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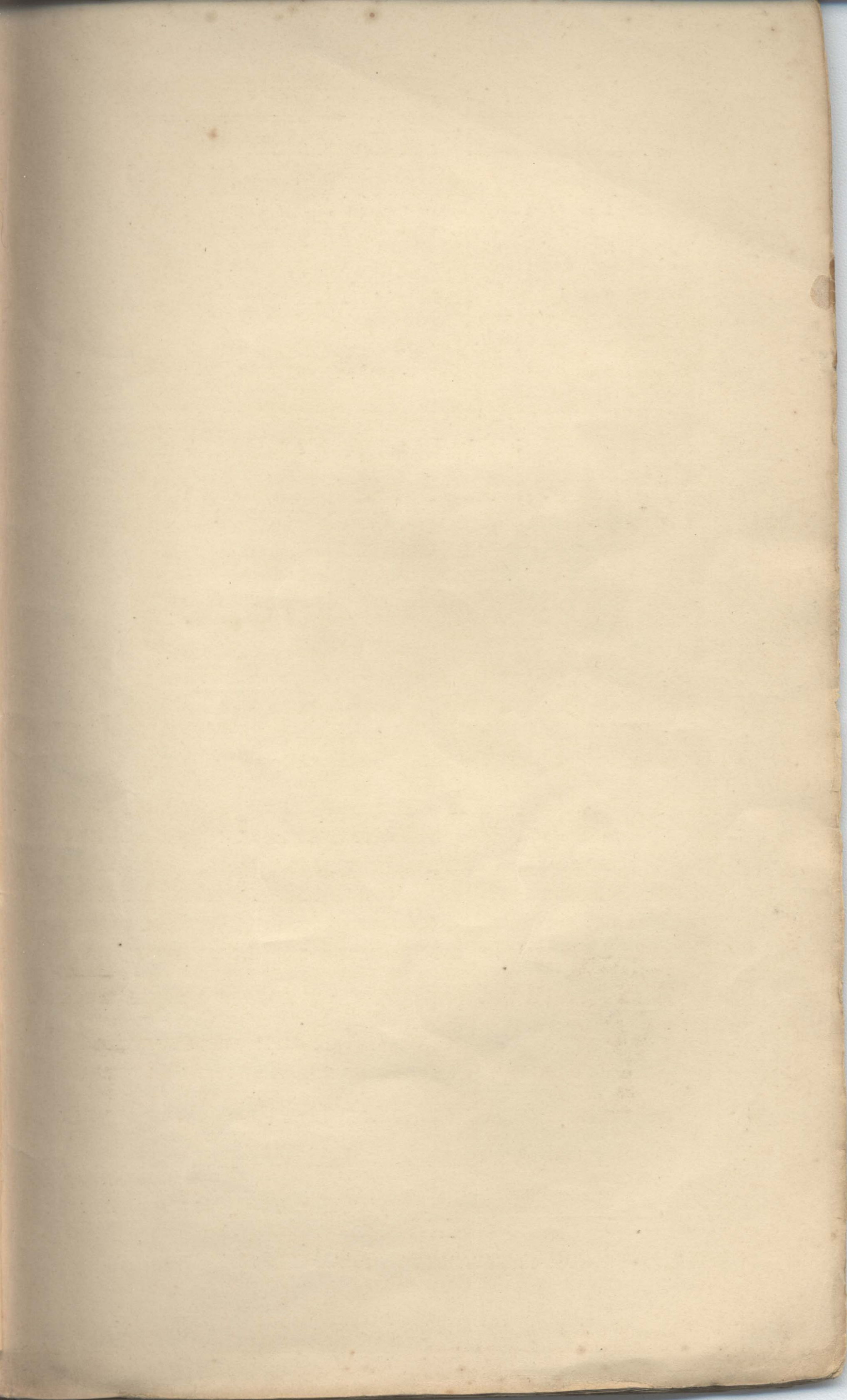
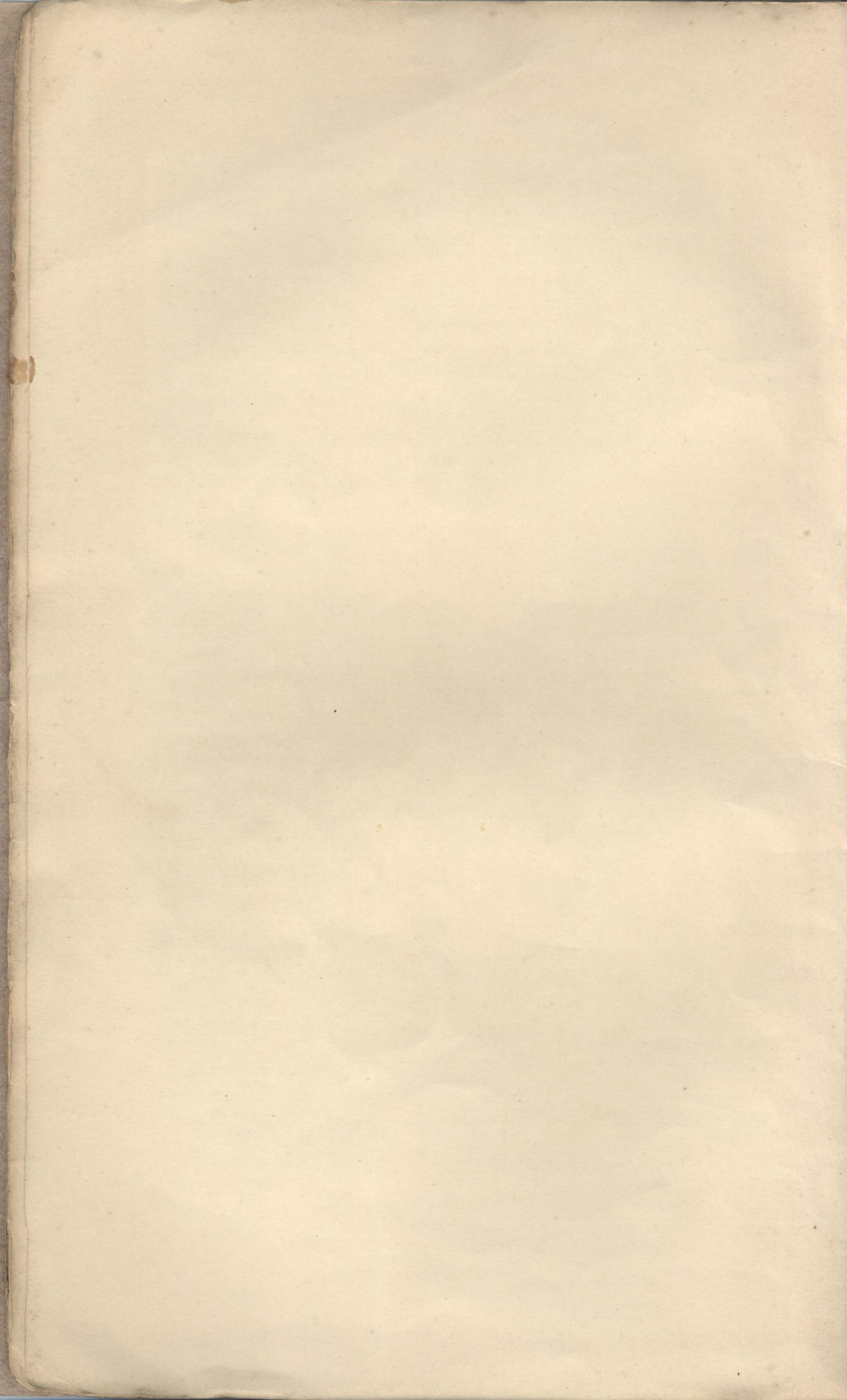


The Angel of Light.

Lucius Mason in his Study.



CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ANGEL OF LIGHT.

In speaking of the character and antecedents of Felix Graham I have said that he was moulding a wife for himself. The idea of a wife thus moulded to fit a man's own grooves, and educated to suit matrimonial purposes according to the exact views of the future husband was by no means original with him. Other men have moulded their wives, but I do not know that as a rule the practice has been found to answer. It is open, in the first place, to this objection,—that the moulder does not generally conceive such idea very early in life, and the idea when conceived must necessarily be carried out on a young subject. Such a plan is the result of much deliberate thought, and has generally arisen from long observation, on the part of the thinker, of the unhappiness arising from marriages in which there has been no moulding. Such a frame of mind comes upon a bachelor, perhaps about his thirty-fifth year, and then he goes to work with a girl of fourteen. The operation takes some ten years, at the end of which the moulded bride regards her lord as an old man. On the whole I think that the ordinary plan is the better, and even the safer. Dance with a girl three times, and if you like the light of her eye and the tone of voice with which she, breathless, answers your little questions about horseflesh and music—about affairs masculine and feminine,—then take the leap in the dark. There is danger, no doubt; but the moulded wife is, I think, more dangerous.

With Felix Graham the matter was somewhat different, seeing that he was not yet thirty, and that the lady destined to be the mistress of his family had already passed through three or four years of her noviciate. He had begun to be prudent early in life; or had become prudent rather by force of sentiment than by force of thought. Mary Snow was the name of his bride-elect; and it is probable that, had not circumstances thrown Mary Snow in his way, he would not have gone out of his way to seek a subject for his experiment. Mary Snow was the daughter of an engraver,—not of an artist who receives four or five thousand pounds for engraving the chef-d'œuvre of a modern painter,—but of a man who executed flourishes on ornamental cards for tradespeople, and assisted in the

illustration of circus playbills. With this man Graham had become acquainted through certain transactions of his with the press, and had found him to be a widower, drunken, dissolute, and generally drowned in poverty. One child the man had, and that child was Mary Snow.

How it came to pass that the young barrister first took upon himself the charge of maintaining and educating this poor child need not now be told. His motives had been thoroughly good, and in the matter he had endeavoured to act the part of a kind Samaritan. He had found her pretty, half starved, dirty, ignorant, and modest; and so finding her had made himself responsible for feeding, cleaning, and teaching her,—and ultimately for marrying her. One would have said that in undertaking a task of such undoubted charity as that comprised in the three first charges, he would have encountered no difficulty from the drunken, dissolute, impoverished engraver. But the man from the beginning was cunning; and before Graham had succeeded in obtaining the custody of the child, the father had obtained a written undertaking from him that he would marry her at a certain age if her conduct up to that age had been becoming. As to this latter stipulation no doubt had arisen; and indeed Graham had so acted by her that had she fallen away the fault would have been all her own. There wanted now but one year to the coming of that day on which he was bound to make himself a happy man, and hitherto he himself had never doubted as to the accomplishment of his undertaking.

He had told his friends,—those with whom he was really intimate, Augustus Staveley and one or two others,—what was to be his matrimonial lot in life; and they had ridiculed him for his quixotic chivalry. Staveley especially had been strong in his conviction that no such marriage would ever take place, and had already gone so far as to plan another match for his friend.

'You know you do not love her,' he had said, since Felix had been staying on this occasion at Noningsby.

'I know no such thing,' Felix had answered, almost in anger. 'On the contrary I know that I do love her.'

'Yes, as I love my niece Maria, or old Aunt Bessy, who always supplied me with sugar-candy when I was a boy.'

'It is I that have supplied Mary with her sugar-candy, and the love thus engendered is the stronger.'

'Nevertheless you are not in love with her, and never will be, and if you marry her you will commit a great sin.'

'How moral you have grown!'

'No, I'm not. I'm not a bit moral. But I know very well when a man is in love with a girl, and I know very well that you're not in love with Mary Snow. And I tell you what, my friend, if you

do marry her you are done for life. There will absolutely be an end of you.'

'You mean to say that your royal highness will drop me.'

'I mean to say nothing about myself. My dropping you or not dropping you won't alter your lot in life. I know very well what a poor man wants to give him a start; and a fellow like you who has such quaint ideas on so many things requires all the assistance he can get. You should look out for money and connection.'

'Sophia Furnival, for instance.'

'No; she would not suit you. I perceive that now.'

'So I supposed. Well, my dear fellow, we shall not come to loggerheads about that. She is a very fine girl, and you are welcome to the hatful of money—if you can get it.'

'That's nonsense. I'm not thinking of Sophia Furnival any more than you are. But if I did it would be a proper marriage. Now—' And then he went on with some further very sage remarks about Miss Snow.

All this was said as Felix Graham was lying with his broken bones in the comfortable room at Noningsby; and to tell the truth, when it was so said his heart was not quite at ease about Mary Snow. Up to this time, having long since made up his mind that Mary should be his wife, he had never allowed his thoughts to be diverted from that purpose. Nor did he so allow them now,—as long as he could prevent them from wandering.

But, lying there at Noningsby, thinking of those sweet Christmas evenings, how was it possible that they should not wander? His friend had told him that he did not love Mary Snow; and then, when alone, he asked himself whether in truth he did love her. He had pledged himself to marry her, and he must carry out that pledge. But nevertheless did he love her? And if not her, did he love any other?

Mary Snow knew very well what was to be her destiny, and indeed had known it for the last two years. She was now nineteen years old,—and Madeline Staveley was also nineteen; she was nineteen, and at twenty she was to become a wife, as by agreement between Felix Graham and Mr. Snow, the drunken engraver. They knew their destiny,—the future husband and the future wife,—and each relied with perfect faith on the good faith and affection of the other.

Graham, while he was thus being lectured by Staveley, had under his pillow a letter from Mary. He wrote to her regularly—on every Sunday, and on every Tuesday she answered him. Nothing could be more becoming than the way she obeyed all his behests on such matters; and it really did seem that in his case the moulded wife would turn out to have been well moulded. When Staveley left him he again read Mary's letter. Her letters

were always of the same length, filling completely the four sides of a sheet of note paper. They were excellently well written; and as no one word in them was ever altered or erased, it was manifest enough to Felix that the original composition was made on a rough draft. As he again read through the four sides of the little sheet of paper, he could not refrain from conjecturing what sort of a letter Madeline Staveley might write. Mary Snow's letter ran as follows:—

'3 Bloomfield Terrace, Peckham,
'Tuesday, 10 January, 18—.

'MY DEAREST FELIX'—she had so called him for the last twelvemonth by common consent between Graham and the very discreet lady under whose charge she at present lived. Previously to that she had written to him as, My dear Mr. Graham.

'MY DEAREST FELIX,

'I am very glad to hear that your arm and your two ribs are getting so much better. I received your letter yesterday, and was glad to hear that you are so comfortable in the house of the very kind people with whom you are staying. If I knew them I would send them my respectful remembrances, but as I do not know them I suppose it would not be proper. But I remember them in my prayers.'—This last assurance was inserted under the express instruction of Mrs. Thomas, who however did not read Mary's letters, but occasionally, on some subjects, gave her hints as to what she ought to say. Nor was there hypocrisy in this, for under the instruction of her excellent mentor she had prayed for the kind people.—'I hope you will be well enough to come and pay me a visit before long, but pray do not come before you are well enough to do so without giving yourself any pain. I am glad to hear that you do not mean to go hunting any more, for it seems to me to be a dangerous amusement.' And then the first paragraph came to an end.

'My papa called here yesterday. He said he was very badly off indeed, and so he looked. I did not know what to say at first, but he asked me so much to give him some money, that I did give him at last all that I had. It was nineteen shillings and sixpence. Mrs. Thomas was angry, and told me I had no right to give away your money, and that I should not have given more than half a crown. I hope you will not be angry with me. I do not want any more at present. But indeed he was very bad, especially about his shoes.

'I do not know that I have any more to say except that I put back thirty lines of Télémaque into French every morning before breakfast. It never comes near right, but nevertheless M. Grigaud says it is well done He says that if it came quite right I should

compose French as well as M. Fénelon, which of course I cannot expect.

'I will now say good-bye, and I am yours most affectionately,

'MARY SNOW.'

There was nothing in this letter to give any offence to Felix Graham, and so he acknowledged to himself. He made himself so acknowledge, because on the first reading of it he had felt that he was half angry with the writer. It was clear that there was nothing in the letter which would justify censure;—nothing which did not, almost, demand praise. He would have been angry with her had she limited her filial donation to the half-crown which Mrs. Thomas had thought appropriate. He was obliged to her for that attention to her French which he had specially enjoined. Nothing could be more proper than her allusion to the Staveleys; —and altogether the letter was just what it ought to be. Nevertheless it made him unhappy and irritated him. Was it well that he should marry a girl whose father was 'indeed very bad, but especially about his shoes?' Staveley had told him that connection would be necessary for him, and what sort of a connection would this be? And was there one word in the whole letter that showed a spark of true love? Did not the footfall of Madeline Staveley's step as she passed along the passage go nearer to his heart than all the outspoken assurance of Mary Snow's letter?

Nevertheless he had undertaken to do this thing, and he would do it,—let the footfall of Madeline Staveley's step be ever so sweet in his ear. And then, lying back in his bed, he began to think whether it would have been as well that he should have broken his neck instead of his ribs in getting out of Monkton Grange covert.

Mrs. Thomas was a lady who kept a school consisting of three little girls and Mary Snow. She had in fact not been altogether successful in the line of life she had chosen for herself, and had hardly been able to keep her modest door-plate on her door, till Graham, in search of some home for his bride, then in the first noviciate of her moulding, had come across her. Her means were now far from plentiful; but as an average number of three children still clung to her, and as Mary Snow's seventy pounds per annum—to include clothes—were punctually paid, the small house at Peckham was maintained. Under these circumstances Mary Snow was somebody in the eyes of Mrs. Thomas, and Felix Graham was a very great person indeed.

Graham had received his letter on a Wednesday, and on the following Monday Mary, as usual, received one from him. These letters always came to her in the evening, as she was sitting over her tea with Mrs. Thomas, the three children having been duly put to bed. Graham's letters were very short, as a man with a

broken right arm and two broken ribs is not fluent with his pen. But still a word or two did come to her. 'Dearest Mary, I am doing better and better, and I hope I shall see you in about a fortnight. Quite right in giving the money. Stick to the French. Your own F. G.' But as he signed himself her own, his mind misgave him that he was lying.

'It is very good of him to write to you while he is in such a state,' said Mrs. Thomas.

'Indeed it is,' said Mary—very good indeed.' And then she went on with the history of "Rasselas" in his happy valley, by which study Mrs. Thomas intended to initiate her into that course of novel-reading which has become necessary for a British lady. But Mrs. Thomas had a mind to improve the present occasion. It was her duty to inculcate in her pupil love and gratitude towards the beneficent man who was doing so much for her. Gratitude for favours past and love for favours to come; and now, while that scrap of a letter was lying on the table, the occasion for doing so was opportune.

'Mary, I do hope you love Mr. Graham with all your heart and all your strength.' She would have thought it wicked to say more; but so far she thought she might go, considering the sacred tie which was to exist between her pupil and the gentleman in question.

'Oh, yes, indeed I do;' and then Mary's eyes fell wishfully on the cover of the book which lay in her lap while her finger kept the place. Rasselas is not very exciting, but it was more so than Mrs. Thomas.

'You would be very wicked if you did not. And I hope you think sometimes of the very responsible duties which a wife owes to her husband. And this will be more especially so with you than with any other woman—almost that I ever heard of.'

There was something in this that was almost depressing to poor Mary's spirit, but nevertheless she endeavoured to bear up against it and do her duty. 'I shall do all I can to please him, Mrs. Thomas;—and indeed I do try about the French. And he says I was right to give papa that money.'

'But there will be many more things than that when you've stood at the altar with him and become his wife;—bone of his bone, Mary.' And she spoke these last words in a very solemn tone, shaking her head, and the solemn tone almost ossified poor Mary's heart as she heard it.

'Yes; I know there will. But I shall endeavour to find out what he likes.'

'I don't think he is so particular about his eating and drinking as some other gentlemen; though no doubt he will like his things nice.'

'I know he is fond of strong tea, and I sha'n't forget that.'

'And about dress. He is not very rich you know, Mary; but it will make him unhappy if you are not always tidy. And his own shirts—I fancy he has no one to look after them now, for I so often see the buttons off. You should never let one of them go into his drawers without feeling them all to see that they're on tight.'

'I'll remember that,' said Mary, and then she made another little furtive attempt to open the book.

'And about your own stockings, Mary. Nothing is so useful to a young woman in your position as a habit of darning neat. I'm sometimes almost afraid that you don't like darning.'

'Oh, yes I do.' That was a fib; but what could she do, poor girl, when so pressed?

'Because I thought you would look at Jane Robinson's and Julia Wright's which are lying there in the basket. I did Rebecca's myself before tea, till my old eyes were sore.'

'Oh, I didn't know,' said Mary, with some slight offence in her tone. 'Why didn't you ask me to do them downright if you wanted?'

'It's only for the practice it will give you.'

'Practice! I'm always practising something.' But nevertheless she laid down the book, and dragged the basket of work up on to the table. 'Why, Mrs. Thomas, it's impossible to mend these; they're all darn.'

'Give them to me,' said Mrs. Thomas. And then there was silence between them for a quarter of an hour during which Mary's thoughts wandered away to the events of her future life. Would his stockings be so troublesome as these?

But Mrs. Thomas was at heart an honest woman, and as a rule was honest also in practice. Her conscience told her that Mr. Graham might probably not approve of this sort of practice for conjugal duties, and in spite of her failing eyes she resolved to do her duty. 'Never mind them, Mary,' said she. 'I remember now that you were doing your own before dinner.'

'Of course I was,' said Mary sulkily. 'And as for practice, I don't suppose he'll want me to do more of that than anything else.'

'Well, dear, put them by.' And Miss Snow did put them by, resuming Rasselas as she did so. Who darned the stockings of Rasselas and felt that the buttons were tight on his shirts? What a happy valley must it have been if a bride expectant were free from all such cares as these!

'I suppose, Mary, it will be some time in the spring of next year.' Mrs. Thomas was not reading, and therefore a little conversation from time to time was to her a solace.

'What will be, Mrs. Thomas?'

'Why, the marriage.'

'I suppose it will. He told father it should be early in 18—, and I shall be past twenty then.'

'I wonder where you'll go to live.'

'I don't know. He has never said anything about that.'

'I suppose not; but I'm sure it will be a long way away from Peckham.' In answer to this Mary said nothing, but could not help wishing that it might be so. Peckham to her had not been a place bright with happiness, although she had become in so marked a way a child of good fortune. And then, moreover, she had a deep care on her mind with which the streets and houses and pathways of Peckham were closely connected. It would be very expedient that she should go far, far away from Peckham when she had become, in actual fact, the very wife of Felix Graham.

'Miss Mary,' whispered the red-armed maid of all work, creeping up to Mary's bedroom door, when they had all retired for the night, and whispering through the chink. 'Miss Mary. I've somethink to say.' And Mary opened the door. 'I've got a letter from him:' and the maid of all work absolutely produced a little note enclosed in a green envelope.

'Sarah, I told you not,' said Mary, looking very stern and hesitating with her finger whether or no she would take the letter.

'But he did so beg and pray. Besides, miss, as he says hisself he must have his answer. Any gen'leman, he says, 'as a right to a answer. And if you'd a seed him yourself I'm sure you'd have took it. He did look so nice with a blue and gold hankercher round his neck. He was a-going to the the-a-tre he said.'

'And who was going with him, Sarah?'

'Oh, no one. Only his mamma and sister, and them sort. He's all right—he is.' And then Mary Snow did take the letter.

'And I'll come for the answer when you're settling the room after breakfast to-morrow?' said the girl.

'No; I don't know. I sha'n't send any answer at all. But, Sarah, for heaven's sake, do not say a word about it!'

'Who, I? Laws love you, miss. I wouldn't;—not for worlds of gold.' And then Mary was left alone to read a second letter from a second suitor.

'Angel of light!' it began, 'but cold as your own fair name.' Poor Mary thought it was very nice and very sweet, and though she was so much afraid of it that she almost wished it away, yet she read it a score of times. Stolen pleasures always are sweet. She had not cared to read those two lines from her own betrothed lord above once, or at the most twice; and yet they had been written by a good man,—a man superlatively good to her, and written too with considerable pain.

She sat down all trembling to think of what she was doing; and then, as she thought, she read the letter again. 'Angel of light! but cold as your own fair name.' Alas, alas! it was very sweet to her!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR. FURNIVAL LOOKS FOR ASSISTANCE.

'AND you think that nothing can be done down there?' said Mr. Furnival to his clerk, immediately after the return of Mr. Crabwitz from Hamworth to London.

'Nothing at all, sir,' said Mr. Crabwitz, with laconic significance.

'Well; I dare say not. If the matter could have been arranged at a reasonable cost, without annoyance to my friend Lady Mason, I should have been glad; but, on the whole, it will perhaps be better that the law should take its course. She will suffer a good deal, but she will be the safer for it afterwards.'

'Mr. Furnival, I went so far as to offer a thousand pounds!'

'A thousand pounds! Then they'll think we're afraid of them.'

'Not a bit more than they did before. Though I offered the money, he doesn't know the least that the offer came from our side. But I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Furnival—. I suppose I may speak my mind.'

'Oh, yes! But remember this, Crabwitz; Lady Mason is no more in danger of losing the property than you are. It is a most vexatious thing, but there can be no doubt as to what the result will be.'

'Well, Mr. Furnival,—I don't know.'

'In such matters, I am tolerably well able to form an opinion.'

'Oh, certainly!'

'And that's my opinion. Now I shall be very glad to hear yours.'

'My opinion is this, Mr. Furnival, that Sir Joseph never made that codicil.'

'And what makes you think so?'

'The whole course of the evidence. It's quite clear there was another deed executed that day, and witnessed by Bolster and Kenneby. Had there been two documents for them to witness, they would have remembered it so soon after the occurrence.'

'Well, Crabwitz, I differ from you,—differ from you in toto But keep your opinion to yourself, that's all. I've no doubt you did the best for us you could down at Hamworth, and I'm much obliged to you. You'll find we've got our hands quite full again,—

almost too full.' Then he turned round to his table, and to the papers upon it; whereupon, Crabwitz took the hint, and left the room.

But when he had gone, Mr. Furnival again raised his eyes from the papers on the table, and leaning back in his chair, gave himself up to further consideration of the Orley Farm case. Crabwitz he knew was a sharp, clever man, and now the opinion formed by Crabwitz, after having seen this Hamworth attorney, tallied with his own opinion. Yes; it was his own opinion. He had never said as much, even to himself, with those inward words which a man uses when he assures himself of the result of his own thoughts; but he was aware that it was his own opinion. In his heart of hearts, he did believe that that codicil had been fraudulently manufactured by his friend and client, Lady Mason.

Under these circumstances, what should he do? He had the handle of his pen between his teeth, as was his habit when he was thinking, and tried to bring himself to some permanent resolution.

How beautiful had she looked while she stood in Sir Peregrine's library, leaning on the old man's arm—how beautiful and how innocent! That was the form which his thoughts chiefly took. And then she had given him her hand, and he still felt the soft silken touch of her cool fingers. He would not be a man if he could desert a woman in such a strait. And such a woman! If even guilty, had she not expiated her guilt by deep sorrow? And then he thought of Mr. Mason of Groby Park; and he thought of Sir Peregrine's strong conviction, and of Judge Staveley's belief; and he thought also of the strong hold which public opinion and twenty years of possession would still give to the cause he favoured. He would still bring her through! Yes; in spite of her guilt, if she were guilty; on the strength of her innocency, if she were innocent; but on account of her beauty, and soft hand, and deep liquid eye. So at least he would have owned, could he have been honest enough to tell himself the whole truth.

But he must prepare himself for the battle in earnest. It was not as though he had been briefed in this case, and had merely to perform the duty for which he had been hired. He was to undertake the whole legal management of the affair. He must settle what attorney should have the matter in hand, and instruct that attorney how to reinstruct him, and how to reinstruct those other barristers who must necessarily be employed on the defence, in a case of such magnitude. He did not yet know under what form the attack would be made; but he was nearly certain that it would be done in the shape of a criminal charge. He hoped that it might take the direct form of an accusation of forgery. The stronger and more venomous the charge made, the stronger also would be public

opinion in favour of the accused, and the greater the chance of an acquittal. But if she were to be found guilty on any charge, it would matter little on what. Any such verdict of guilty would be utter ruin and obliteration of her existence.

He must consult with some one, and at last he made up his mind to go to his very old friend, Mr. Chaffanbrass. Mr. Chaffanbrass was safe, and he might speak out his mind to him without fear of damaging the cause. Not that he could bring himself to speak out his real mind, even to Mr. Chaffanbrass. He would so speak that Mr. Chaffanbrass should clearly understand him; but still, not even to his ears, would be say that he really believed Lady Mason to have been guilty. How would it be possible that he should feign before a jury his assured, nay, his indignant conviction of his client's innocence, if he had ever whispered to any one his conviction of her guilt?

On that same afternoon he sent to make an appointment with Mr. Chaffanbrass, and immediately after breakfast, on the following morning, had himself taken to that gentleman's chambers. The chambers of this great guardian of the innocence—or rather not-guiltiness of the public—were not in any so-named inn, but consisted of two gloomy, dark, panelled rooms in Ely Place. The course of our story, however, will not cause us to make many visits to Ely Place, and any closer description of them may be spared. I have said that Mr. Chaffanbrass and Mr. Furnival were very old friends. So they were. They had known each other for more than thirty years, and each knew the whole history of the other's rise and progress in the profession; but any results of their friendship at present were but scanty. They might meet each other in the streets, perhaps, once in the year; and occasionally—but very seldom—might be brought together on subjects connected with their profession; as was the case when they travelled together down to Birmingham. As to meeting in each other's houses, or coming together for the sake of the friendship which existed,—the idea of doing so never entered the head of either of them.

All the world knows Mr. Chaffanbrass—either by sight or by reputation. Those who have been happy enough to see the face and gait of the man as, in years now gone, he used to lord it at the Old Bailey, may not have thought much of the privilege which was theirs. But to those who have only read of him, and know of his deeds simply by their triumphs, he was a man very famous and worthy to be seen. 'Look; that's Chaffanbrass. It was he who cross-examined —— at the Old Bailey, and sent him howling out of London, banished for ever into the wilderness.' 'Where, where? Is that Chaffanbrass? What a dirty little man!'

To this dirty little man in Ely Place, Mr. Furnival now went in his difficulty. Mr. Furnival might feel himself sufficient to secure

the acquittal of an innocent person, or even of a guilty person, under ordinary circumstances; but if any man in England could secure the acquittal of a guilty person under extraordinary circumstances, it would be Mr. Chaffanbrass. This had been his special line of work for the last thirty years.

Mr. Chaffanbrass was a dirty little man; and when seen without his gown and wig, might at a first glance be thought insignificant. But he knew well how to hold his own in the world, and could maintain his opinion, unshaken, against all the judges in the land.

'Well, Furnival, and what can I do for you?' he said, as soon as the member for the Essex Marshes was seated opposite to him. 'It isn't often that the light of your countenance shines so far east as this. Somebody must be in trouble, I suppose?'

'Somebody is in trouble,' said Mr. Furnival; and then he began to tell his story. Mr. Chaffanbrass listened almost in silence throughout. Now and then he asked a question by a word or two, expressing no opinion whatever as he did so; but he was satisfied to leave the talking altogether in the hands of his visitor till the whole tale was told. 'Ah,' he said then, 'a clever woman!'

'An uncommonly sweet creature too,' said Mr. Furnival.

'I dare say,' said Mr. Chaffanbrass; and then there was a pause.

'And what can I do for you?' said Mr. Chaffanbrass.

'In the first place I should be very glad to have your advice; and then—. Of course I must lead in defending her,—unless it were well that I should put the case altogether in your hands.'

'Oh no! don't think of that. I couldn't give the time to it. My heart is not in it, as yours is. Where will it be?'

'At Alston, I suppose.'

'At the Spring assizes. That will be—. Let me see; about the 10th of March.'

'I should think we might get it postponed till the summer. Round is not at all hot about it.'

'Should we gain anything by that? If a prisoner be innocent why torment him by delay. He is tolerably sure of escape. If he be guilty, extension of time only brings out the facts the clearer. As far as my experience goes, the sooner a man is tried the better, —always.'

'And you would consent to hold a brief?'

'Under you? Well; yes. I don't mind it at Alston. Anything to oblige an old friend. I never was proud, you know.'

'And what do you think about it, Chaffanbrass?'

'Ah! that's the question.'

'She must be pulled through. Twenty years of possession! Think of that.'

'That's what Mason, the man down in Yorkshire, is thinking of. There's no doubt of course about that partnership deed?'

'I fear not. Round would not go on with it if that were not all true.'

'It depends on those two witnesses, Furnival. I remember the case of old, though it was twenty years ago, and I had nothing to do with it. I remember thinking that Lady Mason was a very clever woman, and that Round and Crook were rather slow.'

'He's a brute; is that fellow, Mason of Groby Park.'

'A brute; is he? We'll get him into the box and make him say as much for himself. She's uncommonly pretty, isn't she?'

'She is a pretty woman.'

'And interesting? It will all tell, you know. A widow with one son, isn't she?'

'Yes, and she has done her duty admirably since her husband's death. You will find too that she has the sympathies of all the best people in her neighbourhood. She is staying now at the house of Sir Peregrine Orme, who would do anything for her.'

'Anything, would he?'

'And the Staveleys know her. The judge is convinced of her innocence.'

'Is he? He'll probably have the Home Circuit in the summer. His conviction expressed from the bench would be more useful to her. You can make Staveley believe everything in a drawing-room or over a glass of wine; but I'll be hanged if I can ever get him to believe anything when he's on the bench.'

'But, Chaffanbrass, the countenance of such people will be of great use to her down there. Everybody will know that she's been staying with Sir Peregrine.'

'I've no doubt she's a clever woman.'

'But this new trouble has half killed her.'

'I don't wonder at that either. These sort of troubles do vex people. A pretty woman like that should have everything smooth; shouldn't she? Well, we'll do the best we can. You'll see that I'm properly instructed. By-the-by, who is her attorney? In such a case as that you couldn't have a better man than old Solomon Aram. But Solomon Aram is too far east from you, I suppose?'

'Isn't he a Jew?'

'Upon my word I don't know. He's an attorney, and that's enough for me.'

And then the matter was again discussed between them, and it was agreed that a third counsel would be wanting. 'Felix Graham is very much interested in the case,' said Mr. Furnival, 'and is as firmly convinced of her innocence as—as I am.' And he managed to look his ally in the face and to keep his countenance firmly.

'Ah,' said Mr. Chaffanbrass. 'But what if he should happen to change his opinion about his own client?'

'We could prevent that, I think.'

'I'm not so sure. And then he'd throw her over as sure as your name's Furnival.'

'I hardly think he'd do that.'

'I believe he'd do anything.' And Mr. Chaffanbrass was quite moved to enthusiasm. 'I've heard that man talk more nonsense about the profession in one hour, than I ever heard before since I first put a cotton gown on my back. He does not understand the nature of the duty which a professional man owes to his client.'

'But he'd work well if he had a case at heart himself. I don't like him, but he is clever.'

'You can do as you like, of course. I shall be out of my ground down at Alston, and of course I don't care who takes the fag of the work. But I tell you this fairly;—if he does go into the case and then turns against us or drops it,—I shall turn against him and drop into him.'

'Heaven help him in such a case as that!' And then these two great luminaries of the law shook hands and parted.

One thing was quite clear to Mr. Furnival as he had himself carried in a cab from Ely Place to his own chambers in Lincoln's Inn. Mr. Chaffanbrass was fully convinced of Lady Mason's guilt. He had not actually said so, but he had not even troubled himself to go through the little ceremony of expressing a belief in her innocence. Mr. Furnival was well aware that Mr. Chaffanbrass would not on this account be less likely to come out strongly with such assurances before a jury, or to be less severe in his cross-examination of a witness whose evidence went to prove that guilt; but nevertheless the conviction was disheartening. Mr. Chaffanbrass would know, almost by instinct, whether an accused person was or was not guilty; and he had already perceived, by instinct, that Lady Mason was guilty. Mr. Furnival sighed as he stepped out of his cab, and again wished that he could wash his hands of the whole affair. He wished it very much;—but he knew that his wish could not be gratified.

'Solomon Aram!' he said to himself, as he again sat down in his arm-chair. 'It will sound badly to those people down at Alston. At the Old Bailey they don't mind that kind of thing.' And then he made up his mind that Solomon Aram would not do. It would be a disgrace to him to take a case out of Solomon Aram's hands. Mr. Chaffanbrass did not understand all this. Mr. Chaffanbrass had been dealing with Solomon Arams all his life. Mr. Chaffanbrass could not see the effect which such an alliance would have on the character of a barrister holding Mr. Furnival's position. Solomon Aram was a good man in his way no doubt;—perhaps the best man going. In taking every dodge to prevent a conviction no man could be better than Solomon Aram. All this Mr. Furnival felt;—but he felt also that he could not afford it. 'It would be tantamount to a

confession of guilt to take such a man as that down into the country,' he said to himself, trying to excuse himself.

And then he also made up his mind that he would sound Felix Graham. If Felix Graham could be induced to take up the case thoroughly believing in the innocence of his client, no man would be more useful as a junior. Felix Graham went the Home Circuit on which Alston was one of the assize towns.

CHAPTER XXXV.

LOVE WAS STILL THE LORD OF ALL.

WHY should I not? Such had been the question which Sir Peregrine Orme had asked himself over and over again, in these latter days, since Lady Mason had been staying at his house; and the purport of the question was this:—Why should he not make Lady Mason his wife?

I and my readers can probably see very many reasons why he should not do so; but then we are not in love with Lady Mason. Her charms and her sorrows,—her soft, sad smile and her more lovely tears have not operated upon us. We are not chivalrous old gentlemen, past seventy years of age, but still alive, keenly alive, to a strong feeling of romance. That visit will perhaps be remembered which Mr. Furnival made at The Cleeve, and the subsequent interview between Lady Mason and the baronet. On that day he merely asked himself the question, and took no further step. On the subsequent day and the day after, it was the same. He still asked himself the question, sitting alone in his library; but he did not ask it as yet of any one else. When he met Lady Mason in these days his manner to her was full of the deference due to a lady and of the affection due to a dear friend; but that was all. Mrs. Orme, seeing this, and cordially concurring in this love for her guest, followed the lead which her father-in-law gave, and threw herself into Lady Mason's arms. They two were fast and bosom friends.

And what did Lady Mason think of all this? In truth there was much in it that was sweet to her, but there was something also that increased that idea of danger which now seemed to envelop her whole existence. Why had Sir Peregrine so treated her in the library, behaving towards her with such tokens of close affection? He had put his arm round her waist and kissed her lips and pressed her to his old bosom. Why had this been so? He had assured her that he would be to her as a father, but her woman's instinct had told her that the pressure of his hand had been warmer than that

which a father accords to his adopted daughter. No idea of anger had come upon her for a moment; but she had thought about it much, and had thought about it almost in dismay. What if the old man did mean more than a father's love? It seemed to her as though it must be a dream that he should do so; but what if he did? How should she answer him? In such circumstances what should she do or say? Could she afford to buy his friendship,—even his warmest love at the cost of the enmity of so many others? Would not Mrs. Orme hate her, Mrs. Orme, whom she truly, dearly, eagerly loved? Mrs. Orme's affection was, of all personal gratifications, the sweetest to her. And the young heir,—would not he hate her? Nay, would he not interfere and with some strong hand prevent so mean a deed on the part of his grandfather? And if so, would she not thus have lost them altogether? And then she thought of that other friend whose aid would be so indispensable to her in this dreadful time of tribulation. How would Mr. Furnival receive such tidings, if it should come to pass that such tidings were to be told?

Lady Mason was rich with female charms, and she used them partly with the innocence of the dove, but partly also with the wisdom of the serpent. But in such use as she did make of these only weapons which Providence had given to her, I do not think that she can be regarded as very culpable. During those long years of her young widowhood in which nothing had been wanting to her, her conduct had been free from any hint of reproach. She had been content to find all her joy in her duties and in her love as a mother. Now a great necessity for assistance had come upon her. It was necessary that she should bind men to her cause, men powerful in the world and able to fight her battle with strong arms. She did so bind them with the only chains at her command,—but she had no thought, nay, no suspicion of evil in so doing. It was very painful to her when she found that she had caused unhappiness to Mrs. Furnival; and it caused her pain now, also, when she thought of Sir Peregrine's new love. She did wish to bind these men to her by a strong attachment; but she would have stayed this feeling at a certain point had it been possible for her so to manage it.

In the mean time Sir Peregrine still asked himself that question. He had declared to himself when first the idea had come to him, that none of those whom he loved should be injured. He would even ask his daughter-in-law's consent, condescending to plead his cause before her, making her understand his motives, and asking her acquiescence as a favour. He would be so careful of his grandson that this second marriage—if such event did come to pass—should not put a pound out of his pocket, or at any rate should not hamper the succession of the estate with a pound of debt. And then he made excuses to himself as to the step which he proposed to take,

thinking how he would meet his friends, and how he would carry himself before his old servants.

Old men have made more silly marriages than this which he then desired. Gentlemen such as Sir Peregrine in age and station have married their housemaids,—have married young girls of eighteen years of age,—have done so and faced their friends and servants afterwards. The bride that he proposed to himself was a lady, an old friend, a woman over forty, and one whom by such a marriage he could greatly assist in her deep sorrow. Why should he not do it?

After much of such thoughts as these, extended over nearly a week, he resolved to speak his mind to Mrs. Orme. If it were to be done it should be done at once. The incredulous unromantic readers of this age would hardly believe me if I said that his main object was to render assistance to Lady Mason in her difficulty; but so he assured himself, and so he believed. This assistance to be of true service must be given at once;—and having so resolved he sent for Mrs. Orme into the library.

'Edith, my darling,' he said, taking her hand and pressing it between both his own as was often the wont with him in his more affectionate moods. 'I want to speak to you—on business that concerns me nearly; may perhaps concern us all nearly. Can you give me half an hour?'

'Of course I can—what is it, sir? I am a bad hand at business; but you know that.'

'Sit down, dear; there; sit there, and I will sit here. As to this business, no one can counsel me as well as you.'

'Dearest father, I should be a poor councillor in anything.'

'Not in this, Edith. It is about Lady Mason that I would speak to you. We both love her dearly; do we not?'

'I do.'

'And are glad to have her here?'

'Oh, so glad. When this trial is only over, it will be so sweet, to have her for a neighbour. We really know her now. And it will be so pleasant to see much of her.'

There was nothing discouraging in this, but still the words in some slight degree grated against Sir Peregrine's feelings. At the present moment he did not wish to think of Lady Mason as living at Orley Farm, and would have preferred that his daughter-in-law should have spoken of her as being there, at The Cleeve.

'Yes; we know her now,' he said. 'And believe me in this, Edith; no knowledge obtained of a friend in happiness is at all equal to that which is obtained in sorrow. Had Lady Mason been prosperous, had she never become subject to the malice and avarice of wicked people, I should never have loved her as I do love her.'

'Nor should I, father.'

'She is a cruelly ill-used woman, and a woman worthy of the kindest usage. I am an old man now, but it has never before been my lot to be so anxious for a fellow-creature as I am for her. It is dreadful to think that innocence in this country should be subject to such attacks.'

'Indeed it is; but you do not think that there is any danger?'

This was all very well, and showed that Mrs. Orme's mind was well disposed towards the woman whom he loved. But he had known that before, and he began to feel that he was not approaching the object which he had in view. 'Edith,' at last he said abruptly, 'I love her with my whole heart. I would fain make her—my wife.' Sir Peregrine Orme had never in his course through life failed in anything for lack of courage; and when the idea came home to him that he was trembling at the task which he had imposed on himself, he dashed at it at once. It is so that forlorn hopes are led, and become not forlorn; it is so that breaches are taken.

'Your wife!' said Mrs. Orme. She would not have breathed a syllable to pain him if she could have helped it, but the suddenness of the announcement overcame her for a moment.

'Yes, Edith, my wife. Let us discuss the matter before you condemn it. But in the first place I would have you to understand this—I will not marry her if you say that it will make you unhappy. I have not spoken to her as yet, and she knows nothing of this project.' Sir Peregrine, it may be presumed, had not himself thought much of that kiss which he had given her. 'You,' he continued to say, 'have given up your whole life to me. You are my angel. If this thing will make you unhappy it shall not be done.'

Sir Peregrine had not so considered it, but with such a woman as Mrs. Orme this was, of course, the surest way to overcome opposition. On her own behalf, thinking only of herself, she would stand in the way of nothing that could add to Sir Peregrine's happiness. But nevertheless the idea was strong in her mind that such a marriage would be imprudent. Sir Peregrine at present stood high before the world. Would he stand so high if he did this thing? His gray hair and old manly bearing were honoured and revered by all who knew him. Would this still be so if he made himself the husband of Lady Mason?' She loved so dearly, she valued so highly the honour that was paid to him! She was so proud of her own boy in that he was the grandson of so perfect a gentleman! Would not this be a sad ending to such a career? Such were the thoughts which ran through her mind at the moment.

'Make me unhappy!' she said getting up and going over to him. 'It is your happiness of which I would think. Will it make you more happy?'

'It will enable me to befriend her more effectually.'

'But, dearest father, you must be the first consideration to us,—to me and Peregrine. Will it make you more happy?'

'I think it will,' he answered slowly.

'Then I, for one, will say nothing against it,' she answered. She was very weak, it will be said. Yes, she was weak. Many of the sweetest, kindest, best of women are weak in this way. It is not every woman that can bring herself to say hard useful, wise words in opposition to the follies of those they love best. A woman to be useful and wise no doubt should have such power. For myself I am not so sure that I like useful and wise women. 'Then I for one will say nothing against it,' said Mrs. Orme, deficient in utility, wanting in wisdom, but full of the sweetest affection.

'You are sure that you will not love her the less yourself?' said Sir Peregrine.

'Yes; I am sure of that. If it were to be so, I should endeavour to love her the more.'

'Dearest Edith. I have only one other person to tell.'

'Do you mean Peregrine?' she said in her softest voice.

'Yes. Of course he must be told. But as it would not be well to ask his consent,—as I have asked yours—' and then as he said this she kissed his brow.

'But you will let him know it?'

'Yes; that is if she accepts my proposition. Then he shall know it immediately. And, Edith, my dear, you may be sure of this; nothing that I do shall be allowed in any way to injure his prospects or to hamper him as regards money when I am gone. If this marriage takes place I cannot do very much for her in the way of money; she will understand that. Something I can of course.'

And then Mrs. Orme stood over the fire, looking at the hot coals, and thinking what Lady Mason's answer would be. She esteemed Lady Mason very highly, regarding her as a woman sensible and conscientious at all points, and she felt by no means certain that the offer would be accepted. What if Lady Mason should say that such an arrangement would not be possible for her. Mrs. Orme felt that under such circumstances she at any rate would not withdraw her love from Lady Mason.

'And now I may as well speak to her at once,' said Sir Peregrine. 'Is she in the drawing-room?'

'I left her there.'

'Will you ask her to come to me—with my love?'

'I had better not say anything I suppose?'

Sir Peregrine in his heart of hearts wished that his daughter-in-law could say it all, but he would not give her such a commission. 'No; perhaps not.' And then Mrs. Orme was going to leave him.

'One word more, Edith. You and I, darling, have known each other so long and loved each other so well, that I should be unhappy if I were to fall in your estimation.'

'There is no fear of that, father.'

'Will you believe me when I assure you that my great object in doing this is to befriend a good and worthy woman whom I regard as ill used—beyond all ill usage of which I have hitherto known anything?'

She then assured him that she did so believe, and she assured him truly; after that she left him and went away to send in Lady Mason for her interview. In the mean time Sir Peregrine got up and stood with his back to the fire. He would have been glad that the coming scene could be over, and yet I should be wronging him to say that he was afraid of it. There would be a pleasure to him in telling her that he loved her so dearly and trusted her with such absolute confidence. There would be a sort of pleasure to him in speaking even of her sorrow, and in repeating his assurance that he would fight the battle for her with all the means at his command. And perhaps also there would be some pleasure in the downcast look of her eye, as she accepted the tender of his love. Something of that pleasure he had known already. And then he remembered the other alternative. It was quite upon the cards that she should decline his offer. He did not by any means shut his eyes to that. Did she do so, his friendship should by no means be withdrawn from her. He would be very careful from the onset that she should understand so much as that. And then he heard the light footsteps in the hall; the gentle hand was raised to the door, and Lady Mason was standing in the room.

'Dear Lady Mason,' he said, meeting her half way across the room, 'it is very kind of you to come to me when I send for you in this way.'

'It would be my duty to come to you, if it were half across the kingdom;—and my pleasure also.'

'Would it?' said he, looking into her face with all the wishfulness of a young lover. From that moment she knew what was coming. Strange as was the destiny which was to be offered to her at this period of her life, yet she foresaw clearly that the offer was to be made. What she did not foresee, what she could not foretell, was the answer which she might make to it!

'It would certainly be my sweetest pleasure to send for you if you were away from us,—to send for you or to follow you,' said he.

'I do not know how to make return for all your kind regard to me;—to you and to dear Mrs. Orme.'

'Call her Edith, will you not? You did so call her once.'

'I call her so often when we are alone together, now; and yet I feel that I have no right.'

'You have every right. You shall have every right if you will accept it. Lady Mason, I am an old man,—some would say a very old man. But I am not too old to love you. Can you accept the love of an old man like me?'

Lady Mason was, as we are aware, not taken in the least by surprise; but it was quite necessary that she should seem to be so taken. This is a little artifice which is excusable in almost any lady at such a period. 'Sir Peregrine,' she said, 'you do not mean more than the love of a most valued friend?'

'Yes, much more. I mean the love of a husband for his wife; of a wife for her husband.'

'Sir Peregrine! Ah me! You have not thought of this, my friend. You have not remembered the position in which I am placed. Dearest, dearest friend; dearest of all friends,'—and then she knelt before him, leaning on his knees, as he sat in his accustomed large arm-chair. 'It may not be so. Think of the sorrow that would come to you and yours, if my enemies should prevail.'

'By —— they shall not prevail!' swore Sir Peregrine, roundly; and as he swore the oath he put his two hands upon her shoulders.

'No; we will hope not. I should die here at your feet if I thought that they could prevail. But I should die twenty deaths were I to drag you with me into disgrace. There will be disgrace even in standing at that bar.'

'Who will dare to say so, when I shall stand there with you?' said Sir Peregrine.

There was a feeling expressed in his face as he spoke these words, which made it glorious, and bright, and beautiful. She, with her eyes laden with tears, could not see it; but nevertheless, she knew that it was bright and beautiful. And his voice was full of hot eager assurance,—that assurance which had the power to convey itself from one breast to another. Would it not be so? If he stood there with her as her husband and lord, would it not be the case that no one would dare to impute disgrace to her?

And yet she did not wish it. Even yet, thinking of all this as she did think of it, according to the truth of the argument which he himself put before her, she would still have preferred that it should not be so. If she only knew with what words to tell him so;—to tell him so and yet give no offence! For herself, she would have married him willingly. Why should she not? Nay, she could and would have loved him, and been to him a wife, such as he could have found in no other woman. But she said within her heart that she owed him kindness and gratitude—that she owed them all kindness, and that it would be bad to repay them in such a way as this. She also thought of Sir Peregrine's gray hairs, and of his proud standing in the county, and the respect in which men held him. Would it be well in her to drag him down in his last

days from the noble pedestal on which he stood, and repay him thus for all that he was doing for her?

'Well,' said he, stroking her soft hair with his hands—the hair which appeared in front of the quiet prim cap she wore, 'shall it be so? Will you give me the right to stand there with you and defend you against the tongues of wicked men? We each have our own weakness, and we also have each our own strength. There I may boast that I should be strong.'

She thought again for a moment or two without rising from her knees, and also without speaking. Would such strength suffice? And if it did suffice, would it then be well with him? As for herself, she did love him. If she had not loved him before, she loved him now. Who had ever been to her so noble, so loving, so gracious as he? In her ears no young lover's vows had ever sounded. In her heart such love as all the world knows had never been known. Her former husband had been kind to her in his way, and she had done her duty by him carefully, painfully, and with full acceptance of her position. But there had been nothing there that was bright, and grand, and noble. She would have served Sir Peregrine on her knees in the smallest offices, and delighted in such services. It was not for lack of love that she must refuse him. But still she did not answer him, and still he stroked her hair.

'It would be better that you had never seen me,' at last she said; and she spoke with truth the thought of her mind. That she must do his bidding, whatever that bidding might be, she had in a certain way acknowledged to herself. If he would have it so, so it must be. How could she refuse him anything, or be disobedient in aught to one to whom she owed so much? But still it would be wiser otherwise; wiser for all—unless it were for herself alone. 'It would be better that you had never seen me,' she said.

'Nay, not so, dearest. That it would not be better for me,—for me and Edith I am quite sure. And I would fain hope that for you——'

'Oh, Sir Peregrine! you know what I mean. You know how I value your kindness. What should I be if it were withdrawn from me?'

'It shall not be withdrawn. Do not let that feeling actuate you. Answer me out of your heart, and however your heart may answer, remember this, that my friendship and support shall be the same. If you will take me for your husband, as your husband will I stand by you. If you cannot,—then I will stand by you as your father.'

What could she say? A word or two she did speak as to Mrs. Orme and her feelings, delaying her absolute reply—and as to Peregrine Orme and his prospects; but on both, as on all other

points, the baronet was armed with his answer. He had spoken to his darling Edith, and she had gladly given her consent. To her it would be everything to have so sweet a friend. And then as to his heir, every care should be taken that no injury should be done to him; and speaking of this, Sir Peregrine began to say a few words, plaintively, about money. But then Lady Mason stopped him. 'No,' she said, 'she could not, and would not, listen to that. She would have no settlement. No consideration as to money should be made to weigh with her. It was in no degree for that ——' And then she wept there till she would have fallen had he not supported her.

What more is there to be told. Of course she accepted him. As far as I can see into such affairs no alternative was allowed to her. She also was not a wise woman at all points. She was one whose feelings were sometimes too many for her, and whose feelings on this occasion had been much too many for her. Had she been able to throw aside from her his offer, she would have done so; but she had felt that she was not able. 'If you wish it, Sir Peregrine,' she said at last.

'And can you love an old man?' he had asked. Old men sometimes will ask questions such as these. She did not answer him, but stood by his side; and then again he kissed her, and was happy.

He resolved from that moment that Lady Mason should no longer be regarded as the widow of a city knight, but as the wife elect of a country baronet. Whatever ridicule he might incur in this matter, he would incur at once. Men and women had dared to speak of her cruelly, and they should now learn that any such future speech would be spoken of one who was exclusively his property. Let any who chose to be speakers under such circumstances look to it. He had devoted himself to her that he might be her knight and bear her scathless through the fury of this battle. With God's help he would put on his armour at once for that fight. Let them who would now injure her look to it. As soon as might be she should bear his name; but all the world should know at once what was her right to claim his protection. He had never been a coward, and he would not now be guilty of the cowardice of hiding his intentions. If there were those who chose to smile at the old man's fancy, let them smile. There would be many, he knew, who would not understand an old man's honour and an old man's chivalry.

'My own one,' he then said, pressing her again to his side, 'will you tell Edith, or shall I? She expects it.' But Lady Mason begged that he would tell the tale. It was necessary, she said, that she should be alone for a while. And then, escaping, she went to her own chamber.

'Ask Mrs. Orme if she will kindly step to me,' said Sir Peregrine, having rang his bell for the servant.

Lady Mason escaped across the hall to the stairs, and succeeded in reaching her room without being seen by any one. Then she sat herself down, and began to look her future world in the face. Two questions she had to ask. Would it be well for her that this marriage should take place? and would it be well for him? In an off-hand way she had already answered both questions; but she had done so by feeling rather than by thought.

No doubt she would gain much in the coming struggle by such a position as Sir Peregrine would give her. It did seem to her that Mr. Dockwrath and Joseph Mason would hardly dare to bring such a charge as that threatened against the wife of Sir Peregrine Orme. And then, too, what evidence as to character would be so substantial as the evidence of such a marriage? But how would Mr. Furnival bear it, and if he were offended would it be possible that the fight should be fought without him? No; that would be impossible. The lawyer's knowledge, experience, and skill were as necessary to her as the baronet's position and character. But why should Mr. Furnival be offended by such a marriage? 'She did not know,' she said to herself. 'She could not see that there should be cause of offence.' But yet some inner whisper of her conscience told her that there would be offence. Must Mr. Furnival be told; and must he be told at once?

And then what would Lucius say and think, and how should she answer the strong words which her son would use to her? He would use strong words she knew, and would greatly dislike this second marriage of his mother. What grown-up son is ever pleased to hear that his mother is about to marry? The Cleeve must be her home now—that is, if she did this deed. The Cleeve must be her home, and she must be separated in all things from Orley Farm. As she thought of this her mind went back, and back to those long gone days in which she had been racked with anxiety that Orley Farm should be the inheritance of the little baby that was lying at her feet. She remembered how she had pleaded to the father, pointing out the rights of her son—declaring, and with justice, that for herself she had asked for nothing; but that for him —instead of asking might she not demand? Was not that other son provided for, and those grown-up women with their rich husbands? 'Is he not your child as well as they?' she had pleaded. 'Is he not your own, and as well worthy of your love?' She had succeeded in getting the inheritance for the baby at her feet;—but had his having it made her happy, or him? Then her child had been all in all to her; but now she felt that that child was half estranged from her about this very property, and would become wholly estranged by the method she was taking to secure

it! 'I have toiled for him,' she said to herself, 'rising up early, and going to bed late; but the thief cometh in the night and despoileth it.' Who can guess the bitterness of her thoughts as she said this?

But her last thoughts, as she sat there thinking, were of him—Sir Peregrine. Would it be well for him that he should do this? And in thus considering she did not turn her mind chiefly to the usual view in which such a marriage would be regarded. Men might call Sir Peregrine an old fool and laugh at him; but for that she would, with God's help, make him amends. In those matters, he could judge for himself; and should he judge it right thus to link his life to hers, she would be true and leal to him in all things.

But then, about this trial. If there came disgrace and ruin, and an utter overthrow? If ——? Would it not be well at any rate that no marriage should take place till that had been decided? She could not find it in her heart to bring down his old gray hairs with utter sorrow to the grave.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHAT THE YOUNG MEN THOUGHT ABOUT IT.

Lucius Mason at this time was living at home at Orley Farm, not by any means in a happy frame of mind. It will be perhaps remembered that he had at one time had an interview with Mr. Furnival in that lawyer's chambers, which was by no means consoling to him, seeing that Mr. Furnival had pooh-poohed him and his pretensions in a very off-hand way; and he had since paid a very memorable visit to Mr. Dockwrath in which he had hardly been more successful. Nevertheless, he had gone to another lawyer. He had felt it impossible to remain tranquil, pursuing the ordinary avocations of his life, while such dreadful charges were being made openly again his mother, and being so made without any authorized contradiction. He knew that she was innocent. No doubt on that matter ever perplexed his mind for a moment. But why was she such a coward that she would not allow him to protect her innocence in the only way which the law permitted? He could hardly believe that he had no power of doing so even without her sanction; and therefore he went to another lawyer.

The other lawyer did him no good. It was not practicable that he, the son, should bring an action for defamatory character on the part of the mother, without that mother's sanction. Moreover, as this new lawyer saw in a moment, any such interference on the part of Lucius, and any interposition of fresh and new legal proceedings

would cripple and impede the advisers to whom Lady Mason had herself confided her own case. The new lawyer could do nothing, and thus Lucius, again repulsed, betook himself to Orley Farm in no happy frame of mind.

For some day or two after this he did not see his mother. He would not go down to The Cleeve, though they sent up and asked him; and she was almost afraid to go across to the house and visit him. 'He will be in church on Sunday,' she had said to Mrs. Orme. But he was not in church on Sunday, and then on Sunday afternoon she did go to him. This, it will be understood, was before Sir Peregrine had made his offer, and therefore as to that, there was as yet no embarrassment on the widow's mind.

'I cannot help feeling, mother,' he said, after she had sat there with him for a short time, 'that for the present there is a division between you and me.'

'Oh, Lucius!'

'It is no use our denying it to ourselves. It is so. You are in trouble, and you will not listen to my advice. You leave my house and take to the roof of a new and an untried friend.'

'No, Lucius; not that.'

'Yes. I say a new friend. Twelve months ago, though you might call there, you never did more than that—and even that but seldom. They are new friends; and yet, now that you are in trouble, you choose to live with them.'

'Dear Lucius, is there any reason why I should not visit at The Cleeve?'

'Yes; if you ask me—yes;' and now he spoke very sternly. 'There is a cloud upon you, and you should know nothing of visitings and of new friendships till that cloud has been dispersed. While these things are being said of you, you should set at no other table than this, and drink of no man's cup but mine. I know your innocence,' and as he went on to speak, he stood up before her and looked down fully into her face, 'but others do not. I know how unworthy are these falsehoods with which wicked men strive to crush you, but others believe that they are true accusations. They cannot be disregarded, and now it seems,—now that you have allowed them to gather to a head, they will result in a trial, during which you will have to stand at the bar charged with a dreadful crime.'

'Oh, Lucius!' and she hid her eyes in her hands. 'I could not have helped it. How could I have helped it?'

'Well; it must be so now. And till that trial is over, here should be your place. Here, at my right hand; I am he who am bound to stand by you. It is I whose duty it is to see that your name be made white again, though I spend all I have, ay, and my life in doing it. I am the one man on whose arm you have a right to

lean. And yet, in such days as these, you leave my house and go to that of a stranger.'

'He is not a stranger, Lucius.'

'He cannot be to you as a son should be. However, it is for you to judge. I have no control in this matter, but I think it right that you should know what are my thoughts.'

And then she had crept back again to The Cleeve. Let Lucius say what he might, let this additional sorrow be ever so bitter, she could not obey her son's behests. If she did so in one thing she must do so in all. She had chosen her advisers with her best discretion, and by that choice she must abide—even though it separated her from her son. She could not abandon Sir Peregrine Orme and Mr. Furnival. So she crept back and told all this to Mrs. Orme. Her heart would have utterly sunk within her could she not have spoken openly to some one of this sorrow.

'But he loves you,' Mrs. Orme had said, comforting her. 'It is not that he does not love you.'

'But he is so stern to me.' And then Mrs. Orme had kissed her, and promised that none should be stern to her, there, in that house. On the morning after this Sir Peregrine had made his offer, and then she felt that the division between her and her boy would be wider than ever. And all this had come of that inheritance which she had demanded so eagerly for her child.

And now Lucius was sitting alone in his room at Orley Farm, having, for the present, given up all idea of attempting anything himself by means of the law. He had made his way into Mr. Dockwrath's office, and had there insulted the attorney in the presence of witnesses. His hope now was that the attorney might bring an action against him. If that were done he would thus have the means of bringing out all the facts of the case before a jury and a judge. It was fixed in his mind that if he could once drag that reptile before a public tribunal, and with loud voice declare the wrong that was being done, all might be well. The public would understand and would speak out, and the reptile would be scorned and trodden under foot. Poor Lucius! It is not always so easy to catch public sympathy, and it will occur sometimes that the wrong reptile is crushed by the great public heel.

He had his books before him as he sat there—his Latham and his Pritchard, and he had the jawbone of one savage and the skull of another. His Liverpool bills for unadulterated guano were lying on the table, and a philosophical German treatise on agriculture which he had resolved to study. It became a man, he said to himself, to do a man's work in spite of any sorrow. But, nevertheless, as he sat there, his studies were but of little service to him. How many men have declared to themselves the same thing, but have failed when the trial came! Who can command the temper and the

mind? At ten I will strike the lyre and begin my poem. But at ten the poetic spirit is under a dark cloud—because the water for the tea had not boiled when it was brought in at nine. And so the lyre remains unstricken.

And Lucius found that he could not strike his lyre. For days he had sat there and no good note had been produced. And then he had walked over his land, having a farming man at his heels, thinking that he could turn his mind to the actual and practical working of his land. But little good had come of that either. It was January, and the land was sloppy and half frozen. There was no useful work to be done on it. And then what farmer Greenwood had once said of him was true enough, 'The young maister's spry and active surely; but he can't let unself down to stable doong and the loik o' that.' He had some grand idea of farming—a conviction that the agricultural world in general was very backward, and that he would set it right. Even now in his sorrow, as he walked through his splashy, frozen fields, he was tormented by a desire to do something, he knew not what, that might be great.

He had no such success on the present occasion and returned disconsolate to the house. This happened about noon on the day after that on which Sir Peregrine had declared himself. He returned as I have said to the house, and there at the kitchen door he met a little girl whom he knew well as belonging to The Cleeve. She was a favourite of Mrs. Orme's, was educated and clothed by her, and ran on her messages. Now she had brought a letter up to Lucius from his mother. Curtsying low she so told him, and he at once went into the sitting-room where he found it lying on his table. His hand was nervous as he opened it; but if he could have seen how tremulous had been the hand that wrote it! The letter was as follows:—

'Dearest Lucius,

'I know you will be very much surprised at what I am going to tell you, but I hope you will not judge me harshly. If I know myself at all I would take no step of any kind for my own advantage which could possibly injure you. At the present moment we unfortunately do not agree about a subject which is troubling us both, and I cannot therefore consult you as I should otherwise have done. I trust that by God's mercy these troubles may come to an end, and that there may be no further differences between you and me.

'Sir Peregrine Orme has made me an offer of marriage and I have accepted it——' Lucius Mason when he had read so far threw down the letter upon the table, and rising suddenly from his chair walked rapidly up and down the room. 'Marry him!' he said out loud, 'marry him!' The idea that their fathers and mothers should marry and enjoy themselves is always a thing horrible to be

thought of in the minds of the rising generation. Lucius Mason now began to feel against his mother the same sort of anger which Joseph Mason had felt when his father had married again. 'Marry him!' And then he walked rapidly about the room, as though some great injury had been threatened to him.

And so it had, in his estimation. Was it not her position in life to be his mother? Had she not had her young days? But it did not occur to him to think what those young days had been. And this then was the meaning of her receding from his advice and from his roof! She had been preparing for herself in the world new hopes, a new home, and a new ambition. And she had so prevailed upon the old man that he was about to do this foolish thing! Then again he walked up and down the room, injuring his mother much in his thoughts. He gave her credit for none of those circumstances which had truly actuated her in accepting the hand which Sir Peregrine had offered her. In that matter touching the Orley Farm estate he could acquit his mother instantly,—with acclamation. But in this other matter he had pronounced her guilty before she had been allowed to plead. Then he took up the letter and finished it.

'Sir Peregrine Orme has made me an offer of marriage and I have accepted it. It is very difficult to explain in a letter all the causes that have induced me to do so. The first perhaps is this, that I feel myself so bound to him by love and gratitude, that I think it my duty to fall in with all his wishes. He has pointed out to me that as my husband he can do more for me than would be possible for him without that name. I have explained to him that I would rather perish than that he should sacrifice himself; but he is pleased to say that it is no sacrifice. At any rate he so wishes it, and as Mrs. Orme has cordially assented, I feel myself bound to fall in with his views. It was only yesterday that Sir Peregrine made his offer. I mention this that you may know that I have lost no time in telling you.

'Dearest Lucius, believe that I shall be as ever

'Your most affectionate mother,

'MARY MASON.'

'The little girl will wait for an answer if she finds that you are at the farm.'

'No,' he said to himself, still walking about the room. 'She can never be to me the same mother that she was. I would have sacrificed everything for her. She should have been the mistress of my house, at any rate till she herself should have wished it otherwise. But now——' And then his mind turned away suddenly to Sophia Furnival.

I cannot myself but think that had that affair of the trial been set

at rest Lady Mason would have been prudent to look for another home. The fact that Orley Farm was his house and not hers occurred almost too frequently to Lucius Mason; and I am not certain that it would have been altogether comfortable as a permanent residence for his mother after he should have brought home to it some such bride as her he now proposed to himself.

It was necessary that he should write an answer to his mother, which he did at once.

'Orley Farm, — January.

'DEAR MOTHER,

'It is I fear too late for me to offer any counsel on the subject of your letter. I cannot say that I think you are right.

'Your affectionate son,

'LUCIUS MASON.'

And then, having finished this, he again walked the room. 'It is all up between me and her,' he said, 'as real friends in life and heart. She shall still have the respect of a son, and I shall have the regard of a mother. But how can I trim my course to suit the welfare of the wife of Sir Peregrine Orme?' And then he lashed himself into anger at the idea that his mother should have looked for other solace than that which he could have given.

Nothing more from The Cleeve reached him that day; but early on the following morning he had a visitor whom he certainly had not expected. Before he sat down to his breakfast he heard the sound of a horse's feet before the door, and immediately afterwards Peregrine Orme entered the sitting-room. He was duly shown in by the servant, and in his ordinary way came forward quickly and shook hands. Then he waited till the door was closed, and at once began upon the subject which had brought him there,

'Mason, he said, 'you have heard of this that is being done at The Cleeve?'

Lucius immediately fell back a step or two, and considered for a moment how he should answer. He had pressed very heavily on his mother in his own thoughts, but he was not prepared to hear her harshly spoken of by another.

'Yes,' said he, 'I have heard.'

'And I understand from your mother that you do not approve of it.'

'Approve of it! No; I do not approve of it.'

'Nor by heavens do I!'

'I do not approve of it,' said Mason, speaking with deliberation; 'but I do not know that I can take any steps towards preventing it.'

'Cannot you see her, and talk to her, and tell her how wrong it is?'

'Wrong! I do not know that she is wrong in that sense. I do

not know that you have any right to blame her. Why do not you speak to your grandfather?'

'So I have—as far as it was possible for me. But you do not know Sir Peregrine. No one has any influence over him, but my mother;—and now also your mother.'

'And what does Mrs. Orme say?'

'She will say nothing. I know well that she disapproves of it. She must disapprove of it, though she will not say so. She would rather burn off both her hands than displease my grandfather. She says that he asked her and that she consented.'

'It seems to me that it is for her and you to prevent this.'

'No; it is for your mother to prevent it. Only think of it, Mason. He is over seventy, and, as he says himself, he will not burden the estate with a new jointure. Why should she do it?'

'You are wronging her there. It is no affair of money. She is not going to marry him for what she can get.'

'Then why should she do it?'

'Because he tells her. These troubles about the lawsuit have turned her head, and she has put herself entirely into his hands. I think she is wrong. I could have protected her from all this evil, and would have done so. I could have done more, I think, than Sir Peregrine can do. But she has thought otherwise, and I do not know that I can help it.'

'But will you speak to her? Will make her perceive that she is injuring a family that is treating her with kindness?'

'If she will come here I will speak to her. I cannot do it there. I cannot go down to your grandfather's house with such an object as that.'

'All the world will turn against her if she marries him,' said Peregrine. And then there was silence between them for a moment or two.

'It seems to me,' said Lucius at last, 'that you wrong my mother very much in this matter, and lay all the blame where but the smallest part of the blame is deserved. She has no idea of money in her mind, or any thought of pecuniary advantage. She is moved solely by what your grandfather has said to her,—and by an insane dread of some coming evil which she thinks may be lessened by his assistance. You are in the house with them, and can speak to him, —and if you please to her also. I do not see that I can do either.'

'And you will not help me to break it off?'

'Certainly,—if I can see my way.'

'Will you write to her?'

'Well; I will think about it.'

'Whether she be to blame or not it must be your duty as well as mine to prevent such a marriage if it be possible. Think what people will say of it?'

After some further discussion Peregrine remounted his horse, and rode back to The Cleeve, not quite satisfied with young Mason.

'If you do speak to her,—to my mother, do it gently.' Those were the last words whispered by Lucius as Peregrine Orme had his foot in the stirrup.

Young Peregrine Orme, as he rode home, felt that the world was using him very unkindly. Everything was going wrong with him, and an idea entered his head that he might as well go and look for Sir John Franklin at the North Pole, or join some energetic traveller in the middle of Central Africa. He had proposed to Madeline Staveley and had been refused. That in itself caused a load to lie on his heart which was almost unendurable;—and now his grandfather was going to disgrace himself. He had made his little effort to be respectable and discreet, devoting himself to the county hunt and county drawing-rooms, giving up the pleasures of London and the glories of dissipation. And for what?

Then Peregrine began to argue within himself as some others have done before him—

'Were it not better done as others use——' he said to himself, in that or other language; and as he rode slowly into the courtyard of The Cleeve, he thought almost with regret of his old friend Carroty Bob.

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