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OUR WIDOW.





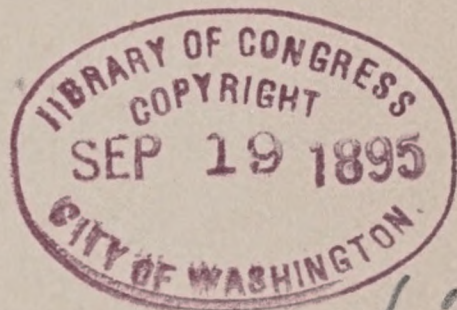
# OUR WIDOW.

(THREE WAYWARD GIRLS.)

BY

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CHAPTER I

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# OUR WIDOW.

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## CHAPTER I.

“WHAT *do* you think papa has done *now*?”

This question, uttered in a shrill treble voice which grew into almost a shriek upon the last word, came from a whirlwind which burst into the midst of a group of ladies who were drinking their after-dinner coffee in a Bayswater drawing-room one warm evening in April, when the fire had been allowed to die down and somebody had begged for an open window.

Everybody looked up. The whirlwind was the prettiest creature imaginable; a very rosebud of a girl, with a pink and white skin, childish blue eyes, a little red-lipped Cupid's bow mouth, and hair which, although it had lost its earliest gold, was still fair and soft and silky as a little child's.

And her figure! Molly Frewen's beauty did not depend upon her face alone. She was not above the middle height, but was so well shaped, so plump where it was best to be plump, and slender where it was proper to be slender, that she might be called an almost perfect specimen of her particular type of beauty.

And it so happened that Molly, in common with her sisters, had a gift which, in English girls especially, is very much more uncommon than beauty; she knew how to dress in the style most becoming to her. Her little white muslin frock, home-made for the most part, and trimmed in the simplest manner with big rosettes of sky-blue baby-ribbon at the elbows, waist, and shoulders, was exactly suited to her, while the bronze high-heeled shoes, with more sky-blue rosettes, a glimpse of which could be got as she flung herself into the room, showed off her pretty little plump feet to as much advantage as her dress did her figure.

“Well, what is it?” said Bab, throwing her arms behind her head, leaning lazily back in her chair, while the book which she had been pretending to read slipped from her knees on to the floor. Bab was really a beauty too, but of quite another type. Her complexion had the waxen, almost unhealthy pallor of the born Londoner; her features were less regular than those of her elder sister; her eyes were less blue; her hair, though more abundant than Molly’s, was less fair. There was a charm in her face, however, though it was not so childlike as her sister’s; the vivid scarlet of her lips, almost startling against the dead white skin of the rest of her face, was strikingly attractive. But her strongest point was undoubtedly her figure, to which the word “willowy,” so often misused, was in this case strictly appropriate.

Not very tall, Bab was so slender, without being thin, so naturally graceful without being languorous or limp, as to suggest the comparison with a lily as

readily as her elder sister suggested the simile of a rosebud.

And Bab, too, was even more conscious than Molly of the best way to show off her own charms to advantage. Instead of being dressed in white, like her sister, she wore black *chiffon*, with puffed transparent sleeves of the same material, and a round black satin waistband with floating, long ends reaching to the bottom of her skirts. She wore black openwork stockings, and black satin shoes with scarlet heels; and a poinsettia, with its flaming scarlet bracts, fastened with a pearl pin a little to the left on the front of her bodice.

Before Molly could answer her sister, another voice, louder, stronger than those which had already spoken, burst into the conversation.

“It’s nothing, of course. Don’t you know Molly better than to suppose she has anything to tell, just because she makes a great noise and a great fuss about telling it?”

And Tryphena, the youngest, the tallest, and altogether the most bouncing and conspicuous of the three sisters, put down her coffee-cup so sharply that the cup fell over into the saucer with a clatter, and the spoon sprang out on to the floor.

A great, handsome, overgrown girl, with wonderful hair which was a rich brown in the shade and guinea gold in the sun, Tryphena, who had the irregular features of Bab, the pretty coloring of Molly, and a splendor of physical development which was all her own, looked at least five years older than her real age, which was seventeen, and was altogether a magnifi-

cent, irresponsible, overgrown, and tremendously unmanageable baby.

She wore white muslin, too, by the way; but she wore it with a difference. Unlike her sisters, she was too lazy or too incapable to make her own clothes, and too impatient to have them properly fitted; so that the white muslin garment she wore, instead of looking as if it had "grown on her," hung so loosely that it would have marred the appearance of a creature less magnificent; and the pink sash around her waist looked as if it had been tied on to keep the various parts of her dress together.

Molly, although she was brimming, bubbling over with her news, determined upon this ungracious reception to keep it for a few seconds all to herself.

"Very well!" she exclaimed with tantalizing airiness, as she sauntered through the big front room into the smaller back one, touching the tips of the fingers of one plump hand with the tips of the other. "I don't want to tell you, if you don't want to know. I can keep it to myself. Or—" evidently as an afterthought, "I can tell it to Sam."

And she walked up to the side-table in the back room, where a tall, thin young man, with a clean-shaven face and colorless hair, was busily copying a piece of music.

From the manner in which Sam looked up when the girl threw him these careless words, it was clear that no word or action of hers was unimportant to him. He spoke good-humoredly enough, though there was something rather pathetic in the note:

"All right, Molly; I'll hear your secret. One more use for the old hack!"

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Molly pettishly, giving him a tap on the shoulder nearest to her by no means so light as might have been expected from a young lady. "Put that stuff down, and come here, and I'll tell you. And then you can just tell them if it's nothing, as they think!"

And she pulled his sleeve so roughly that from the quill pen he was holding there fell a great blot of ink on the neat manuscript.

"Oh, look what you've done! Now, that's too bad! It will look as if you'd done the thing yourself!" exclaimed Sam with transient irritation.

"Why, what is it? You shouldn't be so pedantically particular."

"It's only for you," replied Sam rather ruefully. "The song you said you wanted copied. I suppose you've forgotten all about it by this time!"

"Well, I had," replied Molly, rather contrite. "But it's very good of you, Sam; it is—really. Only I'm sorry you've taken so much trouble. It wasn't worth it, you know."

"It's always worth while to try and please you—if I can. Only sometimes it is jolly hard."

"You should give it up then," retorted Molly, with the brutal good sense and the uncompromising frankness of nineteen.

"I've a good mind to!" said Sam with a frown. "And then you'd see whether you'd get on so well with no one to bully and worry the life out of."

"Oh, I should find somebody else," said Molly

simply. "I'm one of those people who must bully, you see. It's a natural deficiency of amiability. And the reason why you and I got on so well as we have done is that you have a natural excess of the virtue. And now you are free to bestow it on some one else."

And she waved her hand majestically over his head, with this lofty intimation that his allegiance was wasted.

Sam, who had gone back to his music-copying, and who was busily endeavoring to make the best of the blot, threw her an anxious glance.

But before he could humble himself, by uttering the protest which was upon his lips, Bab's voice came to them from the front room.

"When you two have finished your usual daily scrapping match, perhaps, Molly, you will condescend to tell us the wonderful secret. And let's hope it will be something to break up the general dulness of things in these parts!"

Molly, who was dying to tell, came quickly forward. Even the scoffing Tryphena tried in vain to hide her interest. Molly made a curtsey.

"Papa has answered an advertisement," said she. And then she stopped.

"An advertisement of what? A pet dog? A flat in Paris? A second-hand sewing-machine?"

Molly shook her head. She was conscious that the curiosity she had wished to excite was at fever-pitch.

"Was that what he sent for you to the study for?" asked Tryphena.



“Yes. He said that, as his eldest daughter, I ought to know.”

“It’s something serious when papa talks like that about ‘eldest daughters’!” exclaimed Tryphena with round eyes.

And the fifth occupant of the room began for the first time to show interest, and some uneasiness.

This was Miss Roscoe, the companion-governess, from whom the three sisters no longer learnt anything, if they ever had done so, but who was supposed to act as their protectress, guardian, monitress, and chaperon.

Miss Roscoe was either an old-looking woman in the twenties, or a young-looking woman in the thirties; she was a serious-faced person with plump cheeks, large features, light eyes, and heavy gait. She wore black silk in the evening, and in whatever way she dressed her hair, it was always on one side.

She went on with her crewel work, which she always did after dinner and at no other time, but she listened attentively for Molly’s next words.

“He answered an advertisement of—a widow!” burst out Molly at last.

The announcement was followed by a chorus of shrieks and exclamations, in which Miss Roscoe’s plaintive “Oh, dear!” was lost.

Molly whipped out from her pocket a scrap torn from a newspaper, and with much deliberation read these lines:

“Widow would be Paying Guest in family of position, living in good style, but (for the moment) moderate terms: close to Piccadilly, Hyde Park, or

Knightsbridge. Letters to Madame, Willing's Advertisement Offices, Piccadilly."

The reading of this was followed by a short silence, during which Sam Ritchie left his music-copying, and, looking over Molly's shoulder, satisfied himself that, so far, she was playing no trick upon them. The printed words were certainly there.

"He was teasing you, I expect," said he, when he had read the advertisement two or three times.

"Go and ask him yourself if he was," retorted Molly with exasperation. "As if I didn't know when papa was joking. And as if he ever did make jokes at all!"

"He doesn't often, certainly. But—but we must hope that he has got as far as an effort at humor this time, to—to frighten you, to—to give you warning!" added Sam significantly.

"To give us *what*?" asked Bab haughtily.

"To put you on your guard. To show you what may happen if you don't take care."

"If we don't take care of what? Pray explain yourself, Samuel."

Sam, whom any mention of the whole of his Christian name sufficed to enrage, turned fiercely and spoke deliberately:

"I mean that Mr. Frewen, your father, is getting frightened at the way you girls carry on——"

"Carry on! Pray what is that in English?"

"Flirt; go about to all sorts of places with all sorts of people; let it be seen that you don't care for anybody; do everything that you ought not to do, in fact," retorted Sam, who thought it a good opportunity to instil a much-needed moral lesson.

Before the girls had collected breath to fell him to the earth Miss Roscoe's wailing voice broke in from the background:

"It's what I'm always telling you; only you won't listen to me. I knew it would come to your father's ears some day, and that he would put a stop to everything. And now you see what it has come to!"

"But we don't. That's the worst of it," said Molly, who, having been the recipient of her father's confidence, knew better than any of them that he was in earnest over what she did not dare to tell him was a mad idea. "We don't know what this widow will be like——"

"Or whether she's a widow at all. They seldom are!" put in Bab, with an air of worldly wisdom.

"But we soon shall know," pursued Molly. "For he's given her an appointment to call here to-night; and he's expecting her every minute."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when Tryphena rushed to the nearest window and took up her stand there. She had not to wait long. While the others were still disputing as to the exact position the "paying guest" would occupy in the household, and were concocting various plans for "making it hot" for her if she interfered with them, a suppressed shriek from the window brought them in a body to join Tryphena.

"Don't—don't peep behind the blind!" implored Miss Roscoe ineffectually.

"She can't see us," said Tryphena. "She's in a hansom."

"A hansom! Oh, that will be quite enough for

papa. There's nothing to be feared from *her!*" scoffed Bab.

And a full view, or as full a view as they could get from behind the blind, of the lady as she got out of the hansom and disappeared in the portico, reassured them still more.

"Not snuffy enough to please papa!" was Molly's verdict.

And everybody agreeing with her, the ladies one and all heaved a long sigh of relief, while the hard-hearted Sam stoutly affirmed that it was a pity.

## CHAPTER II.

THE general impression in the drawing-room was that Mr. Frewen, whose horror of anything at all "loud," or even "smart," in women was proverbial, would get rid of the visitor he had brought down upon himself in as short a time as possible. The girls knew how effectually he could use that old, old plea of "important business" to cut short an interview which bored him, and expected to see the lady emerge from the portico within a very few minutes of her arrival.

The minutes dragged on, however, and still the hansom waited. At last Tryphena, heedless of Miss Roscoe's entreaties to consider whether it was lady-like, went out and sat upon the stairs to keep watch. And here she waited until a casual visitor of the male sex arrived, and after treading upon her in the dusk which she had herself produced by turning out the gas in order that her father might not see her, kindly consented to share her watch with her.

For a whole hour the hansom had waited, and surprise was growing into consternation when the drawing-room door was suddenly burst open, and Tryphena dashed in, followed headlong by Bradley Ingledew, a handsome young stockbroker whose frequent visits were put down to the account of Bab, although, to do

him justice, his heart was large enough for him to be able to enjoy the society of any one of the three.

"Papa's coming upstairs!" cried she in a dramatic whisper which could be heard throughout the house. "*And he's got her with him!*"

Indeed, the occupants of the room had hardly time to get under control the facial muscles effected by this intelligence, when Mr. Frewen, opening the door with old-fashioned and stiff courtesy, ushered the interesting visitor into the room.

A more oddly assorted couple than these two had surely never been seen.

Mr. Frewen was one of those men of whom every one decides that they can never have been young. Under the middle height, with shoulders slightly bent, as if under the tremendous weight of the cares of his thriving business, with a round gray head, and an impassive smooth face, he was the very type of what a successful solicitor ought to be; just formal enough in manner without being too stiff, just chary enough of words without being too taciturn, he was the man of all others to inspire confidence and to command respect.

He wore side-whiskers, which were almost white; but no other hair on his shrewd, immovable face. And in his evening dress he looked, quite as much as in his sombre black frock-coat earlier in the day, every inch a lawyer.

The lady who accompanied him, on the other hand, breathed an atmosphere of refined frivolity, tempered by the discretion of mature years, and brought with her into the room a certain air of being "in the swim"

of things which fascinated some of the occupants of the room, while it awakened the suspicion of the others.

She was of perhaps no more than the middle height; but the way she dressed, and the manner in which she carried herself, made her appear tall. She was perfectly turned out from head to foot, and wore a gray gown lined with rose-pink, the touches of color showing around her feet when she sat down, a large gray hat with erect gray tips and rose-pink rosettes under the brim; and a long wrap of gray velvet, lined with gray and rose-pink brocade.

And she was very handsome; there could be no two opinions about that. All that ill-nature might have suggested was that she was probably prettier now than she had been in her first youth, before she learned how to make art come to the assistance of bountiful nature.

As it was, she was a delight to the eyes. Her large red-brown eyes were soft and gracious; her profile was regular and handsome; and if, in the full face, the mouth was a trifle too long, and the shape of the face a little too square, these slight defects did not detract much from a beauty which was striking and indisputable.

She walked well, with the air of a person who is used to excite attention. Coming at once toward the group of girls, she held out her hand with a winning smile.

“And these are the girls, of course?” she said, as Molly was the first to take her outstretched hand. “Now let me guess which this one is.” And she

carefully surveyed the three girls, one at a time, with such a charming expression of face that they were all disarmed. "I think this must be—Molly?"

"Yes, I'm Molly. And this is Bab, and this Tryphena."

And Molly, who was the most favorably impressed of the ladies by the new-comer, then proceeded to introduce Miss Roscoe, who betrayed, by her sour, uncertain manner, the violent antipathy she already felt toward the interloper.

Bab was already jealous, and she watched the attitude of the rest with quiet, shrewd eyes. Tryphena was chiefly conscious of an overwhelming delight in Miss Roscoe's evident discomfiture.

Mr. Frewen did not leave them long in doubt as to the upshot of the long interview in the study.

"Mrs. Weir, my dears," he announced, in his dry, incisive tones, as if he had been dictating a brief, "is going to do us the honor of living with us. I hope you will all get on well together. And—and—" He evidently was searching, in his dry, hard way, for a complimentary and gallant speech to wind up with. "And I am sure, if you don't get on well together, it will be your fault, and not hers."

"It's rather early days for such a decisive statement as that," remarked Mrs. Weir, with a laugh. "Perhaps she's showing her best goods in the window, and will shortly be known, in confidential talk, as 'an old cat'!"

"Doesn't Miss Roscoe hope that?" whispered Tryphena to Bradley Ingledew, who was edging himself a little nearer to the principal group in the hope



of being noticed by Mrs. Weir. His action succeeded.

“And is this your son, Mr. Frewen?” she asked, graciously holding out her hand.

“No, I have not that privilege,” said Bradley, speaking with the slightest of all possible brogues.

“—yet,” added Sam in his ear, but loud enough for some of the ladies to hear.

“Be quiet, Sam,” said Bab serenely.

“He’s only a stray Irishman, and not thought much of here,” explained Sam with unnecessarily politeness of manner, “and as nobody will take the trouble to introduce me, I must do it myself. I’m Sam.”

“And that’s all?” asked Mrs. Weir, smiling.

“Yes, that’s all. Nobody troubles about any surname for me. I’ve got one; as a matter of fact it is Ritchie; but nobody ever thinks of using it, and you’ll make yourself undesirably conspicuous if you do.”

“There, that’s enough about yourself, Sam,” interrupted Molly, pulling him back impatiently. “Mrs. Weir will see quite enough of you to know all that she wants about you, without your taking so much trouble to give yourself a character.”

There was no doubt that Mrs. Weir was easy to get on with. Before she had been ten minutes in the room the general talk was fast and furious; the laughter was frequent; and Mrs. Weir, without appearing to take an undue share in the conversation, was the leading spirit of the merriment.

Mr. Frewen was soon able to retreat to his favorite study without anybody missing him; and under the new-comer’s auspices the evening passed so pleas-

antly that, even when two or three more young men dropped in, "friends of Edgar's—my brother's," as Molly explained, there was no adjournment to the billiard-room.

When Mrs. Weir had gone, and the rest of the guests had quickly followed her example, Bradley Ingledew and Sam Ritchie walked part of the way home together. Sam lived in his father's house in Onslow Square, while Bradley had chambers in the Albany.

"You shouldn't have said that to Bab," observed Sam, as he lit his pipe.

"Shouldn't have said what?"

"What you did just now—that they would have to look to their laurels."

"Why shouldn't I? It's quite true. She's d—d good-looking, this Mrs. Weir."

"But why set them against her?"

"Oh, it doesn't make much difference. The arrangement can't last long. Something will be found out about her; there's always something to find out about a woman as handsome as that, when she calls herself a widow and springs from nobody knows where."

"That's awfully unfair, I think. Good looks are not a crime. You wouldn't like to be set down as a murderer and a thief and a few other little things just because you can grow a decent mustache, and the women happen to like the combination of blue eyes with black hair!"

Bradley, who was indeed very good-looking, laughed.

"Some other fellows seem to get on very well with-

out that particular combination!" he remarked, "and I think myself, when a man doesn't grow a mustache, it's because he then gets looked upon as a harmless, necessary adjunct to a house full of pretty girls, who pull his ears, and tweak his hair, and generally treat him with affectionate disrespect. Which he likes. Especially when Molly is the disrespectful ear-tweaker."

"Don't talk about Molly," said Sam hastily, with a sudden change in his voice.

"Why shouldn't I talk about her? You know very well you don't care to talk about anything else."

"I shouldn't," admitted Sam with a sigh, "if it was to be any good. But it isn't. I'm getting more and more sure that it isn't. Those poor little lasses! They do want some one to look after them."

"Well, don't you look after them? You never seem to be doing anything else!"

"Oh, don't be a fool. You know what I mean. A man can't do much, unless a girl cares about him. And Molly doesn't care for me, except, as you say, as a harmless necessary adjunct to the household. She doesn't mind my scolding: she knows I'm too ready to forgive her. Besides, I have no right. And she wouldn't care whether I forgave her or not. But I have hopes of Mrs. Weir."

"I haven't," said Bradley. And after a short silence, he added drily: "I wonder whether she'll hook the old man?"

Sam shook his head.

"He's too law-dried," said he. "His skin is parchment; his bones are deeds; and his blood is fees. If

he knew the origin of that nice nut-brown tint in her hair, he'd have her thrown down the steps."

"No, he'd serve a writ for summary ejection," laughed Bradley. "But, old chap, don't you know that's the very sort of fish that's bound to nibble at a bait like that?"

"Well, we shall see," said Sam, as, with a nod, he left his companion at the bottom of Hamilton Place.

### CHAPTER III.

"IF our paying guest pays as well as she dresses, observed Bab sententiously to her sisters, as she brushed her long hair in Molly's room that night, "we oughtn't to hear any more complaints from papa about the length of the bills we bring him!"

"But the advertisement said 'moderate terms'—'for the present.' Wonder what 'for the present' means! So I expect she spends all her money on her dress," remarked Tryphena.

"I rather like her," said Molly. "She's such a relief after old Roscoe's perpetual nagging cry that this or that 'isn't ladylike.' When she isn't a bit like a lady herself."

"We shall have some fun between the two of them," observed Tryphena. "Miss Roscoe is sharpening her claws. Did you notice the way in which she asked Mrs. Weir whether she was High Church or Low Church?"

"And the sweet way in which Mrs. Weir answered that she didn't care for either extreme? I know Miss Roscoe was hoping she would say something flippant, that she could report to papa that Mrs. Weir was a dangerous person, with lax views!" said Molly.

"All the boys seem to like her, don't they?" remarked Bab dubiously. "How old do you suppose she is?"

“Can’t say. Didn’t detect a date anywhere,” replied her elder sister. “But I think she’s too good-natured to spoil our fun. I’m sure she’s mature enough to amuse herself with papa.”

“Amuse herself!” cried Tryphena. “Why, Molly, you might as well talk about amusing one’s self with a ‘Coke upon Littleton’! And what would Miss Roscoe say? She’s been hugging the hope of becoming our second mamma for ever so long, on the strength of his letting her warm his slippers!”

“Hush! We are getting irreverent!” struck in Bab, who was the greatest stickler for the outward forms of etiquette and proper conduct. “We can let the ladies fight it out between them; and we need not interfere unless they proceed to blows with him in the middle.”

“And she comes next Tuesday! What fun! I want the time to come!” cried Tryphena. “Only I’m too sleepy to discuss the great event any more now. Good-night, girls!”

When Mrs. Weir did arrive, she brought with her such a lot of smart, interesting-looking luggage, suggestive of a boundless store of lovely French frocks, that Bab’s mouth began to water with curiosity and envy; and Mrs. Weir being clever enough to note this act, the afternoon was spent pleasantly for them all by her asking the girls to come and help her to unpack her trunks, and advise her as to the best way to dispose of them.

Bab found this an amusement so greatly to her taste that she afterward owned frankly she had never been happier in her life. She could give valu-

able hints, too, as to the best use of the space in cupboard and wardrobe, having studied the subject of gowns and fripperies with an ardor which had made her wise beyond her years on such points.

It gave her intense delight to be allowed to try on Mrs. Weir's hats, capes, and ruffles; and the present of a scrap of '*point duchesse*,' 'real, my dear, and not what we can buy out of our allowance,' threw her into quite an ecstasy of happiness.

Bab had the quietest manners of the three, and was the only one whose feelings did not show on the surface as surely as an image is reflected in a looking-glass.

By the time dinner was over, every trace of the constraint between strangers had disappeared, except in the case of Miss Roscoe, who openly sulked, and only failed to spoil everybody else's pleasure because she was one of those persons who are too colorless to make their mark on a circle of people.

"Here comes the standing dish!" cried Tryphena as, on leaving the dining-room, they met Sam putting his hat on the hat-stand. "Why didn't you come to dinner, Sam?"

"I wanted to give you a rest, to make myself appreciated. How do you do, Mrs. Weir? I'm sure you must be glad to see some one besides those dreadful girls. Have they made your head ache with their noise?"

"Not yet," said she laughing.

"You won't own it, but they have, I know. I'm going to take you into the conservatory, to give you a little rest. Please, you're expected to admire the

arrangement of that conservatory, because it was I who fitted it up."

And Sam led the way through the front drawing-room to the smaller back room, where there was, as he had said, a conservatory, by courtesy so-called, where a dozen ferns and a couple of good-sized palms made a fair show in the midst of the usual 'Oriental' bric-a-brac.

Tryphena bounced across the room after them.

"Now, Sam, you're not to monopolize Mrs. Weir. And you know she'll spoil her nice frock against your nasty plants!"

"No, she won't. I'm being very careful. I'm going to hedge her round with newspapers, as soon as she sits down, and keep her beautifully dry and clean."

And he waved the girl away with a certain look in his face which showed her that he was in earnest in spite of his light tone.

As soon as Mrs. Weir, professing admiration of his arrangements as she was expected to do, had seated herself in a basket chair, and assured him that her gown, which was of dark-green silk, glistening with 'moonlight' spangles, would suffer no harm from his plants, Sam leaned against the door-frame and turned suddenly grave.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked, perceiving that there was something of importance to be heard.

"I am trying to make up my mind whether I shall tell you a secret—which can be no secret—and ask your advice upon a matter on which you would, I am sure, prefer to have no opinion."



"This is very mysterious. And perhaps rather alarming. But I am too old to be easily frightened. So you had better make up your mind to confess, to unburden yourself."

"I wanted you to say that," said he. "And I expected it. It is about these girls I want to speak."

And he paused.

"Well, go on," said Mrs. Weir. And in the brown eyes, as she looked up at him, Sam saw a look of intelligent sympathy which suggested that his tale would not be a difficult one to tell. "They are dear girls, but——"

She stopped. Sam drew a long breath.

"That's just it," said he. "They're dear girls, the dearest girls in the world—*but*—and I want you to know how that 'but' came about."

Mrs. Weir shook her head very gravely, very kindly.

"The tale needs no telling," said she. "They have been badly brought up, very badly; not put into proper hands, in fact."

"That's it," said Sam earnestly. "They haven't been properly looked after; they have been allowed to run wild since they left school. And their father, through being too strict, has overshot the mark, so that as he would be harsh and angry, he hears nothing."

"And this Miss Roscoe, who is supposed to look after them?"

"Is too lazy and too selfish to make things unpleasant either by telling him or by correcting them, except in a way which is only a further incitement to

them to disobey her. So that there is nobody whose opinion they care for, and they get more and more uncontrollable, until one doesn't like to think where it will end."

There was a long pause. Mrs. Weir bowed her head, and remained thoughtful. At last she looked up suddenly:

"And what makes you tell me this? How do you think I can help you—or them?"

Sam looked rather taken aback; but only for a moment.

"I believe you are the sort of a woman who could do it, if you cared to try," said he, with some constraint. "The sort of woman who—who understands."

A sudden bright look of intelligence, of shrewd, keen sympathy seemed to light up her handsome face.

"That's true, at least," she said shortly. "There is hardly a trial, a temptation, to which a girl, a woman can be exposed, which I do not understand. But to help—ah, that is different!"

"I believe you have heart enough to try," said Sam in a low voice, after another short pause.

Mrs. Weir glanced up at him with some evident alarm.

"What right have you—" she began quickly, almost angrily; and then she broke off and laughed.

"What right have I to suppose you have a heart?" asked Sam, laughing also.

Mrs. Weir twisted one of the rings on her white fingers.

"Well, we will suppose, for the sake of argument,

that I have one," she said, without looking up. "And in the mean time we will continue our conversation in the drawing-room, or we shall spoil everything by bringing upon ourselves the suspicion of plotting." And she rose and sauntered back through the drawing-room, stopping at a side-table to open an inane drawing-room book, with illustrations much too good for the letter-press.

Some more "friends of Edgar's" had come in, and the girls were talking eagerly and brightly, all but Molly, who was hovering near the window, and from time to time peeping furtively, when she thought no one was looking, behind the blind, out into the street below.

Sam saw her, and his face clouded.

"Look at that girl," said he in a low, anxious voice. "She is waiting for some one, some one whom her father won't allow in the house. Presently she will make some excuse, or slip out of the room without being seen, and will appear no more during the evening."

"But this is serious," said Mrs. Weir.

"Indeed it is. But what's to be done? There's no talking to the child, no warning her. She's too innocent. She admires this man because, as she says, he's 'so awfully wicked,' without having the slightest idea, poor child, what the words mean."

"Why doesn't some one tell her father?"

"Because," Sam's voice faltered—"there would be a scene, a row, and the next day, to judge by what we know of the headstrong, spoilt little creature, she might have disappeared."

Even as Mrs. Weir stared blankly at Sam, the sound of a softly closing door made them both turn round.

Molly had disappeared.

"Come into the next room," said Sam, "and see him for yourself."

They passed through the laughing throng, all of whom were by this time too busy with their own flirtations to give more than momentary heed to those two as they went by; and Mrs. Weir sat down on a chair close to the window, and, on a sign from Sam, looked through the space between the blind and the window-frame.

To Sam's astonishment, her face grew on the instant deadly white, and her eyes, as they turned quickly from the window to his face, were full of terror.

"Who is it? Who is he?" she asked quickly, below her breath.

"Sir Walter Hay."

As Sam had at once suspected, it was the name she had been prepared to hear.

"That man!" she repeated to herself. "That man!" Then turning to Sam, she said aloud: "This must be stopped. He is one of the worst men in London. You are interested in this young girl; you must stop this."

"How can I? She won't listen to what I say. You, who know him——"

The glance she threw at him cut him short.

"I mean by reputation," he corrected hastily. "You could give her a warning to which she would be forced to listen."

The beautiful face of Mrs. Weir had suddenly lost its pinkness, its well-preserved look, and become old and worn. She shook her head with a look of fear, and sighed.

“What is the use of my denying that I know him, and that he knows me?” she said in a dull, hopeless tone. “I will tell you further that when he finds out I am here, he will destroy my credit with you, with everybody. My only chance of being left in peace by him lies in my doing what I can to further his wishes. Do you understand my position now?”

Sam looked at the woman steadily.

“Then you decline to interfere?” said he, not harshly, but with deep earnestness. “You forget that his credit is so bad here that he cannot injure yours. He is not even allowed to visit here.”

Mrs. Weir looked drearily at the merry group whose chatter was like music to her world-weary ears.

“For the sake of your confidence, odd though it is,” she said at last, in a flippant tone through which Sam detected the ring of true feeling, “I will try. I will set myself to be unselfish for the first time in my life. But mind,” she added, raising a warning forefinger at him as she got up from her chair, “don’t hope too much. This man is an antagonist who has, where a woman is concerned, never been beaten yet.”

It was a horrible thought which these words suggested. And Sam, loving the girl with all his heart, shivered and felt sick at the peril from which he himself was powerless to save her.

## CHAPTER IV.

It so happened that, following close upon the arrival of Mrs. Weir at No. 203 Cirencester Terrace, and her establishment in the vague character of "paying guest," Sam had a spell of hard work at the office where he earned the respectable salary of two hundred a year; and for more than a fortnight he never appeared at the Frewen house at all.

Not even on Saturdays, an omission which was quite startling; for it had been his custom, from a period forgotten in the dim mist of time, for him to put in an appearance at an early hour on that day, to take the girls, or as many of them as wanted to go, for a row, or a drive, or walk, followed by tea at an A. B. C.

On the third Saturday, however, directly after luncheon, Molly had just opened the front door, and was letting herself out with as little noise as possible, when she came face to face with Sam on the bottom step.

"Hallo!" cried she. And a flush which had in it as much guilty confusion as pleasure mounted into her round cheeks. "I thought you were never coming any more!"

"No, you didn't!" said Sam quietly.

And he stood on the step, and planting a very

handsome walking-stick on the step above him, he leaned upon it and surveyed her calmly.

“And what a swell you are!”

Sam, without immediately answering, proceeded to inspect her dress minutely, beginning at the big hat of drawn silk and muslin, pausing an instant to take in the details of long white *suède* gloves and silk muslin ruffle, and bestowing critical approval on her frock, which was of plain Holland-colored Tussoire silk.

“Perhaps one might suggest that you also are not always quite so smart.”

“The cane too; that’s new, I’ll swear!” remarked Molly, without condescending to notice his observation.

“Allow me, in passing, to mention, that ladies are not allowed to swear at all, except in a court of justice, where they are expected to forswear themselves for want of practice.”

“Where did you get that walking-stick?”

“A lady gave it to me.”

“That’s not true!”

The tone was rather sharp.

“It is true, madam. Surely you know better than to suppose that a man, and particularly a modest man like me, would buy himself such a thing as that!”

And Sam presented the walking-stick, which was ebony, mounted in gold, for her inspection.

Molly took it with a heightened color, examined it in silence, and then, with a vicious little grimace, snapped the stick in half and glared up at him. She was panting with anger; but, of course, wilful little

wretch as she was, she was sorry and ashamed of herself the moment after. As soon as her eyes met his she burst into tears.

This stick was a handsome one, and Sam had been rather proud of it: but those tears were worth the price to him.

“Silly child!” said he very gently, as he took one of the pieces from her hand, and picked up the other, which she had dropped, “What are you worrying yourself about? My sister gave me the stick last Tuesday on my birthday. You might have known.”

Molly was half-choking in her efforts to stop her tears, and to persuade him into thinking, if that were still possible, that she had shed no tears at all. She tried to laugh.

“Was Tuesday your birthday? I—I—I’m sorry I forgot it. And—” By this time she had gulped down the tears, and was ready to be impudent again. “It was all your fault about the stick. Now wasn’t it?”

“Oh, I suppose so. Yes, yes, certainly it was. I ought to have considered who I had to deal with.”

“Now that’s what I call being very unkind, and nasty, and everything that is hateful and odious! To go on sneering at a person, when that person has said she’s sorry, and wants to—to——”

“To make amends? Well, you shall. You shall come for a walk in the park, and be nice all the time.”

But Molly’s visage, as indeed he had feared would be the case, had grown suddenly blank.

“Oh!” said she.

And then there was an ominous pause.



"You had made other arrangements, I suppose?" he asked coldly.

"Well, you see, you haven't been here for two Saturdays, nor sent word that you were not coming——"

"You have forgotten. The last time I saw you, the night Mrs. Weir came, I told you I should be very busy at the office for nearly three weeks, and that you were not to expect me unless I wired."

"*Did* you say all that?" asked Molly, with real or affected incredulity. "I don't remember it."

Sam's tone was rather bitter as he answered:

"No. Because you never pay much attention to what I say. And because you have grown so used to my being at your beck and call that you don't think anything either of me or what I do."

"Oh, if you're going to be disagreeable——"

"But, bless your little heart, I'm not. I 'know my place, mum,' and I'm not going to grumble."

"No, no, of course you're not. And you needn't talk as if you were a martyr. Go inside, and you'll find Bab in the dining-room."

"I know. I saw her as I came up, and she kissed her hand to me."

"Yes. That's because she's got nobody to go out with. I know she will be very amiable."

"Bab always is amiable. It's somebody else who is crotchety."

"Well, you won't have to suffer from my crotchets to-day."

And she tried to make a dive past him. But he stopped her.

"Come, is that fair? After forgetting my birthday, and breaking my stick!"

"Are you going to throw that in my face again?"

"I won't, if you'll accept my terms."

"Pshaw! What terms?"

"Throw over the other fellow, and come out with me."

"There is no fellow in the case. I—I'm going to tea with Aunt Tabitha."

Sam looked stolid, but affected to believe her. Now, thought he, I've got her into a corner!

"In Wilton Place? All right, I'll take you there. Miss Melbury was good enough to say I might call upon her whenever I liked."

"Yes. She likes good young men," said Molly, with fierce sarcasm.

"Well, come along. And if you're very good, we'll have a hansom."

"Thank you, I shall not go with you. I prefer to go by myself."

There was a little anxiety now in Sam's eyes. Her obstinacy was not usually so lasting. He was trying to devise some way of coaxing her into compliance when the door opened again, and Bab appeared, looking particularly fresh and pretty in gray alpaca with a yellow straw hat trimmed with dark green wing, ivy leaves, and cherries.

She was panting, and her face lighted up with satisfaction as she softly shut the door.

"We must oil the hinges again, Molly," she said ingenuously. "It's beginning to squeak again."

“What does it matter if it does squeak?” asked Sam severely.

“Oh, of course it doesn't matter now, when we're going out 'on the square' with you. But we sometimes find it convenient, when we have retired to our rooms for a couple of hours' quiet talk, or for a nap, or to mend our clothes—one excuse is as good as another—to have this door in good working order.”

Now although Sam knew enough of the girls and their ways not to be astonished at this brazen confession, he was considerably alarmed by it. But he knew that Bab's frankness put him upon his honor not to betray her, and he thought it wiser not to show all he felt.

“You're a lot of young monkeys,” was all he said.

“I was so afraid you'd both be gone before I could get ready,” gasped Bab. “You'll have to put the pins in my hat better, Molly, when we've got a little way. Where are you going to take us, Sam? You don't mind me going too, do you?”

Sam had, without appearing to do so, kept an eye upon Molly while her sister rattled on; and he had come to the conclusion that she felt she was caught, and meant to make the best of it.

“Well, we were going to Miss Melbury's,” said he.

Molly was standing on the lowest step of all. He was on the next with his back to her; Bab was at the top. Unseen by her elder sister, therefore, Bab could and did bestow upon Sam a slight but knowing wink. She also slightly inclined her head in the direction of her sister, and clapped her little hands softly in approval of his strategy.

“But,” went on Sam, not daring to give any acknowledgment of her signals, “it would be much more fun to go to the park, and then to have tea somewhere, and to go to Earl’s Court to wind up, wouldn’t it?”

From the pantomime with which Bab favored him at this point, Sam gathered that this was much the same programme that Molly had been proposing to carry out with somebody else. The thought sent daggers into Sam. And his suffering were not all from jealousy.

“Well, and what does Molly say?” he asked quietly.

“Oh, Molly says she supposes so,” replied that young person ungraciously enough. “Anything to put an end to this long discussion on the doorstep.”

And so they all walked away down the street together, Sam trying not to show the satisfaction he felt at having for once beaten the enemy in the most decided manner.

“Where’s Phena?” asked he, as they went along.

“Oh, she’s all right,” said Bab. “Yes, I really mean it; she’s doing the proper thing. She’s going to a concert with Mrs. Weir.”

“Oh!—and why weren’t you going with them?”

Bab’s fair face puckered into a frown. At the same moment a curious change came over the manner of Molly also.

“Thereby hangs a tale,” said Bab.

“Well?”

“Oh, well, you shall hear it all presently. In fact, we’ve been dying to tell you——”

"I haven't," put in Molly.

"Oh, yes, you have, dear. When my mental barometer says 'Set Fair' on matters of this kind, yours does too. And when mine is at 'Stormy,' why, yours is sure to be veering round in that direction."

"That's rather neat, Bab. You're getting quite witty," said Sam. "But what's this little cloud on your horizon?"

Bab made a significant pause.

"Mrs. Weir," said she at last in solemn tones.

"Why, isn't the paying guest a success?"

Here Molly, having got over her ill-humor, broke in:

"No, indeed she's not."

"On the contrary," pursued Bab in a lofty tone, "she's already got very near to being a complete failure."

"In what way?"

Here both girls began to speak together, in tones of great irritation. Between them, it was some minutes before he fully appreciated what the grievance was.

"She is always finding occupations for us——"

"Wholesome occupations——"

"And wanting us to stay at home and learn new music and new songs——"

"And to read books that she chooses for us, you know, entertaining without being unwholesomely exciting——"

"Isn't it perfectly disgusting?"

"And she takes us with her shopping, and to concerts, and even to *picture-galleries*. Just fancy!"

"It's very awful, no doubt, since you both seem to find it so trying. But I really don't, on the face of it, see where the sting of the grievance is. You've been to picture-galleries with me, and though your art criticisms have never got above mediocrity, you haven't seemed to be much bored."

"Oh, don't be silly, Sam!"

"He's only pretending," said Molly severely. "He understands all the time. She's trying to reform us, that's what she's doing. And it's like her cheek!"

"She's got in the thin end of the wedge already," observed Bab gloomily. "Tryphena follows her about like her shadow. Molly and I were caught in the net at first, and went with her like lambs to the St. James's Hall, to hear somebody or other sing. But of course we soon tumbled to it, and kicked."

"By the bye," said Sam, "does she always understand what you say?"

"She pretends not to, of course," answered Molly. "But I'm sure she does."

"People who can dress as well as she does know about everything that's worth knowing," added Bab sententiously.

"And as for talking slang," said Molly restively, "when people pretend not to understand it, I just use more than usual."

"I shouldn't think that was possible."

Molly stopped short.

"If you're going to be insulting, I shall go back," said she.

"Now, isn't that logical? You say there's no

harm in talking slang; and when I say you use a good deal, which is undeniable, you say I insult you."

"Don't take any notice of what he says, dear," said Bab. "We don't want to hear what he thinks; we only want to make him hear what we think."

"And it's just this," went on Molly darkly, "that if she doesn't leave off interfering with us——"

"Well?"

"I shall——"

"You shall what?"

"Scoot," finished Molly promptly.

"My dear girl——"

"Oh, no, I'm not your dear girl. You're nearly as bad as she is, with your everlasting talk about what is 'proper,' and the rest of it. You're another of the people who think girls ought never to have any amusement but darning socks!"

"It isn't as if," put in Bab sedately, "there were any harm in what we do. We only want to enjoy ourselves harmlessly, and to have a little amusement while we are young. The darning is a pleasure which will keep, and which we are sure to have enough of by and by."

"But you're not particular enough in what you do and what you say. It doesn't matter what you say to me, because I'm only old Sam; but lots of things I've heard you girls say sound awful to people who don't know you as well as I do."

"Now what things? And who do we say them to? I've never found anybody disgusted with what we say. It's only you, Sam, because you're such an old fidget, and because you don't like us to talk to

any one but you. Now just confess that that's the reason. Because we won't go any further with you till you do."

And Molly and Bab both assumed attitudes expressive of the indignation they felt at his ridiculous and mean accusations.

"Oh, that's the reason, of course," answered Sam drily. "I know by experience that you girls are always right; or that if you're not, you manage to make it jolly uncomfortable for those that are."

"No, but I won't be shut up like that!" protested Molly with spirit, "you've brought an accusation, and you must just prove it, or else own properly that you were in the wrong. Now, who are the people we've disgusted with what we say? Lindo Goring perhaps, or Tamperley, or Bradley Ingledew?"

"I didn't say you disgusted them, or anybody. But don't you think, if Mr. Frewen could hear you talking to those fellows, for instance, he'd open his eyes sometimes?"

"Papa!" ejaculated Bab in a tone of the deepest scorn at the suggestion. "Now is there anything a girl could say, beyond asking for the bread and butter, that wouldn't shock papa? Take some human instance, if you please."

"Well, I know he's perhaps even over-particular, but he's quite on the right side in liking girls who are quiet and fond of their home."

"Well, we are fond of our home, when it's full of bright people," retorted Molly. "I don't see any virtue in doting on the tables and chairs?"

"Oh, Molly! did you see that lovely hat, in the



victoria that passed just now? My dear, it was a dream! If only I'd had the time to get a good long look!"

"Which one? Where?" cried Molly with excitement.

And after that Sam found it impossible to fix their attention on mere questions of manners and morals.

They had a lovely day; they acknowledged it themselves when, after sitting in the park, and criticising the frocks and their wearers, they spent the evening at the exhibition and insisted on Sam's taking them back along Piccadilly on the top of an omnibus.

"It's been just perfect," said Bab. "Sam, you're a dear. If ever I get tired of Bradley Ingledew, I shall fall in love with you!"

"I'm not the sort of person girls fall in love with. Am I, Molly?"

"You're too nice," replied Molly affectionately. "Bab only falls in love with people who don't matter. And I don't go in for that sort of thing at all."

"Don't you?" said Sam in a low voice. "Then I wish you'd try!"

Bab was on the front garden-seat by herself; and Sam and Molly were together on the seat behind. Bab turned round:

"I do hope you won't make love to her now, Sam," said she plaintively. "It will be so slow for me. Besides, the brim of your hat will tickle the back of my neck presently; I can feel it getting nearer!"

Molly gave Sam a push.

"Go and sit next to her, Sam. I don't care if you make love to her!" she said.

She spoke on the spur of the moment, nettled by Bab's words, and really anxious that Sam should not grow "sentimental." But she did see the look on his face as he quietly obeyed her and changed his place; and her heart smote her.

The girl was headstrong and wilful, and her mad freaks and caprices were taking her into grave peril, as Sam feared. But want of heart was not one of her failings.

At Piccadilly Circus they had to get down, to change into a "green Bayswater." This arrangement was much against Sam's will, as it was by this time very late, and the circus was already thronged by the usual disorderly crowd. The first omnibus that passed was full; and Bab, apparently no more fatigued than she had been at starting, made a dash across the road, expressing her intention of walking as far as Oxford Street, where, she said, there was a better chance of getting an omnibus. So the others were obliged to follow her, and Sam hurried the girls along as fast as he could.

As they drew near the Café Royal, his attention was suddenly attracted by the sight of a face and figure he thought he recognized; and the shock of surprise it gave him, when, the moment after, he ascertained by another look that his suspicions were correct, turned him sick. Luckily, he was so much startled that for a moment his muscles were not under entire control, and Bab, who was in the middle, and who had taken his arm, felt a slight involuntary movement which diverted her attention from the people who were standing at the door of the restau-

rant. He saw that the girl looked up at him, and, with an inspiration, he drew the girls abruptly round and hailed the nearest of the file of hansoms that were crawling slowly past.

"Come along, girls; we'll have a hansom. I've got a stone in my boot."

He bundled them in, and before getting in himself gave one more glance back at the doorway of the Café Royal. Then he jumped in, giving the driver the address.

Molly and Bab shared the same room. It was not until after each had got into her little bed that night that Bab said carelessly to her sister:

"Did you see any one you knew at the door of the Café Royal, Molly? With some one else? Some one we *didn't* know?"

"No," answered Molly with interest. "Who was it?"

There was a long pause.

"Who was it, Bab?" asked Molly more shrilly.

For answer Bab pretended to snore; and Molly, though she was full of curiosity, knew her sister better than to repeat the question. Bab was "close," very "close" when she liked. And she liked to be so now.

## CHAPTER V.

THE next day was Sunday, and Sam, after having been informed that they were too tired to go to church "in the morning," had invited himself to luncheon.

So he presented himself at about half-past one, and found himself the earliest visitor. The weather had changed suddenly from warm and sunny to gray and rather cold. The change seemed to have affected the spirits of all the ladies, for the younger ones were silent and rather "snappy," and Mrs. Weir, who greeted Sam kindly, looked worried and rather bored; while Miss Roscoe glowered at everybody sullenly over a devotional book in a corner.

Only Edgar, Mr. Frewen's eldest child and only son, was quite his usual self. But as that meant that he was taciturn and morose, this did not help matters. He was strikingly unlike his half-sisters, and was much older than they, being the son of the first Mrs. Frewen, while they were the children of the second. Of slight build, very pale, with black hair and eyes, he always seemed to be oppressed with weighty cares, and to find the society of his lively sisters irritating rather than exhilarating. Therefore he was seldom seen at home, except on Sundays, and then only for the briefest possible time.

Bab, who was crouching on the hearth-rug, was the first to welcome the new arrival.

“Look here, Sam, isn’t it horrid? We’ve had to take to fires again; and it w-w-won’t burn up, and I’m so cold!”

Sam stooped to shake her hand, and kept it for a minute in his.

“Why, you’re quite cold! I shan’t take you out again. You must have taken cold on the omnibus last night.”

“Rubbish! It’s papa who has given us cold. He came in just now, and scolded us all for not having been to church. And he says we’re not to go out again so late on Saturdays, since it makes us too lazy to attend to ‘our religious duties.’”

“I knew he would. I told you so.”

“Well, who would have thought of his coming in here? Generally he comes straight home from his own church—some fussy old place where they don’t even chant the psalms—and into the study, and doesn’t come out till luncheon—I mean dinner-time!”

“You ought to go to church with him! I shall speak to the governor, and get him to make you,” put in Edgar shortly. “To go rambling about all over the place, as you do, first to one church and then to another, is not decent; it’s worse than going to no church at all. He’ll have to keep you better in hand.”

There was dead silence. The girls were as much afraid of Edgar as they were of their father, and avoided offending him when they could. Molly, who was sitting very quietly in the inner drawing-room reading a letter furtively between the pages of Blair’s “Sermons,” threw Bab a look, without speaking.

Edgar saw this, and, crossing the room at a bound, snatched away the book from Molly's hands.

The girl gave a scream, and tried to get it back; but Edgar pulled the letter out, and read aloud the first words that caught his eye:

“And as my little darling knows that I can't let two whole days pass without a sight of her sweet little face, she must manage to meet——”

Molly, after tearing in vain, with the energy of a little tigress, at her brother's uplifted arm, was standing white and terror-struck in the middle of the room, with her little hands tightly clasped, and her face expressing a whole tragedy of emotions. But a friend had come to her rescue. Sam, touched by the poor child's misery, and unwilling, whatever her indiscretion might be, that she should fall into the power of the injudicious and unsympathetic Edgar, interposed.

He snatched the letter from the young man's hand, saying good-humoredly:

“Come, that's not quite fair, is it?”

The letter was torn in the effort made by Edgar to retain it, and a scrap fell to the floor. Molly fell down upon it, snatching it up like a hungry animal. As she looked up she met Sam's eyes, and from white grew in a moment crimson.

He had hoped, till that moment, that her constant asseverations were true, that she was not in love, that she had never been in love. While he believed that, he could hope that the perilous game he knew her to be playing was for vanity, for amusement only. But this letter, and the eagerness she had shown over it,

opened his eyes. He scarcely heard the abuse to which Edgar treated him.

It was Mrs. Weir who came forward to set matters right again. And under cover of her movement Molly escaped from the room with the fragments of her letter.

“My dear Mr. Frewen, it was rather hard upon the child, wasn't it?” said she, with her bland smile; “we none of us like to have our letters read aloud——”

“But she has no business to receive them,” retorted Edgar, “for there's no knowing, with these girls, who it comes from. I only wish my father had been here when I got hold of it!”

“And I,” went on Mrs. Weir sweetly, “am very glad that he wasn't. He would certainly have thought the matter of more consequence than it is.”

Bab, who had risen to her feet, and who had been watching and listening in silence, but with breathless attention, gave a sigh of intense relief when the scene was over.

“Oh, Sam!” she whispered, when he had discreetly withdrawn from the scene of action, and left Mrs. Weir to settle the matter with Edgar, “I'm trembling all over! What an escape! You don't know what a scene there would have been if he'd seen who that letter was from and taken it to papa!”

“And I'm not at all sure it wouldn't have served her right if he had,” replied Sam severely. “And some of your correspondence wants overhauling too, young woman, if I'm not mistaken.”

Bab drew herself up with serene impertinence.

“I'm too careful for anything of that sort to hap-

pen with me," said she. "Besides, the only one that matters never writes."

Sam pricked his ears. These words set him thinking.

"Oh, he's careful too?" was all he said. But he began to wonder whether clever Bab did not want more looking after than the less cautious Molly.



## CHAPTER VI.

It was a relief to everybody's feelings, which were at rather a high tension, when there was a fresh arrival in the person of Lindo Goring, one of the *habitués* of the house, surnamed "the makeweight," because his powers of entertaining did not come up to the girls' standard.

He got quite an unusual share of everybody's attention, and did not fall back into his proper place until after the early dinner which was one of the distinguishing features of the Frewen Sunday.

There was no reason in the world why dinner should not have been at the usual time, except that this would have conflicted with Mr. Frewen's old-fashioned ideas of respectability. For the eight o'clock supper, which was another institution to mark the day, was a banquet of a rather elaborate description.

Dinner over, Mr. Frewen disappeared into his study again, and Edgar went out. There was a universal sigh of relief as the rest trooped upstairs to the drawing-room and broke up into groups.

Mrs. Weir took her favorite chair in the corner between the fireplace and one of the windows, and beckoned Sam to come to her.

"It was very good of you to come to my rescue with young Frewen," said he; "it saved a row."

"Really I'm not sure that I ought not to have let

the 'row' happen!" said she doubtfully. "These girls are impossible! One doesn't know what to do for the best with them! Are they unique?"

Sam laughed.

"Not by any means," said he. "I've known others even in my experience; though none that I've liked so well."

"I like them too," admitted Mrs. Weir. "If one were not interested in what's going to become of them, they would be amusing. And they are affectionate and natural—a little too natural. But, Mr. Ritchie, they are more than a little vulgar, aren't they?"

"I don't think so," said Sam stoutly, as he took a low chair, and drew it nearer to her. "To my thinking, there is no vulgarity without either coarseness or pretension. The slang they use seems to me to become a different thing on their innocent lips from what it originally was."

"And pray, what do you think of their ideals? Their ambitions?"

"Why, they have neither the one nor the other. No more than the birds have. And you can't understand the delightful change they are after the hordes of well-brought-up girls I know—my own sisters among the number, whose one ideal and ambition is to make a 'good' marriage!"

"You are too sweeping. There are plenty of girls who steer clear of the two extremes."

"I know there are. And plenty more daring as these, but not so innocent. But the 'safe' girls have not the life and 'go' of Bab and Molly, who make

them seem colorless and dull. There is all the anxiety of their future, too, to make them interesting."

"You are in love with Molly. Why don't you tell her so?"

"It would do no good, harm perhaps. And she knows it, and presumes upon it besides. Look at the glances she throws over here every now and then, just because she's jealous that I should seem interested in talk with another lady!"

"Let her be jealous. It is good for you both. And where there is jealousy, surely there is some hope?"

Sam shook his head.

"That doesn't follow. It might perhaps, if it were not for this other fellow. That letter was from him, of course."

"I'm afraid so."

Sam looked black.

"And the little fool won't hear a word! Or, rather, the more she hears the less he heeds. But one might punch his head!"

"It might have an excellent effect on his looks, from your point of view, but it would be a pity otherwise, I think."

A sudden suspicion darted into Sam's mind, to be dismissed as unworthy the moment after. Mrs. Weir had admitted she feared this man; surely she was not letting things slide under the influence of that fear?

Then he sighed heavily.

"I wonder what we ought to do?" he said.

The next moment he was seized by the shoulder very sharply.

"I'm tired of the makeweight," whispered she. "Come and amuse me; I'm sure Mrs. Weir looks as if you'd bored her long enough!"

"It's very hard," said Mrs. Weir with a pretended sigh, "that we should be parted thus! But you may go, Mr. Ritchie, and we'll take up our conversation at the interesting point it had just reached—next time!"

Molly laughed rather half-heartedly, as she took Sam off to the piano. He had a fairly good voice and it was a weakness of his to like to sing. Only on occasions of rare graciousness, however, did Molly offer to play his accompaniments.

"You might try that pretty thing of Tosti's," said she. "We'll do it very softly, so that perhaps papa won't hear. And very slow, and then he'll think it's sacred music if he does!"

And, not in the least to the disturbance of the talkers in the other room, now reinforced by two or three more of "Edgar's friends," he began to sing. At the end of the very first verse, Molly, in an ominous voice, asked a question:

"What were you and Mrs. Weir talking about?"

"Oh, different things. I forget what."

"No, you don't. You were talking about me."

"You were mentioned, I believe."

"Not 'mentioned,' but talked about," reiterated Molly fiercely. "Now I warn you that I won't be talked about. Or—if I am—"and she threw him a glance of real menace, "if I am, I'll give you all something to talk about!"

"My dear child," said he gently, "you will never

be 'talked about' by any party of which I am one, except in terms which any girl might be pleased to hear."

The tenderness in his tone, as well as the words themselves, brought a lump suddenly into Molly's throat.

She let her fingers drop from the keys, and answered in a husky voice:

"Sam, shut up! I'm not good enough—for you—for you to trouble about! And—and"—she went on quickly, before he could get a word in, "I'm not going to try to be any better. So it's no use my holding out hopes. Your sisters are right, Sam; you're only wasting your time coming here. And I want you—I want you—not to come any more. You'll only hear something that you won't like, soon, if you do. Now I've warned you!"

"Good heavens! child, what do you mean?" cried Sam in a panic.

"I can't tell you now. But—but——"

She was very much agitated. Sam bent over her, determined to get an answer.

But at that moment, the young people in the next room, becoming conscious that the music which had supplied a pleasant fillip to the conversation had ceased, began to ask impertinent questions. One of them jumped up and came toward the piano. Molly, angry at being caught red-eyed, slipped out of the room.

And she did not come back.

Mrs. Weir, noticing this, presently broke off the talk in which she was engaged, and announced her

intention of going to evening service. There was a little surprise in one or of the two faces, but Bab, as usual, looked demurely intelligent.

"She's gone to look after Molly, you bet!" she remarked aside to Sam.

Bab was right. Divining Molly's intention, Mrs. Weir put on a bonnet very quickly, slipped out of the house, and caught Molly, who was armed with a huge "church service," at the corner of the street.

"I'm going to church," said Molly shortly.

"So am I, dear. Let me go with you, and you can let me look over your book," said Mrs. Weir.

Now this amounted to a confession of the impromptu nature of her devotion; and Molly frowned. There was no help for it, however; and the girl was forced to make the best of it, and to enter the church with Mrs. Weir. She stole a look round her at the first opportunity, and found the person of whom she was in search with his eyes fixed intently on Mrs. Weir.

It was real jealousy, and not the sham emotion she had affected in the case of poor Sam, which filled the girl's passionate heart as she noticed this. One thing more she saw also: Mrs. Weir, although she never once appeared to look round, was conscious of the gaze of the stranger and uneasy under it.

When service was over, and the two ladies came out together, Molly tried hard to escape from her companion in the crowd, if only for a moment. But Mrs. Weir was too clever for her. All the satisfaction Molly had was, in passing out through the porch, to meet the eyes of a middle-aged man, of medium

height and slight build, with a deeply furrowed face and carefully dyed mustache, and to exchange with him a glance and a frown of warning.

Mrs. Weir chatted amicably on the way home, but Molly was sullen and silent. Rushing upstairs on reaching home, the girl burst into the drawing-room, and flung her prayer-book, in a violent passion, at Sam's head.

"You put her up to it. I know you did!" cried she, half-suffocated with rage, and quite indifferent as to the comments of the assembled company, who were, however, too much used to Molly's tempestuous ways to be much impressed by this outbreak. "Well, you will see what you will get by it!"

And, without another word to anybody, she flung herself out of the room, and appeared no more that evening.

On his way home that night, Sam, in the gloomiest of humors, was accosted by a man whom he did not know, but whom he recognized, by the description he had received from Bab, as Sir Walter Hay.

"I beg your pardon for stopping you," said the stranger in a perfectly courteous and well-bred tone: "You are Mr. Ritchie, I know, a dear friend of my little friend, Molly Frewen. Let me introduce myself, though I dare say you know who I am—Sir Walter Hay."

"I have heard, Sir Walter, that Mr. Frewen does not allow you to visit at his house. Then how can his daughter be your friend?" said Sam stiffly.

"These things arrange themselves," answered Sir Walter carelessly. "You had better ask Miss Molly

about it. I am quite in the lady's hands. If she wishes to give up my acquaintance—" Sam moved impatiently. "However, that was not what I wanted to speak to you about. Mr. Frewen is straining at a very small gnat, and swallowing an extra-sized camel. He forbids me the house, and allows a person who calls herself Mrs. Weir to reside under the same roof with his daughters!"

"Well?" said Sam, assuring more ease than he felt.

"Well, if Mrs. Weir is the lady I saw at church with Molly this evening, I can only hope, for Mr. Frewen's sake, that her future may be—shall I say—less checkered—than her past. And the dear girls—they like excitement, don't they? Well, sooner or later, if the connection goes on, they will get it!"

And raising his hat in the same easy, slightly amused manner, Sir Walter walked quietly away.



## CHAPTER VII.

TWENTY times a day, with the utmost regularity, Sam Ritchie called himself a fool for caring so much about a girl who didn't care for him. And after each of these occasions he fell into a state of abject penitence or of indignation with himself; and, recalling some pretty word or bright glance of Molly's, he told himself that no man with a heart in him could be expected to resist such charms.

He was under her displeasure since the Sunday night when she had just missed his head with her brass-bound church service; and on the evenings when he appeared at Cirencester Terrace he had to content himself with talking to Mrs. Weir, and to Tryphena and Bab. Molly would not so much as look in his direction.

Although he pretended not to mind, and chatted away to the other ladies as if nothing had happened, Sam's heart was sore smitten by this treatment, so that at last he stayed away from the house altogether, and spent his evenings with his sisters and younger brothers at Onslow Square.

Rhoda and Amy, the two eldest, were rather uninteresting girls, who gave themselves airs on the strength of being "superior" and well informed, but who could never disguise their jealousy of other girls who were not.

“Dear me! Are we to have you at home again to-night, Sam?” asked Rhoda at the breakfast-table with something like a sneer, when her brother had promised to take Amy to a lecture at the South Kensington. “What is the meaning of it?”

“Don’t tease him about it, pray. But be thankful when he does stay at home to look after his sisters a little!” interposed Mrs. Ritchie, who was a typical specimen of the over-fed, over-dressed London mother, with one calculating eye fixed on her account-book and the other on her marriageable daughters, in both cases trying to get the biggest return for the smallest possible outlay.

“Oh, I’m sure we are duly grateful,” retorted Rhoda. “Only we are naturally anxious to know the reason for this unusual honor.”

“You have had a quarrel with them, I suppose!” suggested Amy, in a less disagreeable tone than her sister, however.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you can see in those girls, Sam,” went on Rhoda. “They’re dreadfully fast and vulgar and slangy, and they know nothing whatever on any subject, and care for nothing, but dress and promiscuous flirtation.”

“That’s not exactly correct, as of course you know,” answered Sam quietly. He would have preferred to say nothing at all, but the last words stung him to speech, as indeed they were intended to do. “The Frewen girls are not faultless, and they don’t pretend to be. But they don’t flirt more than other girls, and I have never heard them run down other people.”

“Their father is in a very good position,” observed Mrs. Ritchie.

“They don’t live in very great style,” put in Rhoda. “Don’t even keep a carriage.”

“They’re all the better off on that account,” suddenly interposed Mr. Ritchie, who was a hard-working, good-natured City man, bound to the car of an ostentation which he loathed. “I wish I were as well off as old Frewen must be. ‘Frewen & Smee’ are one of the best-known firms in the city, and they have a splendid business. They’re trustees for Lord Cloone, and a dozen other men in the same position.”

“Lord Cloone!” cried Amy with interest. “The man who has been out shooting so many tigers and things? There’s all about it in *The Morning Post*.” And she took up that paper from where it was lying, near her mother’s plate. “He’s been writing a book about his adventures, and he’s just going to start on his way back to England.”

Everybody looked interested in this information, especially the ladies. Lord Cloone was one of the wealthy young men among whom it is the fashion to take long journeys to far continents in search of big game; and some of his exploits had got into the papers and been talked about.

“Ah, he’ll be on view at Cirencester Terrace, then, when he comes back, depend upon it! And then you’ll have more of your brother’s society, my dears,” went on Mr. Ritchie banteringly. “For Sam’s nose, as well as the noses of all the other young men who flock round those girls—very nice girls they are too!

—like flies round a honey-pot, will be put out of joint when my Lord Viscount comes along!”

A silence fell upon the group. For a few minutes every one went on eating without speaking. It was plain that there had come a revulsion of feeling in favor of Cirencester Terrace, and that the ladies were wondering how gracefully to recede from their former position, and to open the way for an early call.

Sam was disgusted. He knew what money and position meant as well as anybody, and despised neither of them, any more than any other young Londoner. But he was satiated with this eternal talk about them; with this everlasting worship at the same dingy shrine. He changed his mind about the lecture, which Amy seemed to have forgotten, and compounding with her for a promise of a book she wanted, said he had remembered an appointment.

When he and his father had left the house for the city, mother and daughters exchanged glances.

“Sam isn’t so simple as he pretends, after all!” remarked Rhoda.

“But I really don’t think it’s because their father’s rich that he likes those girls,” said Amy.

Mrs. Ritchie broke in hastily.

“Whatever his reasons are, you had much better leave him to do as he likes. They are quite the right sort of people to know, these Frewens. And I shall take one of you girls to call there next week.”

“They have a nice little place on the river,” observed Rhoda thoughtfully. “I wonder whether Lord Cloone will be staying there with them this season!”

Sam's imaginary appointment was not with the Frewens, but it was not unconnected with those wilful young women.

This talk about Lord Cloone had brought into his mind the recollection that Molly and Bab and Tryphena had certain advantages, of which they themselves thought little, but which would have sent them up with a spring and a bound in the estimation of the ladies of his own household.

They were distantly related, on the mother's side, to more than one titled family. And their great aunt, the Honorable Agatha Melbury, was on the very best terms with them.

It had flashed into his mind that Miss Melbury would be a very proper person to consult upon this very awkward matter of Mrs. Weir and Sir Walter Hay's warnings, on the one hand, and of Mrs. Weir's warnings concerning Sir Walter on the other. So, as he was always well received by Miss Melbury, who was what is known as a "character," he presented himself at her house in Wilton Place that afternoon a few minutes after five o'clock.

Miss Melbury was "At home," and he found her pretty drawing-room, with its delicious Eighteenth Century atmosphere of *pot-pourri* and brocade, subdued manners and softly uttered scandal, a curious change from his home on the one hand, and Cirencester Terrace on the other.

He had to make his way, tortuously, between and around groups of faded, quiet ladies, some with equally quiet daughters beside them, some with a courteous, silver-haired gentleman in attendance.

But the ladies, especially the old ladies, predominated, and gave the tone to the whole.

And at the end of his journey he came to Miss Melbury herself, a thin, withered old lady, with hooked features and gray eyes of preternatural shrewdness, sitting in state in an armchair of ancient fashion, over the subdued brocade of which her petunia velvet and lace yellow with age hung in well-studied folds.

A regal old lady this, holding a court one day in each week with some effect. The ladies who were nearest sank into insignificance beside her, although one was a duchess. Miss Melbury seemed to absorb all the dignity within reach of her, and to leave nothing for her immediate neighbors.

She raised a gold, square-framed eyeglass to inspect the new-comer, and having recognized him as one of her fold, held out a thin yellow hand in a manner which would have made a stranger want to kneel.

And then, surprise of surprises! she spoke, and revealed the fact that she combined the manners of the Eighteenth Century with the speech of the end of the Nineteenth.

“You will find this rather ‘slow,’ I am afraid, Mr. Ritchie. Tea with a lot of dowagers!”

“I don’t think you’ll have to set me down as too ‘fast’ for you,” said Sam, as he took the chair beside her to which she graciously invited him.

“And what have you got to tell me? You need not waste your time trying to persuade me that it was the pleasure of seeing a withered old woman that brought you!” she said, fixing upon him those pene-

trating eyes which it was difficult to believe were short-sighted.

Sam came straight to the point.

“You are too clever, Miss Melbury. You ought to give one time for a decent preamble.”

“I will imagine the decent preamble.”

“Well, then, I wanted to speak to you about those girls.”

“Ah? My nieces! Why were they not young men? What spirited fellows they would have made! Instead of being, as they are, the despair of all their friends!”

“They are charming girls though, Miss Melbury!”

“They are. I see very little of them, of course, much less than you do. They find my dowager afternoons dull, and they have the honesty to stay away. I respect them for it. I respect all girls without mothers—until they go wrong, as they invariably do. They are so frank.”

Sam knew that the sharp-tongued old lady was better than her words, but that it was her fancy not to let this be suspected. So he laughed gently in appreciation of her wit, although he did not like the tone of it.

“Mr. Frewen has taken a very strange step. I suppose you have heard of it?”

“Do you mean the widow?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I think Mr. Frewen has taken many worse steps than that. I rather like her.”

“You have seen her then?”

“Yes. She has evidently been used to decent peo-

ple. And think what a relief she is after that terrible Roscoe person! I was always in terror lest Mr. Frewen should marry her. She played upon his love of conventionality and outward propriety, while she neglected her duties to the girls all the time."

"Did you ever suggest to him——"

"Never. I never do. And so you don't like the widow?"

"I like her very much, but——"

"There is always a 'but' with a widow of unknown antecedents. Why trouble one's self about it? Mr. Frewen has chosen to take her under his roof: she conducts herself with immaculate propriety, even doing her best for the girls—which is really almost Quixotic. What can you do but take her as she is, and be thankful?"

However, Sam insisted upon confiding to her the warning which had been given him by Sir Walter Hay. At the mention of this man's name Miss Melbury shivered.

"How can you take the word of a person like that?" she said. "He is a *mauvais sujet* of the first water. Having run through his property in every sort of discreditable way, he gains a dishonest living by any sort of shady business he can find: company-promoting in its lowest form, touting for outside stockbrokers, anything. He has a grudge against Mr. Frewen, who got him prosecuted some years ago in connection with some bogus company or other. He would say anything, do anything, to bring discomfort into his household, I have no doubt."

Sam listened in dismay. The transactions of which



Miss Melbury spoke had taken place years before, when he was a small boy. And he had never heard of them, nor specifically of the other charges now brought against the impecunious baronet.

"Then, Miss Melbury," said he firmly, "you must speak to Molly. For she is meeting this man on the sly."

Miss Melbury sat back in her chair, in despair. Then she sat up again.

"I shall not speak to her," she said crossly. "I am not going to make myself ridiculous by wrangling with that child. But I will, if you like, speak to Mrs. Weir. It is you who must speak to Molly."

"But what can *I* say?"

"Tell her she must marry you."

"It's so easy to say that, Miss Melbury! But she won't. However, I'll try. She threw a book at my head last Sunday. I might put it to her that that would be an acceptable way of making amends?"

"A very good idea. Now, you may go. I see you are dying to put it in practice. And tell the widow she may call. Any evening except Wednesday. I must get her to caution those girls against the way they dress. Their clothes are always so shockingly becoming that they look like the better class of shop-girls! Good-by. Give the girls my love."

And he was dismissed.

## CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Sam arrived at Cirencester Terrace it was half-past six, and therefore very near the Frewens' usual dinner hour. However, he was too intimate a friend to trouble his head about that. Armed with the fresh intelligence he had about her dangerous acquaintance, he felt that he must speak to Molly at once. If he could catch her for a minute in the drawing-room when she came down dressed for dinner, he felt that he could compress what he had to say into a very few words, and that if he came upon her unexpectedly he should have a better chance of being listened to than if she had time to put on a special manner for him.

As soon as the door was opened, however, he saw by the servant's face that something was wrong.

Johns was an ancient institution, on intimate terms with all the old friends of the family.

"Sad news this, sir; have you heard?" said he, in a low voice, as he closed the door with extra gentleness.

"No. What is it?"

"My master, sir, was brought home in a cab about half an hour ago, by one of the clerks."

"Not——"

Sam's face said the rest.

"Oh, no, sir, no. But very ill, very ill indeed.

We had almost to carry him in. He's in the study now, sir." And the man glanced along the hall toward a door at the end. "He chose to be taken in there. And the worst of it is, he's so touchy about it, he won't let us send for a doctor."

"Oh, but that's nonsense! He must have one," said Sam. And seizing his hat again, he turned and was about to rush out of the house when Johns respectfully but firmly interposed, laying his hand upon the door.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I think you'd better not, until he allows it. Miss Roscoe wanted to, when he first came in, and she fussed and insisted. But Mr. Frewen was in such a way about it that Mrs. Weir said we'd better wait a bit. And what she says, sir, it mostly seems best to do," ended the man with conviction.

Sam gave way, and went upstairs to the drawing-room. He was puzzled. When a man is taken ill suddenly, it certainly strikes one as the proper thing to send for a doctor, whatever the opinion of the patient himself may be on the subject. He leaned over the banisters.

"Johns!"

The man came softly up to him.

"Is it paralysis, do you think?"

Johns hesitated.

"I really don't rightly know what it is, sir. It seems a—a peculiar sort of a thing! I suppose we shall know more about it presently, sir."

And, seeing that the gentleman had nothing more to say to him, Johns discreetly withdrew.

Even before he opened the door of the drawing-room, Sam heard loud sobs and also expressions of indignation and complaint in a voice which he recognized as Miss Roscoe's. On entering the room he found the governess pacing up and down, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, and declaring that she never, no never, in all her life had been so treated before!

Bab, in a low-necked pale pink dress, was standing by one of the windows, looking white and rather frightened. Tryphena, also in evening dress, which in her case was of cream-colored muslin, was sitting sulkily in a chair. Miss Roscoe literally flew at him as he entered.

"Oh, Mr. Ritchie, that woman! What do you think? A nice person poor Mr. Frewen has been harboring under his roof! A nice person, to estrange him from all his daughters and his oldest friends!"

Tryphena broke in sharply, in her strident, boisterous tones:

"Rubbish! Don't listen to her, Sam. Papa's been taken ill, and he sent for Mrs. Weir; that's all the story. And why shouldn't he? That's what I want to know!"

"Tryphena, I'm surprised at you!" snapped Miss Roscoe, who was easily surprised. "What right has she to be with your dear papa, when she hasn't been in the house a month, while I——"

Tryphena laughed mockingly.

"He has a right to send for whom he likes. We don't complain that he didn't want to see us. Why should you mind that he didn't want to see you?"

“Well, if you don’t object to having your father’s affection stolen away from you by an interloper, I object for you!” sobbed Miss Roscoe with unappreciated magnanimity. “And I’m sure you, Mr. Ritchie, will agree with me that it’s not natural or right that she should be placed before any of us, this—this Mrs. Weir!”

And from the scornful emphasis which she placed upon the name one would have thought that it was a hall-mark of evil.

“It can’t be denied that he has a right to send for whom he likes,” suggested Sam mildly. “I dare say, being ill, he feels it better and more proper to see a married lady, and an older woman than any of you.”

He thought this was a very neat way out of the difficulty, but Miss Roscoe sniffed, and ejaculated “married woman indeed!” and turned her back upon the despicable man who had so evidently gone over to the enemy.

“I dare say it’s all nothing. Don’t you think so, Sam?” asked Bab anxiously. “Papa’s never ill, you know!”

Sam did not quite see the strength of this argument, but he said he hoped it would prove to be nothing serious.

“Mrs. Weir was going to take us to the Haymarket,” said Tryphena. “But now I suppose we can’t go!”

“Perhaps she’ll let me take you,” suggested Sam, who thought that if he did not go with them, somebody else would. “And where’s Molly?”

“Oh, she’s gone to tea with Aunt Agatha, and will join us at the theatre,” said Bab.

Now Sam knew very well that Molly had not gone

“to tea with Aunt Agatha,” and his face fell. Bab took pity on him, and slipped her arm affectionately into his, as she dragged him up the back drawing-room, as far as possible out of hearing of Miss Roscoe’s ostentatious grief.

“I wouldn’t mind, if I were you, Sam,” she said. “Molly herself says you’re too good for her, and I think she’s right.”

“Good heavens, child! what do you mean?”

Bab glanced up at him quickly, and was evidently sorry she had said so much.

“Oh, oh, I only mean,” stammered she. “But she’ll tell you herself to-night. She really promised to meet us at the theatre to-night.”

“But where has she gone to? I know she isn’t at Miss Melbury’s, for I’ve just come from there myself. And it’s her day, and Molly would never go there when all those old ladies are about.”

But Bab, with a little guilty blush, merely observed that she could only tell where Molly said she was going, and not where she went to, and crossed over to Tryphena.

Sam said he had better go home to dress, if he was to take them to the theatre, and he left the room. As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he came suddenly face to face with Mrs. Weir, who had just come out from the study.

He was shocked to see that she was in a state of great agitation, and that even the unexpected meeting with himself set her trembling violently.

“What is it?” asked he in alarm. “Do tell me the truth. Is Mr. Frewen seriously ill?”

He heard, as he spoke, sounds as of some person moving quickly about in the room she had just left. And as his eyes involuntarily travelled in that direction, she moved rapidly into such a position as to block the way toward that apartment.

“He is certainly ill,” she answered. And her voice was hardly under complete control. “But I really think he is frightening himself more than he need do. A few days’ rest and quiet are, I am pretty sure, all he wants to make him all right again.”

“But,” said Sam, very much puzzled by the contrast between her agitated manner and look and her reassuring words: “Surely he ought to see his doctor? Couldn’t you persuade him?”

“I have tried,” she answered quickly. “But it is of no use. He is exceedingly touchy on the subject!”

“Do you think he would see me? Perhaps I could persuade him.”

“I will ask him.”

She went back into the study, the door of which she closed behind her so rapidly and so neatly that Sam was unable to get a glimpse of what was going on inside. In a very few minutes she came out again.

“It is of no use. He won’t see anybody, even you. I think you had better not try.” As, in spite of himself, Sam looked doubtful and suspicious, Mrs. Weir’s tone suddenly changed. “I hope you don’t suspect that I am not doing what is best,” she said with so much directness, so much womanly earnestness, that he was abashed, and felt his doubts give way against his judgment. “If you only knew what a difficult task I have undertaken, you would do what

you could to help me, and—you would not look at me like that!”

“If there is anything I can do, I will,” said he gently.

“Thank you.” To complete her conquest on his good-nature, Sam saw that there were tears, undoubtedly real ones, in her eyes. “The girls. You can help me with them. You must own that I have kept my promise to try and look after them.”

“You have indeed,” said Sam heartily.

“Take them to the theatre this evening. They won’t go with Miss Roscoe.”

“I have already undertaken that.”

“Thank you. That is just like you. Good-by. I must go back to my patient.”

And, giving him her hand with a kind look which Sam fully appreciated, she left him and returned to the study.

Still, when one got outside and considered the matter in cold blood, it really was a very mysterious illness, this of Mr. Frewen’s.



## CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Sam returned to Cirencester Terrace, an hour later, driving up in a hansom, Bab and Tryphena, their pretty little fair faces peeping out from a nest of white goat fur, which formed the trimming of the short white silk sling capes they wore over their light frocks, were peeping anxiously out of the dining-room window.

Before the hansom could stop they were out on the doorstep; and by the time Sam jumped out he found himself surrounded by fluttering skirts, and with two young voices chattering vociferously in his ears.

"You *have* been a long time! I don't see what a man has to do to make him so long, when he has no hair!" cried Tryphena.

But Sam repelled this charge indignantly.

"What do you mean, no hair?" he cried, as he passed his hand caressingly over the back of his smooth head. "I've got as much hair as any other man!"

"Man! Yes!" retorted Tryphena scornfully. "But you haven't got any to do up. It's just a dab with a brush, and it's done. Unless you curl it, as some of you do. I know Bradley does!" added she mischievously.

But Bab, who had been adding a quiet undercurrent

to her sister's words, refused to be irritated by this remark.

"It looks very nice, however he does it," she replied calmly.

But the faint pink flush which came into her white face showed that she could not hear any reference to Bradley quite unmoved. The truth was, that Bradley Ingledew and Bab had been drifting rather fast lately toward a state of emotion which one of the two, at any rate, would have liked to have strength to avoid.

"How are we going to sit?" she asked, with some anxiety, "three in a hansom is always a squash; and when one's dressed——"

"Well, what on earth was I to do?" asked Sam with bland irritation. "You know very well that if I'd brought up a four-wheeler——"

There was a subdued scream of horror from both girls.

"But I can go on an omnibus, if you like. As you've got a box, you can go straight in, and you won't have to wait for me long."

"Omnibus! Rubbish! Come along!" said Bab laconically. "I'll get in first; then you, Sam; and little Tryphena must squeeze herself in any way she can."

And so "little Tryphena," who was decidedly the finest woman in the family, had to be content with the uncomfortable third place on the knees of the others, a position which, however, she occupied with great good humor and with no disastrous results to her fresh muslin.

"How jolly!" sighed Bab when they had started,

“to be coming with you, Sam, instead of with Mrs. Weir! She’s begun to shadow us lately!”

“She must have hard work to shadow all three of you!” replied Sam drily. “Considering that it’s very difficult to find two of you together, and that you’re all always up to some mischief or other!”

“I’m never in mischief,” said Bab indignantly. “I just pretend things to annoy Mrs. W.”

“Then it’s very ungrateful of you,” cried Tryphena stoutly, “for she is most awfully good to us, and suggests everything so sweetly and nicely that it’s quite a pleasure to please her. Not a bit like that horrid old Roscoe. I am so glad papa paid her out by sending for Mrs. Weir!”

“I didn’t say she was as bad as Miss Roscoe,” said Bab indulgently. “Roscoe is unique. Nature made her, was shocked, and broke the mould.”

“You don’t like Mrs. Weir because she saw you kissing Bradley in the conservatory and came in and stopped you,” cried Tryphena in her loud terrible “younger sister” voice.

Bab retorted with much indignation, which, however, she did not suffer to make her loud.

“It’s no business of Mrs. Weir’s to interfere with me,” she said. “What right had she to say who I may speak to and who I may not?”

“Oh, you might speak to anybody,” retorted Tryphena, “I dare say. But kissing is a different thing, isn’t it, Sam?”

“One doesn’t kiss every one one speaks to, certainly,” said Sam.

“But what reason can she have for objecting to

Bradley Ingledew?" said Bab with considerable irritation in her tone. "How can any one say he isn't by far the nicest man that comes to our house?"

"Thank you," moaned Sam with resignation.

"Well, except you, Sam, of course except you. And even you've spoilt yourself rather by being so ridiculously fond of Molly!"

"Perhaps he can't help that, poor fellow!" said Tryphena with sympathy.

Sam laughed rather ruefully.

"It's very good of you, girls, to take my part and try to spare my feelings, and the rest of it. But I'd rather be left altogether out of the question. Some of your soothing little speeches have an unconscious sting."

But he had better have held his tongue. Tryphena turned round in her boisterous manner, and chucked him under the chin.

"Did it sting its little Sammy?" she cried with exuberant hilarity. "Well, then, it begs its little pardon, and won't do so any more. And Molly's a fool not to like you, Sam. And I can't help thinking you're rather a fool to like Molly. For nobody of any sense would care about that horrid, dried-up, dyed-up Sir Walter, when——"

"Be quiet, Tryphena," cried Bab sharply, as she gave her sister a pinch. She had more discrimination than her younger sister, and she saw that each word cut poor old Sam like a knife. "We were talking about Bradley."

"And I think you'd better not talk so much about him," retorted the irrepressible one. "I don't be-

lieve he cares about you so much as you think, Bab," she went on with admirable tact, "or why should he sometimes stay away for a week at a time, as you know he does, after making all sorts of promises to come, too?"

"Well, then, he comes every day for a week at a time," said Bab, with that outward calmness which was her strong point of difference from her sisters. "It doesn't do to come so often, with so many spying eyes about?"

"But where's the harm of the spying eyes, if you're just going to be engaged and married in the regular way?" retorted Tryphena, speaking more loudly than ever in the consciousness of having made a hit.

"Oh, nonsense, we needn't talk about that," said Bab hastily. "I think it's quite horrid, that talk of engagements and marriages just because two people like to talk to each other, or to see each other, and one happens to be a man and the other a woman. Perfectly disgusting, I call it."

"Perfectly disgusting, other people call it, when they don't want to get married!" retorted Tryphena, unsubdued.

Whereupon Bab, annoyed to find that Sam was secretly amused by her sister's repartees, assumed an aggressive elder-sisterly manner.

"My dear child, you don't know what you're talking about!" she said superbly, with a tone which she felt ought to end the discussion.

But it didn't.

"Oh, don't I? Why, to be sister to you and Molly is a liberal education!"

But at this point Sam's powers of self-control broke down, and he was felt to indulge in a smothered laugh. This encouraged Tryphena in her evil course.

"She's going down with him on his house-boat, Sam, and won't she get herself talked about? We've all heard of the lively times they have on those bachelor house-boats!"

Sam had certainly heard tales told of this particular house-boat, and he grew suddenly grave enough.

"I say, Bab, you'd better not do that," he said with good-humored expostulation. "You never know who's going to be there. They do get a rackets crew up there on Sundays, I know, actors and actresses and—and—lots of people your father wouldn't care about your meeting."

But Bab dashed in at the weak spot.

"And pray, where's the harm of being an actor or actress? I'm ashamed of you, Sam; I didn't think you were so narrow-minded!" she cried with a burst of virtuous indignation. "Everybody knows that actresses are hard-working women who support aged fathers and mothers and swarms of crippled brothers and sisters. It's always being impressed upon us in the papers. And the people who look down upon them are hypocritical Pharisees, who sand their sugar all the week and never miss church on Sundays!"

Sam had again some difficulty in repressing the amusement he felt at this apt travesty of the New anti-Puritanism, but he conquered himself, and replied with due gravity:

"But that sort of actress doesn't spend her money

in smart frocks to go on the river in. You know that, Miss Pert, as well as I do."

"Well," replied Bab composedly. "Perhaps not. But I should like to investigate for myself. If I see these people with my own eyes, I might, by a few judicious questions, get more real truth on this interesting subject than I could from all the papers."

"I dare say you could," said Sam demurely. "But I think, if you must try you had better let Mrs. Weir go with you."

"I think she's too dangerous," said Bab. "And her nice frocks might set the poor, hard-working actresses wishing they could dress as well!"

There was no getting the best in argument of this sort with Bab; and Sam felt glad that the bustle of Piccadilly now began to distract the girl's attention from himself and his crotchets.

As they got out of the hansom at the theatre portico Tryphena asked her sister:

"Is Bradley coming?"

"You know he isn't," answered Bab shortly. "He doesn't know we're coming. You must know," she went on, turning to Sam with a grievance, "that Mrs. Weir didn't tell us she'd got the box till a couple of hours ago, just so that we couldn't make any appointments. Grandmotherly again!"

"I thought you might have wired," said Tryphena.

"I didn't know where to wire to, whether to the city or his chambers. It was such an awkward time."

But Sam shrewdly suspected that Bab had not been eager for a *tête-à-tête* which must have been held under Mrs. Weir's eyes at such close quarters as a

box necessitated. For Bab was falling very much in love, and she did not want Mrs. Weir, of all people, with her shrewd eyes, to know too much.

Sam was looking out for Molly, who was to have been waiting at the entrance. But he saw at the first peep inside the door that the little figure that set his heart beating so fast was not there. He could not conceal his disappointment, his anxiety. And the two girls exchanged glances full of sly amusement mingled with real pity.

“Will you take us in, Sam, and come and wait for her here?” suggested Tryphena.

But Bab said:

“That would be silly. Molly knows her way about, and she knows the number of the box. She will find her way in when she comes, without keeping Sam standing about here.”

Sam looked at her shrewdly. Her demure little white face told him little, but his suspicion was aroused.

“You don’t expect her to come at all?” said he quickly.

“Well, she told me she was coming, but—I shouldn’t be surprised if she didn’t.”

Sam said nothing; but he turned and walked into the corridor with them with a look on his face which made the tender-hearted Tryphena wince.

“Never mind, Sam,” she whispered, putting her hand through his arm with a jerk. “We’ll be very kind to you, Bab and I. And don’t be afraid. Molly’s all right. She can take care of herself as well as anybody.”



But poor Sam could not take this comfort to his heart.

They had a nice, roomy box, and Bab had just placed herself where her pretty person and dainty frock could be seen to the best advantage, when both her companions were startled by a change which suddenly came over her face, and by a smothered cry, like a sob, which broke from her lips at the same moment. Bab's complexion was naturally so pale that her cheeks hardly grew whiter; but the brilliant red color left her lips, and her eyes remained fixed on a box at the opposite side of the house.

Following the direction of her eyes, both Sam and Tryphena saw that the object which had arrested Bab's attention was a woman, a little fair, plump woman, with insignificant features which could scarcely be called pretty, who was dressed all in black, with diamonds in her hair and dress.

Sam did not know the face, but Tryphena did.

"Why," she said, in a whisper, addressed to both of her companions, "it's the woman whose portrait we found in Edgar's room, isn't it? With 'To darling Edgar' on the back?"

Bab said nothing. She was still staring, not at the woman, but at the man to whom, behind the curtains of the opposite box, she was whispering with a certain air of affectionate intimacy.

"Oh!" cried Tryphena almost aloud. "It's Bradley Ingledew!"

"Hush!" said Bab shortly. "We—we shall lose all the piece!"

And she resolutely raised her opera-glasses to the

stage; for the curtain had been up some minutes when they arrived.

But in her steady gray eyes there was a look so steely, with so much quiet determination about her straight-set mouth, that Sam forgot Molly for a little while in wonder as to what was to come of the discovery Bab had evidently made.

## CHAPTER X.

ONLY Tryphena, of the three persons in the Frewens' box that evening at the Haymarket, enjoyed the entertainment, and took away a vivid remembrance of the piece played.

Sam was thinking all the time about the absent Molly, wondering where she was, and whom she was with. Bab's thoughts were concerned with the group in the box opposite; with the plump woman in the black frock and the diamonds, and with the faithless Bradley.

Tryphena good-naturedly tried to persuade her sister that there was nothing to be jealous about. The woman in the black frock was not even pretty, neither was she, in Tryphena's opinion, very young.

"Look at the powder on her face. Why, you can see it from here!" said the younger sister consolingly. "It's one of those candid make-ups that are lilac in the shade. It's only some old married woman he's got to be civil to! His partner's wife, very likely."

But Bab would not be comforted. She was too shrewd naturally, and too much in love besides, to be able to console herself by such thoughts as these. It was quite true, as Tryphena suggested, that the woman Bradley was with was no great beauty; Bab even felt that she herself had no comparison to fear on the subject of good looks with the unknown rival.

But that the woman in black was her rival her instinct made her sure. By something indefinable in the attitude of the woman toward the man Bab could tell something: by the way in which they sat without speaking, she could tell more.

It was a long time before Bradley saw the Frewen girls, not until the curtain fell at the end of the first act. He kept in the back of the box; and no eyes less sharp than Bab's would have found him out.

At the very moment that he recognized them, he turned abruptly and left the box.

"He's coming to see us," said Tryphena.

"No, he isn't," said Bab quietly.

As she spoke there was a tap at the door of their own box. Sam opened it quickly with a gleam of hope. But it was not Molly who was waiting to come in. It was Lindo Goring, who had espied them from the stalls.

"The makeweight!" cried Tryphena, in a loud whisper.

But Bab sprang up, and held out her hand with unusual warmth of welcome.

"Oh, Mr. Goring, I'm so glad to see you! You may take me for a walk round the corridor if you like. It's stifling in here."

She snatched up her little white silk cape; and before Sam, in his odd capacity of chaperon, could suggest that it was hardly—she had thrown at him a pert little nod and swept out of the box, on the arm of the astonished Lindo, with her pretty head very high, and her big white lace fan with the pearl handles moving slightly to and fro as she went.

“Doesn't Bab walk as if she were a princess!” said Tryphena to Sam admiringly.

“But she doesn't behave like one,” snapped poor Sam. “Princesses always do the right thing; which is just what all you girls are warranted not to do!”

“Well, don't be cross, Sam, but get me an ice. It isn't my fault that Molly hasn't come, and that Bab has got tired of us.”

By the time Sam had got her the ice, there was another tap at the door of the box, and the make-weight presented himself with a rather crestfallen and aggrieved air.

“What have you done with Bab?” asked Tryphena.

“Oh, she soon shook me off,” replied Lindo discontentedly. “When we got half-way round the corridor, she tearing along at such a pace that I trod on a man's toes and tore an old lady's dress, and very nearly fell on my nose, we came full tilt into Ingle-dew, who turned white and tried to shuffle past, saying he had to meet somebody. Then I saw how Miss Bab meant to serve me. She suddenly discovered that she was anxious about her father, and asked Ingle-dew to take her home.”

Tryphena looked at Sam, and began to giggle.

“He didn't want to, and he tried to persuade her to go home by herself, saying he would put her into a cab. But she wouldn't let him off, and so he was obliged to make the best of it, and they went off together, both very sulky and very savage. I don't know what they are talking about in that cab, but I don't fancy Ingle-dew is having a good time!”

Tryphena looked at Sam again, and then glanced

across the house to the plump lady in black. She was getting impatient, evidently. Tryphena asked Lindo if he knew who she was.

"That's Minnie Haarlem," said he. "She was at the 'Levity' in 'Little Dick Turpin.' Didn't you see her? She played the Maid at the inn, in a pink frock with black stripes, and sang a nigger song, with a dance and a chorus."

"I didn't see 'Little Dick Turpin,'" said Tryphena. "Bradley Ingledew was in the box with her."

"Oh!" said Lindo. "I know he used to rave about her at one time, but I haven't heard so much about her from him lately. I thought somebody else had put her out of his head."

"Bab thought so too," said Tryphena sagely. "And I don't think she was pleased to find herself mistaken."

And Lindo agreed with her.

In the mean time Bradley Ingledew, as the make-weight had aptly surmised, was experiencing very rough treatment at the hands of Bab. It was not until they were in the hansom he had called, and well on the way toward Bayswater, that she broke the silence.

"Bradley, who was that woman?"

"What woman?"

"Don't pretend you don't know. It's no use. I saw her. I saw you with her."

"She isn't anybody you need trouble your head about," said Bradley rather sullenly.

"Do you care about her?"

"No. There's only one woman I do care about!"

“Then why were you in her box?”

“Well, I couldn't get out of it. I didn't want to go.”

“Will you swear that?”

“Indeed I will,” said Bradley heartily.

“And will you swear you don't care for her?”

Bradley hesitated a moment. Then he said:

“Yes. I'll swear that too.”

“Now you don't say that as if you meant it. Bradley, tell me the truth. I'm not a fool. I can bear the truth, whatever it is, only I must know, know, know!” And she brought down her fan with a series of sharp raps on the door of the hansom. “If you're tired of me, if you like this woman better, you can tell me so, and I won't say anything; I won't even cr-r-ry——” Here her voice was suddenly broken by a sob. “I'm not one of the—of the cr-r-rying s-sort!” Here she broke down altogether, and putting her handkerchief up to her eyes, sobbed her heart out very pitifully. “Only—only—you've broken my hear-r-rt!”

Bradley sat beside her, twisting his mustache with a very fierce air, and keeping his eyes on the horse's head as it bobbed up and down in front of him.

“What rot, Bab!” he said at last pettishly. “You don't know your own mind for two minutes together. Only the last time I called, a week ago——”

“Yes, a week, a whole week!” interpolated Bab hysterically.

“—you told me,” pursued Bradley, still very fierce, and keeping his eyes in such a direction that they should not take in her pitiful, weeping face, her

swaying, bending figure, "that you didn't believe in eternal devotion, and—and that sort of thing; and you said it was stupid of people to promise it, and you never would. And that for your part you meant to enjoy yourself, and to go about as you pleased, and not be tied to love and obey anybody, for years and years, not till you were too old and too ugly for anybody to care to talk to you. Now, Bab, you know you did!"

"Well," said she querulously, "well, and what if I did?"

"Oh, well," said Bradley, rather taken aback, "if you admit that, then what have you got to complain of? If you can go about and enjoy yourself, why shouldn't I?"

"There!" cried Bab, snatching her handkerchief from her eyes in order to face the monster who was capable of such self-contradiction. "Now you say you were enjoying yourself! Enjoying yourself with somebody else! Oh, Bradley!"

He glanced at her hastily, and his mouth quivered a little under his mustache. But if he was amused by the skill with which she avoided an explanation of her own inconsistencies, while reproaching him for his, there was a good deal besides amusement in his face. The expression in his handsome blue eyes changed to one which was very tender, as he suddenly threw his arm round her and drew her toward him.

"Enjoying myself! Oh, my darling, if you knew!"

There was so much passion, so much of something which sounded like despair in his tone, that Bab, startled, resisted his attempt to kiss her.



"If I knew what? What, Bradley?"

Foiled in the attempt to reach her lips, he suddenly withdrew his arm, and, folding his arms, leaned over the door of the hansom and began to whistle softly to himself.

"If I knew what?" repeated Bab persistently.

"Oh, if you knew—nothing," answered Bradley petulantly, but with an expression in his face which made the shrewd girl suspect that his irritability was assumed to hide some deeper feeling than he wished her to guess at. "When you cry like that, and make such a fuss, I don't know what I'm saying."

"Well, which did you mean," persisted she steadily, "that you were enjoying yourself in the box with that actress, or that you didn't want to see her, but couldn't get out of it? Because you said both those things, and the one thing contradicts the other?"

There was a pause. Both these young people had been idly drifting on a pleasant stream of flirtation toward the unseen and unsuspected rock of a serious passion. Neither quite understood this yet; neither wished to understand it. The man was nearer to comprehension of the facts than the girl; but he was very anxious to shut his eyes.

Not a bad sort of fellow, this Bradley Ingledew; light-hearted, good-tempered, generous, and easily moved to impulses of kindness, but not very firm of principle, not very strong where a woman was concerned. He knew as well as any one what dangers lie in the path of a pretty girl who snaps her fingers at chaperonage, and defies convention by taking her pleasure in her own way. He knew that, innocent as

she was, harmless as her pleasure seemed to be, this handsome Bab with the willowy figure could not long persist in doing exactly as she pleased, without getting the sort of reputation which makes a girl shunned by her own sex, and sneered at by the other.

But he chose to forget this; to remember only that she was a very charming creature, with her distinguished appearance, which made a frock of alpaca look better on her than a gown of rich brocade on another woman; and her air of demure gravity, under cover of which she uttered speeches full of quaint shrewdness in a manner which made them stick in the memory.

And so, as the time slipped by, and her open preference for his society made it easy for him to drop into the chair by her side to get the dance he wanted, even if it had been promised to another man, neither had noticed what a blank the absence of the other would have made in life; and if Bradley had an occasional qualm of conscience, he stifled it by keeping away from Cirencester Terrace for a week.

Now, in spite of his will, his eyes were being forced open: as he listened to Bab's voice, and recognized the thrill of deep feeling in her usually flippant tones, he felt that the time had come for some sort of an understanding, some sort of an explanation. And he shuddered at the thought.

For there was something which he ought to confess, but which stuck in his throat; something which would have put a stop to everything; the mere knowledge of which in his circle of friends would have turned him from an object of envy to a mark for the general amusement, perhaps the general contempt. And

more than all this, it would have cut him off from pretty Bab forever. And as he looked at her shyly out of the corners of his eyes, Bradley felt that his strength was not equal to the task.

He would be careful, very careful; and perhaps later—but in the mean time, just for a little while, till things got a bit easier, or till they righted themselves by some bit of luck, they must drift on.

So he answered Bab by saying what was quite true, as far as it went: but it did not go far enough, not nearly the full length of the journey.

“I meant that I didn’t want to go into the box, but that civility forced me to! Will that do for you, your royal highness?”

Bab sighed softly, and put her little gloved hand lightly on his arm.

“Yes, that will do, Bradley, that will do quite well. And please don’t think I’m jealous; for I’m nothing of the kind. Jealousy is a stupid thing, and rather vulgar. Only—only——”

“Only you like your friends to be always at your beck and call, and you are angry and offended if they so much as look at anybody else?”

“Yes, I suppose that is about it!” admitted Bab composedly. “So mind, when I come and see you on your house-boat, that you don’t have any girls there who are prettier than me, or I shall very likely be cross and disagreeable, and spoil the whole day.”

“All right,” said Bradley. “All the girls I know who are prettier than you (and that is some millions) shall be warned not to come near the river on that auspicious occasion.”

“Don’t talk about ‘auspicious occasions’! It’s like weddings!” observed Bab with a frown.

“I didn’t mean to,” said Bradley shortly. “When are you coming?”

“Well, we generally go to the Cottage at Teddington early in June, and it’s the second now. We’d better wait till we get down there; then I can slip away more easily. If I go away for a couple of hours from the Terrace with a sailor hat on, I shall have to answer a whole catechism.”

“All right,” said Bradley.

They were close to the end of the Terrace now, and the cabman put his head to the trap to ask the number.

Bradley thought he would let Bab go unkissed, which would put matters right with his conscience. But when the hansom drew up to the door of her father’s house, she turned and looked at him with evident surprise, in which he chose to fancy there was some suspicion. So he kissed her: she seemed to expect it.

Standing on the top of the steps, Bab produced a latch-key from her pocket.

“Just fancy,” whispered she with indignation, “Mrs. Weir wanted to take away our keys! She said she didn’t mind sitting up for us herself whenever we went out, if we didn’t like keeping the servants up! And that it wasn’t proper for ‘young ladies’—fancy calling us young ladies! Isn’t it horrid?—to have latch-keys! That’s the sort of thing we have to put up with now!”

And Bradley condoled with her and gave her another kiss as she let herself in.

## CHAPTER XI.

SAM had only Tryphena to take back home when the performance was over, and that young person told him frankly that he was rather grumpy, and that he had better have let the makeweight take her back, if he was going to look all the time as if he wished he hadn't had to bring her.

"Don't be cross, Phena," said he. "You girls are such a handful, that it's not surprising the care of you makes one grumpy."

"Oh, it isn't the care of us, it's the not having the only particular one to take care of," said she.

Sam did not deny this.

"Will you run in, when you get home," said he, "and see if Molly has come back? And if she hasn't, come down and tell me?"

"All right," said Tryphena.

So when the cab stopped Sam dismissed it, and waited on the door-step while Tryphena ran upstairs.

She returned very quickly, and put her head out with an expression of mystery.

"No, she's not come home yet. Miss Roscoe and Mrs. Weir have been having a 'set-to' in the drawing-room—about papa, I think. Miss Roscoe says she will go for the doctor herself, and Mrs. Weir daring her to! Bab has come back, she came back early, and she's gone upstairs crying, and she says there's a

mystery somewhere, and that she wishes she was dead, or married, and out of it all."

Tryphena, having uttered all this in a high-pressure whisper, paused to take breath, and looked at Sam, to find out what he thought of her story.

"I think there's something wrong myself," he said doubtfully. "But I don't know exactly what it is."

"It's nothing to do with Mrs. Weir," said the young girl sharply, rushing valiantly to the defence of her friend, even before the latter was attacked. "Oh, Sam, you don't think it is, do you? You wouldn't if you knew how good she is; and how she smooths things over with papa, and yet does her best to keep us girls in better order! She's a dear! I only wish she'd marry papa, as Miss Roscoe is afraid she will. But she won't! No such luck! He's too old! She says she's five-and-thirty, but I don't believe it; do you, Sam?"

"Why, yes, I believe any woman when she says she's five-and-thirty! Now, good-night; run in. I shall look in to-morrow to see how Mr. Frewen is."

The door closed softly, and Sam was left outside.

But he could not go home yet. He felt that he must wait and see Molly safe inside the house on her return. So he lit a cigarette, and began to patrol the street. His anxiety about the girl, which had been growing all the evening, had now reached a climax. It was twelve o'clock: where could the girl have gone? And in whose company had she been?

To this last and most important question his fears gave but one answer. She must have been with Sir Walter Hay, the one person of all her acquaintance

with whom her innocence would be less a protection than a danger.

Sam was at a fever-heat of anxiety on her account when at last he saw, turning into the street, two figures whom he recognized as hers and Sir Walter's. With the relief he felt at the sight of her there mingled such keen resentment and disgust against her companion that Sam felt sick and shivery, and leaned against the railing of the house near which he was standing, watching the two as they came, walking slowly and talking softly, like lovers, up the street.

Just before they reached her father's house they stopped, and Sir Walter kissed Molly, and left her, with two words, which reached Sam's ears, on his lips:

“To-morrow then!”

But at those two words patient, long-suffering Sam took fire. What? Was he to see his darling carried off by this worn-out, patched-up old wreck without a struggle or a sign? Was he to let them make appointments under his very nose, and be content to let the beautiful child waste her sweetness, her youth, her love, on this weary old reprobate?

A bold impulse seized Sam. He himself had been too patient, too gentle, too easily satisfied. The ignorant child found him cold, unimpassioned, compared with the sensual old rogue who knew how to use his voice, his looks, in such a manner as to touch the susceptible heart of a young girl. No doubt he had appealed, and successfully, to every tender quality of the budding woman; to her pity, her forgiveness, her feminine fancy for self-sacrifice; and to her

weaknesses, her vanity, her ignorant and foolish ideals of the school-room.

He had posed as a cheap Byronic hero, always a type of strong fascination to the entirely pure, the entirely ignorant. And Sam's rosebud, Molly, had been his easy dupe.

So thought Sam, as he dashed after the girl, and reaching the top step at the same moment as she, frightened her so much that she staggered, and would have slipped backward off the step if he had not caught her by the arm.

"Is it you, Sam? Oh, how could you? I might have fallen on the steps and cut myself!" panted she.

She was trembling all over; but Sam felt, with jealous rage, that this was much more likely to be the result of Sir Walter's kisses than of the fright he himself had given her.

"No, Molly," he said quietly, "you couldn't have fallen while I was close to you. I want to speak to you, dear."

Perhaps she noted a change in his manner; he spoke more gravely, in a more resolute tone, than usual; and there was a new note of something stronger than mere tenderness in his voice.

She looked up in a frightened way, and turned quickly to the door, fumbling in her pocket for her own key.

"Oh, you can't stay to talk now. It's ever so late. Come to-morrow——"

"You are going out to-morrow," interrupted Sam quickly.

She looked up at him again. It cut him to the



heart to see that she was afraid of him, anxious to get rid of him at any price.

“Oh, well, the day after—any day you like,” she said shortly.

“Molly,” said he very gently, but very firmly, “I must speak to you now, dear, while I have the chance. Let us walk up the street.”

“It looks so bad, so late!” objected she pettishly.

Sam laughed a little.

“You didn’t trouble your head about that just now, Molly!”

“Oh, if you’re going to lecture me I’ll go in!” cried the girl. And, although she was trembling more than ever, she made a dash for the door with great vehemence.

Sam heard something drop, and saw her stoop. It was the latch-key, which she was just fitting into the door. Without a word, he picked it up and slipped it into his pocket.

“Come, dear,” he said kindly, “I shan’t keep you long.”

But his calm assumption of authority was too much for wayward, headstrong Molly. Although she still trembled, she answered with some fire, some spirit:

“You have no right to prevent my going in, no right to preach to me, which is what you want to do, I know. I won’t go with you; I won’t hear anything you have to say. I’ll ring the bell and risk getting into a row rather!”

And she swung round with great daring. With her hand upon the bell, however, she faltered. And the next moment Sam had flung his arms round her,

and, with a passion and fire which she had never found in him before, was whispering in her ear:

“My darling, my darling, you must come, you must listen. What are you afraid of? Why won't you come? Who in the world are you safe with if not with your old Sam?”

The girl was taken by surprise, vanquished, subdued. She did indeed try to disengage herself, did try to murmur something about her anxiety to get indoors before—before it got any later. But the victory was won; and a few seconds after Sam was leading her down the steps, with her unwilling but passive hand drawn through his arm, her shy eyes averted so that he could not read them.

“Well, well, what is it you have got to say? Make haste and get it over!”

“Molly, do you remember the skiff, and the evenings we used to have on the river?”

“Oh, you're not going to be sentimental, are you? I do so hate it! There's nothing I detest more!”

“Do you remember you used to say you liked better going out with me than anybody in the world? Did you mean that, Molly?”

“Oh, oh, I did, of course, at the time, or I shouldn't have said it. I—I do like going out with you, I always have liked it. But it isn't fair to bring up things one has said like that—a long while ago——”

“When they are no longer true, is that it, Molly?”  
She twisted her shoulders pettishly.

“Oh, I knew I was in for a sermon,” she said with an enormous sigh, “but I didn't know that I was ex-

pected to account for every word I've uttered in all my life at the same time! However, go on, go on. Let me get in before the milkman comes round, that's all!"

But Sam was proof even against this tone, especially as he perceived, by the tremulous voice and the nervous pressure of her fingers, that she was less mistress of herself than she would have liked to appear.

"I won't keep you long, dear. Do you remember that I used to tell you I hoped you would always think so, and used to ask you to make up your mind to go out with me, nobody but me, as long as our lives lasted?"

Molly turned upon him sharply.

"Yes. And do you remember that I said it was ridiculous, and told you not to go and spoil everything by talking nonsense?"

"You used to talk like that sometimes, Molly. But at others," and Sam's voice grew lower and softer, "you would say that I might say the same things to you later, and—and that you would always be ready to listen to your old Sam. But now, dear, what has come over you that you won't even listen?"

"Well, well, what's the good?" said Molly, whose arm had begun to tremble more violently than ever. "We're getting too old to talk nonsense now!"

"Ah, that's just it! We've got too old for nonsense. It's life and death to me just now!"

Something in his tone checked the scoffing words with which the poor child, now fairly at bay, wanted to stem the flow of his passionate words, to force him

back into safer commonplace. She tried to draw her hand away from him, but he held it fast.

“No, Molly, no. Don’t take your hand away yet. I love you, my little one, I love you, I love you. Nobody loves you like me. Nobody understands you like me. It’s been going on such a long time that it hasn’t any freshness for you, I’m afraid, hardly any interest. But I tell you it’s because you don’t know. You think just because you see me day after day, always the same, never seeming much excited about things, that I don’t care much. My God, you don’t know! You can’t guess what I feel for you! I wouldn’t have you guess. I don’t want to worry you, but it’s hard not to, sometimes harder than you can think. I want to take you in my arms when you come near me. I never come close to you without wanting to kiss you! And this I’ve felt a long time, Molly, a long time. And more than this, more than I can tell you about, or than you would understand. That’s the beauty of it, and the worry, that you can’t understand. But I want you to try now; I want you to ask yourself whether there’s anybody who would take such care of you as old Sam; anybody whom you would get your own way with as you would with old Sam; anybody who in every time and every place, year in, year out, would make you as happy as old Sam would? Ask yourself that, Molly, do, my little one, my darling, ask yourself whether you couldn’t take me for your husband, and let me take care of you all your life!”

By the time he ended, Molly’s whole frame was shaking like a leaf. The little hand which had been

just inside his arm Sam had gradually drawn further and further through, until he held the convulsively twitching fingers against his breast. His voice had grown unspeakably tender, so that the coldest woman in the world could not have listened to him unmoved.

Molly stopped, struggled to get away, and burst into tears.

“Oh, Sam, Sam, don't! You don't know how dreadful it is, or—or you wouldn't!”

Sam was shocked, frightened. Her tone was so despairing, so unutterably sad and miserable, that a chill crept over him, and for a moment he could say nothing. He could only look at her, note the wild eyes, the quivering of her little mouth, and suffer in sympathy with her evident distress.

In a voice half-choked by sobs, she stammered out:

“I—I'm engaged. I—I'm going to m-m-marry— Sir Walter Hay. And—and don't be angry. And—don't be miserable, don't, don't. It will break my heart!”

And, with one swift glance at him, one little cry of remorse and grief, Molly ran away, rushed up the steps of her father's house, and pulled the bell violently.

But if she was afraid of expostulations, or more explanations, she need not have been so. Sam walked down the street, past the place where she stood shivering on the steps, without so much as a glance in her direction.

## CHAPTER XII.

It was Mrs. Weir who opened the door and let Molly in.

"Why, child, what's the matter?" she asked in a low voice, seeing at once by the look on the girl's face, and by the tears in her eyes, that something was wrong.

Molly dashed her handkerchief across her eyes and gulped down a sob. She and Mrs. Weir, since that night when the latter had insisted on accompanying her to church, had not been on speaking terms. She was not going to confess and humble herself before the spy now.

"Nothing, thank you," she answered haughtily. "I hope I have not disturbed you."

"Not at all," replied Mrs. Weir gravely. "You have not heard, I suppose, that your father has been taken ill."

Molly drew a long breath. The words gave her a great shock. Mr. Frewen was not the sort of father of whom girls could be demonstratively fond; but Molly was too affectionate a creature not to be affected by this intelligence.

"Ill?" she whispered. "Not—very—ill?"

Even she, absolutely ignorant as she was of all the circumstances of the case, thought the manner of Mrs.

Weir was rather curious as she answered, as if uncertain what words to use:

“Oh, no, not very ill, I hope and believe.”

“Is the doctor with him now?” asked Molly.

Mrs. Weir hesitated before she answered this question.

“He won’t have a doctor,” she said at last.

“Oh, but that’s nonsense, isn’t it?” said Molly promptly. “We must send for Dr. Grey, whether he likes it or not.”

“I think it would be better to wait until your brother comes home. He has not come yet, and I am sitting up to see him. Then he will see your father, and perhaps persuade him.”

“But the delay! Is it right? Is it safe?”

“I think so. I saw Mr. Frewen not half an hour ago, and he said he felt better, and thought he should sleep. I am going to sleep myself on the sofa in the dining-room, with the door open, so that if he wants anything I can hear him.”

“But,” said Molly, with a puzzled look on her face, “he is walking about in the study now! I can hear him! Papa!”

With this word on her lips, the girl sprang across the hall, and turned the handle of the study-door.

There was no answer, and there was dead silence.

“Papa!” cried Molly again. “I am so sorry you are ill! May I come in and see you?”

Again there was no answer. But Molly, listening with her ear close to the door, felt sure that she again heard stealthy movements inside the room. She suddenly stood up, horribly frightened, suspicious. Mrs.

Weir was standing, with a sort of stubborn look of unconcern, near the dining-room door.

“I shall go myself,” said Molly in an unsteady voice, “for Dr. Grey. I—I—I don’t know exactly what I am afraid of, but I can’t go to bed till I know something more.”

Mrs. Weir said nothing; but she did not seem to be alarmed, only puzzled and anxious.

“Very well,” she said. “After all, if you, his daughter, insist on going, he can’t complain that it is my fault.”

“*Your* fault? Of course not. What can you have to do with it?”

“I have had everything to do with it up to now,” replied Mrs. Weir wearily, and with some bitterness. “Since he came home this evening, he has locked himself in those two rooms, and he has seen nobody but me. I have done what I could for him, but it has been sufficiently tiring. And I have had to put up with the insults, the stupid insults, of that fatuous idiot upstairs, in the intervals of my labors. Take matters into your own hands by all means if you please; I shall be most grateful.”

Molly looked at her, and was puzzled. She was at war with this woman; she was never tired of inveighing against her impertinent interference with the girls and their independence. But all the time Molly had been conscious, against her own will, that it was Mrs. Weir who was in the right, and she and Bab who were in the wrong. And she had had the generosity to avoid any complaint against Mrs. Weir to Miss Roscoe, who would have been only too glad



to unite forces with the girls to expel the common enemy.

And now she was surprised, against her will, to find that Mrs. Weir had not acted with the judgment which she would have expected of her.

“I don’t want to take anything into my own hands,” said Molly bluntly. “And I am sure it is very good of you to take so much trouble with papa. But it seems such an odd thing, his being taken ill like this, and not wanting a doctor—that I think I will go to Dr. Grey. For, don’t you know, papa is generally so frightened about himself that he sends for the doctor if his little finger aches!”

“Do just as you think best,” said Mrs. Weir, who seemed to be too much fatigued to take a vivid interest in the question. “Perhaps if, as you say, he is nervous about himself as a rule, it is a bad sign that now he is not.”

Molly did not hesitate any longer. She did not even wait to get a hat, but ran off, with her little fan still in her hand, to the residence of Dr. Grey. Luckily, the house was only a few squares away, and Molly returned in less than half an hour, with the information that the doctor was coming.

It was Mrs. Weir who let her in again, but this time there were other faces in the background. Bab in her white dressing-gown hovered on the stairs, while behind her the darker, broader figure of Miss Roscoe loomed large and ominous.

“I’ve prepared him. I’ve told him the doctor’s coming,” said Mrs. Weir as soon as she heard Dr. Grey’s message.

"May I see him?" asked Molly. "I'll be quite quiet, I will indeed. Look! I am not crying, and I won't even speak at all if you think I'd better not."

Mrs. Weir hesitated.

"I'm only afraid, dear, that he may—may frighten you a little," said she in a low voice.

Molly felt a chill, an indefinable dread, creep over her at these words. Here, in the large, cold hall, at the darkest hour of the summer night, with only the little jet of gas from the hall lamp burning above them, it was easy to understand that mystery of the possibility of death, which the young can hardly realize in the broad light of day.

She sobbed, tried to check herself, and ran away toward the staircase. There Bab caught her.

"Won't she let you go in? You, his own daughter?" said Miss Roscoe's voice in a husky whisper.

For it was characteristic of the governess that her complaints against Mrs. Weir never grew loud unless that lady was far away. In Mrs. Weir's presence she contented herself with assuming a sullen, stolid air of having a secret grief.

"Mrs. Weir knows best," said Molly coldly. "We had better wait and hear what the doctor says before we disturb him."

"Oh!" moaned Bab. "Isn't this dreadful? It's like a funeral, without the eating and drinking!"

"You will all catch cold if you sit there on the stairs," broke in Mrs. Weir in those quiet, decided tones of hers which enforced attention. "Go into the drawing-room until the doctor comes; and then you,

Molly, can come down and hear what he says about your father."

There was nothing to be said against this proposal, which the group on the stairs therefore carried out in silence. It was not until they were all in the drawing-room that Miss Roscoe's whining voice made itself heard again.

"Be on the watch, Molly, or she will give you the slip."

At that moment there was a knock and a ring, and they knew that Dr. Grey had arrived. Molly slipped out of the drawing-room, ran down the stairs, and waited. Anxious as she was, it did not seem a very long time before Dr. Grey came out of the study. She ran to meet him.

"Well, what do you think? Is he really so very ill, doctor?"

"I must see him again in the morning before I can tell you," said Dr. Grey. "At present, I can hardly tell what the trouble is. He may have caught a chill, I think. But I don't think you have any cause for alarm. His temperature is very little above normal. However, I will come in again in the morning."

Molly heaved a great sigh of relief. Turning quickly, she was sure she detected a smile, a very curious, demure smile of amusement, on Mrs. Weir's face.

It was the widow who let the doctor out; and while she was exchanging a few words with him at the door in a low voice, Molly ran upstairs to the drawing-room.

Bab got up from the chair into which she had thrown herself.

“Well, did you ask if you could see him?”

“N-n-no. I forgot,” stammered Molly.

“And what did he say it was? Good gracious, Molly, don’t look so—so scared! What did he say?”

“He? The doctor?”

“Why, yes, of course.”

“Oh, he—he didn’t seem to know what was the matter with him.”

Miss Roscoe bounded across the room to the sisters. Her plump face was shaking with her agitation; her dull eyes seemed to be starting out of her head.

“He didn’t know the symptoms, I suppose!” cried she in a portentous whisper. “But I could have helped him! And I could have told him they would never get any better while a certain person is in the house!”

“Miss Roscoe, you don’t know what you’re talking about!” said Molly, so sharply that the governess, with an elaborate and clumsy courtesy bounced out of the room.

The sisters looked at each other.

“What did the idiot mean?” asked Bab in a whisper.

“Oh, some jealous nonsense or other,” said Molly impatiently.

Bab shivered.

“It’s nonsense, of course,” she said in a troubled voice. “But—I do wish she wouldn’t!”

And the two girls crept upstairs, very silent, very cold, to bed.

### CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN the girls came down to breakfast on the morning after the day on which their father was taken ill, they found only Miss Roscoe in the dining-room.

She was sobbing in a chair near the fireplace, and wiping her eyes with an ostentatious pretence of unobtrusive grief.

Breakfast was early in the household, as Mr. Frewen and his son had to start at nine o'clock for the City. It was one of the regulations that everybody should be down for prayers, which preceded the meal; and although it did frequently happen that one or other of the girls crept in late, either during prayers or afterward, the culprit always got a black look from the master of the house, and was made to feel her depravity deeply.

As for Edgar, he never appeared until after prayers were over, and Mr. Frewen had given up remonstrance with him. The young man was in the habit of putting in an appearance when breakfast was half over, pale and leaden of complexion, sleepy-eyed, cold and cross; and his father had learnt that a sharp rebuke to him only brought forth a still sharper retort. And then the girls used to look at each other, and then at Edgar, and wonder how he dared!

On this occasion Miss Roscoe, with a heavy sigh

and an air of martyrdom, on the entrance of the girls, read prayers herself in a most melancholy voice, and took her place in front of the big bronze urn which Mr. Frewen would not allow to be done away with, and began pouring out the tea as if that harmless beverage had been a nation's tears.

Bab made little sarcastic grimaces to Molly, who was helping everybody to bacon. And Molly herself, exasperated by another loud sigh, stood up from her labors, and protested:

"Really, Miss Roscoe, I don't think you need try to make us any more miserable than we are by all this moaning and groaning! We're papa's own daughters, and of course we're very fond of him; but——"

"But we don't cry over the eggs, and whimper at the marmalade," finished Tryphena in her robust voice, as she helped herself to butter.

Miss Roscoe put on an injured air.

"I'm sure I'm sorry if my distress offends you," she said with another sigh. "But I can't pretend not to be grieved when I know that your dear papa is very, very ill, and when I know that those who are nearest and dearest to him are not allowed to go near him, and that it's not taken in good part when I object to his being entirely shut up with a stranger."

"A stranger!" echoed Tryphena indignantly. "Mrs. Weir is not a stranger."

"A comparative stranger," persisted Miss Roscoe plaintively. "She's been here hardly six weeks; while I've been here more than eight y-y-y-years!"

But that's how it always is: the old must always make way for the new!"

"I'm sure that isn't so with papa!" cried Tryphena. "There never was such a man for keeping to people and things and ways he's been used to. The old must be very, very bad, and the new very, very good, for papa ever to change! At least, no, I don't exactly mean that, of course," she corrected, perceiving suddenly what an unfortunate speech she had made.

And then, not having any neat amendment ready, she fell into a silence that became awkward.

"Well, I may be very bad, as you say——"

"No, no, I didn't say that. You know I didn't mean to say that."

"And," pursued Miss Roscoe, not heeding the interpolation, "Mrs. Weir may be very good. But I have never tried to estrange you from your father, and I have never worried your lives out and irritated you by insisting on going about with you wherever you went. I've always trusted in your good sense to take care of yourselves and behave like ladies."

Bab glanced at Molly with a sweeping look of disgust. Poor Miss Roscoe certainly did not succeed in expressing herself well.

"I don't suppose you will take any advice of mine," went on the ex-governess. "But I should advise you all to marry as quickly as you can, for it is my firm opinion—and you are welcome to repeat it if you like—that if anything should happen to your dear papa it would be found that he had been influenced, and that there would be very little left for his children."

“How dare you say such things? How dare you?” cried Tryphena, with her eyes flashing with anger. “I shall let Mrs. Weir know what you say! I shall let her know what a——”

Tryphena's voice was never very low, and never very soft. But her indignation has made it so much more powerful than usual that it was not surprising to find that her words had reached the ears of a person who was approaching the door at the time. That person was Mrs. Weir. Throwing open the door very quickly, and speaking quite easily, with a subdued smile on her face, that lady said:

“Hush, my dear, there will be no need to tell Mrs. Weir anything if you make known your sentiments at the top of your voice!”

“But she says—Miss Roscoe says——”

“Whatever she said was spoken in confidence, no doubt,” said Mrs. Weir quietly; “this is not a time, when there is a great trouble over us all, for us to irritate each other by the repetition of speeches which were probably idle ones.”

Miss Roscoe sniffed, as if to deprecate this magnanimity.

“But, Mrs. Weir,” began Tryphena.

Bab stopped her by a pinch.

“She's quite right, Phena,” she said in her low voice. “She can take care of herself, and I'm sure we don't want another scene.”

They were to have “another scene,” however. For when Edgar dashed in, at the very end of the meal, and began to devour half-cold bacon with much grumbling, he announced that it had been determined to



send Miss Roscoe with all three of the girls down to the cottage at Teddington, leaving himself and Mrs. Weir to look after the house and the invalid.

Molly exchanged glances with Bab, and Tryphena grumbled loudly at having to leave Mrs. Weir. Miss Roscoe rose suddenly from her chair at the table, and, beginning to pace up and down the room, fell into a fit of violent, hysterical weeping that monopolized the general attention.

“No, no, no, I won’t go. I refuse to go! I won’t leave Mr. Frewen; I won’t leave him, I say! It is my d-d-duty to stay where there is sickness; it is my duty to see that he is properly cared for, even if I am not allowed to take care of him myself. I won’t go! Oh, oh, oh! For I should never see him again, I am convinced of that! None of us that loved him would ever see him ag-g-gain! I won’t go, no I won’t go!”

Edgar’s hard, dry, snapping voice—“just the voice for a lawyer,” as his sisters always said—broke in curiously upon this enthusiasm.

“You will have to go, I am afraid, my dear Miss Roscoe, or else resign the engagement you have filled so admirably for so long. My father and I and Mrs. Weir”—Miss Roscoe gave almost a scream—“have decided that it is best for the girls, best for all of us in fact, that they should go away. They generally go up the river before this, as you know. But circumstances have deferred their change this year. Well, as he is ill, he can’t go too, at least just yet. But you can go, as Mrs. Weir is here, and as she has been kind enough to say she will undertake to nurse

him"—another scream from Miss Roscoe. "And as for the girls, I'm sure you must see for yourself that, with the noise they make, and their visitors make, the farther away they can take themselves from the invalid the better it will be for his chance of rapid recovery."

And at the end of this speech, everybody saw Edgar exchange a glance with Mrs. Weir, as much as to say that they were getting through the business as well as could be expected.

Only Tryphena took the announcement of this arrangement simply and without suspicion. She was miserable at having to be parted from Mrs. Weir, to which she had grown much attached; but of the wisdom of the plan she had no doubt. The two elder girls, although they did not sympathize deeply with Miss Roscoe's lamentations, thought that they themselves might have been consulted in the matter. They hardly, however, knew on what ground to make an objection.

At last Bab said, in a tone which expressed admirably both her own and Molly's feeling:

"And when are we to be sent—er—out of the way?"

"To-day," replied Edgar shortly.

There was a silence. Everybody seemed a little out of breath. Even Miss Roscoe had been too much impressed by Edgar's business-like manner to offer any fresh protest. So the meeting melted away gradually, and one by one the ladies retired from the room, until only Edgar and Mrs. Weir were left.

Bab and Molly went quickly up to the little morn-

ing-room at the top of the stairs, where Tryphena kept her birds, and Bab and Molly did their dressmaking.

“What do you think about it, Molly?” asked Bab, who always had an opinion of her own upon every subject, but who always liked to hear that of other people before expressing hers.

Molly glanced at her sister, and idly took up a pair of scissors.

“I—I don’t want to listen to old Roscoe and her grumblings, but I do think it’s rather odd. Of course what Miss Roscoe says is all nonsense——”

“Oh, you think so?”

“Well, don’t you?”

“I suppose so,” said Bab composedly.

And she took up a paper pattern of a sleeve, and a tracing-wheel, and cleared herself a space on the table. Molly knelt upon a settee by the window, and looked out at the uninspiring prospect of chimney-pots.

“As far as one’s own feelings are concerned,” said she, “nothing could be jollier than to get down to the cottage, and to sit under the trees, and go on the river, and get the smoke out of one’s throat. But, somehow, it does seem rather queer to me that it is Mrs. Weir, who we’ve hardly known any time at all, and who isn’t any relation that she should take an interest in papa,—that it should be she who stays with him, and we who have to go! Now, Bab, doesn’t it?”

“Of course it does,” said Bab quietly. “It looks very queer indeed, and I expect we shall come back to find out that we’ve got a new mamma, or——”

Bab stopped.

“Or what, Bab?”

“Well, it doesn't do to think about other contingencies,” said Bab sententiously.

“Oh, but to me—you must!”

“I shan't!”

“Do you—you don't think—she—she won't take proper care of papa?”

“My dear, I don't know anything and I don't care to be so cock-sure as Miss Roscoe. But I do wish we knew a little more about Mrs. Weir!”

Molly looked very grave. Her little mouth puckered into the prettiest pout of anxiety, and her blue eyes began to fill with tears.

“Do you know, Bab,” she said at last, “that I could tell you something?”

“What?”

“Sir Walter Hay says he knew her once; at least he doesn't say it right out, but he implies it whenever I happen to mention her name. And although he won't tell me anything about her, I'm sure he doesn't think well of her.”

Now this opinion of Sir Walter's had very little weight with Bab, who called the baronet “that yellow-faced man with the dyed mustache,” and could not understand her sister's preference for him. But she thought it might be well to set Molly to “pump” him as to what he knew of Mrs. Weir. If she could get him to say anything definite, Bab thought she could get Bradley Ingledew to find out if there were any truth in Sir Walter's report.

“You had better make him tell you just what he does know,” said Bab.

Molly moved restlessly, and strummed an air with her finger-tips on the window-sill.

"I shan't be seeing him for a day or two," she said, with some constraint.

"Why, you said——"

"Yes, I know I said I should see him to-day; but I shan't. I don't mind humbugging the gov'nor at other times, but I can't when he's ill. There!"

"Well, that is absurd," said Bab philosophically. "As if it wasn't just as bad at one time as another. Do you know, really, Molly, I wouldn't carry on as you do with that man if I were you! There must be something awfully shady about him for papa not to allow him in the house!"

"Shut up, Bab! How can you lecture me, when you are always with Bradley Ingledew?"

"Ah, but I'm fond of Bradley, in a way; while you say you don't care for Sir Walter. Besides, you can't! An old fellow like that! Why, he must be quite as old as papa!"

"Well, he's all the more likely to look after me, isn't he, than if he were a flighty young flirt like Bradley Ingledew, or—or the makeweight, or——"

"Or Sam?" suggested Bab.

Molly grew very red and angry at this mention of the name that had indeed been a good deal in her thoughts since the preceding night.

"Oh, don't talk about Sam," she said sharply. "It's ridiculous!"

"Oh, well, I won't if you don't like it, and if you don't like *him*," agreed Bab. "But really I think it's a pity."

"Mind your own business."

"Certainly, dear. And now about Mrs. Weir?"

"I've made up my mind," cried Molly, springing to her feet with an air of great determination, "that I won't leave this house till I've seen papa!"

"If you get the chance, dear."

"I'll make the chance. Even Mrs. Weir shan't stop me. By the by, Bab, how that woman gets round everybody! All the boys like her, and Dr. Grey was whispering to her at the door as confidentially as if she had been already our mamma!"

"Yes. Just fancy her getting hold of Edgar! There's something uncanny about it. And I myself can't help liking her whenever I'm with her. Can you?"

"I try to keep my independence, but I come very near to tolerating her sometimes!" admitted Molly.

"She bewitches everybody, men and women alike. That looks bad. Old Smee's coming here this morning, Edgar says. I wonder how she'll get on with him!"

#### CHAPTER XIV.

MR. SMEE, the junior partner in the firm of "Frewen & Smee" was in every respect a complete contrast to the senior partner. A man not much more than forty years of age, nobody except those irreverent Frewen girls would ever have thought of calling him old. And if he was comparatively young in years, he was much younger still in appearance, in tastes, and in his habits and manners. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, fresh-colored man, with very black hair and whiskers, and twinkling black eyes. He was credited with a great admiration for the other sex; was fond of horses, of racing, and every kind of sport, had a taste for the drama and its accessories, and was commonly supposed to give his partner a good deal of trouble. Indeed it was a matter of universal wonder that two men so opposite in taste and character should have rubbed on together for so many years as they had done.

Mr. Smee was a bachelor, and was supposed to look with particular interest on Tryphena. With the family perversity, that young lady would have nothing to say to him, and was annoyed by the very mention of his name.

Mrs. Weir and Edgar were still in the dining-room together when it was announced to the latter that Mr.

Smee was in the drawing-room. He looked at the lady with entreaty in his eyes.

“Will you see him?” he asked in a low voice.

Mrs. Weir looked thoughtful.

“I think,” she said at last, “that you had better see him first, and prepare him a little. He doesn’t like me, you know.”

Edgar considered a little while, in silence. Then he yielded.

“All right,” said he. “I’ll speak to him, and then bring him down here to see you.”

“To see Mr. Frewen,” corrected Mrs. Weir.

So Edgar went upstairs, where he found Mr. Smee, looking larger, more important than ever, pacing up and down the room with a heavy tread. He turned sharply on his heel when his partner’s son entered, and faced the young man with a countenance full of anxiety.

Planting himself firmly in the middle of the floor, with his hands behind him, he thundered with a frown:

“Where’s that woman? That Mrs. Weir?”

Edgar, who was always cool, rubbed his thin hands, which looked blue and cold, one over the other as he answered in an off-hand tone:

“Mrs. Weir? Oh, she’s downstairs.”

“And how long do you mean to let her remain in the house?”

Edgar blinked at him quietly with his small red eyes:

“As long as ever she’ll stay,” he replied calmly.

Mr. Smee could not bear Edgar. The young man’s



coolness had an irritating effect on his own more hot-blooded nature. He began to shake with anger, which he tried in vain to hide.

"Come, Edgar, you're not a fool," he said, forcing himself to speak quietly. "Don't you know that it is she who is at the bottom of this illness of the gov'nor's?"

"It looks like it, certainly," replied Edgar, speaking very slowly, and pausing to consider his words.

"And in the face of that knowledge you mean to let her stay? A woman who came from goodness knows where, and who has been mixed up with goodness knows whom?"

"Oh," said Edgar, "I know more about her than she thinks I do. I could tell you something if I liked."

And he proceeded to impart to Mr. Smee a piece of information which made the latter ask again:

"And you mean to keep her in the house?"

"Not only that," answered Edgar, "but I propose to take you downstairs to see her, and to do the civil."

The junior partner stared.

"Sit down," said Edgar, "and let's talk things over quietly."

And without waiting for the other to accept his suggestion, the young man threw himself into the cosiest seat he could find, and poured into the ears of the astonished Mr. Smee a short but remarkable story.

From time to time, as the recital continued, Mr. Smee uttered an ejaculation such as "By Jove!"

"First-rate!"

And when it was over, he allowed himself to be conducted downstairs to the dining-room, where Mrs. Weir was busy writing letters, and was not only civil, but almost servile in his manner toward the lady whose presence in the house had seemed an offence in his eyes only half an hour previously.

And when finally Mrs. Weir asked him if he would now go in and see Mr. Frewen, Mr. Smee replied at once that he thought it was unnecessary to disturb him; Edgar would bring him any message that the old gentleman might want to send.

But Mrs. Weir, when this enemy had left the house, vanquished and overthrown, peered out anxiously at his retreating figure, and uttered a deep sigh.

“And the work has only just begun!” she whispered to herself. “Only just begun!”

## CHAPTER XV.

THE three girls were hard at work packing their trunks for the journey to Teddington, when the housemaid came up to inform Molly that her father wished to see her.

Bab and Tryphena sat on their heels and looked at their sister.

“Give him my love,” said Tryphena, “and ask him if I may stay up here with Mrs. Weir. Say, I’d rather than go to Teddington, where I shall only get into mischief.”

“And Molly,” added Bab with a very wise look, “try to see him alone, quite *alone!*”

Tryphena scoffed at this speech, which seemed to contain a reflection on her dear Mrs. Weir. Molly only nodded and went out of the room.

Mr. Frewen’s bed had been made up in a small room, adjoining the study, which had once been a doctor’s surgery. It was at the back of the house, a dark apartment at any time; now, with heavy curtains hung before the one window, it looked lugubrious in the extreme.

Molly crept in on tiptoe, frightened by the gloom. Surely he must be very ill indeed for the place to have to be kept so very dark!

Mr. Frewen was lying in bed, with his back to the little light there was; but even then the young

girl was alarmed by the change which she perceived to have taken place in his face. For the first moment the thought came into her mind that it was not her father at all, this weird old man with shining white hair and sunken jaw, who lay staring in front of her, without turning his head, and appeared wholly unconscious of her presence!

“Papa!” she whispered. “Papa!”

And she wished she had not expressed the wish to go in and see him by herself.

Mr. Frewen turned his head a little. He seemed, even in this slight movement, to show more sign of age than she had been accustomed to see in him.

“Who is it?” said he, in a weak and hollow voice: “Is it Molly?” Then he added, as if by a painful effort of memory: “Oh, yes, of course, I sent for Molly!”

Then he remained silent and still for some minutes, not even looking at his daughter. At last, frightened by this reception, more solemn and more terrible than she had expected, the young girl came a step nearer to the foot of the bed, so that his eyes might rest upon her, and so bring her back to his mind.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, rousing himself again, and uttering a sigh so heavy, so sad, that it made her shiver: “I wanted to speak to you. I wanted to tell you one thing, only one thing; and you must tell your sisters too: Obey Mrs. Weir. Do as she tells you in everything, everything. Then you will be sure to do right. And—and—that’s all.”

He closed his eyes, and turned his head slightly away from her, and toward the wall.

Molly stood still for a few moments, gazing at her father with eyes in which, if he had met them, Mr. Frewen would have seen profound surprise and a little irrepressible suspicion. And then the tears came into them.

“Papa,” she said, in a very gentle voice, “papa! I’m so sorry to see you so ill, so awfully sorry! Isn’t there anything I can do for you? Won’t you let me—let us—stay and—and try to nurse you?”

But Mr. Frewen frowned irritably.

“No, no,” said he peevishly. “I want you to go away—all you girls at once!” Then he noticed that she shrank back a little, and he added less harshly: “You young creatures, what good could you do? I know you are willing to do what you could, but you are not old enough, experienced enough. It takes experience to make a good sick nurse.”

“Would you rather—really, papa?” she asked earnestly.

“Much rather.”

And then Molly noticed that, in his anxiety to impress his wishes upon her, his voice had suddenly got back its strength. She was afraid that she was perhaps exciting him by her persistency, so she only said, after a moment’s pause:

“Very well, papa; of course we will go if you want us to; and we will do just what you wish. May I kiss you, papa?”

He nodded consent, and she kissed him. Mr. Frewen was fond of his daughters, but he was never very demonstrative, and Molly was not surprised to get a very frosty little peck in return for her kiss.

“May the others come and see you before they go?”

Mr. Frewen shook his head.

“No, no. What should they want to see me for? I’ll come down and see them, see all of you, in a few days, when—when I’m well enough.”

He spoke rather testily, and Molly thought he seemed to want to get rid of her. So she said: “Good-by, papa!” and noticed that, although he did say “Good-by” in return, he did not even look at her again.

She went slowly and thoughtfully upstairs. If Edgar had been still in the house she would have spoken to him, would have asked him what he thought of their father’s illness, and of his strange infatuation—there was no other word for it—for Mrs. Weir.

But then Edgar himself seemed to have become, that morning, as infatuated as his father!

Molly heard voices in the morning-room before she opened the door; and when she did so, some sort of skirmish which was taking place there came abruptly to an end.

And under a roll of embroidered muslin, with which it had been thought to extinguish him, she discovered Bradley Ingledew; while Bab, looking as cool as ever, made fresh marks with her tracing-wheel on the stuff spread out before her.

Molly greeted Bradley with a nod.

“You don’t seem to have got on very fast while I’ve been away,” she said.

“I’ve only just begun,” replied Bab quietly. “I’ve

had to finish packing first. And Bradley's no help at all in a workroom! He can't even stick in a pin! But what have you been doing with yourself? You look whiter than my muslin!"

Molly shivered.

"Papa looks awful," she said gravely. "He's very ill. I wish I knew what is the matter with him."

Neither of the others spoke. But they exchanged a glance of deep significance, and Bradley began to whistle softly.

Molly looked from the one to the other.

"What is it?" she said, while the blood began to flow into her cheeks again. "What is it? Do you know anything, either of you?"

"Bradley came here to tell us something," answered Bab softly, as she stepped lightly across the room and peeped outside the door. "Do you happen to know where Mrs. W. is, Molly?"

"No, I haven't seen her since breakfast. Is it about her you have something to tell us, Bradley?"

"Well," said he, twisting his mustache and looking interrogatively at Bab, "it is—er—not wholly unconnected with her, certainly."

"Oh, you can tell Molly," said Bab. "If you don't, I shall."

This was enough for Bradley.

"I met a man the other night," said he, "who had seen her with you girls, and he asked me if I thought your father knew anything about her. It appears she has a history."

"I told you so," remarked Bab to Molly.

“There was a man,” went on Bradley, twisting his mustache and looking at the muslin, as if conscious that his story was hardly the sort of one he would have chosen for his audience, “who was mixed up in some company frauds some years ago; I don’t suppose you remember them, though they made a great stir at the time. There was one in particular, the Pangola Reef smash, that more than one person had to make himself scarce about.”

Bab glanced at Molly, and wondered whether she had heard that the “Pangola Reef” had involved Sir Walter Hay in its discreditable meshes.

“His name,” went on Bradley, “was Max Lowenstein. He was a very good-looking chap, and very young at the time; or at any rate he looked very young. I don’t know what country he was a native of, but he was not an Englishman; he was dark, almost dark enough for an Indian. Well, he had a—a wife, in fact, who was very handsome, and awfully extravagant; so that people said it was she and not the poor fellow himself who was at the bottom of the swindle. However, of course people didn’t know that; they only said it. And others said it was all the other way, and he was a common swindler who used her as a decoy, with her smart receptions and dances, and her pretty turnout in the park. And then, after the crash, he disappeared very suddenly, and nobody knows what became of him. And she—well, she disappeared too. And—and that’s all the story.”

“Oh, no!” said Molly, with unusual gravity, “that isn’t all. Because of course you mean that Mrs. Lowenstein is Mrs. Weir!”



“Well, it isn’t what I say,” said Bradley quickly. “I’m only repeating to you what I’ve been told, because, since the story was going about, I thought you ought to know it. Of course there may be no truth in it at all.”

“And if there were,” said Molly, “nobody seems to have proved anything against her! Women have a right to be extravagant when their husbands can afford it. And very likely she thought he could.”

Little Molly spoke out of the generosity of her heart, feeling that the absent one ought to have a defender. But in truth the story of the husband’s strange disappearance, taken in connection with the mysterious influence Mrs. Weir had acquired in this household, gave her great uneasiness.

Bab was more uneasy still.

“I think Edgar ought to know,” she said, “and Tryphena. And somebody ought to ask her if she ever heard of a Mr. Max Lowenstein. We could see then, by the way she took it, whether the story was true.”

There was a silence.

“Don’t you think, Bradley, that my suggestion is a very good one?”

“I don’t know. Who’s to do it?”

“Well, couldn’t you? You might stay to luncheon, and mention his name casually, you know.”

“Not if I know it!” murmured Bradley fervently. “Ask Edgar. That fellow doesn’t care what he says——”

“To anybody but Mrs. Weir!” sighed Molly. “Besides, we couldn’t do it like that. It’s too unkind, too cruel!”

“But how do we know that she isn't *being cruel to papa?*” said Bab in a deep voice.

Molly shivered.

Before she could make any answer, the door burst open, and Tryphena rushed in.

“Mrs. Weir says—” she began, and then, catching sight of Bradley, she broke off. “Hallo! When did you come?”

“My lucky star brought me in time to say good-by to you all. I hear that Mrs. Weir, who appears to be in possession here, has ordered you all off to Teddington.”

“I'm coming back again,” replied Tryphena defiantly. “I shall go down with the rest of them, like a good girl, and then sneak back again.”

“Like a bad one?” suggested Bradley.

“Well, I don't see why poor Mrs. Weir should have to bear all the trouble of nursing papa and looking after the house, all by herself, when she isn't even a relation!”

Bradley and Tryphena's two sisters exchanged looks which betrayed a mutual understanding. And Tryphena took fire.

“Ah! I see,” she burst out angrily. “You've talked Bradley round, and you're all in a conspiracy against Mrs. Weir. And just because she's done her best for us girls, and tried to make you two behave better than you care to do, you have taken a dislike to her, and you are ready to join old Roscoe in inventing wicked and stupid tales about her!”

Bab, who was the most self-possessed of the trio against whom Tryphena brought her lusty accusations, looked superciliously at her sister.

“My dear,” she said in a lofty tone, “you are a child; you can’t understand things. Your Mrs. Weir is a delightful person, we know. But she has not the monopoly of the cardinal virtues that you suppose.”

“What do you mean? Say out what you mean,” said Tryphena, becoming suddenly so quiet that Molly was deceived into thinking she had resolved to listen with an open mind.

So it was Molly who hastened to answer, in spite of a warning “Sh—sh!” from Bab.

“Why, her real name isn’t Mrs. Weir at all; and she and a man named Lowenstein were mixed up in a big swindle that all London talked about; and nobody knows what has become of him; but people can’t help thinking——”

“Sh—sh!” It was Bab who spoke, gripping her sister’s arm. Molly checked herself, perceiving that Tryphena’s face had flushed and her eyes grown bright with anger.

“What! What! Do you expect me to believe these stories, when I know her, I know her quite well? When I know that she’s the best woman I ever met, and the sweetest and the kindest? And—and—and—oh, it’s hateful, vile, infamous to say such things!”

At each strong adjective Tryphena’s voice grew higher, and she stamped her foot on the floor with increasing vehemence. The others were rather frightened, thinking she would go into hysterics. They tried to soothe her, to calm her; Molly put her arms round her neck.

But Tryphena shook them off, refused to listen, and went on screaming loudly :

“It’s monstrous, monstrous, I say!”

And in the midst of this tumult, while she still screamed, and all the others tried their best to comfort her, Mrs. Weir herself opened the door and walked quietly in.

Every one in the little room was strangely impressed by the change which had taken place in the lady’s appearance,—every one, that is to say, except poor Tryphena, who was far too much excited to notice anything but the fact that there stood her beloved Mrs. Weir face to face with her traducers.

Instead of the placid beauty of her everyday appearance, Mrs. Weir now presented a countenance which, though still handsome by reason of its regular features and smooth delicacy of complexion, looked worn and haggard in the strong light; in the long eyes there was a cloud of anxiety, and the straight red line of her lips was narrower than usual, as if under the pressure of a great resolution.

The two elder girls were touched by the expression of her face, and at once, with the generous impulse of youth, veered round in favor of the woman who looked harassed and unhappy. As for Bradley, it smote him to the heart to think that he had been spreading, however innocently, unfavorable reports about a lovely woman.

They stood horror-struck, helpless, when Tryphena, dashing round the table to Mrs. Weir, flung her arms round her neck, and panted out between her sobs :

“Oh, Mrs. Weir, my dear, dear Mrs. Weir, now you can tell them to their face that their stories about you are a pack of lies!”

“How can you, Tryphena? Be quiet!” cried Bab, whiter than ever, and with her voice trembling with fear.

“I assure you, Mrs. Weir, that I—” began Bradley, who was crimson and uncomfortable, and who looked the picture of guilt.

But Tryphena broke in, silencing him at once by her loud-voiced vehemence:

“Yes, you did. I know it was you who told those wicked stories. Why don't you speak out like a man, and ask Mrs. Weir if she ever even heard of a person called Lowenstein——”

They fell upon her and stopped her at this point, Molly pulling her arm violently on one side, and Bab beginning to talk fast, in a high key, to drown her wild words. For they were frightened by the effect of her rash speech on Mrs. Weir, and would have given the world to undo what their indiscretion had done.

At the mention of the name of “Lowenstein,” the color had suddenly vanished from Mrs. Weir's face, leaving it white, rigid, like a mask of death. The diversion made by the two elder girls gave her time to recover herself, so that when there was a pause in the babel of tongues she was able to laugh quite naturally, and to speak in her usual voice.

“A person called ‘Lowenstein’!” she repeated, puckering her eyebrows with an appearance of profound surprise. “No, I don't think I ever have

heard of the person; but if I had, what of it? What is the precise nature of the crime of having heard of a person called 'Lowenstein'?"

Then they all turned upon poor Tryphena, laughing uproariously and asking her to explain what the crime was. And the girl, feeling that she had blundered, and that she had hurt the friend in whose cause she had interfered, burst into tears and sobbed bitterly.

Mrs. Weir did not attempt to speak to her, but she passed her white hand tenderly again and again over the girl's silky hair, while, with a strange smile on her lips, she went on talking to the other two girls.

"I sent Tryphena up to you with a message," she said; "did she deliver it?"

"No, Mrs. Weir," answered Bab.

"Well, I have been looking at the time-table, and I think it would be better for you to have luncheon a little earlier, and to catch the two-thirty train. It will be better to get down there in good time, won't it?"

They all agreed, and she went away in a few minutes, Tryphena slipping out of the room the moment after, without waiting for the reproaches of her sisters at her maladroitness.

Then the others looked at each other.

"That's the worst of telling anything to girls!" said Bradley shortly. "A nice mess you've landed me in! I shall never be able to look Mrs. Weir in the face again!"

"I'm awfully sorry, awfully!" said Molly, with

contrite tears in her eyes. "I feel so beastly mean over it! I didn't think Phena was such an idiot!"

Then Bab spoke musingly.

"She is very anxious to get us out of the house! And—I'm sure she did know Lowenstein!"

And there was an awkward silence. For, though they did not like to own it, both the others agreed with her.

## CHAPTER XVI.

As soon as the three girls and the melancholy Miss Roscoe had been packed into a couple of cabs with their luggage, and thus started on their journey to Teddington, Mrs. Weir drew a long sigh of relief, and sitting down to the writing-table which stood in the dining-room window, she wrote a note to an institute for sick-nurses, asking that two nurses (with experience in slight mental cases preferred) should be sent at once to 203 Cirencester Terrace.

She had taken care, knowing the erratic character of the young girls with whom she had to deal, to send the housemaid to see them off at the station. She did not want to have one or other of the Frewen lasses running back to the house about tea-time, as it seemed quite possible they might take it into their flighty little heads to do, on the strength of their new suspicions of herself.

Her note written and dispatched, Mrs. Weir, with another deep sigh, seated herself behind the lace curtains of the dining-room window, and, taking up a book, laid it open in her lap, so that if any person were to enter the room unexpectedly, she would appear to be reading.

But she did not read; she did not give one glance at the book; did not even know its name. She set herself to watch through the curtains the passers-



by in the street outside, not with the air of a woman idly amusing herself, but with lips tightly pressed, eyes aglow with excitement, and a look of keen expectancy mingled with fear on her handsome face.

Once, when there was no person or vehicle in sight, she rose hastily, and looked at herself in the glass over the mantelpiece. She was wearing a very plain frock of navy-blue serge, the severe simplicity of which was toned down by a handsome collar of string-colored lace. The dress became her; she was too handsome, too carefully considerate of every touch, not to look well in anything she wore. But she looked perhaps less brilliantly beautiful than in the more elaborate costumes she generally preferred. There was an air of sedateness about her, rather than of voluptuous and regal beauty. And while she looked, the diamonds she habitually wore in her ears caught her eye. She put up her hands, and took the jewels out.

Then hearing a slight sound in the street outside, she hurried eagerly back to the window and resumed her place behind the curtain.

And presently her attention was attracted by something which was evidently not what she had been looking for.

Moving with the utmost caution, so that no slightest movement of the lace curtain should betray the fact that it concealed a pair of watching eyes, she changed her position so that she could command less of the street, but more of a certain unoccupied house a little farther down on the opposite side of the way,

where a great white bill in one of the windows announced that the commodious residence was to let.

She was very patient, very cautious. And before long she was rewarded by the discovery that from behind the dusty panes of the tenantless house a pair of eyes were watching the entrance of No. 203.

And as soon as she was sure of this, Mrs. Weir crept away from the window, for a few minutes, afraid that the nervous trembling she could not at once conquer would betray her presence to the watching eyes.

She paced the room several times, her lips pressed tightly together, her whole face clouded with earnest thought. And so deeply absorbed was she that when at last some one ran up the steps and pulled the bell, the sound took her by surprise, and set her trembling afresh with nervous excitement.

There was the measured step of the servant across the hall; the opening of the door; the short colloquy in low tones; then Johns came into the dining-room, and asked whether Mr. Ritchie might see her. And then Sam walked in, and noticed at once a great change in her appearance.

The fact was that the announcement of this man whom she had not expected, instead of the person for whose arrival she had been waiting, had thrown her off her guard. She received Sam with a welcoming hand and a pleasant smile. But he noticed that the hand twitched nervously, and that the smile was forced.

“You don’t look well,” said he kindly. “This affair of Mr. Frewen’s illness has been too much for

you. What is this Johns tells me about your going to nurse him yourself?"

"I have given up the idea," she said, as she sat down in the darkest corner of the room and invited him to a chair so placed that he should not get a good look at her face. "Not an hour ago I wrote for a couple of nurses, and I am expecting them every minute. You won't mind if I have to run away from you in a hurry? I must see them as soon as they come!"

"Nobody stands on ceremony with me," said Sam. "I hope I haven't disturbed you when you ought to have been resting?"

"Not a bit. Mr. Frewen gives no trouble. He is asleep, I think, now."

"Has the doctor been able to state what is the matter with him?"

"Not very definitely. He can only suggest nervous break-down from overwork, and says he is to remain in bed for the present."

"Yet two nurses are necessary?"

Mrs. Weir smiled rather bitterly.

"Frankly, they are more on my account than on Mr. Frewen's. There have been suspicions cast upon me, I know——"

"Suspicions? Surely not, Mrs. Weir. Surely——"

"I tell you it is so," interrupted she impatiently. And she got up, as if unable to keep still, and began to pace up and down the room. "Mr. Ingledew was here this morning on purpose to impart to these young girls some valuable information about me, or which is supposed to be about me, which he picked

up at his club. If you ask him, no doubt he will communicate it to you also!"

Sam jumped up in his turn.

"Mrs. Weir, is that quite fair?"

"Quite," snapped she. "Suspicious of a woman whose antecedents you don't know count only as common caution; and no doubt you have had yours with the rest. I don't complain of that. You must remember that I was very open with you from the first."

"I know you were. I was grateful to you for your promise to do what you could for those silly girls; I am still more grateful for the way in which you have kept your word. I have come to-day on purpose to consult you about Molly."

Mrs. Weir, who looked more worried, more excited every moment, and who glanced perpetually out of the window as she walked to and fro, stopped and looked at him earnestly.

"Can't you come to-morrow, and tell me then?" she said almost irritably. "I am really rather tired now, and I have to see these nurses——"

It seemed rather strange that she should be so deeply interested in the arrival of the nurses. Sam, however, walked toward the door.

"I will go at once," said he.

Putting strong constraint upon her impatience, Mrs. Weir came quickly across the room to where he was standing, and kept the door shut with her hand while she spoke.

"You will think me rude and unkind," she said. "But indeed I am sorry. No, I will not let you go

away like that; it is selfish of me. Let me hear what you have to say. What about—about”—it seemed to require an effort of memory to recollect what he had said—“about—Molly?”

“You have sent the girls away, Johns tells me, with only that foolish Miss Roscoe to look after them!”

“Well, what could I do? Mr. Frewen has to be kept so quiet! And while he insists upon so much of my attention, how can I look after the girls?”

“You could have done more than you can do now!” said Sam ruefully. “Molly told me last night that she is engaged to Sir Walter Hay. That she is going to marry him!”

At that, Mrs. Weir looked grave.

“Now, do you suppose he really means to marry her? Counting upon getting something out of Mr. Frewen’s fortune in the long run? Or—or—what do you think?”

Mrs. Weir shook her head.

“It would be a slender chance to marry a girl upon, when her father is a man like Mr. Frewen!” said she. “Why, he would never speak to her again, if she ran away and married a man whom he disapproved of! And Sir Walter is too old a man not to know that.”

“That’s just what I thought myself,” said poor Sam. “Can’t you speak to her and tell her that?”

“My dear Sam, consider! Would that do any good? I tell you, the two girls have been turned against me as it is. What heed would she pay me? Your chance is better than mine.”

It was Sam's turn to shake his head.

"I did speak. I spoke last night. I said everything I could think of; I spread myself out for her to trample upon. It was no good. And now I can't do any more. I can't even go near her again. I am ashamed to. I feel that I've made a fool of myself. And I'm going to try to forget her!"

Mrs. Weir smiled, with that air of womanly kindness which was her greatest attraction in Sam's eyes.

"Ah!" she said. "But it will not be so easy, Sam!"

He slapped his left hand with his gloves with an air of great determination.

"Well, you'll see, Mrs. Weir," said he. "You all think I'm made of putty, and that because I've put up with so much, I will put up with anything. But I'm going to make a stand. I'm going to show Miss Molly that there are other girls in the world, and that if she likes Sir Walter Hay better than me, why, there are other people I can get on with as well as with her!"

"Very good; very good indeed. If it will only outlast the first meeting!"

"There will be no meeting," replied Sam fiercely. "At least, none until I am fortified by the presence of—the other girl!"

"Oh, there is another then?" said Mrs. Weir, raising her eyebrows.

"There soon will be," replied Sam, as he drew on one glove with energy which pulled a button off.

"That's right. Unless, of course, you should

prove less stanch than you suppose, and the 'other girl' should have to suffer!"

"Trust me!"

"Poor Molly!"

"Why, 'poor Mollie'? Nobody can say she has been treated badly!"

"No. She has treated you badly. Still I say, Poor Molly!"

"That's not my fault!"

"I wonder how she will get on without her Sam?"

"That's her lookout. I've come to the conclusion that I had a bad moral effect upon her; that she felt that, whatever she did, however outrageous her behavior was, there was always Sam, meek-spirited Sam, to keep her in countenance."

Mrs. Weir's worried expression gave place for a moment to one of amusement.

"Now I really think there's something in that!"

"And now that she won't have me to dance attendance upon her, she'll have the sense to see that she must mind her p's and q's, and behave more like a reasoning creature."

"Ah, well, that may be."

"At any rate," said Sam, "I mean to make an experiment, and I shan't trouble myself about the result. I'm going to wash my hands of the whole family. They took up too much of my time."

"And who do you suppose will be the greater loser by the change? The family, or you?"

Sam's face, unguessed by himself, fell a little. But he stuck to his colors.

"The family," he answered quietly.

Mrs. Weir smiled again.

“Well, we shall see,” she said. “But I notice that, in washing your hands of the family, you expect me not to do the same?”

“Ah, a lady is different. She can do so much more.”

“I’m not so sure of that. However, I am ready to try. It won’t do for everybody to wash their hands of the poor girls at the same time!”

Sam moved restlessly, but he still had the air of a man who is not going to allow himself to be talked over. In fact he had another excellent argument upon his lips, when there was a ring at the front-door bell, and a knock, and Mrs. Weir became perceptibly and suddenly paler.

“There are your nurses,” said Sam. “And now I’ll take myself off.”

But Mrs. Weir seized his arm in such a tight grip that he could not turn the handle of the door.

“Wait a minute,” she said imperiously. “Wait—until they are inside the house. I—I have something to ask you. When you go along this street, notice the empty house a little way down on the opposite side of the way. And find out for me, if you can, whether there is any one in it set to watch this house.”

Sam looked rather startled.

“It may be only my fancy, of course,” said she quickly. “But I should like to know. And I can trust you to say nothing about it. And as for suspicions, why,” she went on with a curious but anxious smile, “you may suspect what you like.”



Even while she was speaking both she and Sam had become aware that there was an altercation of some sort going on in the hall, and that, while one of the voices was that of Johns, the other was that of a gentleman. And while the tones of the former were respectful and full of persuasive and deprecatory civility, those of the other man were angry, imperious, and insistent.

It seemed now to Sam that Mrs. Weir had been speaking about a matter which was startling in itself in order that he might not hear too much of the altercation in the hall. Just as this thought crossed his mind, the door of the dining-room was opened quickly by Johns, who looked much disturbed.

“I have asked the gentleman to go upstairs into the drawing-room, ma’am, but he will not. I—I——”

Johns stopped short, perhaps warned by a look from Mrs. Weir not to say much in the presence of a third person. Sam, feeling that he was in the way, made haste to shake himself off.

“I will see about it at once, Mrs. Weir,” said he, as he passed the servant and went out into the hall.

And there he came face to face with a strongly built, rough-looking man, with a complexion so dark as to be almost swarthy, an untrimmed black beard, a long black mustache with sharp-pointed ends, which gave him an expression which can only be described as fierce, and gleaming black eyes. He wore a shabby old reefer coat, and held crushed up in his hand a shilling tweed cap. Yet Sam, assisted in his conclusion by what he had heard of the stranger’s

voice, saw that the rough-looking stranger was a gentleman.

As Sam came out of the dining-room, Johns followed him to the front door. And at the same moment the stranger made a dash for the open door of the dining-room. Sam looked round in time to see the meeting between the visitor and Mrs. Weir.

He heard no word spoken. But the look which the man exchanged with the woman was one of recognition.

## CHAPTER XVII.

SAM heard the dining-room door close without a word having been exchanged between Mrs. Weir and the visitor. Without being unduly curious, he thought he would like to know what the name of the stranger was.

“Who is that, Johns?” he asked carelessly, as he left the house.

“I don’t know, sir,” answered the man with the slightly haughty tone of an old servant who feels that he ought to have been indulged with more confidence than has fallen to his share: “Mrs. Weir told me to expect a gentleman and to show him upstairs. But he would not give his name, and he would not go upstairs; and Mrs. Weir did not mention his name either, sir!”

“Oh, all right, Johns.”

Sam affected to treat the matter with complete indifference, but he was far from feeling comfortable about this fresh mystery. He would have liked very much to know who this strange man was, who was expected by Mrs. Weir, but who had an angry altercation with the servant, and who then met Mrs. Weir with such mysterious silence. Was he, Sam asked himself, the lady’s husband?

A world of possibilities were opened by this suggestion, which seemed a probable one enough. Mrs.

Weir called herself a widow, but she had acknowledged enough to Sam himself for him to feel by no means certain of the fact. Sam liked her, believed in her goodness of heart, which indeed he had proved by her efforts on behalf of the girls. But that she had had an adventurous, perhaps a stormy, life, he had no doubt. And although he had not heard Bradley's story about Max Lowenstein's and the "Pangola Reef," it occurred to him as very probable that she might be burdened with an undesirable husband from whom she had been hiding, who had at last found her out.

And then Sam's thoughts took a fresh turn. He had reached the end of the street, having forgotten all about Mrs. Weir's request, when the matter of the empty house and of the supposed watching eyes in it came back to him.

He sauntered back up the street, and seeing that on the 'To Let' board were the words 'Apply on the Premises' he ran up the steps, rang the bell, and asked the woman who opened the door whether he could see the house.

She led the way, opening the doors of the different rooms, and carefully pointing out, after the manner of care-takers, never anxious to be turned out by an incoming tenant, the various disadvantages from which the house suffered.

"There's no light at all in this room, sir, 'ceptin' first thing in the morning," she explained as she threw open the door of the study.

"Drains all right?" Sam asked, in his character of house-hunter.

“Well, no, sir, I can't say as what they are. My 'usband and me have noticed some very bad smells at times.”

And, having by this time arrived at the first floor, she showed him into the back room, and remarked that the front-room was locked up, but that it was much like the one underneath, but a trifle bigger.

Sam, however, not content with this assurance, walked past her, tried the door which was supposed to be locked, found that it opened at once, and that there was a man in the room, who was sitting on a box close under the window, so that only his head was higher than the window-sill.

“Oh!” said the woman, rather confused, “Oh, that's only a man who's been cleaning the windows.”

But Sam knew by the cut of the man that he was a detective.

Crossing the room to the window, Sam glanced out at Mr. Frewen's house, and then looked at the man with a knowing nod.

“Watching No. 203?” said he in a low voice.

And the man, taken by surprise, assumed at once that his interlocutor knew more than he in fact did, and answered:

“Yes, sir.”

Sam would have given a good deal to know more.

But he saw that another question would betray his real innocence, so he refrained.

He then told the woman that he did not think it worth his while to see more of the house, as it was too big for him, gave her a shilling, and went away.

He was much disturbed by this discovery, pointing

as it did to the existence of some secret of Mrs. Weir's more dangerous than the possession of a living husband. What unacknowledged terror the woman must be suffering, to make her eyes sharp enough to detect a fact which Sam felt he himself would never have found out. He remembered her agitation; her frequent glances out of the window; the evident distress which peeped out under all her indifferent words.

Surely these two things, both the arrival of the unknown visitor and the watch kept on the house by the detective, were parts of an intricate puzzle to understand which would give the clew to the mystery of Mrs. Weir's past.

Sam liked her well enough to hope that all would turn out well for her. He admired her for her thoughtfulness in sending the girls away, so they might not be involved, in the slightest way, in the meshes of her own unhappy history. And yet—Why had she stayed? Why, since she was plainly on the lookout for these occurrences, had she not made an excuse to leave the house, if only for a time, so that she might escape the evils she feared, and avoid the danger of involving others in them?

True, Mr. Frewen was ill; but, after all, she owed him no devotion; indeed she affected none. She had never posed as a philanthropist. Why should she persist in remaining under a roof where she was certainly regarded with some suspicion by at least one person, unless part of the mystery about her were connected with that house itself?

He worried himself for nearly three hours with

these questions, and then returned from the park, where he had been walking toward Cirencester Terrace.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he got there, having let slip by the family dinner-hour in his own home in his wish to set Mrs. Weir's doubts at rest as soon as he could. If she knew the exact measure of the danger she was in, she would be the more easily able to avert the consequences of it.

To Sam's amazement the front door of No. 203 was opened at the very moment when he was crossing the street toward the house, and he saw Mrs. Weir's face disfigured by recent tears, letting out the stranger, who looked sullen and determined.

And Sam distinctly heard him say, as he came out: "Remember I must have the jewels!"

He stopped deliberately when he saw Sam coming, and waited at the front of the steps for the young man to come up.

It was clear that Mrs. Weir was afraid he would speak to Sam, for she came right out and addressed the latter, in a voice which was husky and tired.

"Come in, come in," she said. "I have had such trouble with Mr. Frewen, Mr. Ritchie! He won't have the nurses. I have had to send them both away!"

A sound from the stranger made Sam, who was half-way up the steps, turn and glance at him. It was an exclamation of contemptuous derision and disbelief; and he shrugged his shoulders as he raised his hat to Mrs. Weir and walked away.

Mrs. Weir gave a sigh of relief, and invited Sam

with a gesture to come in. He had been doubtful whether he should do so, afraid that she might be too tired to see him.

"Shall I come round to-morrow early, on my way to the city?" he asked, trying at the same time to look as if he saw none of the traces of tears on her usually pink skin, which now looked haggard and yellow.

"Oh, why to-morrow?" she answered listlessly, as she shut the door herself and led him into the dining-room. "If you have anything to tell me, tell me now."

Sam saw at the first glance round the room that the interview which had just taken place between the lady and the stranger had been not only a very long, but a very exciting one.

The heavy mahogany table had been pushed out of its place; the table-cloth had been dragged off on to the floor; a chair had been overturned. Mrs Weir seemed, as she entered the room with him, to note these things for the first time. She picked up the chair, and said, with a half-hysterical laugh:

"You can see that there has been a 'scene.' I will confess I have had to do a little acting. But I had not noticed how realistic my efforts were getting!"

Sam helped her to put on the table-cloth; and as he did so, he said quietly:

"I went into the empty house, Mrs. Weir. And it is true that there is a detective there, and that he is watching this house."

Mrs. Weir stood a moment, apparently considering the bearing of this fact upon some other fact of which



she was in possession. After a moment's pause, she said:

"Thank you. I was sure of it. But—but—perhaps it does not matter now!"

The last words she seemed to speak to herself rather than to him.

She gave no further explanation, but turned the conversation by a trivial remark.

Sam dared ask no questions; and, seeing that Mrs. Weir looked absolutely worn out, he said he knew she was dying to get rid of him. "But how will you go on nursing Mr. Frewen without help, if he will not have the nurses?" asked he.

"I shall manage it. One can do everything one has to do," answered she, as she gave him her hand.

And Sam felt, as he walked away down the street, and looking up at the empty house caught sight of the head of the detective at the first-floor window, that the more he learned about the proceedings at No. 203 the more mysterious they became.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

WITH the girls down at Teddington the season began somewhat adversely.

At the very outset, circumstances had concurred to make the whole of the party, for one reason or another, anxious and depressed. In the first place there was deep anxiety about their father. Miss Roscoe, who was in the lowest possible spirits, kept throwing out dark hints concerning the results of leaving an 'adventuress' in charge of the house at Cirencester Terrace and the precious invalid.

She had never dared to speak of Mrs. Weir thus boldly before, but distance gave her courage.

Then all the girls were more or less disturbed by the scene of the morning; and though conversation on the subject of Mrs. Weir and Bradley's story was not possible among them all, on account of Tryphena's violent partnership and Miss Roscoe's equally violent animosity, the narrative was seldom absent from their thoughts on the way down.

Each girl, moreover, had a separate and secret source of disquietude. Tryphena was troubled on account of her dear Mrs. Weir, and her own separation from her friend. Bab grieved because she had not been able to extract from Bradley the required promise to come and see her frequently while they were at Teddington. "He was very busy, awfully hard-

worked just then," he said. And Bab's thoughts reverted at once to the fair-haired woman in the box at the theatre.

As for Molly, although she bore herself with as much outward composure as the demure Bab herself, she was in truth the most perturbed of the three girls. She could not forget, as she would have liked to do, that scene with Sam the night before. He had indeed taken her by surprise. For it was quite true, as he had said, that she had become so used to his devotion that she took it as a matter of course, and never asked herself whether it would be easy, when the time should come, for her to do without it.

And now that the question forced itself upon her, although she answered it to herself with the greatest readiness in the affirmative, she had a secret sense of dissatisfaction under it all, which was, she told herself, dissatisfaction with him, but which really partook a little of the nature of self-reproach.

Had she always been kind, as kind as he deserved? She was annoyed with herself because this question would intrude itself into the midst of her annoyance with him. It had been most inconsiderate of him, when he knew she was in love with somebody else, when she had never denied or concealed the fact, to make that strong appeal to her emotions on his own behalf, the tones of which rang in her ears still. What right had he to say things like that? To say things which hurt her, cut her to the heart? It was horrible to have to hear Sam, dear old Sam, who was always so gentle and so kind, speaking as if all his

happiness depended upon her, as if it lay with her to make him happy or miserable.

Why, of course it didn't! She knew quite well that he would fall in love with some other girl as soon as she herself was married to Sir Walter, that he would marry her, and make her a very good husband. Molly said this to herself with great determination, with a great affectation of cool cynicism and knowledge of the world.

But she didn't quite like the idea for all that!

The fact was, that Molly, in spite of the unconventional liberty she gave herself, or perhaps because of it, was very young for her age, having spent little of her short time on earth, and little in reflection. She did not understand her own heart a bit. Attracted, like the innocent little goose she was, by the experienced wiles of a practised "lady-killer," she invested Sir Walter, dreary old *roué* that he was, with a halo of romance which was without any basis of reality.

Knowing nothing of life, except through the fantastic distortions of a young girl's vision, she regarded Sam with affection indeed, as the known and tried friend whose affection had no surprises: while Sir Walter was the fascinating hero of romance with possibilities boundless because they were unknown.

She tried to comfort herself with the thought that her marriage with Sir Walter would soon be an accomplished fact, and that then old Sam, with his common-sense, would soon console himself.

But—at this point Molly put up her handkerchief hastily, and wiped away a furtive tear. She did not

like hurting Sam, poor old Sam, even if he would get over it quickly.

And so it came to pass that over the first few days at Teddington there hung a cloud of depression, and that the dull, sultry days with little sunshine, and occasional rumblings of thunder, and a mist over the water, were well in accord with the feelings of the household at the cottage.

Sam never came near them, nor did Bradley Ingledew. And the two elder girls spent most of their time in fashioning themselves new frocks, which were to make a "sensation" when the absent ones did turn up, while Tryphena, left to her own resources, since she would have none of Miss Roscoe's society, passed her time in a canoe by herself, paddling between the lock at Teddington and Hampton Court.

It did not escape the observant eyes of the girls, however, that if their truant courtiers neglected them, they had made a new acquisition, "a mash" they called it.

Day by day, and all day long a neat little skiff hovered about that strip of quiet water where the lawn of "The Cottage," bordered and shaded by its sycamore and its alders, reached down to the river. It could not be unintentional, the persistency with which the stranger paddled and fished, and rowed and sculled, or lay in his boat and smoked, always within sight of the "Cottage" lawn and generally with one eye upon the house, about which the pretty girls hung like bees on a branch.

Molly and Bab discussed him together.

"He's a rough-looking customer," said Molly.

“He’s horribly dressed,” said Bab contemptuously.

“Looks as if he had bought his flannels second-hand, and made his tie himself! I suppose he’s a foreigner. No Englishman would dare to turn out like that.”

“He looks like an Italian, or a Spaniard, or an Indian,” suggested Molly vaguely with a sidelong glance at the unknown one, who was at that moment proceeding in a leisurely manner, in a punt, under the opposite shore. “And he’s rather handsome, I think. He doesn’t look quite like a cad, does he? In spite of his clothes?”

But Bab would hardly admit so much as that.

“Busranger!” she ejaculated languidly, and turned her back in the direction of the stranger.

“That’s because he looks at Phena, and not at you,” said Molly.

“Tryphena is very welcome to his admiration. I only hope she won’t let him scrape acquaintance with her, and drag us into it!”

Molly said nothing. She had a shrewd idea that the acquaintance between the stranger and Tryphena had already been “scraped,” and having more of her younger sister’s confidence than Bab had.

The fact was that Tryphena, in her solitary canoe voyages up and down the river, had had several encounters with the swarthy stranger in the shabby clothes. He had happened to meet her one day when she was paddling back from Richmond with a canoe-ful of Maids of Honor, and he had helped her to avoid a danger by directing her attention to a bank on to which she was steering. Tryphena, while ac-

knowledging his courtesy with her accustomed brusquerie, had been rather attracted by his manner.

So that when, on the day after this encounter, he had happened to be in the lock with his punt while she in her canoe was the only other occupant, it had come about quite naturally that he helped her to keep the canoe off the side as the water went down, and gave her a few hints, very respectfully, on the subject of canoe management.

“I’ve had experience of pretty nearly every sort of canoe that’s made,” he explained, in apology for his lecture, “from African reed-canoes to the real Canadian article, which is not a bit like what you call a Canadian canoe up here!”

“Thanks,” said Tryphena, as she started to paddle away through the now open lock-gate, “but I don’t suppose I shall ever do it as gracefully as a Redskin Indian!”

But from the glance the stranger gave at her handsome figure, as she went gliding out through the gate, it appeared that he considered her as graceful over it as any human being could be.

And after this there followed many other encounters between the swarthy stranger and Tryphena, which seemed to be natural enough, but which were perhaps too frequent not to betray a little management on the part of the man. Until at last, after an awkward half-acquaintance of some days, the time arrived when she was able to speak to Molly about “Mr. Brown” by name, with the characteristic comment that he was “an awfully jolly fellow.”

“Well,” objected Molly, who thought that it was

her duty to make some objection to this picked-up acquaintance of her younger sister's, "I wouldn't make friends with anybody I happened to meet like that!"

Tryphena flushed angrily.

"I don't," she retorted, "any more than you do! Mr. Brown knows all about us, just as if he'd known us all our lives!"

"How does he? It's like his impudence to pretend to!" cried Molly.

"No, it isn't. He heard about us through a friend."

Tryphena would have stopped short here, but Molly would not let her.

"What friend?" she asked sharply.

And at last it came out, not without reluctance on Tryphena's part, that Mr. Brown was a friend of Mrs. Weir's.

Then Tryphena fled away, in order that she might not hear anything she did not like about her friend.

For Molly and Bab maintained a reserve on the subject of Mrs. Weir, which savored strongly of suspicion. And Molly went to confide in Bab the information she had just obtained, and both girls decided that there was something wrong about Mr. Brown, and that any attempt on his part to obtrude himself upon them must be promptly frustrated.

That very afternoon, however, that attempt was successfully made.

They had been at Teddington more than a fortnight, and had had on the whole a dull time of it, when a cab drove up to the garden gate, and Mrs. Weir, fresh, pink, smiling, handsome, and dressed



in a new and most becoming costume of navy-blue serge, blue and white striped silk, with wide, lace-trimmed muslin collar and cuffs, came up to the "Cottage."

Her arrival sent a thrill of excitement through the little household. Tryphena went mad with joy, and clung to her neck, to the imminent danger of the pretty frock. Molly and Bab were quite glad to see somebody from town, Bab confessing that the sight of a new frock on Mrs. Weir was such joy it made you ready to condone anything. Even Miss Roscoe, having heard from the servants of the house in town that Mr. Frewen was better, was obliged to feel that the lady's coming was a pleasant excitement.

So they made much of her, and had tea out on the lawn in her honor, while she told them that Mr. Frewen, though still unable to leave his room, was better, and that he had consented to be left in charge of the elderly housemaid, while she came down to see them.

"And how have you been passing your time? I had expected, I think, to see you looking better, or browner, or something!" she said, as she glanced from one to the other of the girls. "Tryphena is the only one of you who looks as if she had been enjoying herself."

The elder girls exchanged looks, and Tryphena blushed a little.

Bab sat up and looked prim.

"Tryphena is the only one of us who has been enjoying herself," she said tartly. "Molly and I have been simply wretched all the time!"

“Wretched! How was that?”

“Oh, it was the weather, I suppose!” said Molly, shortly.

But Miss Roscoe, who, having found her authority set at nought more than ever away from the fear of “papa,” was rather anxious to “make it up” with Mrs. Weir, struck in with a better explanation.

“The young ladies have been dull,” said she in her aggressive voice, “because none of their admirers have been to see them!”

“Admirers!” repeated Bab in a disgusted aside.

“Except Tryphena, who has managed to pick one up on the river!”

Tryphena started up.

“Really, Miss Roscoe, I wish you would express yourself better,” she cried indignantly. “It was a friend of Mrs. Weir’s that I met, as I told you, and that ought to have been enough for you, or for *anybody!*” she added with emphasis, glancing at her sisters.

“A friend of mine!” echoed Mrs. Weir.

But even as she said this, her eyes wandered in the direction of a skiff which was coming slowly down the middle of the stream.

“There he is! There he is! Now he can speak for himself!” shouted Tryphena, as she bounded away over the lawn, and began to beckon energetically to the young man in the skiff, who at once changed his course, and brought his boat in a few swift strokes close under the velvety edge of the lawn.

Mrs. Weir got up from her basket chair, and went down to the water’s edge, with a smiling face of rec-

ognition. Molly and Bab were honestly glad that their sister's stray acquaintance had really some credentials. At a sign from Mrs. Weir, they rose also, and followed her to the spot where she was stooping to shake hands with the stranger.

"Tie up your boat, and come up here," she was saying in her most friendly and bewitching manner. "I must introduce you formally to the Misses Frewen."

"Don't say 'The Misses Frewen,' as if we were school-mistresses," protested Molly. "We're always known as the Frewen girls."

"Well, then," said Mrs. Weir, smiling still more, "to 'the Frewen girls' let me introduce you, Mr.——"

And to the general confusion, Mrs. Weir stopped short. She was introducing him as an old friend of hers, but—she had forgotten his name!

The elder girls exchanged looks, but the pause had hardly lasted more than a second or two when the stranger cut it short by saying, in a very deep and pleasant voice:

"It must come out. You are ashamed, Mrs. Weir, aren't you, to have to introduce a friend of yours under such a modest name as 'Brown'?"

"It was not that," returned Mrs. Weir readily, though with slightly flushed cheeks, "I was wondering whether, in the years since I met you last, you had adopted one of the new double-barrelled names."

And so the matter passed off with a laugh. But when the two elder girls were alone together, Molly said to Bab:

“Do you believe people ever really forget the names of their old friends, Bab?”

And Bab, with a scornful little toss of her head, answered:

“Of course not. Either Mr. Brown is not an old friend of Mrs. Weir’s, or else—his name is not Mr. Brown!”

There was a pause, and when Molly spoke again it was in a whisper:

“Do you think, Bab, his name is—Max Lowenstein?”

“Sh-sh-sh-sh!” said Bab. “We musn’t say so, even if we think so—yet!”

## CHAPTER XIX.

THERE was a strange attraction about Mr. Brown.

Even Molly and Bab, full of suspicion as they were concerning this mysterious person, forgot the shabby flannels, the ill-made tie, when he was talking to them in that peculiarly pleasant deep voice of his. And they found that there was some excuse for Tryphena, whose behavior betrayed to her sisters that the handsome stranger had made a strong impression upon her fancy.

She was much quieter than usual, that summer afternoon, sitting back in her long garden chair, playing with a rose, looking a very Juno in majesty of figure, and in face a very child.

Mr. Brown was paying a very long call indeed. To do him justice, he had made several offers to go, saying he felt sure he was trying their patience too much, and that they wished him at the bottom of the river. But Mrs. Weir had always encouraged him to stay, and the girls, in spite of the vague suspicions of the two elder ones, were nothing loth.

So Mr. Brown stayed on till the shadows had grown long upon the grass, and until the boats which had gone up the stream that afternoon began to come back in the cool breezes of the evening.

It was Saturday, and the river was thronged.

“Does this sort of thing seem tame to you, Mr.

Brown, after the adventurous life you seem to have led abroad?" asked Tryphena, with a start and a slight flush, as, turning her head, she found that Mrs. Weir had got up from her chair and sauntered down to the water's edge, so that she and the visitor were left to a *tête-à-tête*.

Molly and Bab had retreated some minutes before, to exchange confidences about Mr. Brown and Mrs. Weir's encouragement of him.

"Not a bit," said he. "The life of movement is all very well in its way. But there comes a time to every man when he is ready to exchange it for the life of peace."

"And are you going to settle down in England now?"

"I came back with that intention," he answered gravely. "But circumstances have occurred to make me change my mind already."

And there came suddenly into his dark face a look which frightened the girl a little.

"You are going away on your travels again then?"

He threw a quick glance at Mrs. Weir, who was out of hearing, standing at the water's edge, throwing bread to a great white swan, which had glided up the stream under the bank, in answer to her invitation.

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"Which is it you are tired of?" asked Tryphena, rendered curious by that glance at Mrs. Weir, "the people or the country?"

"The people," said he at once.

"And the men or the women?" persisted the girl.

Again he answered without hesitation:

“The women.”

“That’s not nice of you, Mr. Brown, to say that!”

“Oh, I’ve been so long away in the wilds, Miss Frewen, that I’ve forgotten how to be ‘nice.’ In the wilds, you know, among men, it’s more important that one should be sincere!”

“That’s nasty again! Don’t you think women appreciate sincerity?”

“They appreciate nothing so little, I think. Otherwise, why should their influence be ruin to the most upright men, turning straightforward men into liars, and honest men into thieves?”

Mr. Brown spoke with so much passion that Tryphena sat up, a little shocked. And she noticed that again Mr. Brown glanced at Mrs. Weir.

“But that’s only wicked women,” said the girl. “We are not all as bad as that! You wouldn’t think so hardly, would you, of me, or of my sisters, or—or Mrs. Weir?”

Unconsciously she had raised her voice to its usual robust tone.

“What’s that about Mrs. Weir?” asked the lady, turning round, and showing, perhaps, the least little trace of anxiety in her smooth pink face.

Tryphena sprang out of her chair, and bounded across the lawn to her.

“I don’t want to talk to Mr. Brown any more,” said she, with a heightened color, as she seized her friend’s hand, bread for the swans and all, and began to caress it with hers. “He doesn’t believe in the

goodness of women, while I *know* they are good, some of them!"

And she hung affectionately about the lady, without a glance at Mr. Brown. He got up and approached them with a contrite air, while Tryphena saw Mrs. Weir throw at him a glance full of anger and alarm.

"What have you been saying to the child?" she asked shortly.

"Nothing that would have been better unsaid, I think," he answered steadily, meeting her eyes with boldness. "I was telling her of the bad effects women, some women, of course, have on men."

"And I could tell a companion story of the evil influence men, some men, have on women."

There was a pause, and the man and the woman exchanged looks. The woman entreated; the man defied. It was Mrs. Weir who spoke next; and her voice had a new note, which made Tryphena raise her head to look in the handsome face.

"But we expect, we hope, that a man will be as ready to yield to the influence of the good as to the influence of the evil."

Mr. Brown said nothing to this, but that he understood the words to have some hidden meaning was clear from the half-angry, half-guilty look on his face as he glanced at Tryphena, and then turned to stare out at the river.

A boat coming rapidly down the middle of the stream attracted his attention.

"There is a friend of yours, Mrs. Weir, I think," said he suddenly. "Mr.—Ritchie, I think you said his name was."



Tryphena looked up, and, to her intense amazement, recognized Sam in the boat, which was now almost opposite the lawn.

"Sam!" she cried, aghast. "And—somebody with him! Not one of his sisters! What *will* Molly say?"

"Molly will say that he is very welcome to go out with whom he pleases!" cried a voice behind her.

And Molly herself, very pale, very quiet, with a little less curve than usual about the lines of her pretty red mouth, stood twisting the stalk of the rose Tryphena had dropped, and staring at the pair in the boat with dull eyes.

"It's too bad of him!" whispered Bab soothingly, slipping her hand through Molly's arm.

"No, it isn't," retorted Molly sharply. "Why shouldn't he do as he likes? I mean to!" she added fiercely.

And without another word Molly turned and walked into the house with rapid steps.

Bab was not long left behind. Her red mouth began to grow firm with resolution; and after a few seconds spent in deliberation, she ran into the house after her sister. Passing through the open French window of the drawing-room, she saw Molly, her face red and her hands trembling, down on her knees before a writing-table, scribbling a letter with so much rapidity and fire that the ink spluttered up and the pen stuck in the paper. Bab watched her for a moment in silence. Molly knew she was there, but did not look up. Then, still without a word, Bab rushed out of the room, if indeed she could be said to

rush, so graceful were all her movements, snatched up a hat in the hall and fastened it on her head, taking care to glance in the hall mirror as she did so.

To choose a pair of white gloves from a heap in the drawer of the hall table was the work of another few seconds; then she took up a sunshade which was shot pink and yellow, and slipped quietly out of the house, ignoring the question addressed to her by Miss Roscoe through the dining-room window as to where she was going.

And as soon as she was outside the garden gate, she dropped her dignity and ran fast along the road in the direction of the lock.

Anybody but Bab would have reached the lock-gates with a flushed and heated face, starting eyes, and labored breath. For although the sun had gone down, the air was still warm. But slender, pale Bab was not like other people; and she arrived at the lock-gates with only a becoming tinge of pink color in her cheeks, panting just sufficiently for her red lips to be parted and her chest to rise and fall most prettily.

Standing between the lock on one side and the rollers on the other, scanning the occupants of the crowd of boats with an eager scrutiny, Bab was an object of much admiration to them, of which she was not wholly unconscious, in spite of the anxiety from which she was suffering.

One of the most conspicuous figures among the group of girls about the lock, Bab had, as usual, got her effect by the simplest means. A well-cut skirt of navy-blue serge; a blouse of yellowish muslin and in-

sersion mounted on pale pink silk; a hat of rough straw trimmed with the muslin and a bunch of cherries—these were the details of a costume which looked the prettiest within reach of the eyes round about the lock.

At last Bab caught sight of the person she wanted, and all the other men felt envious when she came close to the side of the lock and addressed that person as "Sam."

Sam himself looked up with a face as eager as her own.

"I want to speak to you, Sam. It's important," said she in a low voice.

From the rapidity with which he answered her she could see that he was as anxious for the interview as she was.

"All right," said he quickly. "Wait till we get through the lock, and I'll come ashore for a minute. You'll excuse me, won't you?" he went on to the girl who sat in the stern and steered for him.

She answered by a quiet nod, the nod of pleasant, easy intimacy which does not get jealous, thought Bab, as she glanced at the girl and felt angrier with Sam than ever. For if he wanted to make Molly just jealous enough, he should have brought somebody who didn't matter, and not this well-turned-out, "nice" girl, who looked like a real rival as distinct from a mere manufactured one!

Bab retreated to the shore, and waited. The skiff came through the lock, glided to the landing-stage, and Sam jumped out, with another easy nod to his companion.

Bab, loyal to her sister with all her heart, felt so angry that the first thing she said when she and Sam were alone together, walking up the road, was uttered in a voice of exceeding tartness, without any diplomatic opening:

“Who’s that girl?”

Sam replied, however, quite composedly:

“Never mind that girl. What did you want to see me about?”

“Well, that is one of the things.”

Sam stopped short, and turned on his heel.

“Oh, if that’s all, I think you might have waited till some more convenient season.”

“It isn’t all—by any means. But it’s important too. Do you know what you’re doing to Molly?”

“Molly and her doings don’t concern me now!”

He said it beautifully, with an affectionate glance in the direction of the boat he had just left. Bab stared at him with her gray-blue eyes, and when she spoke, her voice trembled:

“I never thought to hear you say such a thing as that, Sam!”

Sam thrust his hands into his pockets.

“My dear Bab, no more did I! But there are limits to the endurance of any ass; and you never know how near you are to those limits till you get there!”

“Then—then you don’t care—you *really* don’t care—for her any longer?”

Sam did not reply at once. But when he did, his voice was as steady, and his tone as calm, as ever.

“Not in the way I did.”

“But you would like to see her happy?”

“Of course.”

“Well, you won’t then,” retorted Bab fiercely, visiting upon him all the wilfulness, all the errors of judgment, of Molly herself, and speaking as if he had been a villain too degraded for human association. “For you’ve made her more wild about this Sir Walter than she was before. She hasn’t seen him for days: hasn’t even answered his letters. And now—at this moment, she’s on her knees writing to him. And you may expect to hear of her marrying him any day!”

Having uttered this speech with withering reproach, Bab gazed steadily upon Sam, and waited for a faltering, humble reply.

But she got nothing of the sort. He heard her out, with his head raised a little, and his gaze fixed on a tree. And after a short pause, as if he had expected more of the harangue, he said quietly:

“My dear girl, what of that? Isn’t she in love with the man? I understood she had been for a long time!”

“In love!” echoed Bab scornfully, “with that old bag of bones! It’s ridiculous!”

“I quite agree with you. But if it’s nevertheless a fact, what can we do?”

Bab looked at him for a few moments as if uncertain whether she had heard aright. Then she said passionately:

“Do you suppose she’ll be in love with him when she’s married him?”

That question did shake Sam’s *sang-froid* a little. He answered with a catch in his voice:

"No, I don't suppose so. But who can help that either?"

"*You* could, if you choose!"

Then Sam turned and faced her squarely.

"If I choose to go dangling on as I have done, letting her make a fool of me as long as she liked, on the chance of her dropping into my arms when this man is tired of her? That is what you mean, I suppose, Bab. But I don't choose. I would have put up with anything if there had been a chance of her opening her eyes, and caring for me, and taking all the devotion I have to give for ever so little of hers. But to be used as she has used me indefinitely, giving all and getting nothing or worse than nothing, that is not possible, Bab, to any man who is a man at all."

Bab was astonished. Quiet old Sam was "coming out." She admired him for it; listening to him, she felt the blood mounting to her cheeks, and asked herself if it were really possible that Molly could hold out against a love like his.

"Sam," she said at last, almost in a whisper, "why don't you talk to *her* like this? Why don't you speak out, and let her have it straight from the shoulder, as you are doing now to me? She would listen, I'm sure she would!"

"But you see I have tried, and she didn't listen. So there's an end of it, Bab. I'm beginning to think I should like a little devotion myself, for a change."

"And you're going to marry the girl in the boat?"

"Most likely. If she'll have me."

Bab heaved a melancholy sigh.

"Of course she will. There's only one girl alive,

Sam, who'd be such an idiot as not to have you if she got the chance!"

There was a pause, a very short one; then Sam said quickly:

"Now there's something I want to ask you. Who was the man I saw on your lawn just now? What is his name? And how did you come to know him?"

"We didn't. *He* came to know *us*! His name is Brown—at least he says it is. And Mrs. Weir is throwing him at Tryphena's head!"

"What?"

"It's true, it is indeed. Molly would tell you the same. He admires her, I think. He has been always about the river just here ever since we came down. And he scraped acquaintance with her when she was marauding about in her canoe. And to-day Mrs. Weir came down and saw him, and invited him to come on the lawn. And he's rather nice. But there's something curious about his manner to Mrs. Weir and hers to him. She seems afraid of him, Sam, she really does. And he is always saying things to her or at her, as if—as if—his talk had two meanings—one for us, and the other for her! Do you understand what I mean, Sam?"

He nodded, and looked down, scraping up the gravel with his boot with great care, and then flattening it down again.

"Do you know anything about him, Sam? You look as if you did!"

"I have seen him at Cirencester Terrace, that's all."

"At our house? When?"

"The day you came down here. He had a long, and I should say exciting interview with Mrs. Weir."

Bab stared at him for a few moments, and then spoke in a very decided tone:

"Look here, I know there's some mystery about her and this man. And I have an idea what it is. And I've made up my mind to go up to town to-night and speak to papa about it. She's got poor old papa under her thumb, and Edgar too, as she gets everybody."

"To-night! You'd better wait till to-morrow."

"I can't!" said Bab, stamping her foot. "I can't rest. I suppose you can't throw over that girl in the boat and take me up?"

"Of course I can't."

"Then I'll get Bradley to take me up. I know where his houseboat is; Mr. Brown has seen it; he described it exactly—done up with scarlet geraniums and white marguerites—and very smart with muslin curtains and—and a lady in black." And Bab's voice changed a little. "I mean with people on it. I'll get him to take me up."

"Well, my dear girl, you can't go to Staines and then up to town to-night. The thing's not possible."

"I'll get as far as Staines at any rate," replied Bab with determination.

Sam began to see that there was more reason for poor Bab's unrest than she would have admitted.

"Look here," said he, "you can't go to Staines to-night. It's too late. It's six o'clock. It would be a wild-goose chase. Come up to town with us, if you like——"



“What? Play ‘gooseberry’?” exclaimed Bab in horror. “No, thank you, Sam. Good-night!”

And before he had time to exchange another word with the wilful young woman she had flitted away up the road, and left him to his own reflections.

These were of so serious a cast, acquainted as he was with the wayward nature of the girl, that he wrote a few lines in pencil on a spare half-sheet of an old letter in his pocket; folded it into a cocked hat, and gave a boy sixpence to take it to “The Cottage.” The note was directed to “Mrs. Weir,” and the boy was directed to ask for her and to deliver it into no hands but hers.

Sam was conscious of the apparent absurdity of his confiding in a person in whom it was impossible for him to have entire trust. But through all his doubts of Mrs. Weir there rose a dogged belief in that something good in the woman, which would not let a girl come to hideous grief if an effort on her part could prevent it.

## CHAPTER XX.

POOR little Bab! Queen as she looked, as she subsided into her usual graceful walk when she had turned the corner of the road, and was out of Sam's sight, she was really the most miserable of girls. Bradley had not once been to see her since they came down to Teddington, and the last time she had seen him, on the day they left town, his visit had been most unsatisfactory in Bab's eyes. He had come to tell the girls what he had heard about Mrs. Weir, and he had gone without making any opportunity of seeing Bab alone, for so much as a single moment.

This had cost Bab a keen pang, but she had expected him to come to The Cottage on the first opportunity to make it up. And now he had let a whole fortnight go by without coming at all!

What could it mean?

And Bab brooded over that last meeting—real meeting, when they came home from the theatre together; and she twisted every word Bradley had uttered into a dozen different meanings, and tortured herself at one moment by telling herself he was tired of her, that he really liked that horrid dancing woman better than her; and at another there would come into her heart a sweet sense that it was she, Bab, for whom he really cared, and that those words which had escaped his lips as he tried to kiss her,

expressed the true feelings he had for her, and her alone.

But then—why did he not come?

She asked herself this question a dozen times a day; and the thought came into her mind almost as often that she would go and find out where his houseboat was, and pay him a surprise visit.

But at this point in her reflections there always rose up an obstacle, an intangible something, to restrain her from this course of action.

A year ago wayward Bab had thought nothing of hiring a boat and getting herself rowed up to the side of the houseboat, whence, after attracting Bradley's attention by a wave of her Japanese paper sunshade, she had easily allowed herself to be coaxed into getting on board the houseboat itself, to consume strawberries until she was ready to be rowed down the river to The Cottage by the devoted Bradley.

But a change had come, gradually, imperceptibly, in the girl's feelings. She could still propose to do these daring things, but she could no longer carry them out. In truth, though she did not know it, she was hovering over the border line between the irresponsibility of the overgrown child, and the strong impulses and feelings of the passionate woman.

So that while she thought she was only amusing herself by a flirtation with Bradley, she was really nourishing in her breast a passion the strength of which she never guessed. Flippant, frivolous Bab, with her lip-shrewdness and her lip-levity, had a heart beating tumultuously under her white breast: only, unluckily for herself, she never guessed it.

Now, unhappily, her real wish to find out more about the mystery concerning Mrs. Weir and Mr. Brown had furnished her with an excuse for going in search of Bradley, instead of waiting for him to come in search of her.

Bradley, who knew all about Max Lowenstein, could tell her whether Mr. Brown answered to the description of that specious adventurer; and if he did, as Bab believed, what could be more natural than that she should ask Bradley to go up to town with her, to tell Mr. Frewen with his own lips what sort of people these were who had got into his home.

Trembling with excitement, Bab slipped into the house by one of the French windows, and ran upstairs to change her dress for one she considered more becoming.

Ten minutes later she was on her way to the railway station.

Nobody less determined than Bab would have mastered the difficulties of that late journey from Teddington to Staines.

However, the determined Bab accomplished them, and found herself, a few minutes past eight o'clock, being rowed by a waterman across the silent river toward the spot where Bradley's houseboat was stationed.

Bab's heart beat fast. It was still quite light enough for her to see the rows of red and white flowers which Bradley had chosen that year for the distinguishing mark of *The Zephyr*. But it was also just dark enough for the Japanese paper lanterns, which followed the outline of the houseboat, and which

were all lighted, to glow picturesquely in the black shadows of the trees on the bank behind. There were lights in the windows too, glowing softly behind red shades, and veiled by the drawn muslin curtains.

Sounds of laughter; a confused babble of talk; the twang of a banjo—all these came across the water to Bab's ears from the stern of the house-boat, where, veiled by a film of muslin hangings which gave the sense of privacy, without the reality of it, to those within, a merry group were lounging.

With her eyes fixed on the indistinct forms, Bab came on. She presently distinguished Bradley, in a lounge coat, cigarette in mouth, as usual; and her heart gave a great leap at the sight. And suddenly she wished she had not come. She had almost given the boatman the order to row back, seized by a new impulse of terror at the thought of meeting her lover again, and of being perhaps, what she had never been before, unwelcome.

But another stroke of the oars had brought her nearer; and she recognized the makeweight, another man whom she knew slightly, and—the woman who had occupied the box at the Haymarket on the night of her visit.

Yes, there was no doubt about it: the little plump woman, with the obviously dyed canary-colored hair, again dressed in black, leaning back in her cushioned lounging-chair with all the air of being quite at home, was Minnie Haarlem, the burlesque actress and dancer.

The certainty of what she had dreaded for the moment broke down Bab's powers of self-command.

She cried "Stop!" to the boatman in a voice so shrill that one of the party on the houseboat drew back the curtains and looked out.

"Why, it's Bab Frewen!" cried a voice which she recognized as that of the makeweight.

Instantly there was a stir, and a chorus of voices:

"The d—!" "Not possible!" "What a bore!"

Subdued as these exclamations were, Bab's quick ears caught them. But it was too late to turn back; too late to do anything but to put the best face possible on a bad business. She decided upon the line she should take in the few moments still left before her boat swam alongside the houseboat.

In the circle of lamplight which she had just entered, Bab, in her pale beauty, made a curious and striking picture. Dressed in black, like her rival, Bab wore her sombre garb with a difference. While Miss Minnie Haarlem wore the theatrical black satin, with many frills of crumpled *chiffon*, Bab's frock of black *merveilleux* was made quite plainly, with soft full sleeves, the bodice slightly full in front, and trimmed with hanging drops of jet. Her large black lace hat had a brim picturesquely bent, and underneath, resting on the fair hair, which was less gold than a sort of silvery fawn color, was a huge rosette of crimson silk, the one touch of vivid color which Bab so frequently affected.

"I hope I'm not disturbing everybody," she said in her quiet, deliberate tones, as she put out a little hand and arm neatly gloved to the elbow in black *suède*, and rested it on the side of the houseboat. "But I've come with a message, an important mes-

sage for you, Bradley, which I promised to deliver to-night."

Bradley had come to the opening in the curtains, and was holding out his hand. He was very nervous, and when he spoke he stammered. It was also evident that he was making ineffectual efforts to hide Minnie Haarlem from her sight by interposing his own person between the two women.

But he could not cope with Bab. As soon as she had taken his proffered hand, she sprang up, still holding it, and in the most disconcertingly graceful manner possible stepped on to the houseboat.

As she did so, she took in the whole of the scene with one swift glance. Minnie Haarlem, with her round, powdered face and inexpressive, snub features, settling herself with an air of impudent, quiet defiance, back in a nest of scarlet and gold cushions. Bradley, with a face full of unmistakable terror, shuffling about, twisting his mustache, and filling up what would have been an awkward pause by inane remarks about the heat of the day and the coolness of the evening. The makeweight, broadly smiling, and evidently expecting a "scene." The remaining man turned quickly to Miss Haarlem, and tried to engage her in conversation.

Minnie, however, did not want to talk. She wanted to watch.

"Don't chatter now," she observed coolly. "Give me a cigarette."

Delighted to find her an occupation, the man obeyed. Meanwhile Bab was saying to Bradley:

"I'm not going to detain you long, as you have so many visitors. Let us go up to the top a minute, while I tell you the message."

"Oh, ah, yes, yes—oh, of course, if you like!" stammered Bradley, whose face was various colors by turns.

Already Bab, without a glance behind, was on her way up, very nimbly, but without hurry, showing discreet glimpses of high-heeled brown morocco shoes and open-work brown silk stockings, and very slim ankles.

Bradley was hurrying up after her, when Minnie Haarlem's voice, speaking in a drawling but sufficiently loud tone, called him imperiously back.

"Bradley, wait a minute. I want a light."

Bradley took another step upward, affecting not to hear.

"Bradley," repeated the voice with an added note of rather shrewish displeasure: "I want a light. Are you coming, or——"

With a muttered exclamation which had better be left to the imagination, the hapless Bradley turned and came obediently down.

Miss Haarlem was still leaning back in her cushions, but she now held an unlighted cigarette between her lips. As soon as Bradley stood, frowning, before her, she tilted back her head a little, protruding her lips, with the cigarette. He thrust his hand angrily into his pocket, and took out a gold match-box, saying below his breath:

"What are you behaving like this for? What the d—l's the matter with you?"



But Miss Haarlem took no notice of his remarks, did not even look at him.

"No, I don't want a match," drawled she. "Light it from your own cigarette."

Out of patience, Bradley tossed the match-box into her lap.

"I shan't," said he shortly, turning away.

But her next words, uttered no longer with a drawl, brought him quickly back again.

"You will, dear boy, or——"

He did not wait for her to finish. With another word half-uttered, half-swallowed, he bent over her as he was commanded to do, and let her take a light for her own cigarette from the one in his mouth.

"You she-devil!" he growled out as he withdrew his heated face from the neighborhood of hers.

But Miss Haarlem only laughed lazily, as she turned with a satisfied smile to the young fellow beside her.

"Now you may chatter, if you like!" she graciously remarked.

By this time Bradley had already joined Bab on the roof of the houseboat.

The girl had witnessed the little scene between him and Minnie Haarlem and had understood its meaning. Miss Haarlem had meant to make her jealous-- and in this she had succeeded; she had also meant to make Bab show her jealousy; but this, Bab said to herself with an impulse of passionate pride, she should never do!

Poor, wilful Bab was receiving her first lesson in the disadvantages of that borderland between strict

conventional propriety and flagrant Bohemianism in which it had been her delight to wander. She was in a wild tumult of feeling; but her pride enabled her to conceal this, and to receive with apparent coolness her shamefaced lover. It was upon her that Bradley turned his wrath now.

“What on earth do you mean by this move, Bab?” he asked impatiently. “Surely you might know better than to do a thing like this. Look at the infernally awkward position you put yourself and me and everybody in!”

Nobody was more entirely conscious of this fact than Bab herself. She had the sense to see that it would be madness to open the subject of his fickleness, his deceit now, with the other woman almost or perhaps quite within earshot. So putting strong constraint upon herself, she said, smoothing her long gloves as calmly as if nothing had happened of an exciting nature:

“It couldn’t be helped, unfortunately. As I told you, I had an important message.”

“Message!” ejaculated Bradley with contemptuous incredulity.

“Yes,” went on Bab imperturbably. “I have just seen Sam Ritchie. And he wants to know, and I want to know, what this Max Lowenstein was like who was mixed up in the ‘Pangola Reef’ business. Because there is a man who calls himself Brown hanging about Mrs. Weir, and she’s throwing Tryphena at his head.”

“What!”

“It’s quite true. Did you know Max Lowenstein?”

"I never saw him, but I have seen portraits of him, and I think I might recognize him by them, if it were the man himself."

"Then you must come and see," said Bab, rising quickly from the seat she had taken, and holding out her hand. "You see," she added, with the first touch of personal feeling she had shown, "I have not detained you long from—from your friends."

But Bradley was too much afraid of a scene, a collision, to be really grateful.

"Oh, yes, yes, certainly. Come along!" he cried, with affected buoyancy, as he made way for her to go down. "I'll be sure and find out if I can."

"Thank you," said Bab, as he came down.

The group in the stern had broken up, and Miss Haarlem, with a curiously hard look on her face, was standing, cigarette in hand, watching Bab come down. And the makeweight and the other man, foreseeing an encounter of some sort, proceeded to make their way rapidly into the interior of the boat.

"It's too bad of Bradley to forget to introduce us, Miss Frewen," she said, blinking up at Bab through her light eyelashes, and speaking with a set smile on her face. "You've seen me on the stage, I dare say—Minnie Haarlem, I call myself on the boards."

"Oh, yes, I have heard of your beautiful dancing, of course; everybody has," replied Bab in a firm voice.

"But that's not my real name. We like to keep up the 'Miss,' you know, even when we are really 'Mrs.'——"

"Miss Frewen doesn't want to know that!" inter-

rupted Bradley from above, with a note of terror in his voice.

Minnie Haarlem blinked up at him with malicious enjoyment, and went on:

“But it’s always interesting, isn’t it, to know what our real names are? And it may be interesting to you, Miss Frewen, to know that my real name is Minnie Ingledew, and that I’m Bradley’s wife.”

## CHAPTER XXI.

BAB, thanks to that splendid self-command of hers, heard this sensational announcement with outward calmness. She neither started nor changed countenance perceptibly, nor uttered a cry.

But an acute observer like Miss Haarlem could probably detect that the young girl's slight figure wavered a little as she turned round instinctively to read confirmation or contradiction of what she had just heard in the eyes of Bradley himself.

But he had disappeared.

This fact spoke volumes, and Bab staggered perceptibly as she turned again, and made a step forward in the direction of the boat which had brought her.

Minnie laughed, harshly, mockingly.

"I'm afraid I've startled you a little," she said. "But really it's not my fault. It all comes of Bradley's pernicious habit of passing himself off as a bachelor."

"And of yours of passing yourself off as a single woman," said Bab quietly.

Minnie laughed again.

"Oh, well, that is almost a duty in our profession. And, you know, Miss Frewen, that girls who come to see men at this time in the evening, unchaperoned, are not generally very particular as to whether their men friends are bachelors or not!"

These words were uttered in such a tone as to be an insult; and Bab's pale cheeks grew pink, and she bit her lips.

Suddenly, from the black water outside the houseboat, a woman's round, full voice broke pleasantly upon their ears.

"What is that? What is that? Unchaperoned? No, the naughty girl outran her chaperon a little, that's all."

And Bab, starting violently, though this escaped the notice of Minnie, who was peering into the darkness outside, recognized the voice of Mrs. Weir, who had evidently been waiting alongside the houseboat, and who had seized the opportunity of making her presence known at exactly the right moment.

Bab, with an impulse of gratitude, was too clever not to take full advantage of the way of escape offered to her. Looking out into the second rowing-boat, in which Mrs. Weir sat, she nodded with apparent composure.

"Well, you weren't long in catching me up," she said. "I have my message already through, and I'm ready to come back if you are."

"The sooner the better," replied Mrs. Weir, holding out her hand. "We haven't much time before the last train goes."

And with a bow to the bewildered but still only half-suspicious Minnie, Mrs. Weir helped Bab to get into the boat in which she herself had come across from the shore.

They paid the second boatman, and were rowed along to the bank in silence.

It was not until they had landed that Bab said very quietly:

“I ought to thank you, Mrs. Weir; I do thank you. But—how did you know? What made you come?”

“A note from Sam Ritchie,” answered Mrs. Weir, in a less cordial tone than she had used by the house-boat. “He asked me to follow you, to look after you. But—excuse my speaking frankly—I think you hardly deserve it. A young girl who sets so little value on her own reputation can hardly expect that others should take much pains to preserve it for her.”

Never, surely, was reproof better deserved. Bab, down in her inmost heart, knew this. But sore as she was, smarting, burning with shame and something more, she could not bear it. That Mrs. Weir, the woman whose influence she feared, mistrusted, should dare to speak to her so! Her anger smouldered within her, and she told herself that this latest action of the widow's was after all only another proof that she was a spy, getting hold of every member of the household, and throwing her toils about them for purposes of her own.

Once inside the station, therefore, Bab took a bold course. Turning to Mrs. Weir, she said in a firm voice:

“I am going up to town, Mrs. Weir, to my father's house.”

She had got into the train by which she was to travel to London, when Mrs. Weir's face appeared at the window of the carriage, and the

next moment Mrs. Weir herself was sitting beside her.

"I hope you don't mind my travelling with you. You know Mr. Frewen expects me back to-night," she said.

Bab had forgotten this; she, however, now assented quietly, and set about devising plans for seeing her father, a proceeding which she guessed Mrs. Weir would try to thwart. To put the latter off her guard, Bab now affected to be sorry for her brusquerie, and chatted from time to time on the journey until they reached Cirencester Terrace.

"How is Mr. Frewen now?" she asked Johns, when he opened the door.

"Pretty well, I believe, ma'am. Mr. Edgar has been with him," answered the man.

Bab went straight upstairs to her room, without any further inquiries, and waited in her bedroom, without attempting to undress, until the clock struck two.

Then she crept softly downstairs, peeped through the open door of the dining-room, where she saw Mrs. Weir asleep in a made-up bed on the sofa, and went noiselessly to the study door.

It was just ajar, so that Mrs. Weir might be within hearing of the invalid's bell.

Bab entered on tiptoe. If her father were awake, she would speak to him at once, tell him her suspicions. If not, she would wait till he woke up. There was a night-light burning in the little inner room where his bed was. In the study itself, through which she had to pass, there was a tiny jet of gas burning.



The inner door was only open by a couple of inches. Bab went softly in.

There, within the room, she stood transfixed with astonishment, with unspeakable, nameless horror: the bed was disarranged, as if some one had slept in it: but her father was not there.

## CHAPTER XXII.

It was some minutes before Bab could quite persuade herself that she might trust the evidence of her own eyes. She put her hand on the bed; she looked under it; she peered into the cupboard in the corner, shook the curtains. Then she went back into the study, and growing less careful as her alarm increased, she gradually made more noise, and at last stumbled against a chair.

A few moments later Mrs. Weir came into the room.

"What is the matter? What are you doing here, Bab?" she asked rather sharply. "You will disturb your father."

Bab drew herself up, and looked Mrs. Weir full in the face. She had turned up the gas in the course of her investigations, and by the strong light she could note any change in the elder lady's countenance.

"I cannot disturb my father by the noise I make," she answered quietly, "because he is not here."

If Mrs. Weir was not surprised, she was a very good actress indeed. It seemed to the young girl that she grew livid to the lips. But then, thought Bab, that might be only the result of being found out.

"Not—here!" she repeated, slowly.

And in a few rapid steps, Mrs. Weir had crossed

the study, and disappeared into the little adjoining room.

In a few seconds she reappeared, whiter than ever.

"Call your brother!" she said quickly.

And she ran out of the study into the hall, while Bab followed to carry out her instructions. She roused Edgar, and was present when he came out of his room and met Mrs. Weir on the staircase. If there were any doubts about Mrs. Weir's surprise at Mr. Frewen's disappearance, there could be none about Edgar's. He staggered, he shook, he clutched at the banisters. Then, without waiting to hear a word of suggestion or of explanation, he left the two ladies together, and rushed downstairs to the room his father had occupied.

When he came out again, he seemed hardly able to stand. His thin, sallow face looked drawn and old; his teeth chattered as he spoke.

"It's true! Great Heavens! What shall we do? He's gone! He's gone!"

Mrs. Weir, who had entirely recovered her self-possession, if she could be said ever to have lost it, put a restraining hand upon his shoulder.

"Delirious again, no doubt!" said she in his ear.

Edgar started, and looked at her.

"Yes, yes, of course. Delirious!" repeated he, as if saying a lesson.

"You had better go," said she, "and try to find him."

And she whispered a few hurried words in his ear. He sprang up from the table on which he had seated himself, as if hardly able to stand.

“All right, all right!” he answered submissively, but in a hoarse voice. “Just as you think best, of course.”

And the usually self-possessed and self-willed Edgar obeyed her directions, putting on his hat and overcoat at once, and leaving the house quickly and without noise.

Mrs. Weir let him out, and returned to confront Bab, who was silent and rather sullen. What was this spell that Mrs. Weir cast upon everybody, that even Edgar followed each suggestion of hers like a lamb? The girl looked up suspiciously, defiantly, as Mrs. Weir came in.

“Mrs. Weir,” said she steadily, looking at the lady with shrewd, penetrating eyes, “I am not a child. If you can confide in Edgar, so you can in me. What does all this mean? There is some mystery about papa’s illness, something we are not to know. But don’t you think, after what I’ve found out, that you must tell me the rest? If there is a secret, I can keep it.”

Mrs. Weir looked at the girl and smiled. It almost seemed as if she hesitated a moment; but if so, it was only for a moment. When she spoke it was with the kind, motherly manner of a woman who does what she thinks best for a child, and whose decisions are not to be resisted.

“My dear child,” she said, “there is no mystery, at least none but just this: your father’s illness has left him not quite master of his actions, as you see by his getting up and disappearing in the middle of the night. And we are very anxious that this should not

be known, as it would injure his business seriously, perhaps permanently, if his clients got wind of it. Can't you understand this?"

The explanation was a plausible one, at any rate; and from any one but the woman she suspected Bab would probably have received it as a sufficient one. As it was, she could only listen, as she could not attempt to disprove it. Mrs. Weir went on:

"I want you to go back to your sisters as soon as the morning comes. You may rely upon our finding him, and bringing him back, and keeping better guard for the future."

"But," objected Bab, "if he was not quite right in his mind, how was it that he was not better guarded before?"

Mrs. Weir paused for an instant before replying. Then she said:

"He is very touchy, very suspicious, and difficult to manage. I suppose we underrated the difficulties we should have. He used to watch us to see that we did not appear to watch him. At any rate," she went on rather impatiently, "your brother is satisfied that I have done my best. Why should not you be?"

Bab hardly knew herself why it was. Everything this woman did in connection with herself, her sisters, or her father, seemed to be done with the best possible motives. But yet it was all vitiated by the absolute knowledge Bab had that there was a mystery somewhere.

"Well," said the young girl suddenly, "I won't ask you any more questions, Mrs. Weir, you will answer me just this one. Who—is—Mr.—Brown?"

She shot out the words deliberately, one by one, with the emphasis of one who feels that she is plucking at the very heart of a mystery. Mrs. Weir looked at her steadily.

"I have a good mind to tell you," said she simply.

"Then why don't you?"

"Because I think it better for you not to know," answered Mrs. Weir in such a straightforward and honest manner that Bab was for the moment silenced.

"And in the mean time," went on Mrs. Weir imperturbably, "I will just tell you this, that you had better be civil to him, even if it is a little difficult. For he is the sort of man who may be dangerous if he is offended."

Bab listened in perplexity mingled with indignation.

"And Tryphena," she began, "is Tryphena to be encouraged to flirt with this—this adventurer?"

Mrs. Weir paused an instant before she answered with cutting emphasis:

"You and your sisters want very little encouragement to flirt with anybody. However, if you think it is of any use, you can tell her *not*, decidedly *not* to encourage Mr. Brown."

And without another word, Mrs. Weir turned her back upon the girl, and shut herself into the dining-room.

Bab stood where she had been left, with a heavy heart and burning head. She felt unutterably desolate. Her whole world of ease and frivolous enjoyment seemed to be turning to dust and ashes, together with the old peaceful household routine which had existed before Mrs. Weir's coming.

As for the two cardinal misfortunes which had befallen her, each was so great that they seemed to neutralize each other, and she could only say to herself that Bradley Ingledew had got a wife, and that her father had gone away, nobody knew why or where, without being able to feel the full force of either blow.

She stood for some time as if stunned, looking at the door of the dining-room and asking herself whether it would be of any use for her to make one more attack upon the clever adventuress in whose hands they all seemed to be puppets, dancing to any tune she chose to play.

And while she still stood hesitating, the front door was opened by a latch-key, and Edgar, paler than ever, more haggard, more wild of eye and of manner, crept softly in.

There was no light in the hall, except the faint morning rays which were now struggling in through the windows darkened by the portico. Edgar could just see that there was a woman's figure before him. It cut Bab to the heart, with a fresh sense of isolation, to note the tone of affection in his voice as he asked:

“Mrs. Weir, is that you?”

And instantly there flashed into the young girl's mind a host of new suspicions. For Bab was quick to recognize in her half-brother's voice the tender tones of a lover.

Before she could speak he had found out his mistake, and was evidently very angry with himself for having made it, and with her for being the innocent cause of it.

“What are you doing down here? Why aren’t you in bed,” asked he sharply.

Now there had never been much sympathy between Edgar and his half-sisters. To begin with, there was too much distance between the child of the first marriage of Mr. Frewen and the children of the second for them to feel that they belonged to one family. For Edgar was two and thirty, and was even older than his age; and he knew too much about the undisciplined ways of the girls, which he was at the same time powerless to correct, to be ever on any other than snapping terms with them.

For the first time, as she listened to her brother’s “giving himself away,” as she put it to herself, there came into Bab’s heart a new feeling that he was after all of the same flesh and blood as themselves, since he too was capable of an attachment at least as unlucky as any of theirs.

So instead of retorting in the tone he had himself used, she said quite gently:

“Oh, Edgar, don’t snub me! I’m just as unhappy as you can be!”

There was a moment’s pause; then Edgar struck a light, and peered in his half-sister’s face.

“By Jove, she’s right! Poor little soul!” muttered he as he blew it out again.

“Look here,” she went on in a whisper, “you needn’t mind my knowing—what I’ve found out——”

“Why, what’s that?” asked he as sharply as ever. But Bab was not to be suppressed.

“That you’re in love with Mrs. Weir——”

“Hush. For Heaven’s sake hold your tongue,”



hissed he, seizing her arm. "If she were to know, if she were to guess, she'd never speak to me again."

Fortunately, Edgar could not see the scornful curl in his sister's lip. She was saying to herself how blind men were, and wondering how Edgar, who thought himself so clever, could be deceived by an artful woman so easily. But she knew better than to drop a hint of this.

"Come up to the drawing-room," said she; "I want to speak to you."

But he hesitated.

"I must see—I must consult—" he began.

Bab cut him short.

"You will have plenty of time for that," said she rather scornfully in spite of herself. "I am going back to Teddington by the first train in the morning."

"Ah, that's right, that's right. Better to be out of the way of——"

He stopped short, aware that he had already said too much, encouraged by the new sort of confidence which had sprang up between them.

"Oh, don't be afraid," said Bab ironically, as she led the way upstairs. "I'm not going to make any more attempts to learn this precious secret of yours and Mrs. Weir's. But I should like to know whether you have seen anything of a person who calls himself Mr. Brown, a friend of Mrs. Weir's, who has been here, had a stormy scene with Mrs. Weir, and who is now hanging about The Cottage, and making up to Tryphena?"

Edgar had heard of him, evidently. At the mention of the "stormy scene" he frowned.

“Making up to Tryphena, is he?” he repeated with evident pleasure at the suggestion.

“Well, he is and he isn’t. I don’t think that it is more than a flirtation on *his* side, at all events. His looks seem all to be for Mrs. Weir, when she’s about, even when his words are addressed to Phena.”

It was clear that Edgar’s jealousy was roused, which was the consummation Bab desired to bring about. He turned the tables, however, in his reply, which was uttered in a very cross tone:

“Well, you girls have only yourselves to thank if you get entangled in flirtations with undesirable persons. Look at the example you and Molly set the child. You’ll all come to grief some of these days; and there’ll be nobody to blame but yourselves. You go flirting about with anybody and everybody, and——”

To his utter astonishment, Bab, self-possessed, dignified Bab, burst into tears.

“Don’t, oh, don’t! I can’t bear it now, I can’t, I can’t!”

And for the first time since her misfortune of the night before, Bab gave way, and fell sobbing into the nearest chair. Edgar was filled with alarm. A horrible suspicion that his sister had come to some unheard-of harm already came into his mind as he watched her. In the gray light of the morning the world seemed full of unutterable wretchedness for them all. There was real solicitude in his voice as he bent over her and asked:

“My dear girl, what’s the matter? Come, what is it?”

Bab started up, and stared at him with haggard eyes.

“Oh, the matter is that you’re right, quite right! I’ve come to grief already and Molly’s coming. And—and (hysterically sobbing)—and—and so you’d better punch Mr. Brown’s head, and save Tryphena if you can.”

Never guessing the amount of girlish exaggeration there was in the girl’s wild words, Edgar was horror-struck. Perceiving this, Bab presently went on in a calmer, but still reckless tone:

“Molly’s going to marry Sir Walter Hay, and you can’t prevent her, and nobody can: I expect she will have left The Cottage by the time I get back. And I—I—I’m never going to flirt again, or care for anybody, or anything. Bradley—Bradley Ingledew—is married! That’s why he used to come sometimes, and then stay away, of course. I found it out last night!”

“Ingledew married! By Jove!” exclaimed Edgar, somewhat relieved by the tone of her last speech. “Who is he married to? And when did it come off?”

“I don’t know when,” said Bab, shaking her head mournfully. “And I don’t know what her real name is. But she’s an actress, and she calls herself Minnie Haarlem.”

The start, the bound Edgar gave at the name nearly took his sister’s breath away.

“What!” he almost shouted. “Ingledew married to Minnie Haar—” Then he stopped short with a hard laugh: “No, it is impossible! He *said* he was married, but it isn’t true.”

Bab was staring at him in astonishment.

"It was she who told me!" she said plaintively.

"Well, don't have anything more to do with him, my dear girl. And don't come in that woman's way again," said Edgar kindly. "But go and get some breakfast—some of them must be about the house now—and I'll find you out a train to Teddington, and see you off myself. And mind, you warn those two silly sisters of yours to be good girls, and not to bring any more misfortunes upon themselves than—than they will get without any effort of theirs!"

His tone was so solemn, so full of prophecy of coming evil, that Bab shivered, and did not dare ask him any more questions.

Indeed she hardly had a question ready.

For in her mind, as she tried to eat a hurried breakfast, as she drove to the station with Edgar, as she sat in the train when she had bidden him good-by, there rang always the one question: Could it be that Bradley was not married after all?

For the poor little fictions with which she had amused herself were torn to ribbons now: she knew that she loved Bradley with all her heart.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

LONG before Bab arrived at Teddington, Tryphena was already preparing to go on the water with Mr. Brown.

He had proposed on the previous evening that he should row her up the river as far as Sunbury, and she had readily consented. The morning being fine, sunny, and warm, therefore, they were to be on the water soon after twelve; and when Bab arrived soon after eleven she found her youngest sister already in her serge skirt and coat, cream silk shirt and sailor hat, waiting on the lawn.

"Bab!" cried Tryphena, starting up from the chair in which she had been lounging, "where have you been all night? Molly said you'd gone up to town with Mrs. Weir, but I saw you slip out of the house before her, and—and—and I was frightened! And how white you look! What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Bab shortly. "I'm always white. I don't like red-faced people!"

"Well, I don't care for ghosts!" retorted Tryphena, in whose cheeks there was always a healthy color. "You'll have a nice time of it with Miss Roscoe. She's been nag, nag, nagging at us on your account ever since we got up. And as for Mrs. Weir, why, Miss Roscoe's latest craze is to think papa isn't ill at all, but that Mrs. Weir is keeping

him shut up against his will, like a Jew in a thirteenth-century castle, for purposes of torture! And she says she should never be surprised if he were to turn up down here—the poor old governor! Just fancy!—having escaped from her clutches by the skin of his teeth!”

Tryphena laughed heartily at her own words; but Bab received them in solemn silence, and with a frightened expression in her eyes. This uncanny suggestion of Miss Roscoe's chimed in oddly with what she knew about her father's mysterious disappearance.

“What—what are you dressed so early for? And why have you taken the trouble to make yourself look decent for once?” she asked, not caring to let Tryphena into the secret of her own fears.

“Oh, I'm going on the water,” answered the younger sister, with a sudden change to a smiling face.

“Who are you going with? Mr. Brown?”

Tryphena nodded.

“Well, you mustn't. I've just had the most awful lecture—lesson,” said Bab, with a catch in her breath. “We've all got to be very good, and not go out on the river or anywhere without a chaperon for the future,” said Bab quickly.

Tryphena stared. Then she whistled.

“And you're not to whistle. You're not to do anything loud or vulgar, or unlike other people, any more. None of us are.”

At last, after a long pause, during which she had scanned her sister's features narrowly, and found no

trace of an inclination to smile, Tryphena burst into a roar of laughter.

“Oh, I do like that! It’s beautiful, it really is, from you too!”

Suddenly into Bab’s tired eyes there came two great tears.

“I mean it this time,” she said, with a piteous break in her voice. “I’ve reformed myself, and you’ve got to reform too.”

As she paused, to get control of her voice again, Tryphena asked sarcastically:

“And Molly? Are you going to get her to reform too?”

Bab, who was wiping her eyes, nodded in silence.

“Well, I wish you joy of the attempt, that’s all. Just see if you’ll get her to stay at home just because you say she must!”

“At any rate you’ve got to,” retorted Bab severely. “Edgar says so.”

“Who cares for Edgar?”

“Well, Mrs. Weir herself told me to tell you not to encourage Mr. Brown.”

“Mrs. Weir! I don’t believe it! She heard him asking me to go last night, and she didn’t say anything. So there!”

Bab sighed and turned away. She was too unhappy to argue very long or very strongly.

“I’ve warned you. I’ve given you the messages that were given me,” she said shortly, as she walked away toward the house in search of Molly, whom she had not yet seen.

When Mr. Brown made his appearance, rowing

easily down the stream from Kingston, where he put his boat up, Tryphena was standing close to the bank, looking very fresh, and smiling, and handsome under her Japanese paper sunshade.

“Do you know,” she called out, before he had drawn up to the bank, “that I’ve been told I’m not to come out with you?”

“But you don’t mean to take any notice of that command, of course,” said Mr. Brown, looking up under his straw hat at the majestic figure of the young girl, as she stood smiling from the bank.

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you have impressed upon me that you never do what you are told to do.”

“Oh, but this time it’s different,” said Tryphena. “The message was sent from Mrs. Weir. At least so Bab says.”

“Well, I shouldn’t believe Bab. Unless, of course, you want to,” said Mr. Brown.

“Of course I don’t want to, but——”

“Then come along. I’ll make it right with Mrs. Weir, trust me.”

Now it was evident that these last words set Tryphena thinking. She looked at Mr. Brown askance as he made fast the boat to the post by the bank, and held out his hand to help her down. She hesitated.

Mr. Brown looked up. Such a pretty picture as she made, in her quiet, well-chosen dress, against the soft background of green grass and gently stirring trees, he thought he had never seen. He drew back the hand he had been holding out to her, sat



down again in the boat, and clasped his knees with his hands.

A look of disappointment flashed across the girl's candid face.

"Aren't you going to take me?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, if you want to come. I can't take you against your will, you know. And I don't even want you against your inclination."

After an instant's pause, Tryphena came a step nearer.

"I don't believe Mrs. Weir ever said it," she said defiantly.

Mr. Brown waited until she had accepted his assistance, and seated herself in the boat, and then he said quietly :

"And if she did say it, what then?"

Tryphena looked him frankly in the face.

"If Mrs. Weir told me not to go out with you, not to go out with any one, I shouldn't go," said she simply.

"Why?"

"Because—because I'm fond of her."

Mr. Brown looked at her as she made this pretty, childish answer; and an expression something like tenderness came into his rather hard face.

"That's a very illogical answer, child," said he at last. "But—for a child, a very good one, in fact the best."

"Why do you call me a child?" said Tryphena, surprised, and rather inclined to be offended.

"Why, because your childishness, no, childlikeness, was suddenly borne in upon me very strongly,"

he answered gently, as he began to pull the boat, with a long, steady stroke, up the river, keeping close under the bank, with its rushes and tall green grasses.

“I don’t understand how.”

“Why try to understand? Be a child, understanding nothing, as long as you can; as long as you have Mrs. Weir to go to for advice.”

A shadow came in an instant over the young girl’s open face. She was ashamed to find that she felt something like a pang of jealousy at his praise of Mrs. Weir.

“You have known her a long time?” she asked curiously, quite unconscious how much her innocent face betrayed.

“It is a very long time since I met her first,” replied Mr. Brown with caution.

“You like her very much?”

“I admire her enormously. In some respects she is a grand woman. In others, well, not so grand.”

“Do you like her better than any woman you have ever met?” asked Tryphena inquisitively. “Because if you do, you know, why you’re quite right.”

Mr. Brown looked as if he had hard work in restraining a smile. But he answered with perfect gravity:

“I can’t answer a question like that off-hand. It requires reflection. I should have to find out, first, whether, if I told you all the secrets of my heart, you would be equally candid about yours.”

“Oh, I haven’t got any secrets of the heart. The other girls say I haven’t any heart.”

“Perhaps it hasn’t had time to grow?” suggested Mr. Brown.

Tryphena looked at him with shrewd eyes. Mr. Brown thought her fresh young face, in the soft glow from the Japanese sunshade, rather intoxicating.

“That means again that I’m a child,” said she with deliberation. “But——”

“Please to pull a little with your left hand, or we shall find ourselves embedded in the rushes.”

“All right. But don’t call me a child again, or else I shall get excited, and steer straight into something.”

“But there was really nothing to get excited about that time. We were talking about the heart.”

“Oh, yes, I know. And you said I was too young to have one. But that’s absurd. Look at Molly and Bab. They’ve been in love fifteen or twenty times at least; and neither of them’s twenty.”

“You’re certainly a long way behind then, if, as you say, you’ve never been in love at all.”

“I didn’t say that—at least, did I?” said Tryphena, blushing, and threatening again, in her confusion, to go back into the rushes.

“You certainly implied it, if you didn’t say it in so many words.”

“Ah, well, I don’t mean to fall in love at all, ever. That’s *my* secret of the heart. I’ve seen too much of it—with Bab and Molly. I know they’ll both end by marrying badly and being miserable all their lives.”

“So you mean to retrieve the family honor by marrying well, and being happy ever afterward?”

Tryphena looked horror-struck. The boat went straight into the bank this time and stuck there.

"Now you've done it!" murmured Mr. Brown softly, as he unshipped one oar and lay on the other to listen to her.

"I marry well?" cried Tryphena with ineffable disgust, "marry some horrid rich man for the sake of his money, and be awfully proper for the rest of my life? No, not exactly!"

"Are all rich men horrid then?"

"Why yes, you know they are. I suppose you've heard," she went on with flashing eyes, "that they want me to marry Mr. Smee, because he's rich; and they've put you up to advising it too."

"Indeed they haven't put me up to anything of the sort. Though indeed Mr. Smee seems a rather nice fellow. I met him once. Rather good-looking, too, I thought."

"I think he's atrocious. And you'll please not to talk about him any more."

"Well, I won't, of course, if you don't wish it," agreed Mr. Brown meekly, as he pushed the boat once more into deep water and went on rowing. "But at the same time, without suggesting that a girl should marry *for* money, there is no doubt that it is better if she can manage to fix her affections on a gentleman who possesses the article."

"Oh, of course," assented Tryphena indifferently.

"For a marriage without any money at all, or any money to speak of, is wretched, and ought to be impossible."

"Very likely," assented Tryphena, who was trying

to steer carefully, and whose face was puckered into a delightful expression of careworn gravity.

“Now if, for instance, a penniless adventurer like myself, with a bad character into the bargain, were to fall in love with a girl, and induce her to marry him, what could be more wretched for both of us?”

Tryphena was silent, apparently she did not know what could be more wretched. Then, as he seemed to wait for an answer of some sort, she nodded gravely. He seemed just a little surprised at this.

“I suppose you knew I was poor?” he suggested after a pause.

“I guessed it,” answered Tryphena sympathetically.

“How?”

Tryphena blushed a little. She did not like to tell him the sort of remarks her elder sisters had exchanged about his clothes.

“Oh—oh!” she began vaguely, “anybody that’s nice is always poor.”

Mr. Brown smiled.

“Thank you,” he said. “But may I ask why you seem also to take it for granted that my character was not of the best?”

Tryphena blushed more deeply still. She seemed, Mr. Brown thought, to grow handsomer every moment. The blazing heat of the noonday sun, tempered by the Japanese sunshade, became her opulent style of beauty.

“Did I seem to take it for granted?” she said rather prettily, remembering, as she did, the family verdict that he must be “a foreign adventurer.” “It

was only that—that of course I didn't know, you know; and when you said your character was bad, I supposed you ought to know, you know."

"And now that I've told you, aren't you afraid of me?"

Tryphena glanced up at him with a shy smile, and shook her head.

"No," she said sweetly. "If you were a bad character in a bad way, Mrs. Weir wouldn't have let you come and talk to us."

Mr. Brown's smile grew very broad at this.

"You are consistent," said he. "Your standard is always—Mrs. Weir."

"Can't help that," rejoined Tryphena, with a shrug of the shoulders, as the boat passed into the cool shade of the trees as they drew near to Kingston bridge.

Then the talk dropped for a little while, giving place to a silence in which the ideas started by the conversation began to work. And as they glided on, sometimes in the sunshine, sometimes in the shade, with a word exchanged here, and a smile there, they gradually became more and more clearly conscious that this companionship was a perfect thing. And as the day waned again, and they came back in the cool of the late afternoon, in the shade of a gathering thunder cloud, their hearts, and especially that of the man, grew heavy with the sense that the time for parting was approaching and with the knowledge that the evening would seem long.

When he had drawn the boat up to the lawn, and Tryphena had risen to her feet to get out, Mr. Brown

held her hand for a moment in his, with an expression on his face which startled the girl.

“And now good-by,” said he abruptly, in a low voice.

“But—aren’t you coming in? To see Bab and Molly? Just for a minute?” asked Tryphena, almost in dismay.

“No,” said he shortly. “I won’t go in. I have to go away—to-night. I don’t suppose I shall ever see you again.”

Tryphena could hardly repress a cry of dismay and pain.

“And if,” he went on, without looking into her face, though he still held her hand, “if, when you hear more about me, as you will do, you are disgusted at the thought that you ever let me touch your hand, remember that every man has two natures, and that the man who had the privilege of spending this happy day with you was not the man whom you may some day have to curse. Good-by.”

Frightened, trembling, she had got out of the boat, and was watching him, wide-eyed, from the bank.

But he raised his hat without looking up, and began to pull the oars vigorously without another glance at her.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

TRYPHENA found Miss Roscoe, and Molly, and Bab, and the makeweight, and one or two more of "Edgar's friends," on the lawn.

Both the girls were languid and rather disagreeable, as they had wanted to have a long chat about the events of the preceding evening; and a long succession of visitors, beginning in the morning just as Tryphena went off, had prevented their exchanging a dozen words on the subjects nearest their hearts.

All that Molly had gathered from Bab, so far, was that she had interviewed Sam, and that Bradley Ingledew had a wife.

Never had they found it so difficult to entertain their friends; never had those friends been so long-suffering and so meek.

Of course the reason of this extreme devotion lay in the curiosity of the makeweight and his companions about the hurried visit of Bab's to Bradley's houseboat on the preceding evening. The little scene between her and Minnie Haarlem in which that visit had culminated had taken place so quickly, the ladies had been so subdued, that very little was known about the encounter. But still there were rumors, and these rumors were interesting; so the makeweight and the rest of them wanted to know in what condition of mind they should find Miss Bab.



"Hallo, Tryphena, didn't you ask Mr. Brown to come up and have some claret-cup?" asked Molly, when her younger sister came slowly, with a very long face, up the lawn toward the group.

"Of course I did. But he wouldn't come," said Tryphena, nodding to Lindo, and giving a hand to one of the others. "He's got to meet a friend at Kingston."

"We know that friend," said the makeweight. "He didn't want to have only a share of your conversation, Miss Tryphena, when he's had it all to himself all day."

"Shut up," said Tryphena with ferocity.

And thus gracefully adjured, Lindo obeyed.

Bab sighed conspicuously. The conversation, which had been intermittent throughout the afternoon, languished altogether, and the visitors soon made excuses to retire, without having discovered anything material. Bab was too clever even to have mentioned Bradley's name.

When they had all gone, Bab sprang up from her chair suddenly.

"I know what's the matter! I know why it's been so dull!" she cried energetically. "It's because of Sam. We do miss old Sam. He was our real chaperon, Sam. Without him we're nothing but a lot of disorderly girls. He gave a tone of propriety, bearable propriety to us all and to everything. Oh, dear old Sam! Poor old Sam."

Molly listened with a white face. Then, quite suddenly, she jumped up from her seat and ran indoors.

And she locked herself in her own room, and refused either to come out or to let any one come in, all that evening.

Unable to get that long-desired talk with Molly, therefore, Bab was reduced to holding communion with Tryphena. When the household retired for the night, Bab came into her younger sister's bedroom. Down at The Cottage each girl had a separate tiny bedroom.

Neither girl was in good enough spirits to talk, however; they brushed their hair in almost mute companionship, looking out at the waving trees, and at the little bit of the lawn which could be seen from Tryphena's window.

Presently Bab got up from her chair with a curious expression of face, and crept softly to the open window. Attracted by her manner, Tryphena followed her. Bab turned for a moment, and put her finger to her lips.

"There's somebody among the trees. A man!" whispered Tryphena in alarm. "Who is it, Bab?"

Bab's hand shook as she laid it on her sister's arm.

"It's—it's papa!" she whispered back, stopping Tryphena's attempt at a cry by placing her hand upon her mouth. "Be quiet. I must go downstairs and let him in. He wants to come in!"

But before she could carry out her intention, before she could so much as move from the window, there was a fierce cry, scarcely so much like the cry of a man as that of a wild beast, and the next moment the frightened girls saw not one man, but two under the trees.

They were fighting, struggling, tearing at one another.

“What is it? What is it? Who is the other man?” cried Bab, bewildered, horror-struck.

For in Tryphena’s face there was a look of appalled recognition.

“Sh—sh!” whispered she in a strangled voice.

And then words came to their ears, words choked as they were uttered, fierce, terrible, forced up, one by one, with panting breath, out of a parched throat to a faltering tongue.

“You — have ruined me — broken me. Don’t— don’t kill me too!”

“Who said that?” cried Bab hoarsely.

“Papa!” cried Tryphena, scarcely able to utter the word.

There was another struggle, a cry, and one of the men fell, flung down like a heap of old clothes by the other.

Then there was silence.

Shaking with horror, staggering with fear, the two girls went downstairs. But as they went Bab whispered:

“Who was the other man? Was it Mr. Brown?”

For answer Tryphena, shivering, bent her head in assent.

“And which of them is lying there?”

“I don’t know,” sobbed Tryphena.

Clinging to each other, the girls unfastened the door, and went out into the garden.

There in the shadow of the trees, lying across the broad path by the yew hedge, was the prostrate, motionless body of a man.

It was their father.

## CHAPTER XXV.

It was a moonlit night, but under the trees, where Mr. Frewen lay, there was hardly enough light to see the motionless human form.

Bab and Tryphena went down on their knees on the gravel, and Tryphena, with her strong young arms, raised her father, and supported his head against her shoulder.

“He isn’t dead, Bab. His heart’s beating! Call somebody; send for a doctor. Quick!”

But Bab was behaving very strangely, almost as if she had believed herself to be moving in a dream. Instead of following her sister’s very natural suggestion, she was still sitting on the ground, staring into her father’s face, with an expression which Tryphena afterward described as “moonstruck.”

“No, he isn’t dead,” Bab said at last, in as leisurely a manner as if she had been assisting at the most ordinary occurrence in the world. “And as for sending for a doctor, why, we won’t do that unless we find he really wants one. People would think this such a queer thing, don’t you see!”

Tryphena, who had reasons of her own for not desiring a very searching examination made into the cause of her father’s accident, acquiesced by silence.

“I’ll fetch some water,” said Bab.

And she got up and went into the house, coming

into violent contact, as she did so, with the person of Miss Roscoe, who had by this time been roused from sleep by the disturbance. She looked very untidy, Bab thought in disgust. Bab would never have been caught, even by an earthquake or an alarm of fire, otherwise than in a picturesque and presentable "get-up."

"What is it? What's the matter? What's all the noise about?" asked Miss Roscoe querulously. "And what do you girls mean by running in and out of the house, banging doors and waking everybody up, and shouting and screaming, in the middle of the night?"

And she wound a wisp of hair round her right ear, and fastened another button of her red flannel dressing-gown, "of course," as Bab told Molly afterward, "into the wrong buttonhole!"

"Papa has come," answered Bab coolly.

And leaving the astonished Miss Roscoe to digest and to profit by this piece of information as best she might, Bab passed her, and went in search of water and brandy.

When she got back, she found Mr. Frewen already on his feet again, leaning on the arm of Tryphena, and apparently rather bored by the fulsome attentions of Miss Roscoe on the other side. He was snappish, too, and remarked that he wasn't a cripple, and didn't want two arms to help him along.

On the whole, though he was rather shaky, and not in full command of his voice, he seemed to be little the worse for his encounter with the man who had disappeared.

"How did it happen? What made you fall down,

dear Mr. Frewen?" asked Miss Roscoe, in a tone which hardly stopped short of tenderness. "How was it you came so late? Were you trying to make us hear and did you then trip over something?"

"Bless the woman, no," answered the ungrateful old gentleman testily. "I—I was set upon by a scoundrel, who half-choked me! Let me get indoors, for goodness' sake. I don't want to stand out here all night, catching my death of cold!"

And he made haste to get to the house, an attempt in which he had been impeded by the well-meaning Miss Roscoe, casting, as he did so, more than one anxious and startled glance around him.

"A scoundrel! Set upon by a scoundrel!" echoed Miss Roscoe in dismay. "Here! In your very garden!"

There is no knowing to what lengths of hysterical horror Miss Roscoe would have gone if Bab had not hastened to convey to her, by a series of elaborate winks and nods and touches of the head, an implied opinion that Mr. Frewen might have been suffering from a delusion consequent upon his illness.

After this, the excitable lady suffered Mr. Frewen to make his way into the house without further hindrance.

The girls led their father into the dining-room; but he glanced nervously toward the window and expressed a wish to sleep upstairs. And on the way up he condescended to give Bab, who accompanied him, some sort of explanation, at the same time exacting, in return, accurate information as to what she had seen of the encounter.

“I was feeling a little better to-day,” he said. “And the idea came into my head that I should get all right more quickly if I could get down here among you girls again. So I came.”

Bab made no remark as to the singular hour he had chosen for his arrival. Nor did she tell him that he seemed stronger than she had expected to find him, after so long an illness. In Bab’s shrewd little mind some strange ideas were working; until they were ripe, she was quiet, very quiet. He then asked her a direct question:

“Did you girls see the attack made upon me?”

“Not very clearly, papa. We saw a struggle, scuffle, you and another man swaying about together on the path. And then, suddenly, we saw you lying on the ground.”

“And the rascal who attacked me—would you know him again? Could you swear to him if he were caught?”

“I couldn’t certainly.”

“And could Tryphena, do you think?”

Bab hesitated. She had the strongest reason for believing that her younger sister could do so; but she knew also that Tryphena would be a most unwilling witness. Mr. Frewen, however, went on after a pause, without waiting for her answer.

“At any rate, I know the man. A rascal, a black-mailer, a liar of the first water! He has nearly been the death of me this time. But I’ll be even with him; I’ll make him smart for this yet!”

And, in a state of great agitation, Mr. Frewen began to pace up and down the bedroom into which he

had been shown, staggering a little indeed, as might have been expected, but evincing an amount of animosity against his assailant which gave him energy to conquer his bodily weakness.

As he turned in his walk, he came face to face with his youngest daughter, who was standing at the door of the room, watching him with puzzled eyes. He stopped short.

“Ah! Tryphena, now did you see the man attack me? Would you know him again?” said Mr. Frewen quickly.

Tryphena, who had lost her beautiful color, and whose bonny face wore an air of undisguised misery, did not answer. She stared at her father as he asked the question, then glanced quickly at Bab, and, without a word, slipped away into the darkness of the corridor outside.

At this moment the officious Miss Roscoe was heard imploring Tryphena to return to her father, and not neglect him when he was ill. Mr. Frewen, who seemed to be in a highly irritable frame of mind, shut the door and turned to Bab.

“Go,” said he imperiously. “You can bring me up the brandy, in case I want it in the night. And you can put a handbell on the table if you like. But tell that woman not to come near me, because I can’t stand being fussed over. I’m perfectly well; never was better in my life. And I don’t want any doctors, nor nurses, nor anything. Can’t stand ’em. Won’t have ’em. Make her understand. And now you may kiss me, and go to bed. And if I want anything I can call out.”



Bab gave his dry cheek a dutiful peck, as she was told, and withdrew at once. Just as she was leaving the room he said:

“See that the house is properly secured before you go to bed. That ruffian wouldn't stick at anything, I believe. See that the windows are properly fastened, and the doors locked.”

“All right, papa,” said Bab dutifully, noting once more her father's nervous and anxious glances about him as she went out.

In the corridor she met Molly, whose bedroom was on the river-side of the house. She had heard nothing of the disturbance, but had been roused from sleep by Tryphena, who had burst in upon her with a rambling account of Mr. Frewen's arrival and of Miss Roscoe's hysterics.

“Bab!” said she in a whisper.

Bab put her finger rather mysteriously on her lip, and followed her elder sister to the latter's little room.

“Tell me all about it, Bab,” said Molly. “I couldn't make head or tail of what Tryphena told me. She said papa had had a struggle with a man, outside, in the garden! Is it true?”

Bab nodded.

“She didn't tell you who the man was, I suppose?”

“No,” said Molly. “Who was it?”

“Her friend, Mr. Brown. And papa says he is a scoundrel, and a blackmailer, and everything that's dreadful. There!”

Molly whistled.

“I thought our love affairs would take some beat-

ing," remarked she at last. "But the little 'un's been one too many for us!"

Bab sighed.

"Don't talk slang to-night, Molly," she said plaintively. "It's too awful for that. For you've got a lot more to hear. You've got to hear about me!"

Molly nodded, and curled herself luxuriously on her bed. There is something attractive and pleasureable about a love-story, even when it is checkered with woe.

"Now I'm ready, dear," said she soothingly. "Tell me all about it."

"Well, I'll begin at the beginning," replied Bab with a long sigh. "And the beginning is about you."

"Me?"

"Yes. It all began with our seeing Sam go past with that other girl. I was disgusted. I shouldn't have thought it of Sam!"

But Molly interrupted her here by a very forced laugh.

"Oh, you needn't have troubled your head about that. I didn't. Why shouldn't he take another girl out, if he likes to?"

Bab pursed her lips.

"It's all very well to talk like that, Molly, but I know you feel it as much as I do. He had no business to go flaunting this other girl in our faces. If she had been one of the girls who don't count, one of the girls who always smile and look pleased at everything, it wouldn't have mattered. But she had nice boots, and her hair was properly done, and I could tell in a moment, from just that glance I had at her,

that she was one of those girls who say just the right thing to a man, and console him for his troubles with another girl by letting him talk about them, till the old love gets merged in the new! Oh, *I* know!"

It might almost have been thought that Bab had tried her hand at this sort of consolation herself, so well did she describe it. But Molly affected not to care.

"Well, why not?" said she, moving restlessly, and rearranging the long hanging cuffs of her white cambric dressing-gown. "I'm sure I hope with all my heart that she's a really nice girl, and that—that—Bab, don't talk about Sam any more!"

She was on the point of breaking down. Bab, who had been rendered by her own misfortune in love the more anxious that her sisters should be less unlucky, placed herself beside Molly, and put one hand round her shoulder.

"Molly," she said in a voice full of feeling, "don't go and make a horrid, awful mistake. Don't go and marry the wrong man, and then be miserable all your life after because you didn't have the sense to take the right one! Don't, don't—oh, Molly, do—o—on't!"

And Bab ended abruptly with a snivel. But Molly was cross, and fierce, and scornful, and determined, all at the same time. She would not submit to her sister's caress, but sat upright and blinked ferociously to keep the tears back.

"I shouldn't have thought, Bab," she said, unable to speak at all except at a white heat, "that you would have wished me to be so mean-spirited as to throw over the man who does care about me, who

says I'm all the world to him, just for this fellow who doesn't care a pin!"

"Oh, but I believe he does all the time!" interpolated Bab.

"Rubbish!" said Molly hotly. "Let him keep his girl with the nice boots! I wouldn't marry him if there were no other man in the world. You don't seem to understand, Bab, that I love Walter, love him with all my heart; and that he loves me with all his heart, and that if I were to throw him over, it would kill him! He says so."

Bab rashly uttered an exclamation expressive of strong incredulity.

"He *says* so!" said she.

Molly sprang off the bed, and stood in an attitude worthy of Lady Macbeth.

"And why should what he says not count, as well as what the other says?" she asked vaguely but with passion. "Go on with your own story, Bab, if you like; but I won't hear another word about mine. I've given my word to Walter, and I shall keep it, whatever anybody says!"

"Oh, all right," said Bab dismally. "After all it's more consistent, since Tryphena and I have made fools of ourselves, that you should do the same."

"Go on, go on with your story, if you have any to tell," said Molly, stamping her foot impatiently.

Bab sighed again, and obeyed.

"Well, I told Sam——"

"Sam, Sam—nothing but Sam!"

"Well, I must mention Sam when he comes in!" protested Bab. "I told him about this Mr. Brown,

and he said it was odd. And I asked him to take me up to town to tell papa about it, but he said he couldn't, because of this girl."

"Oh, never mind the girl!" said Molly angrily.

"That's the last time she comes in," replied Bab gravely. "Or Sam either."

Molly twisted her shoulders.

"So I ran back here, and put on a nice frock——"

"Of course you wouldn't forget that!" interpolated Molly.

"No fear!" retorted Bab coolly. "And I went off to Staines, to see if Bradley could help me to identify this Mr. Brown with Max Lowenstein."

Molly started.

"Lowenstein! Oh, I'd forgotten all about him! I suppose he *is* Mr. Brown."

"It looks like it," assented Bab. "Well, I got a boatman to row me over to the houseboat, and I saw at once that the woman I told you about, the one I saw Bradley with at the Haymarket, was there. And I felt quite sick, and wished I—I hadn't come. But there was no help for it then. I didn't show what I felt, at least I hope I didn't. I pretended not to notice anybody in particular, and I said I had a message, and that I wouldn't detain him. But oh, Molly, it was so hard just to take his hand, and get on the houseboat, and speak and look as if nothing had happened!"

"But nothing had happened—yet!" observed Molly with interest.

"Yes, it had, Molly. It was all over, for me. I didn't know, of course, what it was exactly that I

was to hear. But I had a feeling that—that it was all over.”

And Bab's voice, which had sunk to a pathetic whisper, faded quite away. It was Molly's turn to be sympathetic now.

“Poor—poor Bab!” she said softly.

Bab sobbed in silence.

“And was it he who told you?”

“No. Worse. She did! Oh, Molly, wasn't it awful! She met me, when I had spoken to Bradley, quite quietly, you know; I pretended not to notice anything, as I told you. But she met me, and said her stage name was Minnie Haarlem, but that her real name was—was—Ing—Ing—gledew! Oh, Molly!”

“And are you sure it's true?”

“Pretty sure. Bradley disappeared when she came up to me.”

Molly looked thoughtful.

“But after all, you know, Bab, you always said you didn't want to marry him, that you wouldn't go and get married and be tied down for a long time yet. So what difference does it make?”

There was a long pause. Then Bab said gravely:

“That's just what I can't make out myself, Molly. I didn't want to marry Bradley, and I always thought it was only the most harmless sort of flirtation; that it was pleasant to see him, and to dance with him, and to talk to him, and that was all. But, Molly, I was wrong. I can see it now. I—I—I feel I hate that woman for being his wife! I shall get over it, of course, but that's how I feel now. As if I hated her, and Bradley too!”

“Well, that’s right. You ought to hate him, for he’s behaved very badly.”

But Bab would not hear of this.

“No, it was as much my fault as his,” she said quickly. “When a girl says she is only going to amuse herself, a man takes her at her word. Molly, we’ve been badly brought up. That’s why all this has happened. Because we don’t behave just like other girls, they think there’s a good deal more harm in us than there is, and they treat us worse than we deserve. Mrs. Weir’s right. We ought to have learned to say ‘papa, potatoes, poetry, prunes, prism,’ and to tell lies, and darn stockings, like other girls. Then people would have respected us, and would have asked us to marry them in the proper way, and we should have grown fat and dowdy and fond of eating in the orthodox way, and have had a nap on Sunday afternoons! It isn’t too late now, Molly, perhaps! Will you try if I do?”

Molly hardly knew whether Bab was half in earnest, or wholly in earnest, or whether she was speaking altogether in fun. But she saw that it was costing Bab a great effort to speak in her usual flippant way, and she was heartily sorry for her.

“Don’t, Bab, don’t talk like that,” she said gently. “Look here, dear. You—you shall have my paste buttons, really, to keep, for the peach-colored blouse.”

These paste buttons had been Mrs. Frewen’s, and they had been given to Molly as the eldest daughter’s right, and had been coveted by Bab for years. This gift, therefore, meant something, and Molly made the offer with a solemn air.

But Bab shook her head.

"Thanks, dear, I'm past being consoled even by the buttons," she said in a rather husky and quavering voice. And she made a sudden plunge in the direction of the door. At the threshold she half-turned, so that Molly could hear her, without seeing much of her face. "I always thought," said she, "and everybody else thought, that I liked frocks better than anything else in the world, except peaches and new bread-and-butter. And now it's all—all crumpled away. I couldn't smile, really smile because I wanted to smile, this moment, if I were to be put into a hansom directed to Bond Street, with five ten-pound notes in my pocket!"

And Bab went quietly back to her own room, while Molly sat wondering whether to laugh or to cry at her sister's remarkable confession.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

It was quite early on the following morning, before breakfast in fact, when Tryphena slipped out of the house through one of the back windows, and made her way, in rather a stealthy and furtive fashion, choosing the shelter of such trees and bushes as grew between the house and the river, down to the water's edge.

She had had a bad night, for her, having been kept awake at least two hours, tormented by ugly suspicions and surmises about Mr. Brown. Try as she would to persuade herself that it had not been he whom she had seen struggling with her father, the evidence of her own eyes would not be rejected; and, puzzled and distressed, the young girl made her pillow wet with sorrowful tears.

She hardly knew whether to be relieved or miserable when, at about half-past seven in the morning, when she was dressing, she caught sight of Mr. Brown in his skiff, paddling about close under the opposite bank of the river.

One thing was certain: she must see him, speak to him, and ask him what that encounter meant.

When she reached the bank, however, a sudden shyness seized her. Mr. Brown had caught sight of her, and had instantly changed the course of his boat and was bringing it straight across the river to the

spot where she stood. And Tryphena felt, in an instant, that this ought to be enough for her. How could a ruffian who had set upon and beaten a respectable elderly gentleman, in the small hours of the morning, turn up in the sunlight, smiling and unashamed, with morning greetings for the respectable gentleman's daughter?

The thing was clearly impossible, and the supposition might be dismissed. And Tryphena heaved a deep sigh as she did dismiss it, and held out her hand frankly to Mr. Brown.

A little feeling of perplexity from her on the one hand, of shame at having harbored such suspicions on the other, made her greeting very subdued, and prettier than ever.

"I thought I was never to see you again," said she in a rather low voice.

Mr. Brown, who had hardly ever heard her speak in a low voice before, was charmed.

"I hope you're not sorry that I have changed my mind?"

Tryphena suddenly blushed. For as he looked up, the remembrance of the face she had seen in the struggle with her father in the night became suddenly vivid. She did not answer at once. Then there came into her mind what seemed to her a brilliant inspiration.

"Won't you come in and have breakfast with us?" she asked. "My father has come down; he came late last night. He's been ill, very ill, and he wants a lot of cheering up. So I'm sure he'll be glad to see you."

But over the dark face of Mr. Brown there had come suddenly a change. How great the change was Tryphena could not see, as she was standing on the bank above him, and he bent his head suddenly, so that his straw hat hid the greater part of his face. But there was a tone of sullen malignity in his voice as he answered her:

“Thanks. I am afraid I can’t allow myself that pleasure. I am going away——”

“But you said that last night!” cried Tryphena interrupting him quickly.

“It is true none the less,” he answered shortly. “I have an appointment in town to-day, an important appointment. And after that I shall be leaving England, at least for a time.”

Tryphena said nothing. She was conscious that a strange change had come over Mr. Brown since the day before, a change she could not exactly define, but which showed itself chiefly in abrupt alternations between gentleness and a sort of sullen resentment. He looked up at last, and their eyes met. Each looked away again at once, and neither spoke for a time. At last he said, with a rather forced laugh:

“You are thinking I need not have troubled you this morning, just to repeat what I said last night?”

“I was not thinking that,” answered she, simply. “I was thinking about something you said yesterday, about your having two natures.”

“I said every man had two natures,” corrected Mr. Brown.

“Yes. And I was wondering, just now, whether this nature, the one you are showing now, was the

one I might 'some day have to curse.' That's what you said, you know!"

Mr. Brown burst out into a roar of unconventionally loud laughter.

"Why should you have to curse me for the nature you see this morning?" he asked, his good-humor quite restored by her ingenuousness.

"Why, you are so very cross. You have been speaking as if it was a great effort even to look at me without frowning. And yet it was your own choice to speak to me at all, wasn't it? I didn't ask you to come across the river!"

"That is quite true. I am cross this morning. I apologize. I will take myself off."

He took up his oars, but he did not begin to row. He tilted his straw hat back a little, and gave a long look at her fresh, handsome face.

"Then good-by," said she.

"Wait a moment. Do you ever read fairy tales, Miss Tryphena?"

She looked at him with scorn.

"Fairy tales! Of course not!"

"But you did once."

"I did when I was a child, I suppose. But that," she went on emphatically, "was a long time ago."

"Well, we differ about that. At any rate you have heard of men who were haunted by a good and by an evil spirit, the good drawing them one way, the bad another?"

"Yes."

"You're my good spirit. But the evil one has got the best of it. Good-by!"

And before the astonished girl could recover breath to utter a word in reply, he had raised his hat and rowed away rapidly, without another look at her.

When he had gone a couple of hundred yards, however, he rested a moment on his oars, and looked at her. He seemed to hesitate, and it came into the girl's mind that he was waiting for a gesture, even a smile, of invitation, to bring him back.

But at that moment, as she looked at his face undistracted by the sound of his voice, the thought that he had indeed been her father's mysterious assailant of the night struck her again with full force, and with a shudder she turned away.

When half-way up the lawn she looked round.

Mr. Brown had disappeared.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

ON coming down to breakfast that morning, Bab found beside her plate a letter, addressed in a handwriting she had never seen. The blood flew to her face, however, for she knew intuitively that it was from Bradley Ingledew.

Mr. Frewen had, of course, not come down to breakfast, so there were only the eyes of the ladies upon her; but those eyes were eloquent.

Tryphena, who had not been let into her sister's secret, giggled.

"I thought you boasted that he never wrote to you, and that you never wrote to him!" she whispered.

Then Bab gave her a cold glance, and Molly frowned and winked her into silence.

Bab slipped the letter into her pocket, and did not open it until she was alone in the garden, when the meal was over. Her hands were cold and trembling as she tore the envelope. There was no beginning and no end to the note; it was the merest fragment of an epistle—a summons and nothing more.

"Be in the grounds at Hampton Court to-day at five, under the limes, by the little stream where we found the forget-me-nots."

Molly came up presently and wanted to know what the note said. Bab told her.

"You won't go, will you?" said Molly doubtfully.

“Yes, I shall,” said Bab with a little frown. “It makes no difference, as you said yourself.”

Now Molly had not exactly said that, and Bab knew she had not. But being in the position of the person in a glass-house, who cannot throw stones at another young woman who defies convention, Molly made no further protest. But she watched her sister with anxious eyes as the latter started on her walk to Hampton Court Palace that afternoon.

Full of anxiety and curiosity as she was, Bab was not the girl to make the mistake of arriving at the place of meeting too soon. When she sauntered along the broad terrace in front of the Palace, Bradley was already pacing the gardens, with a crimson face, full of anxiety lest she should not come.

She caught sight of him before he saw her, and a pang shot through her heart. How could she ever have deceived herself into thinking she did not care for him, when the first glimpse of his handsome, good-natured face between the trees set her heart beating quickly, and brought the tears very near her eyes, at the thought of the barrier between them?

When he did see her, he gave a perceptible start and it was evident that he had to put constraint upon himself to refrain from running to meet her. She, on her side, though she had been quite as eager for the meeting as he a moment before, experienced a sudden reluctance, a strange new sensation of shyness which put leaden weights upon her feet.

And she found herself wishing he did not look so nice, so much better dressed than any other man ever looked; that his blue eyes would not look at her in the

way they did; that very movement as he walked toward her did not bring so many memories of the time that had passed. He wore a light gray suit, and a brown hat, and a scarf of the very pale pearl-gray she loved, and she thought that he had never looked so good-looking before.

And she wondered how he thought she was looking, and wished she had put on black instead of mouse-color, as it would have made her look more dignified.

The meeting by the fountain was the quietest in the world. She stopped and looked at the gold-fish, waiting for him to come up to her; and when he did so, she stood looking down at the fish and said nothing.

She saw that the hand that he put up to twist his mustache was trembling. Then she looked up coldly.

“Well?” said she, slightly raising her eyebrows.

He was pitifully nervous and humble. He breathed quite hard as he spoke.

“I was afraid you—you would not come!” said he hoarsely.

And she gave a swift glance at the blue eyes which were generally so full of laughter, and felt, oh, so sorry for him!

“I thought it best to come,” she said with dignity. “It was only fair to hear what you had to say.”

“I’ve nothing to say,” said Bradley dismally. “Nothing but what you know.”

“What you did not mean me to know,” added Bab, severely.



“Bab, Bab, don't be unkind! I didn't think it would do any harm to hold my tongue about it, and—and it did make a difference, did make things jollier, easier, for you not to know, now didn't it?”

“It makes things decidedly less jolly now!” said Bab tartly. “What right had you to pass yourself off as an unmarried man, when you had a wife all the time! You know it was wrong; it's of no use pretending it wasn't.”

“Bab, Bab, listen. I don't say I did right, but I'm not the blackguard you want to make out. When a man's done a thing in a hurry that he's sorry for and ashamed of directly afterward, and when there doesn't seem any particular reason for anybody knowing, he generally keeps it to himself. That's true, isn't it?”

But Bab said nothing. He went on:

“That was the case with my marriage. I have nothing to say against her, except that I know she did it because I was pretty well off, and not because she cared a hang about me. She doesn't; I don't believe she ever did.”

“She has some discernment,” said Bab cuttingly.

“Oh, well, you must say that if you like. But Bab, dear old Bab——”

“Don't call me that. Don't dare to call me that again!”

She had turned upon him quite fiercely, and sent him staggering back a step with the mere force of her look. But then there came a catch in her breath, and she had to turn away quickly herself.

“Very well, Bab,” said he meekly. “Do you want to hear any more?”

“Not particularly, but—but you can say it if you like!”

Perhaps he saw, in the corner of her mouth which was nearest to him, a sign of softening. At any rate he went on with a little more spirit:

“But I never thought any harm would come of my keeping it quiet to anybody, and certainly not to you. You were ready for a flirtation——”

“Not with a married man!” retorted Bab.

“But if you only wanted a flirtation, and didn’t know it was with a married man, where was the harm? If I had told you at first, it would have put a stop to it altogether, I suppose?”

“Certainly it would, Mr. Ingledew.”

“Now that’s absurd, to call me Mr. Ingledew. Because I’m just as much ‘Bradley’ as I was before. And you’ll always think of me as just ‘Bradley,’ whatever adjective you put before the name!”

“However I think of you won’t matter. For I shall never speak to you again after to-day.”

“O Bab, my darling, you don’t mean that! Look here, Bab, what harm is there in my seeing you? In my taking you for a row on the water, or for a drive through Richmond Park? You’ve often said yourself what nonsense it was that girls shouldn’t go about as they pleased with anybody they liked.”

Bab uttered a low, heart-broken cry.

“I said those things, those mad, crack-brained things, because I didn’t kn-o-o-w! Now I do know, and I can’t do those things any more! I should be as bad as people, straitlaced people think, if I could!”

And I think you must know that yourself, Bradley. Oh, oh, don't ask me, don't talk like that any more. I like you too much not to want to think the best, the very best of you. But I can't if you want me to go on in the old way now! There was no harm in it then, so it seemed to me. But there would be harm now! Don't dare to say any more now. Now good-by; shake hands, and say good-by."

"Oh, Bab, I can't. I do love you so, little one, I didn't know how much till last night. Don't be too cruel, little one, don't be too hard. Look, look, Bab! I'm married, but I have no wife; and I'm in love, but I've got no sweetheart. Bab, darling Bab, forgive me. Don't be so hard."

"I'm not hard. I'm only afraid of being too so-o-oft," sobbed she. "Aren't you going to shake hands?"

"Not here. I will, if you like, under the lime-trees."

But Bab guessed that he wanted to kiss her, and for a long time she was obdurate. But she loved him too well, she had indeed kissed him too often, to be able to hold out forever. So, instead of the formal parting in the sunlight, near the gold-fish, which she had planned, they exchanged a lover's farewell under the trees. And then, weeping hot tears under her flimsy tulle veil and for once forgetting about her appearance as she walked fast away along the road home—alone, as she had insisted on going, Bab chewed the cud of bitter-sweet remembrance, and recognized the fact that her romance begun in folly had ended in a gnawing grief.

When she got home she found that Tryphena had taken it into her head to go up to town in search of Mrs. Weir.

The fact was that the young girl was torn with doubts and questionings concerning Mr. Brown; and failing to get any substantial comfort or counsel from Molly, she had resolved on applying to the one friend on whose judgment she felt that she could thoroughly rely.

It was between six and seven o'clock when she reached Cirencester Terrace, and Johns opened the door to her with an expression of surprise on his face. He looked altogether disturbed and ill at ease.

"Is Mrs. Weir in?" asked Tryphena.

"No, miss. But one of her friends is here," answered Johns with some asperity.

"Who is it?"

"A gentleman who often comes, but who never gives his name, miss. He seems to have the run of the house. And as Mrs. Weir said he was to do as he liked, I suppose it's all right, miss."

"Of course, Johns."

But although Tryphena answered in a matter-of-course tone, she did not feel so easy in her mind as she appeared to be. This friend who had "the run of the house" could be, she supposed, no other than Mr. Brown. And it was about this very Mr. Brown, and his mysterious personality, that she had come to consult Mrs. Weir.

"Is he in the drawing-room, Johns?" she asked as she began to go upstairs.

"I don't know, I'm sure, miss, where he is."

“Mrs. Weir got our telegram, I suppose, telling her papa had arrived at Teddington.”

“Yes, miss.”

She went up the stairs, and Johns disappeared into his own part of the premises.

Tryphena looked into the drawing-room; there was no one there. Into the morning-room, with the same result. Then she went downstairs and opened the door of the dining-room; that also was tenantless.

Last of all she tried the study. Before she opened the door she heard slight sounds within, so that it was with a loudly beating heart that she turned the handle. The door opened without the least noise, and she looked in without disturbing the solitary occupant of the room, who was busily engaged in examining the contents of some open jewel-cases which lay upon the table. Tryphena's heart beat fast. It was never very light in this room, which was at the back of the house, hemmed in by high walls and chimney-pots. And the tenant of the room had his back to her. But she knew him; she recognized him as Mr. Brown; and she felt sick and cold as she stood watching him, wondering what he was doing, alone, in her father's study.

And she looked at the table, and caught sight of the treasures over which he was poring; glittering diamonds, and deep-red rubies, and then, to her unspeakable horror, she saw him take up the cases, which were three in number, put one in his pocket, and turn to leave the room, with the two others under his arm.

A cry of horror escaped her lips. He started, and caught sight of her.

“What are you doing with those cases?” cried she, in a hoarse, tremulous voice.

Mr. Brown seemed confused. He did not answer at once. Then he said, in a cold tone:

“I suppose, Miss Frewen, you are not going to accuse me of stealing them.”

“What are you doing with them?” she repeated in a louder tone. “I know them; I have seen them before. They belong to one of papa’s clients. They——”

At that moment the door was pushed open, and Mrs. Weir, looking white and frightened, appeared just inside the doorway. And she and Mr. Brown exchanged glances of mutual understanding, she looking a question, while he shook his head.

“My dear child, they didn’t tell me you were here,” said Mrs. Weir, as she went quickly up to Tryphena, and put her arms round her.

“They told me you were out,” answered the girl.

Then, turning her head again to look at Mr. Brown, she saw that he had hastily left the room. She sprang away from Mrs. Weir’s restraining arms, and ran into the hall, just in time to hear and to see the hall-door close behind Mr. Brown.

Trembling from head to foot, she turned to Mrs. Weir, who had followed her.

“He has taken some jewels, some family jewels worth ever so much that papa had in his care!” stammered Tryphena with white lips.

“Oh, surely not, dear!” said Mrs. Weir.

But the girl, sick at heart and almost paralyzed with terror, saw that her beloved Mrs. Weir knew what had happened as well as she did.

Mr. Brown was a thief, and Mrs. Weir was in league with him!

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

TRYPHENA was a robust young woman, not addicted to fainting fits or hysterical outbursts of weeping.

But at the moment when the apparently overwhelming proof was given her of the conspiracy between Mrs. Weir and Mr. Brown to rob her father, she broke down. Staggering to one of the seats in the hall, she sank down and burst into tears.

Mrs. Weir seemed to hesitate whether she should go to her, as the girl, after one reproachful glance in her direction, did not again look up. Edgar's voice suddenly startled them both. He had come out of the dining-room, and was standing with his hands in his pockets, and with a very disagreeable expression on his face.

"What's all this noise about, Tryphena? And what are you doing up here at all?" said he impatiently.

The girl struggled with her sobs, and stood up. Even then she was only anxious to hear something which would clear her darling Mrs. Weir of the guilt which seemed to be gathering round her.

"I don't want anything from you," she said, trying to steady her voice. "I want to speak to Mrs. Weir. I want to ask her—to ask her why this Mr. Brown was



allowed to go into papa's study, and—and carry off those—those cases.”

“What cases?” asked Edgar, frowning.

Then Mrs. Weir looked at him, and he altered his tone.

“Oh, it's all right,” said he. “He was sent here for them, and he was perfectly within his rights in taking them.”

Tryphena hesitated. She would have been glad to believe this, but it seemed too improbable. A bright thought occurred to her.

“May I tell papa he has taken them?” she asked.

Again Mrs. Weir exchanged glances with Edgar. Then he said shortly:

“I should strongly advise you not to mention anything about it to the governor. You might have more sense than to suggest it. You know he's been very ill, and doesn't want to be worried about business matters.”

“But this is such curious business!” protested poor Tryphena. “And I want to know who this man is, this Mr. Brown.”

“Why do you want to know more than that, that he is Mr. Brown?”

“Because—because,” faltered out the girl at last, “he attacked papa last night, outside the cottage, and flung him down on the ground. And papa said he was a scoundrel and a—” here her sobs again threatened to choke her voice, “and a blackmailer.”

At these words both Mrs. Weir and Edgar stood aghast.

They looked at each other; they looked at Tryphena. It was Mrs. Weir who spoke first:

“You say Mr. Brown attacked your father! Are you sure?”

“Quite, quite sure,” answered the girl, with another sob. “Do you think I could make a mistake? Why, I was looking out of the window and I saw him look up.”

“Then it’s all up!” exclaimed Edgar laconically, as he turned abruptly, and re-entered the dining-room.

Mrs. Weir sighed wearily.

“Now, little girl,” she said at last rather impatiently, “you had better go back to Teddington. And take all the care of your father you can, for he is far from well yet.”

Tryphena looked at her friend, and a strong impulse of love and trust, in spite of everything, seized her and prompted her to surprise the lady by a hug.

“Look here,” she whispered, with sudden excitement, “I’m not going to trouble my head about all these strange things. I’m going to remember what you’ve done for us girls, and what you’ve tried to do, and I’m going to forget everything else. Mrs. Weir, dear Mrs. Weir, I’ll do whatever you want me to, just the same. And I won’t say anything to papa, because I know that whatever you do is right.”

Mrs. Weir took this rather touching little outburst curiously. She listened in complete silence to the young girl’s words, and then, with a hurried kiss, dismissed her, opening the door herself, and letting her out.

Tryphena could not help feeling rather hurt by this treatment, but she persisted stubbornly in stifling her doubts all the way down to Teddington, where she arrived very late.

It was Bab whom she met first on her arrival.

“Where have you been? You’ll catch it!” was her encouraging greeting. “I went out this afternoon, and got back quite early, and papa was horribly cross.”

“Yes, he gave her ‘beans,’” added Molly, coming up from the kitchen garden with a cabbage-leaf full of gooseberries, and speaking with conviction. “He’s up, and in the drawing-room, and ever so much better, I should think, unless he’s been shamming all the time!”

“Sh—sh!” said Bab.

“And Miss Roscoe’s fawning on him and cringing to him worse than ever, and I know she’s making it hot for us!”

At that moment, as if in confirmation of Molly’s words, the dining-room window was opened quickly, and Miss Roscoe’s voice called to them in the dusk:

“Molly, Bab, you are to come in directly. Mr. Frewen says so. He is very angry with Tryphena for not being home, and he wants you two to tell him where she is gone to. He says he is sure you know.”

“Tryphena’s here to answer for herself,” said Molly.

And they trooped in, much depressed, and presented themselves in the drawing-room, where they found Mr. Frewen walking up and down in the very worst of humors. He had learned something more about his

daughters and their independent ways, during his enforced stay in his own house, than had ever come to his ears before. And having taxed Miss Roscoe with neglect of her charges, he had learned still more; for the ex-governess, finding herself cornered, had done her best to shift the blame from her own shoulders to those of the girls themselves and of Mrs. Weir.

All three girls were frightened by the expression they saw on his withered and hard face when they entered the room. He was leaning on a stick, which he raised from time to time and shook in their faces as he harangued them in words so harsh that the color left their young cheeks and the tears came to their eyes as they listened.

“So,” he began, emphasizing his opening with a hard rap with his stick on the floor—“so I find you have been deceiving me, young ladies; that instead of conducting yourselves like gentlewomen, you have been doing everything in your power to bring disgrace not only on yourselves but on me, going in and out of the house at all sorts of hours, and picking up acquaintances here, there, and everywhere, like—like low-born young women!”

“Papa!” protested Molly.

“Silence! You have to listen to me now. I say you have behaved as no decently brought-up girls should behave; that you have made me ashamed of being your father! How can I go back to my office, and look people in the face, knowing what I do now? Knowing, as I do now, that they are all laughing in their sleeves and pointing at me as the father of a

lot of loose-mannered girls who are known all over the town?"

"Papa!" cried Molly again, loudly and firmly. "You shan't say such things of us! Things that are not true, that everybody knows are not true!"

"What! What! What! You dare to interrupt me! You dare to tell me to my face that what I say isn't true?" almost shrieked the excited old gentleman. "Why, this is monstrous, worse than anything! To be flatly contradicted, given the lie direct, by my own daughters! I never heard of such a thing! It's monstrous! Monstrous!"

"And I say it's monstrous that you should say such things, believe such things, of your own daughters, papa!" persisted Molly, who was shaking like a leaf, and speaking in a hoarse, croaking voice, but very quietly. "If people have told you that we pick up acquaintances anywhere, and that we don't care whom we associate with, they have told you falsehoods."

Instinctively Molly had dropped her usual slangy tone, and she spoke with modest girlish dignity in defence of her sisters and herself.

But the mere fact of her daring to contradict him, to suggest that he was not wholly in the right, was a worse offence in the stern eyes of Mr. Frewen than the misdemeanors of which he accused his daughters. He was a domestic tyrant, who had always looked upon girls as useless and expensive encumbrances, whose sole duty was to keep as much as possible out of the sight and out of the way of the unfortunate person who had been saddled by a malignant Providence with their maintenance. And now these offen-

sive young people, not content with the odium they had brought upon him by daring to have separate and independent existence, presumed to contradict him!

It was too much. Mr. Frewen paused for breath before he spoke again, and when he did so, he raised his clenched fist and shook it with rage.

“It’s the truth, the truth, nothing but the truth!” cried he. “Here’s Tryphena been going about with a man who was a complete stranger to her only a few days ago. Can you deny that? But I suppose you could deny anything, all of you! One backs up the other. You’re a bad lot, a bad lot altogether! But I’ve done with you! I wash my hands of you! I’ll not keep you under my roof any longer!”

The girls stood silent at these words, which, coming from the mouth of their harsh and stern father, had more weight than they deserved. No doubt Mr. Frewen, though undoubtedly he meant them at the time, would have simmered down by the morning, and would have been ready to accept a humble apology and to extend to them his qualified forgiveness, upon receiving a promise of better behavior.

But the girls never thought of this. Accustomed from their earliest infancy to be afraid of him, they accepted his judgment, his sentence, as final. Bab was the only one of the three who entertained a doubt of his remaining permanently in this mind.

There was a pause when Mr. Frewen pronounced this sentence of banishment against his daughters; Tryphena smothered a sob; Molly set her teeth hard, and began to look sullen and defiant; Bab kept her eyes down and remained immovable. Unluckily, Miss

Roscoe thought this a fitting moment to interfere, hoping to put herself right with the girls by a word on their behalf, which yet should be so deferentially uttered as not to offend Mr. Frewen.

Ambling up to him from behind, therefore, with a pocket-handkerchief to her dry eyes, she bleated forth these words:

“Oh, no, Mr. Frewen, you surely won't be quite so severe as that! You surely won't, now, will you? I know your good heart better. They may have been a little unwise, but after all they are your very own children, aren't they now? And I'm sure they're quite ready to promise to do just what you would wish for the future. Come now, you'll promise anything if your dear papa will forgive you, won't you?”

And she turned, venturing to lay a fat and flabby hand on Mr. Frewen's coat-sleeve, from him to the girls.

Now her words were harmless enough, but there was something in her tone and manner extremely offensive to the three high-spirited girls. They did, all of them, more or less, recognize the error of their ways, having been forced to do this by a sudden inrush of misfortune. And they were all therefore in a mood in which penitence and a promise of better things would have been natural and easy. But the necessary tact for extracting such a promise was not Miss Roscoe's. They felt that they loathed her for every word of her abject, cringing appeal; that there was dire offence in every turn of her slow-moving head, in every wag of her well-meaning and complacent forefinger.

So, instead of showing themselves sympathetic to her appeal, they all remained silent, perhaps sullen; while by little frowns and pursings of the lips they showed impatience at the manner if not the matter of her discourse.

Then Mr. Frewen hastened to cut off what slender chance of a compromise there had seemed to be.

“Miss Roscoe, you are wasting your breath,” said he. “They’re a pack of stubborn, ill-conditioned, good-for-nothing young hussies, and I’ll not have the responsibility of looking after them any longer. I’ll not keep a home for them; I’ll send them all off to a Sisterhood, or school, anywhere where they’ll be well looked after; and within a week too!”

“Oh, no, Mr. Frewen, you won’t do that! Think of their chances of getting married!”

“Chances, chances! They have none!” cried Mr. Frewen. “What man in his senses would marry any one of them? They’re good enough to make fools of, such girls as they are! But not to marry!”

Miss Roscoe saw the harm he had done, if he did not, when the three girls looked up, almost at the same moment, shot one proud glance at their father, and then instinctively drew nearer to each other. Molly was spokeswoman for them all again.

“We’re not so bad as you think, papa. And we’re not ungrateful to you, though I dare say we’ve not been very good daughters. But if you want to turn us out, we shan’t be so long as you think in finding new homes to go to. I shall be married next week, and then I can take care of my sisters till they marry too.”



This announcement was rather a sensational one, and then a pause followed. But Mr. Frewen, still more incensed by this continued defiance, affected not only to take no interest in it, but to disbelieve it altogether. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sure I wish the man joy of such a baggage!" said he abruptly, as he turned his back upon his daughters, and with his hands behind him, and his stick dangling, he walked to the other end of the room.

Bab seized the opportunity of making an escape. She perceived that every word which was uttered by either side increased the general irritation, and feeling strongly the force of the proverb that "Least said is the soonest mended," she effected a retreat. With a nod to one and a wink to the other, she got both of her sisters out of the room with her, and closed the door softly, before Mr. Frewen had any idea of her intention.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

BAB dragged her sisters along with her to her own room, and then locked the door. It was the first time she and Molly had included Tryphena in a consultation of importance; but they felt that there was now a bond between them, and Tryphena had moreover conducted herself during the recent trying ordeal with exemplary discretion, not opening her mouth once while it lasted.

The youngest sister, however, very nearly lost the respect she had earned for herself so newly, by subsiding into an hysterical giggle as soon as they were all locked in together.

“You did stand up to him, Molly!” she whispered with excitement and admiration.

Bab frowned.

“Molly, what were we going to do?” said she. “Of course he’ll cool down, and forget half that he’s said in the morning. But we shall have an awful time of it after this!”

“I shan’t,” said Molly coolly. “I’ve had a letter every day for a fortnight, and sometimes two in a day, begging me to get married at once. And now I mean to!”

Tryphena looked rather startled.

“Do you mean it, Molly? Not—not Sir Walter?” she added in a frightened whisper.

‘Why not Sir Walter?’ retorted her sister irritably. “I don’t know why everybody thinks it necessary to mention his name with bated breath! As if he were Old Nick himself!”

“Well, he must be first cousin to that gentleman, if all we’ve heard is true,” replied Tryphena lugubriously. “I wouldn’t trust myself with him if I were you, Molly!”

Molly was on the point of making an angry retort, when Bab interposed with oil for the troubled waters.

“Girls, don’t quarrel now,” she said solemnly. “Things are too serious for that! And none of us have been so lucky in our love affairs that we can turn up our noses at anybody else’s!”

And she gave a glance at Tryphena, which made that young woman blush and hang her head a little. Bab began to feel, as indeed Molly did also, that no great progress toward a solution of the difficulty, if indeed there were one, would be found until Tryphena had been banished from the conference. They were both rather startled when their younger sister suddenly burst into tears, and, as if guessing their thoughts, sprang up and made a dash toward the door.

“You are neither of you so unlucky as I am!” she sobbed. “Because you’ve got each other to talk to, and I’ve got nobody now Mrs. Weir——”

She stopped short, and grew crimson. The other girls looked at her aghast.

For Tryphena to make even such an attempt at an insinuation against Mrs. Weir was portentous. They were longing for an explanation. But they got none;

for Tryphena, sobbing still, and ready to bite her tongue out, blundered to the key, turned it in the lock, and thundered down the corridor to her own room.

“Poor little Phena!” said Molly. “She talks about Mrs. Weir, but the person she is thinking about is Mr. Brown!”

Bab sighed.

“I knew there was something wrong about that man!” she said, shaking her head. “And she has found out something more than we know, I suppose! Something, perhaps, when she was in town this afternoon! I wonder what she did there, by the by? She said nothing about her journey!”

“She is sure to have been in mischief!” remarked Molly. “We always are!”

This recalled Bab to the subject in hand.

“Look here, Molly,” she said gravely, “I wouldn’t write to Sir Walter if I were you—at least not yet! I’m going to send a note to Sam——”

Molly bounded from her seat.

“Bab, how dare you! You know you are not to mention that fellow’s name!”

“All right. But I’m just going to write him a note, and I want you not to write to—to anybody else till I get an answer.”

Molly, who was leaning against the dressing-table, drew one foot restlessly backward and forward over the carpet. In spite of all her efforts to appear greatly offended and annoyed by Bab’s suggestion, she betrayed agitation of a more tender sort in the curves of her mouth, in the tear which trickled from under one

lowered eyelid, in heaving bosom and quivering fingers.

After all her resolutions not to think of the infamous renegade Sam, was it possible that there lingered in her heart a hope that he would come back to her, or at least that he would be interested in the fact that in a few days she would be eternally lost to him?

At last she looked up, and the tears fell.

“What on earth have you got to say to him?” she asked haughtily. “Or do you care for him yourself, Bab?”

Bad, very solemnly, shook her head.

“It wouldn't be of any use if I did,” she said simply. “And I don't. I c-c-can't forget Br-r-radley!”

“Well, don't cry. If we once begin cr-rying,” said Molly, turning away to wipe her own eyes, “we shall none of us ever leave off! What do you want to say to—to the creature?”

“Oh, I should only just mention that—that,” Bab looked at her sister askance and chose her words carefully, “that you thought of getting married, and—and——”

“To Sir Walter Hay,” put in Molly emphatically.

“Oh, yes, yes, I should say that. And—and—well, that's about all. For, of course,” she remarked ingenuously, “if that isn't enough, why nothing would be!”

“Well, you may write that if you like,” said Molly graciously, as she left the room.

Although she was so absolutely indifferent on the matter, Molly kept watch on her sister's door, saw

Bab go downstairs with a letter in her hand, and heard her tell the housemaid to take it to the post.

“Did you write that note you talked about?” she asked Bab in an off-hand tone, as she wished her sister good-night.

“Why, you know I did,” said Bab. “You were on the stairs.”

“Well, it might have been some other letter,” retorted Molly, petulant at having been found out.

But Bab went to bed with a little comfort in her heart, on her sister's account. It would be beautiful if, through her suggestion, Molly's romance should end happily after all! Although Molly would not acknowledge it even to herself, she had been bitterly hurt by the desertion of the faithful Sam, whose devotion had grown precious when it was missed. But she still believed, poor child, that she was in love with Sir Walter Hay, and that her feeling about Sam was only natural irritation at his senseless and sudden neglect.

He was an old friend, nothing more; but such a very old friend as that had no business to turn “nasty” just because she chose to marry some one else. If he would only have the sense and good feeling to repent of his disgraceful conduct, and to tend her his good wishes for her happiness, and perhaps a card, she should be happier in the great step she was going to take.

So he said to herself as she went to sleep that night on a pillow which was wet with furtive tears.

The next day passed feverishly for Molly, gloomily for all of them. Mr. Frewen remained in his bed-

room, and refused to see any of his daughters, though they sent him humble and dutiful messages both by Miss Roscoe and the servants. He sent no messages in return, but sent back their notes unopened.

By the evening post the girls had reckoned that they might get an answering note from Sam. Molly and Bab put on their hats, having first with unusual docility mentioned their intention of taking a walk to Miss Roscoe, and walked down the road to meet the postman. They did not say why they were going, even to each other, but Molly knew as well as Bab what the object of the expedition was.

And when he came, he brought no letter!

Molly walked on steadily, with her eyes blinded by tears. Presently Bab, whom she had left behind, overtook her, hissing in her ear:

“Molly, I’m going back! Don’t you see? There, under the trees, by the side of the road! I won’t meet him!”

“Who? Sam?” cried poor Molly, not knowing the degree of joyous hopefulness there was in her tone.

“Sam! No. *Bradley!*”

“Oh!”

Deeply disappointed, Molly turned abruptly. But Bab stopped her, pulling nervously at her sleeves.

“No, no, Molly, don’t come back with me. I want you to see him, to speak to him, to—to hear what he has to say! There’s no harm in that, is there?”

Molly looked in her sister’s agitated face, and burst into a hollow laugh.

“Bab,” she said, “we are a merry family, we are—we are, we are.”

"But you'll see him?"

"Yes, if you want me to, of course. But, mind, Bab, I shall think it only right to be very severe!" said Molly, in a stern, elder-sisterly manner.

"Oh, yes, he won't mind that. Give it him hot!"

Then Bab fled back toward the house, and Molly went on slowly down the road. And Bradley came in a hesitating manner from his side of the road to meet her. Molly drew herself up and looked at him with an air of great sternness. Rather to her annoyance, but also rather to her relief, Bradley smiled as he raised his hat.

"It's no use, Molly. Your features are not adapted for that sort of expression. You must give it up."

Molly thought there was merit in the suggestion, so she gave it up, and said simply:

"What are you doing down here? You have no business to come here now, you know you haven't, Bradley."

"The public roads are open to all, even to the malefactor," replied he stubbornly. "And I was not going farther than the road. You can't shut me out of Teddington. And it's absurd to pretend that I am not to be spoken to, when I haven't done any harm to anybody."

Molly sighed, and declined to argue the point.

"How's Bab?" asked he very meekly, in a low voice, after a pause.

"Barbara is quite well, thank you."

"It doesn't do any good to the cause of morality to call her Barbara," said he. "She's Bab to you, and she'll always be Bab to me. Molly, I'm miserable!"



I didn't know—I hadn't the least idea how much I cared about her. I can't think about anything or anybody else!"

"But you mustn't think about her," said Molly, angrily. "You must think about your wife!"

Bradley moved impatiently.

"Molly, don't talk like that; don't be unkind. I know you only do it because you think it's the proper way to talk to me, and because you are a child, and don't understand! But a designing woman who gets hold of a man years younger than herself and marries him because he's pretty well off, is not the sort of wife a man cares to think about more than he can help."

"But—but it's very rough upon Bab!" said Molly.

"And upon me too, Molly! Bab doesn't feel it more than I do, or so much. After all, she's free, and she'll have another fellow after her before you can look round. While I'm tied for life to this artful woman, who never comes near me except when she wants to get something out of me, or to make herself disagreeable."

"Well, I'm glad she happened to come down the other day!" said Molly, unsympathetically.

"So am I—in a way—of course," said Bradley, ruefully. "I should never have had the pluck to—to break it to Bab myself! But—but it's jolly hard lines, and I don't feel it any less because I could write reams of poetry about it, or anything of that sort!"

"Well, it's all over now, that's one good thing," said Molly, with forced cheerfulness. "Good-night."

I must run back, for we're being kept like nuns now, and papa watches us as we go in and out!"

"Well, let me tell you what I came about. I've found out for Bab who that Mr. Brown is!"

"For Bab? For Tryphena, you mean!" said Molly quickly, and without thinking.

Bradley looked much disturbed.

"Tryphena! Why, surely you don't mean that she took any notice of the fellow!"

Molly turned white, and nodded reluctantly.

"Mrs. Weir introduced him, you know," she whispered breathlessly. "Why, who is he? Tell me—quick!"

Bradley looked shocked.

"He's a *detective!*" he gasped out at last.

Molly almost screamed.

"Oh, you're not sure!"

"I am though. I came down to tell you. I've been wandering about since five o'clock on the chance of meeting one of you, and I was just going to write a note at the inn here, and send it up. He's a detective employed by Lord Cloone, who is one of your father's clients, and who is now on his way to England; and will be at the Metropole next week."

"Yes, I know. I've heard that," said Molly with white lips, "papa is his trustee."

"It seems," went on Bradley, "that Lord Cloone knew Mrs. Weir, or else knew something about her; and when he heard of her being in your father's house, he set this detective to work. I only heard it to-day, on the best possible authority, and I thought I had better let you know at once."

Bab looked frightened and puzzled.

“It seems a roundabout way of going to work,” said she; “why didn’t this Lord Cloone write and warn papa, instead of employing a detective?”

“Oh, he’s an old crank, Lord Cloone, who never does anything like anybody else,” said Bradley, avoiding her eyes.

Molly remained for a few moments in deep thought. Then she started, and, without thinking, held out her hand. Bradley seized it at once, and shook it with a hearty grip.

“Oh!” exclaimed Molly, reddening with confusion, when she perceived the act of friendship into which she had been betrayed.

“You can’t go back now,” said Bradley smiling, “and I’m glad of it. I’m not such a ruffian, Molly, that you need be afraid or ashamed to shake hands with me,” said he rather ruefully. “Good-night. And— and tell Bab—tell Bab—” His face was for a few moments convulsed with strong emotion. Then he nodded abruptly, said hoarsely, “Never mind,” and turned quickly away.

Molly went back home with her heart very full. It was difficult to consider Bradley such a villain, now that she had seen him, and heard his rough, incoherent defence, the gaps in which she filled up pretty shrewdly, for Bradley’s was a simple nature, presenting no great psychological difficulties.

She found Molly and Tryphena together in the hall, waiting in the dark for her to come. Tryphena had been let into Bab’s mournful little secret, and the two were shedding furtive tears over their own and each

other's misfortune. It was Tryphena who opened the door to Molly, and the latter was so much taken by surprise on coming thus face to face with her younger sister that involuntarily she exclaimed: "Oh, Phena!" in a tone which awakened curiosity.

"Why, what is it?"

"I've heard something so dreadful! Something that will shock you so much!"

Tryphena set her face stubbornly.

"Out with it!" said she with more than her usual brusquerie.

There was no other way out of the difficulty, so Molly obeyed.

"Mr. Brown—" Tryphena drew a deep breath—"is—a detective. He is set by papa's client, Lord Cloone, to watch Mrs. Weir. And he is coming over himself to the Metropole next week."

Tryphena at first received this intelligence in solemn silence. Then she said in a perfectly steady voice:

"Then I shall go and see him, when he comes, and tell him what I think of him."

Her sisters came close up to her, rebuking, protesting, dissuading. She must not dare to offend papa's principal client; Lord Cloone had the reputation of being "an old crank;" everything they could think of they urged upon the girl in vain.

She listened to all they had to say with her mouth firmly closed, and then, without any sort of answer, left them abruptly, and retired for the night to her own room.

## CHAPTER XXX.

It was in a state of feverish anxiety that Molly ran downstairs on the following morning, to wait for the postman at the garden gate. Out of the bundle of letters that she took, with trembling fingers from his hand, there was one for herself; it was from Sir Walter Hay.

There was no letter for Bab: no letter from Sam for any one.

Molly opened Sir Walter's note mechanically, hardly knowing whether the receipt of it gave her most pain or pleasure. The contents of it she knew before she had read a line. It was the same letter which, in slightly different words, she had been receiving from her elderly lover every day for the past fortnight, upbraiding her for her silence, piteously appealing to her to end his suspense, and to come away with him. This time he went even further. He had got the license for their marriage, he said, and her neglect was making him ill. He was staying at the Ship Hotel, Halliford, where she was to write, if she wished to hear ever again from her "ever devoted, but most unhappy Walter."

Molly read the note through in a tumult of agitated feelings. Then she ran indoors, threw down the family letters on the hall table, and wrote a hasty note to Sir Walter, a note in which that experienced gentleman

would be able to detect every feeling of which he wished to take advantage. But as soon as she had written it she tore it up, and put on her hat and went off to the telegraph office in the village, where she sent off the following message:

“Very miserable. Papa turns us out. Should like to see you.”

She said nothing to Bab about this, until the answer came within an hour. It was as follows:

“Will meet you at Shepperton station first train you can come by.”

This telegram, not without qualms, she showed to Bab as she came downstairs, ready to start. Bab turned very white.

“You won’t go, Molly, will you? If you do, you—you will never come back!”

Molly shivered, she did not know why.

“Well, one may as well get it over quickly, when one has made up one’s mind,” she answered quietly.

“But mayn’t I go with you? I don’t want you to be married like that, without even a br-r-ridesmaid!” whispered Bab.

Molly shook her head.

“He wouldn’t like it, I’m sure,” whispered she. “You see, he knows you didn’t want me to marry him. Of course you’ll make it up with him afterward, but it’s better, better to—to get it over first!”

She kissed her sister quickly, and tried to pass her. But Bab clung to her sleeve.

“Molly, you’ll make him marry you in a church,

won't you? None of your registry offices, so that you wouldn't feel as if you'd been properly married at all!"

"Oh, no. It will be in a church," answered poor Molly confidently. "I told him that. No doubt he's made all arrangements. You see, he's been expecting, hoping for this for ever so long."

Bab let her get a few steps farther after this. Then she said:

"Molly, do you think you will be happy?"

Molly turned deadly white.

"I—I don't know," she said in a dull, stubborn tone: "It's too late to think about that, anyhow!"

"O Molly, Molly, I wish it were Sam!" cried Bab in her ears as Molly, wrenching herself away, ran down the road toward the station without another word.

She never forgot that journey to Shepperton, short as it was. She seemed to be in a dream, living through a long series of old sensations, past scenes, with one strange thought underlying all: she was going to be married; to cut herself off from the old life, the old friends, forever—forever—forever! She repeated these words in a dull brain, was still repeating them when the train stopped, and she saw Sir Walter Hay on the platform.

It frightened her to find that she looked at him with changed eyes. For the first time she noticed that what Bab said was true: his hair and mustache were dyed. The next moment she tried to forget it, almost did forget it, indeed, in the excitement of his welcome.

He was fond of her, glad to see her; there was no doubt of that. The pretty prize which had for some days threatened to escape him altogether had fallen into his hands at last. Molly was paler than usual, but this only seemed to make her fresh young face more interesting. Her white lawn frock was trimmed with lace and fine embroidery, the only touch of color being in her hat, which was a wide one of pale pink batiste, trimmed with a mass of black cherries with their leaves. It had been a fancy of hers that, shorn of all state as her wedding would be, she would wear the bridal white.

Sir Walter drew her hand through his arm, and led her from the station toward the river.

“Is that the church?” said she, in a fluttering whisper, as she caught sight of the picturesque building close to the water.

Sir Walter smiled.

“Not our church, darling,” said he. “I am going to take you a little further up the river, while we talk over the arrangements I have made.”

Molly said nothing. She could not understand how it was that now, when her final resolution to be Sir Walter's wife was taken, his society seemed to have lost all its charm for her. When they reached the bank, where a boat was waiting, with a man in charge of it, Sir Walter left her for a moment, while he went forward to give some directions to the man. She occupied herself in trying to find a reason for this change in herself or in her lover. But she could not discover any. None the less certain was it that he had lost his attraction in her eyes; that the expression of his face



no longer pleased her, the touch of his hand no longer thrilled her as it used to do.

When she found that he had arranged with the man to tow the boat up the river, so that, as he said, he could sit by her and talk, she found herself wishing that he had chosen to row himself and to leave her alone. However, she could not say so, and she took her seat submissively on the cushions, and tried to smile when her lover placed himself beside her.

Although she was expecting him to fulfil his promise to tell her of the arrangements he had made for their marriage, she was rather relieved to find that he put off his explanation, and talked instead of the misery he had suffered in her absence.

Yet still his agonies, his protestations left her cold. And she began to wonder whether he perceived this.

But Sir Walter was too much accustomed to regard her as one of his easy victims to have much discernment of the moods of the young girl. So that she listened, so that he could sit near enough to gloat over her fresh beauty, he was satisfied. And even when she grew surprised at the length of this up-river journey, and restless with curiosity as to its end, Sir Walter still prosed tranquilly on, anxious only to keep her quiet.

A little way above Bell Weir Lock the boat was brought to a standstill for luncheon. Sir Walter brought out a picnic basket, and spread out a meal which Molly would have enjoyed greatly at any other time. As it was, she was getting sick with uneasy surprise, with suspense, with a dozen feelings she could not analyze. She ate nothing, she drank nothing.

There was creeping over her a strange longing to get away, to be back with Bab and Tryphena at the Cottage, to hear even the sound of Miss Roscoe's voice. But she was overpowered by terror, by shyness. So she sat saying nothing, listening to the casual remarks of Sir Walter, who was making an excellent luncheon, and looking with wide, dull eyes at the flowing water of the river.

"What time is it?" she asked at last, abruptly, interrupting a speech of Sir Walter's.

He took out his watch, and showed it to her.

"Four o'clock!" she exclaimed. "But——"

She stopped and blushed. It was too late to be married that day. Again puzzled, she was again rather relieved. Her lover took her hand and pressed it tenderly to his lips. He guessed her thought.

"I was afraid," said he gently, "that you would think it too sudden, too abrupt, if I asked you to marry me to-day——"

Molly interrupted him with unexpected vivacity.

"Oh, yes. So it would have been. Yes, yes."

"I thought," went on Sir Walter, more tenderly still, "that to-day we would spend in a picnic, a delicious dream of lazy happiness together, and that, as we went along, we would discuss, and make plans, and——"

"And take me back to Teddington to-night," chimed in Molly eagerly. "Oh, yes, that will be much better, much better!"

At this thought the child recovered her spirits, and after that he found no difficulty in persuading her to go on up the river, still in the same unenterprising

way (so unlike "the boys," thought Molly) at the end of a tow-line, until they reached Windsor, where they got out and spent the rest of the afternoon in the Long Walk.

It was seven o'clock when Sir Walter, beginning at last to perceive that he was not making the headway he expected, took her to a hotel to dine.

They had a private room, and Sir Walter, who had ordered champagne, and who partook of it freely, became more demonstrative in his caresses, bolder of speech and of look. By the time dinner had come to an end, Molly, who had eaten and drunk nothing, was growing faint and sick, not with hunger, but with bitter disgust and disappointment.

Still she was silent, gentle, only showing her feeling by increased reserve and shyness, for a long time. But when the dessert had been placed upon the table, and the waiter left the room for good, she suddenly sprang up, as Sir Walter's arm was tightening round her waist, and ran across the room to the window.

"It is too hot in here," she said. "Find me a timetable, and I will see what train I can go home by."

"There is no train by which you can go back to-night," said Sir Walter, quietly. "But you can stay here for the night, and, if you like, go back by the first train to-morrow morning."

Molly did not move, did not cry out. She was thunderstruck, appalled! She understood now for the first time what manner of man this was to whom she had been ready to trust herself, she saw that he considered her fairly in his power.

And was she not? Was she not? What would

her father say, when he learned with whom she had gone up the river? Who it was that had persuaded her to spend the night away from home? She remained staring out at the throng in the street below as if in a nightmare.

Suddenly in the crowd she caught sight of a figure she knew. She started up with a cry, almost a shriek. The man looked up—saw her: it was Sam.

He stopped for one moment, caught sight of Molly, and then his gaze passed to the face of the man behind her.

And he frowned, and passed on up the street.

Molly sank back in her chair, white, trembling, overwhelmed.

Sam had abandoned her. She was lost then, lost!

## CHAPTER XXXI.

Now Molly was just the girl of whom her friends would have said that "she knew how to take care of herself," just the girl who would have been pronounced full of courage, and spirit, and energy. And yet, at this crisis in her fortunes, she sank down like the most spiritless of her fellow-women, and gave herself up for lost without a ray of hope or a word of protest.

For in truth the courage of a young girl is a curious thing, not to be depended on implicitly, and hanging often on threads of chance and of impulse.

Many circumstances worked together to make the girl's position a hideously difficult one. In the first place there was the fact that the person whose conduct was the cause of her alarm was the man from whom of all others she had expected life-long kindness and protection, the man whom she had accepted as her future husband, the man who had been writing to her daily with protestations of undying love.

It was an utter impossibility to the girl to realize fully the change which had taken place in the attitude of this man to herself, any more than she had realized the meaning and reason of the change in her own feelings toward him.

She chose rather to take the whole fault upon herself, and to conclude, though in a dim and vague

way, that it was the change in herself, the mysterious incomprehensible change, which had brought about this painful result. And this feeling paralyzed her. Her mind, working in a body faint and weak from want of food, refused to act in any definite way, but brought fantastic thoughts of her father, of Miss Roscoe, of Mrs. Weir, instead of offering any solution of the difficulties which beset her.

When she had called out to Sam, and he had turned away and walked on, she sat for some minutes with her hands in her lap, staring before her, and taking no notice of her companion, who, on his side, was at first annoyed, and then amused, by her vain attempt to escape from his clutches.

“Who was that you called out to?” asked he. “That insufferable cad, Sam Ritchie?”

It was the first time he had dared to express some of the detestation he felt for that once dangerous rival.

Molly had spirit enough left to protest in her old rough way at this injustice to her friend.

“He’s not a cad,” said she warmly. “He’s the best man in all the world.”

“A little too good for the rest of the world, dearest,” said Sir Walter, coming over to where she sat, and making one more attempt to kiss her. “Too good, at least, to appreciate as she deserves a wicked little darling like mine!”

Molly watched him in terror. She had wholly lost, in a most unaccountable way, or so it seemed to her, the feeling of romantic and unreasoning affection which she had entertained for this man. But the habit, as

usual, was for a time stronger than the new feeling which had taken the place of the old. When he came near her, with the old look of bold admiration in his eyes, the old smile of confident pleasure on his face, she felt rather a dread of the kiss she was to receive than any impulse of opposition to his wish to kiss her.

But at the very moment when his hand had reached her shoulder, when she had instinctively shrunk back further into her corner, a sudden change came into her face, lighting it up, and making her blue eyes flash and sparkle with sudden joy.

Springing from her seat with so much life, so much vivacity, that Sir Walter staggered and fell back three or four steps, she darted across the room like a deer, and flung herself, with a low cry of unspeakable joy, into the very arms of a person who had quietly entered the room the moment before.

“Oh, Sam, Sam, I’m all right now!” broke from Molly’s lips in a voice so low and broken that it could scarcely be heard. “Take me back! Take me back home!”

Sam was, however, very quiet, very undemonstrative. One might have thought that he did not hear her appeal, so wooden was his manner, so commonplace the tone in which he spoke.

“I beg your pardon,” said he. “I thought you called to me, as I was passing.”

“So I did,—why, so I did! Sam! I want you to find some way of getting me home to-night.”

For one moment Sam said nothing. He looked from one to the other with an expression which had

changed in a second to one of unutterable terror. But he spoke with as much composure as ever:

"There's the train. Why can't you go back by train?"

Molly, who had been clinging to his arm, suddenly drew back, and turned sharply to Sir Walter. Her face had become very pale.

"You told me," said she in a very low voice, "that there was no train!"

"I must have made a mistake, I suppose," said Sir Walter, who was lighting a cigar with an affectation of extreme indifference to what was passing at the other end of the room.

That it was only an affectation, however, was made manifest by the trembling of his hands.

Molly, meanwhile, had snatched up her gloves and her sunshade from the table by the window, readjusted her hat, which she had not taken off, by a touch to the right and left, and then, half-turning to Sir Walter, held out her hand to him, as if it been a mere question of an ordinary leave-taking.

"Good-by," said she in a tremulous and shy tone. "I must try to catch this train."

No particular train had been mentioned, but she forgot that. Sir Walter, however, did not. He threw the match he had used into the fireplace, and said very coolly:

"What train is it we have to catch? Must we hurry? I haven't paid the bill yet, you know."

In an instant there appeared on Molly's face such a look of unconquerable aversion, as he sauntered across the room toward her, and addressed her only, ignor-



ing Sam, that Sir Walter might now see that his last chance was gone. He was not, however, the man to take a defeat of this sort with good grace.

“You are not going to throw me over, Molly, now, are you? And let some one else take you home, after the jolly day we’ve had had together?”

Something in his tone, rather than the words he used, made Sam shiver with the desire to kick him. He controlled this impulse, however, and remained quite still, quite silent, as if indeed he had been the statue Sir Walter affected to suppose he was. Molly, who stood between the two men, grew first red and then white, and her breath came fast.

“You know,” pursued Sir Walter, with a sudden most touching change to a tone of tender reproach, “that you have promised to be my wife.”

Molly looked up, and drew a deep breath. All that she had dreamed, all that she had imagined concerning that hero of romance who was a hero no more, flashed rapidly through her mind. Had she made some great, some ghastly mistake, and was it she who was to blame after all? In the few seconds which elapsed while she stood silent, a whole world of thoughts and emotions convulsed the girl.

But the storm died down as quickly as it had arisen, and left her with one clear, distinct idea. She gave Sir Walter one shy, frightened glance, and lowered her eyelids.

“I want you, if you please, to let me off my promise,” said she in a low voice.

“In favor of—this gentleman, I suppose?” said Sir Walter, with quiet insolence.

"In favor of nobody," answered Molly, quickly. "I—I don't want to be married at all."

"I may be allowed to remark," said Sir Walter in the same extremely quiet manner, "that this decision is very sudden. You met me this morning with the intention of becoming my wife at the earliest possible moment."

Again Sam found it hard to keep still, but again he succeeded. Molly's fair face, in the light of the candles on the table, was a study of maidenly shame. She glanced up at Sam, and when she saw the keen disappointment and annoyance on his face, she burst into tears.

"I did, I did. It is quite true," she sobbed. "I came ready to marry you, and I have changed my mind. I am very sorry, but I cannot help it. I wouldn't marry you now if there were no choice but to be your wife, or to jump into the river!"

Then Sam turned round and faced Sir Walter.

"You have had your answer now," said he, gruffly. "And now I will take her home."

"By all means," said Sir Walter, mockingly. "And I hope, Mr. Ritchie, you will enjoy the journey back with the lady, as much as I enjoyed the journey up."

Sam uttered a short sound like a snort, and his fist clenched. Then he turned his back on Sir Walter.

"Come, Molly," said he in a matter-of-fact tone.

And they left the room together quietly, Molly giving one more shy glance at her broken idol who had, however, walked to the other end of the room as if the loss of his *fiancée* were a matter of the smallest possible concern to him.

When they had got into the busy street, Molly and Sam walked so quickly, on the initiative of the latter, that there was no opportunity for talking. Molly was thankful for this, having been seized with a feeling of strange shyness and shame when she found herself alone with her rescuer. The first feeling of comfort and joy which she had had on his entrance into the hotel sitting-room had given place to an uneasiness which increased every minute, so that by the time they reached the station she felt that she would gladly have exchanged him for any other companion, even for Sir Walter himself.

When they got to the station, Sam broke the silence for the first time. Looking at his watch, he said quite calmly :

“Let me see. The train doesn't go till ten thirty-eight. It is now not quite half-past nine. Would you mind if I left you here a little while? I have some business in the town. I shall be back before the train starts, I think: but if not, you know what you have to do. You get out at Richmond, and if there isn't a train on to Teddington, you can get a cab.”

Molly did not answer at once. Sam was so horribly changed that she did not quite know how to speak to him. As for replying in the old familiar way, that was out of the question: it would have seemed like taking a liberty. And the knowledge gave her a pang much keener than any she had suffered in the society of Sir Walter. She was being made to feel already, and at the hands of the man who was always her apologist, her defender, in the old days, that she had disgraced herself, perhaps irretrievably. At last,

when Sam had made a movement of impatience, she said in an unsteady voice:

“I don’t think I have money enough for my ticket.” Then correcting herself quickly, she added: “Oh, yes, I have. I can go second-class.”

“You need not do that,” said Sam, “I will be back in time.”

And he was out of the station before she could say another word.

Molly walked up and down the platform in agony of heart and mind. What had she done to deserve this cruelty at the hands of Sam, who had always, in the old days, been ready to forgive anything? What did he think of her, that he was so bitterly hard and cold? She felt that she could not wait for his return, could not travel all the way back to Teddington, or even to Richmond, in the presence of the outer form only of the friend of whom she had been so fond.

Why was he so changed? It was not only that his tender kindness, his devotion to herself had vanished; but the warm-hearted kindly manner which he had shown to everybody, which had made him such a general favorite, was now a thing of the past. He was now a quiet, well-bred, formal person, with the automatic speech and manner of a counting-house clerk.

And then Molly stopped in her walk, puzzled, doubting, wondering again whether these miraculous changes in her friends were not the result of her own wild imagination, and whether she did not deserve this treatment for her own stupidity in misunderstanding the man whose wife she had promised to become. Had she done Sir Walter wrong after all? Was it

indeed she who was fickle, and not he who was unreasonable?

She had come to the point of thinking she would go back home by herself, making some excuse to Sam, rather than bear his society now that he was so changed, when he himself dashed suddenly on to the platform, breathing hard, and looking excited and disordered.

"Is the train in?" he asked, gasping.

Molly looked at him in amazement.

"Why, no," she answered. "It won't be in for nearly twenty minutes!"

She would have asked him, in the old days, where he had been, and what he had been doing with himself. Now she did not dare. She looked at him askance, until she suddenly perceived, as he was turning away from her, that his shirt-front was crumpled, and that there was a stain on it. She drew a sharp breath.

"What's that?" said she, in a low voice.

Sam frowned, and looked annoyed.

"Nothing," said he, shortly, as he fastened his coat to hide the stain.

But she had in the mean time looked more closely, and she was sure that the stain she now saw on his right-hand cuff was blood. Her tone was more assured, more imperious as she spoke again.

"Unless you tell me what has happened, Sam," said she, "I shall go back to the hotel."

Then she saw on Sam's honest face a look of stubborn, bull-dog ferocity which she had never seen there before.

“Go, if you like,” said he, abruptly. “And tell your precious friend that if he wants his head punched a second time I’m quite ready!”

Molly stood looking at him in speechless astonishment. That the mild Sam of the old days, the formal Sam of the new, should punch the head of a man who boasted of his skill in boxing, as Sir Walter did! This seemed to Molly a quite inexplicable phenomenon. She spoke quite faintly:

“You—punched—his head?”

“Yes.”

Her admiration, her awe, increased each moment. An outbreak into the mere savage animal, especially if it be on her account, always delights a woman.

“Why, Sam, you’re a hero!”

“Indeed I’m not. But I hope I’m a man!”

But this always means the same thing to a girl of nineteen: and Molly was worshipfully silent, feeling her grief and resentment gone. However sullen, however stiff Sam might now choose to be, she could bear it contentedly, even joyfully. For was he not her champion? Had he not used his fists on her behalf, and put her right in her own eyes after her bitter humiliation?

With a sigh of relief—for, after all, he must think her worth fighting for to have done this—Molly turned thoughts of compassion to Sir Walter.

“I—I hope you didn’t hurt him much?” hazarded she in a humble tone.

“I hope I did!” retorted Sam.

Then there was silence.

“But—it was my fault!” whimpered Molly at last.

"Men are always having to suffer for the faults of women," replied Sam abruptly.

After which snub Molly was constrained to relapse into a silence which Sam did not attempt to break until the train steamed into the station.

Molly had found herself hoping, for the last ten minutes, that they would have a compartment to themselves. Surely, if they had to travel together all the way to Richmond, thoughts of the many times they had taken such journeys before would move Sam to speak to her more kindly! The little creature found herself craving for one of the old kind looks, the old kind words, from him.

But Sam deliberately picked out a carriage in which there were only two vacant seats, and as these were at opposite ends, they did not exchange a word during the journey.

At Richmond Sam did not even ask whether there was a train to Teddington. He put Molly into a cab, paid the driver, and shook hands with her coldly through the window, as if she had been a casual acquaintance, "except," as Molly expressed it afterward to Bab, "that then he would have been more civil!"

Poor Molly was absolutely crushed by this treatment. She did not dare to ask a question, to offer any more thanks. Bewildered and ashamed, she put out her hand meekly, and said "Good-by" in a subdued voice.

"I don't know what papa will say," she murmured in a tearful voice. "He keeps a watch on us now!"

"Oh, you will have some story for him, I've no doubt," said Sam, not in the old tone of gentle remon-

strance, but with something like contempt in his tone. "You girls will never learn to be honest and straightforward!"

Molly sat back, saying nothing. Sam raised his hat, and the cab drove on.

It was nearly midnight when the cab-drove up to the garden gate of The Cottage. Molly got out and walked up the path with her head which almost tottered. She was faint with hunger, sick with shame and disappointment almost bound up with night. As she reached the door of the house, the window above her, which was her father's, opened slowly, and Mr. Brown's voice called out: "Who's that?" "It is I, Molly, papa," answered the girl, who passed through which she had in vain tried to pass her month, and so far back her memory went. The window closed with a snap, and Molly, after a second's pause, knocked at the door, and rang the bell. It was a feeble, uncertain ring of knock, but the hall-boy gave to the bell and it clanged and echoed through the silent house. In a very few moments, he, in her dressing gown with a white and tightened lace opened the door. "You—Molly—or—the countess?" "I am Molly, I thought something was wrong, and it must be you. What way did you get so early? You have your papa?" "I know," said Molly, "I know." "The girl has been here, who was shouting the



## CHAPTER XXXII.

It was nearly midnight when the cab drove up to the garden gate of The Cottage. Molly got out, and walked up the path with feet which almost tottered. She was faint with hunger, sick with shame and disappointment, almost benumbed with fright.

For as she reached the door of the house, the window above her, which was her father's, opened slowly, and Mr. Frewen's voice called out:

"Who's that?"

"It is I, Molly, papa," quavered out the girl after a pause, during which she had in vain tried to moisten her mouth, and to get back her ordinary voice.

The window closed with a snap, and Molly, after a second's pause, knocked at the door, and rang the bell. It was a feeble, uncertain sort of knock, but the pull she gave to the bell sent it clanging and echoing through the silent house.

In a very few moments, Bab, in her dressing-gown, with a white and frightened face, opened the door.

"You—Molly—oh!" she stammered aghast. "At least—I thought something must have gone wrong, and it must be you. But why did you ring so loudly? You have woke papa!"

"I know," said Molly, recklessly. "Let me in, Bab."

She pushed past her sister, who was shutting the

door noiselessly, when Mr. Frewen was heard coming down the stairs with a hurried, heavy tread.

“What do you mean,” he cried in a loud and angry voice, long before he had reached the bottom of the stairs—“what do you mean by coming home at this time of night? What have you got to say in explanation? No, no. Don’t prompt her,” he cried, catching the sound of a faint whisper from Bab. “Let her tell her own tale. The one is just as good as the other, no doubt.”

He had brought the matches with him, and he now proceeded to light the hall-lamp. Molly stood quite still in the full light of it, blinking, and shading her eyes. Bab tried to steal an arm round her, but Mr. Frewen waved her back.

“Leave her alone, leave her alone!” said he harshly. “Let her stand up for herself. Now, what have you got to say?”

Molly drew herself up, and looked steadily at her father.

“I will tell you,” she said.

“And never mind about dovetailing it, or making it appear probable,” snapped he testily. “I can do that for myself. Go on.”

For a moment, as she looked at the hard face, her courage failed, and the first sound that came from her lips was a sob. Mr. Frewen moved impatiently.

“Get the weeping done first, or leave it till afterward,” said he. “It interrupts the story.”

“All right,” said Molly, in a sudden loud voice. And flinging her hands behind her, and joining them, like a child repeating a hardly learned lesson, she

went on steadily: "I left home this morning to be married!"

In spite of himself, Mr. Frewen started.

"To be married!" echoed he.

"Yes. I told you the other day I was going to be married, and so I thought I was. You didn't ask to whom, and I didn't tell you. It was to Sir Walter Hay!"

She paused, expecting some terrible explosion of wrath. But there was none. Perhaps the communication opened Mr. Frewen's eyes a little as to his own sins of omission as a father, since it was through his neglect of his daughters that such an acquaintance had been possible.

There was a pause. Then he said, coolly and deliberately, without any apparent emotion:

"Go on."

The poor child, however, found it difficult to obey. Twice she began to speak, and broke down. Bab, drawing nearer, put out a kind little hand to her.

"Get away, get away from her," said Mr. Frewen, snappishly. "Let her tell her own story. It is a much more interesting one than any you could make."

Molly lifted her head and went on quickly:

"But he didn't marry me; he didn't want to marry me."

"Of course not," put in her father dryly.

"So I came back," said Molly, not looking at her father, but keeping her eyes fixed steadily on the wall. "Sam Ritchie brought me——"

“Oh! And is Sam Ritchie going to marry you?”

A sob choked Molly. Then she said, in a low voice, full of shame:

“No. Of course not.”

Another pause.

“Is that all?” asked her father.

“Yes. That’s all. Good-night, papa.”

She was moving toward the staircase, passing her father.

“Stay,” said he. “Don’t you think I have something to say to you after hearing all this?”

But Molly had heard and suffered enough. The knowledge that now, for once, she had told the whole truth, and had nothing to conceal, made her reckless, bold. She went on up the stairs.

“I’ll hear it to-morrow, papa,” said she, wearily. “I can’t listen now. I—I—I’m tired!”

Her voice broke, and she went up slowly and in silence the few remaining stairs. Mr. Frewen let her go, and retired to his own room, grumbling to himself, and snapping at Bab, who was overwhelmed by the thoroughness of her sister’s confession, as well as by the blow which had fallen on poor Molly.

She knocked softly at her sister’s door, but there was no answer. She tried to turn the handle, but it was locked. Miserable and alarmed, Bab called to Molly, but got no reply. Afraid of waking up the household, or of exciting her father’s anger once more, Bab did not dare to make much noise; but she wrapped her dressing-gown more tightly round her, and curled herself up on the mat of the door opposite to Molly’s, in the hope that Molly, who never slept with her door

locked, would turn the key when she thought everybody else was in bed.

It seemed a long time before the wished-for sound came to Bab's listening ears. But at last, as she had hoped, the key was softly turned in the lock, and Molly, opening the door very slowly, crept out.

There was no light at all in the corridor, but Bab heard a sound, like a smothered sob, escape from her sister from time to time as she hurried along on tiptoe toward the staircase. Bab followed, sick with fright. Such a sorrow, such a humiliation, as had fallen on her to-day bright Molly had never known; and Bab trembled for its effects on the wayward girl. Nothing but despair would have made her speak out as she had done to her father; nothing but despair would have made her shut the door in the face of her old confidante and sympathizer, Bab.

So thought the younger sister, following Molly with ever-increasing dread. Sir Walter's conduct had broken her heart, and what the result might be Bab dreaded to think.

She did not yet dare to speak to Molly, but she kept her in sight, just making out the outline of her sister's form creeping noiselessly down the stairs, and across the hall toward the back of the house. Bab turned cold and sick.

Was she going to the river?

Still following, Bab saw the door at the back of the hall open and Molly go quickly through. Bab went after her. The latch of the kitchen door went softly up, and Molly went through into the dairy beyond. Bab wondered whether she should speak to her before

she got outside; or whether she should wait, and throw her arms round her poor sister when the latter had got on the lawn outside.

Molly was already out of sight. Springing forward, with quicker steps, Bab went through the dairy after her, and making a little more noise than she meant to do in her haste, came suddenly upon Molly, with a huge carving-knife in her hand.

Bab gave a loud scream, and Molly dropped the knife.

“Oh!” cried Molly. “How you startled me!”

“How you startled *me!*” panted poor Bab, who was crying and sobbing. “What were you doing with that knife?”

“I was only going to cut myself some ham,” explained Molly deprecatingly. “Bab, I’m starving! I’ve had nothing—to eat—since breakfast!”

Bab burst into a roar of hysterical laughter.

“I—I thought you were going—going—to—to cut your throat!” explained she between her sobs.

Molly didn’t laugh. She began to munch a piece of bread she had taken out of the bread-pan, and as she munched, she explained solemnly:

“Bab,” she said in a grave whisper, “it’s awful enough as it is. But—I see now—it would have been ten times more awful if I’d married Sir Walter Hay. I begin to understand now, Bab, why girls want chap-erons! All men are not angels—or Sams!”

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE next day there came a decided lull in the tempest of emotion which had raged the night before. Bab made the needful explanations to Tryphena, to avoid the danger of Molly's being greeted by the vivacious younger sister with awkward remarks. Miss Roscoe had evidently been coached up by Mr. Frewen, for she was intensely discreet, and she looked rather frightened.

As for the master of the house himself, he did not appear at all, and Molly, who was in hourly expectation of being called to receive his threatened lecture, grew more hopeful as the morning passed away, and still her father made no sign.

After luncheon, however, they were all thrown into a flutter of excitement by the sudden and unexpected arrival of Edgar, whose first question, on getting inside the house, was whether they had seen or heard anything of Mrs. Weir.

Nobody had, and Tryphena burst into tears. Edgar patted her head, an unusual demonstration for him, and called her a silly girl quite gently.

"I'm going up to town," said Tryphena stubbornly, "to see this Lord Cloone——"

Edgar started.

"What do you know about Lord Cloone?" asked he uneasily.

“More than you think,” replied she with a knowing look. “I know he’s to be at the Metropole next week——”

“He’s there now,” said her brother.

“Very well then. I’m going up to see him, and to ask him what he meant by setting detectives to watch Mrs. Weir! And I’m going to make him see what trouble he’s brought about by his detestable spying. I’m sure,” she went on, “that it was the bother caused by this Lord Cloone which was at the bottom of papa’s illness!”

“Sh—sh! You mustn’t talk like that!” cried Edgar sharply, but with an expression of face which made all three girls think that Tryphena’s random shot had hit the mark. “Come in here, and speak like a reasoning creature; and don’t let the people at Richmond and Hampton Court hear what you have to say.”

Thus rebuked, Tryphena followed the rest into the drawing-room, where a silence fell upon the group.

For they were all suddenly conscious that they had lived through a long succession of strange experiences since they had last met, and the girls felt that they had more sympathy for the brother who could fall in love, even if it were with an adventuress, than with the hard Edgar of former days, who never seemed to care for anything but business.

It was Tryphena who broke the silence. She went suddenly down on her knees by her brother’s chair, and looked up searchingly into his face.

“Edgar,” she exclaimed, “you’ve been crying! Is it because you can’t find Mrs. Weir?”



Her sisters were aghast at her boldness. But Edgar was not offended. He smiled faintly, and said, not unkindly :

“You mustn’t ask questions, little girl. But, I’ll just tell you this—” and he bent his head and spoke close to her ear—“I’d give my right hand to find her!”

“Oh dear, oh dear, and so would I!” And Tryphena, finding at last a really sympathetic sharer of her troubles about her friend, thrust her long white hand into that of her brother. “What was the last you heard?”

Edgar sighed, and seemed to answer with an effort :

“Of course, since the governor disappeared and came down here, I’ve been staying at a hotel. I begged her to stay in the house, until—on the chance of the governor coming back. But just now, I went round after luncheon to tell her something, and I found that she had left the house, with her trunks, telling Johns she should not return, and leaving only this note. You may see if you like.”

But it seemed that he did not like to let the precious missive go out of his own hands, for he held one corner of it while Tryphena read these words :

“DEAR MR. FREWEN :—

“I have done all I can, and I need not tell you how sorry I am that it was so little. It is of no use for me to stay here any longer; I should only be in the way. I am afraid my efforts to be of service to your sisters have not been very successful, but you must tell Mr. Ritchie that I did my best. But they did not trust me, I am afraid. Give my love, especially to dear little Tryphena. I love that girl. For all your own

kindness and the confidence you were good enough to place in me I thank you deeply. I am staying with a lady who has been kind to me, and who has promised me shelter for the two days I shall still remain in England.

“Believe me yours sincerely,

“LAURA WEIR.”

Tryphena was crying when she gave back the note.

“Why does she go away? I don’t understand,” she faltered.

“Your sisters’ mistrust is one thing,” said Edgar bitterly, “and the babbling stories of that fool Bradley Ingledew—that’s another! And Lord Cloone, he’s the third.”

Tryphena started up.

“I’m going to see that man,” said she. “I believe he could tell us, if he choose, where she is!”

Edgar looked doubtful, but he was in a mood to catch at any straw. When she had run out of the room to get ready to go, Bab and Molly came nearer to him, with some shyness.

“It wasn’t Bradley’s fault that he told us what he had heard, was it?” said Bab persuasively.

“It’s his fault that he’s a fool. He’s always doing foolish things,” said her brother impatiently. “Look at this affair of Minnie Haarlem’s, for instance.”

Suddenly he broke off short and turned away to the window, as if anxious not to discuss the subject. Bab began to cry.

“Well, he has suffered for his folly. I’m sure he is miserable about it!” sobbed she.

For the first time since he had entered the house, Edgar smiled.

"No, he isn't," said he. "He isn't miserable about it at all. I've just seen him, and had a long talk with him; and I never saw him in better spirits in my life!"

Bab drew herself up, and hastened to dry her eyes.

"Well," she said, "and I'm not miserable about it either! It was a slight annoyance at the time, that's all."

"You ought to be rather glad to be out of it, a clever, decent-looking girl like you, Bab!" said Edgar. "He wasn't good enough for you!"

"There was never any question of that," answered Bab, haughtily. "I never thought of marrying him."

"Well, that's all right then," returned Edgar, jumping up from his chair as Tryphena entered the room with her hat on, putting on her gloves.

"Aren't you going to see the gov'nor?" asked Molly, who had remained all the time in the background.

He shook his head with a little uneasy frown.

"No. I won't disturb him," said he shortly. "Molly, you seem in the dumps. What's the matter with you?"

Her sisters thought she was going to burst out crying at this direct question; but Molly was learning to be brave. She looked at the carpet and grew very red as she answered quietly:

"I'm in disgrace."

And Edgar, whose own disappointed love had taught him mercy, gave a little compassionate grunt.

“We’re all in the same boat,” went on Molly, with eyes which were tearful, though her tone was bright. And now you know what it’s like yourself, you won’t be quite so hard, will you?”

Edgar did not look at her, but he shook hands with her with a kindly squeeze, and went out.

At the front door, Bab ran after him.

“Tell Bradley, if you meet him again,” said she haughtily, “that *I* don’t care either!”

Edgar promised that he would.

It was a very silent journey up to town. Edgar and Tryphena had never felt so much in sympathy with each other, but they had never had less to say. He was evidently oppressed and dispirited, and the girl hardly felt in the mood to comfort him. She wondered to herself how it was that Edgar, who was as particular about the conduct of his sisters as he could possibly be, and who was never tired of scolding them for their daring pranks, should allow her to take such a bold step as this of visiting Lord Cloone.

When they got to Waterloo she asked him hesitatingly whether he intended coming with her as far as the hotel. She had expected him to answer in the affirmative, but to her surprise he said:

“I think not. Lord Cloone is eccentric, and if he thought I had put you up to coming, he would not even see you.”

Tryphena, who felt her courage beginning to ooze away, wished she had stayed at home. After all, was it not rather a wild-goose chase, this errand on which she had come? Her first idea had been to upbraid this eccentric Lord Cloone for setting a detective

to watch Mrs. Weir; and to this had since been joined the belief that having been instrumental in driving her away, Lord Cloone might know where Mrs. Weir had gone. But on second thoughts this seemed highly improbable.

She was on the point of appealing to Edgar as to whether she had not better give up the idea of going to the hotel at all, when she found herself being helped into a hansom by her brother, and heard him give the direction to the driver. So, finding that she was, as she would have expressed it, "in for it," she plucked up her courage, and thrust out her hand to seize Edgar's with a strong grip.

"Good-by," said she. "Take care of yourself."

"Where shall I meet you afterward?" asked he. "I shall want to hear how the interview goes off, you know?"

Tryphena looked thoughtful.

"Supposing," said she, "we go and give Aunt Agatha a treat? We haven't inflicted ourselves on her for a long time, any of us."

Edgar nodded and waved his hand in farewell.

"All right," said he.

Tryphena thought, when she got out of the hansom at the hotel entrance, that the drive had not been quite so short.

She dismissed the cab, and asked for Lord Cloone with a faltering voice. She would give no name, but after a few minutes she was informed that his lordship would see her, and she was taken up in the lift to the second floor, where she was shown into Lord Cloone's sitting-room.

All the speeches, the eloquent and well-worded speeches, with which Tryphena had primed herself for the occasion, went out of her head, and left her silent and dismayed.

For instead of being brought at once face to face with Lord Cloone, as she had expected, she found, on raising her eyes to those of the solitary occupant of the great room, that she was alone with—Mr. Brown!

He wore a frayed old shooting-coat over a flannel shirt, and was looking more untidy than ever.

Tryphena gave him a withering look.

“I want to see Lord Cloone,” she said.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

TRYPHENA'S courage had all run away before she entered Lord Cloone's sitting-room; but when she found herself face to face with the detective who had been set to watch Mrs. Weir, and who had taken such an extraordinary view of his duties as to make love in a way to Tryphena herself, her indignation brought some of her lost spirit back to her.

"I want to see Lord Cloone," she repeated more haughtily than before, glancing toward the door of an inner room, opening out of the sitting-room, in which she supposed him to be.

"I quite understand," said Mr. Brown, who had thrown the end of the cigarette he had been smoking out of the window. "Won't you sit down?"

And he offered her a chair, in a manner which suggested some shame, some contrition for his past conduct, but also some share of annoyance with her, and constraint in her presence.

"No, thank you," said Tryphena coldly.

"Well, then, what is it you have to say?"

"Nothing—to you, Mr. Brown."

"Oh, but you have, I think. I am the person you wish to see."

For a moment Tryphena stared at him in absolute bewilderment. Then a thousand circumstances which had puzzled her before flashed into her mind with a

new meaning, and she turned white to the lips with the shock of the discovery she had made.

“You—are—Lord Cloone!”

“Yes. *Now* will you sit down?”

But Tryphena took no notice of his words. She was clinging to the back of a chair; she was looking at him with starting, wild eyes. A horrible suspicion, which had already crossed Bab’s mind, but which neither of her sisters had as yet entertained, took away her breath, her power of movement. At last she gasped out:

“You attacked my father! I saw you with my own eyes! You have not been watching Mrs. Weir; you have been watching *him!*”

The blood came into Lord Cloone’s dark face. He was in a difficult position, face to face with this straightforward, frank young girl, with her searching eyes. He began to stammer, to deny.

But she would have no evasions, no falsehoods.

“What is the use of trying to hide anything now?” said she, speaking openly, fearlessly enough now that she understood the position of affairs. “We are wilful and foolish in many ways, we girls, but we are not such fools as people think. There is a horrible secret that we shall have to know, that I can guess already. You may as well tell me the worst we have to expect.”

She drew herself up majestically, a goddess in brown holland and coffee-colored lace. The broad-brimmed sailor hat she wore, of burnt straw, formed a most becoming frame to her sunny gold-brown hair and her handsome, fresh young face. Lord Cloone



gave a rapid glance at her, and then looked out of the window. The girl's whole attitude, her voice, her manner, her proud, pleading eyes—were extremely touching: and he did not want to be touched.

“I would much rather not tell you. It is very unpleasant to have to talk to a lady about the matter,” said he with elaborate coldness of manner. “I shall be much obliged if you will put these questions to some one else.”

“There's no need,” said she in a hoarse voice. “How can I help guessing, knowing, what it is? Papa was your trustee, managed your affairs while you were abroad. You had come back suddenly, unexpectedly. Papa is taken ill. You attack him; you, a young man, attack an old one! You—you—you—Oh, how can I help knowing that there is something wrong.”

She began to sob a little, but not loudly, while Lord Cloone, affecting to hum an air softly to himself, and to take things very coolly, paced rapidly up and down the long room.

“What are you going to do?” she asked at last, controlling her voice by a great effort. “Are you—are you going to put him in prison?”

Lord Cloone stopped with an air of exasperation.

“I don't know what I am going to do. And you have no right to ask me,” said he angrily. “This visit of yours puts me in a very painful position. But I am not going to be talked over; certainly not. I have been infamously treated, I have had my confidence shamefully betrayed. I am sorry for you and your sisters, very sorry. Mrs. Weir took care

that I should be." Tryphena looked up, with sudden comprehension. "She tried to interest me in you all, introduced me, worked upon my feelings in every possible way——"

"Oh, oh, oh!" cried Tryphena, remembering that most perplexing introduction, by Mrs. Weir, of the gentleman whose name she did not seem to know!

"But justice is justice, and it is not my fault that a man's own misdeeds involve pain to his family. And I think, Miss Frewen, considering all things, you might have spared me this interview."

"But I didn't understand," faltered Tryphena in a meeker voice than before. "I knew nothing at all of this dreadful story till I came. They told me Lord Cloone was an o-old crank, and I came to ask him what he meant by setting detectives to watch Mrs. Weir, and to see whether he knew what had become of her!"

"But somebody must have sent you, have known of your coming?" said Lord Cloone suspiciously. "Or how did you find out where I was?"

"My brother Edgar knew," admitted Tryphena.

"Ah!" said Lord Cloone, "I thought so! Well, all he has got by this embassy is this: that I shall change my hotel, and if I find I am still persecuted, I shall go abroad. My agents can do all that is necessary without my presence!"

"That means, I suppose," said Tryphena, suddenly flashing out again with spirit, "all that is necessary for the ruin of poor papa! Well, Lord Cloone, I didn't come here to intercede for him, and I see you would not have heard me if I had. I apologize for

my intrusion, and I hope you may get all the satisfaction possible out of the ruin we have, as you say, well deserved."

"I did not say that," said Lord Cloone tartly. "I said I was sorry you were involved in it, and so I am. Do you think a rogue ought to get off scot-free just because he has a lot of pretty daughters?"

He could have bitten his tongue out with vexation the next moment for having, in the heat of his anger, allowed the word "rogue," which was always in his thoughts, to escape his lips. Tryphena grew suddenly pale, and her eyes filled with tears.

"That is not the way we think of papa, remember that!" she said, with some dignity. "And remember, please, also, that it was not his daughters who brought themselves under your notice. Mrs. Weir made a great mistake in doing so. You need not trouble your head on our account, I assure you. Good-afternoon."

She made him a very dignified bow, and turned to leave the room.

Lord Cloone, who was by no means so indifferent as she supposed, intercepted her at the door. He had always admired this girl, and had fought strenuously against the infatuation of which he found himself in danger. His sense of justice, and his natural longing for justice on the man who had betrayed his trust revolted from the thought of letting off old Frewen easily on account of his handsome daughter.

But he now began to find his feelings of resentment and justice growing weak, in spite of himself, under the influence of the young girl's beautiful presence,

of her spirit, and her ingenuousness. "Won't you at least shake hands, for the sake of the jolly day on the river with Mr. Brown?" said he.

Tryphena blushed, and hesitated a moment. It was a strange thing to remember now the feelings she had had toward "Mr. Brown" in the first days of their acquaintance.

"I took Mr. Brown for a thief, and then I was told he was a detective," she said at last bluntly. "I think, if you please, that I prefer to forget Mr. Brown!"

Lord Cloone bowed in silence, and opened the door for her.

"Good-afternoon," said he coldly.

"Good-afternoon."

She flew down the staircase, and out into the air. Her head seemed to be spinning round. She plunged into the crowd of omnibuses, carts, and carriages in the road without a thought of where she was going; and it was not until she felt a hand dragging her violently backward that she realized that she was in danger of being run over.

"Where on earth are you going to?" said Edgar's voice behind her.

"Edgar! Oh, why didn't you tell me who Lord Cloone was?"

"Well, if I had, you wouldn't have seen him. Was it any good?"

"No, indeed. He was angrier when I came away than he was when I went. And oh, Edgar, I heard some dreadful things! About papa! Oh dear, is it all true?"

“Yes. It’s true enough. Smee and I have been afraid of a crash for more than two years now. And now this means ruin. Lord Cloone’s not to blame.”

“Oh, Edgar!”

“It’s no use talking about it. In fact I can’t talk about it—to you. I’m going to take you to Aunt Agatha’s. She’ll have to be consulted presently, as to what is to be done with you girls. I’ll try and prepare the ground this afternoon, if the old lady’s in a good humor.”

He hailed a hansom, and they drove to Wilton Place. Miss Melbury was at home, and in a few moments Edgar and Tryphena found themselves treading, with instinctively softer steps than they usually took, the slightly worn carpet of the room where Aunt Agatha sat in state.

It was not Miss Melbury’s “day,” and the little *tête-à-tête* corners were unoccupied, and the subdued clatter of the dainty tea-cups and the little silver spoons was unheard. The long rooms, never more than half-lighted, looked full of shadows; the brocade screens stood up like gaunt ghosts among the vacant chairs. The smell of faded rose-leaves seemed stronger than ever.

Only in the furthest corner of the furthest room there was a subdued murmur of ladies’ voices.

“Bother!” muttered Edgar. “She’s got some old woman or other with her!”

But Tryphena, without answering her brother, ran forward with an eager look on her face. Edgar heard her joyful cry, “Oh! oh!” as she reached the end of the inner room before him.

And when he came up, he found her in Mrs. Weir's arms.

He stood petrified with amazement. Miss Melbury, who was holding out her hand to him, had to call him by name before he recovered from the stupefaction into which the discovery of Mrs. Weir in his aunt's house had thrown him.

"This is a pretty business of your father's," she said to him in a low voice, offering him the chair by her side, when he had shaken hands with her and with Mrs. Weir in a constrained and formal fashion.

He started and glanced from Mrs. Weir, who was talking to Tryphena, to Miss Melbury.

"Oh, yes, I know all about it. I have known all about everything from the very first," went on Aunt Agatha. "I took a fancy to Laura, and she, I think, to me; at any rate she confided in me from the outset, told me all about herself, and took my advice at the various points of the exciting adventures of the past few weeks. She is a good creature, and I am heartily sorry for her. And when she told me she was going to leave your father's house and to go abroad again, I begged her to stay with me a few days first."

Mrs. Weir and Tryphena had withdrawn out of hearing of these two, discussing very sadly the affairs of the three girls. They had not the heart to mention the more serious matter of Mr. Frewen's ruin. The one matter on which your father seems to have shown judgment," said Miss Melbury, "is in his treatment of this clever and good-hearted woman. It seems he recognized her, the moment she called upon him for

the first time, as the wife of a rascal named Lowenstein, who was mixed up with Sir Walter Hay and some others, in some very shady transactions which your father and Lord Cloone's father were the means of showing up."

"I know," said Edgar. "And all that could be said against her was that she was a devoted wife to a bad husband."

"And that she helped him to escape from justice," added Miss Melbury. "That was what people could not forgive. And that was why I consider your father acted well toward her. He saw that her fault, if you can call it a fault, was one to be forgiven in a woman, and he gave her what she wanted, a respectable home in England. Used as she had been to a round of foreign boarding-houses, perhaps we can hardly appreciate what the change was to her."

"She didn't tell me that," said Edgar, who was trembling as if with cold. "To me she has been very reticent about herself. Is—is her husband dead? I have never dared to ask her."

"Yes. The crash and the exposure killed him. He died abroad within a year of his having to leave England."

"Why does she want to go abroad again now?"

"What else is there for her to do? She has been recognized, pointed at." Edgar growled. "She says even your sisters, except Tryphena, suspect and distrust her."

"The little fools! But their minds have been poisoned. And, remember, things have looked very fishy at home lately. Bab is clever, and must have

known something was wrong, without knowing exactly what it was. I see that," admitted Edgar.

"Of course. When your father heard that Lord Cloone had found out something, and when he shut himself up, pretending to be ill, in order to keep out of his client's way, the girls must have seen that his illness was puzzling. And when he confided in Mrs. Weir, and got her to help him to keep up the deception, of course she drew remarks upon herself."

"You know, of course, that she saw Lord Cloone, and tried to interest him in the girls?" said Edgar. "And that she managed to trace out and restore to Lord Cloone some of the family jewels of his that my father had the madness to lend, or give, or something, to some woman?"

"Yes," said Miss Melbury.

"And don't you think," went on Edgar, "that there's just a hope, considering what a high character my father has borne for so long, that a jury might pronounce him insane?"

Aunt Agatha looked shrewd.

"No," she said decidedly. "The insanity which makes a man a tyrant to his family and a slave to his passions is not treated in asylums."

Edgar groaned.

"I'm very sorry for you, my poor boy," she said. "For you will have to bear part of the blame, though you have not shared the fault of your father."

He looked at the old lady with a face which looked for the moment as old as his own father's.

"You don't know what it has been like," said he. "For the last two years I have lived in torment. The



girls must have told you what a bear I've been to them——”

“They have,” admitted Aunt Agatha smiling.

“But there has been good cause for it. For many years I've known my father to be a hypocrite, austere to the world, and—well, lax enough and to spare in his own life. But it was only a little while ago that I found he was using Lord Cloone's money for his private extravagances. I consulted Smee. He could do little. I could do nothing. Remonstrance was—well, you know my father! We could only wait, and hope that he would be able to make the losses good when the time came, or that something, anything would happen to avert what we knew he deserved. At any rate Lord Cloone seemed to have deserted England, and the blow was a long time in coming. Then he came back unexpectedly, and—well, you know what is the result. We are ruined. The question is: What is to become of the poor girls?”

“Well, don't worry your head about them. I shall have to do something for them, I suppose. I only hope,” went on Aunt Agatha with a sigh, “that they won't make the place quite a bear-garden, if I have to take them in!”

Edgar thanked her with a sinking heart. The vision of his wilful, energetic, perhaps somewhat noisy sisters, having to tone themselves down to the neutral tint suitable to the subdued light and the old brocades, the fragile furniture, and the close, rose-scented atmosphere, was not a reassuring one. He rose to go, and called Tryphena. She passed him, and went to Miss Melbury to say good-by.

Edgar crossed the floor to where Mrs. Weir, looking handsomer than ever in a gown of pale yellow-green china crape, was looking at the miniatures in a curiosity table.

She turned to him with a gentle smile. Without knowing the extent to which she had attracted and fascinated this rather curt and cold-mannered man, Mrs. Weir was of course not ignorant enough to suppose that she was altogether indifferent to him. Now she suddenly perceived in his dark eyes a look which told her more than she had ever guessed.

“You are going abroad again?” he said abruptly.

“Yes. What else is there for me to do?”

There was a pause. Then he said, in a constrained voice, in which, however, Mrs. Weir’s ear detected the ring of strong but subdued passion:

“Nothing else. As the case stands, nothing. But, if these things had not happened that have happened; if the firm to which I belong had stood now where it stood five years ago, I should not have let you go.”

“You would not!”

“I should not. I should have told you that there was a man in your own country strong enough to protect you, to take you up safe and high out of reach of the words and looks which could hurt you. I should have prevailed upon you, by the love I bear you, to be my wife. As it is, I can do nothing, say nothing—but—good-by.”

She let him take her hand. She only looked up for a moment. But in the momentary contact of

their fingers, in the quick glance of eye to eye, he saw something, felt something, which gave him comfort, if it was a comfort full of pain. He saw that, if Mrs. Weir was something to him, he was not wholly indifferent to Mrs. Weir.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

ON the three days which followed Tryphena's rash visit to Lord Cloone, a dull and heavy cloud of suspense and sorrowful anxiety seemed to hang over the pretty house at Teddington.

During all that time, they saw nothing of their father. Mr. Frewen, on a plea of ill-health which they took care to satisfy themselves was unfounded, shut himself up from his daughters, and refused all the entreaties they made, by notes and verbal messages, that he would see them.

It seemed that he tolerated, rather than encouraged, Miss Roscoe's attentions; for her allusions to him grew less enthusiastic as time went on. The girls began to feel sorry for her, and to wonder when all this would end, and how soon the thunderbolt would come which they were all expecting.

Bab had taken the news of her father's delinquencies very quietly. She had guessed something, though not indeed all of the story.

"Do you remember, Molly," she asked her bewildered and miserable sister, when the recital was over, "one night when we walked up Regent Street with Sam, and when he tumbled us into a hansom very suddenly, just opposite the Café Royal?"

Molly remembered it quite well.

“And do you remember that he whisked us off the pavement in a great hurry, as if he had seen something he didn't want us to see?”

Molly nodded.

“Well, there were some people there, going into the Café, that he didn't want us to see. And papa was one of them.”

“I don't see what that has to do with this business of Lord Cloone's!”

“Only this, that we always thought him a recluse, but he wasn't.”

None of the girls said any more about it. Their poor little hearts were too sore. They had never been able to love their father with the usual open affection of child to parent. But they had respected him deeply; they had feared him, they had thought of him as a person too good for the ordinary world; and to find out the mistake they had made, and in this appalling manner, was a blow to their own self-respect and to all the traditions of their childhood.

It was on the morning of the fourth day that Miss Roscoe rushed into the breakfast-room with horror on her face.

“Your father! Your father! Mr. Frewen!” she gasped out, looking from one to the other of the girls, scarcely able to articulate.

Bab, who was the most collected of the three, addressed her.

“What is the matter?” she asked, white to her lips.

“Matter! Why, that he's gone away—gone I tell you—gone without having slept in his bed!” cried the

governess, whose alarm was even greater than that of the girls.

“Oh, but that’s nothing dreadful,” said Tryphena quickly. “That’s how he came down here, without notice to anybody. He’s gone back to Cirencester Terrace, most likely.”

But then it came out that Miss Roscoe, who was holding in her hand a crushed and crumpled note, had taken the liberty of opening an envelope she had found in Mr. Frewen’s room, although it was addressed to Molly. As she gave it up now, with apologies, no notice was taken of this breach of honor, “which,” as Molly afterward said to Bab, “was just what was to be expected of her!”

The note informed his daughter that he had made up his mind to take a voyage for the sake of his health, and that he had thought it better to go away quietly, without any fuss. Their brother Edgar would look after them, and Mr. Frewen hoped they would behave better in the future than they had done in the past, and that they would not forget that they owed a debt of gratitude to Mrs. Weir.

“Not a word about me, you see!” sobbed Miss Roscoe. “Nothing but that cat! That adventuress who set herself up as a rival to you girls, as I’m sure I never did!”

This last statement was undoubtedly true, and the girls said something to soothe her feelings, being indeed rather sorry for her. If anything, she felt the overthrow of her rather chilling and ungrateful divinity more than the girls themselves did.

A telegram was at once sent to Edgar, who came

down that afternoon. He was in the lowest possible spirits, and thought that Lord Cloone would take this action on the part of his defaulting trustee as the clew to begin proceedings against him.

“He is keeping very dark at present,” added Edgar gloomily. “I haven’t heard a word from him since the day I saw you all last. But the blow must come now, I should think. All you girls can do is to keep quiet, and to try and keep out of mischief while Smee and I do the best we can to settle something to keep you going.”

“We ought to leave this place and take a cheaper one, a real cottage without any garden or drainage or kitchen range or anything,” said Molly with energy.

“And be governesses, if anybody will let us teach their children when they know!” said Tryphena lugubriously.

“And never have any more nice frocks!” cried Bab with a tear on her cheek.

In a subdued and rather childish way, with sighs and tears both for themselves and “poor papa,” and with kind thoughts of Edgar, who had grown so gentle to them, the girls spent the next day in making plans for effacing themselves from the world they loved, and for confronting a hard battle with life under new and dreadful conditions.

Miss Roscoe still remained with them, a dim and tearful background to the doleful picture. She found the girls more sympathetic than she could have hoped, and was quite ready, even anxious to remain with them as long as they would let her.

“But we can’t afford the luxury of a chaperon any

longer," remarked Bab with a sigh when she was alone with her sisters on the lawn in the evening. "I can't say we've appreciated the luxury while we had it; but I expect we shall get a good deal more liberty than we care for now."

And Molly and Tryphena sighed in chorus.

Then silence fell upon the group, and before anybody spoke again, certain sounds from the house behind them attracted their attention, and looking round, they saw the once familiar figures of Bradley Ingledew and Sam, standing in the drawing-room, waiting to be invited to come out.

Molly sprang up, blushed deeply, and sat down again. Bab, although her fingers twitched and her bosom heaved under her gray muslin blouse, pretended not to see them. The more artless Tryphena rushed across the lawn toward them with a cry of unfeigned delight.

"Oh, oh!" cried she ingenuously. "This is lovely, to be able to have one more game at playing the old times before it's all over forever!"

She had shaken hands with both the young men, who were strangely shy and confused, and had detained Sam to tell him something of the family misfortunes, while Bradley was allowed to go down by himself toward the other girls.

Bab affected to be overwhelmed with amazement at this audacious visit; but the pretence was a very feeble one, for in truth the sight of their old friends had all but caused both girls to break down. They shook hands with him in a constrained manner, while he on his side was as awkward as any schoolboy.



“I will go and order some tea for you, or some claret-cup, or something,” said Bab, when a very few words had been exchanged.

She wanted to go away by herself and cry; she felt that if she stayed she would give way before him, and disgrace herself forever.

But when she had got half-way across the grass, skimming along the ground as swiftly as a hare, she found that she was pursued, and dropped immediately into a slow walk, lest Bradley should think she was running away from him.

“We are very glad to see you again,” said she coldly, without looking at him, “as this is the last time we shall be at the cottage to receive our friends.”

“Friends!” echoed Bradley in a husky voice. “You still call me your friend then? You are still good enough to do that!”

“Oh well, I suppose so. I suppose it is out of kindness to old friends, acquaintances, whatever you like, that you come to say good-by to them, having heard of—of——”

“Yes, yes, I know all about it,” whispered Bradley gruffly. “I suppose, Bab, I suppose, if I’d been free, if I hadn’t had a wife, you know, you wouldn’t have married me, would you?”

“Oh, no, no, of course not!” returned Bab hastily, with a catch in her breath.

“No, of course you wouldn’t,” Bradley hurried on, “so I shall have to find a wife somewhere else, of course, as I’ve found out that the lady I married had a husband living in America when she married me! Edgar knew it; he had found it out himself when he

himself had thoughts of marrying her. He had the sense to make inquiries, which I hadn't," added Bradley with doubtful grammar but deep interest.

Bab had stopped short, and was looking at him with such an expression of beatific happiness on her pale face that it was quite natural of Bradley to think that she would be less harsh than her words had portended.

Their eyes met once, and then he whispered:

"When it's all settled—it won't take long, you know—we'll be married here—at the new church, and we'll spend our honeymoon on the river, won't we? and won't it be jolly, eh, Bab?"

But Bab couldn't answer: she was really crying now; the fact could not be gainsaid.

"Oh, Bradley," she whispered at last, "hasn't this been a lesson—never, never to think about enjoying one's self any more?"

"I don't know about that," said Bradley. "I think we shall enjoy ourselves very much. You don't know how I've missed you, Bab. I never thought I cared for you half so much. You make all the other women one meets seem so *stodgy*."

"I'm going to be *stodgy* myself now," said Bab, with a sigh of resignation.

"You can't."

"I'm going to try, anyhow. I've been thinking lately, really thinking, and I've come to a lot of conclusions. I've reformed myself, and now I'm going to reform you. Do you think you shall like being reformed?"

"Awfully, by you! Do you know that I've known

this for nearly a week? And I couldn't come down and tell you before because Edgar, when he told me, made me promise not to come near you. He said we were not suited to each other; we were both too frivolous; and we should get over it. But when I heard—something——”

“Yes, yes,—don't talk about it!”

“When I heard that, I went to Edgar and told him he must let me off my promise. And he said ‘All right!’ And it is all right, isn't it?”

They had got round the side of the house by this time, where the evergreens were tall and thick. And under the shelter of their branches, Bradley persuaded Bab to let him have a kiss, “just one to go on with, to make sure she had forgiven him!”

In the mean time Tryphena had brought Sam down the garden, until they came face to face with Molly. She was very pale, very timid, quite unlike the merry, off-hand, rosy Molly of the old days.

But Sam's manner put her at ease, or almost at her ease, at once. He was quiet, and kind, and unconstrained, not like the Sam who had brought her home from Windsor, but like the old Sam whom she had teased, worried, and tyrannized over. With just this one difference, that there was no trace of the lover in his manner.

He talked about trifles, and so easily that when Tryphena quietly withdrew from the conversation, and then from the vicinity, Molly was able to go on chatting with very little effort.

He said he had seen Edgar, and he said it in such a way as to show Molly that there were no unpleasant

explanations left for her to make. He just nodded, and then she nodded, and went on telling him about the arrangements they were going to make.

"We shall all have to teach or to do something," she said. "Even if the firm isn't ruined altogether, as we expect, it will be a long time before Edgar and Mr. Smee can pull straight. And we want to do something. We've not made very good use of our time up to now." And Molly blushed. "Now we are going to do wonders."

"Poor girls!" said Sam sympathetically. "At least, poor Tryphena and poor Molly!" She looked up in surprise. "Why, yes, for Bab will be all right. It turns out he was not really Miss Haarlem's husband after all. She had been married in America before; and her husband, her real husband, that is, is alive."

Molly clapped her hands with delight.

"Oh, I'm so glad! Then there will be one of us to come to a good end after all!"

Sam laughed a little.

"Why, I hope you all will," said he, with perhaps a slight tinge of constraint in his manner. "It's a good thing that poor Bab won't have to give up her pretty dresses and things, isn't it? I believe to be what she calls 'dowdy' would break her heart."

"I'm no so sure about that," said Molly. "Bab pretends to be silly and frivolous; it suits her, and amuses everybody. But I believe she's clever enough for a Senior Wrangler, if she chose to try! And if she found herself married to a man who couldn't afford to give her expensive clothes, she'd manage to look as nice in cheap ones."

There was a short pause. Then he said, without looking at her:

“And what are you going to do, Molly?”

“Well, I don't quite know yet. You see I'm not clever, like Bab.”

“No. You're not as clever as Bab, Molly, certainly.”

“Well, you needn't tell me I'm stupid, even if I am!” retorted she, with a sudden return to her old manner.

“I don't think I did say so,” said Sam.

Molly blushed a deep crimson, and after a pause, said humbly:

“Well, even if you had said so, you'd have had a perfect right to, after—after the stupid things you've known me to do, the mistakes you've seen me make.”

There was a very long pause. It touched Sam painfully to see his little tyrant so humble. Quite suddenly he got up.

“Well,” he said, “I didn't come to inflict a long call upon you this time——”

“Call!” echoed Molly dismally. “You used not to pay us calls at all, Sam!”

“No, I used to be a sort of permanent infliction,” said he. “Always turning up whether I was wanted or not. I've learned modesty and discretion now. But I shall look in again, to see if there's anything I can do for you. There might be something, you know, if, as you say you're going to move. I can take down pictures and hang them up again, and do all sorts of things of that sort, you know.”

“Yes, I know you can do everything, Sam.”

In silence, they walked on to the house, passed through it with few words, and reached the front-door. It stood open, on account of the heat, and the entrance was shaded by a striped awning.

“Well, good-by, Molly,” said Sam, as he held out his hand. “You will be sure and let me know if there’s anything I can do, won’t you?”

Molly did not answer. She did try to, but she couldn’t get the words out. She had learned a great many things lately, and the number of things she had learned about Sam, and without any particular teaching too, was enormous. And to see him go like this, when she had longed to see him so passionately, was more than she could bear.

Her fair face twitched, the tears rolled down, and she suddenly turned away.

“Goo—ood-by!” sobbed she.

“Molly!” said he. “Molly!”

As she went back into the hall, he pursued her, calling to her as he went. At the foot of the stairs he caught her round the waist, stooped down, looked into her blushing, shy face.

“Molly! Do you care for me? Care for me—the way I want you to?”

For answer she flung her arms round his neck.

“Oh, Sam!” she sobbed, “when I thought—I thought I should never see you any more, I could have d-d-drowned myself! I’ve loved you all the time, ever so long, I think, Sam, only I didn’t know it!”

She was very gentle, very sweet, very humble, and supremely happy.

“You’re ever so much too good for me, you know, Sam,” said she presently. “You’d much better have married the girl in the boat! Why didn’t you?”

“There were one or two obstacles in the way,” answered he frankly. “In the first place she’s got a husband, my brother in fact——”

“Oh, what a shame! Then it was only a trick to annoy me!”

“Well, I won’t say it wasn’t. And the other obstacle—I suppose you can guess what the other obstacle was?”

“Me?”

Sam nodded.

They went into the drawing-room and sat down by the window, and Molly told him, bit by bit, with a good many blushes, a good many interruptions, the story of the way in which her eyes had gradually opened, and how she had learnt to tell where her heart was, and had promised to marry Sir Walter out of the depth of her despair, when she thought the her faithful old Sam had deserted her forever.

“Why weren’t you kinder to me, Sam, that day you brought me home from Windsor?”

Sam hesitated.

“Well, I was angry with you, for one thing, for being such a little donkey. And I couldn’t have been kind to you without making love to you, for I wanted to kiss you whenever I looked at you. And how could I, you know, just after all that affair with that scoundrel?”

“Sam, how did you happen to be in Windsor on that day?”

"Bab put me up to it. I watched you come out, and followed you. I knew that if you met that rascal you would want your old pal."

"Oh, Sam!"

"But mind, you put me to a lot of trouble and expense, and I expect you to make it up to me by the most perfectly submissive and respectful behavior."

"All right. For how long?"

"Forever."

"Oh!"



## CHAPTER XXXVI. AND LAST.

It was two days after the reappearance at The Cottage of Sam and Bradley, when the parlor-maid brought word to Tryphena, who was just going out in her canoe, that a gentleman was in the drawing-room, who wished to see her.

“Who is it?” said Tryphena, with her heart beating very fast.

“He didn’t give his name, miss, but I think it’s Mr. Brown.”

“Tell him—” began Tryphena, and stopped short.

“Mr. Brown” had caught sight of her from the drawing-room window, and was coming over the grass towards her.

“All right, Anne,” said Tryphena.

The maid went back to the house, and Tryphena, trembling from head to foot, waited with her paddle in her hand, until Lord Cloone came up to her.

He was better dressed than she had ever seen him before, and had put on a new frock-coat and tall hat in honor of this ceremonious visit.

He and Tryphena eyed each other with something of the air of combatants as he approached her. She was very cold, although, for the sake of the whole family, she tried to be civil.

“I hope I am not disturbing you, Miss Frewen?”

“Not at all,” said Tryphena, putting down her paddle, and rather stiffly offering her hand.

“I am sorry,” said he, “that circumstances have made a visit from me such an unpleasant ordeal.”

“We can’t help that,” said Tryphena.

“But I thought, in view of the fact—that a certain person has been allowed to get safely away——”

“Allowed!” gasped Tryphena.

“Why, yes. You don’t suppose I didn’t know of it. He has been watched for weeks. My agents saw him get on the boat.”

Tryphena began to tremble, and tears caused by her agitation sprang to her eyes.

“I should have thought, I say,” persisted Lord Cloone, “that in view of that circumstance, you might have found it less difficult to speak to me as if I were a fellow-Christian.”

The girl was silent. Her head swam. Astonishment, incredulity, gratitude, and other feelings that she could not analyze filled her heart and her mind. At last she said, almost sobbing:

“Do you mean that you have—let him off? Forgiven him?”

“No, I don’t mean that,” said Lord Cloone sharply. “Breach of trust is a thing I could never forgive. But I am willing, for the sake of—of *others*, to let him off a million times more easily than he deserves!”

She came a step nearer, she clasped her hands involuntarily. She looked, Lord Cloone thought, more beautiful, more attractive, in this womanly attitude than she had ever looked before.

“Oh!” It was hardly more than a sob.

“That is to say,” went on Lord Cloone in a dogged tone, “as he has exiled himself, I won’t have him brought back and prosecuted. And I will give the other members of the firm, your brother and Mr. Smee, time to make good their partner’s defalcations. That,” finished he in a less decided tone, “is what I came to say, Miss Frewen. And I think you must admit that I haven’t been so very brutal after all.”

Tryphena’s fresh young face beamed with gratitude, with delight.

“Brutal!” echoed she. “You have acted magnificently, nobly. I don’t know what to say to you; I really don’t.”

“Say one of those pretty things you used to say to—Mr. Brown.”

Tryphena started. Mr. Brown had got lost sight of lately, in the new and terrible discovery of Lord Cloone. She grew suddenly shy.

“I thought that I’d atoned for all my misdeeds!” exclaimed Lord Cloone ruefully.

“Oh, you have, but—not for Mr. Brown’s!”

“Why, what harm did he ever do?”

“He got me laughed at, and chaffed, dreadfully. They told me,” dashed on Tryphena with her usual headlong rashness, “that I’d fallen in love with a detective!”

A great and instant change in both followed these words. For while the girl realized the awful admission she had made, and was dumb with discomfiture, Lord Cloone took instant advantage of the indiscreet remark, and came a step nearer, and laughed at her.

“Fallen in love! Did they say that?”

“Yes. To—to annoy me!” said poor Tryphena, crimson and ready to cry.

“It wasn’t true then?”

“Of course not. Of course not!”

“Did they say anything about the detective’s having fallen in love with you?”

“N-n-o. Oh, no!”

“That’s left for me to say then,” said Lord Cloone. “Sit down here and let me tell you all about it.”

Tryphena hesitated, but gave way. And Lord Cloone, very earnestly, very deliberately, told her how hard he had fought against the attraction she had for him, and how it had finally conquered him, and brought him to Teddington that afternoon to tell her so.

And when Molly and Bab, who had been up to town to announce their respective engagements to their Aunt Agatha, came back home, they were surprised to find that the terrible man who was to bring about the ruin of the family, the monster whose nod could bring the firm to the ground, was sitting in the drawing-room with Tryphena, and calling that young woman by her Christian name.

Bab saw the situation at a glance. The childish younger sister, the tomboy, the girl who never could be induced to stand still and have her dresses made to fit her, was going to cut them all out, to make a great match, to be Lady Cloone.

Tryphena hardly realized this yet, happy child that she was. The thought that, next to the escape of her father, was giving joy to her affectionate heart, was that now Edgar could marry her darling Mrs. Weir, and be one of the family.

“Just think of it,” said she to Molly, who had been showing her a photograph of Sam with the remark that it wasn’t half nice enough; “she won’t be our widow any longer, Molly. She’ll be our sister, our own sister!”

“And we’ll get them to marry very soon,” suggested Lord Cloone. “It will do for a rehearsal for—for the rest of us!”

Then there was a knock at the door, and a silence fell upon them till Sam came in.

And the talk grew very low and very intermittent in the room.

There were bright dreams of happy days in store in all their hearts, dreams of the love which was to sweeten and make bright their whole lives.

**THE END.**















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