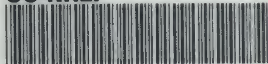

ALTIORA PETO

LAURENCE OLIPHANT

[1890] See date at end of advts

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BY

LAURENCE OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'PICCADILLY,' 'TRAITS AND TRAVESTIES,' ETC.

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ALTIORA PETO.

CHAPTER I.

ALTIORA'S FIRST PROBLEM.

Mamma wants to know what I am always scribbling,—if she was a more sympathetic person I shouldn't always scribble—I should pour my heart out into her confiding bosom instead of upon blank sheets of paper; but it is not possible to feel one's self bursting with thoughts without giving them expression in words. If they are not spoken ones, they must be written ones. I have always had a strong impression that I should have found a congenial nature in the late Mr Peto—I mean papa—who died before I was born, and who was a profound but eccentric philosopher, with a quaint vein of humour, of which, indeed, I am the victim; for his dying request to mamma was, that if I was a girl, I should be called Altiora—thus making me the subject of a gentle pun, that will stick to me till I die, or

marry. It was a sort of moral legacy which he left me in default of anything more substantial—a perpetual reminder that I was to soar; and then he peacefully passed away, "from waste of nervous tissue,"—at least that was what mamma says the doctors called it. They might as well have said protoplasmic decay, or simpler still, "want of breath," as far as any real apprehension of the matter on their part went.

I have a great many odd feelings about papa: one is that I am morally convinced that the whole of my character is affected by the fact of his having died prior to my birth. Although I am not a spiritualist, I have an indefinable consciousness that he has, in consequence, been able to exercise an occult influence over me from the first moment of my existence, which would not have been possible had he remained in the flesh. One of my earliest recollections is overhearing mamma say "that I was the strangest child"—that she couldn't make me out—that I was old-fashioned. It made an impression upon me at the time. I must have been about five then, and I have been thinking over it ever since, until it has acquired the force of a positive certainty—that in a sort of way, if I may venture so to express myself, I am pervaded by his essence, and that, both morally and intellectually, his spiritual nature in some subtle manner is constantly operative within me. I suppose that is why I have so little sympathy with other girls. In the first place, life does not seem to present them with any problems;

they believe everything they are told, take everything as it comes, see no contradictions anywhere, and do not seem haunted by the standing obligation which has been laid upon me to "seek higher things." They grovel;—I don't wish to seem uncharitable—but they really do, and are content. To me life is a perpetual enigma, to which no theological system offers a satisfactory solution—against the reefs of which all philosophies break into foam and empty bubbles. Though I am scarcely nineteen yet, I could have hopelessly puzzled either the Archbishop of Canterbury or Mr Herbert Spencer when I was ten. It was at that early age, when subjected to youthful struggles in regard to the claims of what was called my "conscience," that I first became alive to the perplexing questions arising out of the nature and composition of what was called my "will." And to this day I can give no satisfactory definition of the word "freedom" in connection with it; but then I am still very young. Perhaps if I had arrived at some conclusion I should know better what to do about Mr MacAlpine. We have taken a cottage in the Highlands for the season, and Ronald MacAlpine is the younger brother of Lord MacAlpine, from whom we have rented it. We have seen a great deal of each other during the last three weeks; and his constant presence suggests a problem that other girls seem to have no difficulty about. I have never experienced the sensation before, but I feel no moral doubt that I am in love. To me love is a

puzzle, to them it is a pleasure. I don't mean to say that there is not a good deal of pleasure in it, but that makes the puzzle all the more annoying. What is it? Where does it come from? Did it first come from him or from me? I don't like going headlong into a thing without knowing a little more about it. Shall I go this afternoon and take a sketch on the beach, where he will, in the most promiscuous and accidental manner, certainly go for a stroll? He has found out the quiet corner where the rocks are so picturesque, but he does not go there unless he sees me, because he says they're nothing without a bit of colour in the foreground. So I think I shall escape him by putting on my black dress, because I really ought to finish my sketch.

Let me analyse. First, there is no necessity to finish the sketch. What was it in me that tried to humbug me with a pretence of duty? Second, I should not avoid him by dressing in black, and I knew it when I internally proposed it. Evidently the same influence with the same malign intent. Third, and still more subtle, when he came I could pretend that, by not wearing colour, there would be no attraction in the foreground, and that, therefore, I wanted to avoid him, when I really did not, and that I was surprised to see him when I really was not; in other words, false assumption of maiden modesty. I don't exactly know the definition of coquetry, but I should say this was a near approach

to it, and must be resisted. It is evident there is a strong impulse acting on my will to go and meet him. I suppose it is the force of attraction. If so, what is the nature of the force? Is it magnetic? And how does it operate on my will in such a manner as apparently to paralyse it; and then what becomes of its so-called freedom? I suppose if I was to tell the learned persons who talk about waste of nervous tissue, that I found Mr MacAlpine a highly magnetic individual, they would reply, "Pooh, pooh, my dear young lady! don't use unscientific terms—you're in love," and consider that a scientific explanation. But I suppose love is a force, just as, I am told, light and heat are, and may be made of molecules, for all they know to the contrary. I wonder why they cannot subject it to scientific analysis. It has a very distinct effect on the circulation of the blood, that is certain, or my heart would not beat so when I see what I suppose I must call "the object of my affections" in the distance. No doubt, when he perceives the bit of colour he is looking for on the beach, the same thing happens to him, and yet he has never uttered a word which betrayed his feelings. Hitherto we have discussed principally the beautiful nature by which we are surrounded, from a philosophic and æsthetic point of view. We have discoursed on the science of taste and its possible refinements with our lips, while our hearts seemed to be saying something quite different. I don't know how, but they have. The worst of it is,

that this silent language is quite irrepressible. Just when my countenance is most impassive and my mind most concentrated in its attempt to grasp the ideas of my companion, that rebellious organ seems to bawl its unspoken language the most loudly. Probably here, again, it is the same with him. This arises, I presume, from what are termed "the hidden laws of sympathy," whatever they may be.

I have just come back from the beach. I went there deliberately—or, in other words, because I could not help it; I was drawn. So I did not go through the farce of pretending that I was either surprised or annoyed when I saw Ronald appear. I call him Ronald now—not, of course, to his face, but to myself. He is tall, dark, and in his Highland dress looks the *beau-ideal* of a Scottish chief. I am afraid, even if he had not been so very clever and agreeable as he is, I should still have liked him on account of his *tout ensemble*. Why this mysterious sentiment, which I am now experiencing for the first time, should depend so much upon the accident of external appearance, is another puzzle. Can it be possible that so deep a passion can really have any connection with clothes and colour, or that I should have felt differently towards him in trousers?

We were both slightly embarrassed when we met thus "accidentally on purpose," as it were, to use a somewhat slang expression; and yet I don't know why we should have been,—there was nothing to be

ashamed of. I became internally indignant, and conscious of a strong instinct of maidenly reserve struggling with a self-assertion which I take to be nearly allied to woman's rights. Of course I don't know what emotions were contending in him, but he looked decidedly nervous, and I think I became uncomfortable sympathetically

"How do you like the bit of colour in the foreground?" I said; and I showed him his manly form arrayed in a bright red kilt of his own tartan, which I had just painted in.

"You do me too much honour, Miss Peto," he replied, and his face for a moment reflected the tints of his garment. "I should much preferred to have seen you there: but the omission may easily be remedied," he added timidly; "there's room enough on the beach for both of us, you know."

As this was an obvious truism, I proceeded to put myself in at the opposite corner of the picture, with my back to him. "All pure coquetry," I said to myself as I did so, "or else a degree of shyness amounting to insincerity." Why should modesty make one dishonest? I should have liked to paint us in the attitude of Millais's picture—he holding my face between his two hands, and looking lovingly down into my eyes, while I looked tenderly up into his.

He was looking over me as I was thinking thus, when he said, suddenly, "I know what your thoughts are, Miss Peto."

"Do you?" I said calmly, again forcing myself to lie horribly by the cool indifference of my face and manner, for I was in an internal agony of agitation and alarm lest the quickness of his sympathy should have actually divined what was passing through my mind.

"Yes," he said. "You think my remark impertinent, and this is how you are rebuking it."

"On the contrary, I thought what you said very natural. Why should we not both be on the beach in the picture, since we are both upon it in fact?"

"Yes; but *we* seem to have quarrelled in the picture, and we have not in fact. Do you know how I should like to be painted?" and he gently but firmly took my hand and pressed it to his lips. Of course I should have liked to let him keep it, so I snatched it away, and suddenly began to tremble very violently. This shows how utterly incapable the will is under certain circumstances to control the organism. The hatred and contempt I felt for my own body at that moment was indescribable. Why should it possess a power of humiliating me at a time when all my feminine instincts, which, I suppose, are my noblest, made me wish to disguise my real feelings towards him? On the other hand, what was there humiliating in allowing him to perceive that I returned his affection? If I was angry with my body for humiliating me, I felt equally angry with my soul, or whatever the other part of me is, for feeling humiliated. I got so

absorbed in this physiological dilemma, that for a moment I forgot all about him, and putting down my paint-brush—it was my left hand he had kissed—I clasped them both together and gazed vacantly out to sea.

"Dear Altiora," he went on, "forgive me; I spoke too suddenly, but it was quite impossible for me to restrain my feelings any longer. Ever since we first met I have waited for this supreme moment. I know that I am only a younger son, and have little to offer you but a heartfelt love, and a nature all sympathy." And so he went on,—I suppose very much the usual thing, only it sounded rather as if it had been prepared beforehand, still it was very pleasant to listen to at the time. I forget a good deal of what he said, for I had so many conflicting emotions to contend with that I did not attend very closely. I think the predominant one was an all-pervading sense of content and happiness, and for some reason my eyes filled with tears. I wonder why one thought has the physical result of producing water in the eye, while another will make all the muscles round one's mouth contract with laughter. Evidently the physical result is conditioned on the moral attribute connected with the emotion. In other words, these various emotions are forces, and act dynamically on the organism according to their moral composition, totally irrespective of the will. When Ronald saw my unresisting eyes filled with tears, and an involuntary expression of deep joy

flushing a countenance over which I had lost control, he took me in his arms. I had already risen under some undefinable impulse, and in another moment we were in the attitude my mind had pictured, and which had previously suggested itself to Millais. Then I laid my hand on his shoulder and wept silently, and gently disengaged myself, and felt I ought to say something. I had not known what to say as yet—at least not out loud. Of course my heart had been saying a good deal, but I felt it was not to be trusted under the circumstances—and, in fact, that it was seriously disturbing the normal action of the brain. So I said softly, "Please go away, and let me sit down and think."

"I will let you sit down," he replied, "but don't drive me away; and as for thinking, has not your heart told you all? what more do you want to know? It has told me, darling, that you love me."

"My heart does not think," I answered, "and I have not told you anything yet. You've taken me so much by surprise, I don't know what to say. Please don't ask me to answer you now;" and then, in despair, I took refuge in the duty I ought to have thought of at first, and rising to go away, said, "besides, I must ask mamma."

"I will come here to-morrow at this hour to hear her decision," he said, as he gave my hand a parting squeeze which I continued to feel for some little time afterwards.

I wondered as I walked home whether I had be-

haved as other girls would have done under the same circumstances, and confessed to a sense of mortification in the reflection that my conduct had not been by any means so strikingly original as I should have predicted it would have been whenever an event of so much importance should occur to me.

I have already said that my mother and I never understood each other, and I had a sort of presentiment that this was a subject upon which we should be more than ever mutually incomprehensible. For some reason she never seemed to like Ronald MacAlpine, and I thought had always behaved rather rudely to him. As, however, she had been educated in France, and, indeed, had lived most of her life in Paris before her marriage, and could never quite get over her foreign prejudices, I thought it might only be his bare knees she objected to, and it would be ridiculous to allow them to be an insuperable obstacle to our marriage, particularly as we should probably live in England, where he would have to abandon his native costume.

I may here incidentally observe that it has always been a matter of astonishment to me how a mother and daughter could be so unlike each other; and after reading Mr Galton's book on heredity, I quite regretted that I had no brothers and sisters, as, I am sure, we should have presented extreme varieties of type. As it is, I suppose I take after my father. I am at least six inches taller than my mother, who is a stout, round, brisk, little woman, very practical and matter-

of-fact, with a *nez retroussé*, light hair, grey eyes, and a temper to match; whereas I am dark, tall, and by no means rapid or impulsive in my movements, and if I may venture to say so, equable in disposition, though perhaps not as yielding as I ought to be. She was knitting with unwonted rapidity when I went into her room to tell her what had just occurred on the beach, and I judged from the pace at which her fingers were moving that her thoughts were of an agitated character.

"Where have you been, child?" she burst out; "it is past six, and the tea is quite cold. I told you the other day that I disapproved of these afternoon disappearances. You told me at lunch you were going into your room to write."

"So I did, mamma," I replied; "and when I had done writing, I went down to the beach to sketch."

It had become evident that I could not have chanced upon a more unpropitious moment.

"Let me look at your sketch," she said suspiciously. "Why, you seem to have put yourself into it. Who is the man in the kilt?"

"The gentleman in the kilt," I returned with emphasis, for I felt stung by the sneer, "is Mr Ronald MacAlpine, and it is about him I wish to speak to you. He has just asked me to be his wife."

"His wife, indeed," said my mother with a sort of snort. "What business has any man, much less a bare-legged pauper, though he is the brother of a

ruined Scotch peer, to speak to you on such a subject? It is more than impertinent, it is positively indecent. If he had any sense of propriety, he must have seen that I did not encourage him; and if you had had any sense of propriety, you would have kept out of his way, and not permitted yourself to be insulted. I feel quite ashamed of you."

"I don't think there is anything to be ashamed of," I retorted; "I did not propose to him, though I am not sure that I should have felt ashamed of myself if I had. It has always struck me as an anomaly," I continued, musingly, "which I have never been able to explain satisfactorily to myself, why a woman should not be allowed to choose her husband as freely as a husband chooses his wife."

My recent experience had been a practical refutation of this theory, but my mother had roused my spirit of contradiction, by her unreasonable opposition, to a degree which made me overshoot the mark the other way. I am constantly in the habit of doing this in argument, and it often puts one at a terrible disadvantage. It did upon this occasion. Instead of putting my mother in a rage, she laughed.

"I am glad you have spoken so frankly," she said "As you have taken the matter so completely into your own hands, and as you are so fond of your pen, you can write him a letter which I will dictate. And for the future remember this,—you may propose to as many men as you like, but the man you will marry

will be the man of my choice, not of yours; and the person to whom he will make the proposal will be me, and not you. Now," continued my mother—who, as I have remarked, was a woman of very prompt action —"there is no time to be lost;" and she rose and prepared the writing materials. "Here is a pen,"—and placing a pen in my hand, she threw herself back on the couch, half closed her eyes to facilitate the task of composition, and began—"Sir."

At this point I could struggle against my pent-up feelings no longer. Throwing down the pen, I rushed up to my room, locked the door, burst into an agony of tears,—and there I am still.

CHAPTER II.

ALTIORA SOLVES THE PROBLEM.

I HAVE not seen anybody since yesterday, except the maid, who brought me in some dinner. This does not arise from temper, but from the absolute necessity which I feel imposed upon me by my name to analyse my emotions calmly, review the situation, and think out deliberately what, from the highest point of view, is the right thing for me to do. My brain was so disturbed at first, that after I recovered from my fit of

weeping, I read an article of Mr Mallock's to soothe it —then I reflected. First, there was my duty to my mother; then there was my duty to Ronald; and last, but not least, there was my duty to myself. Then I thought of a higher duty than any of these — one which comprised them all. The problem has, of course, often been presented to young ladies before in some form or other, but it is not until one has to deal with it one's self that one discovers the extreme difficulty of its solution. I had scarcely begun to reason it out before I found that I was not in possession of all the premisses. First, I was in total ignorance of the nature of the sentiment in my own case with which I had to deal. I had, it is true, a certain empirical knowledge of it, but it had only fully and powerfully developed itself in me within the last twenty-four hours, and those had been so stormy that I had been unable to analyse anything. Then if I could not define exactly what I felt myself, how was it possible to know what Ronald felt? And finally, as the whole affair was purely subjective, and affected only us two, what in the world could mamma know about it? It seemed to me that the right course for her to have pursued would have been, first, to give me all her own experience (for she had been married before she married papa, besides, I believe, having been several times in love in her youth); and then, when she had told me all she knew about it, she ought to have advised me not to give any definite answer to Ronald, or to act

hastily, but to explain to him, that the question being one upon which the happiness of our lives depended, we must search ourselves thoroughly, so as to guard against any mere superficial feeling, and put ourselves through various tests and ordeals. My own impression is — but of course I speak without the smallest experience—that it is a matter upon which it would be impossible to come to any safe and definite decision within a year; and if mamma had left it to my judgment, that is what I should have told Ronald, and no amount of supplication on his part would have made me change my resolution. Instead of which, the more I think of it, the more it seems to me that the speech which she made me was utterly irrational and absurd. It amounted, in fact, to this, that I was to have no voice in the selection of my own husband. The only argument in favour of this mode of proceeding is, that I believe it is the one adopted by the French. Perhaps as they are rather a logical people, they may have a good reason for it; but I shall certainly ask mamma to explain it to me. In the meantime, it is quite impossible for me to come to any decision until I know why she objects to Ronald, Clearly my course is, therefore, now that I have had a night's rest and am calm, to discuss the subject with her in all its bearings as fully as I can induce her to do; and then, before acting in any way, to come back and think. I shall, at all events, have more data to go upon.

I had just come to this determination, when a smart tap at the door warned me that the object of my meditations was upon the other side of it. I was glad of this. I have a theory that environment is not altogether without a sort of moral value. As people are made up of forces, by which they are reciprocally affected, either positively or negatively, it is not unnatural that these should be affected by the conditions attaching to certain localities. Thus I should be more positive to my mother in my own room, surrounded as it were by my own moral atmosphere, than I should be in hers, where, on the contrary, she would have a corresponding advantage. Dogs, which I take to be remarkably sensitive animals, magnetically furnish so striking an illustration of this, that it has become proverbial; and we constantly witness most abject cowardice on the part of a dog, succeeded by defiant confidence, by mere contact with his own doorstep. I am always conscious of deriving, in some subtle manner, a moral strength of some sort, conditioned on my surroundings; and hence it was that I said, "Come in," to my mother, with a feeling of some relief. She was in a very amiable mood, suspiciously so, and came up and kissed me—rather an unusual thing with her.

"My dear," she said, "you took me so much by surprise yesterday, that I am afraid I spoke with more warmth than I should have done, if I had been prepared for the news you communicated so abruptly and unexpectedly. Let us talk it over quietly now, and I

think I shall be able to convince you that I am consulting your own interests in refusing to consent to your marriage with Mr MacAlpine."

"I have no doubt," I replied, "that you would not have spoken so strongly without good reason, and I was just coming down to ask you to tell me what it was when you knocked."

"Well, dear," she went on, "from inquiries which I have made, I find Mr MacAlpine's income amounts to £300 a-year, which his brother allows him. It is true that he has been called to the bar, but, so far as I am aware, he has never held a brief; and I should say, from what I am informed of his habits of life in London, if he had one, he would be extremely at a loss to know what to do with it. Still, as he is the brother of a peer, and has a certain social reputation of a flimsy kind, as a dabbler in literature, music, and art—though I am not aware that it adds very materially to his resources—I don't know that I should have been so decided in my opposition if the Baron and I had not formed other plans for you; and when you know what these are, I feel sure that you will quite agree with us. Last year we were obliged to go abroad, so the next will be your first London season; and it would be foolish of you to make up your mind in these barren hills on a question which affects your whole future, until you know what the world has to offer. Believe me, my dear child, we shall spare neither pains nor money to make you a success."

"But, mamma," I said, "I don't want to be a success. I don't think it likely that I shall find any one in London I like better than Ronald; and I shall refuse every offer, if any are made, no matter how advantageous they may be, for his sake, if I find, on further acquaintance, that we thoroughly suit each other. You see I am not in the least impulsive or romantic on the subject."

"Well, darling," she replied, "I don't wish to press you; I merely wish you to understand the necessity of not committing yourself in that direction, because neither your step-father nor I will ever consent to your marrying Mr MacAlpine. You will very soon get over the passing sentiment you entertain for him. I know this love from experience. Before my marriage with my first husband, the Baron's partner, I was very much admired, and indeed was engaged once to an Italian officer, to whom I was passionately attached, but his parents would not hear of the match: he was killed afterwards in a duel." And my mother touched her eyes with a corner of her pocket-handkerchief. "And Mr Crombie, my first husband, attended his funeral; for poor Vittorio had remained my greatest friend after my marriage. There are so many kinds of love, dear, as you will find out when you have more experience, and the one need not necessarily extinguish the other."

Part of this speech took me so excessively by surprise, and part of it was so enigmatical, that for some

moments I felt bereft of the faculty of speech. The idea of having several kinds of love—at least outside of one's natural affections for one's relations—was so entirely novel, that I felt I should have to think over the whole matter alone in my room; so I said, "Thank you, dear mamma; I am very much obliged for this explanation, and I will think about it."

"But, dear, I want you to act upon it. You must not allow Mr MacAlpine to remain any longer under a delusion."

"I can only promise you," I replied firmly, "that I will immediately give the matter my most earnest consideration. Until I have done that, I absolutely decline to commit myself to any course of action."

"How the child takes after her father!" said my mother, rather snappishly, aloud to herself. Then seeing I was perfectly fixed in my resolution, she came and kissed me again, and said, as she left the room, "Well, dear, now that you know what my wishes are, I will rely upon your sense of duty to give effect to them, without dictating to you the method in which it is to be done."

My mother made a mistake when she made that spiteful allusion to my father's firmness. She would not have been guilty of the indiscretion in her own room; but I have always felt that mine was pervaded by his influence, and it was forced out of her in spite of herself, as she became instinctively conscious

that I was inspired with his fixed determination of will, which imposed itself upon hers, and induced her to refrain from pushing me any further. In all that she had said, it was the one sentence that imparted a profound comfort, and certainly decided me, as far as in me lay, to avoid taking after my mother.

And this, again, led me to ponder upon that strange fate which always presented itself to my mind under a veil of mystery, which had snatched the author of my being from this earth before I had appeared upon it; and I gazed upon the photograph, which was my greatest treasure, with a never-flagging wonder and curiosity. My mother was very reticent in regard to my father, with whose pursuits she evidently had had but little sympathy. She says the subject is too painful for her to recur to, and shrinks from all allusion to it with so much feeling, that I have avoided all reference to it for some years past. All that I know of him is, that he was the only son of a superannuated old general, from whom he inherited a large fortune, which had been made in India, and that my grandmother, who had died some years before her husband, was a daughter of the Earl of Sark. I am consequently full second cousin of the present Earl—a fact which my mother seems far more alive to than the Earl,—though he is almost the only relation I have got, at least that I know; for my mother's belongings all emigrated to Australia when she was young, and from hints that she has let drop, I think she began life

as a governess with an Italian family, and then she married Mr Crombie, Baron Grandesella's partner. They were merchants, or in business of some sort, I never could quite make out what; but after his death she married papa, who died before I was born, and then she married the Baron.

Ever since, in my early childhood, my attention was called to a duckling which had been hatched by a hen, I had seemed to occupy the same unnatural relation to my mother. The Baron always made the impression upon me of a turkey gobbler, in a perpetual state of strut, and Mr Murkle, the Baron's partner, of a hawk, who only refrained from pouncing upon the hen and the gobbler because they were too big, but who never took his carnivorous eye off me. I feel him perpetually hovering above me. If ever there was a man whom one word could describe, "Murkle" is the man, and "pounce" is the word. This is the sort of domestic barnyard in which I have been brought up. I have roamed with the gobbler, the hen, and the hawk through all the capitals of Europe. We took contracts, we founded banks, we obtained concessions, we started companies. The Baron swelled and strutted through the financial political world of Europe, Mr Murkle pounced upon it, and my mother made friends with other hens, and scratched its surfaces, and pecked away at what she found with great assiduity. We have always lived with the extravagance of potentates, —I don't mean German princes, but magnates of the

highest order. That I was being carefully brought up for something, I soon discovered; but nothing could cure my unfortunate propensity to swim—in other words, to study. I was unable to have a laboratory, and go in for chemistry as I should have wished, because of the regulations against travelling with explosive materials; but I had a trunk full of books on science and philosophy, which broke the backs of the railway porters, and the heart of my mother,—at least it injured, if not her heart, her temper. I steadily objected to wasting my time on what are termed accomplishments. The Baron spared no expense to procure me the best masters, but in vain. Languages came to me as naturally as any other kind of swimming; and I have a taste for art, which is the chief consolation of my mother, who always tries to make me display my erudition on the subject in society, which I naturally decline to do; in fact, if there is a thing I detest, it is society. As for the purple and fine linen in which both my mother and myself are arrayed, the money spent upon it annually would maintain hundreds of starving pauper families. The Baron, who used to allow me an ample allowance of pin-money, cut me down last year because mamma discovered that I made what she called an improper use of it in relieving distress; but I have, nevertheless, several pensioners in various parts of the world, whom I maintain on the sale of the lace and embroidery which I unpick from the flounces of my petticoats,

and send them the money by post-office orders: Johnson, my maid, who enters enthusiastically into my schemes, being pledged to secrecy.

The effect of being so entirely out of sympathy with my belongings, and of finding myself forced into a life so little congenial to me, has been to develop my inherited tendencies in a premature and irregular fashion; and it therefore becomes all the more essential, now that the important question of choosing a partner for life is concerned, to be quite sure that we are thoroughly in accord as to our hopes and aims. So far I had not had any opportunity of discovering whether Ronald, under his agreeable social exterior and varied accomplishments, possessed those qualities and moral aspirations which I longed to find in some one to whom I could unburden my own feelings. These are subjects one does not rush into lightly; and so reticent is my tendency in regard to them, that I did not wonder at his silence on questions affecting the deeper problems of life. It became, therefore, extremely necessary to know what we had in common, and only right that, before going any further, I should explain to him the conclusions to which my reading and reflections so far had led me, and my notion of what I considered to be the end and object of my existence. I therefore had some luncheon in my own room, and without going through the farce of taking my sketch-book, strolled down to the rocks, upon one of which I perceived him seated, gazing pensively seaward. So ab-

sorbed was he in meditation, that he was not aware of my proximity till I spoke to him.

"My darling! how you startled me!" he exclaimed, jumping off his perch with pleased surprise. "If I had not been thinking about you so deeply I should have heard you. What an agony of suspense I have been in since yesterday! and now," he said, looking at me eagerly, "the expression on your face tells me nothing to inspire hope."

"I do not mean it should," I answered calmly, but I felt such a strange tightening across the chest that speech became an effort. "Mamma is absolutely and firmly opposed to my entertaining any proposal from you, and will listen to no argument on the subject, so it is useless your recurring to it, either with her or me. I am bound to obey her wishes in the matter; but even if I were not, I should have other things to say to you before I could arrive at a decision. I think it right to tell you this, lest you should imagine from what passed yesterday, that, putting me out of the question, I had no difficulties in my own mind to encounter."

The intensity of the effort which this speech caused me, imparted a harshness to it that I could not have avoided without bursting into tears; and now, when I saw what suffering it produced, the trial of nerve was in no degree lessened. My knees were trembling, and my heart was beating so violently, that it suddenly occurred to me to try and restore the moral balance by

a little physical pain. Under this impulse I leant my whole weight upon my hand, which rested upon an edge of rock. The ragged point was so sharp that it cut me deeply, and under other circumstances I should have been unable to restrain an exclamation of pain. As it was, it acted like a sedative. The effect of physical pain and moral suffering on each other is very curious. First, I have a disagreeable duty to perform, and the moral effort gives me a physically painful constriction of the chest; then I hurt myself by cutting my hand on a rock, and feel morally strengthened, and therefore physically relieved. I suppose these are very crude reflections, and that it is perfectly well known by science exactly what physical pain and what moral suffering are, and where they originate. Of course I did not make them at the moment; but the impulse under which I acted proved a sound one, for Ronald was so taken up bandaging my hand, which was bleeding freely, that we were both able to talk more calmly afterwards.

"I can understand your mother's objection," he said; "with her it is probably merely a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence: but I don't understand why, if she had consented, you would still have required time for reflection."

"I should have required to know more of your character, your aims in life, and your aspirations," I answered; "and I should also have needed some more information than I now possess as to your views in

regard to those deep and mysterious problems which have ever agitated the bosom of humanity, as it is of the utmost importance that two people who propose to pass their lives together should be in entire sympathy upon subjects so vital."

I thought it best to come to the point at once, for I was quite prepared to assert my rights as a girl who would soon be a woman, and in a position to defy the maternal authority, if I found him thoroughly satisfactory and sympathetic. An amused smile passed over his countenance as I made this innocent, and, as it seemed to me, very pertinent observation.

"Have you solved the problems of which you speak?" he said.

I had in my pocket notes for an essay which I was engaged in writing on "The Anomalies of Civilised Existence, as Tested by Intuitive Aspirations in Ideal Life," but I was afraid of boring him by reading them to him; so I explained to him shortly, that though my experience of life had been brief, I had lived long enough to discover that the popular theology, so far as its practical social working was concerned, failed to satisfy my religious instinct, and that I had therefore determined to adopt a method of moral research which, so far as my investigation went, had not been attempted, even by the most eminent reformers of ancient or modern times. Those who endeavoured to inculcate a new religious idea, if it had any connection

with another world or a future life, had always started with the assumption of an inspiration which it was impossible rationally to verify, and which contained the new moral truths that they offered to the world for its guidance and salvation; while, if it had no such connection with the unknown, it became a cold system of philosophy—as, for instance, those of Confucius and Plato, or Comte—which had never been acceptable to the masses, because they appealed so much more to the intellect than the affections. In other words, the attempt of reformers and philosophers hitherto had been invariably to endeavour to construct the life out of the religion, instead of the religion out of the life, by either an act of faith or an effort of intellect out of practical experiment.

"Then," said Ronald, delightedly, "we agree entirely, and sympathise thoroughly. We neither of us know anything, or believe anything—in other words, we are both agnostics."

He had no sooner made this remark than I felt that all was at an end between us. It was evident, that if he could so little understand my principle of thought, after the clear explanation I had offered him, as to confound it with agnosticism, the very foundations of mutual sympathy were wanting. I thought, however, that it was only due to him to explain this; so I observed that I was so very far from being an agnostic, that I could only account for his supposing me to be one on the hypothesis of a weakness of intellect on my

part; and I left him to infer that, in my opinion, it included one on his.

"On the contrary," he replied, "it is considered an evidence of advanced and enlightened thought. How can we know anything more of ourselves than that we are phenomena? And since we are nothing but phenomena, how can there be anything else that isn't a phenomenon? Everything in the universe and outside of it—if there is anything outside of it—must be all of one piece."

"How," I said, "knowing nothing, and having no means of knowing anything, do you know that you are a phenomenon? And what is a phenomenon? If you start on the assumption that you know nothing, argument becomes impossible; if you assert that you know anything, you are not an agnostic."

"Pardon me," he replied; "I know that both you and I exist, but it is impossible for me to know anything as to the cause or nature of our existence."

"That last assertion is assuming a good deal of knowledge for one who knows nothing. Pray, do you consider love a phenomenon in regard to the nature and cause of which you know nothing?"

"Ah, it is the most extraordinary and inexplicable of all phenomena, darling, for you: I know that it exists, so far as I am concerned,—why should I care to know more?"

"Because, without knowing more, it is evident that we should both make a mess of it," replied I somewhat

brusquely. "I for one believe that all phenomena, as you call them, are governed by law. How do you account for the world going round the sun?"

"Just as I account for my coming to meet you to-day—by the phenomena, not the law, of attraction."

"Well," I said—for a certain flippancy of presumption in his manner of dealing with so momentous a subject offended me—"it has produced in me the sensation of repulsion, and I am the less distressed at it because you know that it is impossible for you to discover the cause of it. It is a simple phenomenon which will not bear discussion; it exists, that is all either of us knows; further investigation is hopeless. We met, we were both attracted, we exchanged a few ideas; you remained attracted, while I was repelled. Curiously enough, while I am attracting you, and you are repelling me, we both suffer, and shall continue to do so until a new series of phenomena occur. That, I think, is the history of our little romance, looked at from an agnostic point of view." I concluded bitterly, and felt a suspicious desire to blow my nose, which a false pride prevented my doing at the moment, while my eyes were so full of tears that I scarcely dared to wink them. As far as I could analyse my feelings at the time, this emotion was not the result of any noble or tender sentiment, but of sheer vexation and disappointment.

At this critical moment a step on the shingle arrested our attention, and turning round I saw a large

and somewhat ungainly man, dressed in an exaggerated tourist costume of checks and knickerbockers, whom I at once divined to be no less a person than the Baron himself. "Ah," thought I, "he has been telegraphed for." Mamma evidently began to suspect something some days ago. She must consider the matter serious. I had no idea I was growing into such an important personage.

As he approached he stretched out his arms as though he expected me to rush into them, and his face seemed to beam with affectionate eagerness. "Ah, my little Ora!" he called out,—he had adopted the last syllable of my name as a pet appellation, preferring it to Alty, which was the only other alternative; my mother never condescended to abbreviate it,—"have I found you at last, hidden away among the rocks like a sea-gull, my picturesque beauty?" and he folded me slowly in his elephantine embrace. "And my good friend MacAlpine, how well you are looking! but who would not, in that grand costume? Ah, how I envy you Highlanders! what traditions, what poetry, what romance!" and after shaking hands with him, he drew back to give him the full benefit of his admiring gaze. He had only seen Mr MacAlpine once before, but this was too good an opportunity of plunging into familiarity with the brother of a peer to be neglected.

"You are both surprised to see me, no doubt, but, as the French say, there is nothing certain but the unexpected. Murkle telegraphs me from Paris that my

presence is required there without delay on business the most important. You have perhaps heard of the nature and extent of our operations, MacAlpine. Everything on these occasions depends upon promptitude of action; but I cannot sever myself from my domestic treasures. Wealth, life itself, is valueless, unless shared by those we love. Is it not so, *ma cherie?* What pleasures sacrifices become under such circumstances! How delightful was my journey rendered by the anticipation of meeting my wife and daughter!—though we have not been so long separated."

"When are we to start, Baron?" I asked, anxious to put an end to the torrent which I knew by experience would flow without interruption till we reached the house. I never would call him "papa," though he had repeatedly urged me to do so; but I felt that the sacred name must not be so profaned.

"I can only allow you one day for packing, Puss. You know how expert your mother has become by long practice in these sudden moves. And you, MacAlpine—when shall you tear yourself away from your native heath?"

"I don't know," said Ronald, gloomily, who was a good deal depressed by this second blow to all his hopes. The difficulties I had created he evidently had not thought serious, but the prospect of having to part finally from me now rather overcame him.

"He is an agnostic, and does not know anything," I added maliciously, for I was still smarting under a

certain self-satisfied presumption he had shown in our argument.

"*Parbleu!*" said the Baron. "An agnostic in a kilt—what an odd combination! Now if you had said an æsthete, I could have understood. Is a kilt æsthetic, Ora? You understand art, and ought to know. Why should we not seek to adapt the habits and costumes of our ancestors to the thoughts and tendencies of the day? Why is an agnostic in a kilt more incongruous than a financier in knickerbockers?" and he looked down complacently on his own. "What knight-errant was it who, in the days of chivalry, used to wear a sun-flower as his badge? He may have been an æsthete."

Here the Baron's breath was providentially checked by the steepness of the cliff up which we had begun to climb, and at the top of it we stopped to rest and give Ronald an opportunity of bidding me a last farewell. I saw the Baron eyeing us narrowly as he did so, so I gave him no clue to my feelings by my manner; and we strolled on leisurely, he volubly expatiating on his activity and devotion to his family and his affairs, and I scarcely listening—ruthlessly scattering to the winds the seeds of that affection which for the first time in my life had just begun to sprout, for an object that had proved unworthy.

So ends the history of my first delusion. I wonder whether the experience of my life is to be that it is made up of them—whether the satisfaction which most

people seem to derive from existence, arises from the fact that they live on the surface, and don't dig deep enough to find that it is made up of illusions. That the financial operations of the Baron and Mr Murkle are, has long become clear to me; that the social ambitions of my mother are, is no less evident. All the three individuals with whom my life is most closely associated are pursuing shadows, and they persist in dragging me with them. Next year I am to be launched upon the society of London, and no pains are to be spared to make me a success—in other words, to make me another illusion; that is what it comes to. The only things that seem to me real are poverty, sickness—suffering of all sorts. I am strongly inclined to think that if you go deep enough, everything else is sham. But perhaps that is only because I am young, and my experience of life so far has had a tendency to make me morbid. There must surely be another side to the medal; and on that hypothesis, I solemnly dedicate my life to its discovery.

CHAPTER III.

THE CALIFORNIANS.

In the *entresol* of one of the most recent and spacious constructions of Haussmann, near the Arc de Triomphe

in Paris, sat two young ladies of the type which has ceased to produce the astonishment among Parisians that greeted its first appearance, and has become of late not only recognised, but rather the *mode* than otherwise. They had evidently just arrived; for the room still bore traces of the litter of unpacking, and an angular, middle-aged woman, with severe lines about the corners of her mouth, and a long thin nose with a bridge like a razor, was performing the process usually known as "tidying up."

"My sakes!" she said, pausing for an instant in her occupation to look out of the window. "Where air all them carriages a-driving to? If so many people want to go along that road," she went on, looking contemptuously down the Champs Elysées, "I wonder why they don't have a car-track along it! On Sunday, too! Why, they can't be all a-going to church—can they, my dear? They are all a-going the same way," and she sank her voice apologetically, as though fearing she might have done the gay crowd which was then streaming out to the Bois, a wrong.

"Oh you silly innocent old Hannah! What fun it will be completing your education and teaching your antiquated idea how to shoot! Why, that is called the *beau monde*, going out for a drive in the Bois."

"Oh, the bo mawnd, is it? And what's the Bwa? They do seem in an awful hurry to get there. Now, from the looks of them men"—and she gazed critically at the occupants of the roof of a four-in-hand—"if

that's what they are on a Sunday, I guess there ain't much to 'em on a week-day. You don't tell me that you've come all the way from Californey to find husbands among them chaps?"

"Now, Hannah, you mustn't talk so disrespectfully of the male sex because you happen to be an old maid. And we haven't come across the Atlantic to find husbands at all, but to amuse ourselves and inform our minds; and we've brought you—you faithful old thing!—to take care of us, and see we don't get into mischief. And you needn't think it necessary to go about dusting every hole and corner any more, but leave that to the French servants. And now you had much better go and rest yourself, and leave us to our own devices,—only don't forget that I am Stella and Stella's me." At which somewhat enigmatical absurdity both the young ladies burst into a fit of hearty laughter, and the old one smiled with a grim knowingness as she left the room.

"Oh, Mattie, what a joke it will be, trifling with all their budding, *blasé*, or blighted affections, as the case may be!" And the two girls walked to the window and looked out upon the victims they intended to sacrifice with a calm confidence which, considering they had only reached Paris early that morning for the first time in their lives, proved they were not novices in the description of warfare they proposed to enter upon in the Old World. One of them was tall, graceful, and strikingly handsome. It was not

she who had made the last remark, however, betokening so much certainty of their power for mischief, but her companion, who was a good deal shorter, and who made up for her want of looks—for her features were irregular and rather plain—by the extreme brilliancy of her eyes, and the intelligence and mobility of expression.

"I wonder that Keith has not come to see us yet," said the tall one. "I sent round the first thing to tell him we'd arrived."

"What kind of a man is he, anyhow?" asked her friend.

"That's just what I want to know. I saw his photograph once—dreamy blue eye, tawny moustache, plenty of biceps, languid, drawling, aw-aw kind of person, I should judge. The hero of the period, you know—pretends to have brains, but to be too lazy to look for them, which is a capital way of concealing their absence. I shall call him Keith right away, and if he's got any sense he'll offer to kiss me. It would be only natural, as his mother was my aunt. She married an *attaché*, or a secretary, or a consul, or something connected with English diplomacy at Washington. Then he had become a minister and an ambassador, or something of that sort, and my aunt became Lady Hetherington, and then they both died, leaving some sons and daughters. I never saw any of them, of course, as I was born in California; and I never expected to, till you asked me to come to Europe with you to see life

and make acquaintance with my English cousins. What a first-rate idea that was! Oh, I quite forgot," said the girl, suddenly interrupting herself. "My! why, it's you he's got to kiss!"

"Well, I don't think the tawny moustache will much mind making the mistake; still, for the sake of appearances, we ought to decide before he comes which is his cousin. It would not do to give him a bad impression of her at the outset. Now, shall we take him into our confidence, or are we to change places and names at once? am I henceforth during our stay in Europe to be Mattie Terrill, and are you to be Stella Walton? Because, if so, you must post me up thoroughly about the late ambassador and your aunt and cousins."

"Oh, that don't matter," laughed her friend, whom we must henceforth call Stella. "He'll put it all down to Western ignorance. What are benighted beings on the Pacific slope expected to know about their English cousins? You can be as ignorant as you like. Won't it be a joke? I do hope he'll turn out a nice fellow, and that you'll fall in love with him, Mattie. We'd all three stay in Europe and have splendid times. Mind you begin by calling him Keith. The only important thing you've got to recollect is that you're a pauper. Left very badly off, poor thing, in consequence of that terrible crash in mining-stocks, which ruined your poor pa; and I must never forget that I am the heiress, the lovely Bonanza, the fairy princess of nuggets, the celebrated Stella Walton."

"Wasn't it lucky," said her friend, "that the moment I became an heiress I was said to be beautiful; and that Cedar Buttes was such an out-of-the-way place, that it's a thousand to one if we meet any one we ever saw before? and if we do, we must swear them to secrecy. I guess the celebrated Californian heiress and her friend will play such a trick on old Europe as will astonish its gilded youth and its match-making mammas; while it will save me from the dilemma of never knowing whether the impecunious European grandees whom I captivate want to marry me for myself or my moncy. Oh, Stella, I shall so enjoy seeing them all at your feet. Only remember, dear, they'll all be making love to you for *my* money, so don't go and lose your heart to any of them. There he is," she exclaimed, as a ring at the bell announced a visitor.

Excepting that he had a long fair moustache, and may possibly have possessed biceps (for he was a well-made man of six feet), the photograph had evidently conveyed an entirely wrong impression of her cousin to Stella. His eye was anything but dreamy, and there were depths in its dark blue which, so far from denoting the absence of brains, suggested that they were present in an unusual degree. Moreover, there was nothing either languid in his manner or drawling in his speech, and he approached the girls with a frank cordiality which they were not slow to perceive and reciprocate.

"I am Mattie Terrill, cousin Keith," said the shorter girl, with a charming air of innocence, "and this is my bosom friend, Stella Walton, the great Californian heiress, you know. How kind of you to answer my letter so promptly! I thought I might venture so far on our relationship."

"I should never have forgiven you if you had been a day in Paris without letting me know," said Keith. "You must consider me while you are here as absolutely devoted to your service. I suppose you are not alone, Mattie. You don't mind my calling you Mattie?"

"Why, of course not. How do you mean about our not being alone? I guess we are old enough to take care of ourselves. There's Hannah, to be sure, but she hardly counts."

Mr Hetherington looked rather embarrassed and turned to her companion, who, while this dialogue was going on, had sat demurely silent.

"We're both orphans, you know, Mr Hetherington," she now observed, "but are not the less able to protect each other. Besides, if the men get very dangerous, we can always take refuge in flight. I confess I rather hoped that we might enlist you as our knight-errant." And as she glanced at him confidingly, Hetherington thought he had never seen such lovely long eyelashes.

"Oh, there is no real danger," he answered, laughingly; "I was thinking of the proprieties. Paris, you know, which is the least proper city in the world, is

the most particular about these,—perhaps that is the reason. I wanted your whole party to come and dine with me to-night at Bignon's, and I did not know how many it consisted of; and then, if you don't mind its being Sunday, we could go to the theatre afterwards. Would you kindly tell me," he added, somewhat shyly, "who Hannah is? Perhaps we might take her too."

"I am afraid Hannah would not understand French notions of propriety; for she would think it horribly improper to go to the theatre on Sunday, and does not think it at all improper our travelling alone," said Mattie. "We brought Hannah with us as an antique, to give us a sort of air of respectability and impose upon foreigners, but not to participate in our amusements, which she would not enjoy, or to act as a restraint upon us, except when we asked her to. We thought she might be useful in case of sickness; and as the dear old thing has no one to care for her at home, and is very poor, and has known me ever since I was a child, I told her to come along. She's the daughter of a Methodist minister, and taught school,—in the primaries, of course, because she only had a third-grade certificate; so her grammar is faulty. For all that, she knows a good deal more than you or me; but I think she would be a sort of fifth wheel to the coach to-night, even if she would come."

"Then it is agreed," said Hetherington. "I will call for you with the fourth wheel, who is a friend I am living with, this evening, and we shall make a *partie*

carrée. I am sure you will like Bob Alderney, Mattie."

"If he is half as nice as you are, cousin Keith, I am sure I shall," responded Mattie, with a frank laugh. "I predict we are going to have a lovely time in Paris; and then we'll all go to London for the season."

"Oh, Mattie," burst out Stella, when the door had closed on Hetherington, "why, he is perfectly splendid! Not a bit like what I expected. I am real jealous to think that he imagines you his cousin all the time. I was quite afraid he would give you a brotherly salute when he went away. What voices these Englishmen have!—so melodious, ain't they? And how nicely his clothes do sit! If his friend Bob Alderney is only up to the same notch, what a pair of beaux we shall have! This," she said as she rose and struck a melodramatic attitude in the middle of the room, "surpasses my most sanguine expectations."

True to time Hetherington appeared with his friend, who was about three inches shorter than himself, with a black beard and an eyeglass, both in evening costume,—a fact evidently gratifying to the young ladies. They each carried bouquets.

"I must tell you," said Hetherington, after introducing his friend, as he presented his bouquet to Stella, "that it is not the custom in Paris for young men to make presents of bouquets to young ladies as it is in America; but we thought you might have neglected to provide yourselves with any. So far as we are con-

cerned, you may always rely upon us,—mayn't they Bob? only don't do so in the case of others."

Stella, who in her capacity of heiress, wore Mattie's jewels, and was otherwise most becomingly attired, looked so radiantly bewitching as her eyes sparkled with the excitement of anticipation, that poor Bob was almost too dazzled to reply with a promptitude befitting the occasion. In fact, he was only recalled to duty by Mattie saying, "Is that lovely bouquet really for me, Mr Alderney?" upon which that gentleman rapidly dropped his eyeglass and stammered an apology as he handed it to her in such confusion that she laughed and said, "Ah, I see, as Mr Hetherington says, it is not the custom, but you'll soon get used to it. How do you propose going, Mr Hetherington? It's too far to walk."

"Yes, but I have two *coupés* at the door; if you will get into one with Mr Alderney, I will take Miss Walton with me."

Most of us are too familiar with Paris to realise the first impression which its afternoon and evening life, bubbling over into the boulevards from the *cafés*, is calculated to produce; but Hetherington and Alderney had the full benefit of the original observations and gushing spontaneity of their two companions, whose experience of life thus far had been limited to San Francisco and Virginia city, and to whom the novelty and excitement of thus independently launching themselves upon the glittering surface of Parisian existence

produced a brilliant gaiety, which seemed irresistibly fascinating to the young men, accustomed to the more reserved and languid beauties of their own society.

It was difficult to say which was the more sparkling, the Moselle or the conversation, at that never-to-be-forgotten first dinner at Bignon's, at the end of which Stella had decided that, as a distant cousin of hers had married a distant cousin of Mattie's, they were all cousins together, and it was ridiculous for her to call Keith Mr Hetherington, especially as they were likely to be so much together; and that, if they began calling each other by their Christian names at once, it would be a protection to all, and be much less particular than if they put it off until later. And Bob Alderney looked so miserable at being left out in the cold, and pleaded so hard to be considered somebody's cousin, and have the same protection thrown over him, and protested so eloquently that he was quite as much a cousin to Keith as Stella was a cousin to Mattie, and that distinctions of this sort were invidious and harm might come of them, that it was decided that he should be included, as no one need know that they had not been intimate from their childhood.

The Gymnase did not contain a merrier party than the four who comfortably filled the box which Hetherington had secured; and the attention of the girls was equally divided between what was going on upon the stage and the dresses of the ladies; while the beauty of Stella Walton was creating an evident sen-

sation, and during the *entr'acte* a whole battery of *lorgnettes* was opened upon her from the stalls, without, however, in the smallest degree ruffling her self-possession.

"That fellow ought to know Stella again when he sees her," whispered Alderney to his friend, availing himself of his newly acquired privilege. "He has never taken his eyes, or rather his glasses, off her since the curtain rose. See, he is waving his hand to you;" and Hetherington saw a tall, dark, handsome man, with raven hair, a hooked nose, a curled moustache, and a lithe figure, a flower in his button-hole, and a large expanse of shirt-front under his white tie, nodding to him familiarly.

"It's Murkle, the great contractor and financier. I met him several times in Florence, but I didn't know I was so intimate with him as he seems to be with me. I believe he has just got into Parliament. See, he's making signs."

"He wants you to go and meet him in the *foyer*," said Alderney. "Let's go; if what the world says of him is true, he has brass enough to come here, and perhaps that would be awkward."

"The probability is," answered Hetherington, "that his object in wanting me to meet him in the *foyer* is to ask to be presented to the ladies, and it really is compromising. He is probably quite under a mistake as to who our companions are. This comes of introducing American manners into Paris."

"Perhaps the young ladies themselves will be the best judges as to what ought to be done."

"What are you two whispering about instead of amusing us?" interrupted Stella at this moment. "You don't mean to say that you have a secret into which we are not to be admitted? Who is that enormously fat man, with a blue sash across his shirt-front —and what's that thing like a cheese-plate on his chest?—leaning over that equally fat white-powdered woman with the bare shoulders, and the diamond necklace, and the double chin? There! she's just rapped him on the knuckles with her fan, and he seems to be kissing the place to make it well. What a comical old pair! They can't be courting at their time of life, and they can't be married. Yet it's for all the world like some sort of love-making."

"It is love-making of a particular kind," said Hetherington. "He is a celebrated foreign ambassador, and the star on his breast is a decoration; and she is Madame la Comtesse Polischimoff, a female Russian diplomatist, and she is pretending to make love to him in order to find out the secrets of his Government, and he is pretending to make love to her to find out the secrets of hers. The love part of it, like the purity of her complexion, is all sham; but I want to ask your advice." And Hetherington went on to tell her of the celebrated financier, who had by this time disappeared from the stalls, and whose knock he was in momentary dread of hearing at the door of the box.

"Oh, go and bring him in by all means," said Mattie. "What fun!—we'll make him put us into some good things. If there is a thing I understand, it is finance. Don't tell him yet that one of us is an heiress,—we will let that sublime fact dawn upon his enterprising mind by degrees. He'll be sure to want funds for something that wants floating, and is sure to make all our fortunes, and then we'll throw our gaudy fly,—won't we, Stella? Oh, he'll rise to you, never fear. And mind, we are all cousins," she added, as Hetherington was leaving the box. He met Murkle before he had taken many steps along the corridor, who greeted him with easy familiarity.

"Ah, Hetherington, I was delighted to see you again, especially in such good company, that upon my soul I could not resist coming to ask if I might be permitted to share it. I had no idea you went in for that sort of thing. Rumour has it that you are above all such weakness; but human nature—human nature—we are all mortal; but I give you my word, between friends, I am the soul of honour in these affairs."

"You are quite under a mistake," said Hetherington, rather stiffly; "the ladies I am with in the box are cousins of mine, who have just arrived from America; and as the old lady of the party was unwell"—confound it! he thought, I wonder what old Hannah's surname is, and whether we could not convert her into an aunt—"I did not like to disappoint them, the more especially as Mr Alderney, to whom I will introduce

you presently, is—ahem—also a sort of connection. I am sure they will be delighted to make your acquaintance;" and he ushered Murkle into the box, whose manner changed considerably at the frigid and stately reception he met with. There was a calm hardihood in the manner of both these young ladies when they scented the least suspicion of danger, that did credit to the early training of Cedar Buttes—a certain underlying contempt for the male sex as an inferior order of creation, who might understand the use of pick-axes for the extraction of ore, but was a poor defenceless creature when it came to defending itself against the poisoned arrows of their blow-pipes. Mr Murkle felt instinctively that he was in the presence of a new specimen, and that he had better tread warily, and above all, politely; so he made haste to lay aside the fashionable swagger with which he had entered, and twisted his opera hat apologetically, as he made his best bow, and asked them when they had arrived in Paris, and how they liked it.

"Pretty well, as far as we've got, to use the expressive language of Artemus Ward," said Stella, glancing slily at Hetherington and Alderney. "I confess I don't care much for pleasure, for which this city is so celebrated: I leave that to my cousin Mattie. I interest myself chiefly in stocks, and the fluctuations of the money market."

Mr Murkle was so utterly taken aback by this sudden revelation of the propensities of the lovely creature

he had been gazing at with so much admiration, that he was unable to find an appropriate reply before the curtain rose; and for the rest of the evening the two girls were so absorbed by the play that he failed to extract anything from them but monosyllables. His curiosity had, however, been so highly excited, and his interest so much aroused by the beauty of one, and the obvious originality, in spite of their silence, of both, that, as he was helping to put them into their shawls when the play was over, he asked, in a most deferential manner, if he might be allowed to call.

"What is the number and name of our street, Keith?" said Stella; "I never can remember."

"The street has had a great many names, and will probably have a good many more," said Hetherington. "At present it is called 'Rue du dix-huit Mars, dix-huit cent soixante et onze,' in memory of the first day of the Commune; and the number is 'Quatre-vingt dix-huit.'"

"Goodness!" said Mattie; "who is ever to remember all these dix-huits? It's worse than the numbers along Fifth Avenue in New York."

"How very strange!" exclaimed Murkle: "on what floor, may I ask? Some of my most intimate friends have taken the *premier* in the same house, and arrive to-morrow."

"Then I do hope they ain't noisy," said Mattie, "for they are just above us; we're on the *entresol,* I think it is called. Now we really must hurry up, or old

Hannah will think we're lost. Come, Keith, you and I will go together this time for a change, and send Bob and Stella in the other *coupé*. Good-night, Mr Murkle; we shall always be glad to see you."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FINANCIAL TRIUMVIRATE.

GRANDESELLA and Murkle had "places of business" in London, Paris, and Florence. These consisted of two or three large rooms, furnished somewhat more ornately than is usual in such establishments, with a small office, in which there were one or two clerks. It was never certain where they were to be found. There was a great convenience attending this difficulty of unearthing them when they did not wish to be invaded, as the clerk was instructed to say they were abroad, when, in point of fact, they might be in the next room; or Mr Murkle would say that the affair was one which the Baron understood, but to which he had not directed his attention, if it were inconvenient for him to commit himself—and that the Baron was unfortunately in Paris. And when the visitor was gone, the partners would put their heads together and see what was to be made out of the information which Mr Murkle had ex-

tracted. Or if a different impression was to be created, Mr Murkle would lead the visitor with muc. solemnity into the apartment where the Baron sat in great state engaged in a voluminous correspondence. They had one system for London, and another for Paris, and another for Florence, adapted to the usage of the respective countries; but they had not yet succeeded in establishing themselves socially in London society—their undertakings, so far, having necessitated their residence principally abroad; and although not lacking in boldness of conception or skill in execution, these had not turned out so profitable as had been anticipated, and upon more than one occasion had involved an amount of sharp practice to avert disaster, which had left them with a reputation not altogether untarnished: still they had a reputation, such as it was. They were beginning to be well known as enterprising promoters and skilful operators, and they only needed a great *coup* to have the financial world at their feet. It was in connection with an undertaking which seemed calculated to realise their most sanguine expectations, that Murkle had now telegraphed for the Baron to join him in Paris; and as the affair was not one which could be concluded in a day, Grandesella had decided upon taking his wife and daughter with him, and had made up his mind to pass the winter there. He was the more inclined to do this, as he had heard from his wife the dangers which threatened to disturb their domestic plans, by the growing intimacy

of Ronald MacAlpine and Altiora, and which he determined to nip in the bud. Hence it was that, on the day following the events recorded in the last chapter, the asphalt of the Rue du dix-huit Mars, dix-huit cent soixante et onze, resounded with the clatter of the hoofs which notified the *concierge* of No. Quatre-vingt dix-huit, that Baron Grandesella's family and luggage were on the point of arrival, and brought that domestic functionary to the entrance of the *port-cochère*, cap in hand, and with an air of obsequiousness appropriate to the reception of a financial magnate.

"I don't think much of them port cochers," said Hannah, who wanted to inspect the new arrivals, and was darning, with the aid of a pair of magnifiers, an open-worked stocking of Stella's near the window; "they've been and driven right square into the yard. Why, he's never a-goin' to set up a store in this house. I guess he must have chartered a whole car to take all that baggage."

For the next hour, to Hannah's great annoyance, not unmingled with curiosity, there was such a clatter of trunks and porters past the door of the *entresol*, that at last she could stand it no longer, and walked boldly forth on a voyage of discovery, which led her to the landing above, which she passed as if bent on a mission to the upper regions, and then slowly descended, just in time to find Altiora and her maid struggling with a key in the refractory lock of a trunk at the open door of the antechamber. "Bless you, that ain't no good,

my dear young lady," she remarked calmly; "it needs being sat upon. Please allow me," and she perched herself coolly on the resisting lid, which still refused to yield to the pressure, and at this juncture Mr Murkle appeared.

"Welcome to Paris, dear Altiora," said that gentleman with a display of affection, which was evidently not reciprocated, as she coldly gave him her hand. "Why, you've got a new maid," he added, turning to inspect Hannah; for Mr Murkle made it a point to be well informed in regard to the details of the Baron's establishment. But before she could reply, Hannah, who, seated squarely on the box, with short petticoats, and feet an inch from the ground, was giving a spasmodic pressure, proceeding apparently from the base of the spine, broke in—

"Just you come and sit down here alongside of me, and don't talk," she said, making room for him. "I ain't no new maid, and I wish I warn't an old one. You don't expect to make that key turn by standing staring at me, when just a mite more would do it. One would think the man had never seen a woman a-settin' on a trunk before."

"Who is this person, Altiora?" said Murkle, angrily; for Altiora's maid had become utterly unable either to grapple with the lock, or to suppress the laughter with which she was internally convulsed.

"I don't know," said Altiora, "except that she's a very kind one."

"Why, it's no kindness at all, Miss—only a common neighbourly act, sich as I would expect you to do for me. I think it is for me to ask, who is this man as can leave a lady a-settin' on a trunk, and all but getting it open, and refuses to come and help her? If that's your grand Paris politeness as they make such a talk about, I say give me 'Murikan manners," —and she gave a sudden bump of indignation on the lid, which was exactly the "mite" it needed, for the key turned, and she slipped off, and turning to Altiora, before Murkle had time to give vent to his indignation, said "Good day, Miss; my young ladies and me live down on the 'entersoul,' I think they call it, and you'll always be welcome;" and she stumped actively off, not a little pleased to think she had made an acquaintance for her young ladies of so promising an appearance.

"Oh," said Murkle grimly, as he watched her prim upright figure rapidly disappearing, and remembered Hetherington's explanations of the night before,—"so that's the old lady of the party! I don't wonder the young ones dispense with such a *chaperon*, when they go to the theatre alone with young men. You have some neighbours below, Altiora, whom I know slightly, and I think it will be as well for you to let me find out something more about them before you accept this singular female's invitation to make their acquaintance."

"I should prefer to leave that responsibility to my mother," said Altiora significantly, as she ushered

Murkle into the *salon*, and instantly vanished upon the pretext of telling Madame Grandesella that he had arrived. As she opened the door, the deep bass voice of the Baron gushed through it, singing *Figaro qui, Figaro la,* and he promptly followed it into the room, extending both hands towards Murkle, with his usual manner of excessive cordiality.

"Well, I'm glad it's '*Figaro qui*' at last; you've been running things pretty fine," said the latter, "leaving me here all alone to answer inquiries, give explanations——"

"And invent lies," interrupted the Baron. "*Parbleu!* my dear Dick, how could I pay you a higher compliment? What earthly assistance would mine have been to your own brilliant imagination? Besides, I have not been idle. Tell him, Lalla *mia*," he went on, addressing the Baroness who just then entered the room, "how skilfully I baited the hook with our heiress, who is dying to see her noble cousin, and whose beauty and talents are only equal to her wealth, —*ouf!*" and the Baron gave a grunt as if still fatigued with the labour of the task.

"Lord Sark, it seems, was very suspicious," said the Baroness, coming to her husband's relief. "He is, as you know, Altiora's second cousin, but we have never been able to do more than make him admit the relationship. If we had been a band of Italian brigands, who wanted to capture him and carry him off to our mountains, to hold him for a ransom, he could not have

been more wary during all these years. It is fortunate that British brigands exist who can play the same trick by the simple device of making a distinguished nobleman the director of a joint-stock company, limited. Philippo found him in great trouble, dreading liquidation, exposure, and I don't know what more besides, unless he could find some great capitalists to come to the rescue."

"And Grandesella and Murkle, with their great financial connection, are going to assume the liability of the company, and save his lordship from disgrace, I suppose," said Murkle, cynically; "and pray, what are we to get in return?"

"What a gloomy view of things you always take, *mon cher*, before you thoroughly understand them!" said the Baron. "In the first place, I have gone carefully into all the patents possessed by the Universal Scintillator Company; and by becoming its possessors, and making a contract disposing of it to the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company, of which you and I, my dear Dick, are the promoters, we can retrieve the ruined fortunes of the one, and float the other, with the Earl of Sark as a sort of aristocratic *trait d'union.* We will entangle him, *mon ami,* in the meshes of our financial net until he is our slave, when we will marry him to Altiora; and with rank at the helm and beauty at the prow, to borrow the image of the poet, the bark of Grandesella and Murkle will breast the social waves until it is safely moored in the

haven, let us say, of royalty,—after that, titles, honours, decorations, political life, and fame. What say you, Sir Richard Murkle, Bart., M.P., G.C.M.G.?"

"I say," said Murkle, "that it won't work, for the very simple reason that I intend to marry Altiora myself; and you know very well, Laura," he added, turning with a fierce emphasis on the Baroness, "that neither you nor Philippo here, nor Altiora herself, can prevent me. You don't suppose I became a partner in that little arrangement which we entered into eighteen years ago, when I resigned Laura to you, Philippo, to be dictated to now!"

"Resigned me!" and a glance of very evil meaning shot from the Baroness's cold grey eye like a poisoned dart, as she turned upon Murkle; "yes, you resigned me, because I refused you then, as I refuse my daughter to you now. She is not adapted for the *rôle* of a professional beauty, if that is how you mean to advance your fortunes in London," she went on, with a sneer; "and even you could not force her to assume it."

"I think," replied Murkle, rising, and speaking in a voice of suppressed passion, "the person best able to judge of that matter will be Altiora herself. There is that little mystery so familiar to us all, but of which she has been kept in ignorance, which, when I reveal it to her, as I propose to do at once, will put the matter beyond a doubt."

"Ta, ta, ta," interrupted the Baron, drumming his fingers on the table, "don't be so impetuous, Dick; and

you, Lalla *mia*, don't aggravate our old friend. If you two can't be bound by the chords of affection and long association, at least remember that we may all be ruined if you quarrel. Unity is force; for my part, I love you both: I never forget that we all hang by the same rope."

"Not yet," said Murkle, and his lip curled with a sinister smile. "I think we had better not discuss how many ropes we may hang by. The subject is not a pleasant one, but I did not start it. I am glad you recognise, Philippo, that you cannot make any plans with regard to Altiora without consulting me first. If you always bear that in mind, there need be no question of hanging."

"*Sapristi!* what a knack you have of raking up unpleasant topics! How was I to know that you had placed your battered affections upon the girl you've known ever since she was born? Let me see: as you say, that's more than eighteen years ago now, and the house of Grandesella was an obscure commission agency in an obscure Italian town, and Richard Murkle was an obscure clerk in it then."

"And Laura was an obscure and disconsolate widow, whom I resigned in favour of my obscure employer, upon condition of being made a partner in the firm," interrupted Murkle.

"And who made both your fortunes by the money she brought with her," added the Baroness, tartly.

"*Basta!*" said the Baron, "let us have no more of this. We none of us could have got on without the

other; if we fall out, some honest man, if there is such a thing, will get his rights; you know the old proverb. Let us leave the marriage question and get back to business. I have told Lord Sark that he must come over here and satisfy himself in regard to the terms of the concession, by which he becomes a co-proprietor with us of the extensive privileges we have obtained, if he can persuade the board of which he is the chairman, to hand over the company to us at our own terms, which, considering the difficulties they are in, can, I think, be satisfactorily arranged. Of the merits of my project financially, there can be no question, Dick, as you will see when we go into it together; if you don't agree to its advantages matrimonially, we will try another combination. In the meantime, Ora has been most useful as a decoy. She's a young lady with a will of her own, and if you can force her inclinations neither Lalla nor I will interfere;" and he cast a covert glance at his wife, who seemed on the look-out for it, and who snapped it up so dexterously, that it was undetected by the sharp eyes of Murkle.

"Dear Altiora," she remarked; "I am afraid she has thrown away her heart upon Mr MacAlpine, and that both Richard and Lord Sark will have some trouble with her."

Murkle turned an uneasy look of mistrust at the Baroness at this observation. "I won't trouble you to inform me who Mr MacAlpine is," he said, "of whom I now hear for the first time, or what the state of

Altiora's affections may be, as I have the girl herself to apply to, and can rely upon her veracity," and he emphasised the last two words. "Now, Philippo, I am ready to attend to the *exposé* of your project."

The Baroness, who was accustomed to assist at these deliberations, took up her knitting, and followed the two men as they plunged into the intricacies of those financial combinations—that were afterwards to appear in a very different form in an attractive prospectus—with a subtle apprehension of their mysteries, which could only have been acquired by long practice, from time to time interposing observations, to which both men listened with a respect rarely accorded to the fair sex where such matters are concerned. The triumvirate protracted the *séance* until even Murkle was convinced that the Earl of Sark and his "company" might be turned to a most profitable account to themselves, if not to his lordship; and under the soothing influence of the delightful prospect thus opened, and the persuasive accents of the Baron, who was an adept in the art of peacemaking, when it suited his purpose, mutual confidence was to all appearance restored, and a tacit understanding arrived at, that nothing was to be gained by anticipating the complications likely to arise when the force of circumstances should compel decided action to be taken with regard to the destiny of the girl, round whom so many interests, both of heart and pocket, seemed likely to centre.

CHAPTER V.

SARK AND "THE CLYMER."

THE Earl of Sark was one of the best known and most popular men in London. When, at the age of three-and-twenty, he had a few years before seconded the Address in the House of Lords, he captivated in his first sentence a whole file of peers' daughters, who had obtained seats in the gallery on that occasion. In his second, their mammas began critically to examine him through their eyeglasses, and devise schemes for his capture in the matrimonial net. With the third, he made his first point, and the leader of the Opposition pricked his ears, and felt that a young gladiator had entered the arena, who was likely to give trouble, and prove an inconvenient reinforcement to the enemy. And when he had concluded his fourth, the whole of his own side burst forth in a well-modulated and guardedly enthusiastic "Hear, hear," which so excited Sark's intimate friend, young St Olave, that that impetuous young nobleman, who had taken his seat for the first time, in an unguarded moment actually clapped his hands, thus, though he instantly checked himself, producing a shiver of dismay throughout the august assembly, from which it did not recover for some moments, and from the effects of which the noble lord on the woolsack suffered until dinner-time.

By the time Sark had concluded his brilliant oration, his best friends began to regret bitterly that he should have been thrown away upon the Lords. It was evident that he had the right stuff in him, and he was just the sort of man the party needed sadly in the Lower House. That evening all London, by which I mean all the people who crowded to the three drums between which they oscillated, talked of nothing but Sark's speech; and that nobleman was quite tired of looking modest, and receiving and deprecating compliments, until he staggered off to bed under the weight of his honours, the happiest and most triumphant man in England. It was generally admitted that he was the most eligible *parti* of the season. Fairly rich, an earl of ancient lineage, and with an undoubted talent, which should place him in the first rank of the statesmen of his day, he had all the necessary matrimonial requirements,—add to this the secondary considerations, that he was extremely good-looking, of a frank, generous nature, and reported by his contemporaries to have good principles, and we cannot wonder that young ladies, when they saw him approaching in a ball-room, fluttered their fans with a slightly enhanced vigour, arising from nervous agitation, while their cheeks sometimes flushed faintly, and their eyelids drooped timidly—in the case of *débutantes*, aware that the maternal eye was upon them at these trying moments. The more seasoned ones took another line, and carried him off to corners, in mortal dread of his

falling a prey to some unprincipled young married woman, who, having made her own game, continued to poach unrestrainedly on the preserves of her younger sisters on promotion. Such, in fact, in spite of all their precautions, actually occurred; and just as the Duchess of Pentonville had flattered herself that her eldest girl, Lady Adeliza, had finally landed him at her feet, mother and daughter saw him, to their dismay, fairly and apparently irrevocably hooked by "that horrid Mrs Clymer." Mrs Clymer was never called anything else by a certain class of mothers but "that horrid Mrs Clymer." Sometimes the epithet was "disgusting;" but that was only when some tale was narrated, "quite between ourselves, you know, my dear." As a general rule the epithet was thought too strong, as there was no circle, however exalted, in which Mrs Clymer had not achieved success. There had always been a halo of mystery about her, which added immensely to her prestige. You had only to look at her to feel that her life had been a romance. If you were sentimental yourself, she could put on an air which at once touched you—for you felt that she was a woman that had suffered. If you were an artist, you saw by the exquisite taste of her dress that she had a soul which could soar above that baser region of modern æstheticism, into the purer region of a still more sublime conception of what constitutes pure art. If you were horsey, she would give you a lead across country; and if you asked her where she learnt to be

at once so daring and so graceful in the hunting-field, she would fling back her wind-tossed locks recklessly, and tell you "in the Pampas of South America." If you were musical, she had the voice of a siren—and notes which, with a running accompaniment of glances, and "variations" on the feelings, vibrated to your very soul. Her lithe supple figure moved gracefully, without affectation. Her soft white hand possessed a power of thrilling when you clasped it which was simply marvellous—she would have said magnetic. Her little foot, with its high-arched instep, had been immortalised by a sculptor at Rome, and may be seen any day in its nude perfection on the mantelpiece of her perfectly furnished little house in Mayfair—where there is a sanctum to which only intimates are admitted, containing many curious articles of *vertu* and interesting relics, which she keeps as reminiscences of her former life; for Mrs Clymer has lived much and widely. She had only been a season or two in London when she captured Lord Sark, and was then not much over thirty; but she looked a mere girl, and took society by storm by the force of her accomplishments, —her ready wit, her ingenious audacity, her extreme loveliness, and air of ineffable innocence. For two or three seasons before that she had frequented the watering-places in Europe which are the most affected by the British aristocracy; and they admitted her freely, because she said she was American. And so she was, so far as nationality was concerned, but Americans

denied all knowledge of her in their own country. This she explained by the fact that her father, though a citizen of the United States, had been an officer in the army of some South American republic, where she was born, and that he had subsequently, on the death of his first wife, entered into speculations connected with torpedoes in the Mediterranean, where he had married a Levantine; and thus she had acquired the knowledge of most European languages, in which she was a proficient, and the fortune which he left her at his death, after having separated from his second wife. But all these details are hazy and obscure, and subject to modification, as they are a sort of patchwork result from scraps of information, extracted at various times by different people. There was another history, quite different, which begins in the Levant, with a good deal of Italy thrown in, and ends with South America. Probably, if anybody had ever seen Mr Clymer, that gentleman could have thrown some important light on the whole matter: Mr Clymer was the individual with whom so much mysterious suffering was connected. He seemed to have behaved badly on some occasion in Asia Minor; but the subject was evidently so painful, that no one was heartless enough to press for information. He had married her for her fortune, of which, however, she seemed to have saved a good deal, and then ill-treated her, or deserted her, or deceived her. He, too, was said to be an American, and was supposed to be living, if he was living at all, in California; but

Mrs Clymer so plainly gave it to be understood that any reference to this mythical individual was painful to her, that society readily conceded it was nobody's business but Mrs Clymer's. There was nothing American about her, at all events. She was thoroughly cosmopolitan — indeed, so much, that she and the American Minister have never been good friends since the celebrated occasion when he made a difficulty about her presentation at Court. Mrs Clymer was not a woman to be baffled, and eventually carried the day, and has taken her revenge ever since by holding up her own countrymen and countrywomen to ridicule upon every possible occasion. What gives Mrs Clymer her great hold on London society is the hypothetical existence of Mr Clymer; she is just enough married to be a safe person to fall in love with. There can be no possible danger of having to marry her, "because of Clymer, you know." Matchmaking mammas became anxious to verify the fact of Clymer's non-existence; because, if Mrs Clymer was either a widow, or had never been married—and conjecture, in regard to her, stuck at nothing—then if they could marry her to some weak-minded nobleman, and be done with her, it would be a great riddance of a matrimonial obstacle. Moreover, the more widespread and well founded the suspicion of Clymer's non-existence became, the more likely were lovers to become demoralised for fear of possible consequences. When Sark fell a victim, society at large uttered a general groan of dismay.

The mothers were enraged, the daughters dejected, the politicians nervous and disappointed. "That woman Clymer will be the ruin of Sark," said Lord Basinghall; "he has utterly given up all interest in 'The Foot-and-Mouth Disease Bill' ever since she got hold of him. They say that story of her having a fortune of her own is a pure invention; that she is in debt for the rent of her house, and for everything there is in it; that it has all been lent her on speculation by some enterprising usurer, and now that Sark is paying all her debts with interest. His infatuation is something incredible. Not but that she is as handsome as a Peri, and as innocent-looking."

"They say he was offered office the other day, and refused it—couldn't spare the time. Talks of taking Mrs Clymer a cruise round the world in his yacht, with Hurst and Lady Dolly to do proper. I never knew a woman go to the bad so fast as Lady Dolly has, since she has become the *amie intime* of the Clymer," added Lysper, a young Guardsman, who had been making furious love to Mrs Clymer until Sark's appearance on the scene had rendered any further pursuit hopeless.

"I have been trying to persuade Sark to give up that idea," said Lord St Olave mournfully, "and I think I have succeeded. He says he must do something to economise. I hear he lost a lot on the Ascot Cup day. I never knew him bet before; but it seems that woman made it a test of his affection to back some horse she has an interest in. I believe she is a professional

gambler, and goes in for a lot of speculations on the sly, in spite of all her demure ways."

"I know she dabbles in city things," said Lysper. "I used constantly to meet a stockbroking cad at her house, who used to worship at that shrine when I was amusing myself there; and there was always a mysterious whisper before he took his departure, which I am sure meant business of some sort."

"Say rather mischief," said Basinghall. "Poor Sark! It is really heartbreaking to think what a loss he is to the party. It is like the measles, and must run its course; it's impossible to do anything to save him now, he's too far gone."

So it happened that Lord Sark's finances, becoming embarrassed under the influence of the fair adventuress, he plunged into City speculations, with the aid of the young stockbroker above mentioned, to retrieve them, having much faith in that gentleman's experience and Mrs Clymer's sagacity—a confidence which turned out to be quite misplaced; and he was just in the agonies of the financial dilemma alluded to by Baron Grandesella when that astute financier proposed to rescue him if he would pay a visit to Paris to be enlightened as to certain combinations by which he was to become part proprietor of the concessions obtained by the promoters of the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company, and derive immense profits as chairman of that company, when it had been successfully floated upon a confiding public. Sark felt rather nervous when he

had decided upon this step without first consulting Mrs Clymer, and broke it to that lady with a degree of trepidation which turned out to have been unnecessary. She was just in the humour for a trip to Paris, she said. The London season was still in the distance, and the idea of new financial combinations charmed her almost as much as the prospect of renewing her toilet at Sark's expense, and her intimacy with her old friend Worth, who, it was said, or rather she said, had from time to time been indebted to her for some of his best ideas; and she assured Sark he allowed her a heavy discount in consequence. They did not, however, come over by the same train, or even go to the same hotel—for though their relations were tolerably notorious, they still respected the external proprieties; indeed Mrs Clymer had discovered that her intimacy with so distinguished a nobleman, so far from injuring her position in London society, had distinctly the effect of consolidating it. Many country houses were now open to her, because Sark was almost certain to refuse unless "that horrid Mrs Clymer" was asked—he was such a charming social addition; so, for the matter of that, was she. And as they both made a point of exerting themselves to the utmost under these circumstances, it cannot be denied that their presence contributed largely to the success of these rural aristocratic gatherings. Moreover, there was a certain relief in finding that Mrs Clymer was provided for, even at so great a sacrifice; and she no longer was pronounced

so "horrid," now that she had given up "flirting all over the place," as Lysper elegantly expressed it. Though neither the Grandesellas nor Murkle had ever seen her, they were familiar with her photograph in the shop-windows, and with her reputation in the social weeklies; and were too conversant with the weaknesses of human nature to suppose for a moment that she would allow Lord Sark to come to Paris alone. Though her name had not been mentioned in the discussion which had taken place about Altiora, it had been present in the minds of all three; and they all saw in her a possible ally, whose merits they were too divided in sentiment at that moment to discuss. The Baron thought that when it came to the point she could be bought off —he had an unbounded belief in the power of money; the Baroness saw in her a trump-card, which might be played with advantage when she took her hand in the social rubber of her first London season; and Murkle saw a dangerous rival to Altiora in Sark's affections, whose jealousy he would not be slow to excite if necessary. It was to this hornet's nest that the unconscious Sark glided at the rate of thirty miles an hour in the train which conveyed him from Boulogne to Paris.

It would be instructive but tedious, as most instructive things are, if I were to attempt to describe the intricacies of the financial net in which the Paris triumvirate entangled Sark, by means of a dexterous combination of the two companies in whose fortunes he was destined to become so deeply involved. The

process was rapid and skilfully managed. For the first two or three days Grandesella and Murkle saw him alone; then, when he was sufficiently muddled by the jargon of financial detail, and dazzled by prospective results, they descended to the topics and necessities of everyday life, of which eating is one of the most essential, and Sark was in due time committed to a dinner with the Baroness and Altiora, which he returned by another at the Café Anglais, at which the whole party met Mrs Clymer, who said she always came to Paris at this season, and was so delighted to find that she had accidentally so timed her visit as to meet Lord Sark, and expressed her eternal gratitude to the Baron and Baroness for having been the means of bringing him over so opportunely. She seemed instinctively to find in Murkle a kindred spirit, and her voice sank to such a sympathetic cadence, her large eyes beamed upon him so languidly and so confidingly, and her cheek flushed so slightly as they exchanged glances for the third time, that Sark, who happened to look up at the moment, felt a twinge of jealousy, and took another survey of Murkle from quite a new point of view. "So my astute financial friend aspires to be a lady-killer," he thought, and then laughed away his suspicion as he felt the Clymer's gaze burning into his soul. He was so accustomed to the sensation that he did not need to look up to know that she was waiting to reassure him by an unuttered language, of which he had learnt to read every secret. So this dinner, which was

only the prelude to many succeeding ones, passed off very well. The only discordant note in the party was Altiora; but as this history could never have been written were it not for the access which I happen to have had to that young lady's own journal, her experiences can best be narrated in her own words.

CHAPTER VI.

ALTIORA CAPTURED BY THE CALIFORNIANS.

At last the Baron and mamma have achieved the great object of their ambition, and have captured Lord Sark. "Altiora," said mamma, when he called, "let me introduce you to your cousin Lord Sark." I thought his lordship winced slightly, but that may have been imagination—he was too well-bred to show anything but cordiality; but we had no mutual relations to talk about, which made it awkward.

"I have another cousin in Paris," he said at last, with a smile, "whom I must look up. He is quite an oriental pundit, and buries himself in the ancient literature of the Zoroastrians, or some other extinct species. Have you ever met Bob Alderney?"

As I had never even heard of him, I was obliged to confess my ignorance, and tried to engage Lord Sark

in a discussion in regard to the pursuits of this other new-found relative, with whom I may possibly find some interests in common; but I soon became instinctively conscious that I was boring him, or rather that he was boring himself. Neither mamma nor I could discuss London society, nor politics, nor sport; we tried art, but he seemed to know nothing about it. There was left finance, about which I knew mamma was dying to talk to him, but felt that it would not be discreet; and when he alluded to Mr Murkle, I felt sympathetically towards him as a fellow-victim who was to be pounced upon. I shall warn him about this the first time I have an opportunity. It certainly is an anomalous position morally for a girl to find herself in, but I feel that I owe it to the late Mr Peto to be a traitor in the family camp. Dear papa! I am certain he must have been the soul of honour, from the overpowering inclination which possesses me to unearth villany and expose hypocrisy wherever I meet it. I am sure there is a serious side to Sark. He told me always to call him Sark, in an undertone which mamma did not hear. I suppose it is the fashion between second cousins in the aristocracy. At all events he is worth saving, merely as a human being. He is certainly honest, and has a heart; but I suppose he has what mamma calls "the vices common to young men," whatever these may be. How much I have of life yet to learn before I can make myself of any practical use to others! It is ridiculous to suppose that because I am a girl, I

cannot do good honest service to young men. Pure conventionalism, which I am determined to break through.

. . . .

We have just come home from dining with Sark. He invited an American lady, Mrs Clymer, to meet us. As soon as I touched her hand, I felt a slight shiver and a painful constriction of the chest. The only other person who sometimes affects me in the same way is Richard Murkle, but then the pain is generally in the temples. I wonder how doctors account for this. I suppose they would tell me it is imagination, and did not exist at all; but not only do I know, as a positive fact, that it exists, but I know vaguely what it means. There is something radically wrong about that woman, and she feels that I know it. I was puzzling over the various phenomena she presented to me, when I suddenly looked up and caught her eye fully before she had time to lower it. For a second all the blood left her face, and then came back with a rush. I suppose blushing and faintness are imagination too, and don't exist at all. If the look of one person at another can produce a flush or a pallor, why may the emotion not be intensified until it is felt as a pain? And if a look can do it, why should not a touch do it still more effectually? What passes from eye to eye to produce this effect may surely pass from hand to hand. It must be a moral force of some kind, "acting" on what the doctors call the nerves. That word

"acting" is very convenient. It entirely dispenses with any explanation of how the acting is done, so it is a good deal used by scientific men. It is quite evident, at any rate, that I was "acting" on Mrs Clymer, and Mrs Clymer was "reacting" on me. We did not require to say anything to each other to do this. She was doing a good deal of acting all round. She was acting on Murkle, who is too swarthy to blush, but there is an almost imperceptible twitch in the muscle of his upper lip on these occasions; and she was acting on Sark, who sighed. Neither the Baron nor mamma seemed to feel her influence in the slightest degree. When we parted, and Mrs Clymer took both my hands in hers and looked lovingly into my eyes with a face of radiant innocence and gushing affection, and said, "Dear Miss Peto, I am so glad to have had this opportunity of making your acquaintance. We have all been so merry to-night, that I have not had a chance of really talking to you, but I feel sure we shall be great friends. You must let me see a great deal of you;"—when she said all this with much effusion, I felt that she was making a deliberate declaration of war to the knife; and she knew I felt it by the warmth with which I returned her pressure, and which seemed quite to please Lord Sark, who said, "Good-bye, Altiora," to my mother's great delight.

Going down-stairs yesterday, I met my elderly friend, who had so much scandalised Mr Murkle by asking him to sit with her on the lid of my trunk.

She was standing at the open door of the *entresol*, talking to a beautiful girl who had evidently just come in from a walk. "Why, here's the very young lady herself," she said, holding out her hand to me with the greatest cordiality. "I was just a-sayin' to Mattie—Stella, I mean," she corrected herself, "as bein' all strangers together in a strange land, and such near neighbours, it was only becoming as we should go and see whether you wasn't feelin' kinder lonely like, with your parpa and marma out so much." She laid the emphasis on the first syllable of the words papa and mamma, as if I was a lisping infant.

The lady she called Mattie and then Stella blushed slightly as she bowed, and said, "I must apologise for so informal an introduction; but I was just explaining to my friend here that our being strangers and neighbours scarcely warranted our taking the liberty she suggests, though I am very glad"—and she looked at me with such frank, truthful eyes, that my heart warmed to her at once—"of any accident which may give me the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"Well, there ain't no use standing talking out here in the cold, anyway," broke in her companion; "so come in and have a cup of tea. This is Miss Walton—my, now if I didn't as near as anything say Miss Terrill—and Miss Terrill is indoors."

There must have been a good deal of what the Americans call "personal magnetism" in the old lady, for I yielded unresistingly to her will, explaining to

Miss Walton, as I did so, that ever since my first meeting with her friend I had cherished a hope that we might become acquainted.

A girl was sitting reading as we entered the *salon*, and my first friend, who seemed inclined to take all the responsibility of my introduction upon herself, said, "Here, Mattie—laws, now, if I warn't jist a-goin' to say Stella!—here's Miss—I didn't rightly catch your name—come to see you."

"Altiora Peto," I said, laughing.

"Now you mustn't apologise," interrupted Miss Walton, seeing I was going to excuse my abrupt entrance. "This is Mattie Terrill, and this is Hannah Coffin, one of the old New Hampshire Coffins; though she has been a long time away from New England, she has a good deal of the old Puritan ring to her still—haven't you, Hannah?"

But Hannah had no time to reply, for Miss Terrill was expressing her welcome; and in half an hour we were sitting over our tea like old friends.

I confess I was very nervous as to how I should break the fact of my new acquaintances to my mother, who would be sure to treat them with the utmost rudeness if, as was most probable, she did not approve of the whole proceeding; and I was haunted by the vision of an abrupt termination of an intercourse which, from its originality, I was beginning to enjoy immensely. I thought it best to prepare the minds of my new acquaintances for this eventuality, and yet it was

a most difficult matter to approach. As I was meditating upon it, Miss Terrill said—

"I think we know a friend of yours—Mr Murkle. He promised to make us acquainted before your arrival."

This rather astonished me, and led to a whole history of their first visit to the theatre, under the guidance of Miss Terrill's cousin, Mr Hetherington, and Mr Alderney, who turns out to be none other than my own unseen cousin Bob, first brought to my consciousness by Lord Sark.

"Why, you don't say!" laughed Miss Terrill, as she clapped her hands, after listening to my explanation,—"then he's your cousin too, and we're all cousins! Well, now, ain't this perfectly lovely! This is a new version of 'Our American Cousin,' and we'll call Lord Sark Lord Dundreary."

We had just arrived at this satisfactory conclusion when the *timbre* sounded, and in walked Mr Hetherington and Mr Alderney.

"Mr Alderney," said Miss Walton, her eyes dancing with mischief, "let me introduce to you your cousin, Miss Altiora Peto."

Mr Alderney, who was evidently a shy man, was overcome with embarrassment at being thus unexpectedly brought face to face with an unknown relative, and apparently had a strong suspicion that he was being made the subject of chaff; but he had too much politeness under the circumstances to give vent to it,

so he only bowed and murmured something about being too delighted.

"Lady Mary Alderney, who married General Peto, was my grandmother," I said, by way of explanation. "I suppose you know that Lord Sark is in Paris?"

Mr Alderney said that they had exchanged notes but had not met,—and then the conversation became general. I was surprised to find that they all seemed more or less distantly connected, and called each other by their Christian names, and were evidently on terms of the greatest intimacy, which was the more remarkable, as neither Mr Hetherington nor Mr Alderney had been in America, and this was the first visit of the young ladies to Europe. It was a decided relief to my mind when I discovered that Miss Walton was a great heiress. This would quite reconcile my mother to the irregularity of the circumstances under which I had made their acquaintance, and to the fact that they were travelling without any other *chaperon* than Miss Coffin, who seemed to live with them on terms of perfect equality, though evidently a person who had not enjoyed the same advantages of education and social training as her friends.

There was something so refreshing in the originality and spontaneity of the whole party—in the utter absence of conventionality, and in the genuine warmth of natures not yet chilled by contact with what is called polite society—that I felt myself expanding and reviving under its influence, like a tropical plant

rescued from the frost and put into a hothouse. I was just allowing myself the full luxury of the sensation, when I detected a suppressed sigh, and a whispered "Poor darling!" unheard by the others, who were all talking together, and found Miss Coffin's black eyes, which combined a singular benevolence of expression with a very piercing quality, fixed upon me.

"Guess I've got to kiss you: I don't know what come to me that I did not think of it sooner. You need to be loved, my dearie—that's what's the matter with you," she murmured, as she put her arms round me. "You go on talking, and don't mind us," she said sharply, turning to the others, whose conversation had been suspended by the movement. "Time enough to stare like that," she added, turning to Mr Alderney, who had put his glass in his eye the better to observe her proceedings, "when it comes to your turn." Upon which he dropped it with a blush, and both the girls laughed heartily, and I resigned myself to her ministrations with a sensation of calm content which was entirely new to me; and yet all she did was to sit by my side and hold my hand without speaking, with a fixed dreamy look into my face. "You're a-goin' to have trouble," she said, after a pause; "and if I'm anywhere about when it comes, you come to old Hannah. I've never been a mother," she added with a sigh, "and I ain't comfortable and fleshy to lean upon; but I've got a mother's heart, my dear, and

when I feel a-drawin' to any one like I do to you, it's because I've got a use to 'em somehow. Now it don't seem to me, so far as I can feel, as you ever rightly knew what a mother's love was. Well, well, I've known mother-love kill a mother, same as I've known the want of it to kill a daughter. It all happened in my own family. I had two sisters, my dear, and one of 'em married a man as wasn't of much account, against our mother's will, and mother would never see her again; and she took it to heart so, she died. And the other sister married, and had a daughter as married a mighty rich man; but he was downright bad, and she left him, and she was that proud she never let it be known where she had gone to; and her mother—that's my sister—never could hear of her again; and so she took it to heart, and pined for that daughter till she died. It comes of feelings not being properly divided, my dear. Why on airth do heartless mothers have lovin' daughters, and heartless daughters have lovin' mothers? Well, well, it's all a puzzle."

"I feel that sensitive, my dear," she continued after a pause, "to people as I feel a-drawin' to, that I know when they are bein' starved for love by a chill as catches me all about the heart. It gets to feel cold and withered up like—just as though a lump of ice was in my chest, that was a-meltin' away and leaving nothing. The way I know who it is as is suffering is because of the sudden love I feel for them, that

seems to rush into that cold empty place. That tells me I can do 'em good, and I can feel it sorter comin' back to me from the person. Now, dearie, you just keep on a-lovin' me all you have a mind to. Why, old and thin as I am, I've got a life in me as will build you right square up." Then she stopped abruptly, and after a moment added in a sharp tone, which contrasted strangely with the wonderful tenderness of her voice hitherto, "Come into the corner—we're too near them chattering folks here now;" and she added when we could talk more freely, "I want you to tell me all about your mother."

Even if I had desired, which I did not, it would have been impossible for me to have resisted the impulse which I felt to take this stranger into the confidences of my heart. There was such a completeness of comprehension in her sympathy; she seemed to divine my meaning so far beyond what it was possible for me to express in words; her faculty of intuitive perception was so infinitely more acute than anything I had ever met with in any individual before, and so much at variance with the external impression produced by her apparent lack of education and refinement,—that I felt more and more surprised at the union of such exquisite tenderness and sensibility with so much that was strange and uncouth. When, after describing the influences by which I was surrounded, I went on to give her some idea of my own views and aspirations, she listened as one to whom such thoughts

were familiar—who had fathomed depths upon the edge of which I was timidly venturing, and attempted flights, the possibility of which I was only dimly contemplating. Time slipped by so rapidly that I felt I was only beginning to unburden myself, when I was recalled to a recollection of its flight by Mr Hetherington and Mr Alderney getting up to take their leave.

"I shall see Lord Sark to-morrow, and ask him to introduce me to Baron and Baroness Grandesella," said the latter, "when I hope often to have the pleasure of seeing you."

"My, how stiff you English are!" said Mattie. "She's your own cousin; why don't you just run up-stairs and call at once? We can find out from the *concierge* whether the Baroness has come in."

"No, no," he replied smiling; "it is as well to be on the safe side. First I'll call with Sark, and he'll introduce me; then I'll call with Keith, and introduce him; then we'll bring Sark here and introduce him to you; then we'll expatiate on your merits to the Grandesellas and bring Sark's influence to bear, and they'll come and call on you; then you return their visit; then we'll all set sail together and go down before the wind."

"And Mr Murkle, and Mrs Clymer," I mentally ejaculated as I listened to this programme, "they'll want to go down before the wind too. I fear me it will be an ill wind, but I trust it may blow 'somebody good.'"

"Good-bye, and God bless you, my dearie," said Hannah—I can't call her Miss Coffin any more—giving me a last embrace. "That's right," she said, turning to Mattie and Stella as they too kissed me; "you make much of her—she's worth it."

"You bet," said Stella, laughing. "Now you gentlemen mustn't be shocked if I occasionally indulge in slang—I'll only do it when we're quite alone; but there are moments—such, for instance, as a parting like this—when it's a relief to one's feelings. One must say something, and I was brought up with a prejudice against swearing."

CHAPTER VII.

MRS CLYMER MEANS MISCHIEF.

The more Mr Murkle saw of Mrs Clymer, the more he felt convinced, not only that she was a person whom it would be more desirable to have as a friend than as an enemy, but that she might, under the circumstances, be especially valuable to him in the former capacity. He therefore determined to cultivate her acquaintance; and when he asked her what was her usual hour for receiving, she quite understood, and so did he, that one which Lord Sark was not likely

to choose was the one which would suit them both best. For she, too, felt instinctively that in Murkle she would find a natural and congenial ally. If he was afraid of Lord Sark's attractions as a possible husband for Altiora, she no less dreaded the fascination which Altiora might possess for Lord Sark. While she saw in him a financier whom she might turn to profitable account for herself, he saw in her a confederate through whom he might hold the Baron and Baroness in check, if he had reason to suspect they were playing him false. Moreover, there were two or three weak points in the financial combination to which Lord Sark had become a party, which it was not impossible that she might detect; and he felt that it was desirable, therefore, that they should discuss the matter fully, and arrange the nature of the participation in it of Mrs Clymer herself. It was a great relief to Murkle to find, after thoroughly explaining the whole subject to that lady, that though undoubtedly an unusually clever woman, her business capacity was decidedly inferior to that of the Baroness, who had been trained principally by Murkle himself; and he was easily able to satisfy her that Sark was in good hands, so far as his pecuniary prospects were concerned, and to obtain from her a promise of cordial co-operation on terms which he could easily afford to offer. It is wonderful how a conversation, conducted upon purely business principles between two people of opposite sexes, who are neither of them

overburdened with scruples of conscience, creates a rapid intimacy. Each feels a relief as each recognises in the other a breadth of view, where moral questions are concerned, which curiously enough, instead of inspiring mistrust, produces rather a sense of admiration. They each conjecture that there must be a point to which it would not be safe to go without shocking the other, and they may possibly each wonder if the other suspects how remote that point is; but so long as the necessity does not arise, there is evidently no use in going to it. In this confidential intercourse both feel the same scorn of hypocrisy, both the same impulse to a sort of frankness which engenders a certain sympathy; and Mr Murkle and Mrs Clymer could not have felt more intimately acquainted if they had known each other for years, than at the end of their first two hours' chat over the way in which the public were expected to contribute to the pecuniary resources of the contractors and promoters of the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company. Indeed it is probable that the result of a long acquaintanceship would have left them very much less friendly than they were now.

"Is it true that Miss Peto will have a large fortune of her own, or is she dependent on Baron Grandesella?" asked Mrs Clymer.

"The Baroness brought a large fortune to the Baron on her marriage," replied Murkle. "The late Mr Peto, who died suddenly, left the whole of his property un-

reservedly to his widow; and as, on her marriage, she refused to have it placed in trust, contrary to my strong representations, it remains with her and her husband to make any settlement on their daughter that they choose."

"Are they in a position to make a large marriage settlement on her now, and would they do it if they were?"

"No doubt they could settle a large sum of money on her, but its amount would depend upon whom she married. If she were to marry her cousin, Lord Sark, for instance, I believe they would make a very considerable sacrifice."

"Should you like to see her married to Lord Sark, Mr Murkle?" and as Murkle hesitated for a moment, Mrs Clymer extended her hand to him with an air of the most engaging sympathy. He put his into it, and to cover his embarrassment—for this woman, having got off finance, was now on her own ground—he put it to his lips. "Tell me frankly," she went on. "We have not known each other long; but we women, you know, are quick where affairs of the heart are concerned, and I have not seen you together without forming my own conclusions. And she, does she reciprocate?"

"You seem to know so much," said Murkle, "that you need scarcely have asked me that."

"I see," said the lady, pensively drawing her hand from Murkle's, and putting her finger to her fore-

head. "First, we have to prevent Miss Peto from being married to Lord Sark; secondly, we have to marry Miss Peto to Mr Murkle; thirdly, we have to make the Baron give Miss Peto as much money when she marries Mr Murkle as he would have given her if she had married Lord Sark. Excuse my being so blunt, but there's nothing like bringing down affairs of the affections to a business basis."

"But whom are we to marry Lord Sark to?" said Murkle, who did not quite relish Mrs Clymer's offhand way of arranging such delicate matters, considering that she was as deeply concerned in them as he was. "I made the acquaintance of a lovely American heiress a few nights ago, who, I think, would just be the person to help the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company to retrieve his lordship's shattered fortunes."

"Mr Murkle, I imagined you a person of more sense and better taste than to allude to me of Lord Sark's marriage; it is neither sensible nor delicate to force me to talk on a subject which I should not be ashamed to discuss with you if there were any necessity for it, but which I gave you credit for sufficient penetration to understand without expecting me to explain it to you. If you don't understand it, I have entirely overrated your intelligence; if you do, you should never have alluded to it, even by implication. How long had you known the Baroness before her marriage?" she asked abruptly, without giving him time to apologise or to recover from the blow thus roughly dealt.

The effect upon Murkle of her whole speech was very much that which is produced by the sudden hiss followed by the pat of a cat; and though not a person easily rebuked or abashed, he winced involuntarily at the last significant allusion. The movement was not lost upon the sharp eyes of his questioner; and without waiting for an answer, she added—"She must have been an attractive woman twenty years ago, and her fortune must have made her doubly so. I wonder you allowed the Baron to carry her off. The Baroness tells me he was not a Baron then;" and Mrs Clymer rose, and in her most silvery tone and tenderest accents, continued—"I am so sorry, dear Mr Murkle, that I must send you away now; I have an appointment with Lord Sark, and must go and get ready to go out. I have *so* enjoyed your visit, which I hope will only prove the first of a series, now that we find we have so many interests in common;" and she touched the bell, and Murkle found a servant waiting in the ante-room to show him out, before he had clearly realised that his visit had terminated.

He left the house with a disagreeable sensation of defeat, and a consciousness that Mrs Clymer had already discussed him with the Baroness, and was not the woman to make new acquaintances without investigating their antecedents.

It is only due to Murkle to say that he had left a feeling of discomfort in the breast of Mrs Clymer, by his allusion to a beautiful American heiress, very much

analogous to that which she had produced in him. Mrs Clymer had good reason to know that Lord Sark was susceptible to the fascinations of the sex. She was not without experience of the powers of her own countrywomen, and she dreaded the influence which Murkle was evidently rapidly acquiring over her lover, and the uses to which, if it suited his purpose, he might put it. Two lovely girls, with fortunes, in the field as rivals, were enough to make any woman feel uncomfortable; but Mrs Clymer was not one to shrink from a contest of this sort, when it was forced upon her, and lacked neither promptitude nor audacity upon such occasions. Within an hour after Murkle had left her, she was sitting alone with the Baroness, and cross-examined that astute personage with a dexterity worthy of a detective.

"I am on my way, my dear Baroness," she said, "to call upon your neighbours, the great American heiress and her friend,—two of my splurging young country-women, who come over to Europe, and give you all such a false impression of American society. Not that I can tolerate it, at its best, but my curiosity has been excited by Mr Murkle about these latest specimens. Do tell me what you think of them, dear Baroness, you who have seen so much of the world?"

"Now, Mrs Clymer, you really are too hard upon your fair *compatriotes.* I think them quite charming —so original, with a *cachet* quite their own," replied the Baroness, who had her own reasons for wishing to

cement an intimacy with the beautiful heiress. "I am so glad dear Altiora has found such companions; she is down-stairs with them now, dear child, so I am sure you will find them at home."

"I think Mr Murkle is already rather *épris* in that direction," pursued Mrs Clymer, slily.

But the Baroness, who saw the drift of this observation, turned the point of it neatly by saying that she did not think this could be the case, as she had heard Mr Murkle remark what a good match Miss Walton would be for Lord Sark. So Mrs Clymer, after some more futile attempts, determined to lose no more time, and a few moments later found herself standing at the door of the *entresol*. When it was opened to her, the notes of a rich contralto voice flooded the ante-chamber, which only ceased when her card was taken in, and a pause, probably of wonder as to who she was, was followed by a summons to enter. A shyer person than Mrs Clymer might possibly have been taken aback by the large group of strangers upon whom she was thus forcing an entry. Standing near the piano was a tall girl whom she devoutly hoped might not be the heiress, for Sark was passionately devoted to music, and her extreme beauty was undeniable: accompanying her was a gentleman, who was probably her singing-master. At the corner of the room was another girl absorbed in oil-painting, also apparently under the direction of a master; while near her was standing a gentleman with a glass in his eye, critically watching

her performance. At one of the windows was seated Altiora and an elderly lady darning a stocking, to whom a handsome fair-haired man was talking so earnestly that he scarcely seemed to perceive the entry of the visitor. Evidently the tall girl was the heiress, for she advanced to meet her.

"I must introduce myself as a countrywoman," said Mrs Clymer. "I have only just heard of your arrival from our mutual friends, Mr Murkle and the Grandesellas, whom I have been calling upon up-stairs; though, of course, I know you well, Miss Walton, by reputation, and saw in the American papers that you had left the States for a trip to Europe." This was an effort of imagination, but Mrs Clymer felt that it was a safe one. "I could not resist coming to tell you at once how glad I shall be to do anything to make your stay in Paris agreeable. I am only a visitor myself, as I usually live in London, but I have lived so often here that I almost feel a Parisian; and if you want to do any shopping, can tell you all the best places to go to." Mrs Clymer rattled on with this long speech, as there's nothing like talking to relieve embarrassment, and Miss Walton introduced her to Miss Terrill, who was the lady painting; Mr Alderney, who was the gentleman superintending; Miss Coffin, who was the lady darning; and Mr Hetherington, who was the gentleman talking to her; and to the drawing and singing masters—for she was too republican to ignore their presence. Altiora she greeted effusively.

"You find us in the middle of our studies, Mrs Clymer," said Miss Walton. "My friend and I make it a rule to work six hours a-day; but we have just finished our day's labours, so you don't interrupt us, and we are delighted to see you. What with what we've got to learn and see, the days don't seem long enough. Lord Sark is coming to take us to the Louvre. I hope you will stay and go with us. Perhaps you know him? What o'clock did you say your cousin was coming, Bob?" she added, turning to Alderney.

Mrs Clymer felt a cold shiver run down her back, and for a moment her heart seemed to stop beating. Here was the heiress already on such intimate terms with Lord Sark's cousin as to call him Bob, and that nobleman himself might be expected at any moment. How long had this intimacy existed? How was it that Lord Sark had concealed it from her? It seemed incredible that, in the few days which had elapsed since their arrival in Paris, the heiress could have made so much progress. The fact was, that though Alderney had only introduced his cousin a few days before, Sark had been captivated by the delightful air of freedom which reigned in the heiress's establishment, and had fallen in love with the whole party, Miss Coffin included. He was indeed at that moment on his way to them in his *coupé*, looking forward with the utmost delight to the effect which a series of slightly draped Rubens's would produce upon that spinster's unsophisticated mind. There was, in fact. a

sort of healthy breezy rush pervading the moral atmosphere in which Mrs Clymer now found herself, which a good deal disturbed her equanimity. She had often stormed a London afternoon tea when she thought Lord Sark might be in danger, and borne him off triumphantly from the midst of beauties and heiresses; but this was as little like pursuing him in a London conventional kettle-drum, as deer-driving in Windsor Park is from chamois-hunting in the Alps. There was a social lawlessness about the whole performance just calculated by its freshness to captivate the somewhat *blasé* temperament of his lordship. The reckless way in which girls took their singing and drawing lessons, and received young men and young lady visitors, who were supposed not to be in the way, and to be capable of amusing themselves; and the absence of any *arrière-pensée* of flirtation going on anywhere,—so confused the intelligence of this sharp-witted lady, that she had scarcely had time to decide upon her own line of action when the door opened and Lord Sark was announced. Though not easily disconcerted, he flushed, barely perceptibly, on seeing Mrs Clymer—an indication of guilty consciousness not lost upon that lady, who greeted him with the easy intimacy of a proprietor; for this was a moment when she could not afford to be embarrassed by scruples of delicacy. As she did so, she turned to the window where Altiora was talking to Hetherington, irresistibly impelled by the desire to see what impression the whole episode was making upon the

former, when her glance was intercepted by one from Miss Coffin, whose individuality she had till now scarcely noticed, but the flash of whose eye was like that of a sword drawn without provocation upon an unarmed antagonist.

"Why, what a large party of American cousins we shall make," said Lord Sark, cheerily. "We're all going to the Louvre, Mrs Clymer. I hope, even though you are not a cousin, you will come with us."

"Who knows that she ain't?" said Hannah. "Now it's my opinion, Mrs Clymer, you and me'll turn out to be someways related. You never kin tell in a country like Amurika, where marriages and divorces runs so easy-like, where relations mayn't turn up, even when you least expect them, and least want 'em."

Mrs Clymer had lived long enough in London fashionable society to know how to avail herself of the weapon commonly called "a well-bred stare," and she applied it remorselessly to Hannah on hearing this unpleasant suggestion; but it was entirely lost upon that good woman, whose eyes had assumed a dreamy and almost glassy look, as if she were peering into the records of the past for some clue of the lost relationship. Suddenly she said, "I have it now," and relapsed instantly into silence.

"Oh, do tell us how Mrs Clymer's related to you, Hannah, you dear old thing! I didn't know you had had a relation left in the world," said Mattie.

"I am afraid her utter destitution of them has given

a stimulus to her imagination," said Mrs Clymer, somewhat scornfully.

"Come," said Lord Sark, who saw the suppressed passion with which she resented what she feared might seem her humiliation in his eyes, "if we want to see the pictures before the Louvre closes, we must be starting;" and in a few minutes the party was *en route*, without the delicate subject being again alluded to. Here they unexpectedly stumbled upon Ronald MacAlpine, who had been unable to resist following his magnet to Paris, but had not yet summoned up courage to call upon her: and it was Altiora's turn to show a slight embarrassment as she introduced him to the rest of the party—observing which, Mrs Clymer and Hannah, in their different ways, became contemplative, and an acute observer might also have perceived a shade of uneasy interest passing over the handsome countenance of Hetherington; but the two girls and Alderney were too much absorbed with their devotion to art to notice anything; and Lord Sark's attention was so distracted by his admiration for the heiress, and his desire to conceal it from Mrs Clymer, that he, too, hardly noticed the new addition to their party.

"Do tell me," said the heiress to Lord Sark, pointing to a large and fashionable party of English, "why your countrywomen, especially the young ones, all stick their elbows out, particularly when they are shaking hands."

"I am afraid," answered his lordship, "it is a habit

they have picked up from their brothers. I can't say it is a very graceful one in either sex."

"Laws!" said Hannah, who had been watching these British feminine greetings with great interest, "that ain't the reason. It's because they laces so tight. You just try and buckle yourself across the waist and chest like them gells, and then see how it eases your breathing to stick out your elbows. Why, you might as well try and take long steps in a tie-back, as take a long breath when you're laced like that, without opening out your elbows; ain't that so, Mrs Clymer? you must know,"—and she gave a comical look at that lady's waist and elbows, which was evidently *en revanche* for the well-bred stare to which she had been subjected, and which her opponent was unable to venture upon again. So she took another line: as she could not knock her down with her fan, she patted her playfully on the shoulder with it, saying as she did so, "You naughty, quizzical old thing." She hoped that to be called an "old thing," by an entire stranger, might sting; but it didn't, for Hannah only gave a sort of chuckle, and said, "Wal, now, you're gettin' real friendly, like relations should be."

"Still, you know, that won't account for the men doing it," said Mattie, anxious to get back to the safer topic of the elbows.

"Laws! yes it does; they jest foller the gells. It's the gells that sets the fashion."

"Not in England, I assure you," said Lord Sark,

much amused. "In America, I understand, the women take the lead in most things; but in England, we flatter ourselves that the male sex holds its own."

"Bless you, they flatter themselves just the same with us! the question is—do they? Now there ain't no one here as knows as much about the men of both countries as Mrs Clymer. I'll jest ask her what she says: which men have you found most difficult to get along with, my dear?"

But Mrs Clymer, who had by this time become convinced that she was too heavily handicapped to be a match for Hannah, affected not to hear this question, but to be absorbed in admiration of a recumbent Venus of Titian, at which Hannah, following the direction of her eyes, could only gasp "My sakes!" and then turning abruptly round, walked off, for once fairly beaten from the field.

CHAPTER VIII.

RONALD MACALPINE'S KELTIC ENTERTAINMENT.

During the few weeks that followed this episode, the intimacy of the party with whom the reader has now made acquaintance, increased with the rapidity which so often results from a chance meeting of a group of strangers in a foreign country, who, for lack of other

friends, find themselves constantly thrown into each other's society. It is true that Hetherington, Alderney, Murkle, the Grandesellas, Lord Sark, and Mrs Clymer were not without their Paris acquaintances, but for various reasons the Californian girls formed the nucleus round which the party chiefly gathered, and Ronald MacAlpine was soon drawn into the vortex, and became, perhaps because it was an easy way of meeting Altiora, one of their most devoted attendants. Altiora's existence, prior to that episode in her affections which she confided to the reader in her own words in the first pages of this history, had been so comparatively removed from contact with society, that she failed in her appreciation of her lover to convey any true impression of that gentleman's real character or tendencies—of which, indeed, she was totally ignorant. Though nominally a member of a learned profession, MacAlpine had early arrived at the conclusion that he had a nobler mission in life than that of defending clients, and that by developing what he was pleased to term his genius, he might aspire to the position of a social apostle in the age in which he lived. He was just clever enough to be the victim of a vanity which could feed upon a variety of superficial tastes, which the more amiable of his friends called talents, and which therefore secured him a certain amount of admiration and even homage. He dabbled in philosophy, and had read enough of Herbert Spencer to talk with a profound authority about the "unknow-

able," and patter his thin agnosticism to progressive young ladies at London dinner-parties. He had written two or three novels, profusely decorated with stanzas of erotic poetry, which he had subsequently culled from them, and published in a volume apart, and called 'Lyrics to Leda.' He had, moreover, a turn for musical composition, and from this little volume he had made a second selection, which he entitled 'The Swan's Last Notes,' and forced them for a third time in that form upon an admiring public. Then, as he had a tolerable tenor voice, expressive eyes, and slender fingers, he used to sing to his own accompaniment at the piano, when his stock of philosophical small-talk was exhausted: added to which, he was an authority upon all matters connected with art, from a cathedral to a garter; and his rooms in Mayfair were more like Abou Anticha's back-shop in Damascus, than a bachelor's quarters in London.

There was something very suggestive of the progress of the age to find this descendant of an old line of Scottish chiefs, whose ancestor had been an aide-de-camp of Charles Edward in the '45, and whose family traditions were of the rudest and most barbaric type, thus developing by the process of social evolution into a philosophical *littéraire*, a musical æsthete, dabbling in every evanescent hobby which a sated society could invent, and devising new forms of eccentricity, which might increase at once his notoriety and his hold upon the world of fashion in which he lived. By dint of

great industry at his little pursuits, a persevering ingenuity in concentrating attention upon himself, and a shrewd appreciation of the weaknesses of his fellow-men, or rather women—for it was among the latter that Ronald was a special success—he had conquered for himself the position of being, if not a lion, at least a promising whelp; and during the season the looking-glass over his mantelpiece was abundantly wedged all round with cards of invitation; while his services were required as a sort of *entrée*, to lighten the more solid fare of fashion at numerous country houses. His great-grandfather, if he spoke English at all, probably did so after the fashion of those Hebridean characters with which Mr Black's novels have made us so familiar; but Ronald had a style scarcely less widely removed from the ordinary English vernacular of twenty years ago. There was an unctuous deliberation in his method of drawling out his criticisms in a somewhat high key, with a peculiar distinctness, which, in order to make them the more impressive, was frequently interrupted by an affected hesitation, partly deprecatory, partly insinuating, and by a love of giving advice with an apologetic manner, implying at the same time a conscious authority, especially to the fairer portion of his congregation. On these occasions his utterances and gestures resembled those of a lady-like bishop. To appropriate a novel and startling theory from some author or speaker cleverer than himself, and to give it vent, with a carefully prepared delicacy of diction, to a

group of female adorers, and expatiate upon it to them as a profound and original thesis of his own, was an art which Ronald MacAlpine had cultivated to a high pitch of perfection; and when he called upon our Californian friends the day after he had been introduced to them at the Louvre, he promised himself an exquisite satisfaction in initiating their Western minds into the finer subtleties of that delicate thought, upon matters philosophic and artistic, upon which he fancied himself so eminently qualified to discourse.

"I scarcely recognised you," said Altiora, one day when she happened to meet him paying a visit in the *entresol*, "the first day I saw you at the Louvre,—you look so different in the kilt, to which I am accustomed."

"I wear my national costume," said Ronald, "when I am where it does not occasion too much remark, because it possesses a deeper meaning than was ever suspected by the rude barbarians from whom I have inherited the right to do so. Will you allow me," he went on, turning to the two American girls,—"nay, are you sure it will not weary you, if I permit myself to explain the true significance of—er—the Keltic raiment?"

"Oh, pray do," said Stella; "but I am afraid, as I have never seen it, that I shall not be able to understand it unless I saw it on. Don't you think you could just run off to your hotel now and put it on?"

"I am delighted that you show so much interest, Miss Walton. I always keep it with me in illustration of my theory; and if you will do me the honour to take tea in my rooms some afternoon, I shall then be able to enlarge upon my present remarks. You are aware, doubtless, that at the time of the invasion of Scotland by the Romans, the inhabitants of the southern portion of that country were costumed after the fashion of their ancestors, while the Kelts of the north confined themselves principally to skins, either their own, or—er—those of other animals. I think I may venture to assert, with some confidence, that the Kelts, struck by the picturesque beauty of the uniform of the Roman soldiers, with whom they had thus been brought into sanguinary conflict, arranged their skins in imitation of it; and so we have a rude resemblance, continuing to the present day, of a costume which, as a pure matter of artistic effect, would, if it were restored to the original Roman ideal, be far more consonant with the loftiest conceptions of raiment than the fantastic clothing at present in vogue. I am therefore now engaged in modifying and adapting the Keltic dress, and should much wish to consult you in regard to several points—which, perhaps, you will be better able to judge of when you see it on. The hose, as now worn, represents no article of Roman attire; I am therefore doubtful whether to draw them over the knee and attach them with a—er—garter, or to reduce them by about two inches, to the length of an ordinary

sock, which would make them correspond with the height of the Roman buskin."

"What! leaving so much more of the limb bare?" Stella had still retained too much of the prejudices of her countrywomen to say leg. "Oh, that would be what I think you gentlemen would call quite too exquisitely precious!"

"Pardon me," said Ronald. "To prevent the cause of art suffering injury from the vulgar ridicule which has been cast upon it by silly cartoons in a—er—weekly periodical, and in dramatic travesties, I refrain from using art language in so early a stage of evolution. The jacket, which was evidently an imitation of the corselet, must be abandoned; and the kilt, instead of being fastened round the waist, must depend from the shoulders."

"Oh, how delightful! Mind you put it on that way when we come to tea with you," said Stella.

"I am alluding to its modified condition—as I propose it should be worn, Miss Walton; in its present form it would be—er—rather too short. Thus elongated, it becomes a chiton or tunic, over which will flow the plaid scarf, which thus becomes the toga, of which it is a manifest relic."

"It would require as much modification as the kilt," said Altiora, "to resemble the flowing robe which we see on Roman statues."

"Naturally, in order to adapt its folds, it would have to be cut out of a circular piece. I am merely

giving you the outlines of the idea. When I have elaborated it, I propose lecturing on the subject before the Costume Reform Society, and entertain hopes that a movement may be inaugurated by which those art principles which we have hitherto applied chiefly to house decoration may be introduced into modern attire, and effect a revolution in accordance with the—er—æsthetic spirit of the age. At present, I regret to say that art progress in dress is confined almost entirely to women; though," and he cast a reproving glance upon his fair audience, "if you will allow me to venture a criticism, I perceive a sad lack of any of the loftier taste conceptions in the costumes before me."

"Wal, now," said Hannah, who resented this reflection upon American millinery, "I think we're all fixed up to the last notch. I guess, before you git any of us to go about in your Kiltic dress, as you call it, we shall have to see what it's like."

A loud burst of laughter from the three girls followed this sally of Hannah's, under cover of which Ronald got up to take his departure, not, however, without a final arrangement being made for the next meeting at his afternoon tea.

When, a few days after, the engagement was kept, their host, appropriately attired in his Highland dress, received them in the apartment which he had already contrived to decorate with various articles of *bric-a-brac* and solitary flowers—while a piano, which he

had hired for the occasion, was suggestive of the Lyrics of Leda and the Last Notes of the Swan. The Baron had been tempted by the prospect of expanding his chest, in bass accompaniment. Mrs Clymer had come, because she felt sure that her voice had a more powerful compass than Stella's, and she was haunted by the fear of that young lady's fascinations over Lord Sark; his lordship had come, because the feminine attractions generally were irresistible; Murkle had come, because he designed seriously to lay siege to the heiress; and the Baroness was there, of course, with Altiora. Hetherington and Alderney, in their capacity of cousins and permanent escorts, could not be omitted from such a gathering; while Hannah had come, impelled by an overpowering desire to see the Keltic dress, which, in accordance with the progressive art spirit of the age, she fancied she might be required to adopt. The little scream which she gave at the sight of Ronald's bare knees indicated more plainly than any words could have done the shock which her maidenly innocence had received, and she scarcely listened with patience to the plaintive wail of the Swan as he accompanied himself on the piano. It was in the midst of a quartet by the Baron, Ronald, Mrs Clymer, and Altiora, who had a considerable musical talent, that Mr Murkle enticed Stella into a small room adjoining, under the pretence of examining a newly purchased picture, and opened his campaign. He had been leading up to it for some days past, and

the reputed heiress knew too much of the opposite sex not to be perfectly aware of his intentions. She seemed rather disposed to encourage them than otherwise, and to his delight said, "What a charming little room for a quiet chat, Mr Murkle! It is quite refreshing occasionally to have a talk with a practical business man when one is among people who are so much given to pleasure or the more trifling pursuits of life."

"I have long felt, Miss Walton," said Murkle, "that you and I have very little sympathy with the tastes which absorb some of our friends here," and he cast a somewhat contemptuous glance round the carefully decorated little room.

"It is so common to suppose," she responded, "that sympathy needs feeding by sentiment, and that sentiment needs to be stimulated by music, or poetry, or flowers, or moonlight nights. For my part, I can feel quite as sentimental over a share-list as over the most lovely view in nature; and what profounder sympathy can exist than that which binds in a common interest a pair of bulls or a couple of bears on the Stock Exchange?" Stella heaved a sigh charged with such deep feeling as she made this remark, and gazed into the depths of Mr Murkle's eyes with so much tender meaning, that that gentleman, who at first suspected she might be laughing at him, changed his mind under an impulse of gratified vanity, and gave his chair a little hitch which put it three inches nearer to hers. Stella, with a most delightful air of uncon-

sciousness, reciprocated, as if quite accidentally, by a corresponding hitch, and reduced the distance three inches more.

Murkle, whose position and avocation in life had not afforded him many opportunities of cultivating the fair sex, excepting under very questionable conditions, now unexpectedly found youth, beauty, and wealth smiling on him with a degree of encouragement which surpassed his most sanguine hopes. For him the whole atmosphere seemed suddenly charged with a subtle and exquisite aroma, under the influence of which his head began to swim, and his heart to beat with a violence which he had never experienced before, except on one occasion when he had found himself compelled to offer his body as a target at twenty paces to an angry opponent in Italy, who had first accused him of cheating at cards, and then added insult to injury by calling him out; but he was conscious that the pulsation from a thrill of pleasure produced a very different sensation from the pulsation with a thrill of alarm—a physiological problem which Altiora might have sought to solve, but which he was too much engaged otherwise to dwell upon. His eye roved from the slender arched foot to the white taper fingers of his charmer, playing with a tassel almost touching his hand, to the tempting, exquisitely moulded parted lips, and then stealing more timidly upwards to the half-raised lids fringed with their long silky lashes; and as they suddenly opened and caught his conscious gaze with their full, soft, pene-

trating glow, he morally sank a captive at the feet of his enslaver,—an emotion entirely new to him seemed to deprive him of the power of utterance.

"Miss Walton," he said at last, in a changed voice, "you exercise an influence over me such as no woman has ever done before. I meant in bringing you here for a moment's conversation to tell you all I felt, but that has become impossible, for my whole nature seems to have undergone a revolution."

"But you can always try," said Stella, sympathetically. "First tell me what you felt first, and then tell me what you feel now. You will find me a most interested listener."

"Well," said Murkle, thus encouraged, "what I felt was that I recognised in you a person whose talents, wealth, and beauty, eminently qualified you to adorn any society; and I was going to propose to you, upon a purely business basis—all sentiment apart, because I supposed that we were both people incapable of being influenced by it—an alliance by which certain advantages which I may venture to say I possess, might supplement yours. In other words, Miss Walton, I imagined that I could calmly ask you to be my wife upon a practical estimate of the benefits we might both derive from such a union. I am now conscious that it is impossible for me to make you such a proposal on the grounds I originally intended. I feel that they were unworthy of you; but I none the less lay my heart at your feet."

"On what grounds now?" asked Stella, calmly.

"On those of a passionate devotion to the woman I love. O Stella!"

But Stella interrupted him.

"I prefer the other ones. Do you know you are sinking rapidly in my estimation, Mr Murkle? I gave you credit for sound practical common-sense, instead of which you are talking the usual sentimental nonsense, which I am tired of hearing. Please let us get back to business. Before I can entertain your original idea, you would have to make out a schedule of your assets and liabilities. I should naturally require some references as to the commercial standing of the firm, and I should have to look carefully into the nature of the contracts and other enterprises in which it may be engaged. The character of the securities you might have to offer for any contributions I might make would have to be considered; and if, after going into the whole thing thoroughly, I should find everything satisfactory, I am not prepared to say that a partnership—even of the character you at first contemplated—might not be possible. Besides business references, I should require social ones; or, stay—there is one which will quite satisfy me. If Miss Peto, who has known you all her life, endorses you with her approbation, I shall be satisfied, so far as your personal character is concerned. There will remain only the financial considerations. When these are all settled, I will lay before you a balance-sheet of my own assets,

and we can decide upon the extent of my contributions. But you will understand that in saying this I commit myself to nothing. Until the final contract is signed, the parties to it must not be considered bound in any way; and we must fix a time limit—say two months from now—at the expiration of which term this preliminary arrangement is at an end."

Murkle looked up at the end of this speech with very much the expression of an angry man who has been held under a *douche* against his will. Naturally of a violent temperament, when his will was thwarted, he found himself in a position which, while it humiliated him, rendered him absolutely powerless. Miss Walton had, after all, merely made him the proposition which he had intended to make her; and he now became aware, when the tables were turned upon himself, of the insult which it implied, and which he had confessed he had intended to offer the woman for whom at that moment he felt a devouring passion. "If you are only to be won by schedules, and balance-sheets, and assets, Miss Walton," he said bitterly, "I will win you that way."

"There," she replied, "you can't think how much better I like you like that,—when you are nice and natural and practical and business-like, than when you make yourself ridiculous by talking sentiment. Now we quite understand each other. The first move in the game which you talk of winning—mind, in two months—is the approval of Miss Peto to the whole transaction."

And as the quartet had reached the *crescendo* which indicated the final flourish, Miss Walton got up languidly and strolled into the next room, followed by Murkle, in a more suppressed condition than was usual with that gentleman.

Although Mrs Clymer had particularly distinguished herself in the quartet, the disappearance of Stella and Murkle had not been lost upon her, and she gazed keenly into their countenances when they returned. Stella's face was a blank page, but much was to be read by so astute an observer in Murkle's countenance; and Mrs Clymer determined to devote herself to consoling him, as she called it to herself, for the rest of the afternoon. But indications of discomfort on the part of Murkle suggested that the process was anything but consolatory to that gentleman, who was the first to make his escape, in a very bad humour, from Ronald MacAlpine's Keltic entertainment.

CHAPTER IX.

STELLA'S CONFIDENCES.

If, the night after the occurrences just related, some of the gentlemen most interested could possibly have peeped into a certain bedroom on the *entresol* of No.

Quatre-vingt dix-huit, Rue du dix-huit Mars, dix-huit cent soixante et onze, it is probable that they would have found some difficulty in withdrawing their indiscreet and admiring gaze, while it is certain that they would have heard a good deal that was not intended for their eager ears. For here, wrapped in flowing *peignoirs*, with their luxuriant hair rippling down their backs, and their daintily slippered little feet resting on the fender, languidly reposing in a couple of easy-chairs, sat Stella Walton and Mattie Terrill, regardless of the fact that it was one o'clock in the morning,—as the opera from which they had just returned was over at an unusually late hour,—one looking like a queen *en déshabille*, and the other like a gipsy in full dress, but both in their way with a charm peculiarly their own — evidently very wide awake, and fully determined to take advantage of that witching small hour of the morning when girls most love to unburden their fluttering little hearts to each other, and exchange delicious confidences. And here I must remind my reader, in order to prevent confusion, that the girls had changed names, and, lest they should unguardedly betray themselves before the world, had determined to keep up the delusion when alone. It had become a sort of *idée fixe* with Mattie Terrill—whose real name was Stella Walton — that she was unusually plain (which was by no means the case), and that she was more likely to be married for her money than for love—which,

considering her colossal fortune, was no doubt true; and hence she had persuaded her friend, before leaving America, to become a party to her little *ruse*, and adopt the *rôle* which that young lady willingly undertook, inspired thereto by the innate love of mischief which was a prominent feature in her character. Even Miss Coffin entered into the joke with a certain grim enjoyment, as, according to her, "men were mainly made to be fooled;" but she had made so many mistakes in attempting to address the girls by their changed names in public, that it had come to be an understood thing that when she wanted to attract the ear of the false heiress, she always began her remark with "Say!" and when she wanted to talk to the real heiress, who had been her pet from babyhood, she addressed her as "Honey!" By rigidly confining herself to this rule, and never venturing to introduce them to strangers, she had so far avoided any serious or compromising mistakes.

"Mattie, dear," said the lovely Stella, suddenly disclosing a small packet, which she had kept concealed in her lap, and drawing from it a cigarette, "I am going to have a smoke: they say it is calming to the brain, and I feel like wanting to be calmed;" and she lit her cigarette at the candle, and gave a puff which was half a sigh, — an untoward combination, which brought on an immediate fit of coughing.

"Bob says it does not really calm you unless you inhale," said Mattie. "I tried it the other day, but the

only effect was to choke me to a most exciting extent. Fortunately, as I told him, I did not want calming; whereupon he took such a deep inspiration of smoke, that I quite trembled lest it should never reappear: it did, after some time, through his nose. He said he found it necessary, when he was with me, to smother his feelings. I said I would not give much for feelings that could be smothered by a whiff of tobacco-smoke. Then he said that I did not know what it was to be penniless. I did not see the connection of this remark, but I suppose he meant, poor fellow, that he was so poor that he could not buy himself enough cigarettes; so I said, rather heartlessly, that the best thing to do, if you had a bad and expensive habit which you could not afford, was to give it up. Then he said it was not smoking, it was something else he was trying to give up. I asked him 'What?' on which he bluntly replied, 'An idiotic attachment.' I said I was very happy to hear that he thought that being in love with improper or married women was idiotic, as to my mind this custom, so prevalent in Paris, quite accounted for the idiocy of the French youth generally; and I was very glad that he had come to take a sensible and moral view of the matter. You see I thought it best for his good to speak frankly, and not to pretend to be so innocent or prudish as not to dare to call things by their right names.

"'Good heavens, Mattie!' he burst out, 'you don't suspect me of anything so shocking? The

person I love is one of the purest and best of her sex.'

"'Then I don't see anything in the least idiotic about it,' I said.

"'But how can I marry without anything to marry upon?' he went on. 'Do you know what my income is, Mattie? exactly one pound a-day; and I have always been so glad it wasn't more, because it would have confused my accounts. Now a pound a-day is a nice easy sum to remember; and I like my studies so much better than any profession or appointment that could be offered me, that I have refused everything, and been quite happy with it, till now I find that all my happiness in life is blasted by the smallness of the amount.'

"'But,' I said, 'if the "person" as you call her, is worth anything, and cares for you, she will gladly share a pound a-day with you. Why shouldn't you go and live in some cheap place and study together?'

"'Do you really mean it, Mattie?' he said, blushing very much, and looking at me very earnestly: and then seeing, apparently, that I did mean it, he took my hand, and said, 'Oh, my darling, how happy you have made me!' and so on. It's no use saying all he said. It all happened this morning when you were out riding with Mr Murkle, and I was alone with him here studying the Zend-Avesta. You know he is making translations of the Yaçna and Vispered, and all the other writings on Mazdeism, and I am learning the character so as to

try and help him; he has just finished a translation of the Vidæ Vadata, or the law against demons. You can't think how interesting it is! Imagine what fun it will be, Stella, when he finds out that, instead of five dollars a-day to live on, we shall have nearly five thousand!"

"My dear Mattie," exclaimed Stella, whose large eyes had been getting rounder and rounder during this recital, "you take my breath away! Why, how slily you have managed matters! even I am taken by surprise Do you mean to say that you have engaged yourself to Bob Alderney?"

"Well, not irrevocably. In the first place, while he is studying Mazdeism with me, I am going to study him with Mazdeism. I asked him if he was prepared, should I require him to do so, to give up his beloved orientalisms, and become a stockbroker in New York. You should have seen the wry face he made at the prospect of being a possible millionaire. I don't know which he hated most—the pill or the gilding; however, he swallowed it, and I let him give me one kiss, poor fellow, to take the taste out of his mouth, and said, 'Then that is settled.' I shall let him remain in this delusion for a month or more,—it will have an excellent moral effect upon him. He said ruefully, 'I thought you began by agreeing that we were to live on a pound a-day and study.'

"'Oh,' I said, 'I constantly change my mind.' I'm going to make myself as disagreeable to him as I can all the time we are engaged, just to see what kind of

a temper he has got; and then, if he stands the ordeal, when he discovers at last, that besides my fortune he possesses a wife with an angelic disposition, the moral surprise will be more delightful than the material. Oh, Stella, what a splendid thing it is to find a man who hates money so much that he won't object to my giving most of it away, if I have a mind to, and who will marry me on five dollars a-day, regardless of consequences!"

"I call it simply reckless," said Stella. "How does he know how many little consequences you may not have?" and then she jumped up and put her arms round her friend's neck, which she moistened with a few tears of honest congratulation, which, when Mattie felt, she said, "Why, Stella, darling, what's the matter?"

"Oh, I am so happy," said the beauty.

"Yes; but that's not all," said Mattie. "You're a little sad, too; tell me what it is about—confidence for confidence, you know. It seems to me, though we have scarcely been a month in Paris, that the romance of our lives is overtaking us pretty quickly; and I have been so absorbed with my own affairs, I have not been watching yours."

"Ah, mine are much more complicated," said Stella, smiling through the large pearl-drops that stood in her eyes. "At present there are three men making love to me in various degrees, and animated by various sentiments; and I am making violent love to the one

I hate, and turning a cold shoulder on the one I like, and coquetting with the one to whom I am absolutely indifferent."

It was now Mattie's turn to display wonderment, while Stella went on with a calm analysis of the situation.

"And that is only the least of it. It is like the house that Jack built. This is the man that Stella hates. This is Stella who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the woman in love with the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the girl who despises the woman in love with the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the man in love with the girl who despises the woman in love with the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. This is the fool who is jealous of the man in love with the girl who despises the woman in love with the man in love with Stella, who makes love to the man that she hates. From which brilliant illustration you obtain a *dramatis personæ* of four men and three women all inextricably entangled in the web of their affections."

"My dear Stella, how silly you are! How on earth do you expect me to make head or tail of such a jumble as that? Do put names on them," said Mattie.

"The man, then, whom I hate, but to whom I make

love, is Mr Murkle. The man making love to me, and whom I love—there is no use mincing matters by calling it '*like*'—is Lord Sark; the woman in love with Lord Sark, is Mrs Clymer; the girl who despises her, is Altiora Peto; the man in love with Altiora is Keith Hetherington; the fool who is jealous of Keith Hetherington, because he was once himself, and may be still, in love with Altiora, though he is now coquetting with me, is Ronald MacAlpine. Now, in order to enlighten your mind, which, my dear Mattie, has been a good deal bewildered by your studies of the Zend-Avesta, I will enter fully into detail. Know, then, that it is the fixed determination of Mr Murkle to marry either Altiora or me. He really prefers me, partly because I have taken the trouble to captivate him, and partly because he supposes I have so much the largest fortune; but then, I am not Lord Sark's cousin, or connected with the aristocracy, so he fluctuates in his feelings, and when he is alone with Altiora he tries to make love to her, but does not succeed, because she can't bear him; and when he is alone with me, he tries to make love to me, and does succeed, curiously enough, because I can't bear him either. Should he find out that I am not an heiress, nothing could save Altiora from Murkle, for he seems to have some hold over the Grandesellas which would compel Altiora to sacrifice herself. I intend, therefore, to hook him, land him, and when Altiora is otherwise safely provided for, sell him. I am convinced he is a scoundrel

and deserves no better fate. Now I believe Lord Sark to be honestly and sincerely in love with me and not with my supposed wealth, and to be no less honestly and sincerely desirous of escaping from the clutches of the Clymer; but I am also convinced that dear Altiora, though she does all she can to conceal it, is no less honestly and sincerely in love with Lord Sark, and the only way of saving her from Murkle is by her marriage with him, which the Grandesellas are most anxious for. Hence I disguise my feelings and behave brutally to him,—*hinc illæ lacrimæ,* as Bob would say," and she laughed through them. "I could not do a better turn to the man I love than save him from the Clymer and marry him to Altiora; unfortunately Keith Hetherington is in love with Altiora, and he would be worthy of her, but he must be sacrificed, as she does not seem to care for him, and the Grandesellas would not hear of it, as he is only a second son. As for Ronald MacAlpine, with his scraps of poetry, and his literary dabblings, and his musical compositions, and his æsthetic jargon and smattering of philosophy, I merely amuse myself with him because he seems to be a typical specimen of the age in which we live, and to keep him from bothering other people. There now," she concluded,—"with all this on my brain, do you wonder at my trying to calm it with a cigarette?"

"Why, Stella," said Mattie, as she jumped up with undisguised admiration, "you're a perfect heroine, you grand, self-sacrificing creature; but I won't let you do

it,—you shan't throw your happiness away, to say nothing of the worldly advantages, which I don't think so much of myself, in this way. I shall find out what Altiora's real sentiments in the matter are, and I shall tell Lord Sark. Poor man! are his feelings not to be taken into consideration? if, as you say, he really loves you, are you both to be sacrificed to this excess of chivalry?"

"And you would have me stand by and see a noble nature like Altiora's trampled upon by a wretch like Murkle?" interrupted Stella. "Whatever happens, I will not provide for my own happiness while that contingency remains open. If I have obtained a certain power over the man, I mean to use it—if not for his own good, as that seems impossible, at all events to prevent his doing harm to others. No, Mattie, don't interfere in this matter. I am responsible for the influence your fortune gives me while it is supposed to be mine, and I am going to see what good I can do with it. I made a mental resolution to that effect when you asked us to change characters, or I would never have consented to play the part of heiress. You must let me play it my own way till the time comes for handing it over to Bob. And till that time comes our secret must be jealously preserved."

"Trust me for that," said Mattie. "If Bob had the slightest suspicion that I was the heiress, he would disappear into the deserts of Arabia, and write me love-letters in cuneiform, explaining the matrimonial

disabilities of a pauper. He must not know anything about it till the last moment. But though I am not the heiress now, I still have the responsibilities attaching to my prospects, and in the meantime I am not going to let all the self-sacrifice be on one side,"—which enigmatical remark Mattie rounded off with a portentous yawn, to indicate that even the most interesting love-conversation must have an end.

CHAPTER X.

MR MURKLE MAKES A DOUBLE PROPOSAL.

I WISH I understood the law of crises. I suppose it has an intimate connection with that other mysterious problem, the law of chances. If one comes to that, all laws are problems, and the most incomprehensible of all are the laws of the land. This arises from the fact that judges and juries always treat unfortunate mortals as if they could control circumstances, and circumstances never controlled them. In other words, the anomalies of our jurisprudence, not to say its cruelty and injustice, arise from an imperfect appreciation of the laws of free-will and responsibility; for this reason I have not the slightest respect for the laws of the land. If I obey them, I do so for the same reason that

I obey mamma, for whom also I have not any respect —because it would be most inconvenient not to do so. If I thought that human laws had the remotest resemblance to those which are divine, I should either not only obey but respect them, or else, perhaps, not respect those which were divine. I merely mention this in the solitude of my chamber, to the privacy of my journal, which, I am sure, no human eye will ever see ; because, since it has become a question of marrying me to some one, whether I like it or not, I have been reading up the subject in some law books which Bob Alderney borrowed for me, and the distinction they make between *femmes soles* and *femmes couvertes* is perfectly monstrous—utterly opposed to reason and common-sense. I have constructed half-a-dozen cases, where to be their victim would involve an outrage and violation of the holiest instincts of a woman's nature. That is why I began by saying I wish I understood the law of crises, because, should I ever be forced to obey those instincts which I believe to be divine rather than the human law, there would come a crisis. Now I have always had a theory that from time to time our lives culminate to crises. Then the crisis bursts, and we begin again, and slowly or rapidly, as the case may be, culminate to another crisis. I am very young, but I have already seen enough to know that these critical periods are inevitable incidents in the system of the universe. They occur with individuals, they occur with nations, they occur even in nature. The history of the

world and of humanity attests the truth of this statement; but what is the law by which they are governed? It is evident that they depend upon combinations, which seem fortuitous, of individual influences, and this connects them with the law of chances. For instance, I am taking a walk. I come to a fork in the road. I doubt whether I will go to the right or the left. Without any apparent motive I go to the right. I accidentally meet some one. That chance meeting turns out the pivot upon which my whole future life hinges. It changes my destiny. Had I gone to the left, it would not have taken place, and the fate of hundreds, which were subsequently to be influenced by mine, would have been different, as well as my own. In our blindness our fates cross and recross, and our destinies become bound together by those chains of circumstances, the links of which are surely forged in the invisible world. I feel a sort of iron web being woven about me even now. I instinctively sense the organisms whose destinies are linked with mine, whether for good or evil, irrespective of my will, with which, since I have been in Paris, I have come into contact; they are—Mr Murkle, Hannah, Lord Sark, Mrs Clymer, Stella Walton, and Mr Hetherington; as to Mattie Terrill, Bob Alderney, and Mr MacAlpine, their fates may indirectly affect mine, but only remotely. The Baron and mamma I have had to count with from the first. Our three threads formed the skein to begin with, to which Mr Murkle's was almost

immediately added. Oh, if I could only peep into the other world, and watch the "Fates," as they were called by the ignorant old heathen, weaving the other five into them! The reason I feel so sure of this is, that during the past month I have had private conversations with several of the above-mentioned individuals, and each pregnant with fate. I will narrate them, beginning with Mr Murkle. We were riding together in the Bois de Boulogne when it took place.

"Altiora," he began, "you are now a woman, and a sensible woman, and the time has come for me to speak to you frankly upon a subject of the utmost importance to us both. Ever since you were twelve years old, I determined to win you for my wife. You need fear no opposition on the part of the Baron or your mother, should you decide to take me for your husband. You have known me from infancy, while I have never lost an opportunity of manifesting the admiration which I sincerely felt for your character as I watched it develop. The time has now come for me to tell you this, and to ask you for your answer."

"Mr Murkle," I replied quietly, "it is because I have known you from my childhood, and have had every opportunity of studying your character, that I feel convinced we are totally unsuited for each other. While I am very sensible of your kindness and the compliment it implies, I am sure you will not attempt to force my inclinations in this matter."

The peculiar dark predatory look, with which I am so familiar, clouded his face as he answered—

"I was prepared for this refusal. Now that I have had the advantage of seeing as well as of hearing of Mr MacAlpine, it is accounted for; but no rival should stand in the way, had I not had occasion to modify my determination as to the line of conduct I had chalked out for myself. I am not, as you know, Altiora, a sentimental man, nor am I a harsh one, except when I am driven to harshness to accomplish my ends. It is not necessary for me, therefore, unless I am forced to it, to tell you why it would not be in your power to resist my will in this matter if I chose to exercise it. You may think this an empty threat, but were it expedient, I could prove to you at this moment that it is not. I hope it never may be necessary for me to allude to it again. I can offer you an escape from the fate you seem so much to dread," he added sardonically, "if you will help to provide me with another. It may seem strange for me in one breath to ask you to become my wife, and in the next to assist in advancing my suit with some one else, but I have never regarded marriage from a sentimental point of view. In Miss Walton, I find nearly all the advantages which you so eminently possess. She is clever, beautiful, and wealthy; and if she is not so well connected as you are, her nationality dispenses with considerations which would be important were she an Englishwoman. I have therefore decided upon placing my hand at her

disposal. By entering Parliament, I have laid the foundations of a social position which she is calculated at once to grace and to improve. You will see that it is essentially in your interest to use the great influence which you possess with her and her two friends, especially the old one," he pursued with a sneer, "to induce her to regard my suit favourably. Having known me all your life, your testimony to my worth of character, amiability of disposition, and matrimonial temperament generally, cannot fail to have weight. I know, dear Altiora, that, under the circumstances, I can rely upon you," and he held out his hand as though to conclude the bargain. I took it in silence. On the one hand, I was not going to commit myself in words to this unholy alliance; on the other, I wished to lull his suspicions as to what I really intended to do in the matter. For *coûte que coûte,* whatever might be the value of this threat, that if he failed to win Stella, he would fall back upon me, I was determined never to let that dear noble girl fall a victim to so unscrupulous an adventurer; and now that he had shown me his cards, I was fully decided to avail myself of my knowledge to frustrate his designs. I therefore even went so far as to respond to his enclosing palm with a gentle pressure, which he might construe as he liked, and merely said—

"I now quite understand you. You will agree with me that the subject is too delicate for us to discuss further;" and in the same breath, in order to change

it, pointed out Lord Sark driving in a victoria with Mrs Clymer.

"Ah," he said, "there goes my rival! but I know how to put a spoke most effectually into his wheel. With the Clymer for an ally, and the company for a trap, or the company for an ally and Mrs Clymer for a trap,—it does not matter much which way you put it,—Lord Sark is not a dangerous antagonist. By the way," he added, as though a sudden thought flashed upon him, "if I succeed with Stella Walton, what nobler mission could you desire than to save Lord Sark from the Clymer? You would make the Baron and your mother eternally grateful by marrying your cousin."

"Yes," I said; "but I should have to hold my affections in suspense until you had terminated your campaign successfully with Stella, and that might not be possible. Don't you think you are risking a great deal in suggesting such an idea? Suppose Stella refused you, would you expect Sark and me to change our minds?"

"Oh, she won't refuse me if you will only say a good word for me. At any rate, of one thing I feel certain, and that is, that she will never accept him. She makes the most marked difference in her manner towards his lordship and myself. However, far be it from me to suggest that you should involve your affections in any direction,—all I want is your support with Stella."

An idea here rapidly flashed across me, and I gave a sigh which caused him to look up hurriedly.

"You were ridiculously mistaken in thinking," I said,—and I am conscious I blushed while speaking, at the delicate ground I was treading on,—"that I was in love with Mr MacAlpine. It is as well that you should know, what I should have told you had you pressed me further, that my affections are already engaged, but not to him. Of course I do not know the nature of the threat you hold *in terrorem* over me. I hope, as you say, that there will never be any necessity for you to enforce it; but I can conceive of no pressure which it would ever be in your power to bring to bear which could compel me to marry against my inclinations, the more especially since they have become already involved in another quarter."

Mr Murkle, who was by no means a polite person when he was off his guard, gave vent to a long, low whistle; and at that moment Lord Sark and Mrs Clymer, seeing us, drove up. Her presence alone with him at such an hour, and her audacity in coming up to speak to us, caused me to colour violently; and I felt that the conviction suddenly forced itself upon Mr Murkle's mind, as he observed it, that he had not to look further for the object of my attachment, the more especially as Mrs Clymer could not resist shooting at me one of those jealous glances which so acute an observer as my riding companion could not fail to intercept.

"Whose fate were you discussing with such earnestness?" she remarked, with a meaning laugh. "My lord here has been bowing in vain to Miss Peto, but she seemed to have no eyes nor ears except for you, Mr Murkle."

"We were just then talking about you, Mrs Clymer," he answered with the greatest coolness. "You know the proverb, 'Talk of the—angel,' and so forth."

"Lord Sark and I were much less scandalous," she remarked, "for we were discussing the prospect of the Dark Continent Electric Illumination Company. *Apropos*, come and see me to-morrow at two; I have something of importance to talk over with you."

"I shall be at home at two, Lord Sark," I said, and I saw Mrs Clymer's face flush with anger as we passed on without allowing time for a reply. Mr Murkle for the rest of our ride was absorbed in a brown study, and I was only too glad to leave him in it.

It was therefore about the hour on the following day that Mr Murkle was having his interview with Mrs Clymer that I had the conversation with Lord Sark, which I also believe to have been "critical." I had long been thinking how to open his eyes to the dangers by which he was surrounded, and to release him from the bondage in which he was held, when the opportunity seemed thus providentially furnished, for I knew my mother was going to a concert; and at two o'clock, accordingly, Lord Sark made his appearance.

"You may think it strange of me," I said, "to ask

you to call at an hour when I knew my mother would be out; but I have had to act so much for myself through life, that perhaps I am less conventional than most girls, and this must also be my excuse for what I am going to say." I then explained to him, as shortly as I could, my theory about the crisis in our lives—about free-will and moral responsibility—about organic influences and the necessity of evolving the highest ideal conception of daily life, and then of trying to live up to it,—and justified my making a personal application of these theories to both of us by the strong conscientious conviction which I felt that it was my duty to do so, because I believed that every human being—even an unprotected and ignorant girl—might possess an influence which she might exercise for good. His mind had been so little trained to considerations of this nature, that he evidently followed me with difficulty; but he admitted that every individual exercised an influence of some sort or other; that it must be either for good or evil; and that they were responsible for it. So then I asked him what kind of influence Mrs Clymer was likely to exercise upon three pure girls, and whether he could justify having been the means of bringing her into contact with Stella Walton, Mattie Terrill, and myself. "So strongly do I feel on this subject, Lord Sark," I went on, "that either she must go away, or we must. How it is to be managed, I don't clearly see; and this was my reason for asking you to come and discuss the matter with me."

"But, my dear Altiora," he said, looking stupefied with amazement, "Mrs Clymer is the most intimate friend of half the girls in London; their mothers make no objection to their intimacy with her. Society has accepted her without question; and I scarcely think you have a right to set yourself up against it. You have no proof that Mrs Clymer is not as virtuous as any other woman in London. In fact, her conduct is irreproachable. She is nothing more than a great friend of mine; and most pretty women who have lost their husbands, or are unhappily married, or whose husbands don't object, have great friends of the other sex. Life would be intolerable to them otherwise, poor things! but the intimacy need not necessarily be improper."

"I have nothing to do with London society, or its customs, or its standard of morality," I replied; "this is a special case. Stella Walton is my great friend. I have seen enough of you to feel the highest regard for you. I see what your feeling for her is. It is neither doing justice to you nor to her that this woman should remain here. You cannot be her great friend without doing yourself an injury which must pass through you to others. You are under her spell, and as a spell-bound person you affect others hurtfully. You are charged, if I may so express myself, with a poisonous magnetism which you disseminate."

"That may all be true—it is somewhat beyond me," said Sark; "but granting it to be so, how is it to be

remedied? I can't go, because I am attracted like a moth to a candle by Stella, with whom, as you have rightly divined, I have fallen deeply and passionately in love. Mrs Clymer will not go away, because she is determined, if possible, to prevent the match; and I can't make her, because, as you say, she has got me under some spell, which I can only resist in one point. She has been urging me to leave Paris, but here I am able to stand my ground."

"In other words, you're like one of those toy geese that follow magnets," I said, "only in this case there are two, and they pull with equal force in opposite directions. The result is that you are paralysed—that is why I say Mrs Clymer must go away, and you would instantly gravitate in the right direction."

"I am sure Stella does not try to attract me," he gloomily replied, "for she is coldness itself; she seems entirely taken up with that fellow Murkle. I wonder what sort of magnetism his is?"

"As bad as Mrs Clymer's, only of another kind," I answered; "but you are mistaken if you think that Stella cares for him, though I confess her apparent encouragement of him is a mystery which I have in vain endeavoured to solve. But I am sure of this, if Mrs Clymer went away, her whole manner to you would change. It would not advance matters much if you went away with her, even if you could tear yourself from Stella. What I want to see is your emancipation from the whole connection. I can give you the

best idea of your position by Mr Murkle's own description of it,—'with Mrs Clymer for an ally and the company for a trap, or Mrs Clymer for a trap and the company for an ally—it does not much matter which way you put it—I do not fear Lord Sark as a rival;' that was his way of expressing it, and I think it is one which deserves your serious consideration."

Sark bit his lip and tapped the floor with his foot. "Believe me," I added, seeing that I was making an impression, "you are in as much danger materially as you are morally, and it is for your own sake as well as for ours that I want the atmosphere purified. Withdraw from the whole of this financial combination. I am sure that Stella cares for you; and though I don't want you to marry her for her fortune, the fact that she has one will relieve you from all further pecuniary anxieties."

"Dear Altiora," he said, "I feel the soundness of your advice; the unfortunate thing is that it is impossible for me to follow it. I am irrevocably committed to the financial scheme, to which I am both legally and honourably pledged. It is useless for me to attempt to drive Mrs Clymer away; and if I went away myself, she would simply have gained her point and follow me, and I should lose Stella, and fall back into the old bondage. There is a confession of weakness, but it is the truth. Believe me," he said, taking my hand, "I am none the less deeply grateful to you and ashamed of myself."

I had barely time to release my hand when the door opened and Mrs Clymer herself entered the room.

CHAPTER XI.

A PASSAGE OF ARMS.

SARK neither coloured nor started as Mrs Clymer, with a rapid and penetrating glance at both of us, advanced to greet me. I was conscious of doing both, and yet she read an expression of guilt on his honest countenance, while I am sure mine expressed nothing but indignation at her unceremonious entry. We must have presented an interesting study to an experienced physiognomist. I remember, although the moment was a critical one, trying to think by what feature the confusion which his face exhibited was chiefly betrayed. He did not lower his eyes as they met hers, the lines of the mouth did not move perceptibly as he rose slowly to follow up my greeting with his own, and yet there was a distinct admission in his face of a consciousness that he was caught. I ask the inquiring mind, Where was it? By what mysterious agency does the countenance mirror the emotions, when the will holds every feature in an apparently normal calm? And how is it that the mirror is often a distorted one,

and conveys an erroneous impression? Now I am certain it did in my own case. I was conscious of having done nothing to be ashamed of. I was angry, but not dismayed, at Mrs Clymer's sudden entrance, and yet I am sure that that lady utterly mistook the signs of my emotion, and attributed them to a sentiment which she supposed to be common to both Sark and myself. In fact, she was convinced that she had interrupted us at a moment when, as she imagined, some tender passages were being interchanged; and a certain triumphant and vindictive flash of her eye, as she squeezed my hand effusively, and then turned with easy and affectionate intimacy to her "dear Sark," warned me that the passages now in prospect were likely to prove anything but tender.

"I did not let the servant announce me, my dear Altiora," she said, knowing how it jarred upon me to be addressed by her by my Christian name, "because I knew your mother was out, and heard you tell Sark yesterday that you were to be at home. That unpunctual Murkle came half an hour before his time because he had some meeting to attend, and so I was released sooner than I expected. I hope I have not indiscreetly interrupted an interesting *tête-à-tête.*"

"Not at all," I calmly replied. "Your arrival would have been inconvenient a few moments ago; as it is, I have said everything to Lord Sark that I wished." And seeing that she was vainly attempting to suppress a nervous anxiety on the subject, I maliciously added

—"He is quite satisfied,—are you not?" and I turned to him with a glance which I purposely intended should mislead my adversary, so full was it of a tender meaning.

The embarrassment into which it threw poor Sark, who was so taken aback that he could only stammer that he "never could be sufficiently grateful to me," evidently confirmed her worst suspicions. She lost her presence of mind under the pressure of her excitement, and said sharply, "Do you mean to tell me that you are engaged?"

I looked at her with an indignant glance of outraged propriety, and said, "I am not aware, Mrs Clymer, of any circumstance which gives you the right to ask that question."

She apparently considered that the crisis warranted her in disregarding all social conventionality, or perhaps she felt her social position so strong that she could dare anything without danger from me, for she replied with the most unblushing effrontery, "Lord Sark is in a position to explain to you what the circumstance is which at all events gives me the right to ask *him* that question."

"I think," said Sark, overwhelmed with confusion, "that the subject is one which we had better not discuss further just now."

"On the contrary," she replied, "there could not be a more convenient or appropriate occasion. If Miss Peto intends to marry you, it is only right that she

should be informed of the precise relations we occupy towards each other."

I confess I was staggered by the shamelessness of this remark. I had seen so little of society, that I did not know that such things could be possible. I rose quietly and touched the bell. "Mrs Clymer," I said, "if you do not leave the room instantly, I will have you turned out by the servants."

Sark sprang to his feet.

"I implore you, Altiora," he said, "do not let us have a scandal. I shall never forgive myself for having been indirectly the cause of bringing this annoyance upon you;" and then turning to Mrs Clymer, he added, "You are labouring under a complete misapprehension. I am not engaged to be married to Miss Peto or to any one. Let us go now. I am sure that a moment's calm reflection will lead you to regret the hasty conclusion you have arrived at, and the expression to which it gave rise."

"Miss Peto brought it upon herself," said Mrs Clymer, rising as the servant entered; and bowing with an air of outraged majesty, she left the room, followed by Sark, who had just time to press my hand and whisper, "Once more forgive me, and don't despise me utterly."

A quarter of an hour after this, and while I was still brooding over the outrage to which I had been subjected, mamma and the Baron came home. I immediately told them what had occurred, and said it

was impossible for me ever to meet Mrs Clymer again.

"My dear Altiora," said mamma, "when you come to know a little more of life, you will see how ridiculous such scruples are. I look upon Mrs Clymer's intimacy with your cousin as quite providential. I have been assiduously cultivating her friendship, because it will ensure us access into the very best society in London. Why, half the smart people bombard her with invitations, and the other half with requests to get them for them."

"But after what she has admitted to me, surely we could render that impossible," I said.

"In the first place, it would not be convenient to listen to you. In the second place, if we could expose her, which people in our position would utterly fail to do, you would, to use a vulgar expression, be simply cutting off your nose to spite your face. My dear, she may prove a most valuable and useful acquaintance and *chaperon*. Indeed I have already made arrangements for her to take you to a ball next Sunday week, to which she is going with Lord Sark, to be given by the celebrated author and play-writer, Monsieur Housseyn Arsaye, where you will see a little of Parisian life in its most brilliant and characteristic aspect. I am sure your American friends would like to go, and they could scarcely do so under better auspices. I shall insist, Altiora, upon your not giving yourself airs of propriety in these matters. As your mother, I am

responsible for your conduct, and I shall be quite satisfied to place you under Mrs Clymer's guidance. So you will have the goodness to immediately apologise for your rudeness. She may do us the greatest possible injury if we offend her. The idea of a chit like you flying in the face of a recognised beauty like Mrs Clymer, on the score of morality,—the thing is monstrous. Is it not, Baron?" she added, appealing to her husband.

"*Ma foi*, my little Ora, we must take things as we find them," he said, turning to me; "you and I can't afford to run atilt at social follies. We have been most fortunate in securing Lord Sark and Mrs Clymer as intimates, and no one would thank us except a few crabbed old ladies who want him for their daughters, for making a scandal; besides, dirt always sticks. You are the only authority on the subject; and a young lady who makes her *début* by attempting to expose a beautiful and popular woman, because she is too intimate with her own cousin, would certainly not come out under happy auspices. No, Ora *mia*, as your mother says, we must patch up this little difference, and be all the better friends for it. If you can win Sark from her, no one will be better pleased than I shall be; but you have gone the wrong way to work, *ma petite*."

"I don't want to win Sark from her for myself, but for his own good," said I, indignantly; and I had much difficulty in preventing my feelings from finding

vent in a flood of tears. "And," I added, rising to leave the room, while my voice trembled with excitement, "nothing shall induce me even to speak to Mrs Clymer again. You need not, therefore, expect me to apologise to her, much less to make my entry into London society under her auspices."

Thinking the matter over in my own room, I found that I had placed myself in a very difficult position. I knew the Baron and mamma well enough to feel certain that they would spare no pains to conciliate Mrs Clymer, and I knew that lady well enough to be equally sure that she would not lose the triumph of being conciliated, and of coming to the house hardened in her insolence by her success. My reserve would only make me look ridiculous, and she would not spare me. In my dilemma, I determined to go down and take counsel of my friends in the *entresol;* and thither I accordingly repaired, just in time to find the two girls alone with Hannah at their afternoon tea.

"Well, that beats all," said Hannah, when I had concluded my story without interruption. "I felt all through my bones that Clymer was a hard case the first time I sot eyes on her, but I didn't jest know it went that length: but to think of your mama a-knowin' it all, and wanting to git along in what she calls 'society' by sacrificing your innocence to her vice,—why, it's enough to make a body's hair stand on end."

"The question now is," I said, "what am I to do? How am I to escape the humiliation of her presence

and of her triumph? And how, in the face of a command from my parents to the contrary, am I to preserve my own self-respect? I heard Mr MacAlpine and Mr Hetherington talking the other night about the ball she wishes me to go to, and nothing will induce me to go, particularly under the escort of Sark and Mrs Clymer."

"You must jest run away from 'em, my dearie," said Hannah, with the greatest coolness imaginable. "There is times when your dooty to your God is greater than your dooty to your parents, 'specially when one of 'em is only a Eitalian, and a step-father at that."

This proposition was so unexpected that it quite took my breath away, but it was received by the two girls with rapturous approbation.

"Why, that's splendid, you dear old Hannah; she shall run away to us. We'll all 'vamose the camp,' as the boys say out West, in the night, and not leave a sign for them to follow us by," said Stella, clapping her hands.

"Yes," said Mattie, "we'll just leave a line behind to say that we are very sorry, but we had to do it because we found our Californian morals were getting contaminated by the best society we tumbled into on our arrival in the Old World, and we took the liberty of carrying off a little innocent that hadn't been corrupted, with us."

"Now, then, the question is," said Stella, with a

promptitude worthy of a great general, "to decide upon the plan of operations. When do you think Mrs Clymer will be sufficiently reconciled to make an appearance again?"

"Oh, certainly not before to-morrow afternoon," I said.

"Well, then, we'll both go up-stairs. You go into your own room, which you may be supposed never to have left. I will go and see the Baroness, and tell her we are going to spend three or four days visiting Versailles and St Germains, and I'll ask her to let you come with us. This she is likely to do, as she will imagine it will give you time to get over your anger with Mrs Clymer, and give her time to conciliate that lady. Then I will ask to see you, and you will come down, innocent of the whole affair, and accept my invitation; then you'll pack up enough things to last—not for a week, but for a year if necessary; besides, we can always buy more. We will make all the preparations to-night, and all start for Versailles the first thing in the morning, and then decide where to fly to next."

"And Bob?" said Mattie; "do you suppose I can tear myself away from my Zend-Avesta in this unpremeditated manner? No; Bob must be in the secret. We must consult Bob at once. I will telegraph for him to come here instantly."

"But won't Keith Hetherington suspect?" I remarked. "Don't you think we had better consult him too?"

"We'll telegraph for both," said Stella, "to come here and dine; and you can dine too, Altiora. I will ask you up-stairs. Now there is no time to be lost; but first," said the girl, stopping in her enthusiasm, and turning to Hannah, "tell us if you approve; we'll none of us move a step without your approval."

"If I didn't approve, I'd a said so," remarked the old lady. "When it comes to running away in such a good cause as this, you'll find old Hannah making tracks with the youngest of ye; but I ain't a-going to let that Clymer drop—do you know it? If I don't make her run too before I've done with her, I ain't one of the New Hampshire Coffins. She has got to be put down, and she's got to stay put. It's old Hannah says so, and you'd better believe it."

The first part of the programme was carried out without a hitch. And the same evening, while Mattie was initiating Bob into his duties, I was having a serious conversation with Keith Hetherington on the subject.

In spite of the intimacy which had sprung up between us during the past month, I had not been able to assume the cousinly privilege which my American friends had so rapidly availed themselves of, of calling Mr Hetherington by his Christian name; but the more I saw of him, the more I was struck by the breadth and originality of his views upon the subjects in which I was especially interested, but in regard to which, upon ordinary occasions, he manifested the utmost

silence and reserve, feeling either that he was liable to be misunderstood, or that they were of too serious a character to be treated lightly. Indeed he often seemed to have two different lives—an outer and an inner one; one which he lived for his friends and for society, and one which he lived for himself. No one who judged of him by his ordinary conversation could form an accurate estimate of the earnestness of his character, and of the wide range of those faculties with which he was endowed, and which, aided by extensive research, travel, keen powers of observation, and study of his fellow-men and the phenomena of nature, had enabled him to arrive at certain results which he was reluctant to impart to others, because, while convinced of their truth, he had not arrived at the point where they could be verified by evidence which should be satisfactory to the world at large. Hence he guarded them jealously under the mask of a very commonplace exterior. Notwithstanding this, there was an indescribable something about him which had from the first piqued my curiosity, and the interest which I manifested in a certain class of inquiry had finally induced him, so far as I was concerned, in a great measure to break through his reserve. It was the sympathy of thought and feeling which had thus become engendered, that seemed to make it impossible for me to take so serious a step as the one I was now contemplating, without first consulting him, and yet it involved an explanation that could not fail to be more

or less embarrassing. I was aware that the somewhat bold and unusual measure I had resorted to in arranging a private interview with Sark, in order to detach him from Mrs Clymer, was liable to misconstruction, and that the position in which I was now placed by that lady implied that I was a rival with her in my cousin's affections; while the plan of flying from her and from my parents and natural guardians was one which, from a conventional point of view, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to justify; moreover, to take into my confidence a young unmarried man, whom I had not known above a month, even though he was twelve or fourteen years older than myself, and make a sort of father-confessor of him, which I felt strongly impelled to do, was to place us in an entirely new position relatively to each other, and to establish an intimacy on such peculiar grounds, as nothing but the utmost confidence in the justness of his appreciation of my motives and the rectitude of his character would have warranted. In spite of the affectionate sympathy of my impulsive American friends, I felt forlorn and desolate. I wanted a matured masculine judgment to lean upon in this emergency, and whom had I to turn to but him? Still it was not without a sense of the greatest embarrassment and hesitation that I described to him my interview with Sark, the motives by which it was prompted, its interruption by Mrs Clymer, and the outrage to which I had been subjected by her, and my mother's intentions with

regard to her chaperonage of me in London; and without telling him the plan I had decided upon, I asked him what course he would advise me to pursue under the circumstances. "Excuse me, Mr Hetherington," I said in conclusion, "for taking you so deeply into my confidence, and placing you in a position of so much responsibility, what I really need is not social or worldly but spiritual advice. I suppose a clergyman would be considered the right person to go to, but I don't know one; besides, I heard Mrs Clymer, who is a very regular attendant at church, say the other day that she found them such a comfort. She said there was one she always went to in her difficulties. They differ, it seems to me, just as much as other men, and they might think themselves bound by some text like 'honour thy father and thy mother,' which I am sure would not apply in a case like this."

"You must have been in difficulties before," he replied, "though not so serious; what do you generally do?"

"Oh, I always try and think what papa, who, when he gave me my name, gave me the motto of my life, is at this moment wishing me to do under the circumstances. I try and imagine the highest conception of duty, and earnestly seek for his influence to descend and point it out to me; and indeed a good influence does seem to descend, and I seem to feel it encompassing me, but unfortunately it does not appear to be governed by any social considerations, and sometimes

suggests the most impossible courses of action from the worldly point of view. That is one reason why I have shrunk from going to clergymen—they appear to try and adapt their religion to the social requirements of the conditions by which they are surrounded, instead of going for the right and highest thing *coûte que coûte.* It is all a matter of compromise, and I hate compromise where it involves the slightest sacrifice of the highest ideal conception of duty."

"But there may be one high ideal conception of duty to God and to humanity, and another to one's self, or to one's country, or family, or society; it all depends whom the duty is towards, whether it is likely to involve compromise or not. Now the ideal conception of duty towards one's country is a very high one."

"Yes; but surely not so high as towards humanity at large," I replied.

"That was just the reason I refused a seat in Parliament when it was offered to me," he answered, with a smile. "I found that the popular conception of one's duty to one's country involved a compromise which I could not make with that which I felt I owed to humanity. If you feel the same with regard to your family, or to society, you have only one course to pursue."

"But I am not a Romanist, and I can't become a nun. I can't leave them, for I have nowhere to go to."

"And if you could, you would not advance matters.

You would do no good to the world by leaving it. This is the great mistake of ascetics—who are, in fact, more occupied with their own spiritual welfare than with that of their fellow-men—not perceiving the fatal egotism that underlies all efforts after personal salvation."

"But I am not thinking about my personal salvation now," I said; "I am thinking simply of somehow fulfilling the conception of my duty to God, which you tell me admits of no compromise with the conventional idea of my duty to my family."

"One greater than I said that," Mr Hetherington interrupted, in a tone of deep solemnity, "when He described how His cross should be borne."

"But how is a girl under age like me to leave father and mother and house?" said I, knowing to what he alluded. "In the Christian society in which we live I should be answerable to the law," I added bitterly, "and if I persisted in my rebellion, should be put into Chancery or some such thing, because I was trying to fulfil a divine command."

A long pause ensued, during which Mr Hetherington put his elbows on the table, and his face between his hands, remaining in that attitude for some moments.

"My child," he said at last, "there is a way which sets every pulse in my being throbbing when I think of it—for it is one which, if you consented to it, would bring inexpressible happiness and consolation to a spirit that has suffered for many years the misery of utter

isolation and desolation—but it is not open to us yet. I cannot ask you to become my wife merely because it would make my life a joy, and enable you to escape from a dilemma. Not because I fear the law, or would shrink from carrying you away from its clutches, but because in this matter we must be a law unto ourselves, and because marriage is too sacred a state to be entered upon either from motives of natural selfishness or expediency. Not only is it true in a deeper sense than the world wots of that marriages are made in heaven, but the time when they should be consummated here is registered there, and for us that time may never come. I know of only one person who can assist us in this difficulty, and she is not far off," he said, glancing from the corner in which we were sitting to Hannah, who was engaged at the other end of the room in the unusual task for her of writing a letter.

"Oh," I said, clasping my hands, not a little relieved from the emotion into which this singular speech had thrown me, "I am so glad you have arrived at that conclusion at last! I only felt that this conversation was necessary in order to prepare you for what I have arranged with Hannah, only I somehow felt I wanted your sanction to it." And then I told him our plans, and as I saw that Hannah was by this time directing the envelope, I called her. She came to us with the letter in her hand; as she laid it upon the table my eye fell upon the address.

"Why, Hannah," I said, thunderstruck, for I could scarcely believe my eyes, "who have you been writing to?"

"Mr Clymer," she replied calmly.

CHAPTER XII.

FLIGHT AND PURSUIT.

On the following morning the three girls and Hannah, attended by Hetherington and Alderney as escort, started for Versailles, and the same afternoon, the Baroness called on Mrs Clymer, to pacify the outraged sensibilities of that lady. She found Lord Sark with her, which rendered the explanation somewhat embarrassing.

"You can't think, my dear Mrs Clymer," she said, "how distressed I was on hearing from Altiora of her foolish conduct yesterday. I could not lose a moment in coming to ask you to forgive her for her presumption. I can't think where the child has picked up all her ridiculous ideas. I hope, dear Lord Sark, you will make allowances for what must have seemed to you most unmaidenly and indelicate behaviour on her part, and that it will not affect our pleasant relations together. I have sent the child away with her

American friends to spend a few days at Versailles and St Germains, and by the time she comes back I shall take care to put matters on such a footing, that any recurrence of such conduct shall be impossible."

Lord Sark was about to speak, but Mrs Clymer was too well aware of the danger of allowing any deprecatory utterances on his part to give him time. At the same time, she perceived that her only chance of keeping him quiet was to adopt an attitude very different from that which she would probably have assumed had she been alone with the Baroness, and in a position to ride her high horse unchecked. So to Sark's astonishment she replied—

"I am so sorry you have taken the trouble to call, dear. I assure you the apologies, if there are any due, should rather come from Sark, who has a way of talking to girls as if they were women of the world, which is quite shocking. Poor dear girl! no wonder she was startled. At her age I should have acted just in the same way. I tried to disabuse her mind of some erroneous impressions, which, I am afraid, she has received now in reference to our old friendship," and she extended her hand with the most engaging frankness to Sark, who evidently took it with reluctance; "but you, dear Baroness, who know the world so well, and know what sad injustices we married women with wicked husbands have to endure, understand how harmless such intimacies are, and how

desolate life would be if Plato had not invented attachments of that sweet and sympathetic character by which we are bound."

Mrs Clymer was, in fact, not sorry for this opportunity of letting the Baroness comprehend that she had no intention of giving up Lord Sark to Altiora, and that, if she expected her help in London, it must be upon those terms. So she went on: "A month of the London season under my chaperonage will be quite enough to enlighten your daughter upon matters of which she is so utterly ignorant, as she proved herself to be yesterday. Her beauty, talent, and relationship to Sark, added to my humble efforts and the Baron's great financial position, will, I am sure, secure her a brilliant social triumph."

Lord Sark's face was a study during this speech. The notion of the girl, of whose pure and disinterested nature he had received such striking evidence, being introduced into London society by the woman whose reputation in it he had himself done more than any one to compromise, and whose real character, now that she presented it to him in the light of his innocent cousin's *chaperon*, began to assume a totally new aspect, filled him with a mingled sentiment of remorse and dismay. In the degree in which the grandeur and purity of Altiora's mind had made their influences felt, and disturbed the latent sensibilities of his conscience, had he become more keenly alive to the contrast which was presented to it by the perverted

nature of the woman to whose fascinations he had fallen a victim. And the more that this counter-influence seemed to invade his organism, did he shrink from the chains which he had hugged, and begin within himself to devise schemes for releasing himself, and for thwarting those plans of his late charmer, to which the unworthy mother was listening with so much complacency.

In pursuance of the resolution slowly forming within him, he asked the Baroness if she knew whether the party were to be found at that moment at Versailles or St Germains; but Madame Grandesella said, as she expected them back in three or four days at the most, she had not made any special inquiries as to their plans; and Mrs Clymer suggested, with a suspicion of a sneer, that the surest way to find them would be to go to both. So his lordship, to that lady's surprise and disgust, then and there took his leave, glad to escape at a moment when the Baroness's presence would make any opposition difficult.

By the time Lord Sark reached the Hotel des Réservoirs at Versailles, it was already evening, and his inquiries turning out fruitless, he resolved to drive on to St Germains after a hasty meal; but to his surprise and consternation he could find no trace of them there; and as it had now become too late to return to Paris, here he was forced to remain until early the following morning, when he went back to Paris to ask the *concierge* whether the young ladies

had left any address. Here he heard that on the previous afternoon his cousin, Bob Alderney, had appeared with Miss Coffin, had made arrangements for giving up the apartments altogether, had paid off the servants, had packed up everything that belonged to them, and the *concierge* had heard the direction given —"Gare du Chemin de fer du Nord;" on which—without making inquiries of the Grandesellas, which he felt would be useless, or giving them the alarm, which he began to suspect would be treacherous—he drove off to the apartment occupied by Hetherington and Alderney. The former had just gone out; the latter had not been at home since the previous evening, nor did the servant know anything of his movements, beyond the fact that he had taken a small portmanteau with him. The chase upon which Sark had been engaged for nearly twenty-four hours, now began to pique his curiosity, and to interest him intensely,—the more especially, as he strongly suspected that before long he would be the pursued as well as the pursuer. In the midst of his eagerness and anxiety, he could not help smiling as the tableau presented itself to his mind—of his hunting Stella and Altiora, of Mrs Clymer hunting him, and of the Grandesellas hunting the whole party. He rushed to his hotel to pack a few necessaries, wondering as he did so at the positive delight that he felt at the opportunity which seemed thus providentially offered of making his escape; at the utter absence of any senti-

ment for Mrs Clymer strong enough to hold him; at the constant presence of Stella in his mind, fluttering like an *ignis fatuus* from his gaze, at the very moment that existence seemed impossible without her; at the deep brotherly affection which had grown up within him for Altiora—a sentiment which, for force of purity, he had not given his nature credit for entertaining. A whirl of pleasurable emotions seemed to have taken possession of him, as he rapidly sped up the Rue Lafayette in his *coupé*. He pictured to himself a retreat in which he would find the girls hidden away, with Altiora to plead for him, and no Murkle to balk him in his suit; and he conjured up to himself the spectacle, with a satisfaction which he felt was heartless, of Mrs Clymer's fury at finding that he had flown, no one knew whither; he had left word with his servant that he would probably not be away long, and to wait till he returned, which would still further embarrass his fair friend, who would probably make the fruitless journey that he had done to Versailles and St Germains.

The only unpleasant reflection which arose to mar the full enjoyment of the situation, was the uncertainty that attended his own pursuit. The inquiries which he made at the station, left no doubt that he was on the right track. The previous evening, three young ladies and an old one, attended by a young Englishman, had gone by the express to London; and he found himself just in time to take the tidal, so that he

would be in that city within a little more than twelve hours after them—and he felt no doubt that Bob, not expecting such a rapid pursuit, might be heard of at his club. Such, in fact, proved the case. There, a little before midnight, he came suddenly upon his unsuspecting cousin, deeply immersed in the study of Bradshaw.

Bob, though he endeavoured to assume an air of unconscious innocence, was evidently not a little disconcerted at Sark's appearance on the scene.

"Oh, lucky champion of distressed damsels, are you hunting up the train which will most speedily convey them to the retreat you have selected for them?" said his lordship, who was so delighted with his good fortune, that he vented his sense of it in chaff. "To such a knight-errant, Bradshaw becomes an idyl more sweet than the lay of any troubadour, and Pall Mall a scene of adventure which the Knight of La Mancha himself might have envied. But you must take me as your Sancho Panza, Bob. I am not going to be denied in this matter. I will follow you as a devoted squire to the ends of the earth in the defence of the pure and the unprotected from the perils of nineteenth-century civilisation. Only tell me that our interests do not clash, and that the fair Hannah is not the Dulcinea of your affections."

"Before I answer a question," replied Bob, sturdily, "answer me one—Where is the Clymer?"

"At this moment, I should say she was walking up

and down her bedroom in Paris in a dressing-gown, half blind with fury, having just discovered my flight, and that she will start by the first train to-morrow morning to Versailles and St Germains to look for me. I purposely put her off the scent in order to give us time. Is this proof sufficient of my fidelity?"

"It is impossible for me to reveal their whereabouts to you before I consult the girls themselves," said Bob. "Let us see," and he turned to Bradshaw—"we ought to be off by the 1.40 at latest; meet me here to-morrow at 11, and I will tell you their decision. There is not another man in the world, except Hetherington, whom I would treat in this matter as I do you, old fellow; but then I have my suspicions of your real motives, and I am glad to have them. I know you would not have acted as you have done, except as a true friend."

. . . .

"Why, certainly, yes, indeed," said Mattie Terrill, enthusiastically, when Bob asked her on the following morning whether the girls would receive a visit from his cousin. "Just think of our having already made a distinguished member of the British peerage hunt us all the way from Paris—and then you talk about your aristocracy being quite too awfully aw-aw-kind of fellows. Why, I guess no old trapper would have followed our trail more cunningly. Bring him by all means. In the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom, and he has won the right of being admitted into our confidence by the trouble he has taken to prove it.

Don't you think so?" she said, turning to Altiora and Stella—neither of whom, however, responded with the enthusiasm which she expected, though it was evident that the Earl's eagerness to find them was a source of quiet gratification to both. As Hannah gave her cordial adhesion, the matter was settled; and two hours afterwards Lord Sark was in the house, in a quiet Tyburnian region, where Bob had secured them lodgings.

"The problem has been solved more rapidly than we either of us expected when we last met," said Altiora, meeting him cordially, while Stella advanced with a slight hesitation, and a perceptible heightening of colour, very foreign to her usual reckless manner, or the frigid reserve with which she had hitherto treated him. Lord Sark felt a delightful and exhilarating complacency stealing over him as he thus found himself accepted without question as an ally against the machinations of the Clymer, which, considering his relations with her, surprised himself. He contrasted the agitating condition under which his former passion had been stimulated, with the more wholesome influences under which he was now acting, and mentally resolved to preserve the liberty that he had thus won, almost in spite of himself. A veil seemed to be lifting from an inner sanctuary, and revealing to him unknown and unsuspected possibilities of emotion; and as it did so, the contrast that this presented to those of which he had been the victim, struck him with its full force. He perceived that in the passion which he had

felt for the siren who had enthralled him, love, as he now began to understand its nature, had no place, and in the reaction of the discovery he was conscious of a sensation very nearly approaching to disgust.

"I guess, lord," said Hannah, whose eye he caught while thus reflecting, "that you feel a deal better inside of ye than when I saw you last." Hannah always called Lord Sark simply "lord," having apparently a conscientious scruple against calling him "my lord." Nevertheless, in his absence, she always talked of him as "the lord,"—being a person who never wasted words where abbreviation was possible, she had at an early period dispensed with "Sark." Indeed she had a nomenclature peculiar to herself, both for her friends and her enemies. Murkle was always spoken of by her as "that Murkle," with a world of contempt thrown into *that;* and when she addressed him to his face, which was as rarely as possible, it was generally as "Mister;" but she had never forgiven his conduct about the trunk, and often simply attracted his attention, by saying "Hyar;" and once in offering him a cup of tea at a moment when he was making ostentatious love to Stella, to her intense indignation, she called out to him, "Hi, you there!" as if she was hailing a cab. Mrs Clymer, for some reason known only to herself, and which she would never divulge, she never talked of except as that "Valparaiso baggage," and addressed her to her face as "Missus." She had never been heard to add the word Clymer. Hether-

ington had soon been adopted as Keith, and then as Keithy; and Bob had so much advanced in her affections since he had aided in their flight, that he too was now promoted, to his great delight, to being Bobby. There was this remarkable thing about Hannah, that she managed to convey in the tones of her voice, and in the manner of her address, a most exact reflection of her inmost sentiments in regard to the person to whom she was speaking at the moment; and Sark, who knew her peculiarities, felt an underlying tenderness in the uncouth remark, which described so exactly what he was feeling, that it called out a burst of effusiveness, which astonished the whole party. He could not give vent to the emotions that were welling up within him by embracing Stella, Altiora, and Mattie, one after the other, which would have been a natural outlet to his feelings—so he jumped up, and crossing to Hannah, took both her hands, as the only reply he could make to her speech, and shook them violently. "Well, well, lordy," she remarked, gazing at him benignly, "you've got the right stuff in you; guess you ain't got far to go before you'll come all right." And ever after this Lord Sark was distinguished by the terminal *y*, which was a certain evidence that he had become a favourite.

"We must not lose any time, if we are to tell Sark our plans," said Bob.

He then explained that a retreat had been secured by his efforts in a quiet, remote village, to which he

fondly anticipated that it would be difficult to track them; that Hetherington was in the secret, and had been left in Paris to keep them informed of the movements of the Grandesellas and Mrs Clymer; and that the girls were quite reconciled to the experience in store for them of a quiet rural life in a secluded and beautiful part of England. Lord Sark suggested that this might not prove necessary, unless the girls absolutely wished it, and that he could get them all invited to Beaucourt Castle, the seat of his uncle by his mother's side, the Duke of Beaucourt; and he maintained that Altiora would be as safe from intrusion or molestation there as in her undiscovered seclusion, as the Grandesellas would be too much overawed by the grandeur of her retreat to attempt either to pursue her or to extract her from it. Altiora, however, shrank from the possible notoriety which might thus attach to her escapade, from the explanations which might be involved, and from the sudden plunge which it would necessitate into the midst of an unknown world of aristocratic fashion. The Californian girls had no such hesitation, and any reluctance they manifested to accept Lord Sark's offer arose solely from their disinclination to abandon the refugee who had fled to them for protection; but this point was decided by Hannah, who could under no circumstances be induced, so far as she was concerned, to entertain the Beaucourt Castle project; and it was therefore finally settled that they should all go to

Copleydale together, under Bob's guidance, and wait there in secrecy, until Sark had obtained the invitation from his aunt for the two American girls. As Hetherington had declared his intention of coming over to England as soon as the Grandesellas and Mrs Clymer started in pursuit, Bob suggested that he should be directed to mount guard over Hannah and Altiora—a function he felt sure he would readily undertake—and proposed himself to sue for an invitation to Beaucourt; and as he threw out this hint, he looked for approval from Mattie Terrill. But that young lady seemed in a perverse mood, and declared that she wanted to flirt with English lords, and he would interfere with her and idle away his time, which he had much better spend in taking the steps necessary for his initiation into his new career as a stockbroker—an announcement which struck Lord Sark with astonishment; but there was no time to ask any explanation of it then, and an hour afterwards he was standing on the platform at the Paddington terminus, waving his adieux to two lovely creatures kissing their hands to him out of the windows of the carriage of a vanishing express train, much to the envy of the surrounding spectators. The same afternoon he wrote to the Duchess of Beaucourt, asking if she had room for him at the Castle.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DUCHESS OF BEAUCOURT.

"Sapristi, ce n'est toujours pas le mari qu'on cherche comme ça," said the waiter of the Hotel Henri Quatre at St Germains, after he handed Mrs Clymer into a *fiacre* and was watching its retreating wheels—a sentiment suggested to his experience in such matters by the ill-suppressed evidences of anger and anxiety exhibited by that lady, after she had drawn the coverts of Versailles and St Germains in search of the missing party in vain. She had time enough, however, to compose her feelings and her *rôle* before she arrived at the apartments of the Grandesellas with the tidings. She affected to be intensely amused by the whole performance. It was "so like dear Sark to enter into the spirit of a joke concocted by two wild Californian girls, utterly ignorant of all the *convenances* of civilised life, and capable of outraging all rules of propriety. They had no social reputation to lose; but her real concern was for dear Altiora, whose innocence had been betrayed, and whose character had been compromised, poor girl, by her reckless friends: it was very sad." And she composed her features to a becoming condition of gravity and sympathy, and turned appealingly to Murkle, who happened to be present, and invited him to suggest

what course should be adopted in so unexpected an emergency.

"We had better find out from the *concierge*," said that worthy, "when he expects them back again: they may have changed their minds and gone to Fontainebleau." And he left the room, while the Baroness protested that Altiora would never dream of prolonging her absence beyond the time originally specified. But Murkle came back with the appalling intelligence that the party in the *entresol* had paid off their servants and given up the apartment, and left a letter, which was to be given to the Baroness at the expiration of three days; but "as monsieur had made inquiries, he would give it to him at once." And as it was addressed to the Baroness, Murkle handed it to her, and she read as follows:—

"Dear Baroness,—We find that we are altogether too unsophisticated, without further preparation, to stand the wear and tear of Parisian existence under the conditions presented to us. That native innocence which is so marked a characteristic of the girlhood of the Pacific slope cannot bear the moral strain. We feel we want toughening all over, and we have decided to go into seclusion in England to toughen. We have taken dear Altiora with us, for she has as pure a nature as if she had been born at Cedar Buttes, and we cannot bear to see it spoiled. She tried hard, dear girl, to write you a line for me to enclose in this, but her feel-

ings were too much for her.—With kind regards to the Baron and Mr Murkle, amicably your friend,

"STELLA WALTON.

"*P.S.*—You will see from this that it will be quite impossible for any of us to go with Lord Sark and Mrs Clymer to the ball on Sunday."

"If the girlhood of the Pacific slope are half as innocent as they are insolent," said the Baroness, with a snort of indignation, "they must be truly exceptional in that respect. 'Amicably your friend,' indeed!"

"Sark had a most important meeting to attend today. He has guaranteed the transfer of the property of the company of which he was chairman, and the final papers were to have been signed. He is so far compromised, that if he attempts to back out now, we can ruin him morally and financially," said Murkle, who was filled with rage at the prospect of losing the heiress to the man whose rank he had intended to turn to his own pecuniary and social advantage, while there was a still further possibility of Altiora escaping from his clutches.

"Bah, *caro mio!*" said the Baron; "there is nothing to make a fuss about. They are a pack of children whom we can soon bring to their senses. Fortunately the whole matter is arranged so far as our French colleagues are concerned. We have nothing for it but to follow the fugitives to England, and change the base of

our operations. We shall soon find out where they are; they are too distinguished a party to be lost. *Allons,* Lalla *mia!* Pack up; we must be off by to-night's train. Will you allow us to offer you our escort?" he added, turning to Mrs Clymer.

That lady, who had assumed an air of great indifference, at first refused, on the ground that she hated these sudden moves, but allowed herself to be finally persuaded by Murkle to join the party; and the same night they were all *en route* for London.

The following day was not far advanced before Sark received a missive from Mrs Clymer, informing him of her arrival in town, and requesting him to call upon her immediately. "If anybody calls, tell the servant to say I am out of town, and leave orders that all letters are to be kept to await my return; and put up things enough for a week as quickly as possible," said his lordship to his valet, as he tossed the Clymer's letter into the fire, evidently with no intention of answering it. He was, in fact, expected at Beaucourt Castle that afternoon. As the Duchess was a woman of large sympathies, possessed a generous nature, had been devotedly attached to her nephew from his boyhood, and had been sincerely pained by the infatuation which had for the last few years taken possession of him, to the exclusion of those public interests to which she had expected him to devote his talents, she was only too delighted to co-operate in any schemes that might wean him back to the life she longed to see him

lead. She made rather a wry face when she found he had substituted a Californian heiress for the cosmopolitan adventuress, and plaintively objected that he would have done better to look among the countrywomen of his own class, instead of running the risk of transferring his affections from one American to another. However, she consented to invite the two girls, and to *chaperon* them herself—if, on inspection, she found they were presentable; if not, she stipulated beforehand that Sark was somehow or other to get rid of them in twenty-four hours. "It is amazing," she said, "the way in which society is being taken by storm by our transatlantic cousins. It is enough if they have pretty faces and fortunes, and are Americans, to ensure them the *entrée* into houses from which Englishwomen, just as rich, just as pretty, and far better born, are jealously excluded."

"If I were a middle-class Englishman, a railway contractor, or a cable company promoter, or a cotton-spinner, or a chap of that sort, you know, who had made some money, and wanted to get my wife and family into society, do you know what I would do?" said Lord Grandchamp, the Duke's eldest son. "I should take my wife and girls to America, and live there long enough to enable me to become an American citizen, and my girls to pick up New York manners,—they are much better than those of our middle-class—a sort of French *chic* about them, you know, with a free-and-easy originality added,—and then I'd send

them over by themselves, without letting them tell anybody who they were, except that they were the daughters of a wealthy American, who had millions of dollars, you know; and then, when they had both married fellows like Sark here, I'd turn up myself, and he'd find to his astonishment that he had a regular vulgar Britisher for his father-in-law, and a mother-in-law with a great red shawl, and big feet, and no *h*'s. What a sell it would be!—and richly he'd deserve it. How do you know," he added, turning to Sark, "that this girl Stella Walton is not the daughter of old Welton, our head-gardener, who emigrated twenty years ago to America and made a fortune there? It only needs the change of a letter."

"Well, we ought to be grateful to a country whose institutions give us a chance of meeting upon equal terms with our gardeners' daughters, when they have developed a refinement and qualities of their own which make them desirable additions to our *blasé* society. It acts upon my moral epidermis very much as effervescing salts put into my bathing water do upon my skin. I feel internally refreshed and invigorated."

"Well, Sark," said the Duchess, laughing, "it's a pity you should monopolise the enjoyment of these sensations, so I will take your American friends on trust, and see what effect they produce upon my other visitors—so that matter is settled. Now tell me where I am to direct to them."

"Oh, that does not matter," he said; "give the letter to me and I will send it to them. But perhaps I had better tell you the whole story—only mind, Grandchamp, it is in the strictest confidence, so don't go retailing it all over the clubs." And Sark gave the Duchess an account of the Grandesellas, and of his newly found cousin Altiora, which interested her so much that her heart warmed to the friendless girl, and she proposed to include her in the invitation. The fact that Sark had already made this suggestion to Altiora, and that she had shrunk from entering the world, even under the ducal auspices, only raised Altiora in the Duchess's good opinion, and she made a mental resolution to befriend her should opportunity offer.

In the middle of their conversation the post arrived with a note from Bob Alderney, also proposing a visit.

"Why," asked the Duchess, "what can induce the dear boy to tear himself from his beloved oriental studies and his bosom friend in Paris, to offer a visit here? I am sure I shall only be too delighted to see him. I ask him regularly every season, and he as regularly refuses. He writes from some place in Devonshire."

"Perhaps he is after the other Californian girl," said Grandchamp, acutely.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Sark, with a smile. "However, aunt, you'll grant his request, I hope, and then you'll have an opportunity of judging for yourself."

That evening the post carried two letters, both addressed to Copleydale—one from the Duchess to Bob Alderney, and the other from Sark to Stella, enclosing an invitation for herself and Mattie to Beaucourt.

"That will do capitally," said Sark to himself. "Bob can escort them here, and I will wait to receive them. It is lucky that the Duchess is going to have a houseful of people; it will give them some idea of life in an English country house."

The Duchess of Beaucourt was a good-natured easy-going woman of the world, by no means disposed to take a strait-laced view of its shortcomings, and always ready to make allowances for those irregularities which, to her mind, gave a decided piquancy to society. She had regretted Sark's devotion to the Clymer, not so much because it was wrong in itself, as because it interfered with his worldly prospects. She had been a beautiful and dashing woman in her youth; and more than once, had she been Mrs Smith instead of a duchess, her social position would have been seriously compromised by sundry *affaires de cœur*, for which, however, allowances were made, partly because the Duke, who was as popular among women as she was among men, utterly ignored any consciousness of his wife's flirtations, and the cordial understanding which seemed to exist between them was never disturbed by their intimacy with members of the opposite sexes—and partly because people said she dispensed her favours out of sheer amiability and good-nature,

and that it was rather under the influence of a lavish generosity of character than of any essentially improper tendencies that she allowed enterprising admirers to compromise her by their attentions. Besides, people made allowances for a pardonable vanity in a woman of such great personal attractions. It is doubtful, however, whether they would have been so lenient had she not been a duchess, with a charming place in the country, one of the principal attractions of which consisted in the fact that she understood exactly how to select her guests, which she divided into appropriate categories. Thus she generally opened her autumn parties with groups of distinguished politicians. As the Duke had never taken an active part in politics, and as both he and the Duchess were people of wide sympathies, Cabinet ministers and leading politicians of all shades met here on a sort of neutral ground; then, as talent was to be encouraged, and clever men were more or less lions, and agreeable additions to the aristocracy, these gatherings were pleasurably flavoured with artists, philosophers, authors, with a celebrated traveller or distinguished foreigner thrown in. Thus science, politics, art, and literature were skilfully mingled; and for people who were not very dependent for their amusement on a brilliant display of feminine wit and beauty, went off successfully. For the wives of the statesmen and politicians were generally elderly and more or less dull, their daughters too correct in their behaviour to be amusing, and the philosophers,

artists, and authors were generally either bachelors, or, if they had wives, left them at home. Then there were one or two parties of county people, with perhaps a bishop, and sundry London people the reverse of smart, who, for some reason or other, had claims upon the ducal hospitality. When these had all been disposed of, and the time came for the shooting-parties, the fun of the festivities might be said to begin. Then came the turn of the beauties, more or less fast and professional, and of the girls whose mammas were too anxious to get them well married to care whom they met, particularly when the meeting-place was Beaucourt Castle; and of the smart young men about town, some of whom were most desirable eldest sons; and of old *roués* who had known the Duchess in her youth, and whom she now invited out of sheer good-nature, because she knew that it warmed up their battered old hearts to be surrounded by a lot of pretty women, whose flirtations they superintended in a fatherly sort of way, which carried with it its own privileges; besides which, there was always an old dowager or two of questionable notoriety and great social distinction, whose early experiences had not been altogether unmixed with those of the old *roués*, and with whom, therefore, a certain tenderness of relation still existed as they reverted sentimentally to those episodes of years gone by, and morally festooned their *immortelles* over the sacred season of their youth.

It was to meet a houseful thus selected that Sark

despatched the invitation to the two girls at Copley-dale, with no little inward enjoyment of the treat in store for them; for he was too much accustomed to such society to think it anything but delightful, though he could not but own, as he looked through the list of guests furnished him by his aunt, that it was just as well that Altiora was not to be of the party.

CHAPTER XIV.

BEAUCOURT CASTLE.

MRS CLYMER, unable to restrain her impatience, when, after she had allowed a sufficient interval to elapse, Sark did not make his appearance, drove off herself to Grosvenor Square, to make personal inquiries, and arrived there a few moments after he had taken his departure; but the servants were too discreet to hazard any conjecture as to the direction his lordship had taken. This uncertainty, however, in the case of so prominent a member of the aristocracy, could not last long, when such experienced sleuth-hounds as Baron Grandesella and Mr Murkle were on the scent; and on the following morning the latter arrived at Mrs Clymer's "bijou residence," with the intelligence that his lordship was staying at Beaucourt, but that, al-

though they were on the track of Alderney, they had not yet been able to discover his whereabouts or that of the girls. It had been decided by the Grandesellas that the whole episode might be turned to valuable social account, if a proper interest was excited in it, which should not take the form of a scandal, but rather of a mystery, in some way connected with a tender attachment between Altiora and her cousin Sark; and that, in fact, if dexterously managed, it might be the means of acquiring for the Baron and Baroness a not unenviable fashionable notoriety. With a lovely and beautiful heiress for a daughter, with an earl for her cousin—who was consoling himself by a visit to his uncle the duke, during the romantic and mysterious disappearance under the most uncompromising circumstances of the cousin of his love—the Italian adventurer and his wife were supplied with aristocratic materials enough, if they were only cleverly employed, to compensate for any temporary inconvenience to which they had been subjected by Altiora's conduct; and they rather began to enjoy the complication to which it had given rise than otherwise.

Mr Murkle and Mrs Clymer, however, took a very different view of matters, and put their heads together, and plotted vengeance, and concocted schemes of discovery, from which the Baron and Baroness were excluded, in which interesting occupation they were suddenly provided with a valuable and most unexpected ally. This was none other than Ronald Mac-

Alpine, who, finding his occupation gone when the whole party had vanished so mysteriously from Paris, followed them to London, and now heard the whole of the singular history from the lips of Mr Murkle and Mrs Clymer, upon which lady he had made it a point to call immediately on his arrival in town.

"I came across in the same train with Hetherington," he said, "but I failed to extract any of the facts as you give them. All he seemed to know or was willing to tell was, that all our party except ourselves had left Paris. I thought it—er—most extremely singular of none of you to say a word of your intentions beforehand. I have no doubt Hetherington knows where Miss Peto is, and has gone straight to her. You have perceived, doubtless, how deeply his affections are engaged in that quarter."

"All we know at present is," said Mrs Clymer, "that Sark is at Beaucourt, and that he knows where the fugitives are hiding. The Grandesellas are evidently satisfied to let matters take their own course at present; but both Mr Murkle and I have reasons for wishing to bring this absurd escapade to an end."

"The best plan will be," said Ronald, "for me to propose to go myself to Beaucourt. The Duchess invited me just before I went to Paris, and I asked her to allow me to postpone my visit. I shall easily be able to find out something from Sark,—at any rate I can keep you informed of his movements."

"I think," said Murkle, "that I am justified in tell-

ing you under the circumstances, what of course you will consider absolutely confidential so far as the general public is concerned, that I am engaged to be married to Miss Walton. Mrs Clymer, to whom I communicated this fact, agrees with me in thinking that Lord Sark ought at once to be warned against indulging in hopes which can only end in disappointment. Should you go to Beaucourt, you may have an opportunity of saying something on the subject, but it must be left to your own discretion to make a judicious use of this information."

Murkle and Mrs Clymer had indeed already decided that, although the facts did not altogether warrant this assertion, it was one which, for the purpose of influencing Sark, it was quite lawful to make; and the former was not sorry to impart it as a piece of intelligence to MacAlpine, whose own attentions to the heiress had of late been inconveniently assiduous.

"I am sure," said Mrs Clymer, by way of furnishing Ronald with another hint for his guidance, "if Sark only knew how devotedly attached his cousin Altiora was to him, he would not wound her feelings by flirting ostentatiously with that vulgar Californian."

"You quite surprise me," said Ronald, who thus saw his hopes vanishing in every direction. "Murkle engaged to be married to Miss Walton! Pray accept—er—my congratulations," and he bowed with a forced smile to that gentleman: "and Miss Peto attached to

Lord Sark. Pray, Mrs Clymer, what authority have you for this statement?"

"The authority of my own observation, which is the best, and the admission of the girl's own mother."

"And," added Murkle, "her own acknowledgment of the fact to me as one of her oldest friends; but this is, of course, again in confidence."

"I think," remarked Mrs Clymer, after MacAlpine had taken his departure, "that if he uses this information with which we have supplied him, with tact and discretion, and if we supplement it with a little private correspondence of our own to the parties chiefly interested, we ought to complicate matters sufficiently to prevent any serious mischief arising out of the present situation, which is too strained to last very long."

Three days after, she received the following letter from MacAlpine, dated Beaucourt:—

"DEAR MRS CLYMER,—Whom should I meet on the platform of the station for Beaucourt, but Miss Terrill, Miss Walton, and Alderney, who had accompanied them from their undiscovered seclusion, while Sark was waiting to receive them. They were somewhat disconcerted on my making my appearance, and Lord Sark muttered something about an unexpected pleasure, as he had not observed my name in his aunt's list of guests.

"Miss Peto, with the elderly person named Hannah, is, it appears, hiding in some remote village, the name

of which I have not yet been able to discover; but I have lost no time in letting you know this much, as you will at once perceive what a favourable opportunity is afforded me for making use of the information with which you and Murkle were so good as to furnish me.—Yours sincerely,

"RONALD MACALPINE."

Two days later the Beaucourt post-bag contained the following letter from Mattie Terrill to her friends at Copleydale:—

"MY DARLING OLD HANNAH,—Stella wrote a line to Altiora to tell you of our safe arrival, and how we met Mr MacAlpine and Lord Sark at the station, and how we were received at Beaucourt by four men with whitewashed heads, red plush breeches and waistcoats, and silk stockings and buff-coloured coats, with cords dangling over their shoulders—and how a gentlemanlike personage in evening dress, who was called the groom of the chambers, and we thought at first was one of the family, and therefore a relative perhaps of Altiora, showed us to our bedrooms; but she had not time to tell you more to save the mail, so I will go on. We had not seen anybody then, because it was past seven, and they were all dressing for dinner. Well, we fixed ourselves fit to kill, you bet. We had not been six weeks in Paris for nothing; and Stella insisted upon not keeping all my jewels to herself, but

making me wear some. I don't think I ever did see anything handsomer than Stella looked in that mother-of-pearl embroidery and pink ostrich-feather dress, with the long brocade train that we got at Worth's.

"Well, just as we were ready, and were wondering what to do next, we heard a knock at the door, and in came a handsome old lady with a magnificent tiara of diamonds, and a most benevolent eye and sweet smile and winning manner, and shook us both warmly by the hand, and told us she was the Duchess, and would show us the way to the drawing-room; and on the stairs, quite accidentally of course, we met Bob, and at the drawing-room door, also quite accidentally, Lord Sark, so we made our *entrée* well protected. The Duchess said she thought, as we were alone, we might feel a little timid among so many strangers. I guess if she had seen a little more of life she would not have made that mistake. We found the room full of people. Some of the ladies looked at us as if we were wild beasts: I think they expected us to draw revolvers and shoot freely. Others took no notice of us; but the men took a warm and sympathetic interest in us, which only made the women madder. Some of these Englishmen are perfectly splendid, and I had just been introduced to one of them when dinner was announced, and Bob came and offered me his arm. Luckily he has not got much rank, so he fell quite naturally to me; but Lord Sark had to take in the old Countess of Broadmere—she is what they call a dowager, because

her husband is dead. We should call her a widow. I counted twenty-six at dinner, and Bob told me all their names and something about each. There was the Marquis and Marchioness of Swansdowne and their two daughters, Lady Florence and Lady Blanche Featherpoll: I'll tell you about them later. And Lord and Lady Grandchamp, the Duke's eldest son and his wife. And old Lord Cracklehurst, with deep lines all over his face, and an eye-glass and a hooked nose. He kept staring at Stella all dinner-time; and Bob said he was very popular with young women, and respected by young men still, because he was celebrated as having been the wickedest young man of his day. And old Lady Broadmere, who, Bob declared, was wicked still; in fact I had no idea Bob had such a bitter tongue. And the Hon. Mrs Haseleyne, who was separated from her husband; but the fault, Bob said, was all on his side, 'of course.' And the Russian Princess Chemiseoff, who chattered broken English with the most charming vivacity, and was ever so bright, and seemed quite young. Bob said her husband was in Bokhara, a governor-general or something; and nobody knew exactly why she came and lived so much in England, but that made people all the more civil to her. And there was Mr and Madame Lauriola. Bob said he was a great man in the City, and she was the last new professional beauty; he was a naturalised foreigner, but nobody knew anything definite as to his origin, but she insisted upon being called Madame,

because it gave her a sort of prestige. They had only risen above the social horizon two seasons before, but now they went everywhere, because Sir George Dashington, the Duke's nephew and Sark's brother-in-law, had taken her up, and got the Duchess, who was too good-natured, and his wife, who was too 'timid,' to refuse, to take her about; and Lauriola had put Sir George into no end of good City things, and he had made pots of money. And the Lauriolas had given the best entertainments of the year last season, and everybody had gone to them. And she had become quite the rage, because she said such impertinent things to the women, and allowed the men to say such impertinent things to her without taking offence. There was nothing you couldn't say to her, said Bob, if you only knew how to put it. Her conversation was more *risqué* than that of any woman in London; and with that, and a pretty face and lots of money, she was sure to get on. Altiora will tell you what *risqué* means. I had to ask Bob. And then there was Miss Gazewell, Lady Broadmere's niece, who tries to get a husband by imitating Madame Lauriola; but Bob says she won't succeed, because men don't like that sort of thing so much in their own wives as in those of their friends. Then there was Lord St Olave, who, Bob says, is rather nice, and a great friend of Sark's, and is in love with Lady Adela Dashington, Sark's sister, because her husband, Sir George, insists that she is too proper, and does not make herself sufficiently admired

by the men; so she allows St Olave to worship, because he is a safe man, with a certain sense of honour. It seems she does not go in for flirtations, except to please Sir George, who feels more at liberty then. And there was the Hon. Frank Basinghall, who is Mrs Haseleyne's 'man.' Bob said that was what he was always called about town, and that was all he knew about him. He did not go in much for those kind of men himself. Besides these, there was Colonel Lysper of the Guards, who flirted with Madame Lauriola, in order to curry favour with the City magnate, and be put into good things; and Mr MacAlpine; and last of all, the old Duke himself, who flirted in the most paternal way with all indiscriminately, and seems as much the essence of good-nature as his wife does. There now, Hannah, you won't be able to understand most of this, because it is such a high state of civilisation; and if Altiora can't explain it, you must ask Mr Hetherington, and if he can't, or won't, you had better not know it—it might hurt your dear old morals. Luckily for Stella and me, ours are cast-iron; but we tremble when we think what the consequences might have been had we brought you with us. We stayed a little longer than, I believe, is usual after dinner, because the Princess Chemiseoff and Madame Lauriola both like to smoke their cigarettes over their coffee with the men—and I expected to see Stella prove her efficiency in the newly acquired art; but when she was offered one, she declined, saying that she only

smoked strong perique in Manzanita-wood pipes. There happened to be a pause when she said it in the most quiet commonplace tones imaginable. The ladies all looked at her with silent horror, though, if it was true, I don't see why perique is so much more dreadful than Turkish tobacco, or Manzanita wood than cigarette paper. In fact nobody knew what either one or the other was, so she had to invent a description of perique, which she does not know anything about either, and Mr Lauriola undertook to correct her, because he said he had been a good deal in early life in New Orleans. So she asked him, quite innocently, if he was any relation to the Lauriola who keeps a tobacconist's store in Carondelet Street. If a shell had burst in the middle of the table, it could not have produced a greater effect than this very natural remark; but Stella told me afterwards she did it on purpose, to pay Madame Lauriola off for some impertinent remarks she overheard her make to Colonel Lysper about us in quite a loud tone. She said as she was using her faculty of invention about perique, she thought she might as well invent Lauriola the tobacconist. I am sure neither of them will ever forgive her, but I could see some of the gentlemen highly appreciated the joke. Indeed old Lord Cracklehurst gave a sort of approving Haw, haw!—which sounded like Hear, hear! which, Bob says, is all he has ever said in the House of Lords,—and they all began to talk very loud, apparently in the hope of forgetting as soon

as possible that, for all they knew, they might actually be sitting at the same table with a man whose brother was a tobacconist; and in the middle of the noise the ladies escaped, and Lady Broadmere came running up to Stella, as soon as we got to the drawing-room, and said, 'Tell me, dear, is it true that Mr Lauriola's brother is a tobacconist?' And Mrs Haseleyne came up to me and said, 'What a clever, satirical, beautiful creature your friend is! I assure you, I am quite afraid of her. She kept Sir George Dashington, who sat between us, in fits of laughter all dinner-time, and made herself so agreeable, I could not get a word in. Are you both coming to London this season? She'll make quite a *furore*—and with her fortune, too!'

"Lady Swansdowne and her daughters, Madame Lauriola and Miss Gazewell, formed a sort of coterie apart, and treated us with silent contempt; and the Russian princess gazed at us with a sort of amiable amazement, first whispering to the Duchess, and then staring at us through her gold eye-glasses, so that we should have no doubt who she was talking about, and apparently wishing us to understand that she was interested in us as new specimens. But the only really nice woman was the Duke's niece, Lady Adela Dashington, who came and talked to me, while Stella, after answering Lady Broadmere's questions, was posting herself upon social subjects from that experienced dowager, so, as she told me afterwards, she might know

the ropes generally. When the men came in there was a general shuffle, and a little game of some sort going on all round. I could see that Madame Lauriola was quite mad with her 'man,' Sir George Dashington, because Stella had fascinated him at dinner, and he wanted to get back to her now, but Madame would not let him; and Mrs Haseleyne's man was angry, because Colonel Lysper had monopolised the only vacant chair near her, and prowled about like a discontented wild cat; and old Cracklehurst began a sort of fossil flirtation in a loud tone with Lady Broadmere; and Sark and MacAlpine both made a dead point at Stella, and finally sat down, one on each side of her; and Miss Gazewell was furious because no one would flirt with her; and Lady Swansdowne was furious because Lord Grandchamp was keeping the young men away from her pretty daughter, Lady Florence; and she and Lady Grandchamp consoled each other and gazed at him; and Lord St Olave went into a corner with Lady Adela Dashington; and Lauriola fastened himself on to the Duke, because he was a duke, and talked politics; and Bob came to me; and the Russian princess seemed to have a great deal to say to the Duchess, and kept watchful eyes upon everybody through her eye-glasses. Then there was another general shuffle, when we had some rather bad music; and Stella and I at last were asked if we played or sang. You know what a voice she has, and you know that I was considered Hartman's best pupil at San Francisco. So when she

sang and I played, she exploded shell number two. Madame Lauriola tried to go on talking, but her voice died away in the stillness of the general hush of admiration; and the dear girl surpassed herself in those chest-notes of hers, so that there was a burst of applause when she had finished that carried dismay into many feminine bosoms. And I overheard Lord Grandchamp say to Sark, 'Why, my dear Sark, the Clymer is not a patch upon her,' or some such thing, which I suppose is an Anglicism.

"We went off to bed, consequently, in a blaze of triumph, and found that breakfast next morning was a sort of movable meal, which began about ten, and went on for an hour and a half—people coming down when they liked, and sitting about at separate tables like a restaurant. The dandily dressed men of the night before all seemed to me suddenly transformed into teamsters; they wore enormous hob-nailed boots, and gaiters or long stockings, and breeches or knickerbockers, and coarse, rough shooting jackets and vests, and ate large breakfasts, everybody going to the side-tables and helping themselves. I don't know where all the servants with the whitewashed heads were, but they left us to ourselves—even the Duke went and cut his own ham; and then they all started off to shoot, and left us to ourselves. Even Bob said he couldn't get off going. I felt quite ashamed of his legs when I compared them with some of the others, and he seemed quite out of his element; but he said the alternative

was to face thirteen women and MacAlpine, whom he put in as one extra, and that was more than he could stand, even though I was one of them. So we were left to stew in our own juice, and I thought I could not employ my time better than in writing you these first impressions of the British aristocracy, while they are, no doubt, exchanging their first impressions about me.—Lovingly, MATTIE."

CHAPTER XV.

THE EARL OF SARK AT BAY.

IF Mattie could have gone into the smoking-room with the gentlemen instead of going to bed with her friend on the night before she wrote her letter, she might have overheard a conversation between Sark and MacAlpine in a quiet corner of that midnight resort, which would have seriously increased its bulk.

"I am so glad to have a quiet moment with you," said MacAlpine, "to ask if you can give me any information about that most mysterious—er—I think our American friends would call it—stampede, which you made with them and Miss Peto from Paris."

"I did not make any stampede with them," returned Sark, shortly; "I came over from Paris to London by myself."

"Oh—er—then perhaps you can tell me why they went off so extremely suddenly by themselves, and where Miss Peto is now?"

"I am not aware that, even supposing I know, I owe you any confidence on the subject," Sark answered still more brusquely.

"I assure you I am the last person to interfere in matters which don't concern me, or to allow any mere curiosity to influence me; but this is a subject in which I have some sort of indirect interest. I don't mind telling you now that not long since I proposed to Miss Peto, and had some reason to believe that any mere prejudice she might entertain in regard to certain—er—philosophical opinions which I hold, might be overcome, when I found a most unexpected—er—obstacle in Paris, and this I have good reason for saying is none other than yourself."

"Myself!" ejaculated Lord Sark, amazed.

"So Murkle has assured me on a confidential occasion, the details of which it is not necessary to mention, Miss Peto seems to have given him to understand that she had placed her affections irrevocably upon your lordship. You know Murkle has known her from her childhood."

"Impossible!" said Sark. "I have equally good reason for knowing the contrary."

"You will pardon me for saying that you have been misled. I can quite imagine that Miss Peto carefully concealed from you the nature of her feelings; indeed

she has good reason for doing so, and I don't see how, considering your undisguised admiration for Miss Walton, and your no less notorious—er—pardon me—intimacy with Mrs Clymer, she could do otherwise; but you may depend upon it, the facts are as she stated them to Murkle. It may render you less sceptical, if I add that he was at the time informing her of his engagement to Miss Walton."

"You mean render me more sceptical!" exclaimed Sark, still more overcome with astonishment. "Do you mean to tell me that Miss Walton has engaged herself to Murkle?"

"I think you will find that to be the case; but I don't think, from what he said, that she wishes it known until she has enjoyed a little more unmarried freedom in England. These sort of—er—provisional arrangements are an American custom, you know."

"I don't know anything about American customs," said Sark, who now began to feel as thoroughly uncomfortable at the idea of Altiora, on his account, having become the victim of an unrequited attachment, as of the heiress being engaged to Murkle.

"Well, now that you know the facts of the case, I hope you consider that I was justified in making the inquiries I did about Miss Peto. I was actuated merely by—er—a sentiment of interest towards her; and I know no man who can extract her from the—er—false position in which she has placed herself so well as yourself."

Sark threw away the stump of his cigar with an indignant jerk, took up his bedroom candle, and with an abrupt "good-night," turned on his heel, without vouchsafing any reply to this piece of advice. The result of his deliberations was a conversation with Stella, when the ladies came out in a train of carriages to lunch with the gentlemen at a shooting cottage, and inspect the result of the morning's sport. It was no easy work to disentangle that young lady from a group of admirers; but he was ably seconded by Ronald, who had silently watched the effect of the dose he had administered on the previous evening, and drew her off to where some boulders of rock afforded a seat and a shelter.

Stella's manner to Lord Sark had changed a good deal since he had proved his devotion by following her from Paris, and getting her invited to Beaucourt, but was still cold and distant. She seemed to him now especially unapproachable and on her guard.

"Miss Walton," he said, "I have forborne from troubling you with an admiration which seems to annoy you, as my only desire, while you are staying here, is that you should thoroughly enjoy yourself; but I have heard something in regard to which, as it affects the happiness of another in whom we are both interested, I cannot keep silence. You know my cousin Altiora so well, that I am sure you will answer my question, though I feel it is an extremely embarrassing one to put."

"Gladly and truly, if I can," said Stella, much relieved to find that it had no reference to herself.

"Did my cousin, Altiora, ever give you reason to suppose that she cared for me?"

Now Stella, as we have seen, had convinced herself, by many signs known to sensitive young ladies, too generous to be jealous, but not the less alive to a certain kind of suspicion where their affections are concerned, that Altiora was in love with her cousin, and had only concealed it because she had perceived that Sark had only slipped from the thraldom of the Clymer, whom she despised, to succumb to the fascinations of her friend; and she partly attributed the desire Altiora had shown,—first, to break the tie which existed between her cousin and Mrs Clymer; and secondly, to escape herself from the influence of that woman,—to this cause. If she had any further doubt upon the subject, it was removed by the positive assurances of Murkle, which he had not failed to communicate to her after the conversation in which he imagined that Altiora had admitted it; and these had been supplemented by many slight innuendoes on the part of the Baroness. She therefore hesitated and flushed when Sark put his question so abruptly, in a manner which left no doubt in his mind that his worst suspicions were confirmed, and which almost rendered unnecessary her reply.

"She has never mentioned the subject to me," she said; "but I confess that her studious avoidance of it,

and what I have observed and heard from her mother, has led me to believe that such was the case."

"And now, may I ask you another question, Miss Walton?"

"I am not so sure about this one," she replied with instinctive apprehension. "You must be careful."

"But it is closely connected with the last—indeed its answer will determine my course of conduct with regard to Altiora."

"Go on then," she replied shortly.

"Are you engaged to be married to Mr Murkle?"

It was a supreme moment for the penniless Californian girl. She had only to tell the truth, and say No, to secure a countess's coronet; for she knew that Sark only asked the question to clear the way for that other on which her own future happiness depended, and she felt that if she admitted she had listened to Murkle, she would lose his good opinion, and that he would be drawn to Altiora by her love for him. But what made it hardest was, not that she would have to give up the coronet, for which, to do her justice, she cared very little—but the man, for whom she had learnt to care a great deal; and he looked so handsome and so pleading at that moment, lying at her feet as she sat on the rock, that her heart seemed to go out to him, and to quiver with the effort of making her decision, without allowing the momentary doubt and hesitation to become apparent in her features. Her lips, nevertheless, trembled slightly as she replied—

"Mr Murkle and I have some business matters to arrange, and one of them has reference to a matrimonial contract, in regard to the details of which I am not at liberty to enter. I must ask you to be satisfied with this answer, and not to press me further."

"A provisional contract, such as I understand is made sometimes across the Atlantic?" said Sark, bitterly,—for the notion of her having consented to stand in any such relation to Murkle was more than he could bear.

"A provisional contract," she repeated coldly, as she rose and walked off to join a group in the distance, leaving Sark chewing the cud of his disappointment, and his toothpick.

A letter which Mrs Clymer received the day following this episode, from MacAlpine, contained a very accurate report of his conversation with Sark, and of the conclusions at which he had arrived in regard to the effect that it had produced; and he further alluded incidentally to the success which had been achieved by the American girls, and the jealousy which had been excited by them in the breast especially of Madame Lauriola. Now it so happened that this passage Mrs Clymer read to the Baroness Grandesella, and that the Grandesellas and Lauriolas had been on tolerably intimate terms before the latter had attained the summit of that social ambition towards which the former were still laboriously toiling; for they had been in many contracts together, had jointly promoted com-

panies, and had been copartners of concessions. In fact, at this moment Lauriola was not altogether uninterested in the amalgamation of the Universal Scintillator with the Dark Continent Illumination Company, which was taking place under the auspices of Grandesella and Murkle, ostensibly for the pecuniary benefit of Sark. When, therefore, the respectable firm who controlled the destinies of Altiora discovered that the Lauriolas were at Beaucourt, after smothering the first pangs of envy, they determined to turn this fortunate circumstance to account according to their several instincts. Madame Grandesella decided to write to her dear Madame Lauriola, giving her a detailed history of the flight of Altiora with the young ladies who were now guests at Beaucourt, and of the concealment of her daughter under their auspices, and of the part Mrs Clymer had played in the whole transaction, which, as Madame Lauriola and the Clymer were bitter enemies and social rivals, was a weapon in the hand of the former that she would not be slow to avail herself of. And Grandesella wrote to Lauriola, telling him he had good reason to think that Sark was likely to try and back out of the Electric Scintillating Companies' amalgamation arrangement, and to extricate himself from his pecuniary difficulties by marrying the Californian heiress, which should, at all hazards, be prevented. The consequence was, that the whole fashionable world was soon ringing with varied versions of the extraordinary event in high life, the interest of

which centred at Beaucourt, and which propelled the Grandesellas into that fashionable notoriety they courted, at a single bound. Mrs Haseleyne, who was one of the fashionable contributors to a social weekly of those paragraphs that form the *chronique scandaleuse* of the aristocracy and that delight the middle class, wrote as follows:—

"The Duke aud Duchess of Beaucourt are entertaining a distinguished party at Beaucourt Castle, including 'the Marquis and Marchioness of Swansdowne, and the Ladies Featherpoll, the Countess of Broadmere, and Miss Gazewell, the Earl of Cracklehurst, the Earl of Sark, Lord St Olave, the Princess Chemiseoff,'" and so on with the whole list, ending with Colonel Lysper; and then, in another paragraph:—

"Great interest is attached to the celebrated Californian heiress and her friend, who are staying at the Castle, not merely on account of the extreme beauty and fabulous wealth of the former, which will render her one of the most prominent *débutantes* of the next London season, but in consequence of the share she has taken in an event which cannot fail to signalise her advent into the world of fashion. A week has scarcely elapsed since the lovely, accomplished Miss Peto, a cousin of the Earl of Sark and step-daughter of the eminent financier Baron de Grandesella, fled from her home in Paris with Miss Walton and Miss Terrill, escorted, it is said, by Mr Robert Alderney and an American *duenna*, with whom she is still in some place

of concealment. It is understood that, as Miss Walton and Miss Terrill and Mr Alderney refuse to give any information in regard to the whereabouts of Miss Peto, Baron Grandesella, who is her legal guardian, contemplates taking legal proceedings against them."

Then another:—

"It is whispered that the sudden disappearance of Lord Sark's beautiful cousin is not altogether unconnected with another luminary of fashion, who burst upon us not long since from the other side of the Atlantic, and whom to allude to as the greatest social success of her first season is to name."

Then another:—

"If our American visitors are going to bring social storms with them, I really recommend the 'New York Herald' to supplement its weather predictions with a social storm-register, thus: 'A dangerous female combination has just left the shores of the Eastern States. May be expected off the west coast of Ireland about the 22d or 23d.'"

Then another:—

"I should advise investors to beware of amalgamation schemes of Electric Light with Universal Scintillating Companies. I know nothing of Grandesella personally, but I do know Lauriola, and I am not totally unacquainted with the antecedents of Murkle. Perhaps the directors of the Company, of which that very estimable nobleman, Lord Sark, is chairman, may also, by this time, know something of these gentlemen."

When these dexterously connected paragraphs were read by Baron Grandesella and his wife, they threw them into a transport of delight until they came to the last, when they suffered a temporary depression of spirits. Still all publicity, even when it was not complimentary, suited the Baron better than the silence of obscurity. And after all, was he not called an eminent financier, and his step-daughter alluded to as the cousin of an earl? When Murkle read them, he ground his teeth, and cursed the financial spy system of a libellous press. When Mrs Clymer read them, she smiled, conscious that the mysterious allusion to her would only have the effect of enhancing the interest she always excited. When Mrs Haseleyne read them, she was the first to point them out to the Duchess, with the remark, "Isn't it too bad, dear Duchess, that these family episodes should get out, and be given in such a garbled form to an inquisitive public? I often do wonder how the editors of these social weeklies get their information." For Mrs Haseleyne lived in mortal dread of being discovered as the fashionable contributor to the one in question, and had managed to post her letter to the editor herself, rather than trust it to the Beaucourt post-bag, and the editor had added the last paragraph to those she had sent him. And when Lord Sark read them, he took them with bitterness in his soul to Stella, upon whom, with lover-like inconsistency, he now heaped the responsibility of all the discomfort of the situation generally. But Stella per-

used them, to his great annoyance, with much equanimity and apparent interest.

"Why, this is becoming positively exciting!" she remarked. "Fancy beginning my experiences in England by a lawsuit to retain possession of a persecuted young lady! I declare it's perfectly splendid; I must go and consult Bob and Mattie."

The fact was, that she and Bob and Mattie had all three become pretty well hardened by this time,—to such a storm of curious inquiry had they been subjected from the moment that Madame Lauriola had imparted the contents of Baroness Grandesella's letter to a select feminine group, of which, as we have seen, Mrs Haseleyne proved a not inattentive listener.

"Who are these Grandesellas, my dear?" asked Lady Broadmere of Madame Lauriola. "I never heard of them."

"Upstarts, who are trying to push their way into society," replied that lady. "I only know Madame Grandesella slightly. My husband, I believe, has had some business matters to arrange with him."

"But I don't quite understand," said Lady Swansdowne, "what Mrs Clymer had to do with it. Why on earth did the girl run away from Mrs Clymer? I should have thought her a most advantageous acquaintance for a girl in her position."

"Oh, as for her running away from Mrs Clymer," responded Madame Lauriola spitefully, "I don't wonder at that; but they evidently quarrelled over Sark, at whose

head probably the Baroness wanted to fling her daughter. To get at the rights of the story you would have to ask Sark." And Mrs Haseleyne made a mental memorandum that she would see how much she could extract from his unsuspicious lordship, in her quality of secret reporter for the press.

"Zat is one of ze most strange *histoires* I ever did hear," remarked the Princess Chemiseoff. "Ze girl is hiding from her parents, and zere are tree or four persons in zis house who knows vere she is, and you cannot find her. What is ze police about?"

"Oh, it is not a matter for the police," said Lady Adela Dashington. "Poor Sark, how annoyed he will be at having his name dragged into it all! I wonder who will break it to the Duchess." But as we have seen, the Duchess had been prepared for it all, in the first instance, by Sark himself, though she never expected it to become a matter of public notoriety. And with her usual thoughtful kindness, she no sooner heard of the letter Madame Lauriola had received, than she went off to prepare her American guests for the severe fire of cross-examination they were likely to encounter; but the coolness they displayed under that fire, and the skill they exhibited in baffling their adversaries, did credit to their Cedar Buttes education.

"I have had no intimation from the Baron and Baroness Grandesella," said Stella, "that their daughter is staying with my friend in the country against

her will; they have never communicated with me on the subject. Of course I don't know anything about your English ways, and supposed a girl did not always require to ask leave of her parents before going to pay a visit to her friends. Indeed I wrote myself to the Baroness, to tell her she was coming with us, and I supposed that was enough; but you English are so absurdly particular."

"Particular! *Mon Dieu,*" said the Princess, "zey are not half so particular as ze Russians!" and she looked across the lawn at Miss Gazewell going out for a *tête-à-tête* ride with Colonel Lysper.

"Do tell us what Mrs Clymer had to do with it?" asked Lady Florence Featherpoll. "She is one of my dearest friends. I think her quite too deliciously enchanting. I am just writing to ask her all about it."

"Then wait for her answer, my dear," said Stella, who had learned to imitate Lady Broadmere's patronising "my dear," with a nicety that made Lady Florence flush with indignation, and everybody else titter. Bob rose so much in Mattie's estimation by a trick he had, when asked compromising questions, of sticking his glass in his eye, and staring blankly through it at his questioner, as if he was gradually sinking into a state of mental imbecility, and then asking him silly questions, that, in a moment of enthusiasm, after he had particularly distinguished himself, she murmured affectionately, "Why, you splendid Bob, I take back all I said about making you go on to the Stock Ex-

change. You are too clever for it. Just you hang on to the Zend-Avesta."

There were two men, however, one of whom was made thoroughly happy, and the other equally miserable, by the whole episode. The first was MacAlpine, and the other was Sark. The former just knew enough to be able to give little dissertations to all inquirers, and air his elegant diction and authoritative utterance with the bland consciousness of superior information, which, moreover, enabled him to assume an air of mystery, as though there was much that he knew that he did not tell; whereas, in point of fact, he told a good deal more than he knew. Sark, on the other hand, was utterly unapproachable, even by the boldest, on the subject. There was that about him which, when he was roused from the apathy that had enabled the Clymer to rivet her chains upon him, made men and women careful how they ventured too rashly on a familiarity which he did not invite. So he had no difficulty in avoiding cross-examination; but his position in the affair was all the more canvassed, especially when the paragraphs in the social weekly appeared, and his connection with a questionable financial arrangement was appended to the domestic scandal.

"I see," said Lauriola to Sark, as they sat together watching Lysper and Basinghall playing billiards, "that infernal scoundrel, who makes it his business to attack me in all my business operations, has taken the liberty

of connecting your lordship's name with mine, with reference to that amalgamation scheme in which we are both interested. I have a letter from Murkle on the subject of that last transfer which your lordship has undertaken to complete."

"I think we had better not drag business affairs into our life here," replied Sark. "As for the paragraph, I deliberately rushed upon my fate when I went into the City, and I don't complain. I should say you had made enough, Lauriola, not to mind a little dirt being thrown at you. A dab or two more or less won't make much difference." And his lordship turned on his heel, leaving the financier to pour out his feelings to MacAlpine, who came and took the vacant seat.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LITTLE FASHIONABLE CONVERSATION.

Albert Lauriola was morally and physically a coarse-fibred, stumpy little man, with a very slight foreign accent, whose vulgarity would have fatally handicapped any other woman than his lovely and talented wife in the social scratch race. He was therefore all the more proud of the success which he had achieved,

and his inordinate vanity led him constantly to expatiate upon it.

"This affair may turn out a lucky *coup* socially for Grandesella," he said, turning to MacAlpine after Sark had left. "It just gives him the kind of notoriety he wants. It has been a curious race all through life between us. I bet him an even hundred I'd get made a Baron before he did, and he won. Then I bet Murkle I would get into Parliament before he did, and I lost again. Then Grandesella bet me that he would win the blue ribbon of society before I did, and I won; but I knew with my wife I was safe. Bless you, she's a woman in a thousand! nothing could stand against her. Now that step-daughter of Grandesella's ought to carry him anywhere. His wife is against him—she's downright vulgar, you know; but they tell me the girl is as handsome as a Peri—one of your regular blue-blooded ones; and so she ought to be seeing she's Sark's cousin. It's a great chance for Grandesella, to be sure."

"Tell us how you went to work to make your own running, old man," said Basinghall, who had finished his game and overheard Lauriola's last few remarks, and who perceived that he was under the influence of sundry sodas-and-brandies, and therefore in a communicative mood, and not likely easily to take offence. Basinghall, as "Mrs Haseleyne's man," used to make himself useful in picking up interesting scraps of information—likely in this case to be especially welcome,

as she had a grudge against Madame Lauriola. "To tell you the truth, I never could understand how you and your wife managed to achieve your brilliant social success so rapidly."

Lauriola, who was as vain as he was vulgar, flattered by the marked attention which his three listeners—for Lysper had joined the other two—seemed inclined to accord to a recital of his great social achievements, was probably more expansive than he would have been under other circumstances—certainly much more so than if Madame had been present.

"Why, you see, my little woman is ambitious, and clever as she is — though I say it that shouldn't — beautiful.

"'Albert,' she said to me one day, 'how is it you never bring any peers or noblemen to see me?'

"That was just after I had completed my contracts for the Submarine Telephonic Company, which brought me in pretty near half a million.

"'I was looking through the names of the directors of some of the boards you are on,' she said. 'There's the Earl of Creedmore, and Lord Pytchley, and Sir George Dashington.'

"'I only know them officially,' I said. 'I couldn't venture to ask them to come; and they wouldn't come if I did.'

"'Come out and drive with me in the Park to-morrow, and we'll look for some of them,' says she.

"The first man we saw riding next day was Dash-

ington; and when he nodded to me, he looked pretty hard at her; and next board-meeting she came to call at the Company's offices in the brougham, and sent me up a note to say she was waiting. It had been arranged before, that I was accidentally to come down with Dashington; and when he saw her pretty face looking out, and smiling and nodding to me, 'Introduce me to your wife,' he whispers; so I introduced him, and went back to the board-room to sign some papers I had forgotten, and left him talking to Madame through the carriage-window. And when I came back,—

"'Just think, Albert,' she said; 'Sir George has promised to dine with us to-night if we are quite alone, and will let him go to the House immediately after dinner.'"

"And did Dashington go to the House immediately after dinner?" asked Lysper, with an air of assumed innocence.

"I don't know, for I had to meet a man at the club early in the evening, and left him with my wife; but that little dinner was the beginning of our good fortune. Dashington would dine with us two or three times a-week; and there was nothing he would not do for Madame, he took such a fancy to her—so much deep sympathy between them, and all that sort of thing, you know. But I was not going to have scandals set on foot, when I knew there was no ground for them, so I insisted he must bring Lady

Adela to call; and in order to make it still more proper, Lady Adela and Madame were always driving out together. Then we began to give little dinner-parties, and Dashington asked our Duchess here to invite us to her parties; and we worked the press and the photographers. First, there were mysterious paragraphs in the social weeklies about the new beauty—we always had some writers at dinner—and I got my life written,—how I look at home, and all that sort of thing."

"Yes, I remember," said Basinghall; "that was the first time I ever heard of you. Well, what did you do next?"

"Why, we spared no expense to get professional musicians, and had only a select eight or ten for them to play to: and Dashington gave dinners especially arranged for us—poor aristocrats with pretty wives. I put the noblemen into good things, and they brought their pretty wives to dine with us out of gratitude; and the men of fashion who happened to be in love with the pretty wives were only too glad to be asked."

"Yes, I remember," drawled Lysper; "you asked me to meet the Clymer before Sark took her up, and that was the first time I ever heard of you."

"Well, that was how we extended the list of our acquaintances in the highest circles; and what with notices in the papers, and photographs in the shops, and financial plums for the poor aristocrats, and pretty women for the rich ones, we got to where we could

give entertainments on a large scale, and ask some social lions."

"And you invited me," interrupted MacAlpine, "and that was the first time I ever heard of you."

"Well, we began to push our way then," pursued Lauriola, not observing the impertinence of these interruptions. "My little woman has got the hide of a rhinoceros and the sting of a wasp; bless you, she never takes offence, but she never forgets. She believes in money, perseverance, good looks, and audacity, as the forces that govern the world. I used to laugh at her, and call it impudence, but she said you might as well call the *audace* of the first Napoleon impudence. If people didn't return her cards, she would keep on leaving hers till they did, and then say that at last she had made them ashamed of themselves."

"And she was right," said Basinghall; "they should have been ashamed of themselves."

"She had a way of regularly wringing invitations out of people, leaving them astonished at their own helplessness. 'It is better,' she would say, 'to have the whole aristocracy abusing you than that they should be ignorant of your existence.'"

"No, no," said Lysper, encouraged by his obtuseness, "there she was wrong: where ignorance was bliss, 'twas folly to be wise."

"One of her tricks," pursued the unconscious Lauriola, "for frightening an invitation out of a man's wife,

by pretending to make love to her husband, I never knew fail. Of course I knew it was only pretence, but neither the poor man nor his wife did. Then, when she had got the invitation, she would throw over the man, and lavish her affections on the wife, who was too glad to purchase her peace of mind so easily. Still," added Lauriola, musingly, "it is not so hard to get people to invite you to go to their parties as to get them to come to yours; there's where the talent lies. Madame was not one to be satisfied so long as there was a single member of the highest circles, the *élite* of the aristocracy, you know, the very *crême*, that held out. That proud Duchess of Flamborough was the last to give in—but she actually came to dinner."

"What was your secret?" asked Basinghall; "or was it Madame's secret?"

"Just so; that's why I can't tell it to you," replied the *parvenu*, who seemed to feel a glimmer of consciousness that there must be a limit to his indiscretion, and he slowly closed one eye and swallowed the remaining contents of his tumbler with an air of profound cunning. "I must draw the line somewhere, and I draw it at——"

"At your little woman—eh?" said Lysper. "Well, I think it's a pity other people didn't draw it there too; but I warmly congratulate you, my dear fellow, on having such a treasure," he added hurriedly, afraid that he had gone too far, and giving Lauriola a friendly slap on the back by way of a final nocturnal salute.

"What an ineffable little cad it is!" said Basinghall, with a sigh of relief, as he watched Lauriola's retiring and somewhat unsteady figure. "There must be a hidden charm in Madame to make Dashington tolerate him as he does. Did you hear how Sark snubbed him? By the way, what a mysterious young woman that undiscovered cousin of his seems to be! Why shouldn't we go into the knight-errant line of business, Lysper,—discover the retreat of this interesting and persecuted female, and go and protect her, or run away with her, as the case may be?"

"If I could only find out where it was, I should be game. We have all of us tried to get it out of Sark, but one might as well try to draw a hedgehog. I must say, MacAlpine, considering that you formed one of the party in Paris, you might have got it out either of the American girls or Bob Alderney before now."

"I have not made the attempt," said MacAlpine, primly, "as I have felt bound to respect what I understood to be Miss Peto's own wishes in the matter; and I doubt whether your services would be particularly —er—acceptable to her in the capacity you suggest."

"Bob Alderney tells me," said Basinghall, "that Grandesella is a large edition of Lauriola,—another of those financiers who want to use their wealth and their womankind as pulleys to hoist them into society; and, as far as I can understand, the daughter has run away because she refuses to be sold to the Clymer for the purpose. I was talking about her to Lady Adela

to-day, who had no idea that she had such a cousin in existence till this affair happened, and she tells me she is going to consult Sark about it. By the way, I see you've given up Fanny Gazewell, and have been making tremendous running with the Californian heiress for the last day or two."

"The fair Fanny's methods of attack are too aggressive," Lysper simpered. "It is such a bore having to be constantly on your guard. It is all very well with married women, where no harm can come of it, and you can back out when you like, as it seems Sark has from the Clymer; but the way that girl and her aunt lay traps for the unwary, is positively scandalous. Besides, I must marry money if I marry at all."

"You have got rather a serious rival with the Californian in Sark," said MacAlpine.

"It seems to me you are not altogether disinterested in that quarter yourself," retorted the other; "you seemed to be having a most confidential conversation in the library this morning."

"A little triolet of my own composition that I was reading her; what conceptions of the pure she has for —er—a Californian!"

"Then I'm afraid we have none of us much chance," laughed Basinghall. "However, it's a cup I don't mean to enter for, though there's a style about the girl which, with her money, ought to give her the command of the matrimonial market next season; so if you mean to do anything, Lysper, you have no time to lose. I

wonder what made Bob Alderney go in for the friend, who has neither looks nor nuggets. My own impression is that there's a plant somewhere, and that Miss Peto is at the bottom of it."

From all which it appeared that the general situation was one which exercised the imaginations of these smart gentlemen to an unusual degree; nor was it altogether without reason—for in point of fact, both Sark and his sister were at that moment, unconsciously to each other, arranging in their own minds a meeting on the subject, which took place on the following day.

"Adela," said Sark, as he walked her off to the conservatory, "you are one of the best and purest women I know, and the only one to whom I can unburden myself freely about this new cousin of ours, who, curiously enough, has first revealed her existence to you by hiding away from the world—and not about her alone, but about two other women with whom my fate seems to have become linked in an incomprehensible manner."

"You need not name them," said Lady Adela, smiling. "I have not been nearly a week in the house with you and Miss Walton without knowing that she is one, nor have I lived in London for the last two years without knowing that Mrs Clymer is the other."

"Exactly. You have had abundant opportunity of judging of them both, of estimating the value of their respective powers of fascination, possibly of understanding why, in the one case, the attraction which

has held me for so long has lost its charm, and why the other has seemed to me so irresistible. You have observed enough of them both to see how totally unlike they are to the ordinary type, and may have perceived that I yielded, first in the one case and then in the other, to an influence which derived its strength in a large measure from the rarity of its nature. But you have never seen or known the third, perhaps the most remarkable and uncommon character of the three, and as totally unlike the other two as they are to each other; and yet, strange to say, the one whose influence, even more powerful than that of the other two, has never affected me in the same way."

"You mean," said his sister, "that you did not fall in love with her. Perhaps, considering there were two already, it was an *embarras de richesses*."

"If that was all, the difficulty might be more easily solved," and Sark went on to describe his refusal by Stella, and the reasons he had for believing that his cousin would be sacrificed to gratify the social ambitions of her parents by a forced marriage, or a no less forced intimacy with the woman whom he had himself been the means of introducing to them; and what still more complicated the situation—the hints which he had received, that he had himself won her heart, and therefore had it in his power to save her from the fate which she was now hiding to avoid, at the same time that he secured her happiness for life. In fact, he had, since Stella's rejection of his suit, made up his mind that the

easiest way to escape from the Clymer, to console himself for his disappointment, to secure the happiness of a woman he respected, and to put an end to what threatened to become a domestic scandal of a most disagreeable kind, was to propose to marry her himself —"a fate," he added, "considering her great personal and mental attractions and nobility of character, any man might envy."

"Do you come," asked Lady Adela, "to ask me for my advice, or to tell me your intentions?"

"Like most people who ask advice," he replied, "I come to see whether your advice agrees with my intentions. It is fair to tell you, my mind is pretty well made up on the matter."

"Then, from what you have told me of Miss Peto, I think you have made it up wisely," said Lady Adela, who held Mrs Clymer in such horror that she was delighted at Sark's resolution.

"I am glad," said her brother, "to hear you say so; it does not remove my doubts, for they no longer exist, but it confirms my judgment. It is evident that every day is precious, for I gather that the Grandesellas and Mrs Clymer are on her scent, and her retreat cannot much longer be concealed."

"We go home on Saturday," said Lady Adela; "and remember, should she need it, she always has a home with us. I am sure George will make no objection."

"Then I shall start by to-night's train—called away by sudden business; the only person to whom you may

privately tell its nature is Miss Walton. She will be leaving herself the day after to-morrow, but by that time the whole matter will be settled." And, much to the astonishment of the rest of the party, Sark disappeared the same afternoon, while the ladies were out driving, without saying good-bye to them, having accounted for his absence to the Duchess in a manner which easily satisfied that good-natured woman, but with which she by no means succeeded in so easily satisfying the more suspicious curiosity of her guests.

CHAPTER XVII.

LADY ADELA DASHINGTON.

"Can you make an effort to get up an hour earlier than usual to-morrow morning, and let us have a walk in the garden?" said Lady Adela, in an undertone, to Stella that evening as they parted for the night. "There are several matters which I think it might be useful for us to discuss together." Lady Adela had from the first taken a fancy to the heiress, and had learned with pain her brother's disappointment. She not only wished to discover the girl's real motive for refusing an offer which, from a worldly point of view, was so eligible, but for accepting the proposal of so

undesirable a person as Murkle, on conditions so little creditable to herself. There was a mystery in the whole affair which she was determined to unravel, on Sark's account; for the episode seemed altogether inconsistent with the estimate her observation had led her to form of Miss Walton's real character.

To Stella, Lady Adela's conduct had often been no less enigmatical. She had wondered at her intimacy with Lord St Olave, and at a certain lightness and flippancy of manner which was often contradicted by her depth and earnestness of sentiment on the few occasions when the opportunity was afforded of a little longer conversation than usual in a house full of people; and she had no difficulty in divining the motive which had suggested the present meeting. Indeed her curiosity was to some extent roused by her anxiety to discover the cause of Sark's abrupt departure; and by a tacit understanding, they no sooner met than they plunged at once into the topic which was uppermost in both their minds.

"Were you surprised at my brother's sudden disappearance yesterday?" asked Lady Adela.

"Not altogether. He doubtless told you what happened the day before."

"Yes; and that is just why I asked you to meet me alone, for his account of what transpired was so utterly unlike what I expected, and your reasons for refusing him were so different from any I could have conceived possible, that I thought he must have mis-

understood you, and I wanted to hear the rights of the matter from your own lips."

"First tell me, Lady Adela, whether Lord Sark has gone to see his cousin, and with what intention? You will see why it is necessary I should know this before entering upon any explanation, when you have heard what that explanation is."

"Yes," replied Lady Adela; "he has made up his mind, for reasons which you can perhaps understand, to ask Miss Peto to accept him as her husband."

For a moment the colour left Stella's face, and she made a desperate and successful effort to conceal all traces of emotion.

"I am glad of it," she said calmly, after a moment's pause; "they are worthy of each other. Believe me, Lady Adela, you will never regret the choice your brother has made, and he will live to be eternally grateful to me for refusing him. He will marry one who brings him not only the treasures of her heart, but what is more priceless, a moral nature and intellectual gifts of the highest order."

"And now," said Lady Adela, smiling, "the explanation you promised. You will not think me very curious, but I want to know it, for your own sake. I can understand your refusing Sark, on the ground of not caring for him, but I cannot understand it on the grounds upon which you put it to him."

"You mean what he called my provisional contract with Mr Murkle? My dear Lady Adela, it is so pro-

visional, that there is not the slightest chance of anything ever coming of it. Mr Murkle, knowing I was an heiress, asked me to be his wife as a matter of business; and I, knowing he was a contractor, replied to him as a matter of business. No business contract is an impossibility in the abstract; it simply becomes an impossibility by virtue of the conditions imposed. I placed upon Mr Murkle conditions which I knew to be perfectly impossible for him to comply with; and on those conditions, which it is not necessary for me to specify, I agreed to perform my part of the contract. I also took care to give him a time limit, and in another month it will expire; but nothing would ever induce me to marry him. I only thought, as he evidently wanted to make use of me, that I would make use of him. As an heiress, you know, it might be often convenient to say that you were engaged, even when you had no intention of marrying the man you pretended to be engaged to. There is nothing so very wrong in that, is there? And," she added, looking at Lady Adela with a humorous twinkle in her eye, "I am so young and inexperienced, you must make allowances for an untutored savage from the wilds of California."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Lady Adela, laughing. "I could wish some of the young savages in my own country were half as well tutored as you. But as you never meant to marry Mr Murkle, I am all the more puzzled to know why you refused Sark. He is

a man that women have not found it difficult to love, and he was passionately devoted to you—all the more so, because he became aware of the vast difference which existed in his sentiments for you from those which he felt for the woman from whose bondage you have been the means of releasing him."

"That indeed will be matter of lasting consolation to me," said Stella, with such unexpected earnestness that Lady Adela looked up; and she added hastily, to cover her confusion, "because, you know, I am so fond of Altiora, and I shall ever be glad that I have been the means of securing her happiness. And *that*, indeed, was my reason for refusing your brother. I thought if I did, and told him how much Altiora loved him, his own generous nature would leave him no escape from the honourable alternative of proposing to her,—and, you see, my wily tactics have succeeded. That's what comes of passing one's youth among Red Indians."

"And you did not care for him yourself?" asked Lady Adela, in rather a disappointed tone; for she was proud of her brother, and felt a little piqued at this apparent lack of appreciation on the part of one whom she supposed had not had many opportunities of seeing others like him.

"Oh, I think him most delightful—a man any woman might be proud of," said Stella, warmly. "But I have peculiar ideas as to the sentiments one ought to entertain towards the man one marries," she added,

evading the question. "Perhaps some day I will tell you about them. However, all's well that ends well. From what I have seen of English marriages, they don't seem to me very successful."

Lady Adela sighed. "Perhaps if we had what you call your peculiar ideas, they would be happier," she said.

"Dear Lady Adela," Stella went on, "we have known each other so little, that perhaps my curiosity may seem impertinent, but indeed it is not; and this conversation seems to have brought us so much nearer together, that I feel emboldened by it. You asked me for an explanation, so that you should not do me an injustice; I should like to ask you for one for the same reason—may I?"

"Certainly. If I can I will give it, and I hope it will be as satisfactory as yours."

"Then," said Stella, frankly, "I want to know why you allow Lord St Olave to pay you so much attention! Are you not afraid of misconstruction?"

"Misconstruction of conduct which a husband approves, does not hurt a wife socially. If I accept Lord St Olave's attentions, it is because they protect me from those of others, and because he understands my motives, and is too honourable to take advantage of them. In a society where flirtation forms the principal accomplishment of married life on the part of both partners, it would be ridiculous for a poor weak woman like me to attempt to stem the current, or to set up a

standard of my own. In cases where the husbands are especially addicted to this pursuit, their wives are all the less able to stand alone, partly because they lack the legitimate protection; often because they are expected by their own husbands to make their houses attractive to the other sex by accepting their homage; nearly always because men like to see their wives admired, and they themselves gain certain social advantages from their popularity. In addition to this, it allows them greater freedom to flirt themselves if they have wives who flirt; and the wives of men who flirt are much more made up to by the men, because they are less afraid of the husbands, and fancy the wives need consolation. In addition to all these reasons why it is almost necessary for a young married woman to flirt nowadays—the most powerful of all is, that it is the fashion. Therefore, my dear Stella—you don't mind my calling you Stella?—you see that, as we are all doing the same thing, there is no fear of misconstruction, for there is nobody to misconstrue us. If everybody is in the same boat, nobody will tip it over."

"But," said Stella, "surely there are exceptions to this general rule of flirtation?"

"Of course there are exceptions, and very numerous exceptions. There are all the people who are happily married, and therefore don't flirt; and there are the husbands who are too busy, and the wives who are too prim, or too stupid, or too ugly for anybody to want to flirt with them. But they are a scattered company,

without cohesion, and don't make society. They are powerless to affect its conduct. Society is a tolerably compact body, with its own standard of propriety, or rather impropriety; and it's no use, whether you are in it or outside of it, to kick against the pricks. If you are good-looking, and your husband exposes you to it for his own purposes, flirt you must. There is scarcely a young man who would not feel he was wanting in the first duty in life, if he saw you were neglected and did not instantly make love to you; and, in fact, the women would be very much surprised if they did not, and very often have to jog their memories and their manners, and commence operations. Now, as I live in the thick of this society, and as I don't want to be eternally either on the aggressive or defensive, St Olave—who has been a good deal tried by some of the beauties, he is so handsome, you know, but really has no taste for flirtation—and I have agreed that we will do just what is required in the mutual adoration line to satisfy society and protect ourselves, and it really succeeds admirably: we have got to be quite fond of each other."

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed Stella, with such a comical expression of assumed surprise that Lady Adela felt inclined to be offended; seeing which, she hastily added, "There, now, you are angry with me because of my Americanisms; I really must try to break myself of them. How kind of you, Lady Adela, to explain all this to me so clearly! I never should

have understood it otherwise. I quite see now, how, in my ignorance of the manners of the best society, I might have misjudged you. What a bad time the girls must have, with all the young married women going on like that? Don't they do a little flirting too? I have managed a little already; but then, you know, I am a stranger."

"They do all they know, as my husband would say; but they have not much chance, as Lady Florence and Lady Edith Featherpoll, and Fanny Gazewell will tell you. The men are afraid of getting caught, unless in the case of great heiresses like you; but they are few and far between."

"Then," said Stella, demurely, "if my taste happens to run in that direction, I may be able to gratify it."

"Oh, you'll be hunted to death! I should advise you to extend the term of your provisional contract with Murkle; you will constantly have to fall back upon it. And now let us go in to breakfast; but, first, I want you and your friend to come and pay us a visit at Copley Grange after you leave this."

"Copley Grange! Is that anywhere near the village of Copleydale?" said Stella, surprised.

"Only two miles from it. Why, what do you know of Copleydale?" asked Lady Adela, equally astonished.

"Simply—but this, Lady Adela, is in the most profound confidence—that it is the place where your brother is probably to be found at this moment."

CHAPTER XVIII.

SOME PROPOSALS AT A PICNIC.

STELLA found Lady Adela's prediction verified more speedily than she expected. A picnic had been arranged for the same afternoon at some ruins in the neighbourhood, and Lysper, who had suddenly developed great archæological proclivities, had asked the heiress to explore their more hidden recesses, when he thought a favourable moment had arrived for carrying out a design that had germinated in his bosom ever since Basinghall had the night before warned him that now was his chance, and that if he waited for the London season, it would be gone. Moreover, he was much relieved by the absence of Sark; and as the party at the Castle was to break up on the following day, he not only felt that he must act at once, but that a way of escape was prepared for him in case of refusal—for it is always embarrassing, even to a Guardsman, to continue to live in the same house with a girl who has refused you. Lysper had not been at Tel-el-Kebir, but his imagination had been much inflamed by the magnificent manner in which that strong position had been stormed. It is sudden and unexpected dash that does it, he reflected within himself. She may throw down her arms like Arabi's fellaheen, if I storm her unawares; and he did it this wise. "This is a steep little pull,

Miss Walton, but it is worth it—you get such a magnificent view of the ruin from the top. Won't you take my arm?"

Stella, who was quite as competent to scale a hill-side as he was, looked at him askance. She was in a defiant, reckless mood, for she had been stifling her regrets all day, and her envy of Altiora, and felt ready for any deed of daring likely to kill care. With a sigh which might have meant shortness of breath, or a tenderer feeling, she slipped her arm in his, and he pressed it gently in proportion as the ascent became steeper, until, at the top, no doubt remained as to its character. "She does not seem to mind," he thought, "and doing it by squeezing saves such a lot of words;" so with still greater daring he quietly grasped the slender hand on his arm with his other hand. Then, to his delight, he thought he felt a response, which sent a thrill through him.

"Confound it," he said to himself, "how much more difficult it is to think what to say when you mean business, than when you are merely spooning!" Universal experience testifies to the truth of this reflection, and it occurred to Lysper that if he blurted out her Christian name, it would break the ice effectually. Now we all know what an effort it is, and how unnatural it sounds, to say Mary or Jane for the first time to Miss Smith or Miss Thompson. With the daughters of earls and upwards, it is easier—for then you have only to drop the lady; but the privilege of proposing to these

distinguished personages is confined to few. Lysper had overheard Stella called Mattie by her friend, in a moment of forgetfulness—for it will be remembered that the two girls had changed names—and on the information so acquired, he boldly proceeded.

"Oh, Mattie!" he exclaimed, with a deep sigh, and an impressive squeeze on the imprisoned hand.

"Yes," said Stella, with an intensely sentimental gaze into his face, but not a little astonished at his calling her by her right name. "What—oh, what about Mattie?"

"I love her," said Lysper, thinking she was timidly speaking of herself in the third person; and what a capital way she had hit upon to make him feel more at his ease. "Would she marry me if she knew that my heart was wholly hers?"

"Oh," replied Stella, turning her head to hide her laughter, as the ludicrousness of his mistake struck her, "how can I tell you without knowing more? Do you really love her very, very much?"

"I can't describe the nature of my feelings," said Lysper, again at loss for words.

"Try, dear Colonel Lysper," said Stella, encouragingly. "I should so like to hear you say exactly how much you loved her. Can't you analyse the sentiment?"

"Well," said poor Lysper, "the thing is too deep for words, but I'll try and put it into them. Just sit down on that stone for a minute. I will place myself

at your feet. Now, let me look into your eyes for inspiration."

Stella bent upon him those glowing orbs, charged with the most overpowering expression of tenderness they were capable of conveying, and said softly, with a blush—

"What am I to call you?"

"Augustus," said the enraptured Lysper, fast feeling that words were coming to him.

"Go on, Augustus—I am listening."

"Well, I've loved a lot of women, but there is something about Mattie"—and he looked up with infinite meaning—"that beats them all. Her touch sets all my pulses throbbing; the glance of her eye," and he caught hers, "seems to go all through me with a sort of something between a quiver and a shiver that I can't describe. I feel as if I could kiss the very ground she treads on; in fact, hang me if I can stand it any longer!"

"Nor I either," said Stella, jumping up, as Lysper seemed about to proceed to more affectionate demonstration; "see, there she comes,"—and Mattie, accompanied by Bob Alderney, suddenly turned a corner of the ruin. "Mattie, dear, Colonel Lysper has just been telling me that he has something he wishes particularly to say to you," and she ran to meet her friend, and carrying off the astonished Bob, whispered Mattie to go to the discomfited colonel.

"What is it," said Mattie, approaching him, "that you wish to say to me?"

"Oh, nothing," said Lysper, overwhelmed with confusion; "at least—yes, there is something, if you won't think me very rude,—may I ask you what your name is?"

As Lysper seemed temporarily to have taken leave of his senses, Mattie thought it best to humour him, and replied, "Mattie Terrill: why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing, only I wanted to know, thank you so much. Pray tell your friend that it's all a mistake; thank you so much. Pray forgive me for having seemed so rude as to want to know your name. Shall we join the others?" said Lysper, anxious to lose himself in a crowd, and hide his diminished head anywhere.

"Mattie," said Stella to her friend the same evening, "your fortune is becoming a burden greater than I can bear. What do you think happened to-day after I had handed that ludicrous creature, Lysper, over to you?"

"I suppose somebody else proposed to you, as Sark was no longer there to frighten the men away."

"Exactly. I next fell a prey to Ronald MacAlpine, who, it seems, has been assured by Murkle that I am engaged to be married to him. As that is a piece of intelligence I wish no one to impart but myself, I of course denied it flatly."

"And what did he say?"

"Oh, he said I was his supremest conception, his transcendentalest vision, his perfectest dream, his preciousest ideal,—I never heard such a lot of superlatives tacked on to words they don't belong to."

"And what did you say?"

"What could I say? I was in a humour to say anything, I felt so mad, just after I had heard it all from Lysper too. It began to get monotonous, so I said, just to shock his exquisitely refined sensibilities, 'All right, old chap—shove ahead.'"

"Oh, Stella, you never said such a thing!"

"I did indeed. I was obliged to use the English vernacular; I was afraid he might not understand the more forcible language of my native state."

"And then what happened?"

"Why, he flushed up rather offended, and a good deal put out, and said, 'Miss Walton, you are trifling with my most sacred affections.'

"'Not a bit,' I said; 'I never was more serious in my life. I have the greatest esteem and regard for your affections: what do you want me to do with them?'

"'Return them,' he replied.

"'Oh, certainly. I won't keep them, if you would rather I gave them back.'

"'Stella,' he went on, 'you know what I mean; I ask for yours in return for mine. My heart, my—er—hand, everything I have is at your disposition.'

"'Mr MacAlpine,' I replied, 'I won't affect to misunderstand you any longer; you want me in return to place my heart and hand and everything I have at yours. Now, as you are a man of honour, I will tell you in the strictest confidence what it all amounts to,

and then you can tell me whether you continue to want it; but you must pledge me your word as a gentleman never to reveal what I am going to disclose to you to a living soul.'

"'I solemnly swear,' he said.

"'Very well, then, I am not Stella Walton at all, but Mattie Terrill. My friend, who is the heiress, and I have changed places, and my total fortune amounts to 750 dollars a-year, which in your currency is £150. Now don't allow any false modesty to prevent you from frankly taking back your proposal, which was made under a misconception. I shall esteem you more highly if you own up that you meant to marry me for my money, than if you pretend you didn't; and to make it more easy for you, you may consider yourself refused, anyhow.'

"'Oh how magnanimously generous!' he said, accepting the situation without a murmur of apparent shame or regret. 'What a subject for a ballad! You may rest assured that your confidence will be most religiously observed. See yonder spray of fern, how gracefully it droops over that white pebble!' he went on, dexterously changing the subject; and until we joined the others he discoursed to me on the value of ferns in art."

"That makes four proposals you have had in the first two months—Sark, Murkle, Lysper, and MacAlpine; and during the season, I suppose they will come much more quickly," said Mattie. I am so glad

you will have an opportunity then of snubbing all these spoilt men. The sort of way the girls run after them, and make up to them, instead of keeping them under their heels, where they properly belong, makes me trample upon Bob, just because I have to give vent to my feelings on some young man, and he is the only one around who takes any notice of me. Do you see how that ridiculous Edith Featherpoll—the ugly one, you know—has been languishing after MacAlpine, with her flowers, and her sonnets, and her water-colours, and her fantastic style of dress, which she always goes to him to approve; and what a dead set Lady Florence has made all the time we have been here at Lord St Olave; and how Fanny Gazewell enticed Colonel Lysper the other day to get up a tree after her, I suppose in order that she might make him propose among the branches? But what made me real mad was an attempt of Mrs Haseleyne to get hold of Bob. She has got her own man,—what did she want mine for?"

"That's what Fanny Gazewell complains about," said Stella. "She told me that she no sooner thinks she has got hold of a man, than some pretty young married woman comes along and snaps him up, and carries him off—like a big dog taking a bone out of a little dog's mouth. She says the reason she wants to marry some one is, because she is tired of being a little dog, and wants to have some of the fun of being a big one."

"Pleasant for the husband," said Mattie.

"Oh, they don't mind,—at least not in the best society. Lady Adela was telling me all about it."

"Well," returned Mattie, "Bob is in the best society, and he ain't that kind, though I had to cut him for a whole day when I saw him staring back through his eye-glass at Mrs Haseleyne. 'What are you to do,' he said, 'when a pretty woman ogles you or squeezes your hand? It isn't polite not to ogle or squeeze hers back again. And then she draws you on, and you can't be a brute, even if you don't like it; but,' said Bob, frankly, 'I must say it's rather pleasant; it is not the sort of thing that any man can actively dislike, you know. Besides, if he doesn't respond, then she gets furious, and abuses him everywhere, and the men think him an absolute fool. He wouldn't be asked anywhere, because he would not be considered of any use. Flirtation is the sauce of society,' Bob went on sententiously, when he was excusing his abominable conduct. 'Just try, for instance, and fancy all the married women obliged to cover their faces with thick *yashmaks*, and imagination fails in the effort to depict the consequences. For nine young men and women out of ten the spice of life would be gone.' 'The flirtations of the unmarried ones, which are legitimate, would give it quite flavour enough,' I said; 'and if you want any more'—then all of a sudden my eyes filled with tears, and I jumped up from the bench where we were sitting under the trees—'you may go to your Hasel-

eynes, and stay there;' and I ran off, but Bob overtook me almost immediately, and we had a most delicious making up. Stella, do you know, I don't think I like this English society very much. I began to hate it from the first day, when Bob whispered that we must not call each other by our Christian names in public, as it wouldn't be understood,—that it was the privilege which the married women reserved to themselves; and I am sure I overheard Mrs Haseleyne call him Bob."

"Well, dear," said Stella, "we won't stay a day longer than you like; but I think we ought to pay our visit to Copley Grange first. Did Lady Adela tell you of her invitation to us?"

"Yes," said Mattie; "wasn't it odd that Altiora should be staying so near? Bob told me he thought of the place from having once stayed at the Grange, and having been struck by the quiet seclusion of the village. How nice it is to think that we shall be back there to-morrow! and what an age it seems since we left, though it's only a week! I wonder how Altiora, and Hannah, and Keith Hetherington have been amusing themselves?" And as the reader is probably by this time beginning to wonder the same thing, and nobody is able to describe the somewhat complicated workings of Altiora's mind better than that young lady herself, she shall be allowed to do it in her own words.

CHAPTER XIX.

KEITH HETHERINGTON'S SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM.

I WONDER whether moral growth corresponds in any way to one's natural conceptions of time; or whether, while one's physical frame may be slowly undergoing the changes incidental to the lapse of what we call years, our moral natures may not advance by bounds not to be defined by any periods of which our external faculties can take cognisance? I have only been here a week, but my mind, or whatever the part of me is that is not my external physical frame, seems to have undergone a complete revolution. Scientific men should have some name for that part of the body that they admit they know nothing about. "The Small Unknowable" would do. They get as far as protoplasm, and then they stop abruptly; but when you want to talk about the thinking, and the perceiving, and the loving, and the suffering, and the willing part of you, they take refuge in vague terms like "mind," and "imagination," and "volition," and leave other vague terms, like "soul" and "spirit," for the clergy to use with a sort of contempt, as if one set of terms conveyed any more definite idea than the other. I was talking to Mr Hetherington, who seems himself to be a person of a very great toleration for ecclesiastical or scientific bigotry, and he said the confusion

arose from the old-fashioned ideas attaching to the words "matter" and "spirit." He said he had great sympathy with the indignation of the theologians when they were told that everything was matter, and there was no spirit. "Just think," he said, "how angry the scientific men would be if you insisted that they were all living in a delusion, and there was no such thing as matter, and everything was spirit. And yet one statement is quite as true as the other—they are both right, and they are both wrong. They have got hold of two words which mean nothing, because they define nothing. The man of science has no right to say, when he exhausts the power of his microscope, that he has got to the end of matter. He brings an electric light to bear upon what he called a vacuum, because there was what he called 'nothing' in it; and, lo and behold! he finds something which can reflect rays of light: that each of those particles, so small as to exist *in vacuo*, does not seem to him as big as a mountain, is simply the result of the focus of his eye. What is there to prevent the empty spaces, in which every atom composing every molecule of the human organism is held in suspense, from being full of still minuter particles, measured by the standard of our senses, which would therefore correspond exactly to an invisible human frame, and which might continue to exist after the appreciable particles had undergone the chemical change called 'decomposition'? The body then existing, composed of those particles which

hadn't changed, becomes what the theologian calls 'spirit'; but why he should shrink from this hypothesis for fear of becoming a materialist, as much as the scientific man does from it for fear of becoming a spiritist, passes my comprehension. Both must admit the existence of force, but the notion of that force existing, irrespective of a transmitting medium, appears absurd. It would be as well, however, for the purpose of soothing susceptibilities, not to call that 'something' through which it must act, either matter or spirit, but to find another name for it. You would then find a common ground upon which both classes might meet and experiment; but it is evident that, inasmuch as these forces are positive dynamic agencies, the nature of whose action upon the human organism is conditioned upon various emotions, these experiments must partake of a moral character. Thus the emotion of fear would operate in one way upon these forces and the particles which contain them, the emotion of love in another, the emotion of anger in another, and so forth; and it is further evident that the possible result of such experiments might be to indicate a method by which they might be modified, and their existing conditions might be changed for the better. An evolutionary period would thus be inaugurated in the inner man—that essential man who is formed of the particles not appreciable by scientific investigation with existing appliances, but which are held in suspense in the spaces in his organism, which

are scientifically appreciable—which might revolutionise his whole moral nature, and make him a far more fit inhabitant of the world than he is at present. This," said Keith, "is my idea of how the survival of the fittest is to be brought about; for who can say, when once we begin to evolve the real man, instead of tinkering away at his gross outer covering, as we do at present, that we may not effect a fundamental change in his vital conditions—for we shall be dealing directly with his vital forces—whereas we now cut him in half, and give the theologians what they call his soul to doctor, and to the doctors what they call his body to physic? It's a wonder, poor fellow, considering how violently his organism is thus wrenched in twain, that he lives as long as he sometimes does."

"But how would you set to work to make your experiments?" I asked, "in this hypothetical region of the human organism which you assume to exist?"

"All scientific experiments," he replied, "are based upon hypothetical assumptions. The simplest mathematical problem depends upon the assumption of a straight line, which does not exist. Every skipper, when he takes an observation and uses his table of logarithms, is working with materials which go beyond anything that the strongest imagination can realise. It is an old scientific axiom that nature abhors a vacuum—abhors it so much that, as we have seen, men of science so far have been unable to create one.

In granting the hypothesis that the spaces which science has discovered in our organism are not vacua, we are not asking men of science to make an admission for which they would not be prepared. Their difficulty would be, as you suggest, how to experiment upon a region which escapes positive scientific analysis. For this purpose they would have to go a step further, and assume not only that these spaces contained forces, but that those forces must be moral as well as physical. But in assuming this, for the sake of basing an experiment upon it, they would be merely following the recognised practice. It has been on the foundation of unproved assumptions that some of the greatest scientific discoveries have been built."

"Granting, then," I said, "for the sake of argument, that these spaces in the organism are the source from which emotional and will forces radiate, the problem still remains—How do you propose to experiment upon them?"

"Obviously, when once it is granted that they may be moral forces, they must be experimented upon morally; but this is as foreign to the habits and methods of the man of science as of the theologian. Here the human victim, whom they have hitherto divided between them, falls to the ground. The theologian, who has a plan of salvation provided for him by his interpretation of his religion, quite other than the moral purification by a man's own efforts,

of the impure forces occupying the spaces in his organism, will shrink with horror from experimenting in such a direction; while the man of science, scarcely less scandalised at being asked to step out of the region of what he calls 'pure' science, into the quagmire of impure moral force, will shudder at the thought of attempting an experiment in which his microscope will be of no avail."

"But I don't see," said I, "how, even if the theologian, and the scientist as Stella would call him, were not held back by their prejudices, they could set about the experiments you talk of."

"The way to begin is, first, to select the special moral force which, for the sake of experiment, the investigator desires to develop into new conditions; he would naturally, for this purpose, take what he feels to be the purest and most refined in his nature. We will assume that he is a man of elevated moral temperament, and that he is conscious of what is commonly known as 'an enthusiasm for humanity,' and that he perceives intellectually that this love for the human race must transcend every other affection in its essential quality."

"I should have supposed," said I, "that the love for the Deity was an equally high and pure emotion."

"That would be the moral force probably selected by the theologian, and rightly so selected. I had in my mind the scientist or philosopher who knows nothing about the Deity, and must therefore begin

with the highest emotion of which he is capable—the love of his neighbour. It will be found that both classes of investigators will arrive at the same results. Indeed it does not matter where you start from, provided you take what you believe to be the best moral force in you. Some investigators may not be truly conscious of a pure and genuine love, either for God or humanity, though most persons profess both. In that case, they must take the next highest moral emotion they have, and work from that; but these experiments involve such terrible ordeals, and imply such crushing sacrifices, that it requires a tolerably high motive to carry you through. We will assume that our investigator starts with the view of developing a new and hitherto undiscovered potency—his love for humanity. His first discovery is that all the conditions by which he is surrounded, and all the other affectional instincts of his nature, interfere with his freedom of experiment. Then begin his ordeals and his sacrifices. For instance, the sentiment called Patriotism, being perhaps the highest to which some can attain, and therefore a good one for them to work from, is an obstacle to the experimenter on the love of humanity; he finds that he must denationalise himself in feeling, if not in act. He feels that he belongs to no country, but the universe. So he next becomes conscious that all family ties conflict with the due development of the force he is attempting to evolve. All the men and women in the world

become his brothers and sisters. The love of wife, children, and so forth, though it is a moral force to be duly developed, under an entirely new set of conditions, is too much tainted with the grosser natural instincts to be allowed to coexist in the same medium of transmission with the love of humanity, which, in fact, it antagonises as embodying certain opposite or egotistical forces. It is the elimination of these egotistical forces from the organism which is so painful. Of course it follows that if love of country and love of family are to be set aside, in order for the evolution into new and higher potencies of the love either of God or humanity, or both, all the minor egotistical emotions, such as love of rule, love of fame, love of money, love of ease,—all forms, in fact, of ambition, all cupidities, every sensual gratification which interferes with an absolute concentration of the will on the evolution of the force under experiment,—must be discarded."

"But," I interrupted, "ascetics have gone through processes with their affections in all ages such as you describe."

"Never in search of truth, or for an unmixed love of humanity. Of course, in experiments of this kind, the nature of the motive, which is the active agent with which the experiment is made, is everything. If a man starts, not to find truth, but with a credulous assumption that he has found it, based on no such evidence as I suggest, and his object in isolating himself is to save what he calls his soul—instead of

raising, by his efforts, existing humanity to a higher level, his efforts are vitiated at their source. He is not evolving into higher conditions ; besides, I said nothing about the man engaged in experimenting on the forces contained in his internal spaces becoming an ascetic. It is true that, at certain stages of his experiments, he must live apart, as he will become conscious of such powerful antagonistic invading forces from the organisms of his fellow-men, that until he has developed powers in himself to a point where he can resist them effectually, he is likely to be brought into greater suffering, thus produced, than he can endure; but this stage is only temporary—his work lies among his fellow-men, as he can only develop his love for humanity by living with it and for it. He will not remain long investigating and experimenting in solitude, before he will arrive at certain striking and encouraging results, which, however, I cannot allude to now, as they are not susceptible of proof to those who have not experienced them. When, leaving his solitude, he comes out into the world for whose benefit he is struggling, he will enter upon a new and not less striking series of experiences, the nature of which will reveal to him no less startling secrets of his organism, and open up new and altogether unexpected possibilities, and he will then find himself able to dominate certain forces in his fellow-men, to attract some, to repel others, and more or less to sense the quality of all. He then becomes conscious of the differences

which exist in the organic conditions of the persons who surround him, and more especially to perceive the character of the phenomena developed in those who are said, in popular jargon, to be 'of nervous temperament.' He begins to understand the nature of the forces operating in them, by virtue of the discoveries he has made in the nature of those in his own organism, and to induce others to enter upon the same experimental processes. He will find that in each case new phenomena are developed, conditioned on the varied character of the moral forces, which are in no two cases alike; and as this occult region opens to his instructed vision, and man becomes a book, the hitherto dark pages of which he has thus learnt to study, he perceives that it contains the solution of those world-problems which have perplexed the ages, and which in these early days of evolution are being revealed to those who are prepared to dedicate their lives to the service of humanity."

"I guess," said Hannah, who had entered unobserved during this speech, "that there's them as has been makin' this experiment, as you call it, these many years, as ain't either philosophers, nor scientists, nor theologians, and never heerd tell of the enthusiasm of humanity, much less of the spaces round the molly-cools. Well, they had to make it—they was born so. Why, I allers was that sensitive to forces—I didn't know what they were—as I could seem to feel what other people was feeling, 'specially some more than

others. I had to study on it my own way to protect myself. Why, there's times when I go into a sick-room, and the life seems to flow right clear out me. Many and many's the time I've cured aches and pains by rubbing them all out of a body; and anybody else but me rubbin' would seem to rub 'em into the same body, and the same pain will come right into me, just as like as not. Why, I begun to find I had a power in me for helpin' people, both in their bodies and sperits, that was like a sacred gift; and all my life I have prayed that I might use that gift right, and never to serve myself. Well, the more I used it, the more it come; and if I do anything agin a feelin' I have when it comes, and hold back out of a natural feelin' when I feel a body is a-drawin' the love out of me, it kinder curdles in me like milk gettin' sour. If I want to keep in sound speritual health myself, I am bound to let it flow out, just as it has a mind to. It's the Lord as knows his own; and them as he wants drawed He draws. That's how I come to help you in your trouble, my dearie," she said, turning to me, "and that's how it is you come to take such a comfort out of me; and that's how we come to feel so drawed together, him and me," she added, pointing to Mr Hetherington. "Bless you! it's because it ain't ourselves we're a-workin' for. Only it comes to him from experimentin', and it comes to me nat'ral like, because I was born so; and you wouldn't feel his words a-burnin' into you like fire, and mine a-soothing of you like mother love, if what he

calls the spaces in your mollycools wasn't already prepared. Bless you it ain't no good sayin' a word to them as isn't prepared; but them as is, they're bound to hoe in the same row. There's no mistake, you're just one of us, as your father was before you, only he died before he come through; but it's him as has been working in you. I could tell you things as I've heerd and seen as none of them philosophers' patent double-glass magnifiers couldn't show 'em; and that's so. It ain't no good talking to me about imagination and hallucination, and expect me to believe they ain't true. They seem to think, if only they can find a word that's long enough and they don't understand themselves, it's an explanation. Poor critturs! it's the explanation of the explanation as puzzles 'em. It ain't no more good a-scratching on the outside of natur than it is to scratch on the outside of the Bible, like the parsons do. It's the inside as has got the life and the nourishment. Dogmas is to religion what theory is to science. They tell me the Roman Catholics think, when they take the Sacrament, they're eatin' flesh and drinkin' blood; and that the philosophers say we've come out of oysters. Well, now, them things seem to me more like imagination than some things I could tell as I've felt and seen, and knows to be true by experience. Now there ain't no experience in their dogmas or their theories."

"But, Hannah, suppose they were to ask you in your turn to give an explanation of experience?"

"Well, dearie, I should say what I think some

American has said afore: Experience is the experience which experience has experienced. They'll know what it is if they make the trial, as Keithy here has proposed to 'em; but, laws! they won't—don't you believe it. It costs too much—givin' up country, and wife and child, and houses and lands, and all the rest of it, to make an experiment for humanity, without knowing but what it may fail in the end. Not if they know it, my dearie—leastways not many of 'em. Here and there may be one, but they ain't that kind of men. Generally speaking, them spaces in the mollycools has got to be prepared by a deal of suffering. It's suffering as does it. Well, there's a deal of suffering comin' to the world. Keithy knows all about it. It ain't possible to go deep into these things without knowing about it. It's when the ship goes to pieces, and the passengers is a-drownin', that they look out for the plank of safety—not when she's a-sailing in smooth water; and it's a lifeboat that them that studies the laws of life is now preparing."

"Hannah," said I, moved by an uncontrollable impulse, and throwing my arms round her neck, "I am going to work at that lifeboat. I am going to give my own life to help to build it, cost what it may."

"Of course you are, my dearie. You didn'ter need to tell me that; I felt it from the first day I saw you, and so did he: that's why we three was brought here. Things don't come like this by chance. There's them we don't see as arranges meetin's like these. You had to come where you could be protected from them oppo-

site forces he was a-talking of, and our forces could combine freely with yours to strengthen you before you have to go back into the world."

But I scarcely seemed to hear what Hannah was saying—could not tell why I was sobbing so convulsively. It certainly was from a feeling of joy and relief rather than of sorrow; but the foundations of my moral nature seemed to have been stirred, barriers to have been broken down, chasms bridged, darkness illuminated; a revolution of some sort had been effected, which took the form of tears, because the expression of all human emotion seems limited to tears or laughter, but the former may express any number of variations of that emotion. In fact I can best define those tears to the faculty by saying they were the exact opposite of "hysterical"; and as every doctor knows precisely what he means by that word, he must know what its exact opposite must be. I felt that the crisis of my life had arrived; that the vague questionings of my girlhood were at last to be answered; that the yearning aspirations and unsatisfied longings which isolated me from sympathy with my surroundings were to be gratified; that the burden of passionate pity for the misery of the crushed and suffering portion of my fellow-creatures, which had seemed more than I could bear, was to be lifted; and that I could enter upon a life-long effort, sustained by the hope that I might yet do service in the world, and in that effort solve the problems which till now had vexed my soul.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BARONESS MAKES A DISCLOSURE.

Robert Alderney was certainly inspired by some good genius when he discovered this wonderful retreat, in which Hannah and I have so successfully buried ourselves. Our cottage is an ideal seclusion, hidden in the recesses of a wooded glen, at the entrance to which, scarce half a mile distant, is the little village of Copleydale. It has been the home for many years of the poor widow of a retired naval officer, who was too glad to let it to us, as it stood, by the week, while she paid a visit to a neighbour. I have been wandering amid the narrow winding lanes for a week past, with no fear of discovery, either alone, or with Hannah or Mr Hetherington, who has taken up his abode in the village inn; and went out by myself alone this morning to stroll towards the village, in a more unsuspicious mood than usual, when, on turning a corner, I suddenly found myself face to face with Sark. The meeting was so unexpected that my heart began to beat violently, and a general vague presentiment of coming trouble seemed to take possession of me. I suppose he read my perturbation in my manner, as with an effort of cordiality I advanced to greet him; for he said kindly, but with a certain embarrassment, " I am afraid, Altiora, that my unexpected appearance is not

altogether an agreeable surprise." "Indeed I am very glad to see you, though of course I am surprised," I replied. Then Sark turned and walked by my side, as he gave me an account of the commotion which had been produced in society by my disappearance, and of the paragraphs which had appeared in the newspapers, which had suddenly given me the notoriety I so earnestly sought to avoid, and of the legal proceedings for my recovery threatened by the Baron, and finally urged upon me the necessity of preventing any public scandal, and of putting an end to a situation which was calculated to produce it. He told me, to my great satisfaction, that he felt that he had completely emancipated himself from the bondage of Mrs Clymer; expressed his deep regret that he should have been the cause, in the first instance, by having introduced her to me, of having forced me into a false position; and, to my unbounded astonishment, ended by hoping that I would allow him to make the only reparation in his power, by accepting him in marriage. "This, dear Altiora," he concluded, "is a simple solution of the whole difficulty. You will confer a lasting obligation upon me; you will escape the ordeal which you dread, of being forced upon London society, under auspices which are so painful to you; you will be released from all fear of persecution from unworthy or interested suitors, or being sacrificed to the ambition of your parents, who, I feel sure, will at once give their consent, if I can only win yours." He spoke with such

delicacy, and at the same time with so much tenderness, that for the moment I was too much overcome by the unexpected proposition, and by the cogency of the reasons in favour of it, to make any answer. I hung down my head, much agitated by what I felt to be his generosity; for had he not confessed to me his strong attachment for Stella? and I think he mistook my silence for consent, for he took my hand, and began a sentence with "My darling," which I felt bound to stop; for a new and indefinable impression suddenly seemed to overpower me that I no longer belonged absolutely to myself, and that no worldly considerations of expediency, or even of regard for Sark, should for an instant be allowed to invade the sanctity of those affections which I had solemnly dedicated only the day before to the highest of all services: and yet it seemed impossible to explain this to him in any way which he could understand. Fortunately the nature of his confidences to me in Paris furnished me with the escape from the dilemma I sought.

"I feel all the more grateful for the generosity of your offer, Lord Sark," I said, "because I do not forget that in making it you are sacrificing your own affections."

"You give me too much credit," he replied. "I should perhaps have told you before what I concealed—believe me, from no unworthy motive—that Miss Walton has no reason to fear that she will ever be annoyed by my admiration again."

There was a tone of pique not altogether unmingled with what appeared to me contempt, which surprised me, and I felt inclined to ask for an explanation, and enter upon my friend's defence, when I remembered that I should see her in a day or two, and hear all I wanted from her own lips. So I said, "I cannot now explain to you, Sark, why it will be impossible for me ever to entertain the thought of such a relationship as you suggest." He was just going to make some reply when I heard the sound of wheels, and presently saw the lumbering one-horse fly, which was the only vehicle that the village could boast, and from the window of which, evidently scanning the surroundings, protruded the well-known head of my mother. She stopped the fly as it overtook us, and with well-assumed affectionate gaiety, laughingly exclaimed, "Ah, naughty truant, have I found you?" and making Sark open the door, I found myself in the maternal embrace. We walked up to the cottage together, where Hannah, standing at the door, was overwhelmed at the sight of my companions. She received my mother with an aggressive sniff of condescension, and Sark with unaffected cordiality; and I took my mother to my bedroom to take off her things. She said she would stay there for the present, as she did not wish to lose time in explaining to me at once the view which she and the Baron had determined to take of my conduct.

"I will not recur now, Altiora," she said, "to the

impropriety of your conduct in leaving your home; nor am I even prepared to insist on your making full reparation to Mrs Clymer, and accepting her intimacy as a friend, which would have been your proper punishment. Richard Murkle has most kindly offered to extricate us from the dilemma by again expressing his readiness to take you as his wife."

"But, mamma, I thought Mr Murkle was in love with Stella Walton," I said.

"I do not pretend to know what may have passed between him and Miss Walton, but he has authorised me to say, that as you have never fulfilled some promise you made him about some commission in regard to Miss Walton, with which he charged you, he now insists upon your reverting to your old relations."

"I am not aware of any old relations existing between us," I replied, "nor of his right to insist upon anything. At all events, I have told you before, nothing shall ever induce me to marry him."

"What was Sark saying to you when I arrived?" said my mother, abruptly changing the subject.

"He had just proposed to me, and I had just refused him."

"You refused him!" she almost screamed. "Silly girl; now you have deprived yourself of your only chance of escape. Your fate is sealed, Altiora."

"I don't understand you, mamma."

"God knows that I never intended that you should," replied my mother, bitterly. "The story of how

Richard Murkle has got us all in his clutch is one which you alone have the power to wring from me, and it rests with you to decide whether you will now use that power, to the shame and disgrace of your family, or save me a confession which can do no good, and which you of all persons will have the most reason amply to regret."

I was at a loss how to reply to a speech so enigmatical and mysterious. "Whatever your secret may be," I said, "I never can regret its disclosure so much as I should the necessity of becoming Mr Murkle's wife."

"It is impossible for you to judge of that while you remain in ignorance of it,—the result of compelling me to make a full disclosure of all the circumstances now known to Murkle alone, will simply be to oblige you to marry him, with an additional pang which I would fain spare you."

I cannot help now feeling that it would have been better had I taken my mother's advice, and allowed events to shape my fate, leaving the mystery unsolved; but the alternative of marrying a man who exercised this occult influence over my destiny, and used his power with such cruelty, was so revolting to me that I determined to know the worst—the more especially as my imagination failed altogether in conjecture upon the subject, and my curiosity had become excited and alarmed. So I said, "If I am to marry Richard Murkle, I would rather do so knowing the secret which has thus given him the command of my fate, however

painful it may be, than allow him the satisfaction of feeling he still possesses a power which he would probably use to coerce me at some later period."

"Then listen," said my mother, with a glow of malignant satisfaction stealing over her countenance—as if she secretly rejoiced in the pain she was about to inflict. "Listen, child, to a history of fraud and deception, practised on an unsuspecting woman by the man whose memory you so dearly revere and cherish."

"Stop!" I almost shrieked, so utterly unexpected was the quarter from which the blow was coming. "Do you mean my father?"

"Who else should I mean?" she replied boldly. "Now, do you want me to go on, and describe the story of a false marriage, of a betrayed woman, of a daughter who has no legal rights, of crime, of revenge, and of accomplices who, as husband and husband's partner, have her and her daughter in their power? Do you want the details of this twenty-year-old history? because time has not dimmed my memory—they are incidents in a woman's life which she is not apt to forget, even if they are not those which she is apt to confide to a daughter. But then, you know," my mother went on, with increased bitterness and sarcasm in her tone, "our relations have been very peculiar,—we have never understood each other. As you are so much given to philosophical speculation, when you have all the particulars you will be able to construct a metaphysical theory as to the reason why."

I scarcely heard the last part of my mother's speech. A numbness seemed creeping over me which threatened to paralyse all power of thought or feeling. I felt a vague consciousness that I was endeavouring by a mental and moral effort to realise that my father was a villain, but that my faculties gave way in the strain of this attempt to violate the most cherished instinct of my nature. They refused to be coerced into a belief so monstrous. Speech had become impossible—but I stared at my mother with a dumb incredulity which had a more powerful effect upon her than anything I could have said; for the colour rushed to her face as I mechanically held my eyes firmly fixed on hers, and then ebbed away again, leaving her lips white and trembling.

"Don't stare at me like that, child," she exclaimed petulantly; "one would suppose you were going out of your mind."

At this moment the expression of her face changed to one of alarm, and she gazed so fixedly at the door behind me that I involuntarily turned round, and as I did so, heard a gentle tap.

"Who can that be?" she said, and she shivered with a spasm of emotion which I was quite at a loss to account for; but I was conscious at the same time of a rush of vitality into my own system which seemed completely to restore me to myself.

"May I come in, my dearie?" said a voice outside, and the door was gently pushed open, and old Hannah glided in without waiting for further permission.

"Seemed as though you was a-wanting me so bad, I couldn't stay away from you any longer. 'Lordy,' I says, 'my darling is in some kind of trouble; I feel her a-calling of me from her innards,' I says, and I just come right away;" and Hannah brought a chair to my side, and took my hand, and tenderly stroked my head, exactly as if my mother was not in existence. Indeed the Baroness had received a shock of some kind, which had apparently quelled for the time her proud spirit, for she remained silent even when Hannah, putting her arm round my waist, whispered in my ear, "You've got to come along with me, my dearie," and led me from the room. "Now you lie down quiet on my bed for a little," she added; "I've just got a word to say to your māma," and she laid an emphasis of indescribable scorn on the last word, and kissing my forehead, moved swiftly away.

Curiously enough my mind did not revert to its agony,—I dropped off to sleep before I had time to recall the incidents of the scene which had just terminated. When I awoke, I found Hannah sitting by my bedside.

"There, now, my dearie," she said, "your māma and me has been fixing things. They ain't near so bad as you think—only have a little patience, and it'll come all right. What we want is time, and I've got it."

"Oh, Hannah," I said, the memory of all my mother's revelations now rushing over me like a flood, "what has my mother told you? Do you know the frightful

position in which I am placed, and the circumstances that have led to it?"

"Never you mind what I know, my dearie,—the time ain't come for me to tell you that yet. Things is mighty onsartin' in this world; 'tain't what I hear that I believes in, it's what I feels. The outwards is very little account—I goes by the innards. When onst the innards is got right—and it's terrible hard to get 'em right so as they can be trusted,—you ain't got no call to try and work yourself out of a tight place by making calkilations in your head. It's people that loves themselves goes by their heads; but people as loves their God and their neighbours better than themselves, they goes by their hearts. They just go it blind, the way that love leads 'em; maybe it looks like as though it was agin all reason and common-sense—and or'nary folks thinks them insane; but laws, my dearie! that don't matter. People as goes by reason and common-sense don't know anything about the happiness that people have as goes by the love that drives them afore it. Now you know what you was a-settlin' the other day with Keithy and me, when he was explaining to you about the mollycools. You just hang on to what you decided to do then, and leave your māma and that Murkle and the rest of 'em to the Higher Powers. And don't you go to believin' anything agin the memory of your sainted pāpa. You wait till things clears themselves."

"But, Hannah, Mr Murkle threatens the most

fearful exposure if I do not give him an immediate answer."

"Let him threaten, my dear; it don't cost much to threaten, but to carry out the threat may cost a great deal. He thought your māma had only to come here with that story to break you down. But don't you break,—just seem to bend a little, maybe so as to gain time. Meanwhile I am a-goin' to keep your māma here a few days."

"Keep mamma here!" I exclaimed.

"Well, I explained to her why I thought it would be best for her to wait till to-morrow, when Stella and Mattie come, and perhaps when they see her they'll explain why it is best for her to go on stayin'," said Hannah, with a sly twinkle in her eye. "In the meantime," she added, "your māma has promised that she will not allude to the subject again till they come. So don't you think about it any more. You've got a work to do in this world, child, and you ain't a-goin' to be sacrificed to that Murkle, anyhow they can fix it. It's old Hannah says so, and you'd better believe it."

I was so inexpressibly consoled and comforted by this conversation, that it seemed as though I had risen from some horrid nightmare. Hannah had asked Sark and Keith Hetherington to stay to dinner, and assumed the character of mistress of the house with a quiet dignity and power which more and more impressed me with the remarkable qualities of her character. Her strong originality seemed to have an inspiring

effect upon the gentlemen, who were both gifted with singular powers of conversation, which, I observed, was never suffered by Hannah to drop to my mother's level. Indeed I had never seen the Baroness so cowed and subdued by surrounding influences as on the evening of the day when she had swept down upon my retreat, flushed with the premature consciousness of an easy victory.

CHAPTER XXI.

STELLA COMES TO THE RESCUE.

On the day following the incident narrated by Altiora in the last chapter, the party at Beaucourt broke up. Sir George and Lady Adela Dashington went to Copley Grange, where they found Sark, who had used his sister's house for his base of operations when he made his descent upon Copleydale; and the two Californian girls and Bob Alderney returned to the secluded retreat, where Hannah and Altiora were anxiously awaiting their arrival.

"It ain't no use," said the old lady to the latter in anticipation of this event, "telling the gells any particulars; it's enough for them to know that your māma wants to force you to marry that Murkle, and that she dustn't resist him on account of some secret hold as he

has got over her, and threatens all manner of ruin and disgrace if he can't get his way. That's enough for Stella and Mattie. Trust 'em for seein' a way out of it. Give me Stella for gettin' a body out of a tight place when it comes to a pinch. I used to think New England gells pretty spry, but, my sakes! Californy knocks the spots out of 'em."

The Baroness had discreetly retired when the fly drove up with the two young ladies and their escort, and there was, therefore, nothing to check the spontaneous effusiveness of the embraces which they lavished upon Hannah and Altiora, much to the envy of Bob, who plaintively remarked, after Mattie had nearly squeezed the breath out of Miss Coffin—

"Oh, Mattie, how I do wish I was Hannah!"

"I don't, you silly," replied the young lady in a whisper which seemed quite to console him. "There, ask Altiora if she'll allow you a cousin's privilege—I don't like to see you left out in the cold on this joyful occasion—and then go and amuse yourself with Keith Hetherington; we want to go and talk secrets—don't we, Stella?"

And they forthwith trooped to Hannah's bedroom to exchange confidences.

"Oh, Stella," said Altiora, "I have so much to tell you! Mamma is here."

"Here!" exclaimed both the girls at once,—"not in this house?"

"Yes; we kept her here on purpose till you arrived,

because Hannah said you would be sure to see a way out of the terrible dilemma in which I am placed."

"My dear," said Stella gravely, when she had heard Altiora's story, "I have long known that some possibility existed of such a demand being made by Mr Murkle, but I supposed that the escape from the difficulty had already presented itself. Has not Lord Sark been here?" she asked, colouring slightly.

"Yes," said Altiora, and her face seemed to reflect the hue of her friend's. "Oh, Stella, what have you done to offend him? He said that you need never fear again being troubled with his admiration."

"Didn't he say anything else?" And Stella smiled slily, but an almost imperceptible quiver of her lip betrayed the effort of self-control which she was exercising.

"He asked me to marry him," said Altiora in an undertone. "I wouldn't betray his confidence, but everything is so complicated, and I know how true you all are—we must talk openly. He once told me that he loved you, Stella—and I am sure he does still,—and that you have refused him. Can you wonder at the answer that I gave him, even though he professed to care for you no longer? Besides, I have decided never to marry."

"Wal," interrupted Hannah, "it don't quite amount to that; the fact is, me and Keithy and Altiora was a-talking over matters generally, and we all decided we *wouldn't* marry just yet. 'Peared to us we'd got some-

thing more important to do first. Didn't see our way clearly to adoptin' the bonds of matrimony. That's how it is. Don't you press my darlin' to think of her cousin agin her inner feelin's. He ain't no kind of a husband for her. It's old Hannah as says it—and you'd better believe it."

Stella looked quickly up at her old friend, and a conflict of emotions seemed struggling in the lovely countenance, which owed its principal charm to the variety of expression of which it was capable, and which, without losing its sweetness, changed in character like some fair landscape under the influence of the lights and shades of a tropical sunset. "But yet you love him, Altiora?" she asked, slowly.

"As a cousin, yes; but indeed I don't want to marry him or any one. Oh, Stella, all I want is to escape from being forced by the threats of some terrible revelation, which will disgrace my mother, from marrying Richard Murkle."

"What you want in the first instance," said Mattie, "it appears to me, is time—to enable us to find out what this secret is, and what it's worth. From what I have seen of Mr Murkle, he seems to me a gentleman capable of playing a game of brag for very large stakes. Now, as they say at poker, suppose we 'Go him one better' before we 'see' him."

"That's so," said Hannah, with a most approving chuckle. "You don't waste your time in talkin' honey, but what you do say goes straight to the mark. I

expect Master Bobby has found that out. What we need is time—to find things out."

"If that's all," said Stella, with a sigh of intense relief, "I can ensure you that. You three can gossip while I write a letter. I suppose we had better not lose a post."

"Now, silence," said that young lady, coming back to the group after a few minutes, "and listen to this:—

"'To Richard Murkle, Esq.

"'Dear Sir,—In pursuance of the verbal agreement arrived at between us in Paris on the 1st day of November last, by virtue of which we entered into a provisional contract mutually to bind ourselves to draw up schedules of our several assets, both of real and personal property, together with a full statement of our liabilities and indebtedness, with a view to an ultimate matrimonial alliance, I beg to state that I have prepared the above schedule and list of effects, which I shall be ready to submit to you as soon as the legal formalities shall have been completed; and I have to request that you will inform me, at your earliest convenience, whether you have complied with your obligations in this matter, and are prepared to carry out the terms of the understanding.

"'I may add that I have made inquiries of Miss Peto in regard to certain points affecting your private

character about which I was in doubt, and that her report is entirely satisfactory.—I beg to remain, dear sir, yours respectfully, STELLA WALTON.'"

"There," said Stella, turning to Mattie; "how do you like having your name made use of in that way? If ever there was a forgery, that is one. I wonder what the penal consequences will be when I reveal to him that I am not Stella Walton at all, but the almost penniless Mattie Terrill?"

"Not Stella Walton at all!" exclaimed Altiora, in amazement.

"Oh, I forgot that, though you have been with us so long, you have never been let into the secret. Well, you must keep it, dear. 'My face is my fortune, sir,' she said,—as whoever marries me will find out some day."

"I am quite bewildered," said poor Altiora; "your letter is as utterly incomprehensible as this change in your personality is startling. Do you mean to say that you once agreed to marry Mr Murkle?"

"Just so; provisionally, you know. I had a sort of instinct it might turn out useful. One never can have too many strings to one's bow, and now you see how fortunate it was. I suppose that as he has never heard from me since, he is offended, and come to the conclusion that I was making a fool of him, and so has returned to his first love."

"But you don't really mean to marry him?" said

Altiora, who was too matter-of-fact to follow the pseudo-heiress in the reckless extravagances of her action. "Supposing he is so much in love with you that he holds you to the bargain, even if you are penniless, then what will you do?"

"Oh, borrow from Mattie, and swell my liabilities to an alarming amount. His love will never be so limitless but what I can surpass it by my indebtedness, with such a bank as Mattie to draw upon. Don't be alarmed, my dear; there is no danger of my ever becoming Mrs Murkle, and I am quite determined that you never shall."

"I think that letter will do," said Mattie. "Stella, you're a great soul,—you combine dash with judgment in a degree which should qualify you to become one of the great financial magnates of the age."

"I should require Murkle's conscience; but let us consider him disposed of for the moment. What are we to do with the Baroness?"

"I have been considering that point," said Mattie. "We must take her with us to the Dashingtons. Lady Adela will understand that the best way to put an end to the family scandal is to have the mother and daughter as her guests; and the Baroness will be so flattered, that we can mould her conveniently to our purposes in that aristocratic atmosphere."

"Lady Adela is very anxious to make the acquaintance of her new-found cousin, after all we have told her of you, dear," added Stella, "and is coming to pay

you a visit to-morrow, when the whole matter can be satisfactorily arranged. Where are you going, Mattie?"

"To have a little private conversation with Bob," replied that young lady, with the utmost frankness. And this was what she said to Mr Alderney, when she found him strolling with Hetherington among the gooseberry bushes of the primitive garden, smoking a cigar, and had called him away from his companion.

"Bob, dear, things are getting a good deal mixed. You must go off at once to Copley Grange and help to straighten them. Your cousin Adela is coming over here to-morrow, at any rate, to invite Altiora to spend next week at the Grange. You must tell her that the Baroness is here—that there are reasons, which we will explain, and which nearly concern Altiora's happiness, why the Baroness should be invited too. Fortunately the Baron has been suddenly called away to the Continent; and you must see Sark, who, I hope, you will still find there, and implore him not to leave till we come. Now I know that he'll say it is no fun staying to meet two girls, both of whom have refused him."

"No more it is," said Bob. "I don't see how I'm to get over that."

"It is he who has to get over it—not you, stupid. Your turn will come when you're refused. Don't put ridiculous ideas of that sort into my head, or I may act upon them."

"Well, but if they did refuse him, how am I to persuade him to meet them again?"

"Oh, say that they didn't,—that he was mistaken,—that girls never know their own minds; in fact, invent any libel on the sex you like, only persuade him to try again, or we shall be having hearts broken, and Mrs Clymer triumphant, and Sark once more a slave to that woman. Just think, Bob, if you had a Mrs Clymer somewhere, and by some stupid mistake I drove you off to her!" And the bare idea so moved poor Mattie, that her eyes filled with tears, which gave Bob the best opportunity of consoling her that he had enjoyed for a long time; and he started on his mission much refreshed in spirit, and determined to exert his diplomatic talents to the utmost in the cause of youth and beauty.

Meantime Mattie thought the opportunity a good one to have a little private conversation with Hetherington, who had discreetly retired during the foregoing conversation, as she strongly suspected that he was neither an ignorant nor totally disinterested observer of the events which had been transpiring. And she was anxious to ascertain the view he took of them, and the state of his feelings generally.

CHAPTER XXII.

MATTIE IN AN INQUIRING MOOD.

"You have had two unexpected visitors here during the last day or two," Mattie said, when she joined Hetherington, "and they seemed to have thrown our poor Altiora into a sad state of perplexity."

"I have avoided speaking to her on the subject," he replied; "her own instinct of right is too powerful to let her go very far astray, however severe the pressure may be. She has made up her mind to take her own view of her duties in life irrespective of public opinion, and suffering is sure to come sooner or later to whomsoever ventures on such a course."

"Why, what a gloomy view you take of life, Keith! Do you mean to say that the attempt to do right is sure to bring suffering?"

"Not the attempt—the doing it; and that only depends upon the standard aimed at. The doing right according to the popular standard, as a rule, so far from bringing suffering, brings popularity; but the popular standard is a very low one, and framed to meet the demands of society. Just think what a mess people would get into if there were no standard of right at all! But it is as dangerous to pitch your standard too high as too low. He who practised the highest morality the world ever had presented to it, was crucified be-

tween two men who practised the lowest; and His fate seemed to have served as a warning to those who call themselves by His name, if we may judge by the difference which exists between His preaching and their practice."

"But, Keith, I think your judgment is rather harsh. I am sure there are plenty of good people in society who sincerely try to follow the teaching of Christ, and who are all the more respected for it."

"Oh, the world allows them to try, provided they don't succced; it feels rather consoled by their failures. If the best people try and fail, they say it is because the standard is too high to be practicable—evidently an ideal one, and impossible in literal fact; so the ordinary mortal gives up the superhuman effort, and accepts things as they are with a conscience all the more at ease. And, in one sense, they are right. It is an impossible standard, except with a reconstructed society; and in order to reconstruct society, you must revolutionise it. Hence any attempt at radical reform necessarily brings you into collision with it. So long as the churches are content to form part of a social system, based on a compromise between the altruistic morality of Christ and the selfish morality of the world, the reformer must expect persecution from the quarter on which he should rely for support."

"But if it is hopeless, why do you wish to enlist Altiora in so futile an enterprise?"

"I don't say it is hopeless, except for the isolated

individual. On the contrary, the religious inconsistencies of Christendom are pressing themselves so forcibly on the more enlightened minds and quickened consciences of the present day, that we see ourselves involved in a reaction against the popular theology, which, unfortunately, finds its expression in materialism, agnosticism, positivism, and other philosophical attempts at the solution of the social and moral problem,—predestined to failure so far as the heart-needs of humanity are concerned, but all evidencing a progress in the moral consciousness of that same humanity, which demands satisfaction."

"Then you wish me to understand, Keith, that the demand of humanity for a higher moral standard of life—which Christianity, materialism, agnosticism, positivism, and all the other 'isms' fail to satisfy—may be met by some system of ethics which you propose to inaugurate?"

"Pardon me; I say that humanity demands a morality which is impossible without social reconstruction. I deny that the popular theology and true Christianity are synonymous, so far as their essential morality in their application to daily life is concerned; and I maintain that, in order to substitute the Christian standard of morals for the popular one, you must reconstruct society. In the degree in which this conviction forces itself upon many minds will a combined attempt become possible: without a combined attempt, any practical result is hopeless."

"Well, then," said Mattie, "it resolves itself into the one question, How do you mean to reconstruct society?"

"That is exactly the question into which it does resolve itself, and which I am fully prepared to discuss with those who are willing to admit that enlightened selfishness is not the basis upon which society should be constituted, and who are ready to substitute for it that principle of unflinching altruism which is the foundation of pure Christianity."

"Then you would only co-operate with Christians?"

"On the contrary. Nearly all the best Christians I know do not call themselves by that name. I only use the term as applying to the ethical system of Christ—as the one theoretically the most familiar to the whole civilised world. I would co-operate with all who were prepared to live for the highest moral ideal, at any sacrifice of wealth, fame, ties of family or of country, and who would form a social nucleus where such an attempt would be possible."

"Irrespective of their belief in a God? Supposing, for instance, that an agnostic were to wish to join you, would you admit him?"

"Most certainly; for how could an agnostic know till he tried a higher life than is possible to him in his present surroundings, what new faculties might not develop within him? The theologian who, embedded in a selfish social system, says, 'I know with my limited faculties that there is a God,' may be as wrong in his appreciation of the nature of that Being as the agnostic

who says, 'I know that you have no faculties, and never can have any faculties for knowing whether there be one.' The one believes in a Deity of his own imagining, and conditioned on his theological and social environment; and the other believes in none at all. Who can say that, placed under totally new moral conditions, higher than any which have hitherto been attempted in actual realisation, new and higher spiritual faculties might not be evoked, which should reveal to both a new and unsuspected Deity? The theologian has no more right to say that the faculties of man have attained to their fullest capacity for apprehending the Deity, than the scientist has to say that there is a physical limit to his observation of matter, and that he has reached it. Why these men who attribute our existing faculties to a process of evolution should be the first to limit that process to the past, and deny that we are capable of morally and materially continuing to evolve, has always been a mystery to me. But the law of the evolution which they themselves evoke will be their salvation; and in the degree in which they prosecute their search after truth from the purest and the loftiest motives, must they evolve towards their God."

"And so," said Mattie, with a smile, "Altiora has fairly entered upon the new evolutionary process."

"She has unconsciously been struggling in the right direction from her childhood, like your own good old Hannah, Mattie; and I think you must yourself admit

that her intuitive faculties are developed to a very remarkable degree."

"So, then, the sum and substance of it all is, that society is to be reconstructed, on an altruistic basis, by persons undergoing an evolutionary process, through efforts of self-sacrifice; and that you and Hannah and Altiora are to inaugurate this great work."

"Not quite so. I am happy to say there are some hundreds consciously preparing themselves for this work; but it is evident that the process is a slow one. The united effort must depend upon the progress made by each individual; and it is only when a sufficient number have passed through experiences and attained a sufficient development for the ultimation of new results, that the work can be said to have fairly commenced."

"What is the nature of these experiences, and of the results?" asked Mattie.

"There you ask a question to which I am not at liberty to reply. I hope you will not think me rude, but I could no more describe to you the experiments or the results, than I could discourse to a New Zealander on the laws of electricity, or attempt to make him understand the nature of their action. If, when Watt saw the lid of the kettle tremble under the power of the compressed steam, he had predicted the mechanical and social revolution which would result from his new-found force, he would have talked to deaf ears, and been counted a lunatic. If we have begun to find

that our organisms can be made to tremble beneath the action of forces far more pregnant with moral possibilities than steam and electricity have been with material results, it is not while we are learning the laws by which they are governed that we can discourse upon them to the ignorant and inquisitive. There's an old Scotch proverb that 'fules and bairns shouldna see half-dune wark.' The world has been preached to long enough; it wants new moral phenomena, not new theological dogmas, or philosophical speculations. But it is not while these phenomena are in process of development that we can undertake to explain them; they must be tested, like all great discoveries, by their results. Meantime, we are contented to work on in silence and obscurity in our laboratory of moral experiment, craving only the one boon, which of all others the world is the least disposed to grant,—that it will mind its own business, and leave us in peace to follow what we believe to be ours."

"Yes; but if, as you say, in order to carry out your moral experiments, you are compelled to place yourselves in an antagonistic attitude to society, you cannot be surprised if it considers that a corresponding attitude of hostility is its business. Supposing a man knew that in the retirement of a chemical laboratory you were constructing an explosive machine with which to blow up his house, he might find it difficult to believe that you were only actuated by motives of philanthropy, and very naturally wish to interfere with you."

"Society in Jerusalem no doubt laboured under the same misapprehension when, moved by an instinct of self-preservation, it murdered Christ nineteen hundred years ago," retorted Hetherington. "It remains to be seen whether the same spiritual forces which were concentrated in a single individual, and which were so powerful then as to produce a moral convulsion, are destined a second time to succumb to the social collision, when they are applied under new and more powerful conditions. Whatever view may be taken of the personality of Christ, it is impossible to deny that, as a moral phenomenon, He was unsurpassed in the religious history of the world; impossible also to deny, judging by analogy in nature, the probability of a recurrence of a similar manifestation of concentrated spiritual power, though it may take a different and more commanding expression."

"Why, I do believe," exclaimed Mattie, "that if I were to twist all you have said into orthodox language, I could make you out to be an ordinary Christian, expressing your belief in the Second Coming!"

"I would rather that you let any such attempt alone, Mattie. And now to come back to the subject of our communication. You see why I do not interfere with Altiora; there are reasons why it is best for *me*, at all events, to let her work her way through her worldly dilemmas without my assistance. That is no reason, however, why you and our good friends here should not give her all the aid and comfort in your power."

"Well, Lady Adela Dashington is coming over to invite her, and, I hope, the Baroness, to the Grange to-morrow; and, I think, perhaps Sark will come too."

"You need not expect Sark," returned Keith, "for I met him at the station this morning as I was walking out here from the village. He told me he had received a telegram from the secretary of some company, requiring his presence in London immediately on business of importance. You ladies have all been so busy with your private affairs that I have not had an opportunity of delivering the message of farewell with which he charged me. He told me to tell Altiora, however, that he would write his adieux."

"Oh, Keith, don't you see that it's all a plot of that horrid Clymer to get him back again into her clutches, and that Mr Murkle is her accomplice? And yet you can stand there with your hands in your pockets, and let things go their own way, and get more complicated than ever,"—and impulsive little Mattie wrung her hands in despair.

"I don't see what I could possibly do even by getting excited."

"There is ever so much to be done; but you men are so unsatisfactory, and get so easily huffed, and twist everybody's affections up into such a snarl, there is no unwinding them. Look straight into my eyes," she added, after a perplexed pause, "and answer me truly. I would not ask such a question except under

the pressure of necessity. Now, Keith Hetherington, I solemnly ask you, under the seal of the strictest confidence, are you in love with anybody?"

"Loving and being in love mean the same thing, I suppose?"

"Of course they are."

"Well, then, I love humanity as a whole; and, of course, I am in love with all the several units that go to make it up."

"That means that you can't honestly say no, but don't choose to say yes."

"It means that I am outside of the complications which perplex you, Mattie; but I none the less sympathise in your desire to help your friends. Perhaps the best way I can prove it is by following Sark to town."

"Oh, I wish you would!" she exclaimed. "He'll certainly get into mischief in his present frame of mind, unless somebody goes to look after him, and try and bring him back. Keith, I would send Bob, only —hem—he's so useful here; but just come in first and deliver your message, and then say you are also obliged to run up to London for a day or two, but you need not tell them why you are going."

"Dear me," mused Mattie, as she followed Hetherington into the house, "I wonder why people can't manage their love-affairs as simply as Bob and I do! But I don't suppose mine would have been so simple if I had remained the heiress."

CHAPTER XXIII.

MORAL AND CHEMICAL EXPLOSIVES.

MATTIE was not far wrong in her divination of the origin of the telegram which Sark had received. Nor was Mrs Clymer altogether such a novice in finance as Mr Murkle took her for on the occasion when he first unfolded to her in Paris the process by which Sark and his co-directors were to be extricated from the equivocal position in which they had become involved, through sundry irregularities in the management of the company, which it is not necessary to enter into here. She was, moreover, a woman to whom revenge was sweeter than riches, and it therefore naturally occurred to her that it would be more soothing to her feelings materially to ruin and morally to disgrace the man she loved, even at the sacrifice of her own pocket, than allow him to escape from her thraldom and bestow his affections upon a rival. It was sometimes said of Mrs Clymer, by those who had the advantage of knowing that lady the most intimately, that whatever her faults might be,—in spite of her frivolity, her social audacity, her flirtations, and her cunning, she "had a heart,"—that she was a woman capable of a *grande passion;* and her reputation in this regard getting noised abroad, rendered her doubly attractive to men who are, as a rule, almost as much repelled by feminine volcanoes in

a perpetual state of active eruption, as by volcanoes which are extinct, in which the fires, such as they were, are dead. But a slumbering volcano, concealing under a tranquil surface untold potencies of suppressed explosion and flame, which can only be evoked under a special influence, is an incentive which rarely fails to excite the vanity of the male sex, and often becomes a force all-powerful to hold them when once captured. Mrs Clymer loved admiration too much not to flirt, but she was conscious that she possessed passions, the violence of which almost alarmed her, and which she was, therefore, at the greatest possible pains to conceal and control. No art can, however, prevent the subtle force—call it magnetism or what you will—from exercising its power of attraction; and hence Mrs Clymer was always surrounded by admirers instinctively sensitive to the dormant fire, which all their skill failed to kindle into flame. It was not until Sark had been drawn into the magic circle that the necessary fuel was supplied, and that the slumbering embers could no longer be quenched; and she became a prey to emotions, for the violence and consequences of which she held Sark responsible. She was mortified with herself for having, as she expressed it, "lost her heart" to Sark, and still more angry with him for having won it. The only consolation she derived for being no longer free herself to play havoc with the affections of others, was in the feeling that she had an absolute right over the freedom of her lover. He, at all events, must be

made to pay the penalty of her weakness. She had never wanted to fall in love with him. She had merely intended that he should fall in love with her, and dangle in the chain of her adorers—in fact, be another trophy added to the collection already upon her *chatelaine*. So she had a grievance against her lover in that she loved him, and became morbid in her jealousy, and exacting in his allegiance. It was not until a purer and higher sentiment than Mrs Clymer was capable of inspiring, had begun to steal into Sark's breast, that the yoke became intolerable to him; and just in proportion as he had worn it submissively, was he now in a mood to resent its pressure. Mrs Clymer, however, still brooding over the humiliation of having ever loved, followed by the mortification of having lost, devoted her energies to devising plans of revenge; for it is the peculiarity of an egoistic passion of this description, which those who feel it call "love," that it mingles with and finally merges altogether into hate. Having in its origin been an absolutely selfish instinct, and in its essence the exact opposite of what pure love should be, it requires but the necessary pressure to reveal its true character—and yet, curiously enough, Mrs Clymer, all the while she was plotting his ruin, imagined that she loved Sark more than ever—and this led her to perceive that she would never regain his affection by ruining him, unless she could conceal her handiwork; but to disgrace him, to render him desperate, and then to hold out sheltering and consol-

ing arms, and affectionately to rivet the yoke upon his neck again more tightly than before, this would be at once her revenge and her triumph. It was under the influence of these motives that she determined to defeat the combination to which Murkle had made her a party in Paris, and which was to save the Board, of which Sark was chairman, from exposure.

Mrs Clymer bent on business was a very different-looking woman in her external appearance from Mrs Clymer bent on pleasure, and a chance acquaintance might be excused for not recognising at a glance the demure little woman dressed in black who was taking a ticket for the City by the underground railway, as the brilliant apparition which dazzled all beholders at the last fashionable garden-party, and secured her costume a description in the journals which devote themselves to the *chiffons* of professional beauties. There happened to be a passenger, however, by the same train, who had never beheld her on those occasions of social triumph, and who, seated alone in the carriage into which she stepped, apparently found no difficulty in her identification.

"Why, Polly," exclaimed this individual, "can I believe my eyes! Now this is what I call a rare piece of luck."

Mrs Clymer started, flushed, threw up her veil, and exclaimed—

"Terence Dunleavy!"

Then recovering her self-possession, she held out

her hand, and added, with a most engaging frankness—

"Why, I had no idea you were on this side of the Atlantic; when did you arrive?"

"Only yesterday; and to think that the first person I meet should be you! I take it as a good omen, Polly. Why, it is a matter of five years since I saw you last, and you are looking younger than ever."

The speaker was a good-looking man of about five-and-forty, with his whiskers and moustaches shaved, leaving only what the Americans call a "goatee," of considerable dimensions. His eyes were blue, clear, and penetrating; his nose slightly hooked; and were it not for a somewhat sinister expression about the corners of his mouth, his general appearance would have been prepossessing. He wore a travelling suit and a wide-awake hat; and there was an air of self-confidence almost amounting to recklessness, which was too aggressive to be the manner of a gentleman. It was rather the defiant attitude of a man who felt that what he might lack in social breeding he would make good by force of will, audacity, and mother-wit.

"What a mark you've been making in the fashionable world, Polly! I was talking to Ned about it not three months ago. He's doin' well, is Ned, I tell you."

"Still at the old trade?" asked Mrs Clymer.

"Well, it's not a trade to leave as things are going. His business is increasing every day, and is bound tc

increase. I am a sort of agent for him over here—and for others," he added significantly, after a pause. "Do you remember," he went on, "how we used to talk over politics in old days, and what a little revolutionist you were? You and I used always to side together in those arguments we had against Ned. The worst of Ned is he lacks principle. He'd as soon sell a torpedo to an emperor as he would a dynamite clock to—you know who. If it wasn't for Ned's powers of invention we'd have nothing more to do with him. That was why we split the partnership. I said, 'Ned,' says I, 'it goes against my conscience to invent all kinds of weapons to be used in regular warfare, maybe against the down-trodden classes of the world. The market is getting big enough to sell to the regular societies, and make a good thing too.' 'Terry,' he said, 'I don't hold by politics. I'm in the explosive business, generally, but it ain't no concern of mine who gets blown up. I've got no particular sympathies. I look for the demand, and I try to meet it in the fair way of trade.' So we dissolved partnership, and I went in with another chap, to work on some kind of a principle, but Ned was all the time cutting under us by bringing out some new contrivance—he's great on electricity, Ned is. So we—the S. F., that is—agreed that he was to work for us, and I would be his agent for the societies. Then he's got another agent that goes round to all the Governments; but he has a deal of trouble with them on account of their having all kinds of rules about

what's fair in war, which we haven't got. He's worked out a system of land torpedoes, to be fired by electricity, so that you can blow up whole regiments at a time without any regular mining; but he says he don't think he can get it accepted a bit more than his explosive bullets. Well, I don't see the logic of it myself. Provided your ball is as big as your head, you may burst it; but if it's only as big as a marble you mayn't. Provided you want to blow up a ship, with five hundred men on board, you may; but if you want to blow up a regiment on shore, you mayn't, except according to rule; but it is all so much the better for us when we come to fight them. We go in for killing our enemies anyhow, not according to any particular rules. When once you admit that it's a legitimate act of war to kill your enemy, I want to know where you are to look for the rules as to how you are to kill them—not in the Bible, I guess."

"No, indeed," assented Mrs Clymer; "it's a dreadful alternative. But my sympathies are all with those who bring wars to the speediest conclusion by the most rapid slaughter, especially if it is to result in the relief of the oppressed."

"That's so," said her companion. "Well it's a great business, this explosive material and infernal machine business,—and only, you may say, in it's infancy. There's no saying what a future may not be before it; and Ned's got the inside track of it—he'll make his fortune sure. I've got a packet of envelopes in

that valise, as a sample; every one of em's bound to blow up the face of the man that opens them."

"Dear me!" said Mrs Clymer, looking with no little alarm at the rack overhead; "and what else are you doing besides dealing in explosives?"

"Just as inquisitive as ever,—eh, Polly? but you were always true to your pals. You don't suppose I can stand by and see what's going on in my own country without lending a helping hand. Why, I've been in the Fenian business pretty near fifteen years."

"Well, but I thought your own country was America."

"So it is, but my parents were born in Ireland. And what's the use of bein' an American citizen, and having American protection, except to do the work the Irish don't dare to do for themselves, and couldn't do if they did dare? Why, not only Ireland, but the whole of Europe, is like a great powder-magazine,—and it's boys like me that carry the sparks that are to blow it up; but we must have a place to fire from, and run to in time of danger. God bless the Stars and Stripes,—they're a great institution."

"Well, Terence," said Mrs Clymer,—for by this time they had reached their destination,—"you must come and see me. Here is my address; and send me a line first, telling me when to expect you, so that I may be sure to be at home."

"And able to tell everybody else you're out, eh?" Dunleavy added, with a laugh. "Well, I am not

proud. I don't want to meet any of your grand acquaintances, at least not that way. Good-bye; I'll write and tell Ned that I've seen you."

"I think I shall have to write myself," ruminated Mrs Clymer, as she wended her way to the neighbourhood of Austin Friars and Tokenhouse Yard. "I must certainly prevent Ned from coming over here without giving me warning. I wonder what his address is. I must find out from Terence. I wish Ned would blow himself up with his own materials," she added spitefully, as she scanned the names on the door-frames for that of the young stockbroker of whom Lysper has already made mention, and whose worship of her charms rendered him a fitting instrument for the service she was about to require of him.

Young Casseroll, who was distantly connected with the aristocracy, and enjoyed a certain social position at the West End, was transported with delight when the bright apparition burst upon his dingy chamber, and being an intelligent young man, and well versed in the Joint-Stock Companies Acts, he apprehended at a glance the position in which the directors of the Universal Scintillator Company had placed themselves, and the nature of the transfer in process of completion, with the combination represented by Grandesella & Murkle, and perceived how easy it would be to excite such alarm and suspicion among discontented shareholders as should precipitate a crisis in the affairs of the Company—an operation facile of accomplishment, as there are always

rebellious spirits to be found, anxious to acquire notoriety and become directors themselves, who are ready to start a movement of this sort, and by the circulation of pamphlets among the shareholders, and letters in the City articles of the newspapers, to head an opposition which becomes the terror and the torment of the unhappy Board.

"Dear Mr Casseroll," said Mrs Clymer, in her most winning tones, "I am telling you all this in the strictest confidence. I would not for the world, as you will readily understand, do anything to injure Lord Sark, but you know how ignorant he is of business; and when I found he had placed himself unreservedly in the hands of such able, and I suppose I may say, between ourselves, such unscrupulous financiers as Baron Grandesella and Mr Murkle, I thought it time to take the advice of an experienced friend. I should so much rather that Lord Sark was ruined in purse than disgraced in reputation. Of course, as a woman, I know nothing of these matters, but I do think some steps should be taken to prevent these negotiations going any further."

"So far as I understand the position of affairs," observed Casseroll, "the Board, of which Lord Sark is chairman, is in this dilemma. The transaction which is in contemplation with the new company, represented by Grandesella, is in itself a questionable one; but if it turns out financially a success, it will probably never be inquired into, and the Board may ultimately not

only escape from their present difficulty, but gain in reputation. If, unfortunately, it should not turn out a success, or if some inquisitive shareholder insists upon an inquiry,—and I agree with you that Grandesella & Murkle are most unsafe men to act with, and do not enjoy the highest possible reputation,—then the results might be more disastrous than if the transfer had never taken place. On the other hand, if it does not take place, the very next general meeting of the Company may disclose a state of affairs which cannot fail to reflect the greatest discredit on all concerned, and may possibly lead to the liquidation of the Company. It is too late now for Lord Sark to retire from the Board. His only course is to carry through his negotiations to the end; or if that—owing to a rebellion among the shareholders—becomes impossible, by the sacrifice of his own private property, if he has any, to supply such funds as shall make a balance-sheet that may satisfy the auditors."

"Oh," said Mrs Clymer, "surely that will be the honourable course; the thing of all others to save Lord Sark's own reputation is evidently, at all hazards, even by exciting the shareholders to a danger of their position if necessary, to put a stop to his negotiations with Grandesella."

"Poor Sark has clearly not been to blame, except in trusting the manager and secretary, and probably one of his own colleagues, who, from what I hear, has been the inspiring genius of the Company; but I doubt

whether, if he was sold up to-morrow, he could meet the necessities of the case. However," added Casseroll, playing with a paper-cutter, "I think we shall best serve the cause of financial morality by forcing things to a head, and I happen to know just the man among the shareholders who will lead the movement. I quite appreciate the motives by which you have been actuated, Mrs Clymer; and if you leave the matter in my hands, and say nothing about it, I will see what can be done."

Casseroll had been evolving a scheme of his own during this conversation, by which he saw his way to turning the troubles of the Board, of which Lord Sark had been the victim, to his own profitable account, and shrewdly suspected that his fair visitor was not altogether so disinterested as she wished to appear,—in fact, he thought the occasion not unfavourable for urging his own suit, and the beauty was too anxious to propitiate him not to offer him some encouragement.

"*Au revoir*, dear Mr Casseroll," she said, after some tender passages had occurred which are not important to our narrative; "mind you come and see me soon, to report progress, as they say in the House of Commons."

The results of Mr Casseroll's energy made themselves apparent in a few days, and the enterprising manager became so alarmed at the turn affairs were taking, that he consulted the most active director as to the necessity of summoning an extraordinary meeting of the Board;

and an urgent telegram was sent to Lord Sark at Beaucourt, which only reached the Castle after he had left. Lady Adela, however, being in the secret of his whereabouts, undertook to forward it to him; and he found it waiting for him at Copley Grange on his return from dinner on the evening of the eventful day when he had placed his heart and coronet at the disposal of Altiora. As may be imagined, he regarded it as a welcome excuse for disappearing from a scene where his efforts had proved unavailing to make his cousin the only reparation in his power, and where a meeting with Stella in her company could only lead to embarrassment; and he therefore wrote Altiora a note to say that he had suddenly been called to London on important business, and intrusted Hetherington on the morning of his departure with a similar message. If, however, Mattie had known how resolutely Lord Sark, on his way to town, was steeling himself against the machinations and the charms of the Clymer, she needed not have undergone the paroxysm of alarm which she displayed when she heard the news. He had reacted, rather, let us say, from his weakness, than from his passion, for his enslaver. He was able now to look back with wonder at his own infatuation; and he felt that the only thing he had to guard against was lest his compassion—for he gave her credit for a real sentiment of affection for him—should lead him to compromise, where firmness was his only safety. At all events, he saw no reason why he should let her know of his arrival in town; and when

he attended the meeting of the Board on the following day, he little suspected that the result of their deliberations was known to Mrs Clymer a few hours afterwards; for the wily Casseroll had secured an accomplice to his schemes among the directors, and the opposition was through his agency kept duly informed of the decision arrived at by the Board, which Casseroll, only too glad to have a legitimate excuse for calling at the *bijou* residence, where Mrs Clymer received him in a most bewitching *deshabille* and in a dim religious light, duly reported to that lady. She had no sooner heard what he had to say, and impatiently listened to the expression of his eternal devotion, than she despatched by a *commissionaire* a note to Sark, couched in that language of peremptory complaint which the sex is so skilled in adopting under certain circumstances.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MR MURKLE PAYS A VISIT.

Mr Murkle was sitting in his office pondering. There was an open letter on his desk, and an open penknife in his hand, and his attention seemed divided between the former and his nails. Occasionally a particular

nail apparently irritated his nerves, and he pared viciously. Then it suddenly ceased to interest him; his hand dropped languidly, the lines in his face softened, his eyes turned from his fingers to the open page before him, from thence to the ceiling, and he sighed. It was not often that sentiment invaded the business sanctuary of Grandesella & Murkle, and even now the emotions which agitated the breast of the junior partner were not altogether free from a commercial taint; but he felt, nevertheless, that his moral equilibrium was, so to speak, upset. The document before him could scarcely be called a love-letter, and yet it was not one which came within the ordinary routine of commercial transactions, excepting in the sense that it might fairly be considered an "esteemed favour." Mr Murkle felt, that while in practice it was perfectly legitimate to mix up affairs of the heart and the pocket—and that, in fact, social life would be impossible upon any other basis—yet that the crudeness with which Stella Walton had associated finance with love savoured somewhat of indelicacy on the part of that young lady. In fact, at the moments when he cut his nails viciously, he was a prey to the horrible suspicion that he was being "chaffed," and that the beautiful American heiress was trifling with his affections, to see how much he would stand. But then his vanity would come to the rescue. "After all," thought Mr Murkle, "she is an American; it may be the way that marriages are contracted in the

wilds of Nevada; it certainly is not our way of doing things, but her immense fortune has probably suggested to her a line of her own. She may be in earnest,"—and he recalled the tender glances, and I may even without a breach of confidence add, gentle pressures, with which the supposed heiress had favoured him when she was in a particularly mischievous mood, and in especial that never-to-be-forgotten evening at MacAlpine's, when, carried away by the violence of his emotion, he had given full vent to his pent-up feelings; and at this point he cast his eyes upwards and sighed. He had expected to hear from her since then; and when accounts reached him through MacAlpine and his friend Lauriola of Sark's attentions to her at Beaucourt, and rumours of an approaching alliance between the Californian girl and the English nobleman had actually gone the round of the society papers, he had reacted into a mood of indignation, and had despatched the Baroness on her mission to Copleydale, in the hope that it might bring matters to a head one way or the other. And so far he had apparently been successful; it was evident from Stella's letter, that Altiora, to avoid the fate with which he threatened her, had satisfied all Stella's doubts as to his domestic virtues, and that the latter young lady, true to her engagement, had now written to inform him, in her own peculiar phraseology, that she was prepared to fulfil her obligations. Still Mr Murkle had a morbid dread of being made a fool of,

and every time he re-read Stella's letter, an uncomfortable sensation haunted him that, if he took it *au sérieux*, he might find himself in that much-dreaded position; while if he did not, he might not only lose the girl he loved, but her fortune to boot. It of course never entered his head that the heiress was playing with him, merely to save her friend from his designs; and he was at a loss, therefore, to conceive why she should want to make a fool of him. But his perplexities redoubled when he set himself to answer this singular production. Should he begin it "Madam" or "My beloved one"?—and as between these two extremes there was a large choice, Mr Murkle tried them all, and was satisfied with none. He could write either as the lover or the junior partner, but when it came to combining the two in equal proportions, his ingenuity failed him.

Now it is not to be supposed that the little plot of Mrs Clymer and Casseroll should have altogether escaped the cognisance of a person of Mr Murkle's extreme perspicacity and experience in City intrigues. No sooner had the agitation among the hitherto quiescent shareholders of the Universal Scintillator Company commenced, than he suspected an exciting cause; and this, by a patient process of induction and inquiry, he finally traced to Casseroll. He had the proceedings of that enterprising young stockbroker watched, and became thereby aware, not only of his visits to Mrs Clymer, but of Sark's arrival in town,

and attendance at the Board meeting. Being once upon the track, he further discovered that the details of his negotiation with Sark had become known, which could only have been divulged by Mrs Clymer, or by that nobleman himself; and as it was evidently the interest of the latter that they should remain secret, the treachery of Mrs Clymer became apparent. And this confirmed him in his fear that matters might be so serious between Stella and Sark as to have excited her jealousy, in which case the heiress's letter to him became all the more inexplicable. Under these circumstances, he decided that, before taking any definite step, or troubling himself any further about framing a reply to the letter he had received, he would take the bull by the horns,—in other words, boldly go and call upon Sark, when he would have an opportunity of finding out, first, what the intentions of that nobleman might be with regard to completing the negotiations affecting the Company of which he was chairman, and carrying out the engagement into which he had entered; and secondly, what position he occupied in the affections of Stella Walton. "For," said Murkle viciously to himself, as he stepped into a hansom cab, "if he adds insult to injury, first, by marrying the heiress, and then by throwing over his engagement with me, I will have my revenge."

Now it so happened that at the very time when Mr Murkle was engaged in the perplexed cogitations which I have been describing, Lord Sark was very

similarly employed in his comfortable library in Grosvenor Square. He also was painfully discussing in his own mind whether he should answer a little tinted note, with a resplendent monogram, in which the letters M.C. were inextricably and most illegibly intertwined in the shape of a heart, and which exhaled a subtle and delicate perfume which too forcibly reminded him of a moral atmosphere from which he had determined to escape for ever. "Pah!" said Sark, as he rose impatiently from his chair and paced the room to and fro, "the horrid thing makes me feel quite sick. It's very odd that an odour should have such an effect upon one's nerves, and yet there was a time that I decidedly liked it. That's one of those problems Altiora is always trying to get to the bottom of. I wonder why no scientific man has ever written a treatise on the physical effects of a smell, as determined by association. I've made a fine mess of my affairs," he went on, with a sudden transition of idea; "the old proverb, 'Malheureux au jeu heureux en amour,' does not hold good in my case, for my speculations in finance have been as unlucky as my heart-ventures. I am now engaged in the interesting experience of finding out which is the easier,—to appease a parcel of enraged shareholders or an infuriated woman. I wonder whether it will be best to write to her or to see her!" At this moment he was interrupted by the door opening, and the servant entering with Murkle's card.

"Show him in," said his lordship, with an angry frown, flinging himself back into his chair, and covering Mrs Clymer's letter with a sheet of blotting-paper.

"So sorry to disturb you," said Murkle, in his most silvery voice. "I know how worried and busy you must be, for of course one cannot be in the thick of things in the City, as I am, without knowing what is going on; but the fact is, Grandesella is over in Paris trying to pacify the *consortium* there, who are getting most impatient about the conclusion of our arrangements, you know, and I have just received a telegram from the Baron urging me to see you without delay, and get something definite. There are some documents which still need signing, you remember."

"If," replied Sark, "you are so well informed as to what is going on, you must be aware of the difficulties which have unexpectedly arisen, and which make it very doubtful whether the proposed arrangements can be carried out. There has been some treachery at work," he went on, with a keen glance at Murkle; "in a few more days we should have secured a majority for any arrangement we liked to propose, but these premature disclosures have utterly upset my calculations. I have been racking my brains in vain to discover who the traitor could have been."

"*Cherchez la femme*," said Murkle, with oracular irony.

"What do you mean by that, sir?" returned Sark, sharply.

"I mean that the traitress is not far to find. I am in possession of proof that Mrs Clymer has been the *Dea ex machinâ*."

Lord Sark kept his gaze sternly fixed on his visitor, but said nothing.

"You'll excuse me, Lord Sark, for speaking so freely," Murkle went on, feeling rather uneasy under it, "but the circumstances are such as may justify my frankness. If there is any truth in the rumour which we have all heard of an approaching event, which may materially affect your lordship's financial position, you may possibly be able to see your way to making arrangements which will be satisfactory to us all, and nip the conspiracy in the bud which has been set on foot by Mrs Clymer and a stockbroker named Casseroll, by acquiring a controlling interest in the Company."

Murkle threw in this delicate allusion to the rumour, which was uppermost in his mind,—first, as a hint to Lord Sark that it might have had something to do with Mrs Clymer's energetic interference in his affairs; and secondly, because it would force him to a declaration on the subject which would set his own mind at rest.

"I am not aware of any approaching event which can in any way affect my present financial position except the Irish Land Bill, and you have my authority for contradicting all rumours of the kind to which you allude. Indeed I should have imagined that you were

the last person to give credence to them, for no one has such good reason to know that they are unfounded."

This admission caused what Mr Murkle called his heart to thump against his waistcoat. Could anything be clearer than that Lord Sark had tried his luck with the heiress and failed, and that she had told him of her previous engagement to himself? He was conscious of an embarrassment very foreign to his ordinary sensations, and of a rush of blood to his ears. Murkle was incapable of blushing, or it would have gone into his cheeks. He was, moreover, unable, in the confusion of the moment, to decide how much to admit or deny; so he took refuge in his pocket-handkerchief and the weather, and remarked that he had caught a violent cold.

"I am sorry to hear it," said Sark, upon whom Murkle's embarrassment had not been lost, and who, with her ignoble-looking lover before him, felt more profoundly indignant with Stella than ever. "I hope you will excuse me if I terminate our interview. I am sorry that I do not see my way to giving you any message at present to send to Paris; and I must honestly tell you that I doubt very much whether our proposed arrangement can be carried out. I may now find it necessary, in order to save my own credit, to take measures which may involve me in pecuniary ruin, but not, I hope, with the loss of my reputation. Meanwhile, should another alternative present itself

by which I can avoid making this sacrifice, I will let you know."

There was a cool dignity about Sark which made it difficult for a man of Murkle's calibre to venture either upon menace or familiarity; moreover, he was in too amiable a mood to be easily offended, and too anxious to be alone with his bliss and his love-letter, which he had already decided to answer at once, to wish to prolong his stay; so he graciously bowed himself out, and left his lordship to chew the bitter cud of his fancies, which his visit had certainly not helped to sweeten.

CHAPTER XXV.

MRS CLYMER PLOTS REVENGE.

Murkle's visit to Sark had the effect of dispelling in the mind of the latter any doubt he might have felt as to the next course to be pursued with regard to the invitation contained in Mrs Clymer's note. Whatever feeling of compassion he had entertained towards that lady, or lingering fear of too roughly wounding her affections, had now vanished; and half an hour later he was ushered into the well-known sanctum of the fair adventuress, and was threading his way in the pink gloom, through the maze of low

easy-chairs and tiny tables, loaded with *objets de vertu*, the gifts of numerous admirers, with which it was studded. Mrs Clymer, who had denied herself to all other visitors on the chance of his coming, had carefully prepared the effects of costume and surroundings which her long experience told her would be most taking, and was languidly reclining on a lounge, a prey to sorrow and despair. She was too depressed even to rise and greet him, and could only murmur, as he seated himself by her side, while she extended her soft little white hand, glittering with jewels, "At last, dear friend!"

Sark took the hand, but did not return its pressure, as he remarked coldly, "I came because you sent for me. Are you ill?"

"At heart very, and at head too," she replied, passing her hand wearily over her eyes. "No one knows what I have suffered these last weeks. Oh, Sark, why did you desert me so cruelly in Paris? What have I ever done to offend you that you should break off a friendship which I prized more than my life? Since you so cunningly stole from me the heart I had sworn to hold safely in my own keeping, I have felt new and higher hopes and aspirations rising within me—our friendship was so elevating and purifying in its character; your influence over me was so wholesome; my whole inner life was changing under it so completely, that you have done me a moral wrong, by withdrawing the

strong arm which was supporting me, which you can never repair. I feel like a rudderless ship, abandoned to the mercy of the winds and waves of this cruel, heartless world,—oh, so desolate and forlorn!" and Mrs Clymer pressed a piece of lace to her eyes which did duty for a handkerchief, and had a mopping capacity for about two tears, and went off into an agony of sobs.

Now this is a sort of appeal that makes any man with a particle of sentiment feel like a brute, no matter how false he may suspect it to be, and his first instinct is invariably to offer some sort of consolation.

Sark was conscious of an uncomfortable sensation of being rapidly disarmed, as he said, "Come, don't cry, Marion; I want to talk to you like a sensible woman. You know how I hate tears."

It was just because she knew it that they seemed to flow more freely. "I can bear anything—sob—which will make you—sob—happy. When is the—sob—marriage to take place?"

"What marriage?"

"With that Cal—sob—ifornian girl."

"I am not going to be married to her; and I do not see the remotest probability of my ever being married to anybody."

There was a long pause, broken only by the gently subsiding sobs of the Clymer, as they recurred at rarer intervals and with less violence—for she was prepar-

ing for her great *coup*, and required time. At last she said softly, turning her large brimming eyes on Sark, "And you never knew that I was a free woman?"

If she had fired a bullet into him she could not have produced a more painful impression upon his organism. "Good heavens, Marion! why did you never tell me this before?" he ejaculated.

"I thought you knew it. I told you once Mr Clymer had married again—which, of course, he could not have done had I remained his wife. What could I say more?"

Sark vainly tried to remember the occasion on which this piece of information had been imparted to him, and felt that it rendered it still more important that he should define his own position for the future definitely. "It is strange," he said coldly, "that I should have forgotten the circumstance, and that you should have allowed the world to remain under a false impression on a subject so important to yourself; but it is too late for me to alter my views in regard to my future now, however I might have been affected by what you tell me at a former period. I have quite made up my mind never to marry; indeed my financial position is such that I could not if I would: and it is with reference to that I wished especially to speak to you. Why was it necessary to consult Casseroll about my affairs without my knowledge?"

It was now Mrs Clymer's turn to receive a shock; and the question was so sudden and unexpected, and

involved the possibility of so much acquaintance with her proceedings on the part of Sark, that her whole calculations were thrown out. She had hoped he would confide his many troubles to her, when she would have sympathised with him, instead of which he was evidently going to make her responsible for them.

"Oh, Sark," she said, "I hope I did not do wrong; but I heard such horrible rumours about the state of your Company, and became so uneasy on your account, as you were absent, that I went to consult Mr Casseroll on the subject, and he told me what an agitation had been produced among the shareholders by some things that have leaked out about your negotiations with Grandesella & Murkle in Paris. I am sure I can't imagine how so much could have become known," said the Clymer, innocently.

Her explanation did not satisfy him, but Sark was too much of a gentleman to press the matter further. His eyes were now thoroughly opened to the character of the woman he had loved. And as we always seem to think that wasted affections are to be regretted, he rose with a sigh, and gave her his hand in parting.

"When am I to see you again?" she said.

"I don't know. I am very much occupied now."

"What are you going to do about your arrangement with Murkle?"

Mrs Clymer had risen from the couch, and was

standing up. She felt that she must change her tactics, and, to use the language of the period, was "pulling herself together."

"I have decided to break off all further negotiations for transferring the Company's property."

"Then how do you intend to face your shareholders at the next meeting?" she asked. "If I understood Mr Casseroll rightly, there has been gross mismanagement and irregularity in its affairs."

"I think by the sacrifice of all my Irish property—though Irish property is not very valuable just now—I may save the situation; and I am prepared to ruin myself in the attempt, though I have in no way been a party to, or benefited by, the irregularities Mr Casseroll alludes to."

"And when you are a ruined man, what do you intend to do? Penniless peers are not, as a rule, easily provided for."

"That depends on whether your party is in power. I think the present Government would take compassion upon me."

"Will you come and see me to-morrow?" she asked, with the pertinacity common to the sex under these circumstances.

"No; I must go over to Ireland and see my agent about finding some one insane enough to pay for the privilege of becoming an Irish landlord."

"Would you mind my taking a trip to Ireland about the same time?"

"If you took it with any hope of meeting me, I am afraid you would be disappointed."

"Am I to understand"—and Mrs Clymer's lips got very white—"that you no longer care for me?"

"I shall always feel a friendly interest in you; but I have made up my mind to regain my complete independence. It is very painful for me to have to say this, but it is better that you should know that my whole nature has undergone a revolution since we last met; and it would be folly to pretend a sentiment I do not feel."

At this moment Mrs Clymer felt a strong inclination to throw herself on the ground at his feet. Had she for a moment thought an act of this kind, however humiliating to herself, would have been successful, she would not have shrunk from it. She now struggled as fiercely against a violent outbreak of hysterical sobbing, as she had striven to bring on an imitation of it at the commencement of the interview. She knew with unerring instinct that she had irrecoverably lost Sark, and lost him in the way most galling to a woman, because he had met some one who had stolen his affection from her. At that moment her hatred was pretty evenly divided between her lover and her rival; and with it there surged in upon her an overwhelming desire for revenge. It was true he had said that there was no chance of his marrying, but she none the less felt that the temple of her affections had been burglariously entered, and robbed of its treasure. It was at

this moment that the servant entered with a note. She opened it, and saw—"DEAR POLLY,—Expect me this evening at 9.—Yours, TERENCE." A compromising epistle, she thought, with a bitter smile; and she looked up at Sark, standing before her coldly, and, as she felt, heartlessly, waiting to bid her a last adieu. She fancied she read in his glance—perhaps it was the effect of a morbid imagination—a concealed loathing, which stung her to madness.

"Go," she said, and sinking back on the couch, buried her face in the cushion; then she heard the door close behind him, and gave way to the violence of her emotion. It was not till her passion had exhausted itself that she rose, and calmly went to her writing-desk. "Now," she murmured, "for revenge." Her note was only an excuse for a dinner engagement for the same evening, on the plea of ill health, for her anxiety had now become feverishly concentrated on the visit of Terence Dunleavy. True to time that champion of the down-trodden classes made his appearance; and Mrs Clymer, who had removed all traces of the storm through which she had passed, received him with affectionate cordiality.

"My dear Terence," she exclaimed, as she held out her hand, "how good of you to come so soon! I thought such a busy man as you would have forgotten all about me."

"Why, the fact is," he replied, "I have to go to Ireland to-morrow on a rather important affair, and I

wanted to know, first, whether you were inclined to do an old friend and a noble cause a good turn?"

"I would do anything I could for both in reason," she replied.

"Well, then, look here, Polly; it is not necessary for me to tell you exactly what I'm going over about, but it's a matter of life and death. Now I may want information which only some one placed like you, you understand, that knows all the ropes in society, could give me. I shall let you know how to write to me, so that there is no chance of its ever being traced to you. You're all safe enough, only I must be able to rely upon you acting true."

"I suppose you won't tell me now, what it is you are likely to want to know?"

"No," he said; "I would rather not, because I may never want to know it. If you would rather not promise, tell me now, only don't betray me if you do promise."

"There's no fear of that. Let me think a minute —it does not do to decide such things in a hurry,— you will have a distinguished fellow-passenger to-night."

"Who's that?"

"Lord Sark."

"Lord Sark! Why, he's got a large property in County Kintrary somewhere."

"I daresay he does not know where it is himself. I shouldn't wonder if he'd never been there."

"Taken pretty good care to draw his rent though, I'll be bound."

"Oh yes; I believe he is going over to put the screw on now. He told me his agent had become so demoralised since he got a ball through the leg the other day, that he is going over himself to collect his rents and enforce some evictions. I must say for Lord Sark, if he is a tyrant, he does not know what fear is."

"Is he a friend of yours, Polly?"

"A friend of mine—I hate the man!" and at the moment she spoke the truth. "He has done me the greatest wrong a man can do a woman. He is a type of the class that keep the poor and the oppressed from getting their rights. Merciless by nature, he deserves no mercy; and those who show it to him will rue it some day,—that's my opinion of Lord Sark. If you are going to make war against the aristocracy, as countries make war against their enemies, and cut them off in detail, now's your chance."

"Why, Polly, what a little spitfire you have become! One would think you wanted the man murdered because you want to be revenged; that would make it assassination, you know, and we are opposed to assassination. When we have to remove individuals, it is done as an act of war, and that renders it holy."

"Well it is as an act of war I am talking of it. If you want to demoralise a class, you must begin with the most prominent and popular members of it. You might shoot several small Irish noblemen without

producing the same effect that you woul. if you shot the Earl of Sark. However, please yourself; and in regard to a correspondent, I would advise you to look for some one else."

"Come now, Polly," said Dunleavy,—who saw that it needed very little to enable him to get Mrs Clymer completely into his power, and that she would be all the more trustworthy as an ally if he did,—"I see you are one of the right sort. I am not sure but what there's a deal of sense in what you say. Let's act together in this matter all through. I'll give you a secret code, and enrol you as one of the sisterhood; it's a grand cause, and, let me tell you, the women are mighty useful in it, and have a deal of power."

"Well," said Mrs Clymer, "I think we understand one another. Now perhaps you will answer the question I asked you first, and tell me what you are going over about." But as these are matters of too confidential a character to be divulged, I must leave the worthy pair to discuss the salvation of society by means of dynamite, and return to the party that we left at the cottage at Copleydale.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HANNAH'S TOILET.

Copley Grange was one of those old English country houses which are the especial delight of our American cousins. It had a moat and the remains of an old drawbridge, with a venerable archway, and a groove in it, which, in ancient times, was fitted with a portcullis, and which was ornamented with the armorial bearings of the Dashington family, with the year 1460 carved beneath them. It had turrets and winding stone stairs, and walls four feet thick, and haunted chambers, and secret passages—in fact, every architectural device which the rude luxury of the period in which it was built could suggest, or its wealth procure; and it had been added to recently in accordance with more modern requirements,—for the Dashingtons had been one of the great county families from old time, and had ever been celebrated for their princely hospitality, the traditions of which had been cherished by each successive baronet, so that it had become the fashion to increase the size of the mansion just in proportion as the acreage of the property was diminished through a too lavish expenditure. When the present baronet came into the property, he found it burdened not only with a house and park very much too large for it, but with sundry mortgages, which would have

suggested to a prudent man that the time had come when the traditions of the family might advantageously be departed from, and its too generous hospitality curtailed. Sir George, who was at Oxford when his father died, no sooner succeeded than he showed his readiness to depart from the traditions of the family, but not in the sense of limiting its hospitality. On the contrary, he was quite as extravagant as any of his ancestors, but he conceived that he possessed a talent for finance which had been denied to them, and he determined, therefore, to restore the fallen fortunes of his house by methods which they would probably have shrunk from. As the director of ten joint-stock companies, the aristocratic tool of Lauriola, and the *cavalière servente* of the wife of that great speculator, his reputation was not exactly one which his ancestor, the famous Sir Grey, who had been a cavalier of quite another type, in the days of Cromwell, would have envied. Still he was not an unamiable man, or unkind to his wife, provided she flirted enough to keep up the character of the establishment. She might invite as many friends of her own to Copley Grange as she pleased, so long as they did not clash with his; and he was always ready to make himself a charming and affable host. So when Lady Adela, on her return from the visit to the cottage, announced that she had asked the whole party there to spend a week at the Grange, he had offered no objection; on the contrary, he was rather pleased with the idea. He had taken a

fancy to the two Americans. He was curious to see Altiora after the notoriety she had acquired; and Baron Grandesella was of so much importance in the financial world, that the Baroness was a welcome visitor,—it would put the Baron under an obligation which might be made available some day; moreover, all the credit of thus putting an end to the scandal so nearly affecting his wife's family would devolve upon him.

"I shall telegraph for the Lauriolas," he said. "I know they are not engaged elsewhere—they will just suit the Baroness Grandesella; and you can send for St Olave, you know, and one or two other young men."

"St Olave has already promised to come," she replied, slightly flushing; "and there will be Mr Hetherington and Bob Alderney. I am so sorry Sark had to go away so suddenly,—we want more men."

"Ask Basinghall."

"I am afraid he would not care to come without Mrs Haseleyne."

"Well, ask her too."

"Very well, George; but I'm nearly sure they are both engaged. I know they were discussing the merits of two or three invitations when we were at Beaucourt."

"Well, there's Casseroll, he'll do well with the Lauriolas and the Baroness—he is a sharp young fellow; and I hear she has quite a head for business. We might knock up some new combination. Then if

you want another odd man, there's always the curate. I think a very slight infusion of ecclesiasticism gives a delicate flavour to a mixed party. It's like a suspicion of garlic in a salad. He will be too much swamped by the others to be offensive. By the way, there's MacAlpine, only he is such an ass; but he can supply a whiff of scepticism to correct the odour of sanctity if it becomes overpowering."

Meantime the Baroness, in a flutter of delight at so unexpected a development, had written, announcing the turn affairs had taken, to Murkle, urging the expediency of delay, in so far as Altiora was concerned, as it was evident that her social position would be so much improved by it, and refraining from any allusion to the determination expressed by the young lady herself to resist, at all hazards, the proposed marriage. She had scarcely despatched her letter, when, to her surprise, she received one from that gentleman, saying that, on consideration, he had decided for the present not to urge his suit on Altiora, and that, so far as his immediate interests were concerned, the Baroness might consider her mission terminated, but that he declined to give any assurances that he would not renew the subject. Murkle had indeed never clearly realised the somewhat anomalous position in which he had placed himself, so absorbed had he been by the receipt of Stella's letter, until he began to answer it. It then occurred to him that the Baroness might, at that moment, most inconveniently have secured him the hand

—he never hoped for the heart—of Altiora; but as he knew that the latter would only be too glad to be released from the engagement, even if her consent had been obtained to it, he had no scruple in writing to the Baroness in the above sense, prudently keeping, however, the sword of Damocles suspended in case of necessity. His letter to Stella, which began, "Dearest Miss Walton," contained an effusive expansion of his gratitude, with his promise that in a few days the necessary documents should be prepared, and the expression of the hope that he might be allowed to bring them down to Copleydale himself.

"And the men say that we are vain," said Stella, when she read the letter. "What but the most inordinate vanity could have induced him to gorge such a coarse bait? I shall be quite sorry when the farce terminates; it's such fun making a fool of a man who thinks himself so smart. Now, Hannah, I've pretty nigh fixed this lace on. I'm going to present you at Copley Grange as a harmony in slate. Now you will see that the dress I had such trouble to have made for you in Paris will come in most usefully."

"You just hold steady," said Hannah, placing her hand on Stella's shoulder; "afore I put them duds on, I've got to learn the trick of my legs in 'em. There now, supposin' I want to turn round of a suddent, I've got to give a sort of a sweeping kick sideways to clear the train, as I understand—so."

"Not so violently, Hannah, or you would lose your

balance; besides, you must show grace in your movements," said Stella, laughing. "More like this, but I ought to have a train on to show you; it looks ridiculous to be kicking at nothing, however gracefully you do it. Then there's another thing, Hannah, you must be very careful about sitting down with dresses made like this; don't go and plump down suddenly and throw yourself back, without remembering to take hold of your train and throw it over your feet."

"I know," said Hannah. "I've often seen that Clymer do it, and wondered why she did not do it sooner—shameless hussy; then she'd look for all the world like a cat with her tail twisted over her toes—same as you sometimes see 'em a settin'. Well, there's no need to tell me to be keerful in my movements when I'm carryin' them fixin's about. Why, I suppose that dress, now, cost a matter of a hundred dollars?"

"Two hundred. Only don't let Mattie know I told you. She would have got you one that cost twice as much, only she was afraid you would be angry, and wouldn't wear it. She says there's no dress that was ever made that is good enough for you; but then, you know, Mattie's a little fool, and we, none of us pay any attention to what she says." And Stella put her arms round the old lady's neck, and made her pant for breath under the violence of her embrace. "Now it's all ready for you to try on—let us make haste, and then I'll go and call Mattie and Altiora."

"Don't appear to me," said Hannah, while she was undergoing the attiring process, "as them colours go well together,—they're too much alike, and ain't no particular colour at that."

"They are called *teints dégradés*, and harmonise with your general style and complexion."

"Well, I suppose it's better to have 'em muddy-lookin', so as not to show the dirt. My, now, if I ain't real uncomfortable about the legs! Don't seem to me as I could walk without bustin' something, or toppling over myself. What was that went crack?"

"Only a string. You mustn't move about so energetically, Hannah. Do stand still. Draw in your breath a little, so that I can make this meet—there. Now walk on slowly. Why, that's perfectly splendid; you look something between a medieval saint and a dowager empress. I must complete the resemblance by putting a diamond star on your forehead on a black band over the parting where your hair is so thin, then the lace-cap covers all the rest. Now you're finished," and putting her head through the door into the next room, where the girls were impatiently waiting the summons, she called, "Altiora! Mattie! the full-dress rehearsal is about to begin. Advance, Hannah, and shake hands with Altiora and Mattie as if they were Sir George and Lady Adela. Don't step back so suddenly or you'll tumble over your tail. Always give a kick immediately after shaking hands as you retire."

"Shall I stick my elbow out so when I shake hands?" asked Hannah.

"No: that's going out. Now, imagine that you are being introduced to the Duchess of Beaucourt;—don't walk stiffly up and put your hand out and say, 'Duchess of Beaucourt, I'm pleased to know you, madam,' but make a curtsey—so; perhaps she won't want to shake hands—these British aristocrats often think bowing quite enough, and you needn't say anything."

"Guess I can't make that curtsey," said Hannah; "don't see how on airth you do it sweepin' down like that."

"Well, a bow will be enough. I don't know myself exactly how it's done, as I never was taught in America; now gracefully retire to the couch and sit down, and see that you handle your train properly—smartly now, as they say in the navy."

"The plaguy thing seems like as if it was caught somewhere," murmured Hannah with her head down, as, seated on the couch, she tugged at her skirts. Finally, extricating them from a footstool, she flung them triumphantly across her feet.

"There; that was capital. You only want a little more practice," said Mattie, laughing heartily. "Now Altiora has got some news to tell you."

"Mamma has just been to tell me that she has heard from Mr Murkle, who writes to say that if the proposal she had to make on his behalf to me seems disagreeable, she is not to press it."

"Ah," said Stella, laughing, "he is beginning to find out that it requires some dexterity to manage two strings to one bow, for fear of getting them entangled."

"My sakes!" exclaimed Hannah, jumping up from her seat, having previously dexterously kicked aside her train, "I guess I can sympathise with him,—if there doesn't go the second string to mine; what's the use of it, anyway, stuck on in front like a soup-plate? I guess it don't hold up anything."

"Why, Stella," laughed Mattie, "Hannah is quite right; she has profited by her lessons from Mr MacAlpine. Don't you know that it's against the first principles of æsthetics to add anything for the sake of ornament to a work of art for which there is no constructive necessity?"

"Well, but Mattie, the bow is a work of art in itself."

"Ah, but the supremest art, according to our kilted prophet, consisted in making the whole person a single artistic conception, and not a conglomeration of separate artistic ideas."

"Yes. I suppose," retorted Stella, "that was why he wanted to pull his kilt up to his neck, and turn it into a Roman toga. Which would you rather be, Hannah—a single artistic conception, or a conglomeration of separate artistic ideas?"

"I suppose paint and false hair and patches, and all them things that Clymer wears, are separate

artistic ideas," said Hannah. "Well, I guess; I was a single artistic conception from the time I was born, and you can't improve upon me much. Why, here's Bobby comin' in at the gate. What a start he did give me!"

"I have just received a telegram from Hetherington," said that gentleman on entering, "and he says that he has seen Sark safely off for Ireland, and hopes to meet us all at the Grange to-morrow. Oh, Hannah, I beg your pardon."

"'Tain't your fault, Bobby. How the men's ever to keep off my tail, I'm sure I don't know; it's one o' them gathers gone, Stella."

"You really must learn to be more careful, Hannah, how you approach the opposite sex. Trains were invented to teach that lesson, I suppose, but they don't seem to have been much use. I wonder why Lord Sark has gone to Ireland!"

"Perhaps for safety," suggested Altiora, whose thoughts reverted to Mrs Clymer.

"He didn't ought to have gone," said Hannah. "Laws! that was why I gave that start when I seen Bobby; there's no safety for him there. It's old Hannah says so, and you'd better believe it."

CHAPTER XXVII.

HANNAH EXPOUNDS TO THE CURATE.

"Mr Chalfont, will you take Miss Coffin?" said Lady Adela Dashington to the curate of Copley, as she was marshalling the guests for dinner on the evening of their arrival at the Grange; and the clergyman, bowing gracefully, offered his arm to Hannah, who, sitting bolt-upright on the edge of a chair, was severely scanning the assembled company very much with the air of a general on a field-day waiting for the troops to march past. Miss Coffin was too utterly devoid of self-consciousness ever to be in the slightest degree shy, flurried, or embarrassed; but being of a philosophic and reflective turn of mind, she was studying human nature, in the phase under which it was now being presented to her for the first time, with an earnest desire to enlighten her mind, and add to her stock of general information.

"I didn't rightly catch your name," said Hannah, "but I suppose you're the minister."

"My name is Chalfont—Sidney Chalfont; and, as you rightly observe, I am in holy orders."

"Holy orders is mighty difficult to obey; don't you find 'em?" she remarked, rising and taking his arm.

"The present state of the law in this country renders it impossible, very often," replied Mr Chalfont, who

had long made up his mind on the first convenient occasion to become an ecclesiastical martyr.

"Do tell!" exclaimed Hannah.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Coffin."

"Oh, I ain't noways offended, but it does beat all."

"What beats all?"

"Well, I don't know as I understood you, but you seemed to say that you couldn't keep the laws of God because of the laws of man—and you a minister, too; and I say that beats all—and what's more, I stick to it."

"Dear me," thought the Reverend Sidney Chalfont, "this American is a very plain-spoken woman." "My dear madam, I don't wonder that you are astonished. I am well aware that the Anglican priesthood of America are not subject to the same tyranny that we are in this country."

"Then why do you stand it?"

"We don't stand it,—we go to prison for it."

"Seems to me, if they put you in prison for it, as it is them as won't stand it. Did you know, before you became a minister, that you would either have to obey the laws of man, or else go to prison for not obeying 'em?"

"That consideration was not sufficient to deter me from following a vocation to which I felt internally called, and from being a witness for the truth and a martyr for conscience' sake."

"And you feel sure that them laws you won't obey

was made to uphold untruth, and you was made to uphold the truth?"

"I can only act according to my conscience, and what I believe to be truth."

"And them as puts you in prison acts the same, maybe."

"I give them credit for being sincere."

"Well, now," pursued the old lady, "I've been in search of the highest truth since I was a gell—that's a matter of a half a century; always on the search. How old might you ha' bin when you determined to obey the holy orders?"

"About two-and-twenty," said Chalfont.

"And you was so sure then that you'd got the truth, that you decided to go where you could break the laws of a country as calls itself Christian, to testify to it?"

"Well, I don't think that's altogether a fair way of putting it," said Chalfont, laughing; "but the subject is a large one, and involves the whole question of the government of the Church by the Church instead of by the State. May I ask what was the result of your fifty years' search after truth?"

"Well, I guess I'm on the track at last."

"What! only on it now?"

"It's difficult saying when I first got on—a body can't jest always give dates in them things. I dessay I was on all the time, but if I didn't know it, there was no peace. It's only with the knowledge as peace

comes. It's not by readin', nor by study, nor by spekilatin', that you find Divine truth—it's by loving what is good, and a-doin' of it."

"I should have said that Divine revelation and the teaching of the Church were the guides to truth," said Chalfont.

"If one set of people as is guided by 'em puts another set of people as is guided by 'em into prison because they can't agree which way they pint, seems to me they're mighty onsartin' guides."

"It has been so from all time," replied Chalfont, mournfully. "The history of Christendom is a history of religious strife: till man is regenerate it cannot be otherwise."

"Well, then, it's o' no use for a man as isn't regenerate darin' to say he knows what Divine truth is,—it's a-puttin' the cart before the horse, young man; he hasn't got the materials in him to find it out with. There's no bishop nor yet a judge in the land as has a right to speak on such things—leastways till he has conquered his own evils, and that's a mighty hard job. It's the heart as finds out truth, and not the head. When a man has given up houses, and lands, and wife, and children to serve his fellow-critturs, then he is beginning to get his heart into trainin' for findin' the truth. It's only by lovin' his kind more than himself, and sacrificing everything for 'em, that a man who starts not knowin' whether there is a God at all, can find Him out, and then He leads him into all truth;

but if you begin as soon as you can toddle to be sartin' that what your māma told you must be true, I don't wonder at your gettin' put into prison for stickin' to it afterwards, by them whose māmas told 'em different."

"But my present views were not obtained from my mamma," said Chalfont, much amused.

"Well, you set your muddled young brains against the muddled old brains of the others—both of you tryin' to work out God's truth as if it was a problem in mathematicks. Things as can't be proved are things as must be felt, and things as are felt mostly can't be proved. How can a truth as is based on pure love be proved? When people feel the same love, never fear but they'll feel the same truth. What I hold to is lovin' what's good."

"Then try some of those truffles, madam," said Lauriola, who was sitting on the other side of her, as the servant handed her those dainties wrapped in a napkin, and who only caught the last sentence. "I quite agree with you about loving what's good—take plenty of butter."

Hannah, who had never seen those unprepossessing-looking tubers before, in her thirst for knowledge boldly imitated the example of her neighbours. "My sakes!" she said, turning again to Chalfont, and speaking with her mouth full—"it's like trying to eat a chunk of tamarack-root, same as you see in swamps. If you call that nice, it's a truth I can't swaller," and she elegantly suited the action to the word. "It may

be true to you because you love it, it ain't true to me because I don't. Who can prove who is right? I only hope it's a truth as'll agree with you after you've swallered it."

"But that goes to show," replied Chalfont, "that people differ in their ideas of what is good, and that the first step in the search for truth is the finding out what the good thing is that you are to love."

"That's so—now you're gettin' to the root of things. There is just two kinds of love. Some folks think the best and highest love is the love of themselves—and others that it is the love of their fellow-critturs; and what seems true to the first set, will always seem false to the others. People who really love their kind live for 'em; and it's through givin' up everything for 'em and livin' for 'em that you find out things—not by studyin' on old doctrines, maybe true, but that nobody can't prove the truth of. Believin' as they call it, in doctrines, don't seem to do much good to people's lives," pursued Hannah, looking round the table.

"I assure you," said Casseroll, at this moment speaking across to Lauriola, of the Company of which Sark was chairman, "that in spite of the high character of some of the directors, there will be a terrible exposure —the thing will turn out to have been a complete swindle."

"One of the members of the Board fills, if I am not mistaken," said MacAlpine, with a sneer, "a prominent position in the Society for the Protection of the Inter-

ests of the Church. You must surely know about him, Mr Chalfont?"

"I know that there are a great many people who make use of religion as a cloak to cover their iniquity," responded the curate, coldly, "just as there are many who use a smattering of science to conceal their ignorance, or indulge in philosophical platitudes in order to impose upon the ignorance of others. There are the Pharisees and hypocrites of scepticism as well as of religion."

"Mr MacAlpine," said Hannah, breaking solemnly in upon the pause which followed this speech, and looking round the table for a general assent, "that's so, and you'd better believe it."

This produced a general laugh at MacAlpine's expense.

"That old woman is perfectly delicious," Sir George Dashington remarked to Madame Lauriola.

"The Baroness there ought to be eternally grateful to her," observed that lady.

"How so?"

"Why, it was she, I believe, who put up Altiora Peto to running away from her parents in Paris, thereby giving them a start in society which they would never have got in any other way,—witness her presence under your roof now."

"Come, come, *ma mie,* you mustn't be jealous; the Baron and Baroness have just as good a right to be in society as many others who are there—better, in fact,

considering Altiora's relationship to my wife; and I'll turn the Baron to account before I've done with him. There's Lady Adela giving the signal for a move; take my advice, and make the Baroness an ally and not a rival."

"Keithy," said Hannah to Hetherington a day or two afterwards, when they found themselves alone in the corner of the library, "I've been talkin' a good bit to that young minister, and ha' got him on my mind. It's amazin' how I seem to know more what's in a body by what he don't say than what he does. He's got a heart of gold has that young man, if he could only be got on the right track. It's the martyr-spirit as he's got. He's just a-bustin' with love for God and his fellow-critturs, and it runs into all kinds of fancies as he wants to be put in prison for,—suthin' about some kind of clothes he wants to wear when he's a-preachin', I disremember the name of 'em, and the Courts won't let him—seems there's a judge as says it's agin the laws of God to wear 'em, also to mix wine with water, and light candles and sech things in Church. 'Well,' says I, 'as the judge can't know what the will of the Almighty is a bit more nor you can in the matter, and it ain't no account any way, why don't you give in?' Says he, 'If I did, I should be a traitor to my God and my Church; there's a great principle a-lyin' under it,' says he, 'and I should be false to the highest love of my soul if I didn't hold to it.' Jest the same as you sometimes see a young man in love with a gell, and

he'll try and break his neck over a precipice to get a flower for her which she don't want, and which ain't no good after he's got it, jest because he seems driv' to it by his love, and he don't know no better. I tell you it makes my heart feel sad,—it's like a fine water-power all goin' to waste in a new-settled country, with plenty of lumber all round, and people starving for shelter, and no mill on it as can do anything but turn chair-legs and sechlike."

"What surprises me is," said Hetherington, "that people should not feel more universally the necessity of a fresh moral departure of some sort; that the inadequacy of the theological systems of the day to cope with the evils of the age should not force itself more powerfully upon men's minds; that with the increase of knowledge and civilisation, we should have an almost corresponding increase of armaments and of improvements in the methods of human destruction; that crimes should be more rampant, moral abuses more refined; that all the great social problems should remain unsolved, and that the effort to solve them should be left to men of science and philosophers, while the Churches remain passive, and apparently satisfied with the condition of things as they are; that men like Chalfont should not perceive that their zeal and devotion are running in the same narrow channel as those of the best men for the last two thousand years, and leaving the moral problems as far from solution as ever."

"It 'pears to me," rejoined Hannah, "that Christians have given up the idea of being Christ-like—gave it up pretty soon, I guess—and with it gave up the whole social idea contained in the religion which applied it to daily life,—turned it into a passport system for savin' souls, with dogmas, and ceremonies, and sech-like, about which people have been quarrelling ever since."

"It can only be through a combined effort on the part of those penetrated with the absolute need of a new departure being attempted, which shall grapple with the moral problems of our present life, rather than with the hypothetical considerations involved in a future one, that a new force can be evolved which shall be sufficiently powerful to display itself in what may be termed new natural moral phenomena. The elements are pregnant with them, and their manifestation cannot much longer be delayed. When that time comes, men like Chalfont will be attracted to the movement as certainly as the needle to the magnet; till then, his sufferings and his unrest are the preparations necessary for the discipline and the purification of his nature."

At this point Hetherington was interrupted by the entry of Sir George Dashington with the morning paper in his hand.

"Do you know where Bob Alderney is?" he asked in an excited manner.

"I saw him walking in the garden with Miss Terrill

a few moments ago," replied Hetherington; "is anything the matter?"

"Read that; but for God's sake say nothing about it till we have decided what is to be done. Poor Adela! I don't know how it is to be broken to her."

"Read it out, Keithy," said Hannah.

Hetherington took the paper and read the following telegraphic despatch: "The Earl of Sark was blown up last night on his estate in Ireland when retiring to rest. It seems that some explosive material had been placed in the bed-clothes. But faint hopes are entertained of the unfortunate nobleman's recovery."

"Somebody will have to tell Adela," said Sir George, who disliked all untoward occurrences, and the trouble they involved. "She will be sure to want to go off at once—and as I have all sorts of important business to attend to, Bob Alderney had better take her. 'Pon my life, it's one of the worst pieces of news I have ever received; but what else could you expect from the policy of the Government? Ah, here's a telegram," he added, as the servant entered with a despatch; "just wait a moment, Hetherington, till I see what is in it. Perhaps Miss Coffin would kindly go and look for Miss Terrill and Alderney;" but Hannah had already disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE EFFECTS OF AN EXPLOSION.

"BOBBY," said Hannah, as she overtook that gentleman walking with Mattie in a sheltered avenue, "where is Lady Adela?"

"I saw her this moment go out driving with the Baroness, Madame Lauriola, and St Olave," replied Alderney.

"Stella and Altiora have gone out riding with Mr Lauriola and Mr Casseroll; Mr MacAlpine is in the throes of musical composition somewhere; Mr Chalfont has gone to look after his parishioners; Sir George is engaged in what is supposed to be financial correspondence; I thought Keith Hetherington was with you,—and having thus accounted satisfactorily for the whole party, we had no fear of interruption," added Mattie, significantly.

"When does the first train start for Ireland?" asked Hannah.

"Well, no train goes there direct," said Bob, laughing. "I should have to consult Bradshaw as to the quickest route from here. Why? Are you thinking about making the trip?"

"I ain't thinking about it; I've done all that. I am a-goin' to start at onst, and you're a-comin' with me. Listen to this"—and Hannah repeated the words of

the telegram which Hetherington had read. "That's the kind of news that don't bear delay, nor waitin' for folks to come home from ridin' to consult what's to be done."

They met Sir George and Hetherington as they returned hurriedly to the house, and in a few moments it was discovered that the boat from Holyhead might be caught by going by the next train.

"You have only ten minutes to get ready in, Hannah. Order the dogcart at once, George, while I put a few things together. We may just do it," said Bob.

"There! I only want a brush and a comb and a night-gown in my hand-valise, Mattie," said Hannah, while she was putting on her bonnet. "You and Stella can follow with the rest of the things. Tell the Lady"—Hannah generally spoke of Lady Adela thus—"I had to take Bobby to show me the way, and there was no time to wait. Didn't I say, Mattie, there was danger for Lordy in Ireland when first I heard he was a-goin' over? If her husband won't bring the Lady over, I suppose Keithy will, and you can come along with them. We shall have to let Altiora go back with her māma; but there ain't no danger for her just now. Tell Stella she's bound to come at onst; maybe she holds his life in her hands. It's old Hannah as says it," she added, after a pause, "and she'd better believe it. Now hurry up, child, with them things. I hear the buggy a-comin' round"—and snatching the bag from Mattie's hand, she gave her a

parting embrace, ran down-stairs with the alacrity of a girl of eighteen, and two minutes later was seated by Alderney's side in the dogcart. "I've told Mattie what you'd best all do," she called out to Hetherington, as she waved her hand to him, without taking the slightest notice of Sir George, who never seemed to have realised her intentions until he saw her form rapidly retreating on his dogcart down the approach.

It is needless to describe the consternation and distress of the riding and driving parties when they returned to the Grange, to be met with the terrible intelligence which had been so promptly acted upon by Hannah and Bob Alderney. The Lauriolas, the Baroness, and Altiora, with MacAlpine and Casseroll, at once made preparations for their immediate departure.

"You had better go to London with the Baroness and Altiora," said Stella to Hetherington. "It seems that Lord St Olave is going to take charge of Lady Adela, as Sir George is too busy to go to Ireland."

"And what are you and Mattie going to do? Hannah said that she expected you to follow her to Ireland."

"I must go in the first instance to the Cottage; after that our movements are uncertain. There are reasons why I am particularly anxious that they should remain so. Now, good-bye; I am going to confide them to Altiora, and shall then be the first to leave this house of mourning."

"Dear Altiora," said Stella, taking that young lady

into a corner of her bedroom while her maid was packing, "Mattie and I have come to bid you good-bye. We are going to the Cottage first, and shall then meet Lady Adela at the station, and go with her to Ireland; but I don't wish any of our party here to know it. I was afraid, dear, that you might be bothered with that horrid Murkle, so I have just had time to write him this hurried note. Listen—

"'Dear Mr Murkle,—I shall be delighted to see you at Copleydale, if you will come here and bring the necessary documents with you.—Your friend,

"'Stella Walton.'"

"But," said Altiora, "you won't be at the Cottage if you are going to Ireland."

"Oh, I shall leave a note behind, begging him to follow me. There are many reasons why it will be much better for all of us to keep him travelling about on a wild-goose chase, than brewing mischief in London. I went out riding with Mr Casseroll to-day on purpose to pick the substance which he calls his brains; and from what I have been able to gather, there is a sort of conspiracy on foot in London to ruin poor Lord Sark in money and reputation: and now that he is no longer able to protect either, such men as Murkle are too dangerous to be left to their own devices. I only wish the Clymer could be as easily disposed of."

"Why," said Altiora, "what has she got to do with it?"

"Find out from your mother, my dear, if you can; she has been most confidentially engaged with Casseroll ever since he has been here, and, I think, has discovered more than I have. We are not going to let your cousin die, darling," she added, with a quivering lip, and an emphasis on the last word as if it might have another application. "And if you keep your eyes and ears open when you get to town, you may be of use to him. Keith will help you. The people to be watched are Mr Casseroll and Mrs Clymer. Lady Adela will tell you where to write to me, and you shall hear from us the moment we arrive."

And the two girls hurried off, escaping the formality of special adieux under cover of the general pressure of events.

The fate of Lord Sark affected Messrs Lauriola and Casseroll only in the degree in which it might influence their financial arrangements and damage their pockets. And they had much to say to each other on their way to town. Lauriola, who had an interest in the Grandesella and Murkle combination, being in the difficult position of having to make up his mind whether to throw over his friends and join the Casseroll movement, or trust to Sark's recovery and final escape from his present difficulties by fulfilling the arrangement to which he was honourably pledged. The Baroness and Madame Lauriola, each inwardly speculating whether

it would pay best to fight their way in society as friends or rivals, were cementing the forms of a hollow intimacy by sympathetic remarks on the recent lamentable occurrence, which Madame Lauriola had heard of, not altogether without a secret satisfaction; for she felt that the fascinations of her youth and beauty could scarcely compensate for the aristocratic connection, however distant, which the Baroness enjoyed, and which Sark's death would tend so materially to weaken. There was one subject, however, upon which they could exchange views with a delightful freedom and sense of luxury, if not with actual unanimity. To both, Mrs Clymer was an object of interest and curiosity: to Madame Lauriola she was, in addition, one of aversion; while the Baroness professed a guarded friendship in a certain deprecatory tone, defending Mrs Clymer just sufficiently to call forth the severe criticisms on her friend's general conduct and morality which it did her feminine heart good to hear.

"Depend upon it, Baroness," said Madame Lauriola, "a woman like Mrs Clymer does not easily forgive such treatment as she seems to have received from Lord Sark. In one way or other she will be avenged. She has too much the instinct of an adventuress—I might almost say of the *demi-monde*—to treat him with the dignity of a woman of the world."

"Indeed I think you are mistaken in supposing Mrs Clymer to be a vindictive woman," returned the Baroness, who had good reason for knowing the con-

trary, from the admissions she had extorted from Casseroll; "and I am sure I should never have allowed her intimacy with my daughter had I not assured myself that her friendship for Lord Sark arose merely from a sympathy of taste, and was of a purely Platonic character. Poor thing! I am sure, in spite of the little coldness which seems to have arisen between them, that she will be dreadfully distressed to hear the news. I shall go and call upon her the first thing to-morrow."

But the Baroness had another visit to pay first; for she was alarmed at the turn affairs had taken financially, and at the threatened collapse of the negotiations, with the details of which, as we have seen, she had become familiar in Paris, and the pecuniary advantages of which she was not disposed to allow to slip from her without a struggle—for she was a woman who entertained a strong belief in the power of money, and in the necessity of making as much of it as possible. She was therefore exceedingly anxious to hear from Murkle the real state of the case, and drove to the office on the following morning with an unpleasant suspicion that, for some reason or other, he had not watched the interests of the firm, in the absence of its senior partner, with his ordinary vigilance. Richard Murkle had not long before arrived at his office, and was indulging in a sentimental day-dream, and wondering why he had not heard from Stella, when he was somewhat rudely disturbed by the entrance of the Baroness.

"I only arrived last night from Copley Grange," she said, "and have come straight here,—I wanted to see you at once about this dreadful business. First, I want to know, if Sark dies, whether there is any one else who can carry out his engagements; secondly, if he lives, whether there is anybody that can act for him; thirdly, in either case, whether there is anything seriously to be apprehended from this counter-agitation among the shareholders, the particulars of which I have obtained from young Casseroll—but of course I could not rely upon them; and fourthly, whether, if there is any real danger, what steps you have taken to meet it."

"If you expect me to answer all those questions with the fluency with which you have put them, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed, Laura," said Murkle, yawning. "I saw Sark before he left on his unfortunate journey for Ireland, and telegraphed your husband the results of our interview."

"And what were they?"

"He wanted time, and he seems likely to get eternity," he returned, with a smile of grim satisfaction at his joke.

"And what becomes of the transfer of the Company?"

"Oh, I'm afraid the Company will get blown up, like its chairman, before all its rights, privileges, and concessions can be transferred."

"And you can talk of a fatal accident to Lord Sark, which is likely to be attended with serious pecuniary

loss to us, as if it was all a capital joke! I confess I don't understand your conduct during the last week, Richard. You overwhelm me with threats and menaces; insist upon my going into the country to force Altiora to accept you as a husband, then write and tell me you have changed your mind; allow Sark to slip through your hands, and go to Ireland without forcing him to fulfil his engagements; stand idly by and see a conspiracy formed to ruin him, when it is most important to us he should not be ruined; keep the Baron in ignorance of everything that is going on, and sit here twiddling a paper-knife and staring at the ceiling like an idiot, and then try to explain your conduct by profane and heartless jokes. Are you in love, or is your brain softening? If you think you are likely to win Stella Walton for a wife, let me tell you that you are uncommonly mistaken," added the Baroness, spitefully.

"Are you aware that Sark proposed to her, and that she refused him?" he said.

"No; and I don't believe it."

"Possibly Altiora could give you some information on the subject which would lead you to change your mind. Meantime, perhaps you will allow me to be the best judge of my own affairs."

"But they are my affairs as well as yours. I shall telegraph to the Baron to come over at once;" and the Baroness flounced out of the room and drove straight to Mrs Clymer's.

"Mrs Clymer's gone out of town, my lady," said the servant.

The Baroness was particular about being always called "my lady" by servants.

"What address did she leave?"

"She didn't leave no address, my lady."

"Then you don't know where she has gone? Try and think;" and the Baroness, who was standing in the hall, significantly handled her purse.

"Well, I think she's gone to Ireland, my lady—leastwise I know the tickets was took for Holyhead."

As she turned from the door she met Mr Casseroll.

"It's no use,—the bird has flown, Mr Casseroll. Don't you think, now, that you had better suspend operations with reference to this unfortunate Company of Lord Sark's until we hear something more definite from Ireland? Come and see me to-morrow, Mr Casseroll," she added, insinuatingly: "the Baron will be back from Paris, and I really think we could arrive at a compromise which might be profitable to all of us."

Casseroll, who had already had flies thrown to him in the same direction by Lauriola, and began to perceive that he might play an important part as an intermediary between these great financiers and the leaders of the opposition which he had been the means of creating, readily consented.

"Let me see," pursued the Baroness; "the Baron will come over by the night train. Come and break-

fast with us, and if you don't mind, if you are going back to the city, look in upon Murkle and ask him to come too. I will write a note to Lauriola, and we will have a comfortable talk over the whole matter; by that time we shall have heard more definite news of Lord Sark."

The same night the Baroness received the following note from the young stockbroker:—

"DEAR BARONESS,—I thought it best not to wait till we should meet at breakfast to-morrow to tell you that, on calling at Mr Murkle's office in the city this afternoon, I found that he was absent, and had left word that he had gone to the country, and would not be back for some days.—Yours truly,

"T. CASSEROLL."

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS CLYMER MEETS A MAN AND A "BROTHER."

A WOMAN'S vengeance is rarely logical. No sooner did Mrs Clymer begin to realise that the suggestions which she had made in a moment of passion to Dunleavy might result fatally to Sark, than the fear that his life might be in danger took possession of her. A strong reaction set in. She reproached herself with having

been too precipitate—with having yielded too quickly to an impulse of rage and despair, when, after all, with time and perseverance, there might be no reason why she should not regain his affections. He had admitted that no rival stood in her way. If now, she reflected, she could prove her devotion by being the means of saving his life, he need never know that her inspiration had endangered it; and the very peril which she had contrived, might thus lead to the full realisation of her desires, provided always that she was not too late to avert it. Under the conflicting emotions engendered by these hopes and fears, the *bijou* residence became unendurable, and within twenty-four hours of Sark's departure from London she was hurrying after him to Ireland.

It was dark, with a light drizzling rain, when she reached Holyhead, and she was alighting from the train with her hands full, and somewhat embarrassed by the slipperiness of the steps, when a gentleman passing politely offered his hand. The light of a lamp fell full on his face as he did so; and Mrs Clymer, with a little scream, made an effort to shrink back, lost her footing, and would have fallen heavily, had she not been received by a stalwart pair of arms, and placed lightly on her feet.

"There, ma'am, you're none the worse. By thunder, why, it's Polly!" ejaculated the owner of the arms, still keeping one of them round her fair form. "Give us a kiss, old girl, just to show there's no ill feeling."

And without waiting for a reply, this unceremonious individual proceeded to take it from the unresisting lips of the Clymer.

"Oh, Ned," she sighed, "how you startled me! Terence Dunleavy told me you were in America."

"Well, you see I am here—good luck to me, I may say, since it has brought us so lovingly together; and it's just that same Terence I'm after at this minute. I got to Liverpool yesterday, and found a message telling me to meet him in Dublin, for I had wired him that I was called over to England unexpectedly. Where are you bound for? You're not the sort of one that used to like travelling alone."

"Give me time to collect my thoughts, Ned, and I'll tell you all about it; but it has flurried me a little meeting you so unexpectedly. Terence tells me you are doing a large business in dynamite—blowing up people, and that kind of thing."

"Here, let me stow you away in a comfortable corner," said her companion, without answering this remark. "You used not to be sea-sick; we can have a quiet talk crossing over—it'll make the time pass."

And the speaker began to make a dexterous arrangement of shawls and rugs, that showed he was no novice at travelling. He was a smooth-shaved, straight-nosed, bright-eyed man, with thin lips, a pointed chin, and somewhat sallow cheeks, but a remarkably fine head and brow, betokening considerable intellectual powers. He was quick in his movements, but de-

liberate of speech—evidently a man not easily discomposed, and of strong nerves.

"There, little girl! Why, it reminds me of old times to be sitting alongside of you so cosy-like."

"How long is it since we parted, Ned?"

"A matter of five years; and it wasn't my fault if we didn't stay hitched till now."

"We won't go back on that," said Mrs Clymer. "But perhaps I ought to remind you, now that we are nearing the coast of Ireland, that I bear your name, Ned, and am your lawful wife."

"Well, now, I don't know how that matter stands," he replied deliberately, moving his mouth like a man who has once had a habit of chewing tobacco, but has now given it up. "You know I married again, Polly."

"And have placed yourself completely in my power by so doing. There is a very heavy penalty attached to such irregularities on this side of the Atlantic, however common they may be on the other."

"Well, whenever you have a month to spare, come across, and we'll have it all put legally square. I can get a divorce in Illinois, where I live, any time in an hour. What's making you so anxious about it, after letting five years go and saying nothing? Do you want to marry again, Polly?"

"Possibly; and as I don't want any inconvenient questions asked until I am legally freed from you, perhaps, Ned, you'll be good enough, while we are likely to meet, to change your name."

"Well, that will be difficult," he rejoined. "I've come especially over to see some one that has known me since I was a boy; besides, there's Terence and the others that I'm doing business with."

"I should have thought your business was just a kind that made a change of names very convenient sometimes. At any rate, if we are to be friends and not enemies, you must agree to this; and I want to be friends, Ned—it would be so disagreeable for me to have you put in prison."

"It would take two of you, clever as you are, Polly," replied Mr Clymer, contemptuously. "I thought you knew me well enough not to try threats, little girl. Take that back, or the first thing I do when I get to London is to call on the American Minister as Edward Clymer."

"Very well, Ned, I take it back."

"That's good. Now, Polly, what name would you like me to take?"

"Oh, please yourself."

"Well, seeing my baggage is marked E. C., you may call me Mr Collings. Now, is there anything more I can do for you, Polly? I'm pretty flush of cash; a thousand dollars or so, for the sake of old times, wouldn't make much difference to me."

"Oh, thank you, Ned, you were always generous."

"So were you," he retorted, drily.

"There is one thing I want you to do," she went on;

"I want to introduce you to a great friend of mine, the Earl of Sark."

"Stop," he interrupted. "Sark — Sark, — where under heaven have I heard that name before?" And he continued to repeat the name as she pursued—

"He is now in Ireland; and I want you to tell him that you are my brother, and that you know that I am a free woman, and that there is no legal impediment to my marrying again—because there won't be, Ned, if I run across and have our affair arranged; and you can tell him that I have come into some property in America, and must go and see about it; and then I will go over and get the thousand dollars you are so kind as to offer me. Couldn't you make it two, Ned? It would seem more worth going over for."

"Polly, if you marry this Lord Sark I'll make it five. Maybe we shall be able to do some business through him with the British Government. Anyhow, if you will work for a connection for me, you can have the money. You may be able, as my Lady Sark, to help me in my line of business with foreign Governments. There's a deal of money in it, Polly. You find out what's going on, at the same time, among the Socialist chaps. I can't always trust Terence. And these Irishmen, they're always quarrelling among themselves, and giving orders and countermanding them, and ordering things and not paying for 'em, and accusing each other of stealing the money. I'm right glad I met you, Polly. We can do a great business to-

gether if you can bring this marriage off; and you may count on me to help you. Meantime, we'll pass as brother and sister."

"Do you know Terence's address in Dublin?" she asked; "because we must see him at once. I am afraid he may have misunderstood what I said to him about Lord Sark, and that something may happen to him."

"To which of them? Terence?"

"No; Lord Sark. He has gone over to his property on business, and I'm so afraid he may be shot. It's terrible how they are shooting landlords now."

"Yes," replied Clymer; "it's a clumsy way of doing things. I've got a new invention for getting rid of them; that's one of the things I've come over about,—not but what I would much rather take orders from the landlords to blow up the peasantry. Don't you think, through this lord of yours, that you could manage to do anything for me in that line, Polly? Seems to me these Irish landlords are a poor-spirited lot,—got no grit in 'em. Now I could supply 'em with processes of eviction that would make it impossible for the tenants that were evicted ever to hold back their rents again in this world; and I defy any one to find out the landlord that served 'em, or the way they were served. I tell you, Polly, I would much sooner blow up the tenants than the landlords, because, you see, I should be sure of my pay; but trade don't take that channel,—more's the pity."

"Well, Ned, you must make the best of things as they are," said Polly, philosophically; "and if I marry Sark, I will do what I can to help you. You had better send to Terence as soon as we arrive, to tell him to come and see us; and just watch my lead, and follow it, when I explain matters to him."

Mrs Clymer said this as they were driving to the hotel, and was about to send a message to Dunleavy, requesting an immediate interview, when she was startled by an ejaculation from Mr Clymer, who had just purchased a morning paper, which contained in staring capitals a notice of the tragic occurrence of the night before.

"Holloa, Polly!" he exclaimed, "I am afraid you'll be behind time with that marriage of yours. Listen to this;" and he read the paragraph. "Great Cæsar! what a mess they must have made of it! If they had known how to handle that stuff properly, there shouldn't be a square inch of him left; and they say he is only mortally wounded. Why, little girl, what's the matter?"

This query was called forth by the fact that Mrs Clymer had suddenly subsided on the floor in a dead faint.

"No shamming about it," pursued Mr Clymer musingly, and turning in his mouth his imaginary quid. "First time I ever saw her do such a thing. I didn't believe she had it in her to care about anybody but herself to that amount. Guess the best way of bring-

ing a woman out of a fainting fit is to let her come to of herself. What queer critturs women are! Now I might have blown myself higher than a kite at the time she was pretending to love me most, but she never would have done that for me. Perhaps it was because he was a lord. Maybe some water would do her a little good, with a nip of whisky in it. Here, Polly, look up, little girl. He's only mortally wounded, so he ain't dead! and where there's life there's hope."

Mrs Clymer opened her eyes, took a sip of whisky-and-water, and murmured, "Send for Terence at once."

"I'll go myself for him. Don't you go fainting away again while I'm away. What fools, to go wounding a poor man like that! Astonishing to think that Polly could love any one so much," he muttered; and until he reached Dunleavy's door, Mr Clymer seemed equally perplexed to account for the stupidity of men in not being able to blow up a fellow-man more skilfully, and for the capacity of women unexpectedly to develop such strong emotions of affection. Nobody had ever heard of Terence Dunleavy at the address which that gentleman had furnished Mr Clymer by wire.

"Sorra a Terence Dunleavy did I ivir hear tell of," said the shock-headed porter of the obscure second-class hotel, in answer to Mr Clymer's inquiries. That gentleman refrained instantly from making further comment, and turned on his heel with a low whistle.

"Got too hot for him already, and he only arrived

yesterday morning. He must be mixed up in this affair of Polly's lord," he mused, as he retraced his steps. "If they hadn't been in such a hurry, they might have done it better, maybe. I wonder what Polly will do now."

But he was not left long in doubt. "Ned," she said, when she received his report, "we must not lose a moment. Find out when the next train goes to Killboggin, county Kintrary."

"Am I to come with you?" asked Clymer, divided between a desire to find out why the explosion had not been more successful, and a certain shrinking from approaching too closely the scene of a crime for which he had furnished the materials.

"Certainly; I need you now especially," she replied. "Oh, if I could but be the means of saving his life!"

"All right, Polly; I am always ready to sacrifice myself in the cause of humanity and beauty," he added, politely. And five hours afterwards they descended at the station of Killboggin, where they were narrowly inspected by a strong force of police drawn up on the platform, and where they found many of the county and Government officials already assembled.

CHAPTER XXX.

NURSING UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

Mrs Clymer was not a woman to be denied access to Lord Sark's bedside—though, under the circumstances, she had to employ all her diplomacy to get there. Fortunately she was a sufficiently public character—thanks to her position in the world of fashion, and the notoriety she enjoyed in the society papers as a beauty—to be known by name to some of the gentlemen present; and her brother, Mr Collings, played a most useful part in affording her that fraternal protection of which a lone lady, rushing to the bedside of a wounded nobleman, stood in need. And indeed her promptitude stood her in good stead. The trained nurse that had been telegraphed for had, through some mistake, not yet arrived; and the doctor, to whom she offered her services, was only too glad of an assistant who promised to be so capable and intelligent. What she chiefly feared was the effect upon Lord Sark's nerves which her unexpected presence might produce. "What is the exact condition of your patient, doctor?" she asked.

"Well, my dear madam," he answered, "the shock was so great that I feared he might have succumbed to its first effects; but every hour brings hope with it. He is perfectly conscious, but, alas! perfectly blind.

Whether he will remain so, it is impossible yet to tell. His left arm and side are severely injured, but I trust that amputation will not be necessary. The wound in the side is the most dangerous. The face has been damaged, but not so seriously as to remain permanently disfigured, with careful treatment. In the meantime, utterance is painful and difficult. I must warn you, as an old friend of Lord Sark's, that you must prepare yourself for a painful spectacle."

"It is just because I am an old friend of his," she said, with a sad smile which awoke a profound sympathy on the part of the susceptible little doctor, "that I have a special request to make, and this is, that Lord Sark should be kept in utter ignorance of my presence here. Let me be called nurse, and treated as one."

"We have a professional nurse coming; and have just received a telegram from Lady Adela Dashington to say that she expects to arrive here to-morrow night." And seeing that Mrs Clymer's brows slightly clouded at this intelligence, he murmured to himself, "Evidently a little family romance. My sympathies are all with the first comer," and he politely led the way up-stairs.

"I shall probably only stay till the arrival of some of the family," she remarked; "and perhaps my brother, Mr Collings, may be put up in the castle somewhere."

"It is scarcely worth while mentioning the matter

to my colleague, who has just arrived. I will take all the responsibility, my dear lady," said the doctor, who, in his professional capacity, looked forward to a delightful familiarity of intercourse with the beautiful and interesting nurse; "and I am sure that Lady Adela, when she arrives, will only be too glad to retain your services. Meantime, if you will allow me, I will go and inform my patient that the nurse has come."

If compassion is akin to love, love certainly is a wonderful stimulant to compassion. And when Mrs Clymer looked upon the victim of her vengeance, lying wrecked upon his bed in the prime of his strength and manly beauty, it was only by an effort of most powerful self-control that she prevented herself from falling on her knees at his bedside, bursting into an agony of tears, and pouring out her soul in a mixed torrent of remorse and devotion, of self-reproach and passionate protestations of her love. But although the room was darkened, she felt the doctor's eye gleaming through the gloom upon her with sympathetic curiosity; and she hoped he did not see the trembling of her limbs and the pallor of her countenance. It seemed to her providential that she was not called upon to speak, for she could not have trusted herself to break the silence, disturbed only by the heavy breathing, sometimes prolonged into a moan, of the suffering patient. His face and eyes were bandaged, and his left arm and side swathed in the wrappages

which it would be her duty to attend to. She sat down silently by the head of the bed, and placed her handkerchief to her eyes. This, she felt, was a feminine weakness which the doctor would understand and think legitimate under the circumstances. After a few moments, during which Mrs Clymer was passing through some internal experiences which were new to her, and which may not impossibly exercise a favourable influence upon her character in time to come, the doctor beckoned to her.

"I must now, my dear lady—my dear nurse, I should say—give you some directions in regard to our patient. You will first, please, assist me, as it is time to change the bandages and dress the wounds again."

For four hours did Mrs Clymer keep her watch with an assiduity and tenderness which quite justified the doctor's acceptance of her services—her bosom a prey to the conflicting emotions excited by the sufferings of her patient and by her own. As it was, above all things, essential to Lord Sark's safety that he should be spared any mental shock or agitation, she could devise no way by which she could maintain her position by his bedside after the arrival of the first members of his family, now that it was impossible to obtain from him the expression of his desire that she should do so. She foresaw that the meeting, even with gentle Lady Adela, would be a stormy one, as she was well aware of the existence

of her antipathy, which her ladyship had taken no pains to conceal. Moreover, what right could she claim, in the presence of Lord Sark's own sister, to be his nurse? She wondered whether Sir George would accompany his wife, and whether she might not be successful with him. Then her mind reverted to the fact that Sark's cousin, Bob Alderney, might not improbably form one of the party; and this suggested a whole train of reflections, connected with the two Californian girls and Altiora, which were by no means calculated to restore her equanimity. If only she could, in some way, make her ground secure while the field was clear! She determined to repose a partial confidence in the doctor, and see whether he could not suggest a method of sounding the patient on the subject without producing an undue agitation.

"I expect the Dublin nurse in half an hour," whispered the doctor, "and then you must really allow her to relieve you: you will be quite unfit for further attendance on his lordship if you exhaust yourself in this way immediately on your arrival."

"Alas! my dear doctor," she replied, in her most winning tones, "it is just because I fear that my services will so soon be dispensed with, that I am anxious not to spare myself while I am allowed to be here. I feel convinced that unless Lord Sark himself expresses a wish that I should continue to nurse him, Lady Adela will insist upon taking entire charge of him."

"Are you not on good terms with her ladyship?" he asked, bluntly.

"Well, frankly, no. Lord Sark and I have been great friends for some time, and she has been jealous of what she imagines to be my influence over him—though, I am sure, I have never tried to use it except for his good."

"Hum!" mused the doctor, with a quizzical glance; "I am afraid my word would go for very little, my dear nurse. In what way do you think could I assist you?"

"Could you not sound Lord Sark as to whether he would not like me to attend him? Say that you have received a telegram from me from Dublin, offering to come at once if he wishes it. Unfortunately, the last time we met we had a little quarrel; but with his life trembling in the balance, he would not, I am sure, continue to harbour any bitter feeling towards me."

"Listen," said the doctor—"he is moaning; he is beginning to recover from the effects of the anodyne I gave him to lull the pain, and probably wants something. Go into the next room for a moment, and I will see what can be done."

This conversation had been carried on in a whisper in a corner of the large bedroom, and Mrs Clymer slipped silently out of it as the doctor approached his patient.

"How do we feel now?" he asked—"a little easier?"

But an inarticulate murmur was the only reply. "Your sister, Lady Adela Dashington, will be here to-morrow," he went on. "Meantime we need another nurse badly. A friend is often much better under these circumstances than a professional," he continued, after a pause, gently placing his finger on Lord Sark's pulse to feel how the suggestion he was about to make might affect him. "Though professionals are in some respects most valuable, what we need is a judicious combination of the experience of the one and the devotion of the other. You follow me?"

Lord Sark slightly moved his head in sign of assent.

"I have received a telegram from a lady in Dublin who seems to be an old friend of yours, and who has kindly offered her services; but before accepting them, I should like to know whether it would be agreeable to you that I should do so." ("That's a thumper," said the doctor to himself, "but it's justified by professional necessity.") "Now," he said, placing his left hand in Sark's while he kept the right on his pulse, "you need not make an effort to speak; but if, when I mention the name, you approve, press my hand—and if you don't, draw it away. The lady's name is Mrs Clymer."

"No!" ejaculated Sark, with a groan that almost amounted to a shout, as he drew his hand quickly away, and the doctor felt the pulse bounding under his touch.

"Soho! gently. Why, our strength is coming back!

I was quite glad to hear that energetic 'No,' my lord. Don't be the least alarmed; there is not the slightest danger of the lady's coming here if you don't wish it. I will telegraph at once to decline her offer with thanks." ("God help me, how I am lying!" he muttered.) "Here, take a little of this. You are decidedly improving. We shall have a consultation as soon as Dr Crooks arrives. Meantime my colleague, who came this morning, takes a decidedly hopeful view of the case. Now try and rest a little;" and the doctor withdrew silently to make his report to Mrs Clymer.

"I am sorry that I can't bring you very favourable news," he said. "Lord Sark seems to entertain a strong objection to your presence. I put it bluntly, my dear"—the doctor forgot to add "nurse" this time, in his anxiety to spare Mrs Clymer's feelings—"but it must be kept a profound secret from him that you are here. I am afraid you must disappear before Lady Adela's arrrival, or you will get me into a terrible scrape, as I was obliged to pledge my word that I would telegraph to Dublin to you not to come; so you see my position. It would really relieve my mind very much, Mrs Clymer, if you would not stay after the nurse arrives: if by any chance Lord Sark were to discover that you were here, the consequences might be terrible. You cannot think how it pains me to urge this point;" and he took her hand and pressed it in a fatherly way—for to do the doctor justice, he

would much rather that she could have stayed, and felt that they were both making a sacrifice.

"I accept my fate without a murmur," she replied; "but I shall be too tired to start at once. It is now getting late. You must let me force myself upon Lord Sark's hospitality for the night. I will not enter his room again without your permission; but there is no danger of Lady Adela coming before I can make my escape in the morning. In the meantime, so much may happen, I want to know the result of your consultation; and perhaps to-morrow, before I leave, you will be able to judge more definitely as to his state. It would save me so much suspense, dear doctor, to let me stay;" and this time Mrs Clymer put her hand in his. "Do you know," she said, sweetly, "that I have not eaten anything for nearly ten hours?"

"Bless my soul! what have I been thinking about? Dinner has been ordered for your brother and yourself, and should be ready in half an hour. You will find him in the drawing-room. There's the carriage with the nurse and the doctor. Let me show you the way;" and the doctor ushered Mrs Clymer into a sitting-room, where, seated in an arm-chair, with his feet on the fender, before a cheerful blaze, Mr Clymer, *alias* Collings, had buried himself in the sporting experiences of Mr Soapey Sponge.

"Well, Polly," he remarked, looking up, as the doctor left the room, "come at last. How goes it with the

exploded aristocrat? Is there any prospect of hash in this old castle?"

"Oh, Ned, don't be so heartless! I hope he will live. Yes, we shall have some dinner immediately. Then we shall sleep here, and go back to Dublin the first thing in the morning."

"Oh that's it, is it? And what about my telling him you are free to marry him, and your late husband is married again, and all that story?"

"Well, we must put that off. He is not in a condition to hear anything—scarcely conscious, in fact. And some of the family are coming to-morrow, and it might make a *muss* if I stayed on and met them. But there will be other people I shall want you to tell that story to, Ned, who can tell him afterwards. It has become important that my social position should be more clearly defined. I see I made a mistake in neglecting to straighten matters before. But English society is so easy; they don't ask questions, especially if you are an American and can amuse them, and have good looks, and understand how to rise from æsthetics into flirtation. High art, pluck, beauty, and a foreign extraction, cover a multitude of sins."

"What puzzles me, Polly," said her companion, whose mind was apparently running in a different channel, "is, how the darned thing missed fire and didn't blow his head off. Did you find out?"

"No, Ned; I never thought of inquiring. The doctor said it must have been something very

small, as they could find no traces of it left in the bed."

"Yes, it covers its own tracks, that's the beauty of it. But it was just like those blundering Irishmen,—they put it under the clothes, I suppose, instead of under the pillow, where the even pressure, when you put your head down, makes it go off, and carry away pillow, head, and all. Of course, if you go putting it down among the bedclothes, you can't calculate on what it will do lying about loose,—depends, then, on how it happens to be struck. But, bless you, Ireland's no market in comparison to Russia!—they don't bungle things there. I'm sending a consignment over there now, that will wake up old Europe when they get them fairly to going. That's one of the things I came over about. Did you ever think about cause and effect, Polly? Because here I am, a mighty insignificant-looking cause, sitting with my feet cocked up over your lord's fire; but I tell you, when you come to read in the newspapers about the effects I've produced, you won't be astonished at its giving a man a sort of feeling of power he don't like to part with. I suppose Bismarck's the biggest man in Europe; but I've got tricks in my pocket that would play him out, when it comes to creating a general sensation. It takes very small men to pull the biggest wires nowadays, thanks to the progress of invention and the arts of civilisation; but what beats me, Polly, is, who is it that pulls the small men? That's what I wonder

when these inventions come into my head, and I sell them to those that calculate to overturn empires with them. How do they get into my head, and why are they allowed to get there when they're bound to do such a lot of mischief? Well, it's no affair of mine. I'm not responsible for inventing things; I've got to make a living. Live and *don't* let live,—that's my motto."

"Ned," said Mrs Clymer, "shut up! I've got puzzles in life enough of my own to solve; I don't want to hear yours. The way you talk makes me feel quite uncomfortable, particularly when I think of my poor friend up-stairs. Here's dinner. You can behave like a gentleman when you choose: act your best now, because we shall meet some of the doctors; and for your own sake, keep off the topic of explosives and the tragedy here. I am very tired, so I shall go to bed immediately after dinner, and we'll take the first train to Dublin in the morning."

CHAPTER XXXI.

HANNAH HEARS SOMETHING TO HER ADVANTAGE.

It was past midnight. Mrs Clymer had long forgotten her troubles and anxieties in a sound and dreamless sleep, the doctor having been especially

careful to see that the necessary directions had been given for her early waking and departure on the following morning. The dining-room had long been deserted; but Mr Collings, to call him by his assumed name, had been initiated into the mysteries of a comfortable smoking-room, where the doctors, who were amused by the originality of his conversation and his knowledge of certain branches of science, from time to time came to smoke a cigar and keep him company. It was the habit of this ingenious gentleman, on such occasions, to pass as a professional electrician; and having great fluency of speech, and a very considerable knowledge of the subject, he seldom failed, especially when under the influence of strong liquors, of which there was an abundant supply in the smoking-room, to entertain his hearers. He was, moreover, a person who was in the habit of indulging in what he called "dog snoozes,"—in other words, of sleeping either by day or night, whenever the fancy took him; and the advantages of the smoking-room seeming greater than those of bed, he sat up without manifesting any disposition to retire until it approached the small hours of the morning. He was holding forth to one of the doctors on the merits of a self-steering torpedo, when their attention was arrested by the sound of wheels on the gravel. Shortly after there was the noise of an arrival in the hall, and the doctor went out to see who had come.

Ned being a person who usually lived with his eyes and ears open, was more decided than ever to devote himself to whisky-and-water and cigars, and waited to hear who the new-comers might be; but no doctor returning to report, and his curiosity increasing with the delay, he determined to set forth on a voyage of discovery, which he could always explain by pretending to be in search of his bedroom. He had crossed the hall and was proceeding along a passage towards the sound of voices, when he saw advancing towards him a tall female figure carrying a candle. "One of the new arrivals, I suppose," said Ned to himself. "I wonder whether this can be the lord's sister come before her time. Polly will be in a fix, I guess, if it is. Great Cæsar!" he exclaimed, as they met; "why, it's Aunt Hannah herself!"

"So, Ned Clymer," said Miss Coffin, without showing a particle of surprise or emotion, "you have come over at last,—in consequence of my letter, I suppose; but what are you a-doin' in this house? I mistrust you're here for no good. Curious," she said, musing to herself; "seemed all the time as if it wasn't for Lordy I felt bound to hurry so. I suppose it was you I had to meet here. You know what I wanted you over for?"

"How should I?" he replied. "Your letter was like a message from a Delphic oracle. You said I ran great risks if I delayed on the other side, and could make

great profits if I came to this one; and as I only once before in my life received a letter from you, just of the same kind, and it all came true as gospel, I did not dare to disobey this one, especially as mine is the kind of business that is made up of great risks and great profits: besides, I had other reasons for coming over."

"Well, a man with two wives, both alive, and his pockets full of dynamite, has more risk than profit, seems to me," said Hannah. "But it's cold standing here; and I have a little to say to you, and you have a great deal to say to me. There's a little parlour with a fire in it—a 'boodwar' they call it—off my bedroom, where we can talk. Here, Bobby," she called out to that gentleman, who was standing at the other end of the passage, wondering at her delay—"come here. This is my nephew by marriage, come to meet me by special appointment, and we have a deal to say to each other that has to be said to-night. You go and help watch in Lordy's room, and call me if I'm wanted, otherwise I won't disturb him to-night; and you had best not tell him I am here. I ain't a-goin' to bed anyway. Now, Ned"—and Miss Coffin led the way to the apartment in question.

"Sit down," she said. "I suppose you know that your wife Polly, as left you five years ago, is a-keepin' up a grand style in London as a fashionable beauty?"

"I know that she is sleeping under this very roof to-night," he answered.

"My sakes, but she's a smart one! When did she hear the news?"

"We were in Dublin when we heard it. I met her accidentally coming across from Holyhead. The intelligence seemed to upset her so that she went off into an honest faint, and insisted on coming down here at once. She seems to want to marry this lord, as she asked me to pass as her brother, and tell him, when I saw him, that she had been legally divorced. Then she was to go over with me to America later to get it properly fixed; so just now I go by the name of Collings, if you'd kindly remember. I should like to see poor Polly well married, and told her I'd help her all I could," he added, in his own justification. "How do you come to get mixed up with her and her concerns?" he asked. "She ain't one of your sort."

"That don't matter," said Hannah: "she never guessed who I was; but I made her out the first day I set eyes on her."

"There was no reason she should," he answered. "I never spoke about poor Clara to her, nor yet about Clara's relations. There was no way for her to know that my first wife was a niece of yours. It was a matter of ten years after Clara died before I married her; and after three years we couldn't agree, and she left me. We lived in Europe all the time travelling about. I picked her up in Chili, where, I believe, she was born. Her father was in the Chilian army or navy, I forget which."

Miss Coffin listened to his recital with an unmoved countenance, but with her eyes fixed on him as he rattled on with the utmost unreserve, as a man reckless by nature, and too confident in himself and his resources to love mystery when it was not needed. Indeed it seemed a relief and satisfaction to meet some one to whom, from early association, he could talk freely of the events of his own life. She knew that he merely needed the cue to be given to him to ramble on.

"It's many years since we met, Ned, and we parted angrily then. I thought I never could forgive you for your conduct to Clara; but time brings forgiveness—and, poor darlin', I know she would be the first to say 'Forgive him, aunty—he was young, and didn't know no better.'"

"That's so," he replied, huskily. "She was the only woman I ever loved—more shame to me. You may forgive me, but I can never forgive myself."

There was a long pause, during which she watched him narrowly; and he turned uneasily in his chair, apparently in doubt.

"Aunty," he said at last, "there's many a time during these twenty years I've been wanting to come and see you, and tell you something that was on my mind; but, either from pride or shame, I wouldn't be the first to make the offer, and I blame myself. It's about poor Clara's aunt Fanny, your youngest sister."

"What!" exclaimed Hannah, in a voice of the

most painful surprise, and for the first time her face worked with an emotion which she vainly endeavoured to control. She drew her chair to his, and clasped his hand. "Oh, Ned, Ned! to keep back that from me, and you knowing how I loved her, and never ceased grievin' and wonderin'! Quick! tell me."

"I'm sorry, aunty—I am indeed. It's a curious story. It was about six months after poor Clara died that I went for the first time to Europe; that's a matter of eighteen or nineteen years ago. I was five-and-twenty then, and went over to travel for a firm that manufactured the newest rifles of that day. One day, as I was crossing through Italy, the train I was in broke down in a wild part of the country, and I found myself with nothing to do at a small wayside station. Seeing there was an old castle near by, standing in the middle of gardens and vineyards, I made inquiries if it was worth seeing, and was told that it was lived in by an English lady, whose husband had died only a short time before. So I strolled along the road to get a better look at the gardens, and saw a lady in black coming along with a nurse and a baby; and when I came up to her, who should it be but Aunt Fanny herself. It was five years since I had seen her, and she looked so thin and changed, I scarce knew her; but she was always a beauty. She gave a little scream when she saw me, and I thought she would have fainted. Then I told her how I came to be there, that it was only by accident; and she made

me fetch my valise, and stay over the night. She told me her husband had died only six months before, and that she had a baby, a little girl, that was only four months old."

"Do you remember whether she told you how she named the child?" interrupted Hannah, breathlessly.

"I remember distinctly, because it seemed such a curious name. I wrote it down in full, and I have kept it ever since; and one of the reasons that determined me to come over when I got your letter, was to give it to you and tell you all about it," and he took from his pocket-book the memorandum, which he handed to Hannah, and as he did so a little scrap of paper fluttered to the ground unperceived. Scarcely able to see through her blinding tears, she read "Altiora Peto." "Peto," he continued—"that was the name of the English gentleman she married; and he said, before he died, that if the child was a girl, she was to be called Altiora. It was the last word he ever spoke. Then she went back on the old family quarrel, and her own headstrong temper, that made her marry Cartwright against all your wishes; and how they disagreed; and how she ran away with the child so that he should not get him, and hid away in Europe; and how, when she heard of his death, she was coming back with her little boy, when he took ill, and it was in his illness that Mr Peto was so kind to her, and comforted her when her child's death nearly drove her to despair. So she married him, and still kept it

secret, although meaning, when she could persuade her husband to come, to bring him to America; but they were so happy in their castle, that the time slipped by. He was a great student and a clever man, with a large fortune, which was all to go to his daughter; but he loved solitude and the climate of Italy, and she was happy with him for a year, and then he died. Some time before his death they had a lady staying as a sort of companion, the widow of an English merchant and banker who was Mr Peto's man of business, and she was there when he died, and I suppose remained with Aunt Fanny afterwards, only I did not see her, as she happened to be ill that day. She said Mr Peto had no near relations alive; and now I remember why Lord Sark's name seemed known to me when Polly mentioned it. Aunt Fanny told me that Altiora was related through her grandmother to the noble family of Sark. Next morning I went away, promising to keep her secret. 'As soon as I am well enough, I shall start for America with baby,' she said; but she was hardly able to come down and wish me good-bye, she felt so poorly, and she said she was going back to her bed. I have often wondered since," he added, "whether she ever got up from it, and what became of the baby."

"Do you remember the name of the English lady who was living with her as a companion?" asked Hannah.

"I don't think she told it to me; but we had so

much to say, I have forgotten it if she did. She had not heard of Clara's death, and of course wanted news of you all. And I had to tell her some things about myself that were not true, God help me!"

Mr Clymer's narrative was followed by a long pause, which Hannah broke abruptly.

"Give me a kiss, Ned," she said. "Now go and lie down on that couch and go to sleep while I think. I don't want to let you out of my sight till this Polly business is settled."

"What has Polly got to do with it, aunty? Don't be too hard upon her."

"Just look square at me," said the old lady, whose eyes were now as bright and glittering as ever, and from whose countenance all traces of emotion had disappeared. "Am I likely to take advice from such as you, even though she is your wife? You do what I bid you, right straight through this business, as you don't understand anything about, or you'll get into serious trouble. It's old Hannah says so, and you'd better believe it. Now go to sleep."

And Ned, who apparently held his late wife's aunt in considerable awe, probably from some old association, meekly obeyed the injunction, which a man of more sensitive nerves would have resisted in spite of himself, and in five minutes was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MR COLLINGS PERFORMS A DELICATE DUTY.

For more than an hour did Hannah sit musing over the unexpected intelligence she had just received, and over the new and tender light that it had thrown upon her existence. Her thoughts reverted to those early days when the warm affections of her strong nature were concentrated on the little sister, fifteen years younger than herself, who was the life and joy of the family, and upon whom, as she grew up to be the belle of the village, her old father had lavished his devotion, sparing no expense to complete that education which in Hannah had been so wofully neglected, until, naturally highly gifted, the renown of her beauty and accomplishments spread far and wide, and attracted, among other suitors, George Cartwright, the brilliant but unprincipled politician, who wooed and won her, in spite of the tears and entreaties of both her sisters; and how, too proud afterwards to acknowledge her mistake, she had been compelled to side with her husband in the quarrel which had led to her final breach with her family, and more especially with that eldest sister, whose daughter had made a no less unfortunate choice in her union with Edward Clymer. But made of sterner fibre than her niece, instead of pining to death under neglect and ill treatment, Mrs

Cartwright, who had inherited a little money, took the decided step of flying from the country with her child, and, eluding all pursuit, had remained *perdue*, so far as her family were concerned, until Ned had now so suddenly revealed her history, and brought to Hannah's beating heart the consciousness that in Altiora she had found a niece on whom the affections which had been so long smothered might be lavished anew. "No wonder I felt drawed to her," she murmured, "and seemed to feel at times as if it was Fanny's voice I was a-listening to, and Fanny's step I heard, and Fanny's lips on mine, when the dear child was a-kissin' me." So absorbed was she by this conflict of sad reminiscences of the past with pleasurable anticipations for the future, that it was some time before she reacted into a passionate outburst of indignation against the Baroness for the fraud which had threatened to sacrifice the girl's existence to her selfish ends, and by which she had so successfully concealed her own identity and adopted that of the lost sister. She saw it all now,—the cleverly devised conspiracy, by means of which a group of adventurers in an obscure Italian town had been enabled to appropriate the large fortune which of right belonged to Altiora, and to take advantage of the mystery in which her mother's fate had become involved, to conceal her death and pass off her lady companion, familiar with all the circumstances of her life and private marriage, as the widow of the de-

ceased Mr Peto. "Their turn will come," she muttered —and I am afraid for a moment her natural instincts got the better of her, and the prospect of being revenged on the wicked triumvirate afforded her a fleeting satisfaction; but if such were the case, she speedily checked it, for she went on,—"God help me for thinking of such things, or feelin' anything but love for 'em poor infested critturs—it's the devils in 'em as does it. There's Ned, now, makes his livin' by explodin' people, and calls himself a sane man. The proper place for him is a 'sylum. He's a dangerous lunatic, he is." As she spoke, she glanced at him, and then her eye rested on the scrap of paper on the floor which had fallen from his pocket-book when he had given her Altiora's name. She stooped and picked it up. "Terence Dunleavy, Raggitt's Hotel, Dublin," was all that was written upon it. Mechanically she twisted it up, unable to bring her thoughts back from the one absorbing topic, till she started suddenly with a smothered exclamation, "My sakes, how I go on a-dreaming and wastin' time! It's nigh four o'clock in the morning, and I ain't begun to think about that Polly business yet."

Just then a low tap at the door aroused her attention; she got up and went to it. "It is only me, Hannah," said Bob Alderney. "I thought I should find you here, as you said you would sit up in case you were wanted. Holloa!" he exclaimed, startled at seeing the unknown visitor peacefully slumbering on the couch, "your nephew seems to be making himself

at home. How in the world did he know that he should meet you here?"

"Never mind, Bobby—you'll know in good time; only trust old Hannah. How's Lordy?"

"The doctors say that he is going to pull through after all, unless he gets some unexpected relapse; but it seems to have been a near thing, and the danger is not past yet. The police appear to have got a clue to the perpetrators of the crime. I have just had a long talk with the chief detective, and he tells me they are on the track of an American Irishman, who seems to have been mixed up with it in some way."

"Did he tell you his name, Bobby?"

"No; I didn't ask, for I knew he wouldn't tell me."

"Go and find it out at onst. Tell 'em there's reasons you can't explain now, why maybe, if you know the name, you may be able to help 'em. Don't you fail now, Bobby—there's a deal hangs on it; and come back as quick as you can."

"Deary, deary," she went on to herself, when Alderney had taken his departure, "where is this thing a-goin' to lead to? To think that it may fall to me to be the accuser of poor Clara's husband! Oh, Ned, Ned, what trouble you've brought with you, and what joy!" she added, after a pause; and she slowly opened the paper she had never ceased twisting between her fingers, and read the name and address again carefully.

"Well, Bobby, did they tell you?" she asked as he

re-entered. "Softly, speak very low—I don't want him woke; did they tell it to you?"

"Yes, Hannah. I had some trouble to get it out of him,—it's Terence Dunleavy."

"Well, don't you tell anybody else," said Hannah, without showing any sign of surprise or recognition of the name, "but just go back to Lordy's room and stay there; or maybe you had better go to bed, I don't want you any more."

Alderney cast a suspicious and lingering glance at Ned. "Does anybody besides you know he is here?" he asked. "They ought to know, you know."

"Well, I will tell 'em; but you'll spoil everything if you meddle. Just keep your head shut till I give you the word to open it. Now, good night, or rather good morning. Trot off."

No sooner was she left alone than she laid her hand on the sleeper's shoulder and shook him lightly.

"It's gettin' on for five, Ned; I can't let you sleep longer, with the work that we have afore us. Do you know the room Polly is a-sleepin' in?"

"Not I, aunty; but that doctor that was here when we came could tell you, if he isn't in bed. He seemed to have the general charge of things, and no doubt some of the servants are up that know."

"Are you flush of money? Have you made much out this of killin' business?" she inquired.

"Pretty tidy. I was telling Polly, that if she married this lord, I'd give her five thousand dollars.

I'm not a stingy man, nor one that bears malice, aunty."

"Good for you. If you were, what a lot more people you'd blow up than you do! It's a dangerous business, Ned—mighty risky. There's a man by the name of Terence Dunleavy is in it with you,—ain't there?"

"How in—— Well, I won't swear, aunty, seeing it's you; but how came you to know that?"

"Polly knows him, don't she?" asked Hannah, whose suspicions had been roused when she first heard of Mrs Clymer's presence in Dublin, before the news of the accident had reached England.

"What has that to do with it?" he answered, sulkily.

"Don't you see, Ned, that I'm a-puttin' things together, and that I know enough to do it, whether you choose to help me or no? But there's this difference between your doin' it with me, or leavin' me to do it without you: in the first case, I do it with the police; in the other case, we do it together, and keep the police out of it. That's why I want you to help me. You see, I like that plan best—so much less risky for you, you know. And it ain't much I ask in return."

"What is it, aunty?" he replied; for Mr Clymer was a man easily open to conviction, and with no prejudices.

"Well, you've got to ship Polly off to America by the very first steamer as sails from Queenstown. There

must be no goin' up to London first, nor making explanations to folks. She's just got to get up and get, and that's all about it."

"But suppose she won't?"

"That's just why I want you to come with me straight to her bedroom now. She's got to,—there ain't no suppose about it. You see, Ned, if she says she won't, I should have to have both you and she taken up by the police on suspicion of bein' intimate friends of Terence Dunleavy's; and they are on his track now,—they have his name and his address—Raggitt's Hotel, if I don't disremember."

Ned made an uneasy attempt to laugh scornfully as he said, "They are not likely to find him there."

"Maybe not; but I doubt whether Polly would care to be questioned about when she saw Dunleavy last, and what business you and she did together, and when she was married, and when you were married again. They punish bigamy by transportation in this country," said Hannah, whose notions of the law of domicile were hazy; and even Ned felt vaguely alarmed. "Bless you, you don't, neither of you, want all the past and present of your lives raked up, as it's bound to be onst them police gets hold of you! Then, to make it easier, you could promise her a few of them dollars if she would go over quietly without any fuss. I can make it up to you another way, Ned; but you must let me boss you through this business, if you want to come out at the right end at last."

"Go ahead, aunty! You're an all-fire smart woman, —I'll follow your lead."

"Then here we go," said Hannah, and she touched the bell.

They were quickly shown to Mrs Clymer's bedroom, and Hannah entered it, leaving Ned to cool his heels in the passage for the sake of propriety, but keeping him as a reserve force, to be used in case of need and when the coast was clear.

"Polly," said Hannah, throwing the light of the candle full upon the eyes of the sleeping beauty, and shaking her roughly, "come, wake up."

Mrs Clymer started, rubbed her eyes, sat up, and stared in a bewildered manner at the tall, ghostly-looking apparition before her.

"The police are after Terence Dunleavy, and if you don't want to be took up, you must make tracks at onst. To think," pursued Hannah, with a confidence of assurance that seemed to paralyse Mrs Clymer's half-awakened wits, "after all that you have done to the lord, of your havin' the audacity to come and sleep under his very roof! Why, it beats all. Hurry up if you want to escape; you ain't got no time to lose."

It is probable that even in her coolest and most self-possessed moments such an address would have staggered the adventuress; but taken unawares, scarcely able to distinguish between Hannah's real presence and a horrid nightmare of her, Mrs Clymer was thrown

into a state of absolute terror. Conscious of having been the instigator of the crime, the most appalling consequences presented themselves to her excited imagination; and Miss Coffin's aspect as she glared at her, like an avenging angel advanced in years, was not calculated to allay her fears.

"Where am I?" she exclaimed wildly, looking round.

"Where you didn't ought to be, my dear. Come, hurry up, and get your duds on; Ned's outside waiting for you. You did not know that your husband, that helps people to blow up their enemies, married my niece before he married his other wives, or you wouldn't ha' been so offish when we first met over in Paris. He's agreed to do what he can to help you to escape. My! there's steps! I wonder if them's the police!"—and Hannah went to the door and looked out. Seeing all clear, she beckoned to Ned. "Now's your time," she said, "I've skeared her 'most out of her wits; she thinks the police are after her—and mind, Ned, a word from me and they will be. I leave her to you now. When she's dressed, bring her to my room. It's all safe yet, Polly," she said, turning back to Mrs Clymer, "but it won't be long. Ned will wait outside, and when you're dressed, he'll bring you to my room to say good-bye. I shall have a last word to say to you;" and Hannah disappeared, leaving Mrs Clymer in a turmoil of indignation, apprehension, and confusion, which had deprived her of the power of expressing her

sentiments of Miss Coffin's conduct generally. In a few moments she opened the door.

"Ned," she said, "you can come in now. Is what that horrid woman said true?"

"True as gospel, Polly. I'm safe enough if you can be got away before you're arrested. You are what naturalists call the missing link between me and Dunleavy,—that's why I've got to ship you off, little girl; but I will give you something to grease the machinery of life with after you get to the other side. I don't wonder now that you fainted when you heard your lord had been blown up, considering the hand you seem to have had in it."

Whatever doubts the Clymer may have entertained as to immediate compliance with Hannah's directions were dissipated by this speech. Her conscience exaggerated the dangers of the situation, which had been painted by both Hannah and her husband in sufficiently appalling colours. She dressed in nervous haste, and appeared in Hannah's little room with a promptitude which seemed to please the old lady.

"I've told 'em to get some coffee ready for you—leastways the doctor has. He's quite a high-toned, nice kind of a man, Polly, and seems so anxious to get you off, that he must kinder know what danger you're in. He says he was a-goin' to send you off, anyways, by this train. We've been a-lookin' at the papers, and there's a steamer as leaves Queenstown this afternoon. Ned will take your passage and see you off comfortable.

And you'd better stay in America till I write and tell you that it's safe for you to come back again. Now don't you come back afore," she continued, casting a withering glance upon her, "or it will be the worse for you. It's old Hannah says it, and you'd better believe it."

"Miss Coffin," said Mrs Clymer, whom this last remark stung into a retort, "if I have been silent under your insults or accusations, it is not because the first were deserved or the latter well founded, but entirely owing to the false position in which I find myself placed by the unexpected appearance of my husband in Ireland. Out of regard for him, as well as for my own character, I had already decided, after assuring myself of the condition of Lord Sark, to proceed to America at once. My departure has therefore no reference to your threats or unjust accusations; nor shall I be guided in my movements by anything you may see fit to write, but shall return to England whenever it suits me. In the meantime, I trust that your combined schemes for entrapping an English nobleman as a husband for your Californian heiress may meet with the success which they deserve. I can only regret that she will have to wait so long for whatever may be left of him."

"I expect her here with Lady Adela this afternoon to nurse him," said Hannah, who had the satisfaction of seeing Mrs Clymer wince under the information. "Take her away, Ned, and give her her breakfast, and

never let me set eyes on her in this country again; and when you've shipped her off, just you come straight back here to me without losing an hour."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE PARTY AT KILLBOGGIN.

It was not until Miss Coffin had assured herself that Mr and Mrs Clymer were safely off, that she made her presence in the castle known to Lord Sark. She had indeed been on her way to that nobleman's room when she met her nephew, but his sudden appearance changed her intention; and she felt that she could do her host a greater service by sending the siren who had pursued him out of the country than by any amount of personal attendance. Indeed, so cleverly had she managed the matter, that even Bob Alderney was ignorant that Mrs Clymer had spent the night in the castle. She now, under that gentleman's guidance, went to his cousin's bedside. "Lordy, my dear," she whispered soothingly in his ear, as she sat down by him and took his hand in hers, "it's old Hannah, come to nurse you till your sister comes."

He moved restlessly, and murmured "Thank you;" but she knew instinctively the questions which he had

not strength to ask, and the cares which were agitating his mind. "There ain't no cause for frettin'; there's many changes has been taking place this last twenty-four hours that you haven't got strength to listen to now. Perhaps when Stella comes—she'll be here with your sister this afternoon—she'll explain 'em to you better than I can,—many things as you mistook, through not understandin' the natur of gells; but there ain't a nobler gell breathing than Stella, no matter how she may cut up sometimes. Now it's old Hannah says so, my dear, who has known her for years, and you'd better believe it. And as for them other things as is a-pressin' on your mind, I never seed the money trouble yet as there wasn't a way out of, leastways in Amurrika; and I guess it's pretty much the same here. Bless you, they ain't o' no account! what you need is an easy mind, and a belief in the unexpected. Providence can always make things turn up in a way nobody could ever ha' foreseen. Now there's that Clymer packed off in a steamer for New York this afternoon, and it was old Hannah done it. That woman did a deal o' mischief, but she won't trouble you any more, Lordy: it was the devils in her, poor thing." It was difficult to say what effect this curious speech had upon Lord Sark's mind, as his eyes were hidden by the bandages, and his whole face swathed in a manner which concealed its expression; but after a moment his hand opened eagerly, and when she placed hers in it, he raised it to his lips, which seemed to be all the

response the old lady required, for her eyes glistened with tears as she returned the pressure. "There was a man did that to me onst before," she murmured, looking with an analytical expression at the spot on her hand which Sark's lips had touched. "It must be a matter of fifty years ago now. If anybody had told me then that I would have let that place be kissed again by a man, and an English lord at that, and have liked it, I should have said, 'My dear, you don't know the natur of Hannah Coffin.' Lord forgive us! it's little we any of us know of ourselves or of each other, and of His wonderful dealings who can make things happen in a way as no imagination could ha' pictured," —and as her mind again reverted to her newly found niece, she sank into a reverie, from which she was only aroused by the entry of the nurse.

In the evening Lady Adela, Stella, and Mattie, in charge of Lord St Olave, arrived, and were cheered by the doctor's report that the patient had made remarkable progress during the afternoon. Whether this was due to Hannah's moral treatment, or to their own medicaments, will never be known; but the news of their arrival still further contributed to relieve the mental suffering under which Lord Sark was labouring almost as much as from his wounds.

"Stella," said Mattie that evening when they were both sitting with Hannah in the little boudoir, which had been appropriated to the latter, "what was the last address you gave Mr Murkle?"

"I left a letter for him at Dublin, requesting him to go to Londonderry and wait there till he received a telegram, which I would address to him at the post-office, telling him the day of our arrival, when I proposed that he should accompany us on a trip to the Giant's Causeway. It's rather a cold expedition for the depth of the winter, but to the American tourist or the Cockney lover nothing is impossible."

"Oh, Stella, what a ridiculous journey to send the poor man upon, when we haven't the slightest intention of going near the Giant's Causeway!"

"Telegraph him to come here at onst, Stella," said Hannah.

"To come here, Hannah! What on earth should we do with him here?"

"That's just what I want to show you when he comes," rejoined Miss Coffin. "Just you bring him here, and then leave him to me; and don't lose a moment," said the old lady, rubbing her hands in anticipation of that event. "There'll be no call for you to see him if you don't want to."

It was so very unlike Miss Coffin to give a decided direction of this sort without a very good reason for it, that Stella did not venture on any further remonstrance.

"How shall I word it, Hannah?" said that young lady, taking a form—without a supply of which she never travelled—from her travelling-bag.

"Put it very strong, my dearie,—like a gell would

to her lover, so as it may be quite sure to fetch him."

"Will this do?—

"Your presence here without delay essential. Our joint happiness at stake. Reply.—STELLA."

"And that's true," said Hannah. "We'd best send Bobby with it to the telegraph-office. Mattie, you take charge of all that."

When that young lady returned from her mission, she had a letter in her hand. "From Altiora," she said, and eagerly opened it. "Why, Stella, Altiora says that when the Baroness went to call on Mrs Clymer in London, she found that she had left town for Ireland. I wonder where she is, and what mischief she is contriving?"

"I wonder!" remarked Hannah, drily. Her tone of voice arrested the attention of both girls, who looked up quickly at her.

"Oh, Hannah, you know something, and you won't tell us! How mysterious you have become, with your telegrams to Murkle, and your wonderings about the Clymer!"

"It ain't time to tell you yet all I know, my dears. I suppose you'll be answering that letter to-morrow, Mattie: just tell the darling that she ain't a-goin' to be left alone in London with that mother of hers many days longer, but I am a-comin' to her right away, as soon as I've settled with this Murkle; but you needn't say anything about him. And say! just leave me

some paper; I want to write to Keithy. And now I am too tired to have you a-settin' here any longer. Good night, my dearies." And the two girls, knowing from experience that when Hannah was in an impenetrable mood it was useless to attempt to read her riddles, took their departure, full of speculation as to the cause of the mystery which had suddenly enveloped her conduct.

Mr Murkle, when he received Stella's telegram at Derry, was by no means in an amiable frame of mind. He had flown from London on the wings of love, with his pocket full of documents setting forth his pecuniary value, and his heart full of hope, but to find, on arriving at Copleydale, that the nest was empty, and that, as his only consolation, Stella had left a rather coldly worded note, saying that she and her sister and Miss Coffin had suddenly decided on making a tour in Ireland, and that she hoped he would meet her in Dublin; and she enclosed the name of the hotel. This eccentric conduct roused his suspicions, and he was half inclined to return to London; but he felt that due allowances should be made for the caprices of an heiress and a beauty. He reflected that the prize was a large one, and worth a little trouble; and he registered a mental resolution to pay Stella back for all the anxiety and inconvenience to which he was now subjected, by a pretty severe exercise of marital authority when he once secured her as his wife. At Dublin he was infuriated by having a letter put into his hand, in which

Stella, with a clever frankness, admitted that she and her sister had been persuaded by Lady Adela Dashington to accompany her to her wounded brother's estate, but that the visit would probably only last a couple of days, when they intended to go on a trip to the north of Ireland, and hoped for his company on the occasion. This letter, as it made a great demand upon his credulity, was affectionately worded; and when once he had cooled off from the anger caused by his first disappointment, he felt consoled by the evidence it seemed to afford of Miss Walton's sincerity in wishing to carry out her engagement with him, in spite of the difficulties which an accidental combination of circumstances had opposed to their meeting. That she should actually propose to leave the house of his rival to travel in his company was, moreover, doubly flattering to his vanity. So he hastened to Derry, internally anathematising the love of sight-seeing which could have prompted the journey at such a time of year. He had no sooner arrived at his journey's end than he found waiting for him the telegram which we have seen despatched, and which did not improve his already ruffled temper. A journey more or less, however, now made but little difference; he was rather glad of the excuse of paying the castle in which its owner was lying wounded a visit at such a time, and of course could place no other construction upon the words of the message than that he might consider the matter arranged, and his bride — and, what was more im-

portant, her fortune — secured. His journey from Derry to Killboggin was therefore made in a more sanguine and self-satisfied frame of mind even than that from London to Copleydale.

"Mr Murkle will arrive this afternoon," said Stella to Hannah, coming into her room the following morning with a telegram in her hand. "Now that he is coming in obedience to your wishes, and not mine, you must tell me what you wish me to say to him."

"I think that as your love affair seems to be kinder conducted on business principles, whatever passes should be in the presence of two witnesses," replied Hannah, with a chuckle.

"That means, I suppose, that you wish me to tell him the real state of the case as regards Mattie and myself in the presence of you and her; but I am afraid that will only have the effect of making him mad, and driving him straight off to Altiora, and persecuting the poor girl, by his threats of disclosing some horrible secret, into marrying him."

"You ain't got no call to be feared about Altiora, my dear. As soon as you've done with this Murkle, I'm a-goin' to take him up to London myself," said Hannah, talking of him as if he were a brown-paper parcel or a poodle.

"What! go up with that creature alone!" exclaimed Stella.

"Why not, my dearie? You've got Lordy to look after, and Mattie has got Bobby, and I've got this

Murkle to 'tend to. We've each got our duty to do in that state of life—I disremember exactly how it goes on, being in the Episcopal Catechism, that I haven't looked at since I was a gell. Besides, I shan't be alone with him."

"Why, who will go with you, Hannah?"

"Well, I'm expectin' a gentleman from Cork in an hour or two. He's a-sorter related to me. Don't you ask no more questions now, dearie; let me play this game out o' my own hand. You'll understand a good deal more when you hear what I have to say to this Murkle."

"But have you told Lady Adela that two gentlemen are to arrive here to-day—one to see me, and the other to see you—and who those gentlemen are? We must remember we are in England, Hannah; and we cannot be having our friends or our enemies come to see us in a wounded nobleman's castle, without telling people what we're about. It's a funny thing us three Americans being here, anyway."

"Well, I never was in a wounded nobleman's castle before, and I don't know rightly what their manners and customs is. You go and explain it to the Lady. You ain't seen Lordy yet, have you?"

"No; Lady Adela seemed to think it would be better for me to wait a little. I suppose she does not think it quite proper; but I'm sure there's no nurse could do him so much good, if you come to that," added Stella, with a pout. "I think it would be far

more proper than for her and Lord St Olave to nurse him between them, as they do now."

"Well, my dearie, you must just have patience; them's all part of the manners and customs in wounded noblemen's castles. Now you just go and tell her about Murkle and the other."

"What's the name of the other?"

"Well, you may call him Collings; 'tain't his real name, but it's the name the doctor knows him by. He was here before; and you may say he is related to me, and it's very important I should see him and Murkle together. Tell her I won't keep 'em long here, and then we calculate on goin' up to London together."

Lady Adela was too good-natured to offer any objection, and too absorbed by her cares to allow her curiosity to be excited by Stella's request. Two or three hours after, as Bob and Mattie and Stella were discussing the problem which Hannah's conduct suggested, and Bob was narrating his previous experience of the gentleman she had introduced to him as her niece's husband, and whom he had seen peacefully slumbering in her sitting-room, a jaunting-car appeared in the avenue containing two gentlemen, who, on their nearer approach, were recognised to be none other than Mr Murkle and Mr Collings.

"Curious their arriving together," said Bob; "they must have met at the junction, and come on by the same train. I wish Hannah would let me assist at

the scene as a third witness. Let him down easy, Stella."

"Bob," said Mattie, "mark my words—the day that Stella lets down Mr Murkle easily will find you hoisted up far more violently than you can possibly imagine,"—with which singular remark, and a saucy toss of her head, the young lady and her friend took their departure.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR MURKLE FEELS THAT HE IS A VICTIM.

STELLA and Mattie met a servant in the hall with Mr Murkle's card.

"Show him into the library," Stella said. "Now, Mattie, let us first go to Hannah's room, and see what this relative of hers is like."

"This is Mr Collings, my dears; you'll know his real name in a few minutes, maybe," said Hannah. "Edward, these two young ladies and me have some particular business with that gentleman as you come along with from the station. If you'll just kindly wait here, I'll send for you when I want you. I'll leave him to you to begin with, Stella, and pick him up where you drop him," she added, as they left the room.

Murkle had been pacing the library in the frame of

mind characteristic of the impatient lover who has at last succeeded in surmounting all intervening obstacles, and needs only the impress of the first chaste salute to seal the long-anticipated bliss. His doubts were at an end. That allusion in the telegram to their "joint happiness" warranted him in taking the fair creature to his arms the moment he saw her, and pressing her to his heart. Every sound he heard set that organ beating violently; and his excitement was augmented by the calculations which seemed to intertwine themselves with his tenderer sentiments when he attempted to estimate in imagination her possible pecuniary value. Ever since he left London he had been a prey to the emotions of love and of speculation alternating, as it were, within his breast. At the moment when Stella's coldness and caprice would damp the ardour of his flame, the thought of the fortune which he might lose by yielding to the influence of pique arose to check his resentment. "If it wasn't for her money," he muttered each time he took a new departure in his pursuit, "I would not follow the baggage another yard." But now that he had run to earth the money and its fair possessor in the very stronghold of his rival, his sense of triumph was complete, and his arrogance grew in proportion as he felt that the victory was won, since it only depended upon his presence here to secure the happiness which was otherwise at stake. It puzzled him occasionally to think how it could have become imperilled; but he was too self-confident to feel much

anxiety on the subject. "If worse comes to the worst, I can always run away with her," he said to himself; and just as he arrived at this decision the door opened, and Stella, followed by Hannah and Mattie, appeared.

"Dear Mr Murkle!" said the young lady, running forward with a little joyous exclamation, and both hands extended, "how good of you to come! What devotion you have shown in careering all over Ireland after me! You know I was bound to test it. You are not angry with me?" By this time he was holding both her unresisting hands, and she was looking appealingly in his face.

"Hang those other two women!" he thought, as he gently drew her towards him; "I think I'll risk a kiss in spite of them."

"No, no," she said laughing, and gently disengaging herself as she detected his intention—"not yet. I am not a prude," she added, looking frankly straight into his eyes, "and I like being kissed by the right person, and at the right time and place, as well as anybody; but we have met here on business, and you remember the old proverb, 'Business first, and pleasure afterwards.' It was for the business part I brought my two witnesses; when that is finished, I will send them away."

"As you please," said Murkle. "I am your obedient slave, as you must have perceived from the way I have been following you all over the country at your behest. May I ask what is the danger which threatens our joint

happiness, and which induced you to summon me here so urgently?"

"Miss Coffin will tell you that as soon as our business matters are settled," she replied with a happy inspiration, looking towards that lady, who nodded emphatically, her lips tightly compressed. "Have you brought the papers?"

"Yes, here they are;" and Murkle pulled a roll from his pocket, and attempted to smile amiably, though he felt a good deal irritated.

"I was so glad to learn from dear Altiora," remarked Stella, who detected his suppressed impatience, "what a sweet and equable temper you had! Nothing ever puts you out, does it?" and she slipped off the elastic band, and glanced her eye over the lines of figures and their total amounts. "You mean me to keep these, of course; they seem quite satisfactory, but I should like to look through them at my leisure."

"They are most strictly private—confidential," he observed, somewhat alarmed.

"I quite understand, and I will not show them to my lawyer without first telling you. Now, Mr Murkle, if you will kindly exchange documents,—here is the list of all the property I possess in the world."

"I assure you it is quite unnecessary; I could not think of looking at it," he replied, anxious to show his indifference to money considerations, though he was longing to know the amount of the total. "I beg you, my dear Miss Walton, to keep the paper till after our

marriage—it will be quite time enough. You have only to specify the amount you wish settled on yourself," he added, in a fit of generosity.

"That is easily stated," she replied, laughing. "If you will only glance at that paper, you will see that I cannot ask for a larger settlement out of my own money than ten thousand dollars."

Murkle, whose curiosity was excited as much as his mind was relieved by this piece of information, took the paper, and read:—

"Total amount of the personal property of Mattie Terrill,—

New York Central Railway stock,	.	$5,000
Toledo and Wabash Railway stock,	.	5,000
	Total,	$10,000
Real estate, . .	*nil*."	

"This is a statement of Miss Terrill's property," he said, turning to Mattie; "you have handed me the wrong paper by mistake."

"No, Mr Murkle," said Mattie; "I feel sure it will make no difference in your sentiments as regards my friend, if I tell you that I am the real heiress, and that my name is Stella Walton. We changed names when we came to Europe, because I have always had a great horror of being married for my fortune and not for myself. My friend, with her beauty and her talent, is a prize in herself, which I am not," she continued,

modestly; "and she would doubtless have revealed her identity to you sooner, had she felt that there was the slightest danger of your being influenced by mercenary considerations. It was her confidence in your disinterestedness which has induced her to give you this opportunity of proving it."

It was some moments before Mr Murkle, who was too stunned and bewildered to find words to express the tumult of his feelings, could reply. His first clear perception of the situation was, that he had designedly been made a fool of by the false heiress—whom, to save confusion, I shall continue to call Stella—from the beginning; and his wounded vanity, adding fire as it were to the keenness of his disappointment, threw him into a paroxysm of rage.

"Miss Walton or Terrill, or whatever other *alias* it may please you to assume," he said, rising and addressing Stella, his lips white with passion, "in withdrawing from the position I have hitherto occupied towards you, I wish you to understand that I do so not because you are a pauper,—had I known you to have been one from the beginning, I might have still sought your hand,—but because you are a cheat—because you have heartlessly trifled with affections which have been pure and disinterested, whatever you may think to the contrary—because you have deliberately chosen me as a subject of sport, and have turned into ridicule the most sacred emotions of my nature. But I am not one upon whom practical jokes of this kind can be

played with impunity; nor does the law of this country, as you will find to your cost, permit people to assume false names, forge cheques, and otherwise impose upon society, without risk."

"Now that's just the pint you know more about than most people, maybe, is that matter about takin' up false names, and imposin' on society under 'em," interrupted Hannah. "Mattie, just ask the gentleman in my room to be so good as step this way. You didn't happen to be acquainted with the late Mrs Peto, did you?—Altiora's real mother, I mean, not that Baroness as imposes upon society as her mother. Take time and don't get flurried; you ain't bound to criminate yourself, as the lawyers say. We can get at it all another way; only you might save yourself, don't you see, by bein' the first to tell your own story. Maybe you was a victim of a designin' woman—same as you are now, you know. You seem a poor kind of a crittur, anyway," she concluded, as she looked at his white cheeks and trembling hands and lips, contemptuously.

"I don't know anything——" began Murkle.

"There, there, 'tain't no use a-lyin'. You was with Grandesella in Italy at the time the Baroness was a-livin' with Mrs Peto as her companion, when Altiora was born after her husband's death, because you told me once you'd known Altiora ever since she was a baby, and know'd her father; so it ain't no good a-tryin' to wriggle out of it. You know that the Baroness ain't Altiora's mother just as well as she does herself,

or you wouldn't always be a-holdin' threats of secrets you can tell, over her. Now this gentleman, he saw Mrs Peto and Altiora in Italy when the Baroness was a-livin' with Mrs Peto as a friend, and there ain't no difficulty about provin' the child's birth nor the mother's death; and there wouldn't be none in showin' what hand you had in helpin' to deceive the executors and bankers, and suchlike, by keepin' Mrs Peto's death a secret, and passin' off the Baroness for her. We've only got to set to work to examine into it all; but you might save us all that trouble, don't you see, and no one need know what you've bin and done, if you give a clear story of what the Baron and the Baroness did, so as I can get a holt of 'em. Look here you, Murkle," said the old lady, suddenly starting up and advancing towards him with such menacing vehemence that he shrank back till his chair nearly tipped over, "that dead woman, murdered maybe, was my sister; and the gell's my niece, and I'm a-goin' to get her back to where she belongs, if there's necks got to wring for it. Now, it's old Hannah says so, and you'd better believe it."

Murkle, during this energetic tirade, had been rapidly turning over in his mind the dangers of the position in which he now found himself involved. He saw before him a determined and enterprising group of women, who, he knew from experience, were not to be trifled with in matters where intelligence and resolution were concerned, who possessed almost boundless

financial resources, who were in possession of a most dangerous witness, and who had only to make inquiries on the spot to expose the whole fraud which the adventurers had so boldly perpetrated nearly twenty years before. They had calculated, and not without reason, that, provided they could satisfy the representatives of Mr Peto that the Baroness was his widow, the secret of the real widow's death could easily be preserved, so far as the obscure Italian village in which she was buried was concerned. The familiarity of the Baroness—then Mrs Crombie—with the private correspondence of Mrs Peto, for whom she used to act as secretary, rendered it easy for her to continue writing as Mrs Peto, after the death of that lady, to her man of business, and thus, with the assistance and co-operation of the Baron and Murkle, to retain possession of Mr Peto's fortune, which had been left unreservedly to his widow. No sooner did it become clear to Murkle that the game was up—to use his own expression—than he perceived the advantages of the course suggested by Hannah of providing for his own safety with that lady on the best terms he could make with her, regardless of any fate which might befall his partners and accomplices.

"It's quite true," he said, after a pause; "the Baroness is not Altiora's mother. I was only a clerk in the house at the time that the Baron and Mrs Crombie, as she was then, conceived the scheme of acquiring Mr Peto's fortune. I made the great mistake of my life in

not at once resigning my position and retiring from the firm when I discovered their designs. They made me a partner to keep me silent; and I admit my complicity only to this extent, that, knowing that a great wrong had been done to Altiora, I did not expose it."

"Instead of trying to force her to marry you for the purpose of getting her money, should you fail in obtaining what you thought was mine," said Stella. "And you dare to talk of my having trifled with what you are pleased to term your affections!"

"Let the poor crittur be," said Hannah; "he ain't got no sting left in him worth a cent. Mr Murkle, this is Mr Clymer, Mrs Clymer's husband—that is, he was. He passed by the name of Collings to save his wife's character so long as she was in the country; but now she's gone to the States, it don't much matter what you call him. Him and you has got to come with me to London. I guess we'd better start to-night. Ned, you take charge of him while I go and see how Lordy is, and tell the Lady that I'm a-goin' away for a spell."

After a consultation with Lady Adela, to whom Hannah confided what had just transpired, it was decided that the news was likely to prove so agreeable to Lord Sark that she was to tell him of it; and it was arranged that Altiora was to accompany Hannah on her return to Killboggin. The fact that Grandesella and Murkle were for the future rendered powerless, so far as any interference in his financial affairs was concerned, was evidently no less a relief to Lord Sark than

the intelligence that Altiora was in no way related to the Baron and his wife, and that she would probably shortly be placed in possession of her own fortune. "I have Keithy in London a-waitin' to help me," she said; "and, Lordy, don't you be anyways anxious about your cousin,—it's my opinion that she couldn't have a friend more able nor willing to help her than Keithy, and none as she would sooner be helped by. What is it you say?"—and she leant down to catch his whisper —"Bring 'em both back with me? Yes, that I will, sure. Now you keep up a good heart. I tell you that the way that Stella has played that Murkle for the last two months, to save Altiora from him, and then made him run all over Ireland after her, and then got him snarled up here at last, with Ned Clymer a-keepin' watch over him, shows that she's as clever with her head as she is lovin' with her heart; and"—bending down very low, she added in a whisper—"I know who it is that's got her heart,"—with which comfortable assurance Hannah gave his lordship's sound hand a squeeze, and was gone.

That night, after Hannah and Murkle and Ned Clymer had started for London, Stella went into Mattie's room, and found that young lady softly sobbing.

"Why, Mattie darling, what's the matter?"

"Bo—ob," she sighed, with a gulp.

"Well, what about Bob?"

"How am I ever to break it to him, Stella?

"Break what to him?"

"Why, that I've got nearly five millions of dod—dod—dollars," with a long series of catching sobs.

"Then let me break it to him."

"No, no; I am sure he will run away when he hears it, and I shall never see him again. He's set his heart on our both living on a pound a-day."

"Well, so you can, dear. You needn't spend more than you like."

"No; but I know that he will talk about his honour, and say it is impossible, and—and—that I've deceived him. It was only the other day he was saying how lucky it was that you were the heiress and not me, as he never would have proposed to me if I had been richer than he was. And I said it was awfully lucky. Oh, Stella, what a lie we've both been living! It seems as if I never had been Stella, and as if you had never been Mattie."

"Well, dear, don't let us confuse our heads or our hearts any more just now with our own identity. Bob will like you just as much by either name, I'm sure; but there's no occasion to let him into the secret just yet. Let's wait till Hannah and Altiora come, at any rate, and then we'll have a regular good time. Remember how much better off you are than I am. You can see Bob at any time; but I am shut off from my poor darling, who thinks I have behaved so cruelly to him. Besides, who knows, when I have to break to him that you are the heiress and not me, whether I may not be in as bad a fix as you? Do you think it

possible, Mattie," said Stella, in a sudden paroxysm of alarm, "that we may both lose our loves through having changed places? What a dreadful punishment it would be!"

"Oh, don't, Stella!"

"Don't what?"

"Suggest such horrid things," said Mattie, illogically. "I've a good mind really to change, and give you all my fortune. I never thought of that,—we can make it quite safe that way."

"We'll try the other first, dear," responded Stella, drily. "Meantime I have been too full of Hannah's happiness in this wonderful discovery of her newly found niece to conjure up imaginary sorrows. Now kiss me good night."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BARON AND BARONESS SUCCUMB TO CIRCUMSTANCES.

"SAY, Murkle," said Hannah, who had ceased to think that gentleman worth the compliment of adding Mr to his name, as they were gliding into the London terminus, "what's the best time to catch them two conspirators together?"

"The probability is, that we shall find them this evening, if we go there as soon as we have had something to eat," he replied.

"Well, you know what you're a-goin' to say. You've been a poor deluded victim all through, as wants to clear your conscience by turnin' States' evidence, or whatever they call it here; and your conscience is a-troubling you so much you can't a-bear it any longer —knowing that if you did, I've other witnesses as could send you to prison. Just you stick to that, and whatever I say, you agree to, or it will be the worse for you."

The Baron and Baroness had been dining at home, and he was just starting for his club when the cab containing Miss Coffin, Mr Murkle, and Ned Clymer drove up to his door.

"Ah, Dick, *mio caro!*" he exclaimed, as Murkle jumped out and handed out Miss Coffin, "whom have we here? What a delightful surprise!" he added, turning with effusion to Hannah.

"Guess you're a-goin' to find it so," she murmured; but the Baron did not hear her, and went on—

"And the two lovely young ladies—I hope they have returned to London? What a pleasure for my Altiora, who has been longing to see them again! Present me, pray;" for by this time Mr Clymer was standing on the Baron's doorstep with the rest of the party.

"This is Mr Clymer, my nephew by his first mar-

riage, as come over to send his present wife, the Baroness's great friend, you know, back to America."

"Dear me, how interesting! How charmed the Baroness will be to make his acquaintance! Pray let me show you the way up-stairs;" and the Baron led the party — whose mixed composition considerably puzzled him, and caused him a vague feeling of uneasiness, which he was at a loss to account for—towards the drawing-room, "Where have you all sprung from?" he pursued, hoping to solve the mystery.

"Lord Sark's castle—I disremember the name of it —was where we all started from yesterday, if you mean that," replied Hannah; and the Baron was more profoundly perplexed than ever as he ushered them into the presence of his wife and step-daughter. Altiora, seeing so unexpected an apparition, jumped up, and, with an exclamation of delighted surprise, flung herself into Hannah's arms.

"There, my darling!" whispered the latter, as she returned her embrace with equal ardour; "you slip out, I've got something very particular to say to the Baron and Baroness as you'll hear about later. This is Mr Clymer," she added, after bowing stiffly to the Baroness, "as has come to tell you that he has packed his wife, your friend, off to the States, and he's got some other business to talk over besides;" and she nodded to Altiora, who left the room.

The Baron felt much relieved; it was evident that the visit related entirely to Mrs Clymer's affairs. His

wife received Mr Clymer with great cordiality, and said she would be so interested to hear the last news of her dear friend.

"You can tell the Baroness that afterwards, Ned; let us get to business first," interposed Hannah. "Before you was the Baroness, you was Mrs Crombie, wasn't you?"

"I was," said the Baroness, coldly; "but I do not know by what right you have come here to ask me these questions."

"Oh, you needn't answer any of 'em you don't like; it's out of nothing but wantin' to save you havin' a rough time as I've come. When you was Mrs Crombie, you lived at an old castle in Italy with Mr and Mrs Peto as Mrs Peto's companion, didn't you?"

"Go on," said the Baroness, showing symptoms of nervousness, which she concealed beneath a haughty sneer.

"Oh, don't be in a hurry; I am a-goin' faster nor you'll like, maybe. When Mrs Peto, who was my niece, died, or you poisoned her—I've got to find that out yet—you stole her name, and her daughter, and her fortune, with the help of the Baron there and this Murkle, and you've kept 'em ever since? Ain't that so? You've no call to answer if you ain't a mind to."

The brutal directness of this charge, every word of which issued from Hannah's pinched lips like pellets from a pop-gun, caused the blood to ebb from the heart of the Baroness, and for a second she seemed to

lose consciousness. It was only by the most powerful effort of will that she prevented herself from fainting. The Baron felt his courage oozing from his pores and standing on his forehead in beads.

"It's a false, vile, atrocious calumny!" the Baroness almost shrieked at last. It seemed to her that it was only by raising her voice to a scream that she could use it at all.

"Well, there's Ned here; he saw his wife's aunt—that is, my sister Fanny—when Altiora was about four months old, and she told him it was her baby as she was a-goin' to bring to America when she got a little better, and how you was her companion, and wasn't well the night he slept at the castle; and there's this Murkle, he's ready to swear in a court of justice exactly how you and the Baron and he did it all,—imposed upon the lawyers and bankers, and forged my poor Fanny's name, and all that. 'Tain't no use a-screeching like that. I've come to talk business. This game's played out,—there ain't no two ways about it. Now it's old Hannah says so, and you'd better believe it. Ain't that so, Murkle?"

"Well," said the gentleman thus appealed to, "I am bound to say, my dear friends, that I have come to the conclusion, if you force Miss Coffin to carry this matter to a court of justice, to turn Queen's evidence. I have assured her that her suspicions in regard to the circumstances of her niece's death are entirely unfounded—the poor lady died from natural causes. Still, though

it would be impossible to prove the reverse, it would be disagreeable to have a charge of murder added to the fraud, forgery, and false personation which certainly can be proved, whether I give evidence or no. I therefore strongly recommend you both, for all our sakes, to see whether it would not be possible to compromise this unfortunate affair. I am in a position to say that Miss Coffin is prepared to offer certain conditions, on the acceptance of which she will not press the matter criminally."

"That's so. You put that well, Murkle," remarked Hannah, approvingly.

During all this time the Baron remained perfectly silent, softly drumming with his fingers on the table, and occasionally wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. The Baroness was breathing quick and hard, as though in imminent danger of going into a fit; though her lips moved as if in an attempt to speak, no sound issued from them.

"I ain't a-goin' back," pursued Hannah, "on your treatment of that darling you call your daughter, nor the lies you and this Murkle made up against the character of her poor dear dead father, because I am a-goin' to take her away with me in the cab that's waitin' at the door—and once she's with me, she'll soon forget you and what she suffered with you; but I must have every cent of my girl's money,—and you and this Murkle have made enough out of it to pay it all back to her, and more too,—and after that, maybe you'll find

it best to leave the country and live abroad: because if you stay here it will have to be known that you never was her mother, and the thing can't be kept quiet; but if you stay away in other countries, people will forget all about you, and neither me nor Altiora will talk about our family affairs. When would you propose to start?" she asked, after a pause, turning suddenly upon the Baron.

"Really, my dear lady, the whole thing is so sudden, you must allow me a little time to think it over."

"Well, I'll leave you alone to put your heads together, while I go and get my darling ready to come along with me. Say, you!" she said, turning to the Baroness, "just come and show me the room."

The Baroness perceiving that her husband had decided not to attempt resistance to the overpowering force of circumstances, complied without a word. On her return, the triumvirate retired to a corner to consider the situation, and Clymer became absorbed in the evening paper. Meantime Hannah had delighted Altiora's heart by telling her that she was to leave the house with her at once.

"There ain't no occasion for you to do more than throw a few things together now, honey, and we'll send for everything else that belongs to you to-morrow; for you're never a-goin' back to that woman, that isn't your mother, again, but you're a-goin' to live with old Hannah just as long as ever you've a mind to. 'Tain't time to explain it to you all now, but you need

never be afraid of having to marry that Murkle, nor bein' handed over to the Clymer, who's gone back to the States. Day after to-morrow, if all's settled, you'll come along with me to Lordy's castle in Ireland, where Mattie and Stella are."

Altiora listened to this somewhat disconnected account of the new aspect her affairs were assuming with an amazement which almost amounted to stupefaction, and mechanically made her preparations for accompanying Hannah.

"I expect Keithy will be waitin' for us when we get back to the hotel," she went on; "he's got to settle all the business part of this matter. Now I'm a-goin' down-stairs again. You can put on your bonnet and follow me to the sittin'-room as soon as you're ready."

The Baron advanced as she entered. "My dear lady," said that worthy, "the Baroness and I appreciate your generosity. Perhaps, had the prime instigator of this unfortunate transaction not shown such willingness to betray the victims who were tempted by him to commit this irregularity, the Baroness and myself might have assumed another attitude in this unhappy business. However, we recognise the strength of your position, and are prepared frankly to accept your terms, on condition that the whole subject be buried in the most profound secrecy. The Baroness and I will take up our residence in Paris or Rome. The fortune left to Altiora by Mr Peto shall be restored to her in full, and with its payment all further

connection between myself and the man by whom we have been so grossly betrayed ceases," and he looked savagely at Murkle. "As soon as ever the business part of this matter is settled, we shall take our departure. I need not say that I shall take leave of my dearest Altiora, towards whom I ever felt the affection of a parent, with the most profound emotion."

"I'll send Mr Hetherington here the first thing in the morning to go into the whole matter; guess he's smart enough to see you don't act noways crooked."

"Ah, here comes my little Ora! Good-bye, *carissima mia*, for the last time!" exclaimed the Baron, and opened his arms with effusion.

"Good-bye, mamma," said Altiora, after receiving the Baron's salute.

"Altiora," broke in Hannah, sternly, "never you go to use that word to that woman again; and don't go wasting your feelings upon her, honey—she ain't wuth it."

For Altiora, overcome by the suddenness of the changes that were in process around her, and of which she understood so little, had been unable to restrain her tears at the thought of an indefinite separation, apparently attended with disgrace to those whom she had regarded as parents, and with whom she had spent her life, even though they had made it a suffering one.

"It has not been possible for me to understand what has happened," she whispered to the Baroness, "but I shall see you again in spite of everybody."

"I doubt it, when you know all," replied that lady, sadly; "but perhaps you may, for you have a noble heart, Altiora, and are not to be judged like other people. Good-bye, my dear;" and Altiora followed Hannah down-stairs, the Baron accompanying the party with the utmost suavity to the cab.

"Perhaps," he said to Hannah, as he politely offered her his arm across the pavement, "there would be no objection, provided we both undertake to reside abroad, to my coming across to London alone for a few days on business?"

"On condition that your wife never, under any circumstances, accompanies you, I don't see no harm in it. But look ye here, you've got to act square right straight through this matter,"—and she fixed him with her eye under the gas-lamp,—"old Hannah ain't one to be trifled with."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A JOINT CONFESSION.

The soothing words of Hannah's last interview with Lord Sark acted like balm to that nobleman's wounded spirits. Though incapable of unimpeded utterance, owing to the injuries he had received, his intellect, after the first few hours, had become perfectly clear;

and the conviction which now began to force itself upon his mind, that Stella had loved him always, and had been trifling with Murkle merely to save his cousin from persecution by that individual, rendered it difficult for him to remain at ease, with the consciousness that he was separated from her loved presence only by a few walls and doors. During the long hours of the night, when he was unable to sleep from pain, he was harassed by the conflicting considerations which presented themselves. Could he venture to press for an interview with a girl who had never given him reason to suppose that she returned his affection, under such peculiar circumstances? Would her sense of propriety be shocked, and would he place her in a position from which her natural delicacy would shrink? If he overrated her feelings towards him, would it not be subjecting them to too severe a strain to ask her to visit an object, blinded, disfigured, and almost incapable of speech? And might not the effect be to destroy the tender shoots of a sentiment which might be growing for him? On the other hand, Hannah spoke with the conviction of positive assurance; and if she was really longing to be with him, and only restrained from a sense of maidenly modesty, what a solace and consolation was he not losing! The result of a night passed in restless questionings with his own mind was a slight increase of feverish disturbance, which the doctors were at a loss to account for, regard being had to the condition of the wounds.

"Is there anything troubling you, dear?" asked his sister—"you seem so restless; is the pain worse?"

"Better," he replied.

"Then what is it?"

He gave a little moan. Then he felt that it would be better for him to know the worst—even that she refused to come—than this suspense, so he murmured, "Stella."

Lady Adela reported this symptom to the doctor.

"Excuse me, my dear lady," replied the little man, "is he in love with her?"

"I think so," said Lady Adela, colouring slightly.

"Then she is the very best remedy we can possibly administer—that is, if she returns his affection. We shall know that when we tell her that his lordship desires to see her. Will you kindly communicate his lordship's wishes at once?"

Lady Adela found the girls with Bob Alderney in the library, listening to a letter which that gentleman had just received. "Oh, Adela," he said, when she returned, "I have just heard from Hetherington. I told him, you know, to see that fellow Casseroll, and do something about postponing that meeting of Sark's Company, which seems to have been the cause of this unfortunate journey. It seems the whole tragedy has created such a sensation, as well it might, that it has been decided to postpone all action for the present. So that's good news. It will relieve poor Sark's mind awfully, I'm sure."

"Would you like to be the bearer of such good news?" said Adela, turning to Stella. "Sark has expressed a wish to see you; and the doctor urges it so strongly, that I don't think there can be any impropriety in it, as it may do him so much good, poor fellow! But don't go, Stella," she added, "unless you can tell him what will make him happy."

The colour rushed into Stella's face, as the desire to go to him, which had been growing almost uncontrollable, was at last about to be realised.

"I'll do what I can to——" but the sentence remained unfinished in consequence of the violence of the embrace which the impulsive Mattie felt at this moment constrained to give her.

"Be very nice to him, darling," she whispered, "and take care you don't give him too sudden a shock when you break it to him you're not me; and remember, that just at the same time I shall be breaking it to Bob that I'm not you. Oh my, I do feel so frightened! I was only giving her a little wholesome advice," she said to Lady Adela, as an apology for the whisper. "Now run off, Stella, and behave yourself properly;" and Lady Adela, followed by Stella, left the room.

"Bob, dear," Mattie said, when they were alone, "just feel my hand; isn't it cold?"

"It is indeed, my darling; what makes it so? Let me warm it," and he carried it to his lips.

"Sheer fright—nothing but fright; just feel my heart, how it is beating!"

Bob obeyed. "Why, so it is, little fluttering thing," and his arm unconsciously glided round her waist.

"Oh, Bob, forgive me—don't squeeze quite so much—I have deceived you, and done very wrong. I have got a terrible confession to make." At this Bob's arm gently withdrew, and Mattie gave a sob. "Oh, I feel as if I was going to faint. Hold me, Bob, or I shall never have the courage to tell you; but promise first that you'll love me just the same."

"Don't frighten a fellow out of his life, Mattie," said Bob, somewhat sternly. "Of course I will love you just the same, if you have not done anything to be ashamed of."

"But I am ashamed of it,—that's just the trouble, Bob," she said, and she gazed at him through brimming eyes. "I'm a fraud. I'm a living lie."

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated.

"So is Stella," she added, solemnly.

"Mattie, you'll drive me mad with your self-accusations. Out with it, and let me know the worst."

"Well, I'm Stella, and Stella's me."

Bob got seriously alarmed. "She is certainly going out of her mind," he thought.

"Mattie, darling, am I going to lose you?" he murmured, as the vision of an asylum presented itself.

"Not if I know it, dear. Of course you don't change to Stella, because Stella's me. You stick to me all the same. Oh, Bob, how stupid you are!"

"Well, dear, I confess I feel a little confused; try and clear your head a little."

"Clear *your* head, you mean. Don't you see, if I am Stella Walton, that I'm the great heiress, worth five millions of dollars,—and that Stella is Mattie Terrill, not worth more than ten thousand?"

"When did you become Stella Walton?" he asked, still doubtful about her sanity.

"When we first arrived in Paris we changed names, because I was so afraid some one might want to marry me for my money; and now I am afraid, because I've got it, that you won't want to marry me."

"I shall always *want* to marry you, Mattie,—Stella, I mean. Good heavens! what am I to call you? But this alters our relative circumstances so materially that I hardly know what to think. You have done very wrong, Mattie, to practise such a wicked deception and place me in such a false position."

"I know it, Bob, dear," she sobbed, penitently. "Just think how bad it must be for Stella. She's telling Sark now that she's herself—no—that she's me; I mean that she's Mattie, and not Stella at all. Do you think he'll mind, Bob, dear?"

"Well, I don't suppose he'll mind half as much as I do. I should begin to feel a fraud myself if I got all that money,—as if I had robbed Sark. Oh, St—attie, M—ella I mean, what a muddle and a mess you've got us all into!"

"Oh," said Mattie, and she clapped her hands, "I

know how to make it all straight. You go right away up to London and find out all about Sark's money troubles, and I'll give you as much as ever you want to buy up the whole of that Company. We'll buy every share, Bob; and then we'll have a meeting of contented shareholders—that will be you and me, with Stella for the Board and Sark for chairman; then we'll scintillate the universe with electricity, declare dividends, and live happy ever afterwards."

"Well, Mattie, if you really want to divide your fortune between Sark and me, I suppose I must let you do it," said Bob; "that certainly is a way out of it. I never could keep such a sum all to myself; and I can't lose you because you happen unfortunately to be a millionaire."

"If you've quite forgiven me, Bob, don't you think we ought to make it up?" pleaded Mattie. So they made it up, and, after a pause, she added—"Oh, how glad I am it's over! Poor Stella! I wonder how she broke it to Sark!"

It was indeed with no small internal trepidation that the apparently calm and stately Stella had followed Lady Adela to her brother's bedside.

"Here's Stella come to see you, dear," she said to Sark. "I have got some matters to attend to, so I shall leave her to take care of you for a little."

He held out his hand, and Stella, trembling with the wave of tenderness and pity that seemed to flood her whole being, placed hers in it.

"How kind!" he murmured.

"I wanted to come before, but they would not let me. I have been so miserable, thinking how unhappy I made you; but indeed I did it for the best. I trusted to being able to explain matters later. You understand it all now, don't you?"

He pressed her hand.

"And you quite forgive me?"

As he raised it to his lips, he felt that she was trembling violently.

"You don't know all yet. You have still something to forgive. Mattie and I have been very foolish. She persuaded me, before we left America, to change names; and of course in doing so we changed fortunes. It was a girlish freak. She was afraid of being persecuted for her money, and I rather enjoyed the idea of baffling the fortune-hunters; but I am really Mattie Terrill, with only £2000 in the world."

He gave a groan. Poor Stella's heart stood still. "So, then," she thought bitterly, "he's like the rest,—he only wanted me for the money." She would have withdrawn her hand, but he held it firmly. "I was wrong," she thought, bitterly, "not to have waited till he got stronger, and could have borne the shock better." Then he spoke. "Darling!" was all he said; but it is amazing what a wealth of meaning may be compressed into a single word—what riddles it may solve, what suspense it may remove, what misunderstandings it may clear up—and when one's faculty of speech is

limited, how clever one becomes at finding the right one!

"Why do you groan, dear?" she whispered, as she bent over him; "are you in pain?"

"No."

"You don't doubt my love?"

A still tighter pressure was the response.

"Don't try to tell me now, my own," she cooed softly over him; "and whatever happens, I am yours, if you will have me—it will give me the right to watch over you and nurse you; and you must try and get well for my sake. Lady Adela," she said, as that lady entered the room, "Mattie and I have a little secret to tell you presently, which I have already revealed to your brother. He has given me the right to be his nurse now, because I am to be his wife when he gets well; and he is quite decided to do that for my sake. Oh, I know what is troubling your mind," she exclaimed, suddenly; "just think of my forgetting it till now! but then the other matter was so much more important, I am sure it was no wonder. Bob has just got a letter from Keith Hetherington, and he says that Mr Casseroll tells him that the meeting of the shareholders of your Company is to be put off for the present. In the meantime," added Stella, drawing upon her imagination, "in consequence of some developments which you are too weak to attend to now, it is probable that the whole affair will be easily and satisfactorily arranged. I am sure I don't know what they are,"

she said to herself; "but I think, under the circumstances, that was a little moral tonic which I was justified in administering."

When she rejoined Bob and Mattie, she found that at the very moment the idea had occurred to her these new developments were actually in progress, for the first thing that Mattie said was—

"Oh, Stella, Bob and I have hit upon such a delightful way of solving all Sark's pecuniary difficulties. We are going to arrange it all with Keith Hetherington when he comes with Hannah and Altiora. It is a profound secret, and I can't even tell it to you, but you can tell Sark that he need give himself no more concern about that Company: it will hasten his recovery, I am sure. I had such trouble breaking it—you know what I mean—to Bob. We almost quarrelled. Did Sark take it easily, dear?"

"Why, Mattie, you talk of '*it*' as if it was a pill; and, after all, you are not far wrong, for it was me he had to swallow, with the gilt rubbed off. Yes, dear, he gulped '*it*' down like a man."

"I'm sorry I can't say the same for Bob. He seems to like his pills best without the gilt. But so long as they take them, dear, what does it matter what sort of faces they make over them, or what names they call us by? They'll soon get used to our middle initials. Mine is F., sir, remember, and stands for Fay. Henceforth, Bob, you must call me Fay."

"And what's Stella's?" asked Bob.

"J., which stands for Jones," replied that young lady, laughing; "but Sark is going to invent a much prettier one, which I will give you leave to call me by when we are married."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ALTIORA'S LAST WORDS.

I HAVE been trying to understand the relations which our natural ideas of time bear to the changes, both external and internal, through which we pass; and I find that it is absolutely impossible to establish any correspondence between them. I believe that Time hatches or evolves catastrophes, both moral and material, out of long periods of incubation. This epoch is naturally characterised by monotony. The storm which is to burst upon us from without, brews we know not where. It gathers its forces together silently; and the lull which precedes it is so universally recognised, that it has become a proverb. So the revolution which is being prepared within is unmarked by any conscious moral disturbance that can at all account for the completeness of the change when it comes. The elements at work are as subtle in their operation as those of external nature, and the sudden burst of spring upon

a scene which has been locked in the embraces of a Canadian winter but faintly portrays the aspect of the soul when it awakes to the touch which is to evoke its latent harmonies. More than six months have now elapsed since I described an episode which I foolishly imagined for a day had caused some responsive chord in my inmost nature to vibrate, and which led me to listen sympathetically to the silly rhapsodies of Ronald MacAlpine. The whole of my life prior to this last six months seems to have been the long winter of my discontent, unmarked by change, and concealing beneath its cold monotony the unsuspected elements of that revolution in the outward circumstances of my existence, no less than in its hidden moral recesses, which has since overtaken me. A transformation has taken place in the external relations of my life, and in my most sacred affections, under the influence of which I seem to have blossomed into a new being. If I try to trace the periods of my development into these new conditions, I find the first marked change to have taken place under the influence of Keith Hetherington during the first week of my seclusion at Copleydale. I did not then know or suspect the nature of that influence as I know it now; but the soil had been prepared, and the seed which the sower went forth to sow fell upon good ground. I am perfectly certain, after a careful internal analysis, that the same seed, sown a year before, would have withered. Some day, perhaps, I shall write something on the laws governing

moral receptivity. They are absolutely ignored by the majority of seed-sowers: the consequence is, that the amount of seed wasted is something frightful to contemplate. I was explaining this point the other day to Mr Sidney Chalfont, in whom I take a great interest, as I observe signs of preparation in him. He said he had never considered the subject from this point of view, and thought that it was his duty to scatter the seed broadcast, and let it take its chance where it fell—a manifest error, arising out of his ignorance of the laws of receptivity.

The next great evolutionary epoch, so far as regards the structure of my own internal organism, was when Aunt Hannah revealed to me the secret of my birth and parentage, so far as my mother was concerned, and her own relationship to me. The rupture of the tie which had bound me filially to the Baroness set loose within me an entirely new set of forces, the very existence of which had been so suppressed by the supposed relationship between us, that they were unsuspected by me. This has given rise to a very interesting series of considerations, as bearing upon congenital affinities. The circumstance that I believed that the blood of the Baroness coursed in my veins, and that I was in actual fact her own daughter, produced such an effect upon that part of my interior structure ignorantly called "imagination," that certain abnormal and disorderly forces were called into operation, to the entire suppression of others properly destined to exer-

cise a most potent influence over my character. The extinction of these false forces opened the door to the evolution and free play of those that had been latent; and that part of the organic interior structure in which they reside is consequently taking a new development. It is only within the last few days that I have entered upon the third period of protoplasmic change,—a term which I venture to use, not because it means anything very definite to those familiar with the finer constituent elements of the interior organic structure, but because scientific men would not understand any other. They will probably be ready to admit that the conditions of protoplasm must be modified by the emotions, and that the most powerful of all emotions is the affectional instinct. Hence, when, under the influence of Keith Hetherington's teaching, I developed a new love of my species and their Maker, and determined to devote my life to their service, a protoplasmic modification took place, which was still more accentuated when I was relieved from the violent emotional effort to which I had been subjected all my life, of attempting to love a woman who was not my mother, and when I found a near relative in the person of my Aunt Hannah, upon whom my distorted or suppressed affections could be freely and legitimately lavished. And now, once more, the affectional instinct has been violently roused, and I am conscious of an internal change into new conditions being operated within me. It was only three days

ago,—Sark had been wheeled out upon the terrace to inhale the balmy spring air; it was the first day that his eyesight was so far recovered that he could bear the light. Stella was walking by his side, her hand in his. As soon as he is well enough — the doctors hope in three months from now—they are to be married. Bob Alderney was pushing his chair, and Mattie was pretending to help him. They were married a month ago. Mattie—whom we now call Fay—wanted to wait till she could be married on the same day as Stella and Sark, but Bob was too impatient. Aunt Hannah and I were walking some distance behind. All this at Copley Grange, which the Dashingtons, who had gone abroad to economise, have let to the Alderneys for a year,—I should not wonder if they were ultimately to buy it,—when I saw Keith Hetherington coming towards us. Keith and Bob had been much occupied, during the first weeks of Sark's illness, buying up all the shares of the Universal Scintillator Company with Mattie's money, and succeeded in winding up its affairs in the most complete manner, without Sark's knowing anything about it until it was done. I then charged him to negotiate for me the purchase of Copleydale Cottage; and here Hannah and I have now arranged to take up our abode when we are not staying at the Grange. Meantime it has been repaired, added to, and furnished anew, under Keith's superintendence.

"I have just come over from the Cottage," he said:

"the last van-load of furniture has arrived; it only needs the presence of the mistress of the house to come and set it in order."

"I am afraid my unassisted efforts," I replied, "would shock the æsthetic tastes of Mr MacAlpine."

"So far you will fail utterly to make it resemble an old curiosity shop. There is a striking absence of *bric-a-brac;* and you will be able to move about freely without fear of knocking over tables knee-high."

"Let us all drive over to-morrow," said Fay Alderney, who had fallen back to join us, "and help you to consider the weighty question of the disposition of the tables and chairs; besides, I want to see that Hannah is properly cradled in the lap of luxury."

"Altiora and Keithy and me ain't a-goin' to cradle ourselves in no kind of a lap," said my aunt; "we've got some work to do. I don't calkilate on livin' here reg'lar. Why, 'twas only the other day Altiora was a-sayin' all she counted on was havin' what she called a Peter tare."

"It was to be a *pied-à-terre* for me, not you, aunt; it is to be your home."

My aunt looked at me in a very peculiar way when I made this remark. "Keithy," she said, "take her away and talk to her—the time's come. There's Lordy a-beckonin' to us, Fay Alderney;" and Hannah rolled her darling's new name out with great unction. Keith took me down the path through the shrubbery that follows the river-bank.

"You know what your aunt wants me to say to you, Altiora?" he said, as we sat down on a rustic bench, with the stream eddying and gurgling at our feet.

"Yes," I said, "I think I can guess;" and I felt my heart beating and my cheeks flushing.

"It doesn't require any telling, does it? You've known it all along, haven't you?"

"I think so," I again said, in an undertone; "and yet," I added, in a trembling voice, "I didn't feel quite sure."

"You didn't feel quite sure!" he exclaimed, in a surprised voice.

"I mean I didn't exactly know what kind it was; and," after a pause, "I don't quite know now."

"You mean that you have known that I have loved you almost ever since we first met, but that you didn't quite know the nature of my love; is that what you mean to say, Altiora?"

"Yes."

"I've never asked you whether you have loved me, have I?"

"No."

"But you do, don't you?"

Here, foolishly enough, I began to tremble violently, and found it quite impossible to use either of the monosyllables to which I seemed to be confining my conversation.

"Do you know why you can't answer? because you don't exactly know the nature of your own love for me. Our love for each other is not a common love.

That is a phrase in ordinary usage among lovers who wish to express by it the uncommon intensity of their devotion; but that is not what I mean—it is, that the nature of our devotion to each other is not of a common kind. Do you know why?"

"No," I said, at last recovering my voice to that amount.

"Because it is not based on an exclusive love for each other, which in its essence is a purely selfish love, but on the love of a common service, to which we are both dedicated: the love-current does not flow direct from one of us to the other, but it flows from God through us to humanity. Take away our love and our service for them, and our love for each other perishes. It is in that greater love that our lesser love is held and comprised until absorbed by it. It partakes of its magnitude, and acquires a force and intensity unknown to those who are wrapped up in each other to the exclusion of every interest which does not centre in themselves. Theirs is a love as certain to decay with time, on one side or the other, possibly on both sides, as ours is to grow and expand in the degree in which we lose ourselves in that highest love common to us both."

"Where will our work lie?" I asked.

"Chiefly in the hearts of men; but it will not lie in speech but in deeds, and they may take us anywhere. Nor would it be necessary, except for what the world might say, that we should marry, since our love is of a kind that the world knows nothing of, and depends

on something far more internal, and therefore solid, than that which unites ordinary mortals. You feel that, don't you, Altiora?"

"Yes," I answered; and it seemed as though, with the surrender of my life to his, our very souls had melted into each other. "I did not know such happiness could be felt by human beings," I murmured, and placed my trembling hand in his. We sat for some moments in silence; but the veil which curtained the inner sanctuary in each seemed to have been lifted, so that we could hold communion without speech, and feel the divine thrills of a higher inspiration uplifting us in a common supplication, and a common dedication of our beings to mankind, and therefore to each other.

"That was beyond the power of Church or priest," he said at last, and he pressed his lips to mine. "Now, if you like, we will go to Sark and Stella, and tell them that we will add our ceremony to theirs."

Thus it was that my life culminated to its crisis; and I felt another and unseen presence by my side as, with my arm in Keith's, we strolled slowly back—and I knew it was my father. "The time has come for you to change your name," he seemed to say, "for you have sought and found."

THE END.

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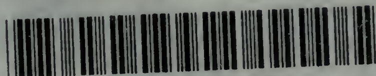
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