listened at first in silence. As I proceeded, he felt about for his hat, put it on, and drew its broad brim close down over his eyes. Not even when I told him of the flour we had promised in his name, the giving of which would, as we had calculated, cost him con-

siderable loss, did he utter a word or move a muscle.

John at length asked him if he were satisfied ?
“ Quite satisfied.”

But, having said this, he sat so long, his hands locked together on his knees, and his hat drawn down, hiding all the face except the rigid mouth and chin—sat so long, so motionless, that we became uneasy.

John spoke to him, gently, almost as a son would have spoken.

“ Are you very lame still ? Could I help you to walk home ?”

My father looked up, and slowly held out his hand.

“ Thee hast been a good lad, and a kind lad to us ; I thank thee.”

There was no answer, none. But all the words in the world could not match that happy silence.

By degrees, we got my father home. It was just such another summer morning as the one, two years back, when we two had stood, exhausted and trembling, before that sternly-bolted door. We both thought of that day : I knew not if my father did also.

He entered, leaning heavily on John. He sat

down in the very seat, in the very room, where he had so harshly judged us—judged him.

Something, perhaps, of that bitterness rankled in the young man's spirit now, for he stopped on the threshold.

“Come in,” said my father, looking up.

“If I am welcome; not otherwise.”

“Thee art welcome.”

He came in—I drew him in—and sat down with us. But his manner was irresolute, his fingers closed and unclosed nervously. My father, too, sat leaning his head on his two hands, not unmoved. I stole up to him, and thanked him softly for the welcome he had given.

“There is nothing to thank me for,” said he, with something of his old hardness. “What I once did, was only justice—or I then believed so. What I have done, and am about to do, is still mere justice. John, how old art thee now?”

“Twenty.”

“Then, for one year from this time, I will take thee as my 'prentice, though thee knowest already nearly as much of the business as I do. At twenty-one thee wilt be able to set up for thyself, or I may take thee into partnership—we'll see. But”—and he looked at me, then sternly, nay, fiercely, into John's stedfast eyes—

“remember, thee hast in some measure taken that lad’s place. May God deal with thee as thou dealest with my son Phineas—my only son !”

“Amen !” was the solemn answer.

And God, who sees us both now—ay, *now !* and perhaps not so far apart as some may deem—He knows whether or no John Halifax kept that vow.

CHAPTER IX.

“WELL done, Phineas—to walk round the garden without once resting!—now I call that grand, after an individual has been ill a month. However, you must calm your superabundant energies, and be quiet.”

I was not unwilling, for I still felt very weak. But sickness did not now take that heavy, overpowering grip of me, mind and body, that it once used to do. It never did when John was by. He gave me strength, mentally and physically. He was life and health to me, with his brave cheerfulness—his way of turning all minor troubles into pleasantries, till they seemed to break and vanish away, sparkling, like the foam on the top of the wave. Yet, all the while, one knew well that he could meet any great evil as gallantly as a good ship meets a heavy sea—breasting it, plunging through it, or riding over it, as only a good ship can.

When I recovered—just a month after the bread-riot, and that month was a great triumph to John's kind care—I felt that if I always had him beside me, I should never be ill any more: I said as much, in a laughing sort of way.

“Very well; I shall keep you to that bargain. Now, sit down; listen to the newspaper, and improve your mind as to what the world is doing. It ought to be doing something, with the new century it began this year. Did it not seem very odd at first to have to write ‘1800?’”

“John, what a capital hand you write now!”

“Do I? That's somebody's credit. Do you remember my first lesson on the top of the Mythe?”

“I wonder what has become of those two gentlemen?”

“Oh! did you never hear? Young Mr. Brithwood is the 'squire now. He married, last month, Lady Somebody Something, a fine lady from abroad.”

“And Mr. March—what of him?”

“I haven't the least idea. Come now, shall I read the paper?”

He read well, and I liked to listen to him. It was, I remember, something about “the spacious new quadrangles, to be called Russell and

Tavistock Squares, with elegantly laid-out nursery-grounds adjoining."

"It must be a fine place, London."

"Ay; I should like to see it. Your father says, perhaps he shall have to send me, this winter, on business—won't that be fine? If only you would go too."

I shook my head. I had the strongest disinclination to stir from my quiet home, which now held within it, or about it, all I wished for and all I loved. It seemed as if any change must be to something worse.

"Nevertheless, you must have a change. Doctor Jessop insists upon it. Here have I been beating up and down the country for a week past—'Adventures in Search of a Country Residence'—and, do you know, I think I've found one at last. Shouldn't you like to hear about it?"

I assented, to please him.

"Such a nice, nice place, on the slope of Enderley Hill. A cottage—Rose Cottage—for it's all in a bush of cluster-roses, up to the very roof."

"Where is Enderley?"

"Did you never hear of Enderley-Flat, the highest table-land in England? Such a fresh

free, breezy spot—how the wind sweeps over it! I can feel it in my face still.”

And even the description was refreshing, this heavy, sultry day, with not a breath of air moving across the level valley in which Norton Bury lay.

“Shouldn’t you like to live on a hill-side, to be at the top of everything, overlooking everything? Well, that’s Enderley: the village lies just under the brow of the Flat.”

“Is there a village?”

“A dozen cottages or so, at each door of which half-a-dozen white little heads, and a dozen round eyes appeared staring at me. But oh, the blessed quiet and solitude of the place! No fights in filthy alleys! no tan-yards—I mean”—he added, correcting himself—“that it’s a thorough country spot; and I like the country better than the town.”

“Do you, still? Would you really like to take to the ‘shepherd’s life and state,’ upon which my namesake here is so eloquent? Let us see what he says.”

And from the handful of books that usually lay strewn about wherever we two sat, I took up one he had lately got, with no small pains I was sure, and had had bound in its own proper

colour, and presented it to me—"The Purple Island," and "Sicelides," of Phineas Fletcher. People seldom read this wise, tender, and sweet-voiced old fellow now; so I will even copy the verses I found for John to read.

"Here is the place. *Thyrsis* is just ending his 'broken lay.'

"'Lest that the stealing night his later song might stay—'"

"Stop a minute," interrupted John. "Apropos of 'stealing night,' the sun is already down below the yew-hedge. Are you cold?"

"Not a bit of it."

"Then we'll begin:—

"'Thrice, oh, thrice happy, shepherd's life and state:

When courts are happiness, unhappy pawns!"

"That's not clear," said John, laying down the book. "Now I do like to understand poetry. A poet ought to see things more widely, and express them more vividly, than ordinary folk."

"Don't you perceive—he means the pawns on the chess-board—the common people."

"Phineas, don't say the common people—I'm a common person myself. But, to continue:—

“ ‘ His cottage low, and safely humble gate,
Shuts out proud Fortune, with her scorns and fawns :
No feared treason breaks his quiet sleep.
Singing all day, his flocks he learns to keep,
Himself as innocent as are his quiet sheep.’

(“ Not many sheep at Enderley, I fancy ;
the flat chiefly abounds in donkeys. Well—)

“ ‘ No Serian worms he knows, that with their
thread
Drew out their silken lives—nor silken pride—’

“ Which reminds me that—”

“ David, how can you make me laugh at my
reverend ancestor in this way? I’m ashamed of
you.”

“ Only let me tell you this one fact—very inte-
resting, you’ll allow—that I saw a silken gown
hanging up in the kitchen at Rose Cottage.
Now, though Mrs. Tod is a decent, comely
woman, I don’t think it belonged to her.”

“ She may have lodgers.”

“ I think she said she had—an old gentle-
man—but *he* wouldn’t wear a silk gown.”

“ His wife might. Now, do go on reading.”

“ Certainly ; I only wished to draw a parallel
between Thyrsis and ourselves, in our future
summer life at Enderley. So the old gentleman’s

wife may appropriate the 'silken pride,' while we emulate the shepherd.

“ ‘ His lambs' warm fleece well fits his little need—’

“ I wear a tolerably good coat, now, don't I, Phineas ?”

“ You are incorrigible.”

Yet, through all his fun, I detected a certain under-tone of seriousness, observable in him ever since my father's declaration of his intentions concerning him, had, so to speak, settled John's future career. He seemed aware of some crisis in his life, arrived or impending, which disturbed the generally even balance of his temperament.

“ Nay, I'll be serious ;” and passing over the unfinished verse, with another or two following, he began afresh, in a new place, and in an altogether changed tone.

“ ‘ His certain life, that never can deceive him,
Is full of thousand sweets and rich content ;

The smooth-leaved beeches in the field receive
him ;

With coolest shades till noon-tide's rage is spent ;

His life is neither tost on boisterous seas

Of troublous world, nor lost in slothful ease.

Pleased and full blest he lives, when he his God can
please.

“ ‘ His bed of wool yields safe and quiet sleeps,
While by his side his faithful spouse hath place ;
His little son into his bosom creeps,
The lively image of his father’s face :
Never his humble house or state torment him,
Less he could like, if less his God had sent him ;
And when he dies, green turfs with grassy tomb content him.’ ”

John ceased. He was a good reader—but I had never heard him read like this before. Ending, one missed it like the breaking-off of music, or like the inner voice of one’s own heart talking when nobody is by.

“ David,” I said, after a pause, “ what are you thinking about ? ”

He started, with his old, quick, vivid blush—
“ Oh, nothing—No, that’s not quite true. I was thinking that, so far as happiness goes, this ‘ shepherd’s ’ is my ideal of a happy life—ay, down to the ‘ grassy tomb.’ ”

“ Your fancy leaps at once to the grassy tomb ; but the shepherd enjoyed a few intermediate stages of felicity before that.”

“ I was thinking of those likewise.”

“ Then, you do intend some day to have a ‘ faithful spouse, and a ‘ little son ? ’ ”

“ I hope so—God willing.”

It may seem strange, but this was the first time our conversation had ever wandered in a similar direction. Though he was twenty, and I twenty-two—to us both—and I thank Heaven, that we both could look up in the face of Heaven and say so!—to us both, the follies and wickednesses of youth were, if not equally unknown, equally and alike hateful. Many may doubt, or smile at the fact; but I state it now, in my old age, with honour and pride, that we two young men that day trembled on the subject of love as shyly, as reverently, as delicately, as any two young maidens of innocent sixteen.

After John's serious "God willing," there was a good long silence. Afterwards, I said—

"Then you purpose to marry?"

"Certainly! as soon as I can."

"Have you ever"—and while speaking, I watched him narrowly, for a sudden possibility flashed across my mind—"Have you ever seen any one whom you would like for your wife?"

"No."

I was satisfied. John's single "No," was as conclusive as a score of asseverations.

We said no more; but after one of those pauses of conversation which were habitual to us—John used to say, that the true test of friend-

ship was to be able to sit or walk together for a whole hour, in perfect silence, without wearying of one another's company—we again began talking about Enderley.

I soon found, that in this plan, my part was simply acquiescence ; my father and John had already arranged it all. I was to be in charge of the latter ; nothing could induce Abel Fletcher to leave, even for a day, his house, his garden, and his tan-yard. We two young men were to set up for a month or two our bachelor establishment at Mrs. Tod's : John riding thrice a week over to Norton Bury to bring news of me, and to fulfil his duties at the tan-yard. One could see plain enough—and very grateful to me was the sight—that whether or no Abel Fletcher acknowledged it, his right hand in all his business affairs was the lad John Halifax.

On a lovely August day, we started for Enderley. It was about eight miles off, on a hilly, cross-country road. We lumbered slowly along in our post-chaise ; I leaning back, enjoying the fresh air, the changing views, and chiefly to see how intensely John enjoyed them too.

He looked extremely well to-day—handsome, I was about to write ; but John was never, even in his youth, “handsome.” Nay, I have heard

people call him "plain;" but that was not true. His face had that charm, perhaps the greatest, certainly the most lasting, either in women or men—of infinite variety. You were always finding out something—an expression strange as tender, or the track of a swift, brilliant thought, or an indication of feeling different from, perhaps deeper than, anything which had appeared before. When you believed you had learnt it line by line, it would startle you by a phase quite new, and beautiful as new. For it was not one of your impassive faces, whose owners count it pride to harden into a mass of stone those lineaments which nature made as the flesh and blood representation of the man's soul. True, it had its reticences, its sacred disguises, its noble powers of silence and self-control. It was a fair-written, open book; only, to read it clearly, you must come from its own country, and understand the same language.

For the rest, John was decidedly like the "David" whose name I still gave him now and then—"a goodly person;" tall, well-built, and strong. "The glory of a young man is his strength;" and so I used often to think, when I looked at him. He always dressed with extreme simplicity; generally in grey—he was fond of grey; and in something of our Quaker

fashion. On this day, I remember, I noticed an especial carefulness of attire, at his age neither unnatural nor unbecoming. His well-fitting coat and long-flapped vest, garnished with the snowiest of lawn frills and ruffles; his knee-breeches, black silk hose, and shoes adorned with the largest and brightest of steel buckles, made up a costume, which, strange as it would now appear, still is, to my mind, the most suitable and graceful that a young man can wear. I never see any young men now who come at all near the picture which still remains in my mind's eye of John Halifax as he looked that day.

Once, with the natural sensitiveness of youth, especially of youth that has struggled up through so many opposing circumstances as his had done, he noticed my glance.

"Anything amiss about me, Phineas? You see I am not much used to holidays and holiday clothes."

"I have nothing to say against either you or your clothes," replied I, smiling.

"That's all right; I beg to state, it is entirely in honour of you and of Enderley that I have slipped off my tan-yard husk, and put on the gentleman."

“ You couldn’t do that, John. You couldn’t put on what you were born with.”

He laughed—but I think he was pleased.

We had now come into a hilly region. John leaped out and gained the top of the steep road long before the post-chaise did. I watched him standing, balancing in his hands the riding-whip which had replaced in his favour the everlasting rose-switch, or willow-wand, of his boyhood. His figure was outlined sharply against the sky, his head thrown backward a little, as he gazed, evidently with the keenest zest, on the breezy flat before him. His hair—a little darker than it used to be, but of the true Saxon colour still, and curly as ever—was blown about by the wind, under his broad hat. His whole appearance was full of life, health, energy, and enjoyment.

I thought, any father might have been proud of such a son, any sister of such a brother, any young girl of such a lover. Ay, that last tie, the only one of the three that was possible to him—I wondered how long it would be before times changed, and I ceased to be the only one who was proud of him.

We drove on a little further, and came to the chief landmark of the high moorland—a quaint hostelry, called the “ Bear.” Bruin swung aloft

pole in hand, brown and fierce, on an old-fashioned sign, as he and his progenitors had probably swung for two centuries or more.

“Is this Enderley?” I asked.

“Not quite, but near it. You never saw the sea? Well, from this point I can shew you something very like it. Do you see that gleaming bit in the landscape far away? That’s water—that’s our very own Severn, swelled to an estuary. But you must imagine the estuary—you can only get that tiny peep of water, glittering like a great diamond that some young Titaness has flung out of her necklace, down among the hills.”

“David, you are actually growing poetical.”

“Am I? Well, I do feel rather strange to-day—crazy like; a high wind always sends me half crazy with delight. Did you ever feel such a breeze? And there’s something so gloriously free in this high level common—as flat as if my Titaness had found a little Mont Blanc, and amused herself with patting it down like a dough-cake.”

“A very culinary goddess.”

“Yes! but a goddess after all. And her dough-cake, her mushroom, her flattened Mont Blanc, is very fine. What a broad green sweep—

nothing but sky and common, common and sky. This is Enderley Flat. We shall come to its edge soon, where it drops abruptly into such a pretty valley. There, look down—that's the church. We're on a level with the top of its tower. Take care, my lad,"—to the post-boy, who was crossing with difficulty the literally "pathless waste"—"Don't lurch us into the quarry-pits, or topple us at once down the slope, where we shall roll over and over—*facilis descensus Averni*,—and lodge in Mrs. Tod's garden hedge."

"Mrs. Tod would feel flattered, if she knew Latin. You don't look upon our future habitation as a sort of Avernus?"

John laughed merrily. "No, as I told you before, I like Enderley Hill. I can't tell why, but I like it. It seems as if I had known the place before. I feel as if we were going to have great happiness here."

And as he spoke, his unwonted buoyancy softened into a quietness of manner, more befitting that word "happiness."

Strange word! hardly in my vocabulary. Yet, when he uttered it, I seemed to understand it and to be content.

We wound a little way down the slope, and

came in front of Rose Cottage. It was well named. I never in my life had seen such a bush of bloom. They hung in clusters—those roses—a dozen in a group; pressing their pinky cheeks together in a mass of family fragrance, pushing in at the parlour window, climbing up even to the very attic. There was a yellow jasmine over the porch at one front door, and a woodbine at the other; the cottage had two entrances, each distinct. But the general impression it gave, both as to sight and scent, was of roses—nothing but roses.

‘How are you, Mrs. Tod?’ as a comely, middle-aged body appeared at the right hand doorway, dressed sprucely in one of those things Jael called a “coat and jacket,” likewise a red calamanco petticoat tucked up at the pocket-holes.

“I be pretty fair, sir—be you the same? The children ha’ not forgotten you—you see, Mr. Halifax.”

“So much the better!” and he patted two or three little white heads, and tossed the youngest high up in the air. It looked very strange to see John with a child in his arms.

“Don’t ’ee make more noise than ’ee can help, my lad,” the good woman said to our post-

boy, "because, sir, the sick gentleman bean't so well again to-day."

"I am sorry for it. We would not have driven up to the door, had we known. Which is his room?"

Mrs. Tod pointed to a window—not on our side of the house, but the other. A hand was just closing the casement and pulling down the blind; a hand which, in the momentary glimpse we had of it, seemed less like a man's than a woman's.

When we were settled in the parlour, John noticed this fact.

"It was the wife, most likely. Poor thing! how hard to be shut up in-doors on such a summer evening as this!"

It did seem a sad sight—that closed window, outside which was the fresh, balmy air, the sunset and the roses.

"And how do you like Enderley?" asked John, when, tea being over, I lay and rested, where he sat leaning his elbow on the window-sill, and his cheek against a bunch of those ever-intruding, ever-inquisitive roses.

"It is very, very pretty, and so comfortable—almost like home."

"I feel as if it were home," John said, half

to himself. "Do you know, I can hardly believe that I have only seen this place once before; it is so familiar. I seem to know quite well that slope of common before the door, with its black dots of furze-bushes. And that wood below; what a clear line its top makes against the yellow sky! There, that high ground to the right; it's all dusky now, but it makes such a nice view by daylight. And between it and Enderley is the prettiest valley, where the road slopes down just under those chestnut-trees."

"How well you seem to know the place already."

"As I tell you, I like it. I hardly ever felt so content before. We will have a happy time, Phineas."

"Oh, yes!" How—even if I had felt differently—could I say anything but "yes" to him then?

I lay until it grew quite dark, and I could only see a dim shape sitting at the window, instead of John's known face; then I bade him good-night, and retired. Directly afterwards, I heard him, as I knew he would, dash out of the house, and away up towards the Flat. In the deep quiet of this lonely spot I could distin-

guish, for several minutes, the diminishing sound of his footsteps along the loose, stony road; and the notes, clear and shrill, of his whistling. I think it was "Sally in our Alley," or some such pleasant old tune. At last it faded far off, and I fell into sleep and dreams.

CHAPTER X.

“THAT Mrs. Tod is an extraordinary woman. I repeat it; a most extraordinary woman.”

And leaning his elbows on the table, from which the said extraordinary woman had just removed breakfast, John looked over to me with his own merry, brown eyes.

“Wherefore, David?”

“She has a house full of children, yet manages to keep it quiet—and her own temper likewise. Astonishing patience! However people attain it who have to do with brats, I can’t imagine.”

“John! that’s mean hypocrisy. I saw you myself, half-an-hour ago, holding the eldest Tod boy on a refractory donkey, and laughing till you could hardly stand.”

“Did I?” said he, half-ashamed. “Well, it was only to keep the little scamp from making a noise under the windows. And that reminds

me of another remarkable virtue in Mrs. Tod—she can hold her tongue.”

“How so?”

“In two whole days she has not communicated to us a single fact concerning our neighbours on the other half of Rose Cottage.”

“Did you want to know?”

John laughingly denied. Then allowed that he always had a certain pleasure in eliciting information on men and things.

“The wife being indicated, I suppose, by that very complimentary word ‘thing.’ But what possible interest can you have in either the old gentleman or the old lady?”

“Stop, Phineas: you have a bad habit of jumping at conclusions. And in our great dearth of occupation here, I think it might be all the better for you to take a little interest in your neighbours. So I’ve a great mind to indulge you with an important idea, suggestiou, discovery. Harkee, friend!”—and he put on a comical face of sentimental mystery, not a bad copy of our old acquaintance, Mr. Charles—“What, if the—the individual should not be an old lady at all?”

“What! The old gentleman’s wife?”

“Wife?—ahem! more jumping at conclu-

sions. No ; let us keep on the safe side, and call her the—individual. In short, the owner of that grey silk gown I saw hanging up in the kitchen. I've seen it again."

"The grey gown ! when and where ?"

"This morning, early. I walked after it across the Flat, a good way behind, though ; for I thought that it—well, let me say *she*—might not like to be watched or followed. She was trotting along very fast, and she carried a little basket—I fancy a basket of eggs."

"Capital housekeeper ! excellent wife !"

"Once more—I have my doubts on that latter fact. She walked a great deal quicker and merrier than any wife ought to walk when her husband was ill."

I could not help laughing at John's original notions of conjugal duty.

"Besides, Mrs. Tod always calls her invalid 'the old gentleman !' and I don't believe this was an elderly lady."

"Nay, old men do sometimes marry young women."

"Yes, but it is always a pity ; and sometimes not quite right. No,"—and I was amused to see how gravely and doggedly John kept to his

point.—“Though this lady did not look like a sylph or a wood-nymph—being neither very small nor very slight, and having a comfortable woollen cloak and hood over the grey silk gown—still, I don’t believe she’s an old woman, or married either.”

“How can you possibly tell? Did you see her face?”

“Of course not,” he answered, rather indignantly. “I should not think it manly to chase a lady as a schoolboy does a butterfly, for the mere gratification of staring at her. I stayed on the top of the Flat till she had gone indoors.”

“Into Rose Cottage?”

“Why—yes.”

“She had, doubtless, gone to fetch new-laid eggs for her—I mean for the sick gentleman’s breakfast. Kind soul!”

“You may laugh, Phineas, but I think she is a kind soul. On her way home I saw her stop twice; once to speak to an old woman who was gathering sticks; and again, to scold a lad for thrashing a donkey.”

“Did you hear her?”

“No; but I judge from the lad’s penitent

face as I passed him. I am sure she had been scolding him."

"Then she's not young, depend upon it. Your beautiful young creatures never scold."

"I'm not so sure of that," said John, meditatively. "For my part, I should rather not cheat myself, or be cheated after that manner. Perfection is impossible. Better see the young woman as she really is, bad and good together."

"The young woman! The fair divinity, you mean!"

"No;" shutting his mouth over the word in his quiet, firm way—"I object strongly to divinities. How very unpleasant to woo an angel of perfection, and find her out at last to be only—only Mrs. —"

"Halifax," suggested I; at which he laughed, slightly colouring.

"But how woful must be our dearth of subjects, when we talk such nonsense as this! What suggested it?"

"Your friend in the grey gown, I suppose."

"*Requiescat in pace!* May she enjoy her eggs! And now I must go saddle the brown mare, and be off to Norton Bury. A lovely day for a ride. How I shall dash along!"

He rose up merrily. It was like morning sunshine only to see his face. No morbid follies had ever tainted his healthy nature, whatsoever romance was there—and never was there a thoroughly noble nature without some romance in it. But it lay deep down, calm and unawakened. His heart was as light and as free as air.

Stooping over my easy chair, he wheeled it to the window, in sight of the pleasant view.

“Now, Phineas, what more books do you want? You’ll take a walk before dinner? You’ll not be moping?”

No; why should I, who knew I had always, whether absent or present, the blessing, the infinite blessing of being first in his thoughts and cares? Who, whether he expressed it or not—the best things never are expressed or expressible—knew by a thousand little daily acts like these, the depth and tenderness of his friendship, his brotherly love for me. As yet, I had it all. And God, who knows how little else I had, will pardon, if in my unspeakable thankfulness lurked a taint of selfish joy in my sole possession of such a priceless boon.

He lingered about, making me “all right,” as he called it, and planning out my solitary day. With much merriment, too, for we were the

gayest couple of young bachelors, when, as John said, "the duties of our responsible position" would allow.

"Responsible position! It's our good landlady who ought to talk about that. With two sets of lodgers, a husband, and an indefinite number of children.—There's one of them got into mischief at last. Hark!"

"It's Jack, my namesake. Bless my life! I knew he would come to some harm with that donkey.—Hey, lad! never mind. Get up again."

But soon he perceived that the accident was more serious; and disappeared like a shot, leaping out through the open window. The next minute I saw him carrying in the unlucky Jack, who was bleeding from a cut on the forehead, and screaming vociferously.

"Don't be frightened, Mrs. Tod; it is very slight—I saw it done. Jack, my lad!—be a man, and never mind it. Don't scream so; you alarm your mother."

But as soon as the good woman was satisfied that there was no real cause for terror, hers changed into hearty wrath against Jack for his carelessness, and for giving so much trouble to the gentleman.

“But he be always getting into mischief, sir—that boy. Three months back, the very day Mr. March came, he got playing with the carriage-horse, and it kicked him and broke his arm. A deal he cares: he be just as sprack and mad as ever. As I say to Tod—it bean’t no use fretting over that boy.”

“Have patience,” answered John, who had again carried the unfortunate young scapegrace from our parlour into Mrs. Tod’s kitchen—the centre room of the cottage; and was trying to divert the torrent of maternal indignation, while he helped her to plaster up the still ugly-looking wound. “Come, forgive the lad. He will be more sorry afterwards, than if you had punished him.”

“Do’ee think so?” said the woman, as, struck either by the words, the manner, or the tone, she looked up straight at him. “Do’ee really think so, Mr. Halifax?”

“I am sure of it. Nothing makes one so good as being forgiven when one has been naughty. Isn’t it so, Jack, my namesake?”

“Jack ought to be proud o’ that, sir,” said the mother, respectfully; “and there’s some’at in what you say too. You talk like my master does, o’ Sundays. Tod be a Scotchman, Mr.

Halifax ; and they're good folk, the Scotch, and read their Bibles hard. There's a deal about forgiving in the Bible, isn't there, sir?"

"Exactly," John answered, smiling. "And so, Jack, you're safe this time ; only you must not disobey your mother again, for the sake of donkeys or anything else."

"No, sir—thank'ee, sir," sobbed Jack, humbly. "You be a gentleman—Mr. March bean't—he said, it served me right for getting under his horses."

"Hold thy tongue!" said Jack's mother, sharply ; for the latch of the opposite door was just then lifted, and a lady stood there.

"Mrs. Tod, my father says—"

Seeing strangers, the lady paused. At the sound of her voice—a pleasant voice, though somewhat quick and decided in tone—John and I had both involuntarily turned. We felt awkward ; doubtful whether to stay, or retire abruptly. She saved us the choice.

"Mrs. Tod, my father will take his soup at eleven. You will remember?"

"Yes, Miss March."

Upon which, Miss March shut the door at once, and vanished.

She wore a grey silken gown. I glanced at

John, but he did not see me; his eyes were fixed on the door, which had disclosed and concealed the momentary picture. Its momentariness impressed it the more vividly on my memory—I have it there still.

A girl, in early but not precocious maturity, rather tall, of a figure built more for activity and energy than the mere fragility of sylph-like grace: dark-complexioned, dark-eyed, dark-haired—the whole colouring being of that soft darkness of tone which gives a sense of something at once warm and tender—strong and womanly. Thorough woman she seemed—not a bit of the angel about her. Scarcely beautiful — and “pretty” would have been the very last word to have applied to her; but there was around her an atmosphere of freshness, health, and youth, pleasant as a breeze in spring.

For her attire, it was that notable grey silk gown—very simply made, with no fripperies or fandangos of any sort—reaching up to her throat and down to her wrists, where it had some kind of trimming of white fur, which made the skin beneath show exquisitely delicate.

“That is Miss March,” said our landlady, when she had disappeared.

“Is it?” said John, removing his eyes from the shut door.

“She be very sensible like, for a young body of only seventeen: more sensible and pleasanter than her father, who is always ailing, and always grumbling. Poor gentleman!—may be he can’t help it. But it be terrible hard for the daughter—bean’t it, sir?”

“Very,” said John. His laconism was extraordinary.

Still, he kept standing by the kitchen-table, waiting till the last bandage had been sewn on Jack’s cut forehead, and even some minutes after his *protégé* had begun playing about as usual. It was I who had to suggest that we should not intrude in Mrs. Tod’s kitchen any longer.

“No—certainly not. Come, Phineas. Mrs. Tod—I hope—our presence did not inconvenience—the young lady?”

“Bless your heart, sir! nothing ever inconveniences she. There bean’t a pleasanter young body alive. She’ll often come into this kitchen—just as you did, gentlemen, and very happy to see you always,” added Mrs. Tod, curtsying. “When Mr. March is asleep, she’ll come and

sit for half an hour, talking to Tod and me, and playing with the baby—”

Here, probably at sound of its name, the individual alluded to set up, from its cradle in the corner, such a terrific squall, that we two young men beat a precipitate retreat.

“So, John, your gray gown is discovered at last. She’s young, certainly—but not exactly a beauty.”

“I never said she was.”

“A pleasant person, though; hearty, cheerful-looking, and strong. I can easily imagine her trotting over the common with her basket of eggs—chatting to the old woman, and scolding the naughty boy.”

“Don’t make fun of her. She must have a hard life with her old father.”

Of course, seeing him take it up so seriously, I jested no more.

“By the bye, did not the father’s name strike you? *March*—suppose it should turn out to be the very Mr. March you pulled out of Severn five years ago. What a romantic conjuncture of circumstances!”

“Nonsense,” said John, quickly—more quickly than he usually spoke to me; then came back to wish me a kind, specially kind, good bye.

“Take care of yourself, old fellow. It will be nightfall before I am back from Norton Bury.”

I watched him mount, and ride slowly down the bit of sloping common—turning once to look back at Rose Cottage, ere he finally disappeared between the chestnut trees: a goodly sight—for he was an admirable horseman.

When he was gone, I, glancing lazily up at Mr. March’s window, saw a hand, and, I fancied, a white-furred wrist, pulling down the blind. It amused me, to think Miss March might possibly have been watching him likewise.

I spent the whole long day alone in the cottage parlour, chiefly meditating; though more than once friendly Mrs. Tod broke in upon my solitude. She treated me in a motherly, free-and-easy way: not half so deferentially as she treated John Halifax.

The sun had gone down over Nunnely Hill, behind the four tall Italian poplars, which stood on the border of our bit of wilderness—three together, and one apart. They were our landmarks—and skymarks too—for the first sunbeam coming across the common struck their tops of a morning, and the broad western glimmer showed their forms distinctly until far in the night. They were just near enough for me

to hear their faint rustling in windy weather—on calm days they stood up straight against the sky, like memorial columns. They were friends of mine—those four poplars; sometimes they almost seemed alive. We made acquaintance on this first night, when I sat watching for John; and we kept up the friendship ever afterwards.

It was nine o'clock before I heard the old mare's hoofs clattering up the road: joyfully I ran out.

David was not quite his youthful, gay self that night; not quite, as he expressed it, "the David of the sheep-folds." He was very tired, and had what he called "the tan-yard feeling,"—the oppression of business cares.

"Times are hard," said he, when we had finally shut out the starlight, and Mrs. Tod had lit candles, bade us good night in her free, independent way, and "hoped Mr. Halifax had every thing he wanted." She always seemed to consider him the head of our little *ménage*.

"The times are very hard," repeated John, thoughtfully. "I don't see how your father can rightly be left with so many anxieties on his shoulders. I must manage to get to Norton Bury at least five days a week. You will have enough of solitude, I fear."

“And you will have little enough of the pleasant country life you planned, and which you seem so to delight in.”

“Never mind—perhaps it’s good for me. I have a life of hard work before me, and can’t afford to get used to too much pleasure. But we’ll make the most of every bit of time we have. How have you felt to-day? Strong?”

“Very strong. Now, what would you like us to do to-morrow?”

“I want to show you the common in early morning—the view there is so lovely.”

“Of nature, or human nature?”

He half-smiled, though only at my mischievousness. I could see it did not affect him in the least. “Nay, I know what you mean; but I had forgotten her, or, if not absolutely forgotten, she was not in my mind just then. We will go another way, as indeed I had intended: it might annoy the young lady, our meeting her again.”

His perfectly grave and easy manner of treating and dismissing the subject was a tacit reproach to me. I let the matter drop; we had much more serious topics afloat than gossip about our neighbours.

At seven next morning we were out on the Flat.

“I’m not going to let you stand here in the dews, Phineas. Come a little farther on, to my terrace, as I call it. There’s a panorama!”

It was indeed. All around the high flat a valley lay, like a moat, or as if some broad river had been dried up in its course, and, century after century, gradually converted into meadow, woodland, and town. For a little white town sat demurely at the bottom of the hollow, and a score or two of white cottages scattered themselves from this small nucleus of civilization over the opposite bank of this imaginary river, which was now a lovely hill-side. Gorges, purple with shadow, yellow corn-fields, and dark clumps of woodland dressed this broad hill-side in many colours; its highest point, Nunnely Hill, forming the horizon where last night I had seen the sun go down, and which now was tinted with the tenderest western morning grey.

“Do you like this, Phineas? I do, very much. A dear, smiling, English valley, holding many a little nest of an English home. Fancy being patriarch over such a region, having the whole valley in one’s hand, to do good to, or ill. You can’t think what primitive people they are

hereabouts—descendants from an old colony of Flemish cloth-weavers: they keep to the trade. Down in the valley—if one could see through the beech-wood—is the grand support of the neighbourhood, a large cloth-mill!”

“That’s quite in your line, John;” and I smiled to see his face brighten up as it had done when, as a boy, he had talked to me about his machinery. “What has become of that wonderful little loom you made?”

“Oh! I have it still. But this is such a fine cloth-mill!—I have been all over it. If the owner would but put aside his old Flemish stolidity! I do believe he and his ancestors have gone on in the same way, and with almost the same machinery, ever since Queen Elizabeth’s time. Now, just one or two of our modern improvements, such as—but I forget, you never could understand mechanics.”

“You can, though. Explain it clearly, and I’ll try my best.”

He did so, and so did I. I think he even managed to knock something of the matter into my stupid head, where it remained—for ten minutes! Much longer remained the impression of his energetic talk—his clear-headed way of putting before another what he

understood so well himself. I marvelled how he had gained all his information.

“ Oh ! it’s easy enough, when one has a natural propensity for catching hold of facts ; and then, you know, I always had a weakness for machinery ; I could stand for an hour watching a mill at work, especially if it’s worked by a great water-wheel.”

“ Would you like to be a mill-owner ? ”

“ Shouldn’t I ! ”—with a sunshiny flash in his eyes, which soon clouded over. “ However, it’s idle talking ; one cannot choose one’s calling—at least, very few can. After all, it isn’t the trade that signifies—it’s the man. I’m a tanner, and a very good tanner I intend to be. By the bye, I wonder if Mrs. Tod, who talks so much about ‘ gentle-folk,’ knows that latter fact about you and me ? ”

“ I think not ; I hope not. Oh, David ! this one month at least let us get rid of the tannery.”

For I hated it, more than ever now, in our quiet, free, Arcadian life ; the very thought of it was unsupportable, not only for myself, but for John.

He gently blamed me, yet, I think, he invo-

luntarily felt much as I did, if he would have allowed himself so to feel.

“Who would guess now that I who stand here, delighting myself in this fresh air and pleasant view, this dewy common, all thick with flowers—what a pretty blue cluster that is at your foot, Phineas!—who would guess that all yesterday I had been stirring up tan-pits, handling raw hides? Faugh! I wonder the little harebells don’t sicken in these my hands—such ugly hands, too!”

“Nonsense, John! they’re not so bad, indeed; and if they were, what does it matter?”

“You are right, lad; it does not matter. They have done me good service, and will yet, though they were not made for carrying nosegays.”

“There is somebody besides yourself plucking posies on the Flat. See,—how large the figure looks against the sky. It might be your Titaness, John—

‘Like Proserpina gathering flowers,
Herself the fairest—’

—no, not fairest: for I declare she looks very like your friend Grey-gown—I beg her pardon—Miss March.”

“It is she,” said John, so indifferently, that I suspect that fact had presented itself to him for at least two minutes before I found it out.

“There’s certainly a fatality about your meeting her.”

“Not the least. She has this morning taken her walk in a different direction, as I did; and we both chanced again to hit upon the same,” answered John, gravely and explanatorily. “Come away down the slope. We must not intrude upon a lady’s enjoyments.”

He carried me off, much against my will, for I had a great wish to see again that fresh young face, so earnest, cheerful, and good. Also, as I laboured in vain to convince my companion, the said face indicated an independent dignity which would doubtless make its owner perfectly indifferent whether her solitary walk were crossed by two gentlemen, or two hundred.

John agreed to this; but nevertheless he was inexorable. And, since he was “a man of the world;” having in his journeys up and down the country for my father, occasionally fallen into “polite” society, I yielded the point to him, and submitted to his larger experience of good-breeding.

However, Fate, kinder than he, took the knot of etiquette into her own hands, and broke it.

Close to the cottage door, our two paths converging, and probably our breakfast-hours likewise, brought us suddenly face to face with Miss March.

She saw us, and we had a distinct sight of her.

I was right: we and our contiguity were not of the smallest importance to Miss March. Her fresh morning roses did not deepen, nor her eyes droop, as she looked for a moment at us both—a quiet, maidenly look of mere observation. Of course, no recognition passed; but there was a merry dimple beside her mouth, as if she quite well knew who we were, and owned to a little harmless feminine curiosity in observing us.

She had to pass our door, where stood Mrs. Tod and the baby. It stretched out its little arms to come to her, with that pretty, babyish gesture which I suppose no woman can resist. Miss March could not. She stopped, and began tossing up the child.

Truly, they made a pleasant picture, the two—she with her hooded cloak dropping off, showing her graceful shape, and her dark-brown

hair, which was all gathered up in a mass of curls at the top of her head, as the fashion then was. As she stood, with her eyes sparkling, and the young blood flushing through her clear, brunette cheeks, I was not sure whether I had not judged too hastily in calling her "no beauty."

Probably, by his look, John thought the same.

She stood right before our wicket gate; but she had evidently quite forgotten us, so happy was she with Mrs. Tod's bonny boy, until the landlady made some remark about "letting the gentlemen by." Then, with a slight start, drawing her hood back over her head, the young lady stepped aside.

In passing her, John raised his eyes, as was natural enough. For me, I could hardly take mine from her, such a pleasant creature was she to behold. She half smiled—he bowed, which she returned, courteously, and we both went in-doors. I told him, this was a good beginning of acquaintance with our neighbour.

"Not at all; a mere civility between two people living under the same roof. It will never be more."

"Probably not."

I am afraid John was disappointed at my "probably." I am afraid that when he stood

at our window, contemplating the little group which filled up our wicket gate, he missed some one out of the three,—which, I suspect, was neither Mrs. Tod nor yet the baby.

“I like her face very much better now, David.”

“Do you?” It was a curious fact, which I never noticed till afterwards, that though there had been some lapse of time before I hazarded this remark, we both intuitively supplied the noun to that indefinite personal pronoun.

“A good—nay, a noble face; though still, with those irregular features, I can’t—really I can’t—call her beautiful.”

“Nor I.”

“She bowed with remarkable grace, too. I think, John, for the first time in our lives, we may say we have seen a *lady*.”

“Most certainly a lady.”

“Nay, I only meant that, girl as she is, she is evidently accustomed to what is called ‘society.’ Which makes it the more likely that her father is the Mr. March who was cousin to the Brithwoods. An odd coincidence.”

“A very odd coincidence.”

After which brief reply, John relapsed into taciturnity.

More than once that morning we recurred to the subject of our neighbours—that is, I did—but John was rather saturnine and uncommunicative. Nay, when, as Mrs. Tod was removing the breakfast, I ventured to ask her a harmless question or two,—who Mr. March was, and where he came from?—I was abruptly reproved, the very minute our good landlady had shut the door, for my tendency to “gossip.”

At which I only laughed, and reminded him that he had cleverly scolded me after, not before, I had gained the desired information, namely, that Mr. March was a gentleman of independent property—that he had no friends hereabouts, and that he usually lived in Wales.

“He cannot be our Mr. March, then.”

“No,” said John, with an air of great relief.

I was amused to see how seriously he took such a trifle; ay, many a time that day I laughed at him for evincing such great sympathy over our neighbours, and especially—which was plain enough to see, though he doubtless believed he entirely disguised it—for that interest which a young man of twenty would naturally take in a very charming and personable young woman.

Ay, naturally, as I said to myself, for I admired her too, extremely.

It seems strange now to call to mind that morning, and our light-hearted jests about Miss March. Strange that Destiny should often come thus, creeping like a child to our very doors; we hardly notice it, or send it away with a laugh; it comes so naturally, so simply, so accidentally as it were, that we recognise it not. We cannot believe that the baby intruder is in reality the king of our fortunes, the ruler of our lives. But so it is continually; and since *it is*, it must be right.

We finished the morning by reading Shakespeare—*Romeo and Juliet*—at which the old folio seemed naturally to open. There is a time—a sweet time, too, though it does not last—when to every young mind the play of plays, the poem of poems, is *Romeo and Juliet*. We were at that phase now.

John read it all through to me—not for the first time either; and then, thinking I had fallen asleep, he sat with the book on his knee, gazing out of the open window.

It was a warm summer day—breathless, soundless—a day for quietness and dreams. Sometimes a bee came buzzing among the

roses, in and away again, like a happy thought. Nothing else was stirring; not a single bird was to be seen or heard, except that now and then came a coo of the wood-pigeons among the beech-trees—a low, tender voice—reminding one of a mother's crooning over a cradled child; or of two true lovers standing clasped heart to heart, in the first embrace, which has not, and never needs, a single word.

John sat listening. What was he thinking about?—Why that strange quiver about his mouth? why that wonderful new glow, that infinite depth of softness in his eyes?

I closed mine. He never knew I saw him. He thought I slept placidly through that half-hour, which seemed to him as brief as a minute. To me it was long—ah, so long! as I lay pondering with an intensity that was actual pain, on what must come some time, and, for all I knew, might even now be coming.

CHAPTER XI.

A WEEK slipped by. We had grown familiar with Enderley Hill—at least, I had. As for John, he had little enough enjoyment of the pretty spot he had taken such a fancy to, being absent five days out of the seven; riding away when the morning sun had slid down to the boles of my four poplars, and never coming home till Venus peeped out over their heads at night. It was hard for him; but he bore the disappointment well.

With me, one day went by just like another. In the mornings I crept out, climbed the hill behind Rose Cottage garden, and there lay a little under the verge of the Flat, in a sunny shelter, watching the ants running in and out of the numerous ant-hills there; or else I turned my observation to the short velvet herbage that grew everywhere hereabouts; for the common, so far from being barren, was a perfect sheet of

greenest, softest turf, sowed with minute and rare flowers. Often a square foot of ground presented me with enough of beauty and variety in colour and form, to criticise and contemplate for a full hour.

My human interests were not extensive. Sometimes the Enderley villagers, or the Tod children, who were a grade above these, and decidedly "respectable," would appear and have a game of play at the foot of the slope, their laughter rising up to where I lay. Or some old woman would come with her pails to the spring below, a curious and very old stone well, to which the cattle from the common often rushed down past me in be vies, and stood knee-deep, their mouths making glancing circles in the water as they drank.

Being out of doors almost all day, I saw very little of the inhabitants of our cottage. Once or twice, a lady and gentleman passed, creeping at the foot of the slope, so slowly, that I felt sure it must be Mr. March and his daughter. He was tall, with grey hair; I was not near enough to distinguish his features. She walked on the further side, supporting him with her arm. Her comfortable morning hood was put off, and she had on her head that ugly, stiff

thing which ladies had lately taken to wearing, and which, Jael said, was called a "bonnet."

Except on these two occasions, I had no opportunity of making any observations on the manners and customs of our neighbours. Occasionally Mrs. Tod mentioned them in her sociable chatter, while laying the cloth; but it was always in the most cursory and trivial way, such as "Miss March having begged that the children might be kept quiet—Mrs. Tod hoped their noise didn't disturb *me*? but Mr. March was such a very fidgetty gentleman—so particular in his dress, too—Why, Miss March had to iron his cravats with her own hands. Besides, if there was a pin awry in her dress, he did make such a fuss—and, really, such an active, busy young lady couldn't look always as if she came trim out of a band-box. Mr. March wanted so much waiting on, he seemed to fancy he still had his big house in Wales, and his seven servants."

Mrs. Tod conversed as if she took it for granted I was fully acquainted with all the prior history of her inmates, or any others that she mentioned—a habit peculiar to Enderley folk with strangers. It was generally rather convenient, and it saved much listening; but in

this case, I would rather have had it broken through. Sometimes I felt strongly inclined to question her; but on consulting John, he gave his veto so decidedly against seeking out people's private affairs in such an illicit manner, that I felt quite guilty, and began to doubt whether my sickly, useless, dreaming life, was not inclining me to curiosity, gossip, and other small vices which we are accustomed—I know not why—to insult the other sex by describing as “womanish.”

As I have said, the two cottages were built distinct, so that we could have neither sound nor sight of our neighbours, save upon the neutral ground of Mrs. Tod's kitchen; where, however I might have felt inclined to venture, John's prohibition stopped me entirely.

Thus—saving the two days when he was at home, when he put me on his mare's back, and led me far away, over common and valley, and hill, for miles, only coming back at twilight—save those two blithe days, I spent the week in dignified solitude, and was very thankful for Sunday.

We determined to make it a long, lovely, country Sunday; so we began it at six A.M. John took me a new walk across the common,

where, he said, in answer to my question,—we were quite certain *not* to meet Miss March.

“Do you experimentalize on the subject, that you calculate her paths with such nicety? Pray, have you ever met her again, for I know you have been out most mornings?”

“Morning is the only time I have for walking, you know, Phineas.”

“Ah, true! You have little pleasure at Enderley. I almost wish we could go home.”

“Don’t think of such a thing. It is doing you a world of good. Indeed, we must not, on any account, go home.”

I know, and knew then, that his anxiety was in earnest; that whatever other thoughts might lie underneath, the sincere thought of me was the one uppermost in his mind.

“Well, we’ll stay—that is, if you are happy, John.”

“Thoroughly happy; I like the dashing rides to Norton Bury. Above all, I like coming back. The minute I begin to climb Enderley Hill, the tan-yard and all belonging to it drops off like an incubus, and I wake into free, beautiful life.—Now, Phineas, confess; is not this common a lovely place, especially of a morning?”

“Ay,” said I, smiling at his energy. “But you did not tell me whether you had met Miss March again.”

“She has never once seen me.”

“But you have seen her? Answer honestly.”

“Why should I not?—Yes, I have seen her—once or twice or so—but never in any way that could annoy her.”

“That explains why you have become so well acquainted with the direction of her walks?”

He coloured deeply. “I hope, Phineas, you do not think that—that in any way I would intrude on or offend a lady?”

“Nay, don’t take it so seriously—indeed, I meant nothing of the kind. It would be quite natural if a young man like you did use some pains to look at such a ‘cunning piece of Nature’s handiwork’ as that apple-cheeked girl of seventeen.”

“Russet apple. She is brown, you know—a real ‘nut-brown mayde,’” said John, recovering his gay humour. “Certainly, I like to look at her. I have seen many a face that was more good-looking—never one that looked half so good.”

“Sententious that;” yet I could not smile—he spoke with such earnestness. Besides, her

sweet looks were true. I myself would have walked half-way across the common any day for a glance at Miss March. Why not he?

“But, John, you never told me that you had seen her again?”

“Because you never asked me.”

We were silent. Silent until we had walked along the whole length of a Roman encampment, the most perfect of the various fosses that seamed the flat—tokens of many a battle fought on such capital battle-ground, and which John had this morning especially brought me to look at.

“Yes,” I said at last, putting the ending affirmative to a long train of thought, which was certainly not about Roman encampments; “yes, it is quite natural that you should admire her. It would even be quite natural, and not unlikely either, if she——”

“Pshaw!” interrupted he. “What nonsense you are talking! Impossible!” and setting his foot sharply upon a loose stone, he kicked it down into the ditch, where probably many a dead Roman had fallen before it, in ages gone by.

The impetuous gesture—the energetic “Im-

possible," struck me less than the quickness with which his mind had worked out my unexpressed thought—carrying it to a greater length than I myself had ever contemplated.

"Truly, no possibilities or impossibilities of *that* sort ever entered my head. I only thought you might admire her, and be unsettled thereby as young men are, when they take fancies. That would grieve me very much, John."

"Don't let it then. Why, I have only seen her five times; I never spoke to her in my life, and most probably never shall do. Could any one be in a safer position? Besides," and his tone changed to extreme gravity, "I have too many worldly cares to think of; I can't afford the harmless little amusement of falling in love—so be easy, Phineas."

I smiled; and we began a discussion on camps and fosses, vallum and prætorium; the Danes, Saxons, and Normans; which doubtless we carried on to a most learned length: but at this distance of time, and indeed the very day after, I plead guilty to having forgotten all about it.

That long, quiet Sunday, when, I remember, the sun never came out all day, but the whole

earth and sky melted together in a soft, grey haze ; when we lay on the common and heard church-bells ringing, some distant, some near ; and, after all was quiet, talked our own old sabbath talks, of this world and the world to come ; when, towards twilight, we went down into the beech-wood below the house, and sat idly there among the pleasant-smelling ferns ; when, from the morning to the evening, he devoted himself altogether to my comfort and amusement,—to perfect which required of him no harder duty than to be near me always ;—that Sunday was the last I ever had David altogether for my own—my very own.

It was natural, it was just, it was right. God forbid that in any way I should have murmured.

About ten o'clock—just as he was luring me out to see how grand the common looked under the black night, and we were wondering whether or no the household were in bed—Mrs. Tod came mysteriously into the parlour, and shut the door after her. Her round, fresh face looked somewhat troubled.

“ Mr. Halifax, might I speak a word to 'ee, sir ?”

“With pleasure. Sit down, Mrs. Tod. There’s nothing wrong with your children?”

“No, I thank’ee. You are very kind, sir. No, it be about that poor Miss March.”

I could see John’s fingers twitch over the chair he was leaning on. “I hope—” he began, and stopped.

“Her father’s dreadful bad to-night, and it’s a good seven-mile walk to the doctor’s at S—; and Miss March says—that is, she don’t, for I bean’t going to tell her a word about it—but I think, Mr. Halifax, if I might make so bold, it would be a great kindness in a young gentleman like you to lend Tod your mare to ride over and fetch the doctor.”

“I will, gladly. At once?”

“Tod bean’t come in yet.”

“He shall have the mare with pleasure. Tell Miss March so—I mean, do not tell her, of course. It was very right of you to come to us in this way, Mrs. Tod. Really, it would be almost a treat to be ill in your house—you are so kind.”

“Thank’ee, Mr. Halifax,” said the honest landlady, greatly delighted. “But a body couldn’t help doing any thing for Miss March.

You would think so yourself, if you only knew her."

"No doubt," returned John, more politely than warmly, I fancied, as he closed the door after the retreating figure of Mrs. Tod. But when he came and sat down again, I saw he was rather thoughtful. He turned the books restlessly, one after the other, and could not settle to anything. To all my speculations about our sick neighbour, and our pearl of kind-hearted landladies, he only replied in monosyllables; at last he started up and said,

"Phineas, I think I'll go myself."

"Where?"

"To fetch Doctor Brown. If Tod is not come in, it would be but a common charity. And I know the way."

"But the dark night?"

"Oh, no matter; the mare will be safer under me than a stranger. And though I have taken good care that the three horses in the tan-yard shall have the journey, turn and turn about; still it's a good pull from here to Norton Bury, and the mare's my favourite. I would rather take her myself."

I smiled at his numerous good reasons for

doing such a very simple thing ; and agreed that it was right and best he should do it.

“ Then shall I call Mrs. Tod and enquire ? Or perhaps it might make less fuss, just to go and speak to her in the kitchen. Will you, Phineas, or shall I ? ”

Scarcely waiting my answer, he walked from our parlour into what I called the Debateable Land.

No one was there. We remained several minutes all alone, listening to the groanings overhead.

“ That must be Mr. March, John. ”

“ I hear. Good heavens ! how hard for her. And she such a young thing, and alone, ” muttered he, as he stood gazing into the dull wood-embers of the kitchen fire. I saw he was moved ; but the expression on his face was one of pure and holy compassion. That at this moment no less unselfish feeling mingled with it, I am sure.

Mrs. Tod appeared at the door leading to the other half of the cottage ; she was apparently speaking to Miss March on the staircase. We heard again those clear, quick, decided tones, but subdued to a half-whisper.

“ No, Mrs. Tod, I am not sorry you did it— on my father’s account, ’tis best. Tell Mr. ——,

the young gentleman, I forget his name,—that I am very much obliged to him.”

“I will, Miss March ;—stay, he is just here.—Bless us! she has shut the door already.—Won’t you take a seat, Mr. Halifax? I’ll stir up the fire in a minute, Mr. Fletcher. You are always welcome in my kitchen, young gentlemen.” And Mrs. Tod bustled about, well aware what a cosy and cheerful old-fashioned kitchen it was, especially of evenings.

But when John explained the reason of our intrusion, there was no end to her pleasure and gratitude. He was the kindest young gentleman that ever lived.—She would tell Miss March so ; as, indeed, she had done many a time.

“ ‘Miss,’ said I to her the very first day I set eyes on you, when I had told her how you came hunting for lodgings—(she often has a chat with me quite freely, being so lonesome-like, and knowing I be too proud myself to forget that she’s a born lady,)—‘Miss,’ said I, ‘who Mr. Halifax may be I don’t know, but depend upon it he’s a real gentleman.’ ”

I was the sole amused auditor of this speech, for John had vanished. In a few minutes more he had brought the mare round, and after a word or two with me, was clattering down the road.

I wondered whether this time any white-furred wrist stirred the blind to watch him.

John was away a wonderfully short time, and the doctor rode back with him. They parted at the gate, and he came into our parlour, his cheeks all glowing with the ride. He only remarked, "that the autumn-nights were getting chill," and sat down. The kitchen clock struck one.

"You ought to have been in bed hours ago, Phineas. Will you not go? I shall sit up just a little while, to hear how Mr. March is."

"I should like to hear, too. It is curious the interest that one learns to take in people that are absolute strangers, when shut up together in a lonely place like this, especially when they are in trouble."

"Ay, that's it," said he, quickly. "It's the solitude, and their being in trouble. Did you hear anything more while I was away?"

"Only that Mr. March was rather better, and everybody had gone to bed except his daughter and Mrs. Tod."

"Hark! I think that's the doctor going away. I wonder if one might ask—No! they would think it intrusive. He must be better. But Dr. Brown told me that in one of these pa-

roxysms he might — Oh, that poor young thing!”

“Has she no relatives, no brothers or sisters? Doctor Brown surely knows.”

“I did not like to ask, but I fancy not. However, that’s not my business: my business is to get you off to bed, Phineas Fletcher, as quickly as possible.”

“Wait one minute, John. Let us go and see if we can do anything more.”

“Ay—if we can do anything more,” repeated he, as we again re-crossed the boundary-line, and entered the Tod country.

All was quiet there. The kitchen fire burnt brightly, and a cricket sang in merry solitude on the hearth; the groans overhead were stilled, but we heard low talking, and presently stealthy footsteps crept down stairs. It was Mrs. Tod and Miss March.

We ought to have left the kitchen: I think John muttered something to that effect, and even made a slight movement towards the door; but—I don’t know how it was—we stayed.

She came and stood by the fire, scarcely noticing us. Her fresh cheeks were faded, and she had the weary look of one who has watched for

many hours. Some sort of white dimity gown that she wore, added to this paleness.

“I think he is better, Mrs. Tod—decidedly better,” said she, speaking quickly. “You ought to go to bed now. Let all the house be quiet. I hope you told Mr.—Oh—”

She saw us, stopped, and, for the moment, the faintest tinge of her roses returned. Presently she acknowledged us, with a slight bend.

John came forward. I had expected some awkwardness on his part; but no—he was thinking too little of himself for that. His demeanour, earnest, gentle, kind—was the sublimation of all manly courtesy.

“I hope, *madam*”—young men used the deferential word in those days, always—“I do hope, madam, that Mr. March is better. We were unwilling to retire until we had heard.”

“Thank you! My father is much better. You are very kind,” said Miss March, with a maidenly dropping of the eyes.

“Indeed he is kind,” broke in the warm-hearted Mrs. Tod. “He rode all the way to S——, his own self, to fetch the doctor.”

“Did you, sir? I thought you only lent your horse.”

“Oh! I like a night-ride. And you are sure,

madam, that your father is better? Is there nothing else I can do for you?"

His sweet, grave manner, so much graver and older than his years, softened too with that quiet deference which marked at once the man who revered all women, simply for their womanhood—seemed entirely to reassure the young lady. This, and her own frankness of character, made her forget, as she apparently did, the fact that she was a young lady and he a young gentleman, meeting on unacknowledged neutral ground, perfect strangers, or knowing no more of one another than the mere surname.

Nature, sincerity, and simplicity conquered all trammels of formal custom. She held out her hand to him.

"I thank you very much, Mr. Halifax. If I wanted help, I would ask you; indeed, I would."

"Thank *you*. Good-night."

He pressed the hand with reverence—and was gone. I saw Miss March look earnestly after him; then she turned to speak and smile with me. A light word, an easy smile, as to a poor invalid whom she had often pitied, out of the fulness of her womanly heart.

Soon I followed John into the parlour. He asked me no questions, made no remarks, only took his candle and went up stairs.

But, years afterwards, he confessed to me that the touch of that hand—it was a rather peculiar hand in the “feel” of it, as the children say, with a very soft palm, and fingers that had a habit of perpetually fluttering, like a little bird’s wing—the touch of that hand was to the young man like the revelation of a new world.

CHAPTER XII.

THE next day John rode away, earlier even than was his wont, I thought. He stayed but a little while talking with me. While Mrs. Tod was bustling over our breakfast, he asked her, in a grave and unconcerned manner, "how Mr. March was this morning?" which was the only allusion he made to the previous night's occurrences.

I had a long, quiet day alone in the beech-wood, close below our cottage, sitting by the little runnel, now worn to a thread with the summer weather, but singing still. It talked to me like a living thing.

When I came home in the evening, Miss March stood in front of the cottage, with—strange to say—her father. But I had heard that his paroxysms were often of brief continuance, and that, like most confirmed valetudinarians, when real danger stared him in the

face, he put it from him, and was glad to be well.

Seeing me coming, Miss March whispered to him; he turned upon me a listless gaze from over his fur collar, and bowed languidly, without rising from his easy-chair.—Yes, it was Mr. March—the very Mr. March we had met! I knew him, changed though he was; but he did not know me in the least, as, indeed, was not likely.

His daughter came a step or two to meet me. “You are better, I see, Mr. Fletcher. Enderley is a most healthy place, as I try to persuade my father. This is Mr. Fletcher, sir, the gentleman who—”

“Was so obliging as to ride to S—— last night for me?—allow me to thank him myself.”

I began to disclaim, and Miss March to explain; but we must both have been slightly incoherent, for I think the poor gentleman was never quite clear as to who it was that went for Dr. Brown. However, that mattered little, as his acknowledgments were evidently dictated more by a natural habit of courtesy than by any strong sense of service rendered.

“I am a very great invalid, sir;—my dear, will

you explain to the gentleman?" And he leaned his head back, wearily.

"My father has never recovered his ten years' residence in the West Indies."

"'Residence?' Pardon me, my dear, I was governor of ——."

"Oh, yes!—The climate is very trying there, Mr. Fletcher. But since he has been in England—five years only—he has been very much better. I am in hope he will be quite well in time."

Mr. March shook his head drearily. Poor man! the world of existence to him seemed to have melted lazily down into a mere nebula, of which the forlorn nucleus was—himself. What a life for any young creature—even his own daughter, to be bound to continually!

I could not help remarking the strong contrast between them. He, with his sallow, delicately-shaped features—the thin mouth and long straight nose, of that form I have heard called the "melancholy nose," which usually indicates a feeble, pensive, and hypochondriac temperament; while his daughter—But I have described her already.

"Mr. Fletcher is an invalid too, father," she said; so gently, that I could feel no pain in her noticing my infirmity—and took gratefully a

seat she gave me, beside that of Mr. March. She seemed inclined to talk to me; and her manner was perfectly easy, friendly, and kind.

We spoke of common-place subjects, near at hand, and of the West Indian island, which its late "governor" was apparently by no means inclined to forget. I asked Miss March whether she had liked it?

"I was never there. Papa was obliged to leave me behind, in Wales—poor mamma's country. Were you ever in Wales? I like it so! Indeed, I feel as if I belonged altogether to the mountains."

And saying this, she looked the very incarnation of the free mountain spirit—a little rugged, perhaps, and sharply outlined; but that would soften with time, and was better and wholesomer than any tame green level of soft perfection. At least, one inclined to think so, looking at her.

I liked Miss March very much, and was glad of it.

In retiring, with her father leaning on her arm, to which he hung trustingly and feebly as a child, she turned abruptly, and asked if she could lend me any books to read? I must find the days long and dull, without my friend.

I assented with thanks; and shortly afterwards, she brought me an armful of literature—enough to have caused any young damsel to be dubbed “a blue,” in those matter-of-fact days.

“I have no time to study much myself,” said she, in answer to my questions; “but I like those who do. Now, good evening, for I must run. You and your friend can have any books of ours. You must not think—” and she turned back to tell me this—“that because my father said little, he and I are not deeply grateful for the kindness Mr. Halifax showed us last night.”

“It was a pleasure to John—it always is, to do a kind office for any one.”

“I well believe that, Mr. Fletcher.” And she left me.

When John came home, I informed him of what had passed. He listened, though he made no comment whatever. But all the evening he sat turning over Miss March’s books, and reading either aloud or to himself, fragments out of one—which I had expected he would have scouted, inasmuch as it was modern, not classical poetry:—in fact, a collection of Lyrical Ballads, brought out that year by a young man named Mr. William Wordsworth and some anonymous friend, conjointly. I had opened it, and found

therein great nonsense ; but John had better luck—he hit upon a short poem called “ Love,” by the Anonymous Friend, which he read, and I listened to—almost as if it had been Shakspeare. It was about a girl named Genevieve,—a little simple story—everybody knows it now ; but it was like a strange, low, mystic music, luring the very heart out of one’s bosom, to us young visionaries then.

I wonder if Miss March knew the harm she did, and the mischief that has been done among young people in all ages (since Caxton’s days), by the lending of books, especially books of poetry.

The next day, John was in a curious mood. Dreamy, lazy, mild ; he sat poring in-doors, instead of roaming abroad—in truth, was a changed lad. I told him so, and laid it all to the blame of the Anonymous Friend : who held him in such fascinated thrall that he only looked up once all the morning,—which was, when Mr. and Miss March went by. In the afternoon, he submitted, lamb-like, to be led down to the beech-wood—that the wonderful talking stream might hold forth to him as it did to me. But it could not—ah, no ! it could not. Our lives, though so close, were yet as distinct as the musical living water and the motionless grey rock beside

which it ran. The one swept joyfully on to its appointed course: the other,—was what Heaven made it, abode where Heaven placed it, and likewise fulfilled its end.

Coming back out of the little wood, I took John a new way I had discovered, through the prettiest undulating meadow, half-field, half-orchard, where trees loaded with ripening cider-apples and green crabs, made a variety among the natural foresters. Under one of these, as we climbed the slope—for field, beech-wood, and common formed a gradual ascent—we saw a vacant table laid.

“A pretty piece of rusticity—domestic Arcadia on a small scale,” said John; “I should like to invite myself to tea with them. Who can they be?”

“Probably visitors. Resident country-folks like their meals best under a decent roof-tree. I should not wonder if this were one of Mr. March’s vagaries.”

“Not vagaries—he is an old man.”

“Don’t be reproachful—I shall say nought against him. Indeed, I have no opportunity, for there they both are, coming hither from the house.”

Sure enough they were—Miss March helping her father across the uneven bit of common to the gate which led to the field. Precisely at that gate we all four met.

“’Tis useless to escape them,” whispered I to John.

“I do not wish,—why should I?” he answered, and held the gate open for the father and daughter to go through. She looked up and acknowledged him, smiling. I thought that smile and his courteous but far less frank response to it, would have been all the greeting; but no! Mr. March’s dull perceptions had somehow been brightened up. He stopped.

“Mr. Halifax, I believe?”

John bowed.

They stood a moment looking at one another; the tall, stalwart young man, so graceful and free in bearing, and the old man, languid, sickly, prematurely broken down.

“Sir,” said the elder, and in his fixed gaze I fancied I detected something more than curiosity—something of the lingering pensiveness with which, years ago, he had turned back to look at John—as if the lad reminded him of some one he knew. “Sir, I have to thank you.”

“Indeed no thanks are needed. I sincerely hope you are better to-day?”

Mr. March assented; but John's countenance apparently interested him so much that he forgot his usual complainings. “My daughter tells me you are our neighbours—I am happy to have such friendly ones. My dear,” in a half audible, pensive whisper to her, “I think your poor brother Walter would have grown up extremely like Mr.—Mr.—”

“Mr. Halifax, papa.”

“Mr. Halifax, we are going to take tea under the trees there—my daughter's suggestion—she is so fond of rurality. Will you give us the pleasure of your company? You and——” here, I must confess, the second invitation came in reply to a glance of Miss March's—“your friend.”

Of course, we assented: I considerably amused, and not ill-pleased, to see how naturally it fell that when John appeared in the scene, I, Phineas, subsided into the secondary character of John's “friend.”

Very soon—so soon, that our novel position seemed like an adventure out of the Arabian Nights—we found ourselves established under

the apple-tree, between whose branches the low sun stole in, kissing into red chestnut-colour the hair of the "Nut-browne Mayde," as she sat, bare-headed, pouring into small white china cups that dainty luxury, tea. She had on—not the grey gown, but a white one—worked in delicate muslin. A bunch of those small pinky-white roses that grew in such clusters about our parlour window, nestled, almost as if they were still growing, in her fair maiden bosom.

She apologized for little Jack's having "stolen" them from our domains for her—lucky Jack! and received some brief and rather incoherent answer—not mine—about being "quite welcome."

John sat opposite to her—I by her side—she had placed me there. It struck me as strange, that though her manner to us both was thoroughly frank and kind, it was a shade more frank, more kind, to me than to him. Also, I noted, that while she chatted gaily with me, John almost entirely confined his talk to her father.

But the young lady listened—ay, undoubtedly she listened—to every word that was said. I did not wonder at it: when his tongue was once unloosed, few people could talk better

than John Halifax. Not that he was one of your showy conversationalists; language was with him neither a science, an art, nor an accomplishment, but a mere vehicle for thought; the garb, always chosen as simplest and fittest, in which his ideas were clothed. His conversation was never wearisome, since he only spoke when he had something to say; and having said it, in the most concise and appropriate manner that suggested itself at the time—he was silent; and silence is a great and rare virtue at twenty years of age.

We talked a good deal about Wales; John had been there more than once in his journeyings; and this fact seemed to warm Miss March's tongue, rather shy and reserved though it was, at least, to him. She told us many an innocent tale of her life there; of her childish days, and of her dear old governess, whose name, I remember, was Cardigan. She seemed to have grown up solely under that lady's charge. It was not difficult to guess—though I forget whether she distinctly told us so—that “poor mamma” had died so early as to become a mere name to her orphan daughter. She evidently owed everything she was to this good governess.

“My dear,” at last said Mr. March, rather testily, “you make rather too much of our excellent Jane Cardigan. She is going to be married, and she will not care for you now”

“Hush, papa, that is a secret at present. Pray, Mr. Halifax, do you know Norton Bury?”

The abruptness of the question startled John, so that he only answered in a hurried affirmative. Indeed, Mr. March left him no time for further explanation.

“I hate the place. My late wife’s cousins, the Brithwoods of the Mythe, with whom I have had—ahem!—strong political differences—live there. And I was once nearly drowned in the Severn, close by.”

“Papa, don’t speak of that, please,” said Miss March, hurriedly; so hurriedly, that I am sure she did not notice what would otherwise have been plain enough—John’s sudden and violent colour. But the flush died down again—he never spoke a word. And of course, acting on his evident desire, neither did I.

“For my part,” continued the young lady, “I have no dislike to Norton Bury. Indeed, I rather admired the place, if I remember right.”

“You have been there?”—Though it was

the simplest question, John's sudden look at her, and the soft inflexion of his voice, struck me as peculiar.

“Once, when I was about twelve years old. But we will talk of something papa likes better. I am sure papa enjoys this lovely evening. Hark! how the doves are cooing in the beech-wood?”

I asked her if she had ever been in the beech-wood.

No; she was quite unacquainted with its mysteries—the fern-glades, the woodbine tangles, and the stream, that, if you listened attentively, you could hear faintly gurgling even where we sat.

“I did not know there was a stream so near. I have generally taken my walks across the Flat,” said Miss March, slightly smiling, and then blushing at having done so, though it was the faintest blush imaginable.

Neither of us made any reply.

Mr. March settled himself to laziness and his arm-chair; the conversation fell to the three younger persons—I may say the two—for I also seceded, and left John master of the field. It was enough for me to sit listening to him and Miss March, as they gradually became more

friendly; a circumstance natural enough, under the influence of that simple, solitary place, where all the pretences of etiquette seemed naturally to drop away, leaving nothing but the forms dictated and preserved by true manliness and true womanliness.

How young both looked, how happy in their frank, free youth, with the sun-rays slanting down upon them, making a glory round either head, and—as glory often does—dazzling painfully.

“Will you change seats with me, Miss March?—The sun will not reach your eyes there.”

She declined, refusing to punish any one for her convenience.

“It would not be punishment,” said John, so gravely, that one did not recognise it for a “pretty speech” till it had passed—and went on with their conversation. In the course of it, he managed so carefully, and at the same time so carelessly, to interpose his broad hat between the sun and her, that the fiery old king went down in splendour before she noticed that she had been thus guarded and sheltered. Though she did not speak—why should she? of such a little thing—yet it was one of those “little things” which often touch a woman more than any words.

Miss March rose. "I should greatly like to hear your stream and its wonderful singing." (John Halifax had been telling her how it held forth to me during my long, lonely days.)—"I wonder what it would say to me? Can we hear it from the bottom of this field?"

"Not clearly; we had better go into the wood." For I knew John would like that, though he was too great a hypocrite to second my proposal by a single word.

Miss March was more single-minded, or else had no reason for being the contrary. She agreed to my plan with childish eagerness. "Papa, you wouldn't miss me—I shall not be away five minutes. Then, Mr. Fletcher, will you go with me?"

"And I will stay beside Mr. March, so that he will not be left alone," said John, re-seating himself.

What did the lad do that for?—Why did he sit watching us so intently, as I led Miss March down the meadow, and into the wood? It passed my comprehension.

The young girl walked with me, as she talked with me, in perfect simplicity and frankness, free from the smallest hesitation. Even as the women I have known have treated me all my

life—showing me that sisterly trust and sisterly kindness which have compensated in a measure for the solitary fate which it pleased Heaven to lay upon me; which, in any case, conscience would have forced me to lay upon myself—that no woman should ever be more to me than a sister.

Yet I watched her with pleasure—this young girl, as she tripped on before me, noticing everything, enjoying everything. She talked to me a good deal too about myself, in her kindly way, asking what I did all day?—and if I were not rather dull sometimes, in this solitary country lodging?

“I am dull occasionally myself, or should be, if I had time to think about it. It is hard to be an only child.”

I told her I had never found it so.

“But then you have your friend. Has Mr. Halifax any brothers or sisters?”

“None. No relatives living.”

“Ah!” a half-compassionate ejaculation, as she pulled a woodbine spray, and began twisting it with those never-quiet fingers of hers. “You and he seem to be great friends?”

“John is brother, friend, everything in the world to me.”

“Is he? He must be very good. Indeed, he looks so,” observed Miss March, thoughtfully. “And I believe—at least I have often heard—that good men are rare.”

I had not time to enter into a discussion on that momentous question, when the origin of it himself appeared, breaking through the bushes to join us.

He half apologised for so doing, saying Mr. March had sent him.

“But pray do not come upon compulsion. It would be an injustice to this lovely wood.”

And the eyes of the “Nut-browne Mayde” were a little mischievous; brimming with the fun of girlhood. John looked preter-naturally grave, as he said, “I trust you do not object to my coming?”

She smiled—so merrily, that his slight haughtiness evaporated like mist before the sunbeams.

“I was obliged to startle you by jumping through the bushes,” John said, all his pleasant self again; “for I heard my own name. What terrible histories has this friend of mine been unfolding to you, Miss March?”

He spoke gaily ; but I fancied he looked uneasy. The young lady only laughed.

“ I have a great mind not to tell you, Mr. Halifax.”

“ Not when I ask you ?”

He spoke so seriously that she could choose but reply.

“ Mr. Fletcher was telling me three simple facts :—First, that you were an orphan, without relatives. Secondly, that you were his dearest friend. Thirdly—well, I never compromise truth—that you were good.”

“ And you ?”

“ The first I was ignorant of ; the second I had already guessed ; the third——”

He gazed at her intently.

“ The third I had likewise—not doubted.”

John made some hurried acknowledgment. He looked greatly pleased—nay, more than pleased—happy. He walked forward by Miss March's side, taking his natural place in the conversation, while I as naturally and willingly fell behind. But I heard all they said, and joined in it now and then.

Thus, sometimes spoken to, and sometimes left silent, watching their two figures, and idly noting their comparative heights — her head

came just above John's shoulder—I followed these young people through the quiet wood.

Let me say a word about that wood—dear and familiar as it was. Its like I have never seen since. It was small—so small that in its darkest depths you might catch the sunshine lighting up the branches of its outside trees. A young wood, too—composed wholly of smooth-barked beeches and sturdy Scotch firs, growing up side by side—the Adam and Eve, in this forest Eden. No old folk were there—no gnarled and withered foresters—every tree rose up, upright in its youth, and perfect after its kind. There was as yet no choking under-growth of vegetation; nothing but mosses, woodbine, and ferns; and between the boles of the trees you could trace vista after vista, as between the slender pillars of a cathedral aisle.

John pointed out all this to Miss March, especially noticing the peculiar character of the two species of trees—the masculine and feminine—fir and beech. She smiled at the fancy; and much graceful badinage went on between them. I had never before seen John in the company of women, and I marvelled to perceive the refinement of his language, and

the poetic ideas it clothed. I forgot the truth — of whose saying was it? — “that once in his life every man becomes a poet.”

They stood by the little rivulet, and he shewed her how the water came from the spring above; the old well-head where the cattle drank; how it took its course merrily through the woods, till at the bottom of the valley below it grew into a wide stream.

“Small beginnings make great endings,” said Miss March.

John answered her with the happiest smile! He dipped his hollowed palm into the water, and drank: she did the same. Then, in her free-hearted girlish fun, she formed a cup out of a broad leaf, which, by the greatest ingenuity, she managed to make contain about two tea-spoonfuls of water for the space of half-a-minute, and held it to my mouth.

“I am like Rebecca at the well. Drink, Eleazar,” she cried, gaily.

John looked on, with not quite so bright a face as heretofore; “I am very thirsty, too,” said he, in a low voice.

The young girl hesitated a moment; then filled and offered to him the Arcadian cup. I

fear, he drank out of it a deeper and more subtle draught than that innocent water

Both became somewhat grave, and stood, one on either side the stream, looking down upon it, letting its bubbling murmur have all the talk. What it said, I know not : I only know that it did not, could not, say to those two what it said to me.

When we took leave of our new acquaintances, Mr. March was extremely courteous, and declared our society would always be a pleasure to himself and to his daughter.

“ He always says so formally, ‘ my daughter, ’ ” I observed, breaking the silence in which they had left us. “ I wonder what her Christian name is. ”

“ I believe it is Ursula. ”

“ How did you find that out ? ”

“ It is written in one of her books. ”

“ Ursula ! ” I repeated, wondering where I had heard it before. “ A pretty name. ”

“ A very pretty name. ”

When John fell into this echo mood, I always found it best to fall into taciturnity.

CHAPTER XIII.

NEXT day, the rain poured down incessantly, sweeping blindingly across the hills, as I have rarely seen it sweep except at Enderley. The weather had apparently broken up, even thus early in the autumn; and for that day, and several days following, we had nothing but wind, rain, and storm. The sky was as dusky as Miss March's gray gown;—broken sometimes in the evening by a rift of misty gold, gleaming over Nunnely Hill, as if to shew us what September sunsets might have been.

John went every day to Norton Bury that week. His mind seemed restless—he was doubly kind and attentive to me; but every night I heard him go out in all the storm to walk upon the common. I longed to follow him, but it was best not.

On the Saturday morning, coming up to breakfast, I heard him ask Mrs. Tod how Mr.

March was ? We knew the invalid had been ailing all the week, nor had we seen him or his daughter once.

Mrs. Tod shook her head ominously. "He is very bad, sir ; badder than ever, I do think. She will sit up wi' him best part of every night."

"I imagined so. I have seen her light burning."

"Law, Mr. Halifax ! you don't be walking abroad of nights on the Flat ? It's terrible bad for your health," cried the honest soul, who never disguised the fact that Mr. Halifax was her favourite of all her lodgers, save and except Miss March.

"Thank you—for considering my health," he replied, smiling. "Only tell me, Mrs. Tod, can anything be done—can we do anything for that poor gentleman ?"

"Nothing, sir—thank'ee all the same."

"If he should be any worse, let me go for Doctor Brown ? I shall be at home all day."

"I'll tell Miss March of your kindness, sir," said Mrs. Tod, as with a troubled countenance she disappeared.

"Were you not going to Norton Bury to-day, John ?"

“I was—but—as it is a matter of no moment, I have changed my mind. You have been left so much alone lately. Nay—I’ll not disguise the truth ; I had another reason.”

“May I know it?”

“Of course you may. It is about our fellow-lodgers. Doctor Brown—I met him on the road this morning—told me that her father cannot live more than a few days—perhaps a few hours. And she does not know it.”

He leaned on the mantel-piece. I could see he was very much affected.

So was I.

“Her relatives—surely they ought to be sent for?”

“She has none. Doctor Brown said she once told him so : none nearer than the Brithwoods of the Mythe—and we know what the Brithwoods are.”

A young gentleman and his young wife—proverbially the gayest, proudest, most light-hearted of all our county families.

“Nay, Phineas, I will not have you trouble yourself. And after all, they are mere strangers—mere strangers. Come, sit down to breakfast.”

But he could not eat. He could not talk

of any common things. Every minute he fell into abstractions. At length he said, suddenly—

“Phineas, I do think it is wicked, downright wicked, for a doctor to be afraid of telling a patient he is going to die—more wicked, perhaps, to keep the friends in ignorance, until the last stunning blow falls. She ought to be told: she must be told: she may have many things to say to her poor father. And, God help her! for such a stroke she ought to be a little prepared. It might kill her else!”

He rose up and walked about the room. The seal once taken from his reserve, he expressed himself to me freely, as he had used to do—perhaps because at this time his feelings required no disguise. The dreams which might have peopled that beautiful sunset wood, necessarily faded in an atmosphere like this—filled with the solemn gloom of impending death.

At last he paused in his hurried walk, quieted perhaps by what he might have read in my ever-following eyes.

“I know you are as grieved as I am, Phineas. What can we do? Let us forget that they are strangers, and act as one Christian ought to

another. Do *you* not think she ought to be told?"

"Most decidedly. They might get further advice."

"That would be vain. Dr. Brown says it is a hopeless case, has been so for long—but he would not believe it, nor have his daughter told. He clings to life desperately. How horrible for her!"

"You think most of her."

"I do," said he, firmly. "He is reaping what he sowed, poor man! God knows, I pity him. But she is as good as an angel of heaven."

It was evident that, somehow or other, John had learnt a great deal about the father and daughter. However, now was not the time to question him. For at this moment, through the opened doors, we heard faint moans that pierced the whole house, and too surely came from the sick—possibly, the dying man. Mrs. Tod, who had been seeing Dr. Brown to his horse, now entered our parlour—pale, with swollen eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Halifax!" and the kind soul burst out into crying afresh. John made her sit down, and gave her a glass of wine.

"I've been with them since four this morning, and it makes me weakly like," said she. "That

poor Mr. March!—I didn't like him very much alive, but I do feel so sorry now he's a-dying."

Then he *was* dying.

"Does his daughter know?" I asked.

"No—no—I dare not tell her. Nobody dare."

"Does she not guess it?"

"Not a bit. Poor young body! she's never seen anybody so. She fancies him no worse than he has been, and has got over it. She *wouldn't* think else. She is a good daughter to him—that she be!"

We all sat silent; and then John said, in a low voice—"Mrs. Tod, she ought to be told—and you would be the best person to tell her."

But the soft-hearted landlady recoiled from the task. "If Tod were at home now—he that is so full o' wisdom learnt in 'the Kirk'"—

"I think," said John, hastily interrupting, "that a woman's soothing would be the best. But if you object, and as Doctor Brown will not be here till to-morrow—and as there is no one else to perform such a trying duty—it seems—that is, I believe"—here his rather formal speech failed. He ended it abruptly—"If you like,—I will tell her myself."

Mrs. Tod overwhelmed him with thankfulness.

“How shall I meet her, then? If it were done by chance, it would be best.”

“I’ll manage it somehow. The house is very quiet: I’ve sent all the children away, except the baby. The baby ’ll comfort her, poor dear! afterwards.” And again drying her honest eyes, Mrs. Tod ran out of the room.

We could do nothing at all that morning. The impending sorrow might have been our own, instead of that of people who three weeks ago were perfect strangers. We sat and talked, less perhaps of them individually, than of the dark Angel, whom face to face I at least had never yet known—who even now stood at the door of our little habitation, making its various inmates feel as one family, in the presence of the great leveller of all things—Death.

Hour by hour of that long day, the rain fell down—pouring—pouring—shutting us up, as it were, from the world without, and obliterating every thought, save of what was happening under our one roof—that awful change which was taking place in the upper room, in the other half of the house, whence the moans descended, and whence Mrs. Tod came out from time to time, hurrying mournfully to tell “Mr. Halifax” how things went on.

It was nearly dusk before she told us Mr. March was asleep, that his daughter had at last been persuaded to come down stairs, and was standing drinking "a cup o' tea" by the kitchen fire.

"You must go now, sir; she'll not stop five minutes. Please go."

"I will," he answered; but he turned frightfully pale. "Phineas—don't let her see us both. Stay without the door. If there were anybody to tell her this but me!"

"Do you hesitate?"

"No.—No."

And he went out. I did not follow; but I heard afterwards, both from himself and Mrs. Tod, what transpired.

She was standing so absorbed that she did not notice his entrance. She looked years older and sadder than the young girl who had stood by the stream-side less than a week ago. When she turned and spoke to John, it was with a manner also changed. No hesitation, no shyness; trouble had put aside both.

"Thank you, my father is indeed seriously ill. I am in great trouble, you see, though Mrs. Tod is very, very kind. Don't cry so, good Mrs. Tod; I can't cry, I dare not. If I

once began I should never stop, and then how could I help my poor father? There now, there!"

She laid her hand, with its soft, fluttering motions, on the good woman's shoulder, and looked up at John. He said afterwards, that those dry, tearless eyes smote him to the heart.

"Why does she sob so, Mr. Halifax? Papa will be better to-morrow, I am sure."

"I *hope* so," he answered, dwelling on the word; "we should always hope, to the very last."

"The last?" with a quick, startled glance.

"And then we can only trust in God."

Something more than the *mere* words struck me. She examined him closely for a minute.

"You mean—yes—I understand what you mean. But you are mistaken. The doctor would have told me—if—if—" she shivered, and left the sentence unfinished.

"Dr. Brown was afraid—we were all afraid," broke in Mrs. Tod, sobbing. "Only Mr. Halifax, he said—"

Miss March turned abruptly to John. That woful gaze of hers could be answered by no words. I believe he took her hand, but I cannot tell. One thing I can tell, for she said it

to me herself afterwards, that he seemed to look down upon her like a strong, pitiful, comforting angel; a messenger sent by God.

Then she broke away, and flew upstairs. John came in again to me, and sat down. He did not speak for many minutes.

After an interval—I know not how long—we heard Mrs. Tod calling loudly for “Mr. Halifax.” We both ran through the empty kitchen to the foot of the stairs that led to Mr. March’s room.

Mr. March’s room! Alas, he owned nothing now on this fleeting, perishable earth of ours. He had gone from it: the spirit stealing quietly away in sleep. He belonged now to the world everlasting.

Peace be to him! whatever his life had been, he was *her* father.

Mrs. Tod sat half way down the staircase, holding Ursula March across her knees. The poor young creature was insensible, or nearly so. She—we learnt—had been composed under the terrible discovery made when she returned to his room; and when all restorative means failed, and the fact of death became certain, she had herself closed her father’s eyes, and kissed him, then tried to walk from the

room—but at the third step she dropped quietly down.

There she lay ; physical weakness conquering the strong heart : she lay, overcome at last. There was no more to bear. Had there been, I think she would have been able to have borne it still.

John took her in his arms ; I know not if he took her, or Mrs. Tod gave her to him—but there she was. He carried her across the kitchen into our own little parlour, and laid her down on my sofa.

“ Shut the door, Phineas. Mrs. Tod, keep everybody out. She is waking now.”

She did, indeed, open her eyes, with a long sigh, but closed them again. Then, with an effort, she sat upright, and looked at us all around.

“ Oh, my dear ! my dear ! ” moaned Mrs. Tod, clasping her, and sobbing over her like a child. “ Cry, do cry ! ”

“ I *can't*,” she said, and lay down again.

We stood awed, watching that poor, pale face, on every line of which was written stunned, motionless, impassive grief. For John—two minutes of such a gaze as his might in a man's deep heart do the work of years.

“She must be roused,” he said at last. “She *must* cry. Mrs. Tod, take her up-stairs. Let her look at her father.”

The word did what he desired; what almost her life demanded. She clung round Mrs. Tod’s neck in torrents of weeping.

“Now, Phineas, let us go away.”

And he went, walking almost like one blind-fold, straight out of the house, I following him.

CHAPTER XIV.

“ I AM quite certain, Mrs. Tod, that it would be much better for her ; and if she consents, it shall be so,” said John, decisively.

We three were consulting, the morning after the death, on a plan which he and I had already settled between ourselves, namely, that we should leave our portion of the cottage entirely at Miss March’s disposal, while we inhabited hers—save that locked and silent chamber wherein there was no complaining, no suffering now.

Either John’s decision, or Mrs. Tod’s reasoning, was successful ; we received a message to the effect, that Miss March would not refuse our “ kindness.” So we vacated ; and all that long Sunday we sat in the parlour lately our neighbour’s, heard the rain come down, and the church-bells ring ; the wind blowing autumn gales, and shaking all the windows, even that of the room overhead. It sounded awful *there*.

We were very glad the poor young orphan was away.

On the Monday morning we heard going up-stairs the heavy footsteps that every one at some time or other has shuddered at ; then the hammering. Mrs. Tod came in, and told us that no one—not even his daughter—could be allowed to look at what had been “poor Mr. March,” any more. All with him was ended.

“The funeral is to be soon. I wonder what she will do then, poor thing !”

John made me no answer.

“Is she left well provided for, do you think ?”

“It is impossible to say.”

His answers were terse and brief enough, but I could not help talking about the poor young creature, and wondering if she had any relative or friend to come to her in this sad time.

“She said—do you remember, when she was crying—that she had not a friend in the wide world.?”

And this fact, which he expressed with a sort of triumph, seemed to afford the greatest possible comfort to John.

But all our speculations were set at rest by a request brought this moment by Mrs. Tod—

that Mr. Halifax would go with her to speak to Miss March.

“I! only I?” said John, starting.

“Only you, sir. She wants somebody to speak to about the funeral—and I said, ‘There be Mr. Halifax, Miss March, the kindest gentleman;’ and she said, ‘if it wouldn’t trouble him to come——’”

“Tell her I am coming.”

When, after some time, he returned, he was very serious.

“Wait a minute, Phineas, and you shall hear; I feel confused, rather. It is so strange, her trusting me thus. I wish I could help her more.”

Then he told me all that had passed—how he and Mrs. Tod had conjointly arranged the hasty funeral—how brave and composed she had been—that poor child, all alone!

“Has she indeed no one?”

“No one. She might send for Mr. Brithwood, but he was not friendly with her father; she said, she had rather ask this ‘kindness’ of me, because her father had liked me, and thought I resembled their Walter, who died.”

“Poor Mr. March!—perhaps he is with

Walter, now. But, John, can you do all that is necessary for her? You are very young."

"She does seem to feel that. She treats me as if I were a man of forty. Do I look so old and grave, Phineas?"

"Sometimes. And about the funeral?"

"It will be very simple. She is determined to go herself. She wishes to have no one besides Mrs. Tod, you and me."

"Where is he to be buried?"

"In the little churchyard close by, which you and I have looked at many a time. Ah! Phineas, we did not think how soon we should be laying our dead there."

"Not *our* dead, thank God!"

But the next minute I understood. "*Our* dead"—the involuntary admission of that sole feeling, which makes one, erewhile a stranger, say to, or think of another—"All thine are mine, and mine are thine, henceforward and for ever."

I watched John as he stood by the fire; his thoughtful brow and firm-set lips contradicting the youthfulness of his looks. Few as were his years, he had learnt much in them. He was at heart a man, ready and able to well-design and carry out a man's work in the world. And in his whole aspect was such grave purity, such

honest truth, that no wonder, young as they both were, and little as she knew of him, this poor orphan should not have feared to trust him entirely. And there is nothing that binds heart to heart, of lovers or friends, so quickly and so safely, as to trust and be trusted in time of trouble.

“Did she tell you any more, John? Anything of her circumstances?”

“No. But from something Mrs. Tod let fall, I fear”—and he vainly tried to disguise his extreme satisfaction — “that she will be left with little or nothing.”

“Poor Miss March!”

“Why call her poor? She is not a woman to be pitied, but to be honoured. You would have thought so, had you seen her this morning. So gentle—so wise—so brave. Phineas,”—and I could see his lips tremble—“that was the kind of woman Solomon meant, when he said, ‘Her price is above rubies.’”

“I think so too. I doubt not that when she marries, Ursula March will be ‘a crown to her husband.’”

My words, or the half sigh that accompanied them—I could not help it—seemed to

startle John, but he made no remark. Nor did we recur to the subject again that day.

Two days after, our little company followed the coffin out of the woodbine porch, where we had last said good-bye to poor Mr. March—across the few yards of common, to the churchyard, scarcely larger than a cottage garden, where, at long intervals, the few Enderley dead were laid.

A small household procession—the daughter first, supported by good Mrs. Tod, then John Halifax and I. So we buried him—the stranger who, at this time, and henceforth, seemed even as John had expressed it, “our dead,” our own.

We followed the orphan home. She had walked firmly, and stood by the grave-side motionless, her hood drawn over her face. But when we came back to Rose Cottage door, and she gave a quick, startled glance up at the familiar window, we saw Mrs. Tod take her, unresisting, into her motherly arms—then we knew how it would be.

“Come away,” said John, in a smothered voice—and we came away.

All that day, we sat in our parlour—Mr. March’s parlour that had been—where, through

the no longer darkened casement, the unwonted sun poured in ; we tried to settle to our ordinary ways, and feel as if this were like all other days—our old sunshiny days at Enderley. But it would not do. Some imperceptible but great change had taken place. It seemed a year since that Saturday afternoon, when we were drinking tea so merrily under the apple tree in the field.

We heard no more from Miss March that day. The next, we received a message of thanks for our “ kindness.” She had given way at last, Mrs. Tod said, and kept her chamber, not seriously ill, but in spirit thoroughly broken down. For three days more, when I went to meet John returning from Norton Bury, I could see that his first glance as he rode up between the chestnut trees, was to the window of the room that had been mine. I always told him, without his asking, whatever Mrs. Tod had told me about her state ; he used to listen, generally in silence, and then speak of something else. He hardly ever mentioned Miss March’s name.

On the fourth morning, I happened to ask him if he had told my father what had occurred here ?

“ No.”

I looked surprised.

“Did you wish me to tell him? I will, if you like, Phineas.”

“Oh, no. He takes little interest in strangers.”

Soon after, as he lingered about the parlour, John said,

“Probably I may be late to-night. After business hours, I want to have a little talk with your father.”

He stood irresolutely by the fire. I knew by his countenance that there was something on his mind.

“David.”

“Ay, lad.”

“Will you not tell me first what you want to say to my father?”

“I can't stay now. To-night, perhaps. But, pshaw! what is there to be told? Nothing.”

“Anything that concerns you, can never be to me quite ‘nothing.’”

“I know that,” he said, affectionately, and went out of the room.

When he came in, he looked much more cheerful—stood switching his riding-whip after the old habit, and called upon me to admire his favourite brown mare.

“ I do ; and her master likewise. John, when you’re on horseback, you look like a young knight of the middle ages. Maybe, some of the old Norman blood was in ‘ Guy Halifax, gentleman.’ ”

It was a dangerous allusion. He changed colour, so rapidly and violently, that I thought I had angered him.

“ No — that would not matter — cannot — never shall. I am what God made me, and what, with His blessing, I will make myself.”

He said no more, and very soon afterward he rode away. But not before, as every—every day, I had noticed that wistful, wandering glance up at the darkened window of the room, where, sad and alone, save for kindly Mrs. Tod, the young orphan lay.

In the evening, just before bed-time, he said to me, with a rather sad smile, “ Phineas, you wanted to know what it was that I wished to speak about to your father ? ”

“ Ay, do tell me.”

“ It is hardly worth telling. Only to ask him how he set up in business for himself. He was, I believe, little older than I am now.”

“ Just twenty-one.”

“ And I shall be twenty-one next June.”

“Are you thinking of setting up for yourself?”

“A likely matter!” and he laughed, rather bitterly, I thought—“when every trade requires some capital, and the only trade I thoroughly understand a very large one. No, no, Phineas; you’ll not see me setting up a rival tan-yard next year. My capital is *nil*.”

“Except youth, health, courage, honour, honesty, and a few other such trifles.”

“None which I can coin into money, however. And your father has expressly told me, that without money a tanner can do nothing.”

“Unless, as was his own case, he was taken into some partnership where his services were so valuable as to be received instead of capital. True, my father earned little at first, scarcely more than you earn now; but he managed to live respectably, and, in course of time, to marry.”

I avoided looking at John as I said the last word. He made no answer, but in a little time he came and leaned over my chair.

“Phineas, you are a wise counsellor—a ‘brother born for adversity.’ I have been vexing myself a good deal about my future, but now I

will take heart. Perhaps, some day, neither you nor any one else will be ashamed of me."

"No one could, even now, seeing you as you really are."

"As John Halifax, not as the tanner's 'prentice boy? Oh, lad—there the goad sticks! Here, I forget everything unpleasant; I am my own free natural self; but the minute I get back to Norton Bury—However, it is a wrong—a wicked feeling, and must be kept down. Let us talk of something else."

"Of Miss March? She has been greatly better all day."

"She? No, not of her to-night!" he said, hurriedly. "Pah! I could almost fancy the odour of these hides on my hands still. Give me a candle."

He went up-stairs, and only came down a few minutes before bed-time.

Next morning was Sunday. After the bells had done ringing, we saw a black-veiled figure pass our window. Poor girl!—going to church alone! We did not see anything more of her that day.

On Monday, a message came, saying that Miss March would be glad to see us both. Of course, we went.

She was sitting, quite alone, in our old parlour, very grave and pale, but perfectly composed. A little more womanly, perhaps, in the dignity of her great grief, which, girl as she was, and young men as we were, seemed to be to her a shield transcending all worldly "proprieties."

As she rose, and we shook hands, in a silence only broken by the rustle of her black dress, not one of us thought—surely the most evil-minded gossip could not have dared to think—that there was anything "strange" in her receiving us here.

We began to talk; of common things—not *the* thing. She seemed to have fought through the worst of her trouble, and to have put it back into those deep quiet chambers where all griefs go: never forgotten, never removed, but sealed up in silence, as it should be. Perhaps, too—for let us not exact more from Nature than Nature grants—the wide, wide difference in character, temperament, and sympathies between Miss March and her father, unconsciously made his loss less a heart-loss, total and irremediable, than one of mere habit and instinctive feeling, which, the first shock over, would insensibly heal. Besides, she was young—young in life, in hope, in body and soul; and youth, though it grieves passionately, cannot for ever grieve.

I saw, and rejoiced to see, that Miss March was in some degree herself again ; at least, so much of her old self as was right, and natural, and good.

She and John spoke together a good deal. Her manner to him was easy and natural, as to a friend who deserved and possessed her warm gratitude : his was more constrained. Gradually, however, this wore away ; there was something in her which, piercing all disguises, went at once to the heart of things. She seemed to hold in her hand the touchstone of truth.

He asked—no, I believe *I* asked her, how long she intended staying at Enderley ?

“ I can hardly tell. Once I understood that my cousin Richard Brithwood was left my guardian. This my—this was to have been altered, I believe. I wish it had been. You know Norton Bury, Mr. Halifax ?”

“ I live there.”

“ Indeed !” — with some surprise. “ Then you are probably acquainted with my cousin and his wife ?”

“ No ; but I have seen them.”

John gave these answers without lifting his eyes.

“ Will you tell me candidly, for I know no-

thing of her, and it is rather important that I should, what sort of a person is Lady Caroline?"

This frank question, put directly, and guarded by the battery of those innocent, girlish eyes, was a very hard question to be answered; for Norton Bury had said many ill-natured things of our young 'squire's wife, whom he married at Naples, from the house of the well-known Lady Hamilton.

"She was, you are aware, Lady Caroline Ravenel, the Earl of Luxmore's daughter."

"Yes, yes; but that does not signify. I know nothing of Lord Luxmore—I want to know what she is herself."

John hesitated, then answered, as he could with truth: "She is said to be very charitable to the poor, pleasant and kind-hearted. But, if I may venture to hint as much, not exactly the friend whom I think Miss March would choose, or to whom she would like to be indebted for anything but courtesy."

"That was not my meaning. I need not be indebted to any one. Only, if she were a good woman, Lady Caroline would have been a great comfort and a useful adviser to one who is scarcely eighteen, and, I believe, an heiress."

“An heiress!” The colour flashed in a torrent over John’s whole face, then left him pale. “I—pardon me—I thought it was otherwise. Allow me to—to express my pleasure—”

“It does not add to mine,” said she, half-sighing. “Jane Cardigan always told me riches brought many cares. Poor Jane! I wish I could go back to her—but that is impossible!”

A silence here intervened, which it was necessary some one should break.

“So much good can be done with a large fortune,” I said.

“Yes. I know not if mine is very large; indeed, I never understood money matters, but have merely believed what—what I was told. However, be my fortune much or little, I will try to use it well.”

“I am sure you will.”

John said nothing; but his eyes, sad indeed, yet lit with a proud tenderness, rested upon her as she spoke. Soon after, he rose up to take leave.

“Do not go yet; I want to ask about Norton Bury. I had no idea you lived there. And Mr. Fletcher too?”

I replied in the affirmative.

“ In what part of the town ? ”

“ On the Coltham Road, near the Abbey.”

“ Ah, those Abbey chimes !—how I used to listen to them, night after night, when the pain kept me awake ! ”

“ What pain ? ” asked John, suddenly, alive to any suffering of hers.

Miss March smiled, almost like her old smile. “ Oh ! I had nearly forgotten it, though it was very bad at the time : only that I cut my wrist rather dangerously with a bread knife, in a struggle with my nurse.”

“ When was that ? ” eagerly cried John.

For me, I said nothing. Already I guessed all. Alas ! the tide of fate was running strong against my poor David. What could I do but stand aside and watch ?

“ When was it ? Let me see—five, six years ago. But, indeed, 'tis nothing.”

“ Not exactly ‘ nothing.’ Do tell me ! ”

And John stood, listening for her words, counting them even, as one would count, drop by drop, a vial of joy which is nearly empty, yet Time's remorseless hand still keeps on, pouring, pouring.

“ Well, if you must know it, it was one of my naughtinesses—I was very naughty as a child.

They would not let me have a piece of bread that I wanted to give away to a poor lad."

"Who stood opposite—under an alley—in the rain?—was it not so?"

"How could you know? But he looked so hungry; I was so sorry for him."

"Were you?"—in a tone almost inaudible.

"I have often thought of him since, when I chanced to look at this mark."

"Let me look at it—may I?"

Taking her hand, he softly put back the sleeve, discovering, just above the wrist, a deep, discoloured seam. He gazed at it, his features all quivering, then, without a word either of adieu or apology, he quitted the room.

CHAPTER 'XV.

I WAS left with Miss March alone. She sat looking at the door where John had disappeared, in extreme surprise, not unmingled with a certain embarrassment.

“What does he mean, Mr. Fletcher? Can I have offended him in any way?”

“Indeed, no.”

“Why did he go away?”

But that question, simple as it was in itself, and most simply put, involved so much, that I felt I had no right to answer it; while, at the same time, I had no possible right to use any of those disguises or prevarications which are always foolish and perilous, and very frequently wrong. Nor, even had I desired, was Miss March the woman to which one dared offer the like; therefore I said to her plainly—

“I know the reason. I would tell you, but I think John would prefer telling you himself.”

“As he pleases,” returned Miss March, a slight reserve tempering her frank manner; but it soon vanished, and she began talking to me in her usual friendly way, asking me many questions about the Brithwoods and about Norton Bury. I answered them freely—my only reservation being, that I took care not to give any information concerning ourselves.

Soon afterwards, as John did not return, I took leave of her, and went to our own parlour.

He was not there. He had left word with little Jack, who met him on the common, that he was gone a long walk, and should not return till dinner-time. Dinner-time came, but I had to dine alone. It was the first time I ever knew him break even such a trivial promise. My heart misgave me—I spent a miserable day. I was afraid to go in search of him, lest he should return to a dreary, empty parlour. Better, when he did come in, that he should find a cheerful hearth and—me.

Me, his friend and brother, who had loved him these six years; better than anything else in the whole world. Yet what could I do now? Fate had taken the sceptre out of my hands—I was utterly powerless; I could neither give him comfort, nor save him pain, any more.

What I felt then, in those long, still hours, many a one has felt likewise ; many a parent over a child, many a sister over a brother, many a friend over a friend. A feeling natural and universal. Let those who suffer take it patiently, as the common lot ; let those who win hold the former ties in tenderest reverence, nor dare to flaunt the new bond cruelly in the face of the old.

Having said this, which, being the truth, it struck me as right to say, I will no more allude to the subject.

In the afternoon there occurred an incident. A coach-and-four, resplendent in liveries, stopped at the door : I knew it well, and so did all Norton Bury. It was empty ; but Lady Caroline's own maid—so I heard afterwards—sat in the rumble, and Lady Caroline's own black-eyed Neapolitan page leaped down, bearing a large letter, which I concluded was for Miss March.

I was glad that John was not at home ; glad that the coach, with all its fine paraphernalia, was away, empty as it had arrived, before John came in.

He did not come till it was nearly dusk. I

was at the window, looking at my four poplar-trees, as they pointed skywards like long fingers stretching up out of the gloom, when I saw him crossing the common. At first I was going to meet him at the gate, but on second thoughts I remained within, and only stirred up the fire, which could be seen shining ever so far.

“What a bright blaze!—Nay, you have not waited dinner, I hope?—Tea—yes, that’s far better; I have had such a long walk, and am so tired.”

The words were cheerful, so was the tone. *Too* cheerful—oh, by far! The sort of cheerfulness that strikes to a friend’s heart, like the piping of soldiers as they go away, back from a new-filled grave.

“Where have you been, John?”

“All over Nunnely Hill. I must take you there—such expansive views. As Mrs. Tod informed me, quoting some local ballad, which she said was written by an uncle of hers—

“ ‘ There you may spy
Twenty-three churches with the glass and the eye.’

Remarkable fact, isn’t it?”

Thus he kept on talking all tea-time, in-

cessantly, rapidly talking. It was enough to make one weep.

After tea, I insisted on his taking my arm-chair; saying that after such a walk, in that raw day, he must be very cold.

“Not the least—quite the contrary—feel my hand.” It was burning. “But I am tired—thoroughly tired.”

He leaned back and shut his eyes. Oh, the utter weariness of body and soul that was written on his face!

“Why did you go out alone? John, you know that you have always me.”

He looked up smiling. But the momentary brightness passed. Alas, I was not enough to make him happy now.

We sat silent. I knew he would speak to me in time; but the gates of his heart were close locked. It seemed as if he dared not open them, lest the flood should burst forth and overwhelm us.

At nine o'clock Mrs. Tod came in with supper. She had always something or other to say, especially since the late events had drawn the whole household of Rose Cottage so closely together; now, she was brim-full of news.

She had been all that evening packing up for poor, dear Miss March; though why she should call her "poor," truly, she didn't know. Who would have thought Mr. March had such grand relations? Had we seen Lady Caroline Brithwood's coach that came to-day?—Such a beautiful coach it was—sent on purpose for Miss March—only she wouldn't go. "But now she has made up her mind, poor dear. She is leaving to-morrow."

When John heard this, he was helping Mrs. Tod, as usual, to fasten the heavy shutters. He stood, with his hand on the bolt, motionless, till the good woman was gone. Then he staggered to the mantel-piece, and leaned on it with both his elbows, his hands covering his face.

But there was no disguise now—no attempt at it. A young man's first love—not first fancy, but first love—in all its passion, desperation, and pain had come to him, as it comes to all. I saw him writhing under it—saw, and could not help him. The next few silent minutes were very bitter to us both.

Then I said gently, "David!"

"Well?"

"I thought things were so."

“ Yes.”

“ Suppose you were to talk to me a little—it might do you good.”

“ Another time. Let me go out—out into the air ; I’m ehoking.”

Snatching up his hat, he rushed from me. I did not dare to follow.

After waiting some time, and listening till all was quiet in the house, I could bear the suspense no longer, and went out.

I thought I should find him on the Flat—probably in his favourite walk, his “ terrace,” as he called it, where he had first seen, and must have seen many a day after, that girlish figure tripping lightly along, through the morning sunshine and morning dew. I had a sort of instinct that he would be there now ; so I climbed up the shortest way, often losing my footing ; for it was a pitch-dark night, and the common looked as wide, and black, and still, as a midnight sea.

John was not there ; indeed, if he had been, I could scarcely have seen him ; I could see nothing but the void expanse of the Flat, or, looking down, the broad river of mist that rolled through the valley, on the other side of which

twinkled a few cottage lights, like unearthly beacons from the farthest shore of an impassable flood.

Suddenly I remembered hearing Mrs. Tod say that, on account of its pits and quarries, the common was extremely dangerous after dark, except to those who knew it well. In a horrible dread I called out John's name—but nothing answered. I went on blindly, desperately, shouting as I went. At length, in one of the Roman fosses, I stumbled and fell. Some one came, darting with great leaps through the mist, and lifted me up.

“ Oh ! David—David ! ”

“ Phineas—is that you ? You have come out this bitter night—why did you ? ”

His tenderness over me, even then, made me break down. I forgot my manhood, or else it slipped from me unawares. In the old Bible language, “ I fell on his neck and wept.”

Afterwards, I was not sorry for this, because I think my weakness gave him strength. I think, amidst the whirl of passion that racked him, it was good for him to feel that the one crowning cup of life is not inevitably life's sole sustenance ; that it was something to have a friend and brother, who loved him

with a love — like Jonathan's — “passing the love of women.”

“I have been very wrong,” he kept repeating, in a broken voice; “but I was not myself. I am better now. Come—let us go home.”

He put his arm round me to keep me warm, and brought me safely into the house. He even sat down by the fire to talk with me. Whatever struggle there had been, I saw it was over, he looked his own self—only so very, very pale, and spoke in his natural voice; ay, even when mentioning *her*, which he was the first to do.

“She goes to-morrow, you are sure, Phineas?”

“I believe so. Shall you see her again?”

“If she desires it.”

“Shall you say anything to her?”

“Nothing. If for a little while—not knowing or not thinking of all the truth—I felt I had strength to remove mountains, I now see that even to dream of such things, makes me a fool, or possibly worse—a knave. I will be neither—I will be a man.”

I replied not: how could one answer such words?—calmly uttered, though each syllable must have been torn out like a piece of his heart.

“Did she say anything to you? Did she ask why I left her so abruptly, this morning?”

“She did; I said you would probably tell her the reason, yourself.”

“I will. She must no longer be kept in ignorance about me or my position. I shall tell her the whole truth—save one thing. She need never know that.”

I guessed by his broken voice what the “one thing” was;—which he counted as nothing; but which, I think, any true woman would have counted worth everything—the priceless gift of a good man’s love. Love, that in such a nature as his, if once conceived, would last a life-time. And she was not to know it! I felt sorry—ay, even sorry, for Ursula March.

“Do you not think I am right, Phineas?”

“Perhaps. I cannot say. You are the best judge.”

“It is right,” said he, firmly. “There can be no possible hope for me; nothing remains but silence.”

I did not quite agree with him. I could not see that to any young man, only twenty years old, with the world all before him, any love could be absolutely hopeless; especially to a young man like John Halifax. But as things

now stood, I deemed it best to leave him altogether to himself, offering neither advice nor opinion. What Providence willed, through *his* will, would happen : for me to interfere either way would be at once idle and perilous ; nay, in some sense, exceedingly wrong.

So I kept my thoughts to myself, and preserved a total silence.

John broke it—talking to himself as if he had forgotten I was by.

“To think it was she who did it—that first kindness to a poor friendless boy. I never forgot it—never. It did me more good than I can tell. And that scar on her poor arm—her dear little tender arm!—how this morning I would have given all the world to——”

He broke off—instinctively, as it were—with the sort of feeling every good man has, that the sacred passion, the inmost tenderness of his love should be kept wholly between himself and the woman he has chosen.

I knew that too ; knew that in his heart had grown up a secret, a necessity, a desire, stronger than any friendship—closer than the closest bond of brotherly love. Perhaps—I hardly know why—I sighed.

John turned round—“Phineas, you must not

think, because—because of this—which you will understand for yourself, I hope, one day; you must not think I could ever think less, feel less, about my brother.”

He spoke earnestly, with a full heart. We clasped hands warmly and silently. Thus was healed my last lingering pain—I was thenceforward entirely satisfied.

I think we parted that night as we had never parted before; feeling that the trial of our friendship—the great trial, perhaps, of any friendship—had come and passed, safely: that whatever new ties might gather round each, our two hearts would cleave together until death.

The next morning rose, as I have seen many a morning rise at Enderley—misty and grey; but oh, so heavenly fair! with a pearly network of dewy gossamer under foot, and overhead countless thistle-downs flying about, like fairy chariots hurrying out of sight of the sun; which had only mounted high enough above the Flat to touch the horizon of hills opposite, and the tops of my four poplars, leaving Rose Cottage and the valley below it all in morning shadow. John called me to go with him on the common—his voice sounded so cheerful outside my door, that it was with a glad heart I rose and went.

He chose his old walk—his “terrace.” No chance now of meeting the light figure coming tripping along the level hill. All that dream was over now. He did not speak of it—nor I. He seemed contented — or, at least, thoroughly calmed down; except that the sweet composure of his mien had settled down into the harder gravity of manhood. The great crisis and climax of youth had been gone through—he never could be a boy again.

We came to that part of John’s terrace which overhung the church-yard. Both of us glanced instinctively down to the heap of loose red earth—the as yet nameless grave. Some one stood beside it—the only one who was likely to be there.

Even had I not recognized her, John’s manner would have told me who it was. A deadly paleness overspread his face—its quietness was gone—every feature trembled. It almost broke my heart to see how deeply this love had struck its roots down to the very core of his; twisting them with every fibre of his being. A love, which though it had sprung up so early, and come to maturity so fast, might yet be the curse of his whole existence. Save that no love conceived virtuously, for a good woman, be it ever

so hopeless, can ever be rightly considered as a curse.

“Shall we go away?” I whispered—“A long walk—to the other side of the Flat? She will have left Rose Cottage soon.”

“When?”

“Before noon, I heard. Come, David.”

He suffered me to put my arm in his, and draw him away for a step or two, then turned.

“I can’t, Phineas, I can’t! I *must* look at her again — only for one minute — one little minute.”

But he stayed—we were standing where she could not see us—till she had slowly left the grave. We heard the click of the church-yard gate: where she went afterward, we could not discern.

John moved away. I asked him if we should take our walk now? But he did not seem to hear me; so I let him follow his own way—perhaps it might be for good—who could tell?

He descended from the Flat, and came quickly round the corner of the cottage. Miss March stood there, trying to find one fresh rose among the fast withering clusters about what had been our parlour window and now was hers.

She saw us, acknowledged us, but hurriedly, and not without some momentary sign of agitation.

“The roses are all gone,” she said, rather sadly.

“Perhaps, higher up, I can reach one—shall I try?”

I marvelled to see that John’s manner as he addressed her was just like his manner always with her.

“Thank you—that will do. I wanted to take some away with me—I am leaving Rose Cottage to-day, Mr. Halifax.”

“So I have heard.”

He did not say “*sorry* to hear.” I wondered, did the omission strike her? But no—she evidently looked upon us both as mere pleasant companions, inevitably, perhaps even tenderly bound up with this time; and as such, claiming a more than ordinary place in her regard and remembrance. No man with common sense or common feeling, could for a moment dare to misinterpret the emotion she shewed.

Re-entering the house, she asked us if we would come in with her; she had a few things to say to us. And then she again referred gratefully to our “kindness.”

We all went once more—for the last time—into the little parlour.

“Yes—I am going away,” she said, mournfully.

“We hope all good will go with you—always and everywhere.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fletcher.”

It was strange, the grave tone our intercourse now invariably assumed. We might have been three old people, who had long fought with and endured the crosses of the world, instead of two young men and a young woman, in the very dawn of life.

“Circumstances have fixed my plans since I saw you yesterday. I am going to reside for a time with my cousins, the Brithwoods. It seems best for me. Lady Caroline is very kind, and I am so lonely.”

She said this not in any complaint, but as if accepting the fact, and making up her mind to endure it. A little more fragmentary conversation passed, chiefly between herself and me—John uttered scarcely a word. He sat by the window, half shading his face with his hand. Under that covert, the gaze which incessantly followed and dwelt on her face—oh, had she seen it!

The moments narrowed. Would he say what he had intended, concerning his position in the world? Had she guessed or learned anything, or were we to her simply Mr. Halifax and Mr. Fletcher—two “gentlemen” of Norton Bury? It appeared so.

“This is not a very long good bye, I trust?” said she to me, with something more than courtesy. “I shall remain at the Mythe House some weeks, I believe. How long do you purpose staying at Enderley?”

I was uncertain.

“But your home is in Norton Bury? I hope—I trust, you will allow my cousin to express in his own house his thanks and mine for your great kindness during my trouble?”

Neither of us answered. Miss March looked surprised—hurt—nay, displeased; then her eye, resting on John, lost its haughtiness, and became humble and sweet.

“Mr. Halifax, I know nothing of my cousin, and I do know you. Will you tell me—candidly, as I know you will—whether there is anything in Mr. Brithwood, which you think unworthy of your acquaintance?”

“He would think me unworthy of his,” was the low, firm answer.

Miss March smiled incredulously. "Because you are not very rich? What can that signify? It is enough for me that my friends are gentlemen."

"Mr. Brithwood, and many others, would not allow my claim to that title."

Astonished—nay, somewhat more than astonished—the young gentlewoman drew back a little. "I do not quite understand you."

"Let me explain then:" and her involuntary gesture seeming to have brought back all honest dignity and manly pride, he faced her, once more himself. "It is right, Miss March, that you should know who and what I am, to whom you are giving the honour of your kindness. Perhaps you ought to have known before; but here—at Enderley, we seemed to be equals—friends."

"I have indeed felt it so."

"Then you will the sooner pardon my not telling you—what you never asked, and I was only too ready to forget—that we are *not* equals—that is, society would not regard us as such—and I doubt if even you yourself would wish us to be friends."

"Why not?"

“ Because you are a gentlewoman, and I am a tradesman.”

The news was evidently a shock to her—it could not but be, reared as she had been. She sat, the eye-lashes dropping over her flushed cheeks—perfectly silent.

John’s voice grew firmer—prouder—no hesitation now.

“ My calling is, as you will soon hear at Norton Bury—that of a tanner. I am apprentice to Abel Fletcher—Phineas’s father.”

“ Mr. Fletcher !” She looked up at me—a mingled look of kindness and pain.

“ Ay, Phineas is a little less beneath your notice than I am. He is rich—he has been well educated ; I have had to educate myself. I came to Norton Bury six years ago—a beggar-boy. No, not quite that—for I either worked or starved.”

The earnestness, the passion of his tone made Miss March lift her eyes, but they fell again.

“ Yes, Phineas found me in an alley—starving. We stood in the rain, opposite the mayor’s house. A little girl—you know her, Miss March—came to the door, and threw out to me a bit of bread.”

Now indeed she started. “ You—was that you ?”

“It was I.”

John paused, and his whole manner changed into softness, as he resumed. “I never forgot that little girl. Many a time, when I was inclined to do wrong, she kept me right—the remembrance of her sweet face and her kindness.”

That face was pressed down against the sofa where she sat. I think Miss March was all but weeping.

John continued.

“I am glad to have met her again—glad to have been able to do her some small good in return for the infinite good she once did me. I shall bid her farewell now—at once and altogether.”

A quick, involuntary turn of the hidden face asked him “Why?”

“Because,” John answered, “the world says we are not equals, and it would neither be for Miss March’s honour nor mine did I try to force upon it the truth, which I may prove openly one day—that we *are* equals.”

Miss March looked up at him—it were hard to say with what expression, of joy, or pride, or simple astonishment; perhaps a mingling of all. Then her eye-lids fell. She silently offered her hand, first to me and then to John. Whether she meant it as friendliness, or as a mere cere-

mony of adieu, I cannot tell. John took it as the latter, and rose.

His hand was on the door—but he could not go.

“Miss March,” he said, “perhaps I may never see you again—at least, never as now. Let me look once more at that wrist which was hurt.”

Her left arm was hanging over the sofa—the scar being visible enough. John took the hand, and held it firmly.

“Poor little hand—blessed little hand! May God bless it evermore.”

Suddenly he pressed his lips to the place where the wound had been—a kiss long and close, such as only a lover’s kiss could be. Surely she must have felt it—known it.

A moment afterward, he was gone.

That day Miss March departed, and we remained at Enderley alone.

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