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NO NEW THING.

CHAPTER I.

FRIENDSHIP.

It is now close upon three thousand years since an old king in Jerusalem sat down in some weariness and bitterness of spirit to record his conviction that nothing new was discoverable by human wisdom: 'The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.' A later and less famous philosopher has added to this that there is nothing true, together with the comfortable conclusion that 'it don't signify.' To such extreme lengths not many of us will be prepared to go; but it will be agreed on all hands that our common mortal nature remains much the same to-day as it was in King Solomon's time. Now, as then, gardens and orchards, men-singers and women-singers, gold and silver, and all the delights of the sons of men can bestow nothing but satiety; now, as then, the experience of all the past generations is of very little service to the passing one; now, as then, the wise man's eyes are in his head, while the fool walketh in darkness, and one event happeneth to them all; very much the same vices and virtues flourish, and meet with very much the same degree of recognition. And so, when a small novelist of the nineteenth century takes up his pen to describe, within the limits of his small capacity, that infinitesimal section of humanity which has come under his own observation, no one, surely—except a very unreasonable person—will expect his work to be novel in anything save the name.

The following story, then, will professedly contain nothing

new. The personages who are to figure in it will be, without exception, unremarkable personages. There will be good and bad folks among them; but none of these will be very good or very bad, and the events of their several and joint lives will not be half so startling as many that may be read of in the newspapers every day.

It is to be hoped, however, that readers will not allow themselves to be discouraged by the candour of this preliminary confession, but will plod cheerfully on; and who knows but that, before they reach the last words of the last chapter, they may light upon something that will be at any rate new to them?—seeing that they will not be all of them Solomons. For, although there be nothing new in the planet which we inhabit, it by no means follows that phenomena calculated to fill us with the most profound astonishment are not daily occurring upon its surface. Are we not invariably astonished by some proof that our fellow-creatures are made of the same clay as ourselves? Does not ingratitude, for instance, shock to the full as much as it angers us, especially when we suffer personally in consequence of it? When we are brought face to face with selfishness, baseness, infidelity, are we not usually as much surprised at the sorry spectacle as if such failings had never been heard of before, and as if we ourselves were wholly exempt from them? Does any man understand how his neighbour can be so utterly stupid as to fall a victim to self-deception?

All these qualities, and their opposites, will appear incidentally in the course of the ensuing pages; so that the fault will lie with the writer, not with the subject, if no interest is felt in the persons treated of; the first of whom shall, without further waste of words, be introduced upon the scene as he hurries along the platform of the Charing Cross station on a bright summer's morning.

'Guard,' says he, 'I want a smoking carriage.'

'Very good, sir.'

'And—here you are, guard.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Just look the door, will you, till we're off? I don't want anybody else in here.'

'I'll do the best I can, sir,' says the functionary, making use of the time-honoured formula of his genus; and apparently his efforts to earn five shillings in defiance of the Company's regulations are crowned with the success which honest labour

merits, for presently the train glides out of the station with but one occupant of the carriage in question.

The passenger who had displayed so great a love of privacy as to require an entire smoking-compartment for his own use lit a cigar, sighed heavily once or twice, and dropped into a brown study, which, judging by the frown on his brow and the worried expression of his face, must have had some intricate and perplexing matter for its starting-point. He was a tall, thin man, whom some people might have called fine-looking, but whom no one, probably, would have considered handsome. He had a pair of pleasant brown eyes, a nose which was decidedly too large for beauty, and his mouth was concealed by a long moustache, which he twisted and tugged in the course of his meditations. He had in no way the appearance of a young man, although his age at this time could hardly have exceeded three-and-thirty. Some men, as the casual observer has doubtless noticed, preserve the ways and the air of youth up to the confines of middle age; while others—and these are perhaps the majority—pass through a transition period which is neither the one thing nor the other. Our solitary passenger was of the latter class. The casual observer would scarcely have found anything sufficiently striking about him to excite curious speculations as to his identity; but no observer, however casual, could have felt one instant's doubt as to what was his calling in life. He was a soldier from the crown of his closely-cropped head to the tips of his well-blacked boots; and observers with an eye for detail might even have formed a tolerably confident guess at the branch of the service to which he belonged. Had he been an officer of infantry he would not have had a clearly-defined diagonal line across his forehead, separating a corner of white skin from a larger expanse of red-brown; a hussar or a lancer would have been more fashionably, and a plunger more loudly, dressed. There remain the two scientific corps; and some trifling points about this gentleman, such as his attitude, as he sat slightly sideways, his right leg tucked under his seat and his left stretched out stiffly before him, seemed to harmonise with the addresses upon a packet of letters which he presently drew from his pocket—'Captain Kenyon, R.H.A., Aldershot.'

He had read his letters before, for the envelopes were all torn open; but possibly he may have desired to refresh his memory by reading them again. He ran through the first two or three briskly enough; they had a legal aspect, and evidently related to matters of business. But over the last he lingered for a

long time, often referring back to words already perused, breaking off every now and again to gaze abstractedly out of the window, smiling faintly sometimes, yet sighing even while he smiled, and maintaining always the puzzled and anxious expression of one who has got into a situation of which the full significance is not yet clear to him. This letter was written in a woman's firm, flowing hand, upon paper with a broad black border, and ran as follows:—

Longbourne: August 18.

'My dear Hugh,—I ought to have written before this to thank you for the kind letter which you sent me four months ago; but I am sure that I need not really apologise, and that you will know that I did not value your sympathy the less because I could not acknowledge it just at once. If I could have written to anybody, it would have been to you. Now I am quite able to write, and to talk to you too; and you need not have any scruple about discussing the business matters which you say we must go into, because I want to hear about them, and to know what my duties are, and where I am to begin, and all the rest.

'And I do very much long to see you. The others mean to be kind, but they don't understand; and of course they cannot, never having had to suffer in quite the same way that I do. It is only you who have the secret of putting yourself in everybody's place, and knowing things that you have never been told, and could not have been told. Do you remember how poor old nurse used to say, "There's not a man or woman in Crayminster as can hold a candle to 'Ugh"? And then the person whom she was addressing would simper, and look down with an air of modest deprecation, till she explained, "Bless your soul, I don't mean *you!* I mean 'Ugh Kenyon." I reminded them of it yesterday, when we were talking of your coming down; and I think they were a little shocked at my laughing. They think I ought not to be able to laugh, and at the same time they talk of the necessity of my "rousing myself," and are in a terrible fright lest I should "shut myself up and mope." My father reminds me that I have many duties and responsibilities to face, and a career of great usefulness open to me; and Mr. Langley warns me to beware of the temptation of a selfish sorrow, and he is convinced that I should be better in mind and body if I went to confession. I don't think I will go to confession; but of course I should like to be of use to others, if I can, and I do wish and intend to put my wretched

self out of sight, and let my neighbours suppose that I have "got over" my trouble, as everyone is expected to do after a time. But, oh! dear old Hugh, *you* know, if nobody else does, that that is quite an impossibility, and that neither four months, nor four years, nor any number of years can make the smallest difference. It won't be the same Margaret whom you used to chase round the Precincts when she was a child, and whom you used to dance with at the county balls when she was a gawky girl—it won't be that Margaret who will meet you to-morrow, but another person altogether, who has somehow got into her skin, and would give anything to be out of it. I died when Jack died: that was the end of my happiness and the end of my life. Only someone, who is I, and yet not I, has got to live many years longer in a world which is the old world, and yet is a totally new one; for, like auld Robin Gray's wife, "I'm no like to dee." And so it is all bewilderment and a puzzle; and I think, if anyone can give the clue to it, it will be you. You remember how I used to run to you in all my little troubles in the old days; you were always my best friend. And then you were Jack's best friend too. I have got a few things of his to give you—his gun, and a trout-rod, and some other things. I don't know whether they are good of their kind; but I thought you would like to have them, so I set them aside for you. It has been such a comfort to me that he made you his executor. Old Mr. Stanniforth has written to me; but he seemed to think you would tell me all that it was necessary for me to know—and I would very much rather have it so. I can't tell you what a relief it will be to me to be able to talk to someone just as I feel.

'I should never have ventured to inflict all this rambling egotism upon anyone but you, and perhaps after now, I won't make even that exception; but I know you will forgive it for this once. I have a great deal to tell you and ask you about; but it will be better said than written.

'Ever your affectionate friend,

'MARGARET STANNIFORTH.'

'A comfort to her that Jack made me his executor!' muttered Captain Kenyon, as he restored this letter to his pocket, after having perused it often enough to have learnt its contents by heart. 'I hope it may be a comfort to her, poor thing! I hope so, I'm sure, with all my heart. It ain't much of a comfort to me, I know.'

He sighed, re-lighted his cigar, which had gone out, and shifted his place from one side of the carriage to the other and then back again. 'Not that I grudge the trouble, mind you,' he added, apologetically addressing an imaginary hearer, 'nor the—the—awkwardness of it; it isn't that. But——' He did not finish the sentence, but presently resumed, in a more decided and cheerful voice, 'Well, Lord knows how it will all end! but for the present my duty is clear and simple enough; there's some consolation in that.'

So he gave his broad shoulders a shake, as though mental burdens could be cast off after that easy fashion, and, turning to the window, looked out at the woods and hills and pastures of the pleasant county where he had been born and bred, and through which the train was now rushing. It was a year since he had last gazed at those familiar scenes and landmarks. Barely twelve months before he had travelled down from Aldershot, on just such a sunny summer's morning, to be present at a gay wedding in Crayminster Cathedral. It had been his pleasing duty to act as best man on that occasion, and the bridegroom had been his old friend, Jack Stanniforth, and the bride his still older friend Margaret Winnington, the daughter of the Bishop. The ceremony had been a grand and largely attended one, and had created no small stir in the county, where Mrs. Winnington, whose eldest daughter had recently been led to the altar by no less a personage than Lord Travers, enjoyed that mixture of respect, envy, and detraction which commonly falls to the lot of mothers who marry their daughters well. Jack Stanniforth, to be sure, was hardly so big a fish as Lord Travers, being not only unconnected with the aristocracy, but devoid, to all intents and purposes, of so much as an authentic grandfather. But then, as everybody remarked, Kate had been a beauty, whereas Margaret was really almost what you might call a plain girl, and the riches of the Stanniforths were understood to be boundless.

Big fish or little fish, Jack had, as a matter of fact, been landed by no skill on the part of his future mother-in-law, but simply by his own goodwill and pleasure. He had been brought down into those waters by Hugh Kenyon, who was thus responsible, if anyone was, for his subsequent capture; and it was therefore only right and proper that Hugh should have been present, in his best blue frock-coat and with a sprig of stephanotis in his buttonhole, to stand behind the bridegroom on the auspicious day.

Of Old Mr. Stanniforth, the wealthy Manchester merchant, who dwelt in a palace near the city in which he had made his fortune, and who rarely stirred beyond his own park gates, Crayminster knew nothing and London very little; but his two sons had the privilege of a large acquaintance in the metropolis and beyond it, and were as popular as rich, well-mannered, and modest men are sure to be. Tom, the elder, had for some time sat as one of the members for a large manufacturing borough; Jack, the younger, had entered a smart hussar regiment, and had disported himself therein, during the early years of his youth, to the satisfaction of himself and his brother-officers, and to the intense admiration of the opposite sex, until he had added to all his other charms the crowning one of inheriting unexpectedly a large fortune by the death of a maternal uncle. Upon this he had sent in his papers; and almost immediately afterwards, having happened to go down to Crayminster with his friend Kenyon, had seen Margaret, had fallen in love with her, and, after a very brief courtship, had proposed and been accepted.

Little as Captain Kenyon had foreseen such a result of his introduction of the ex-hussar to the Bishop's family, his share in bringing it about was not the less gratefully and magnanimously acknowledged by Mrs. Winnington. 'Dear Hugh,' she had said, in her most benign manner, 'I shall never forget, and I am sure Margaret will never forget, that her happiness has come to her through you.' And this compliment should have been the more agreeable to its recipient, inasmuch as Mrs. Winnington had not always been used to address him in so friendly a tone. Of course—as she would often explain to her intimates—she was devoted to dear old Hugh, and during the lifetime of his uncle the Dean, he had almost lived in the house, and had been quite like a son to herself and an elder brother to her daughters; but now that Kate and Margaret were growing up, one really had to be a little more careful; because people would talk, and there was no saying what preposterous notions men might not get into their heads if proper precautions were not taken to nip such notions in the bud. There had, therefore, been occasions upon which a sense of duty had led Mrs. Winnington to turn the cold shoulder to her dear old Hugh, and to point out to him with somewhat unnecessary emphasis how great was the disparity of years between him and the young ladies to whom he had been 'quite like an elder brother.' Now a glance at Hart's Army List would have disclosed the fact

that Jack Stanniforth was only Captain Kenyon's junior by a year; but, as has been already remarked, some men are young up to the verge of middle age, while others have ceased to be so before they are out of the twenties; and Jack certainly belonged to the former and Hugh to the latter category. He had, indeed, been so long accustomed to hearing himself addressed as 'old Hugh' that he had ended by accepting the adjective in its literal sense and acquiescing in its propriety; nor had he failed to join in the laughter which arose from all sides when the bridegroom, in returning thanks at the wedding-breakfast, had expressed a hope that his best man would soon follow his bright example. Old Hugh was so evidently a predestined old bachelor.

Immediately after the wedding the young couple had started for Switzerland and Italy, upon a tour which was prolonged far beyond the limits of ordinary honeymoons, the excuse for their protracted absence being that their new home could not possibly be made ready to receive them in less than six months at earliest. This new home was that fine old place Longbourne, near Crayminster, for many generations the residence of the Brune family. It had come into the market some years previously, owing to the necessitous circumstances of the owner, and had found a purchaser in Mr. Stanniforth of Manchester. What could have been Mr. Stanniforth's object in acquiring an estate which he had scarcely seen and showed no disposition to occupy was a puzzle to everybody, until the construction of the Crayminster and Craybridge branch line, which cut through an angle of the property, with satisfactory results to the pocket of its new owner, seemed to throw some light upon the mystery. Now, the old gentleman, in an easy and princely fashion, had offered Longbourne as a wedding gift to his second son, stipulating only that he should be allowed to put the place in order before the bride and bridegroom took possession of it. They, for their part, were nothing loth to consent to an arrangement which promised them a somewhat longer holiday under southern skies; and so architects and artists, landscape-gardeners, stone-masons, and upholsterers, had come down from London in a small army, and had busied themselves throughout the winter in beautifying the house and grounds, which were destined never to be enjoyed by those for whose sake all this expense and trouble had been incurred. For, one afternoon, Jack Stanniforth, a strong man, who had scarcely known what illness was in the course of his merry life, rode back to Rome

feeling tired and chilled after hunting on the Campagna; and the next day he took to his bed; and before the week was out he was dead and buried.

Under the shock of this sudden and terrible calamity the young widow had fallen into a sort of stupor, which at first caused considerable alarm both to her friends and to her medical advisers. The latter had enjoined absolute rest, change of scene, a bracing atmosphere, and what not—since doctors, when they are called in, must needs enjoin something—and Mrs. Winnington had hastened out to Italy, and had taken her daughter, passive and indifferent, to the Engadine. After a time Margaret had rallied, had returned, by her own desire, to England, and had taken up her residence at Longbourne, where it now became necessary that Hugh Kenyon should seek her out, in order to explain to her the provisions of her husband's will, under which he and the dead man's father had been appointed executors and trustees.

Such was the condensed tragedy of which the details passed quickly through Captain Kenyon's mind, as he sat looking out of the railway carriage window. And as he remembered it all, and how, only the other day, he had travelled over the same ground on his way down to the wedding, and how, but a few months before that, Margaret had not even seen the man who was to be her husband, he could not help saying to himself that it was impossible that so brief an episode—however terrible it might be—should cast a permanent gloom over a young life.

'It isn't the same thing,' he mused, 'it can't be the same thing, as losing a husband or a wife after twenty years of married life. That would be like having an arm or a leg cut off—there would be something gone from one which one could never forget nor replace. But this—well, this is more like having a tooth out; a wrench and a howl, and all's over.' Then, repenting of having used so homely a metaphor, even in thought, he muttered sadly, 'Poor Jack—poor old fellow!'

Presently the train drew up in Crayminster station, and a groom in mourning livery came to the door and touched his hat. The dog-cart was waiting outside, he said, and was there any luggage, please? No; Kenyon answered, there was no luggage; he was going back that same evening. He climbed into the dog-cart, but declined to take the reins. With an odd sort of pang and feeling of compunction, he had recognised the cart as one that Jack used to drive, and the horse as one of his friend's old hunters. As the vehicle clattered through the

narrow streets of the old town, more than one pedestrian nodded and waved his hand to its occupant; but Hugh, who kept his eyes obstinately fixed upon his boots, saw none of these friendly signals. He knew that by no possibility could he traverse Crayminster on any day of the week without encountering at least a dozen acquaintances; and he was afraid of being stopped and questioned. Therefore he would not look up, and was relieved when he had left the town behind him and was well out into the open country.

Half an hour's drive, at first across broad water-meadows and then through woods and up a long gradual incline, brought him to the lodge gates of Longbourne—new gates and a new lodge, as Hugh observed. He had known the place well in the late Mr. Brune's time, and was prepared to find it altered, not altogether for the better, by the touch of the Manchester millionaire. It appeared, however, that Mr. Stanniforth's taste, or the taste of those employed by him, had been better than Hugh had anticipated; for the alterations were not conspicuous, and such as there were were of a kind to which exception could not be taken. In the undulating park and in the long avenue of lime-trees which was the pride of Longbourne there was no room for change; only the gardens had been extended and improved; new lawns and terraces had been laid out, and brilliant masses and ribbons of colour replaced the scanty and ill-tended flower-beds of former years. The house itself, a red-brick structure, which, like most country-houses of its date, was said to have been built after designs of Inigo Jones, showed no traces of interference, except in so far as that its white stone facings had been renewed or cleaned; no plate-glass had superseded the many panes of the large oblong windows, nor was the long flat façade disfigured by any modern bows or bays.

But when once the hall-door was passed, Hugh found himself upon totally unknown ground. Under the Brune *régime* the furniture of the mansion had been meagre and its servants few; now there was perhaps rather a superabundance of both. The entrance-hall was embellished with antlers, with old carved-oak chests and cabinets, with huge vases of Oriental china and with arm-chairs in stamped leather. The drawing-room, into which Hugh was ushered, had been despoiled of its tarnished gilding, its brocade and three-pile Axminster; and in lieu of these departed glories was a more sober style of decoration; subdued colouring; a few paintings by old Dutch

masters; chairs, sofas, and tables more valuable than resplendent. Everything was perfectly correct—a little too correct, Hugh thought; for at the time with which we are concerned correctness of upholstery had not yet become the chief aim and object of the British householder. The place looked a trifle cold and stiff and uninhabited; and over the whole establishment there brooded the solemn hush of wealth.

While Captain Kenyon was proceeding with his unspoken criticisms the door opened, and a tall, slim woman, dressed in widow's weeds, entered, and held out her hand to him, saying, 'How do you do, Hugh?' in a low, quiet voice. Though he could hardly have been unprepared for the appearance of this lady, he started as violently as if he had seen a ghost, and, finding not a word to say, grasped her hand silently, while he looked into her face with an eager, questioning gaze.

The face that he scanned so anxiously was not beautiful, nor even pretty. For one thing, it was extremely pale, with that grey pallor which comes only from illness or suffering; and, as is often the case with fair-complexioned women, the colourlessness was not confined to the cheeks, but seemed to have extended to the hair and eyes, the former of which ought to have been, but was not, golden, while the latter ought to have been, but were not, blue. An old-fashioned passport would probably have summed up the remaining features tersely with 'forehead high, nose ordinary, mouth rather large.' It was, however, an honest, trustworthy, and kind face—a face which all dogs and children, and some discriminating adults, understood and loved at the first glance. Margaret Stanniforth had never been accounted a beauty, yet she had never lacked admirers; and, when in the glow of youth and health, she might even have passed for a pretty girl, had she not happened to be the plain one of a family somewhat notorious for good looks. For the rest, she had a good figure; she carried her head well, as all the Winningtons do, and she had, as they all have, a certain undefinable grace and air of good breeding.

The sight of her in those deep mourning robes almost unmanned the soft-hearted Hugh; and, instead of one of the brisk little cheerful speeches which he had rehearsed on his way from the station, he blurted out something awkward and incoherent, at last, about never having thought he should meet her again like this; but she had the quiet ease of manner which belongs to unselfish people, and she gave him time to recover himself by talking about the proposed restoration of

the cathedral, and her father's speech in the House of Lords, and other matters which could be treated of without danger of disturbance to anyone's equanimity.

'Are you all alone here?' Hugh asked at length.

'I am now. I had two of the boys with me until yesterday; but they have gone back to school.' She added after a pause, 'My mother is very kind, and would stay with me as long as I liked; but of course she is wanted at home; and, as I shall have to be a great deal by myself in future, I thought it was better to begin at once.'

She spoke without a tremor in her voice, quite calmly and almost coldly; and Hugh was just the least bit in the world disappointed and chilled. Her speech was so very unlike her letter, he thought. But then the speech of most people is unlike their letters. Presently luncheon was announced, and he had to seat himself opposite Mrs. Stanniforth in a dining-room, or rather dining-hall, which would have accommodated fifty guests comfortably. He had hoped that a cover might have been laid for him beside her, for he had an uncomfortable feeling about occupying Jack's place; but the butler had probably omitted to take this delicate scruple into account. The repast was prolonged and very dreary. The table, though narrowed to its smallest dimensions, was still a long one; and Hugh and Margaret laboriously kept up conversation in a high key across it, conscious all the time of being furtively watched by a discreet butler and two stealthy giants in mourning livery. Hugh thought to himself that, if he were Margaret, and if he were compelled to eat his meals every day with three respectful pairs of eyes fixed upon him, he should infallibly go out of his senses in less than a week.

Perhaps she guessed what was passing through his mind; for, as soon as they were alone, she said, laughing a little, 'Those servants are a terrible ordeal to me. I found them here when I arrived: Mrs. Stanniforth had supplied them, with the furniture and the carriages and all the rest. I am hoping that you will tell me I must dismiss at least two of them.'

'Oh, I don't think there will be any need for that,' answered Hugh.

'No? So much the worse for me, then. Shall we go back to the drawing-room now, and get our business talk over?'

Jack Stanniforth's will was a portentous document of the old-fashioned pattern, drawn up for him by his father's lawyers

and signed by him on his wedding day. The effect of it—there being no child born of the marriage—was that, subject to the usual restrictions, his widow took a life-interest in all his property, real and personal; which, together with her settlements, would give her an income of from fourteen to fifteen thousand a year. But it took Captain Kenyon some little time to state this simple fact. He was a man of an orderly and somewhat slowly-moving mind; and he thought it incumbent upon him to explain the will, clause by clause, going into many details which his hearer only half understood, and with which it is needless that the reader should be wearied.

'Fifteen thousand a year!' ejaculated Margaret, with a sigh, when he had at last reached his conclusion; 'that sounds an enormous sum of money.'

'Well, yes; it is a large sum. Not so large as it might have been, if we had not been so tied down as to investments; still——'

'Still, enough to live upon with strict economy,' interrupted Margaret, with a slight laugh. 'Hugh,' she added suddenly, 'do you know what I should like to do?'

'Yes; you would like to give away the whole of it to somebody without loss of time.'

'Not exactly that; but I should like to give Longbourne away; or at least to restore it to its proper owner.'

'To Mr. Stanniforth, do you mean?'

'No; to the Brunes. It really belongs to them, you know; we have no right to the place. Jack felt that very strongly, and he did not at all like the idea of coming to live here. He always used to say that Mr. Brune had been deprived of his property by an unfair bargain.'

'Hardly that, I think. Of course it was a bit of bad luck for him. If he had held on a little longer, the railway would have put him pretty nearly straight, I suppose; but no one could have foreseen that at the time of the sale.'

Margaret was silent. 'At all events,' she said presently, 'I want to let him have his own back now, if it can be managed.'

'But, my dear Margaret, it cannot possibly be managed.'

'Why not?'

'For many good reasons; but one of them is final. The place is not yours to dispose of. I am afraid I must have explained matters very stupidly; but the fact is that you are only a tenant for life.'

'It is I who was stupid; I ought to have listened more attentively. And what becomes of Longbourne after my death?'

'Well, then it goes, with the rest of the property, to Tom Stanniforth or his heirs.'

'Tom Stanniforth will have more money than he will know what to do with,' observed Margaret. 'I am sure he would willingly surrender his chance of inheriting Longbourne.'

'I am not much of a lawyer; but I almost doubt whether he could. In any case, Mr. Brune would not be very likely to accept a gift of an estate from a stranger; and he could not buy it back. I used to see the elder brother sometimes in years gone by: this one I hardly knew; but from what I have heard of him, I should think he was about the last man in the world to whom one could venture to propose such a thing.'

Margaret rose, and walked to the window. 'Ah, well,' she said, 'it was only an idea of mine; I scarcely expected to be able to carry it out. But, Hugh, I feel almost certain of one thing: I shall never be able to go on living here.'

Hugh wrinkled up his forehead, and looked distressed. If he had felt free to speak out plainly the thought that was in his mind, he would have answered, 'I'm sure you won't. Flesh and blood couldn't stand it.' But women are so uncertain, and so prone to act upon impulse: and it is not always wise or kind to show all the sympathy that one may feel. Upon the whole, it seemed best to reply, 'I wouldn't do anything in a hurry, if I were you.'

Margaret went on, as if she had not heard him. 'It isn't the solitude that I mind; I could be contented enough in a little cottage, with a cook and a housemaid to look after me; but I was never meant to rule over a large establishment. The small worries of it suffocate me. One would think that a great sorrow, like mine, ought to make one indifferent to small worries; but somehow or other it doesn't. You would be amused if you knew how frightened I am of the servants. There is an old housekeeper, a Mrs. Prosser, who was here under Mr. Brune, and who took care of the house all the time that it stood empty, after Mr. Stanniforth bought it. I am obliged to have an interview with her every morning, and she is very respectful and deferential; but of course she looks upon me as an interloper, and she has a way of standing with her hands clasped before her, turning one thumb slowly over the other and staring at me with her little black eyes, which

makes me so nervous that I hardly know what I am saying to her.'

'Give her the sack.'

'I don't think I should ever dare. And there would be no excuse for sending her away either; for, as far as I can judge, she is an admirable housekeeper. Besides, the butler and the coachman are quite as bad in their way. Sometimes I have thought of entering a sisterhood. Would that be very wrong, do you think?'

'I don't think it would be wrong,' answered Hugh slowly; 'but——'

'Yes; I know there are a great many buts; too many for me to think, except in a vague sort of way, of doing such a thing as yet. I keep it as a last resource—in case I should find my life quite unbearable.'

Captain Kenyon had risen, and was standing beside her at the window now.

'Oh, Hugh,' she said suddenly, clasping her hands round his arm, 'what am I to do? What am I to do with my life?'

'My dear,' he answered, greatly moved and full of pity, yet quite unable to express what he felt, 'how can I tell you? You must have patience. When things go wrong with us, there is nothing for it but patience.'

After all, it is seldom by speech that a sense of sympathy and friendship is conveyed. Perhaps no eloquence could have given Margaret more comfort than these few words from a friend who was himself always patient, always brave, and whose life had been full of petty troubles, arising for the most part out of the lack of that which she found so heavy a burden.

'I will try,' she said, straightening herself up. 'Only it seems to me that it would be so much easier if I were not rich. Everybody keeps repeating to me that money is such a blessing, and that I ought to be so thankful for it; and yet what can it do for me? Nothing—absolutely nothing!'

'It is at least so far a blessing that it brings independence with it.'

'But if one does not want to be independent? I am one of those weak people who are born to be subordinates and to be told their duty day by day. Is there *no* way in which I could rid myself of this enormous income?'

'I'm afraid not. You see, the will says—let me see; where is it? Oh, here—"Trusts"' And Hugh began reading, in a hurried, mumbling voice—"'To be received by her my said

wife for her own use and benefit during her life or until she shall marry again or until she shall sell assign mortgage or charge or otherwise incumber the same or attempt so to do or shall do or suffer or become subject or liable to some act proceeding matter or thing whereby the same interest dividends and annual produce if payable to her absolutely for her life would become vested in or payable to some other person or persons. Provided nevertheless and——"'

'Oh, never mind,' interrupted Margaret, with a half laugh. I quite understand that there is no legal way out of the difficulty.' And she wondered why a slight flush had mounted into Hugh's brown cheeks while he had been reading, and why he looked so oddly, and was such a long time in folding up the big document again.

How could she tell that he had loved her almost from her childhood? How could she tell that her marriage to his friend had shattered all his hopes and day-dreams? How could she tell that that possibility of her re-marriage, contemplated as a mere formality by the will, was one that, despite poor Hugh's honest efforts to banish it from his mind, was forcing its way thither every day and every hour? These were secrets which Captain Kenyon had hitherto successfully kept, and was likely to continue to keep, to himself. If, in the depths of his heart, he had begun to look forward to some remote future time, at which Margaret, having read and re-read this dark page of her life, might find that the power was still in her to open a fresh one, and if he had heard with a certain inward exultation of her anxiety to be free from that wealth which must needs be hers so long as she bore the name of Stanniforth, he was sincerely ashamed of such thoughts, and did his best to stifle them. For he had been loved and trusted by the man who was dead; he was trusted, and in a manner also loved, by the dead man's widow; and to be guilty of an unspoken treachery to either of them was what he could not bear without self-reproach.

But if the tongue is an unruly member, the brain is a substance yet more unruly, and is wont to assert its independence after a specially vexatious fashion when it receives direct orders from the will. Therefore this conscientious executor and compassionate friend was ill at ease, and discharged himself of his double functions in an awkward, guilty, and half-hearted manner. He fancied, at least, that he was doing so; as a fact, he could hardly have shown greater kindness to Margaret than by abstaining, as he did, from counsel or consolation, and by

listening to her in silence while she told him of the incidents of her short wedded life and of the swift catastrophe which had closed it. She shed no tears; she had a low, pleasantly-modulated voice; she talked so calmly that it might almost have been the story of another woman's life that she was relating. Pacing by her side along the shady lawns, he heard her with a mixture of pleasure and pain and hopelessness. He knew—though she never said so—that he was the first person to whom she had spoken so openly since her husband's death; he knew that she was treating him with a confidence which she would not have reposed in her father or mother; but this knowledge made him neither more sanguine nor less remorseful.

'You will come and see me again soon, won't you?' she asked, when the time came for him to bid her good-bye. And he answered hurriedly, 'Yes; as soon as I can—that is, as soon as you please. I can almost always get away for a day now; and you know you can't give me greater pleasure than by sending for me whenever you want me.'

Nevertheless, as he drove away, he hoped that no very speedy summons from her would reach him. Such advice or assistance as it was in his power to give her would be more easily and safely conveyed by letter than by word of mouth, he thought; and it even occurred to him once or twice to regret that he had not effected an exchange to India which had been upon the point of arrangement when the news of Jack Stanniforth's death and his own appointment as executor had caused him to abandon the project.

On the platform he encountered the Bishop of Crayminster, who was on his way to hold a series of confirmations in neighbouring towns, and who hurried up to him with trembling hands outstretched.

'Ah, my dear Kenyon, my dear friend, this is a sad meeting! You have been with our poor Margaret—poor dear!—poor dear! How little we anticipated this a year ago!'

The Bishop of Crayminster was a tall, thin old gentleman, with a weak, handsome face, blue eyes, and white hair. He spoke habitually in tremulous lachrymose accents, addressed all men as 'my dear friend,' was greatly beloved by the clergy of his diocese and commiserated by their wives, who asserted that Mrs. Winnington ruled him with a rod of iron.

'I should like much to have a few minutes' conversation with you,' he said, casting an imploring glance at his chaplain,

who discreetly got into a carriage lower down in the train, leaving Hugh to enter the empty compartment which had been reserved for the Bishop.

'And how did you find her?' asked the latter, when the train had begun to move. 'Sadly altered, I fear: terribly shaken and bowed down?'

'Well, no,' answered Hugh, 'I can't say that she struck me as being exactly that. Of course she feels the loneliness of her position a good deal, and the—the weight of her wealth, you know.'

'Ah yes, dear me, yes! Riches are indeed a doubtful blessing. But we must not repine. Poverty is perhaps a more severe trial.'

'Perhaps it is.'

'In some ways—in some ways. I don't know what she will do with herself, poor child.'

'She spoke of entering a sisterhood,' Hugh remarked.

The Bishop threw up his white hands in dismay. 'A sisterhood! Oh, my dear friend, I trust you dissuaded her from taking so serious a step as that.

'Oh, I don't think she contemplated it very seriously. In time, I dare say, she will learn to stand alone; but it comes a little hard upon a woman just at first.'

'It does—it does indeed. Her mother thinks—of course it is early days yet to speak of anything of the kind; but mothers will look forward—she thinks that dear Margaret may eventually marry again. Perhaps we ought to hope that it may be so. I doubt whether our dear Margaret's shoulders are broad enough to bear the cares of life unaided.'

'If she does marry again, she will be delivered from the cares of a large fortune,' said Hugh bluntly. 'Her interest in Stanniforth's estate terminates with her death or re-marriage.'

'Eh?—really? I don't think Mrs. Winnington—I—er—I did not understand that. Is it not rather an—unusual arrangement?'

'I believe not at all.'

'Ah, well; I am very ignorant of such matters—very ignorant. Can this be Craybridge already? Well, my dear friend, I must bid you good-bye. I trust we shall see you in these parts again before long. Dear Margaret, I know, leans very much upon your help and advice; and I am sure you will advise her wisely.'

The Bishop had taken Hugh's big brown hand, and was

patting it paternally. 'We must trust to time and Providence,' he said, 'and not try overmuch to rule the destinies of others. For my own part, I am disposed to be of St. Paul's mind with regard to widows. They are happier if they so abide—happier if they so abide.'

And with that, his lordship descended slowly to the platform, and shuffled away on his chaplain's arm.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. STANNIFORTH'S NEIGHBOURS.

THE venerable city of Crayminster stands in a vast hollow. From the neighbouring heights its gabled roofs may be seen huddled together in a compact phalanx round the cathedral towers, having changed little in aspect or area in the course of the last hundred years or so, and having only thrown out here and there an outpost in the shape of a detached suburban villa. The slow-flowing Cray intersects the town and winds down the long valley, through water-meadows where cattle crop the rich grass, and over which light mists usually hang in summer and cold fogs in winter. The valley of the Cray does not indeed bear a high character for salubrity, and the strangers who are attracted to Crayminster by the fame of its ancient cathedral seldom carry away with them a favourable impression of the surrounding district. For when, having duly admired the Lady-chapel, descended into the crypt, and climbed the tower, they escape from the hands of the verger into those of the flyman, the latter, whose generic instinct leads him to shirk uphill work, commonly suggests to them a nice drive along one of the excellent turnpike roads which leave the town either by the eastern or western gate, and pass through mile after mile of flat, fertile, and monotonous country, where sleepy silence reigns, where there are but few habitations, and those of an unpretending and eminently unpicturesque order.

But if, instead of following these rather dreary thoroughfares, they were to strike off due north or due south, they would find themselves almost immediately in a higher, healthier region, a region of low, rolling hills and leafy coverts, a region of hop-gardens and waving cornfields and frequent hamlets, diversified by glimpses of park lands and old timber—for properties do not run to any great size hereabouts, and the

squircarchy rules in force—a region rich in pleasant mansions and substantial, prosperous-looking farmhouses.

Near the high-road, some two miles beyond Longbourne, is a long, low edifice, which can hardly be said to come under either of the above denominations. The paddocks which surround it could not, by any stretch of courtesy, be made to do duty for a park; adjoining it are barns and ricks and a large strawyard, while the sunny slope of the hill behind it is occupied by a well-filled orchard in the place of terraces and shrubberies. These and other indications sufficiently show its tenant to be a farmer; but, on the other hand, the house itself has an air of comfort and refinement somewhat above the aspirations of an ordinary yeoman. This house, known as Broom Leas Court, had at the time with which we are concerned been for a good many years owned by Mr. Neville Brune, and inhabited by him and his numerous family. It would be difficult to give an accurate description of it. It had been constructed bit by bit as occasion had seemed to require, and as funds to pay the builder had been forthcoming, and was a complete architectural jumble. Here was a fragment of the original structure, with gables, overhanging upper storey, latticed casements and black beams upon plaster of a yellowish-white tinge; there a modern bay, with French windows opening upon the lawn; every kind of building material seemed to have been employed, brick in one place, stone in another, stucco in a third; over all was a mantle of ivy, of swaying Virginia-creeper and clematis.

A great deal of money had been spent, first and last, upon the creation of this queer domicile, for Neville Brune had the family incapacity for doing anything cheaply, and the family dislike to being worried by small economical details. With the fortune which he had inherited from his father—a very respectable one for a younger son—he had purchased and stocked the Broom Leas farm; there he had dwelt ever since, and there, to all appearance, he was now likely to end his days.

A gentleman who adopts farming as a trade is, by common consent, only a step removed from the proverbial fool who chooses to be his own lawyer; and Noville Brune's friends and neighbours, who were acquainted with his hereditary failings, smiled and shook their heads when they heard after what fashion he proposed to make his living. A considerable time, however, elapsed, during which he lived, not extravagantly, yet with a certain careless profusion of expenditure, and if he did

not make his fortune, neither did he figure in the *Gazette*. Then he married Miss Boulger, the daughter of a rich banker, and began those building operations which were long the delight of his life, and which were renewed intermittently, year after year, to meet the requirements of a rapidly increasing family. It was rumoured that Mr. Brune was getting into difficulties, when his elder brother and his father-in law died suddenly within a few days of one another. Either of these events might have been expected to convert him into a much richer man, but it so happened that neither of them did produce that desirable effect, for the old banker bequeathed to his daughter a thousand pounds, her mother's jewels, and nothing more; and Mr. Brune the elder, who had been a very eccentric and expensive personage, living much in foreign countries, and squandering money through every channel whereby money can be squandered, left his affairs in such inextricable confusion, and his estate so heavily encumbered, that Longbourne seemed likely to prove a white elephant to the heir. It was always Neville Brune's way to make up his mind quickly, after holding counsel with himself and with nobody else. He saw clearly that neither he nor his son would ever be able to live at Longbourne. To let it would be a mere protracting of misery and putting off the evil day; moreover, he wanted ready money badly. He therefore determined to offer the place for sale, and it was immediately snapped up by Mr. Stanniforth.

No sooner had this decisive act been accomplished than there arose up to heaven such a weeping and wailing from the numerous collateral Brunes, to whom Longbourne had ever been as the Palladium to the Trojans, that the luckless head of the family was like to have been deafened by the din of it. Uncle John and Uncle James, Aunt Harriet and Aunt Elizabeth, not to mention a host of cousins far and near, all wrote to say that they could find no words adequate to express their horror of the sacrilege which had been committed. Sooner would they have starved, sooner would they have united their own small means and purchased the estate between them, than that it should have passed into the hands of a stranger. And, great as had been the wrath of these worthy people at the outset, it was naturally increased tenfold when that windfall of the Crayminster and Craybridge railway went to swell the already overflowing money bags of the infamous Stanniforth. Then it was that the insane—the indecent precipitancy of Neville's conduct cried aloud for denunciation.

Then it was that Aunt Elizabeth, in an eloquent and breathless letter, drew a parallel between her nephew and Esau, and predicted that his ill-gotten gains would prosper no better than those of Ananias. Nor, unhappily, was it only by reproaches from without that the delinquent was made to feel the heinousness of his guilt. Mrs. Brune, who had once been pretty and fond of society, who had always detested a rural life, and had consoled herself through long years of monotony with an undefined expectation of one day escaping from it, considered that she had a strong case against destiny. Being blessed with high principles and a fine sense of duty, she could not breathe a word reflecting upon the memory of her father, and for the same unexceptionable reasons she refrained from bringing railing accusations against her husband; but neither principle nor duty forbade her to sigh over the loss of Longbourne, and accordingly her life became, so to speak, one protracted sigh. She had long wanted a grievance, and now that she had got one, she did not stint herself in the indulgence of it. Never a day passed without some reference being made by her to the fallen fortunes of the Brunes. Her children were taught to regard themselves as despoiled and the Stanniforths as their despoilers; and her husband, who would fain have allowed the whole matter to pass into the category of those misfortunes which, being irreparable, are best not talked about, was soon driven to recognise the impracticability of such a course. Mrs. Brune was a weak, plaintive, and disappointed woman, much given to religious exercises and to breakfasting in bed. Her health was bad, and so perhaps was her temper; but as the latter defect did not manifest itself in any of the recognised fashions, she passed pretty generally for a martyr, and was as much commiserated as she was respected by the entire parish.

From all this it will be seen that the world had not gone altogether well with Neville Brune, but he was not one of those who cry out when they are hurt, nor had anyone ever heard him complain of his luck. Acquaintance with disappointment had not soured his strong and sweet nature, but had bred in him a disposition to make the best of things, an increased enjoyment of the woods and fields, and a kindly humour which was not always understood by those of his own household. It had not been without a sharp struggle that he had brought himself to part with the old home where he had been born, and where the happiest years of his life had been spent; but of this he had said nothing. Only—unlike Mrs. Brune, who, through

the long period during which Longbourne had remained untenanted, had loved to wander among its silent paths and gardens like a Peri at the gates of Paradise—he had never once set foot upon the property since it had ceased to be his. At the time when this story opens he was a small, spare, wiry man of forty or thereabouts, dark complexioned, and a trifle stern of aspect, as his father had been before him, but by no means stern of character. He had a trick of looking straight into the face of any person whom he might be addressing, which sometimes gave offence, and which was certainly rather embarrassing, for his grey eyes were as keen as a hawk's; but, in truth, he meant no offence by this practice. At people whom he disliked—there were not many such—he avoided looking at all.

One day, shortly after that on which Hugh Kenyon had paid his first visit to Longbourne, Mr. Brune came in late for luncheon. This was a most unusual event, for at Broom Leas punctuality was a duty rigidly inculcated and practised, and a number of small heads were turned inquisitively towards the master of the house as he took his seat at the end of the long table.

'I will give you all three shots apiece,' he said, 'and bet you a big apple that you don't guess where I have been this morning.'

'Oh, Neville,' murmured Mrs. Brune plaintively, 'do let the children eat their dinner.'

'My dear, I feel sure that you need be under no apprehension of their failing to do that. But suspense is bad for digestion, I dare say. Will you make a guess yourself?'

'I am not curious,' said Mrs. Brune languidly.

'Still, you are susceptible of astonishment, and I am confident that I shall astonish you when I say that I have been at Longbourne.'

A slightly incredulous murmur ran round the table, starting with Walter the eldest boy, who was at home for the holidays, and ending with Geoffrey, a young gentleman in his third year, who cried 'Oh, oh!' from a precocious tendency to shout with the majority. Mrs. Brune straightened herself in her arm-chair, and gathered her shawl about her with a quick, nervous movement.

'Has that woman gone away then?' she asked.

'On the contrary, that woman is making up her mind to settle down at Longbourne, and it was she who took me up to the house.'

'Upon what pretence?'

'I ought not to have said that she took me. I walked up with her of my own accord, and a very pleasant walk it was. To avoid future unpleasantness, Ellinor, I may as well confess at once that I have fallen in love with that woman.'

Mrs. Brune laughed a little, in a forced, perfunctory way. She had a notion that her husband often intended to be funny, and that, though he failed to amuse her, it was her duty to make some polite acknowledgment of his efforts.

'I met her,' Mr. Brune went on, 'at the church door. I wanted to see Langley this morning about some parish matters; and feeling pretty sure that he would be reading complines or nones, or whatever it is——'

'I suppose you mean matins?'

'I suppose I do. Feeling sure that something of the kind would be going on, I went down to the church, and there, sure enough, I heard his voice murmuring melodiously within. So I sat in the porch till he came out in his cassock and biretta, accompanied by a tall lady in widow's weeds, who had one of the most interesting faces I have ever seen in my life. I stated my business while she stood reading the inscriptions on the tombstones, and then, as Langley didn't introduce me, I made bold to introduce myself.'

'Really, Neville!' cried Mrs. Brune in a tone of great vexation, 'you are like nobody else in the world. How extraordinary she must have thought it of you!'

'Perhaps she did; but, if so, she was well-bred enough to disguise her feelings, and to behave as though it gave her pleasure to meet me. We walked away together quite amicably, and were fast friends in less than ten minutes.'

'But what induced you to go up to the house with her?'

'The pleasure of talking to her, I suppose. I dare say you would have been equally weak in my place.'

'I should certainly not have entered Longbourne as the guest of that woman. I shall always feel that Longbourne no more belongs to the Stanniforths than—than Lorraine does to the Germans.'

'You will be interested in hearing that that is precisely her own view of the case. She told me so, blushing and looking as much ashamed of herself as if she had picked my pocket. Really, Ellinor, she has strong claims of various kinds upon your sympathy.'

Mrs. Brune shook her head decisively. 'I could never feel

sympathy with any one bearing the name of Stanniforth,' she declared.

'Why not? Here is a woman who not only attends matins and sends down a cartload of flowers to decorate the altar, but confesses her sins with every appearance of sincere remorse. Are we to be so inconsistent to all Christian principles as to refuse her forgiveness? Her sin, if you come to think of it, is not an unpardonable one; it only consists in her being the daughter-in-law of a man who once bought some property of mine and paid me my own price for it. Seriously, Ellinor, I want you to be kind to this poor Mrs. Stanniforth. It made my heart ache to think of her living all alone in that great barrack, and trying to put a good face upon it too. It would be a real act of charity if you would call upon her. And, in point of fact, I have promised that you will do so.'

The silence that followed this announcement was broken by a small childish voice, which asked—

'Papa, does Longbourne belong to Mrs. Stanniforth?'

'To the best of my belief it does, Nellie. Anyhow it will be her home for the rest of her life, most likely.'

'Then *I* won't go and see her,' declared the young lady emphatically. And Walter with his mouth full of tart, growled out, 'Hear, hear, Nellie!'

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Mr. Brune, 'you are a pretty set of young mutineers. I have a great mind to order the whole tribe of you up to Longbourne this very afternoon. After this I suppose I must expect nothing less than a flat refusal from your mother.'

'Of course, Neville,' said Mrs. Brune, 'if you tell me to leave cards I must obey you; but I do think it will look very odd. You never consider what people will say.'

'Not very much, I confess.'

'I always thought,' Mrs. Brune continued, 'that you did not wish me to visit strangers. During all these years that the Bishop has been at Crayminster we have never called upon Mrs. Winnington, though everybody else in the county has; and to thrust ourselves upon their daughter now—under the very peculiar circumstances of the case too—does seem to me unnecessary, to say the least of it. As to my being kind to her, that is nonsense. She has plenty of friends, and needs no kindness from me. Probably she thinks she would do me a kindness in receiving me.'

'I assure you she is not a born idiot.'

'I don't see how you can possibly tell what she may be. Besides I must say I should hardly have expected that she would wish for visitors yet, considering that her husband has not been dead a year.'

'My dear Ellinor, I am not asking you to pay a formal visit, still less to leave cards at the door. What I wanted you to do was to go in a neighbourly way, and try to be of some comfort to a fellow-creature, who perhaps has not so many friends as you credit her with. However, I have not the gift of persuasiveness, and I see I had better leave you to Langley, who is coming up to dinner, and who will probably use his ghostly authority over you in the matter. Come along, Miss Nell.'

And Mr. Brune rose and left the table, Nellie, a sturdy little brown-haired maiden, toddling after him with the important air which beseemed her father's chosen companion and the only girl out of a family of ten.

Mr. Brune had not erred in attributing to Mr. Langley an influence more powerful than he could hope to exercise. The rector of Longbourne was a gentleman who took himself very seriously, and who, as a natural consequence, was accepted at his own valuation by the majority of his flock. The female portion of it, in particular, looked up to him with an unquestioning faith and devotion which may have been called forth in part by his pale, smooth-shaven face, his stooping figure and his reputation for asceticism, but which was doubtless also due to the blameless integrity of his life, and to the known fact that he spent three-fourths of his income upon his church and upon the poor. When he mentioned his new parishioner emphatically as one whom it was a privilege to know, Mrs. Brune capitulated without a protest, murmuring that it would give her great pleasure to make Mrs. Stanniforth's acquaintance. Accordingly she walked over to Longbourne the following day, accompanied by the recalcitrant Nellie, and confessed on her return that she had found her neighbour a very quiet and ladylike person, 'A little cold and reserved in manner perhaps, but that was far better than rushing into the opposite extreme, as I was half afraid from your description of her, Neville, that she would do. If she had begun about the question of her title to be where she is, I hardly know how I could have answered her; but I am glad to say that she had the good taste not to refer to the subject.'

It was in this somewhat unpromising fashion that the

foundation was laid of an intimacy between the houses of Longbourne and Broom Leas which lasted throughout the lives of their respective occupants. Mrs. Brune did not, it is true, at once accord her friendship to the new-comer: she tolerated her; and that, according to her lights, was of itself no small concession. But of the children Margaret made a prompt and facile conquest. It was agreed among these young people that the resentment which they were bound to harbour against the whole Stanniforth family should not be extended to this alien, who was not by birth one of the proscribed race, and whose personal amiability took forms difficult to resist. They soon found out that they were welcome in her house at all hours of the day, and needed but little persuasion to convert her gardens into a playground. She let them come and go as they pleased, sometimes looking on at their games, sometimes taking part in them, and being always ready to act as arbitrator and referee in those disputes which sports of all kinds are apt to engender, be the players young or old. And then no one could tell fairy-tales with so leisurely, serious, and convincing an air as she did. One day Walter announced gravely that he had discovered a simple solution of certain family difficulties.

'When I am grown up,' he said, 'I shall marry Mrs. Stanniforth; and then we will all live at Longbourne together.'

'That is such an admirable plan,' Mr. Brune remarked, 'that I cannot think how your mother has failed to hit upon it before this. You have obtained the lady's consent, I presume?'

'Oh, that'll be all right,' Walter replied confidently. 'I told her about it, and she said she would have to take a little time to consider of it. She'll have a good ten years, you see, to think it over in;—or, perhaps, we might make it eight years. I don't want to marry before I leave Oxford, though.'

'Walter,' said Mrs. Brune, 'you ought not to talk nonsense upon such a subject as that to Mrs. Stanniforth; it is very thoughtless of you. I don't know where you children get your want of consideration for the feelings of others from. I am sure you do not inherit it from me.'

'The inference,' remarked Mr. Brune, 'is unavoidable. Still, a capacity for better things will crop up occasionally even in the worst of us; and to prove it, I mean to go up to Longbourne this afternoon and meet Mrs. Winnington at five o'clock tea; and I shall make an excuse for you, Ellinor. I need not point out to you what that implies; for you know how I love five o'clock tea—not to speak of Mrs. Winnington.'

The truth is that Mrs. Winnington had not contrived, and probably had not endeavoured, to make herself beloved by the Brunes. She was a person of the fine-lady type, common enough twenty years or so ago, but now rapidly becoming extinct. Of a commanding presence, and with the remains of considerable beauty, she was always dressed handsomely and in bright, decided colours; she carried a gold-mounted double eyeglass, through which she was accustomed to survey inferior mortals with amusing impertinence; while, in speaking to them, her voice assumed a drawl so exaggerated as to render her valuable remarks almost unintelligible at times. These little graces of manner had doubtless come to her from a study of the best models, for she went a good deal into the fashionable world at that time; but, in addition to these, she possessed a complacent density and an unfeigned self-confidence which were all her own, and which would probably have sufficed at any epoch, and, under any circumstances, to render her at once as disagreeable and as contented a woman as could have been found under the sun.

Whether because she resented the slight put upon her by the Brunes in that they had never seen fit to call at the Palace, or because she had an inkling that their pride surpassed her own vain-glory, she made up her mind to snub them; and when Mrs. Winnington made up her mind to any course of action, it was usually carried through with a will. The plainness with which these worthy folks were given to understand that, in her opinion, they were no better than country bumpkins, and the mixture of patronage and insolence with which she bore herself towards them, were in their way inimitable. There are some people magnanimous enough, or indifferent enough, to smile at such small discourtesies; and probably the former owner of Longbourne was more amused than angry when he was informed that the house had been a positive pig-stye before it had been put in order, and that Mrs. Winnington really could not imagine how anyone had found it possible to live in such a place. But Mrs. Brune, who was more irritable, trembled with suppressed wrath at the contemptuous allusions which were frequently made in her presence to 'bankers, and brewers, and people of that class;' and, indeed, it is not likely that friendly relations could long have been maintained between Broom Leas and Longbourne if Mrs. Winnington had not, fortunately, been due in Scotland early in September.

What Mrs. Stanniforth thought of the cavalier manner in

which her new friends had been treated it was not easy to say. She never attempted to check or soften down her mother's rude speeches; for she had not that exasperating quality which is known as tact, and she was probably aware that by no amount of stirring can oil and vinegar be made to mix. Also she loved her mother—('The Lord knows why?' said Mr. Brune, who had observed this phenomenon); and it may have been that she was a little blind to the defects of that unamiable lady. However, Mrs. Winnington departed for Scotland to pay a round of visits to various aristocratic friends; and then all went smoothly again.

Mr. Langley was much pleased by the amicable spirit in which the new lady of the manor had been received by her nearest neighbours. He had been interested in Margaret as a doctor is interested in a difficult case; he had perceived that company and occupation were the medicines of which she stood chiefly in need, and he had at first hardly seen how or whence these two alteratives were to be obtained. But the companionship of the Brune children had seemed in a great measure to supply the first want, and he had himself been able to satisfy the second by an ample provision of parish work, so soon as he had found that the patient had aptitudes that way. He thought she was doing very nicely now, and would soon be convalescent.

In truth, however, she was not doing so well, either in mind or in body, as Mr. Langley and others supposed. When she was alone—and she was a great deal alone—she was listless and miserable; she slept badly and had little appetite; and no sooner had the autumn set in with chilly winds and rain than she caught a cold, which settled on her chest and kept her in bed for a week.

It was at this juncture that Hugh Kenyon, who, throughout the summer, had been inventing one excuse after another to defer his second visit to Longbourne, reappeared upon the scene, and was frightened out of his wits by the change in Margaret's aspect. He found her lying upon the sofa, looking flushed and feverish, and coughing at every other word, and was horrified to hear that she had not yet thought it necessary to call in a doctor. Shortly afterwards it was known in Craymister and the vicinity that Mrs. Stanniforth had been ordered to the Riviera for the winter, and would start immediately. Hugh had remembered that the Winningtons were a consumptive family, and had been seized with a panic which

had found relief in prompt action. By mere force of will, and in spite of Margaret's protestations, he carried her off to London, and took her to see an eminent specialist, by whom his fears were to some extent confirmed. Then he wrote to Mrs. Winnington to come back from Scotland instantly; and, without waiting for an answer, telegraphed to Nice to secure suitable rooms. Mrs. Winnington arrived from the Highlands in no very good humour, and informed Hugh in so many words that there was such a thing as over-officious friendship; but when she heard the doctor's report, she said no more, but packed up her trunks, and prepared to accompany her daughter once more to the continent. Hugh took first leave, and travelled with the ladies to their destination.

'After all,' said Mrs. Brune, with unwonted charity, 'there must be some good in that horrid vulgar woman. I should have imagined her utterly heartless and devoid of all maternal affection; but I suppose I must have judged her too harshly.'

'We are all of us too prone to judge our neighbours harshly,' her husband remarked; 'but I don't think that, in my moments of bitterest injustice towards Mrs. Winnington, I should ever have suspected her of being the sort of old woman to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.'

'I don't know what you mean, Neville,' said Mrs. Brune. 'Mrs. Winnington is not an old woman' and——'

'And Mrs. Stanniforth is not a goose? Well, I don't know. If ever you find me deliberately spending a winter in the south in such company as she has chosen, I will give you leave to call me a goose, at all events.'

CHAPTER III.

DISTRUST.

Once upon a time there dwelt in the East a king so mighty and wealthy that he was the envy of all mankind. He had armies and palaces and treasure-houses, and shady gardens, where fountains rose and fell all the day long, and where neither roses nor bulbuls were lacking; not to mention sherbet, and jewels innumerable, and a plurality of wives—in short, all that the Oriental mind could find to desire. And this made him sad; for he was a thoughtful monarch, and he soon found out that the fact of having nothing left to wish for is not only

insufficient to render kings happy, but is apt to have a precisely opposite effect upon them. Therefore he summoned the wise men of his kingdom, one by one, and demanded of each of them privately how happiness might be gained. And some said one thing, and some said another; but the inquirer could find no suggestion to satisfy him till it came to the turn of a certain dervish to be heard. 'Happiness, O King,' said this holy man, 'belongs not to our world; but I have with me a talisman which, if a man will but consent to wear it next his skin for a twelvemonth, will assuredly confer upon him as near an approach thereto as is obtainable by mortals.' And so, permission having been asked and given, he proceeded to place this wondrous charm upon his master's person. It consisted of a collar and a waistband, loosely united by a strip of leather so arranged as to follow the line of the wearer's backbone, and to the middle of this strip was affixed a good stout thorn. The thorn pierced his Majesty's august skin, and he smiled graciously, for he thought he had divined the dervish's meaning. For a year he wore the talisman; and it caused him all the suffering and inconvenience imaginable. He could not bow without receiving a sharp stab which almost caused him to shriek aloud; to lean back upon his throne was out of the question; when he walked, the strip of leather swayed to and fro, leaving a horizontal scratch for every step, and when he rode, it flapped till his back was punctured like a pin-cushion. But all this he bore manfully, knowing that every hour brought him nearer to the end, and looking forward to the time when he should taste the greatest of earthly joys, which is relief from pain. Besides, it pleased him to think how heroically he was supporting a torment of which only one man in his dominions suspected the existence. But, when the longed-for day of deliverance came, lo and behold! the poor king was no better off than he had been at starting. Repose indeed he had gained; but that he had had before; and, on the other hand, he had lost a hundred small daily solaces, of which anticipation had not been the least. If the dervish had not prudently made himself scarce at the time, it is probable that he would have had his head cut off for his pains.

The allegory has more than one moral; but the most direct of them lies upon the surface, and there are few men or women who have not had occasion, at one time or another of their lives, to recognise its force. '*Ah! l'heureux temps quand j'étais si malheureux!*'—one hears the cry every day in more or less

articulate accents, and there are certain poets whose whole utterances amount to little else. Looking back, in after years, upon the few weeks which he had spent at Nice under the same roof with Margaret Stanniforth—upon their drives along the sunny Cornice, upon their long talks on the balcony, during warm southern evenings, after Mrs. Winnington had gone out to the opera, or to a party given by some English friend—upon numberless incidents and speeches remembered only by himself, Hugh Kenyon often sighed for his lost thorn. It is doubtful whether he would have consented to part with it even at the time, although it galled him cruelly; and in truth his lot was not without compensations. Like the Eastern potentate, he wanted what he was very nearly sure that he could never obtain; but, like him, he perhaps got as near an approach to it as was to be had. It was something to see Margaret growing better in health with every day; it was something to be always near her, and to possess her entire confidence. If that confidence usually showed itself after a fashion that made him wince, he accepted the punishment as a just and inevitable one, deriving such consolation as he could from conscious stoicism.

Nice was full of English, as it always used to be in the days when Cannes was as yet little frequented, and San Remo, Pegli, and other winter resorts all but undiscovered; and among these were, as a matter of course, many of Mrs. Winnington's numerous acquaintances. That lady was persuaded to exhibit her mauve and purple gowns, night after night, at various social gatherings, apologising a little for going into the world so soon after her daughter's loss; and one, at least, of her fellow-travellers was only too ready to excuse her, and to keep Margaret company through the long evenings.

The intercourse of these two people was of that pleasant and easy kind which can only subsist between old friends who have many tastes and reminiscences in common, and it was but occasionally that Margaret referred to the subject which was always in her thoughts. Hugh noticed with pleasure that she did not shrink from receiving casual visitors, and was able to talk cheerfully; and what pleased him still more was that her cough had almost left her, and that the danger which he had dreaded seemed to have passed away. He could not help telling her as much one evening; and her rejoinder disconcerted him a little.

'Why do you say that?' she asked quietly. 'I never thought I was going to die; but if I had died, it would have

been the best thing that could have happened to me. You know I have nothing to live for.'

'You are too young to talk so; you will feel differently some day, I hope,' said Hugh, rather stupidly.

But she went on, without heeding his interruption: 'If we could only know a little more! If I could feel quite sure that we should all be together again some day—you, and Jack, and I, and all of us—just as we used to be, it would be easy enough to live through the rest of my time. Do you think it is at all possible that we should meet like that, and talk over old days, and ask one another heaps of questions, as we should do if we had been separated for a time here?'

Hugh had not bestowed much reflection upon this problem. He considered it now for a brief space, pulling his moustache thoughtfully, and then said, 'Well, I always think, you know, that the less we bother ourselves about a future state the better.'

At this Margaret had a little laugh, which ended in a sigh. 'Sometimes I feel quite hopeless,' she said; 'and it seems to me that in reality everybody else is hopeless too. When people want to comfort me, they all say the same thing, though of course not in the same words: "You have no business to go on groaning over what can't be helped. Nothing is known about the next world; and all that is certain is that you have lost what you can never by any possibility find again here. The best thing that you can do is to forget all about it, and make a fresh start."'

This so very nearly expressed Captain Kenyon's own view of the subject that he could only remain silent.

'After all,' Margaret resumed, 'it is unreasonable, I suppose, to expect comfort from others. One must bear one's own burden, and fight one's own fight as best one can. I don't mean,' she added quickly, 'that it isn't the greatest possible comfort to have a friend like you; I am not so ungrateful as that. I often think that life can never become quite unendurable to me so long as I can talk to you or write to you sometimes; for I know I may tell you all my troubles and perplexities and every stupid notion that comes into my head. There can't be many people in the world fortunate enough to have such a friend.'

Speeches of this kind went far towards consoling Hugh for many an hour of dejection. There were moments when he almost felt as if the friendship of which she spoke might be

sufficient to satisfy him; but then again there were others when he was perfectly sure that friendship would not do at all, that it was dangerous to linger upon these sunny shores, and that prudence and duty alike pointed him northwards. At the end of a month this conviction forced itself upon him so strongly that he struck while the iron was hot, and left for England rather abruptly.

Before Christmas, Mrs. Winnington followed his example. Her daughter, whose health no longer gave cause for anxiety, had plenty of friends in Nice to cheer her solitude; and there were other persons at home who had claims upon Mrs. Winnington's care and supervision. The fact was that the Bishop, if left too long to himself, was apt to get into scrapes, accepting invitations which he ought not to have accepted, allowing his children to make acquaintances which they ought not to have made, and otherwise usurping functions which he was ill qualified to exercise.

Meanwhile the mistress of Longbourne was greatly missed by those who dwelt around her new home, and her movements were discussed as such matters only are discussed in country neighbourhoods. The winter passed away as usual, with gales and rains and frosts; and, as usual, everybody said that there had not been so hard a season for twenty years. Then, when the customary easterly winds of spring had blown themselves out, Mrs. Stanniforth returned; and a welcome stimulus was afforded to local conversation by the circumstance that she did not return alone. It was Mr. Brune's privilege to be the first to acquaint the parish with this bit of intelligence. Trudging across the fields, one sunshiny April morning, he encountered Margaret, accompanied by Hugh Kenyon and by a pale-faced little boy with enormous dark brown eyes, whose hand she held.

'I have brought this little man home with me,' said she, as soon as the usual greetings and inquiries had been interchanged, 'to make an Englishman of him. Or rather, I have brought him to have an English education; for his father was a countryman of ours, though he has lived all his life with his mother in Italy.'

'He looks as if he might have been left to his mother a little longer with advantage,' Mr. Brune remarked.

'His mother is dead,' answered Margaret, gently. 'You are my little boy now, aren't you, Philip?'

A dissentient growl from Hugh Kenyon died away unnoticed.

'And what is your name, my lad?' asked Mr. Brune.

Margaret answered for him, after a momentary hesitation, 'His name is Filippo Marescalchi. I am counting upon my friend Walter to take a little care of him just at first, till he learns to fight his own battles.'

'I can say on Walter's behalf that he will be proud to obey any commands from Mrs. Stanniforth; and, physically speaking, Walter is all that a fond father could wish him to be. You intend to send this young gentleman to school, then?'

'Yes; at twelve years old it is time, is it not? And he wants to go to school, and he isn't a bit afraid of English boys; are you, Philip?'

The child shrank closer to the side of his protectress with a movement which certainly did not convey the idea of any great natural intrepidity. He was frightened of the wiry little man whose keen grey eyes had been fixed upon him throughout this brief explanation, and if he had been in a position to follow the bent of his own inclinations, he would probably have turned and run back to the house as fast as his legs could carry him. As he will play a principal part in the course of the succeeding narrative, and as the reader will be supposed to be interested in the progress of his career, it may be as well to state, without further delay, so much of his origin and past life as was known to his present patroness.

During the winter which was just over he had been frequently seen wandering all by himself along the Promenade des Anglais at Nice; and Margaret, who loved all children, had soon scraped acquaintance with this one. Through him she had come to know his mother, a certain Countess Marescalchi, who had come to the Riviera in the last stages of consumption, who had apparently neither kith nor kin to look after her, and whose means were evidently of the narrowest. The poor woman was inordinately grateful for such kindnesses as Margaret was able to show her, and, with the communicativeness of her nation, had ere long put this English Samaritan in possession of all the details of a sufficiently sad history. She had, it appeared, been married, some twelve or thirteen years before, to a wealthy Englishman named Brown, who had assumed the title of Count Marescalchi on purchasing an estate in the dominions of King Bomba, which, as a matter of course, carried nobility with it. She had lived happily with him, she said, during the first year of their married life, more or less unhappily during the second, and before the third was

at an end he had departed for his native land, and had never returned. She had received from his lawyers the title-deeds of the Italian estate, together with an intimation that she might now regard the same as her own, and that Mr. Brown did not desire to hold any further direct intercourse with her. After that she had had remittances at irregular intervals; but these had soon ceased, and it was her belief that her husband was dead. By her own family she had not been treated over well. She had two brothers living; but they had absolutely declined to do anything for her when her funds had begun to run low, alleging that the sale of her property should produce a sufficient income for her to live upon, and declaring that, in any case, it was not their business to support one who had managed her affairs so badly. 'What would you have?' she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. 'They were terribly disappointed at the disappearance of my husband, whom they had counted upon to make them rich; and indeed I think it was as much they as I who drove him out of the country, poor man!'

For her own part, she confessed that she had never had any wish to become reconciled with Mr. Brown, whose temper had been of a most trying kind. All the love that was in her had been lavished upon her *bambino*; and when she thought that she must soon leave him utterly alone in the world, or at best under the care of two uncles from whom he could expect nothing but harsh treatment, she was tempted to take him down to the harbour some night, and let the sea put an end to the troubles of both of them at once.

'What could I say to the poor creature?' Margaret asked, relating all this to Hugh Kenyon. 'Of course I told her to set her mind at rest, and that her boy should never want, and that I would do my best to take his mother's place as long as I lived.'

'I don't see any of course about it,' returned Hugh, who was by no means pleased with Margaret's impulsive behaviour in this matter.

'Well, at all events, I did tell her so; and I am glad to think that she died more peacefully for knowing that the poor *bambino* would not be uncared for after she was gone. To me he will be the greatest possible blessing; he has given me the very thing I needed—an object to live for. And he *is* a pretty child, isn't he?'

'Oh, I don't know; a little white thing, all eyes. Yes; I dare say he's pretty enough, if that's any advantage. The

question is whether you haven't saddled yourself with a burden which nothing in the world compelled you to take upon your shoulders. I suppose you never thought of making any inquiries as to the truth of the mother's story. The chances are, you know, that she was never really married to the individual calling himself Brown—supposing that there ever was such a person.'

'I am not so imprudent as you would make me out. I wrote to the uncles; and the elder of these Signori Cavestri came from Florence and saw me. He confirmed all that I had heard from his sister, and was quite willing that I should adopt the boy.'

'No doubt he was.'

'And we signed an agreement in the presence of witnesses; so you see everything was quite business-like. My only fear is that Mr. Brown may turn up, some day, and claim his son.'

'That, I should think, is in the last degree improbable. By-the-by, what is the young gentleman to be called?'

'I hesitated a little about that at first; but I came to the conclusion that it would be really too bad to call him Brown when he has a very fair right to the name of Marescalchi. I don't think we need say anything about the Count. Fortunately, he talks English as well as I do; and he is a friendly little fellow. I do hope he will be happy at school.'

'I hope he will, I'm sure; but I hope still more that he won't make you unhappy at home—which seems to be quite on the cards. Why did you never consult me about all this?'

'Because, my dear Hugh, I knew you would make all sorts of objections, and, as I was determined to have my own way, it was better to take it, without preliminary fuss. Isn't that a sufficient reason?'

In truth Hugh Kenyon was not alone in raising objections to the adoption of this little waif and stray. Mrs. Stanniforth's relations, one and all, declared themselves against her in the matter. Old Mr. Stanniforth wrote from Manchester to say that charity was all very well, but that it was pushing charity beyond its legitimate limits to pick up small Italian boys from the gutter and seat them in your drawing-room. In his opinion, a barrel organ and a couple of white mice would have met all the requirements of the present case. As for the Bishop, he almost shed tears over it; while Mrs. Winnington was so angry that she reverted to a freedom of language with which her daughters had been familiar in their schoolroom days, and roundly told Margaret that she was a fool. What was to

be the future of this imp? she reasonably inquired. Who was to support him, in case anything should happen to his present protectress? Did Margaret remember that it would not be in her power to make any permanent provision either for him or for any other chance object of benevolence? And the good lady's wrath was by no means appeased when her daughter answered quietly that she hoped to be able to lay by several thousands a year, and that, for the rest, she proposed to insure her life in Philip's favour. If one came to talk of insuring lives, Mrs. Winnington thought, it should be the wants of one's own relations that one ought first to consider. She was, however, a woman of some practical good sense, and after her first natural outbreak of indignation, she wisely resolved not to quarrel with accomplished facts and to make the best of a vexatious business.

Nor was Margaret unreasonable. Having carried her point in the main matter of providing herself with an adopted son, she was quite willing to listen to counsel as regarded his education and prospects, and even to follow it, when it coincided with her own views. And harmony was in no small degree promoted by the unanimity with which her advisers decided upon what was the first thing to be done. 'Send him to school,' cried each and all of them, without a moment's hesitation; and to little Philip, listening eagerly to the discussion, this sentence seemed to be delivered with a certain triumphant ring which was far from being reassuring. Many people imagine, or behave as if they imagined, that children are conveniently deaf, except when spoken to, and that of conversation held in their presence they understand only so much as it is desirable that they should understand. Philip Marescalchi heard and understood very well. He understood, for one thing, that all these strange ladies and gentlemen were inclined to be against him; and, as he had never done any of them an injury, this struck him as an unjust predisposition, and one that reflected little credit upon the English as a nation. Mrs. Stanniforth he loved with all the demonstrative passion of a southern nature; but by the time that he met Mr. Brune in the manner already described, he had learnt to look upon each fresh face with suspicion, as upon that of a probable enemy; and, as we have seen, Mr. Brune's greeting had failed to inspire him with any confidence.

Nevertheless, he felt a strong interest in this alarming personage; for he had found out who Walter was, and that his own

destiny was to be sent to Walter's school after Easter; and when it transpired that Mr. Brune was to dine at Longbourne that night, Philip guessed at once why the invitation had been given. He would gladly, if he had dared, have concealed himself behind the window-curtains during dinner-time, and heard a few particulars as to the mysterious place of discipline whither he was to be despatched; but this was for various reasons out of the question, and he was fain to console himself with the hope of gleaning some information at dessert.

When the expected guest arrived, Master Philip was lurking on the top landing of the staircase, and, peering beneath the bannisters, saw the butler help him off with his coat, after which he was shown into the library. Then the servants went away; and Philip, stealing down the broad, shallow stairs on tip-toe, approached Mr. Brune's Inverness cape, and began touching it and lifting up the corners of it with a half-frightened curiosity, much as you may see a little dog timidly poking his nose into the empty kennel of a big one. Growing bolder after a time, he proceeded to examine this garment (an altogether novel one to him) more closely, wondering at its weight and thickness, and at the multiplicity of its pockets. Presently it became almost a necessity to discover whether these pockets contained anything, and, if so, what; and just as he had made up his mind to set these questions at rest, and was fully committed to an investigation, the library door was suddenly flung open, and Mr. Brune himself suddenly strode out into the hall.

'Hullo, youngster!' cried he, 'are you looking for oranges? You won't find any in the pockets of my coat, I'm afraid; but if you'll come up and see me at Broom Leas, you shall have as many as you can eat; though we don't pick them off the trees in our country. All I have got here is a letter from your future schoolmaster, which I forgot to take in with me; and you will soon see as much of his handwriting as you will care about, I daresay.'

Mr. Brune did not appear to be angry at the liberty which had been taken with his property; but the culprit was none the less terrified. He drew back, stammering out:—

'I was not touching your coat, sir. I—I thought I had left my ball here.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Mr. Brune, curtly; and, having found his letter, he returned to the library without another word.

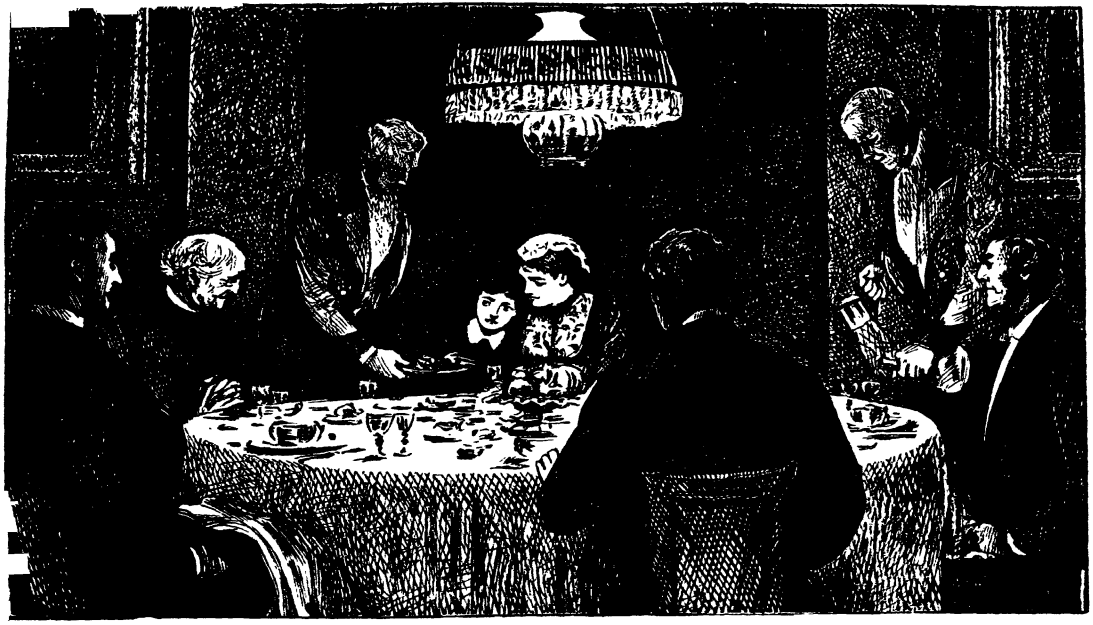
This unlucky encounter robbed Philip of any desire to face the company at dessert; but in due time he was sent for as

usual, and led into the dining-room, where he stationed himself beside Margaret's chair—a picturesque little figure in his black velvet costume.

There was nothing that should have excited apprehension in the aspect of the five guests who were seated round that well lighted and prettily decorated table. They were in good humour, as most people are after an excellent dinner, and when the Bishop called out, 'Hey! not in bed yet?' he meant to express nothing more than playful amiability. But Philip snuggled under Margaret's wing, and made no reply. To him these good folks were all enemies, and he answered their questions in monosyllables and with downcast eyes; so that they all thought him shy (which he was not), and some of them set him down as sulky into the bargain. As soon as he had disposed of his grapes and biscuits he threw his arms round Margaret's neck, and kissed her on both cheeks; after which, with a funny little old-fashioned bow to the rest of the company, he made his escape. As he was in the act of shutting the door behind him, he heard Mr. Brune say, 'He is a pretty little fellow. Don't get too fond of him.' But Mrs. Stanniforth's answer, if she made any, was inaudible; and the boy went away, wondering what Mr. Brune could have meant by that rather unkind piece of advice.

Later in the evening this enigma was explained to him after a fashion confirmatory of the old adage that listeners hear no good of themselves. Being wide awake, and hearing a carriage drive up to the door and the sound of voices in the hall, he slipped out of bed and crept to his old post of observation at the top of the staircase, whence he could see the Bishop and Mrs. Winnington enveloping themselves in wraps, and could hear them remarking upon the loveliness of the evening to the others, who had come out to bid them good-night. Presently they took their departure, and were soon followed by Mr. Langley, who had got the good-natured Hugh by the button-hole, and was haranguing him upon the undue facilities afforded to the British private soldier for changing his religion, whenever it might suit the convenience of that ignorant and erratic creature to do so.

'It is a grave scandal,' Philip heard him saying, 'and one to which the authorities do not seem to be properly alive. Good-night, Mrs. Stanniforth, good-night—most delightful evening—thank you so very much. Such a state of things is a disgrace to the country, Captain Kenyon. I understand that it is an



'HEY, NOT IN BED YET!'

absolute fact that these men will shift about from one denomination to another—Anglicans to-day, Romanists to-morrow, Dissenters next day—simply with a view to attending the place of worship in which they are likely to be detained for the shortest time. Now, so long as the army chaplains are not backed up——'

'I think I'll just light a cigar and walk down as far as the gate with you,' Hugh said, resignedly. And so Mr. Brune and his hostess were left alone in the hall, and the proceedings took a turn more interesting to the small watcher overhead.

'What made you tell me not to get too fond of the boy?' Margaret asked, rather abruptly.

'It is a mistake to get too fond of anybody or anything in a world of change,' answered Mr. Brune, sententiously.

'Yes; but that was not what you meant. I wish you would tell me what you did mean.'

'My dear Mrs. Stanniforth, if I were to answer your question honestly, you would only be angry with me, and I should not convince you that I had any good reason for my warning.'

'Having said that much, you must be perfectly aware that I shall not let you go until you have explained yourself.'

'This is what one gets by allowing one's tongue too much freedom. Well, then, I recommended you not to grow too fond of him because I suspect that he is not likely to prove worth it. There!'

'I did not know it was so easy to foresee what a child of twelve years old was likely to prove worth.'

'It is less difficult than people are willing to allow. Anyone who has had as much to do with the breaking-in of young animals as I have will tell you that they all possess hereditary vices and defects, or the reverse; and, humiliating and puzzling as the fact may be, I fear that we mortals are subject to the same laws. Of course, if you or I were creating a world, we should give everybody a fair start, and little boys and girls would be little lumps of clay, to be moulded by the care and wisdom of their parents or guardians; but even that system might be found open to objections, and it is pretty clear that that is not the system which actually prevails. Therefore, I say that there will always be specimens of the race for whom it is advisable not to care overmuch.'

'What defects and vices have you discovered in my poor little Philip?'

'I have discovered that he is a liar, and I am half afraid that he is a coward too; but I won't insist upon the latter point. I told you I should make you angry. Come, it is only a question of words, after all. Let us say that he has a highly-strung nervous temperament, and that his intelligence is precocious. How much nicer that sounds! And it means very nearly the same thing.'

'I don't think it means the same thing at all; and I can't understand your being unjust and cruel enough to speak so of a child whom you have only seen for a few minutes. You were certainly right in saying that your prejudice would not convince me. And even if he were what you pretend, I should not be the less fond of him, especially as, by your own showing, he would not be to blame for his faults.'

'But I didn't blame him, if you remember. Well, well; don't say I never warned you, that's all.'

Mr. Brune had struggled into his Inverness cape by this time, and had got as far as the doorstep, whither he was followed by Margaret.

'I daresay I am unjust,' he said; 'that is likely enough, goodness knows!—though I won't admit that I am cruel. It was only a little fib that he told me, Mrs. Stanniforth. I caught him with his arm thrust up to the elbow in the pocket of my coat, and he assured me that he had never touched my coat at all. An accomplished liar would hardly have said that, would he? So there's comfort for you. I suppose we have most of us told lies in our time. I am ready to confess that I have, and that if I had no worse sins on my conscience than your young rascal has been guilty of, I should be a happier man than I am. Let us shake hands, and acknowledge that we are all miserable sinners, and say no more about it.'

But these last consolatory sentences did not reach the ears of Philip, who stole back to his room, got into bed again, and cried himself to sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RISING AND THE SETTING SUN.

Bad beginnings do not always make bad endings. After the cold welcome which had greeted Philip's entrance into the land of his adoption, he was so fortunate as to earn speedily a general good-will which—if he had rightly understood the case—should

have been especially gratifying to him, seeing that it was evidently due to his personal merits alone. As an institution Mrs. Stanniforth's relations and advisers had felt bound to object to him; but as an individual they were quite willing to let him have a fair trial; and further acquaintance showed him to be an attractive little individual enough. His manners, when he got a chance of displaying them, were acknowledged to be charming, albeit a trifle odd and old-fashioned; being accustomed to shift for himself, he had none of the tiresome habits of a spoilt child, and required nobody to entertain him; he was quick at picking up the tone and falling into the ways of those about him; and a select few were privileged to make the discovery that he was an excellent mimic. The guffaws that arose from the region of the servants' hall when he took off Mr. Langley's hurried gait and nasal intonation, caused the grooms in the stable-yard to pause in their work and grin at one another from the mere contagion of merriment; he had caught the good Bishop's trick of murmuring 'Oh, my dear friend, my dear friend,' so perfectly that a listener with his eyes shut would have been puzzled to distinguish the imitation from the original; and even Mrs. Prosser, the sour-tempered housekeeper, condescended to smile when he sailed across the room, holding up invisible skirts with his left hand, peering here and there through imaginary eye-glasses, and ejaculating, 'My dearest Margaret, you ought really to insist upon your servants' doing their work properly?' For Mrs. Prosser did not love her mistress's mother.

But these exhibitions were reserved for those who appreciated them, and were never indulged in in the presence of Mrs. Stanniforth; for, young as he was, Master Philip knew that what is one man's meat is another man's poison, and had learned the important lesson of how to adapt his demeanour to his company. Mrs. Brune, for instance, thought him a sweet, gentle-mannered child, and wished, with a sigh, that her own rough little mob were more like him; while, if he had failed to ingratiate himself with her husband, it was only because he had made up his mind that any effort to do so would be hopeless, and because (pardonably enough) he entertained for that gentleman a deep-seated aversion, not unmixed with dread. As for the children at Broom Leas, they sat in judgment upon him, for a day or two, after the pitiless and uncompromising fashion of children, and finally pronounced a verdict in his favour. Probably they were influenced in no small degree by his inde-

pendence and his assumption of certain airs of superiority to which his experience and knowledge of the world entitled him; but, be that as it may, their friendship, once accorded, was given without reserve, and he was immediately admitted into a freemasonry which no parental orders or entreaties could have thrown open to him. He, on his side, was greatly taken with these new companions, and especially with Nellie, to whom he made love so openly that Mrs. Brune actually began to speculate upon what might come to pass in ten or fifteen years' time, and asked her husband privately whether he supposed that Mrs. Stanniforth's *protégé* had anything substantial in the way of expectations.

Philip was strolling across the fields from Longbourne to Broom Leas, one morning, when he was met by a broad-shouldered, fresh-coloured boy of about his own age and about twice his size, who left off whistling on catching sight of the stranger, and presently called out: 'I say! is your name Marescalchi!'

Philip said, 'Yes.'

'Oh, all right! You're going to school with me next half. I'm Brune—Walter, you know: you've heard of me from the young 'uns?'

Philip smiled amiably, said, 'I am glad to see you,' and held out his hand, which the other took, staring and laughing a little. Walter was not accustomed to so much ceremony.

'I say,' he began again, after a pause, 'can you play cricket?'

Philip answered in the words of the gentleman who was asked whether he could play the flute, that he didn't know, never having tried.

'Hum! that's a pity. Football?'

Philip had never even seen a football; and his questioner was visibly depressed by this intelligence. It was evidently in no sanguine spirit that he suggested 'Fives?' and a third disclaimer appeared to grieve rather than surprise him. 'Well,' he said, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, 'you'll have to learn, you know.' And then, 'You don't ride, I suppose.'

This time Philip was able to nod affirmatively. 'I have got a new pony,' he said.

'Have you though?' cried the other, brightening. 'Where is he? Up at the Longbourne stables? Come along, and let's have a look at him.'

So Walter was taken to admire the purchase which Hugh Kenyon had made, a short time before, at Mrs. Stanniforth's

desire; and after that, the two boys visited the other stalls and loose boxes together, and were very knowing upon the subject of horseflesh, and in that way made friends. Philip could stick to his saddle as well as most boys of his age; for his mother had had him taught to ride, just as she had been careful to provide him with an English nurse, so long as that extravagance had been possible to her. No one could tell what might happen, she used to say to herself, when in a hopeful mood, and there was no harm in being prepared for all contingencies. In her heart she had always cherished a notion that, one day or another, Mr. Brown's relatives might claim their kinsman, and bear him away to wealth and honours in that far-off northern island which she well knew that she herself would never see. Her pains and forethought had their reward now; though not under such circumstances as she had anticipated.

'I think he'll do,' Walter announced confidentially to his father some days later. 'I should not wonder if he was to get just a little bit kicked at first——'

'If you are quite sure that it will be only just a little bit, Walter, I should be inclined to doubt whether that would be an altogether unmixed evil.'

'Oh, there's no such thing as bullying now-a-days,' answered the boy, who was not himself made of the stuff which is easily bullied; 'he'll get on all right. The only danger is—he's awfully clever, you know—the danger is that he may turn out a sap, and stick indoors all day.'

'I am convinced, my dear boy, that we may rely upon you to do your utmost, both by precept and example, to avert such a calamity. Judging by the report which you were kind enough to hand to me on your return, the disgrace of being known as a "sap" is one which you are in no danger of incurring. Can you conjugate *vapulo*, for instance?'

'Yes,' answered Walter, 'I can; but I'd rather not; because——'

'Quite so. I respect your feelings, and have no desire to stir up painful memories during the holidays. But mind you, if this youngster is promoted over your head, there shall be no Eton for you. I can't afford to send more than one of you to the old school; and if you won't learn, why Dick must take your place; and I shall—well, I think I shall ship you off to the colonies, and make you work your passage out as cabin-boy.'

Walter grinned, knowing that there was no likelihood of

this threat being carried into effect, though he considered it quite upon the cards that the supposition which had given rise to it might be fulfilled. For he had discovered, to his astonishment, that little Marescalchi could do Latin verses, not to speak of construing a page of Virgil without the aid of a crib; and he had the best reasons for thinking modestly of his own classical attainments.

Meanwhile, it was indispensable that this benighted foreigner should gain some elementary knowledge of how to hit and how to throw up a ball, before being sent to school. Therefore Walter, who was the most good-natured soul alive, spent a large portion of his three weeks' holidays in bowling lobs to the stranger, while Nellie long-stopped; and at the end of the time he was able to speak with qualified approbation of his pupil's progress. The last day was a trying one for Philip—and not for Philip alone—but it passed away without any unseemly exhibition; and if there were tears in anybody's eyes when the moment of parting came, they were resolutely winked away.

'Oh dear! I almost wish he had been a girl,' sighed Margaret, as she stood looking after the carriage which was bearing away her adopted child and his juvenile protector.

'It would have been much better in all respects if he had been,' agreed Mr. Brune; 'but, my dear Mrs. Stanniforth, why didn't you think of that before? Boys are a nuisance even when they come into one's possession in the ordinary course of nature; but nothing compels one to adopt other people's boys. Considering the vast preponderance of the female over the male population, it does seem odd that, when you had made up your mind to relieve the destitute, you should have fixed upon one of the wrong sex.'

'The destitute females did not happen to come in my way; you see; and Philip belongs to me now as much as your boys belong to you. I am sure I have no right to grumble. He has been a godsend to me already, and I don't doubt but that he will be the joy of my life and the prop of my old age.'

'Unless he comes to the gallows in the meantime. Now, Mrs. Stanniforth, don't look so reproachfully at me; I did not really mean that. Set it down to jealousy of your boy, who is so much better-looking and cleverer than mine, you know. I foresee how you will crow over me for the next three months, and I can't help feeling sore in anticipation.'

It must be confessed that, if Margaret did not actually crow over Mr. Brune, she was very exultant when the first reports

from Philip's school reached her, and that she talked about him and his triumphs a little too much for the patience of her mother, who was at that time spending a few days with her.

'Now I do think there are very few boys of twelve years old who could produce anything so good as that,' she exclaimed, one morning, throwing across the breakfast-table a letter which, in truth, was not ill written and was disfigured by no blots.

Mrs. Winnington picked it up, and surveyed it through her glasses. 'My dearest Meg,' it began.

'Really,' cried Mrs. Winnington, laying down the sheet, 'I am surprised at your encouraging the boy to address you in that disrespectful way. "Meg," indeed! Why, I should never have allowed even your brothers and sisters to make use of such a vulgar nickname.'

'But "Mrs. Stanniforth" would be so formal. He always used to call me Meg at Nice, and I rather liked it. I don't think it sounds disrespectful.'

'Oh, very well! I suppose the young gentleman will be addressing me as Sukey next,' said Mrs. Winnington, whose christian name was Susan. And then she raised her eye-glasses again, and went on with the letter.

'My dearest Meg,—This is a half-holiday, so I am going to write to you as I promised. We have two half-holidays a week. I like it very much, only I want to go to Eton at Christmas when Walter goes. Please dear Meg let me go. Walter says he is sure I should take middle fourth, which is Upper School you know. I play cricket every day. I never cry, and I say my prayers as you told me. All the boys say their prayers here because one of the masters comes into the dormitry in the morning and then we have to do it while he is there and then we dress and then we go into school. We don't get much *butter* with our bread at brekfast. Walter says all the boys at Eton have rooms of their own and buy what they like for brekfast. I should always buy *sossiges*. I wish I was there. But I am very happy here. Please send me ten shillings as I have got no money left. I must stop now for I have no more to say. Give my love to Prosser and Wilson and James and Thomas and all the animals and Mrs. Winnington, and

'Believe me
'Ever your loving
'Philip.'

'There are a few mistakes in spelling,' Margaret observed in an apologetic tone.

'A few,' said Mrs. Winnington drily. 'It is a comfort to think that Philip is not likely to fail in life through any foolish feeling of delicacy as to asking for what he wants. I suppose you have already begun to make inquiries about a house at Eton.'

'Well, it would be a great thing if he and Walter could go there together, would it not? And you know, mother, it is one of your maxims that those who won't ask don't deserve to receive.'

Mrs. Winnington, who had consistently acted in accordance with this principle for many years, did not find it convenient to make any direct rejoinder, and merely remarked: 'Eton was thought too expensive a school for your brothers: but I dare say I had better not interfere. I hope you will thank your young prodigy for his polite mention of me when you write.'

'Oh, yes; I will certainly,' replied Margaret, quite seriously. And she despatched an answer to Philip's letter that same afternoon, enclosing the ten shillings as requested, and promising that if he continued to be good, and was careful about the orthography of 'dormitory' and other recondite words, the propriety of sending him to Eton in eight months' time should be considered.

The boy had not told the truth in asserting that he was happy at school. But what boy ever does tell the truth in such matters? He was physically weak, nervous, and sensitive, and he experienced the inevitable fate of those who possess such organisations. This private school, which was neither better nor worse than other establishments of its kind, did him some good and some harm. It taught him a respect for discipline; it gave him a rough notion of what commonly passes for justice in this world; and it confirmed his previous impression that the English, with a few bright exceptions, were a thick-headed and hard-hearted race. Probably he would not have pulled through as well as he did had he not had a powerful friend in Walter Brune. With the help of that good-natured son of Anak, he just managed to hold his own among his companions, and, although he did not achieve popularity, he was not much tormented after the first few weeks. To set against this mediocre social success, he had the good word of all his masters, and he returned to Longbourne at Midsummer with a pile of prizes under his arm and a highly eulogistic letter, addressed to Mrs. Stanniforth, in the pocket of his jacket.

Perhaps, if Philip had known it, that first day of his first holidays was the happiest of his life. The joy of regained liberty; the joy of being surrounded by none but friendly faces; and the joy of once more embracing his beloved Meg—the only person in the world in whom he had complete confidence: these would of themselves have satisfied him. But when to such delights was joined the supreme one of returning to them in the character of a conquering hero, the measure of his contentment was filled up to overflowing; for it was a part of his nature to adore applause. Margaret was not alone when he arrived; she had Captain Kenyon and two of her young brothers, schoolboys like himself, staying with her. But Hugh was so kind and complimentary that his presence could hardly be considered as a drawback; and the Winnington boys had the pleasant, soft manners of their father's family, and did not look askance at Philip, as at an intruder, after the fashion of certain other people whom he had met at Longbourne earlier in the year.

In the afternoon Walter came up; and then there were the stables to be visited, and various plans for the employment of eight blissful weeks to be concocted; after which came late dinner, to which—the occasion being so auspicious a one—the juveniles sat down with their elders. But what pleased Philip more than all this, more even than the news that his hopes were to be fulfilled, and that he was to go to Eton after Christmas, was the footing upon which he felt himself to stand with regard to those about him. He was no longer the little Italian waif, picked up nobody knew whence, and eyed from every quarter with curiosity and suspicion; he was a recognised member of the family, and one who was acknowledged to have brought credit upon it in the shape of those gilded volumes which were lying in a conspicuous place upon the drawing-room table.

Thus it was, in all respects, a day to be marked with a white stone; but, somehow or other, Margaret's spirits did not seem to be as high as they ought to have been under the circumstances; and Philip, who was an observant little person, was not slow to detect this deficiency. He noticed also that Captain Kenyon was not himself. That ordinarily quiet and taciturn gentleman was so talkative and so laboriously jovial that a far less shrewd listener than Master Marescalchi must have suspected that something was amiss. Taking one thing with another, and remarking that no direct interchange of words

took place between the head and the foot of the table, our young friend came to the conclusion that Captain Kenyon had been misbehaving himself in some way, and that Margaret was displeased with him; and this impression was confirmed by what took place subsequently in the drawing-room. Hugh began talking about Eton, and, mentioning as a curious circumstance that he himself had never seen the place, added that he would now have a pretext for running down there occasionally.

'Have you ever seen Oxford?' asked Margaret, looking up for an instant from her embroidery.

'Well, no; oddly enough, I never have. Why do you ask?'

'Only because your pretext will most likely have moved there before you come back.'

'Oh, I hope it will not be so bad as that,' answered Hugh, laughing in an uncomfortable, nervous sort of way.

'I thought,' said Mrs. Stanniforth, rising slowly, and gathering up her skeins and scissors and needles, 'that you told me you would not be in England again for another five or six years at least.'

And with that she walked to the other end of the room, and engaged one of her young brothers in a game of backgammon, disregarding Hugh's confused murmurs about getting leave, he hoped, and distance being nothing in these days, and more to the like effect. Whereupon the latter thrust his hands into his pockets, stretched his long legs out before him, and became lost in frowning meditation.

It was Margaret's custom to peep into Philip's room, before retiring to rest, for a last look at her boy, who was generally sound asleep at the hour of these visits. Upon this occasion, however, she found him sitting up in bed, and eager for conversation; and one of the first things he asked was—

'Meg, is Captain Kenyon going away?'

Margaret said yes; Captain Kenyon was going to India very soon.

'What for?' Philip inquired.

'He is sent there, my dear. Soldiers are sent to India sometimes.'

'Is India a long way off?'

'Yes; a long way. I dare say you won't see Captain Kenyon again until you are almost a man. Aren't you sorry?'

Philip did not feel that the prospect was one which affected him very greatly; but he expressed a proper amount of civil regret, and then went on with his inquiries.

'Why are soldiers sent to India, Meg? For a punishment?'

'Oh dear, no! many of them don't think it a punishment at all. There are tigers to be shot in India, and pigs to be stuck, and other excitements which are not to be had in this country. Of course those who go leave their friends behind them, which some might consider a drawback.'

'And are they obliged to go?'

'Well, I believe they can generally arrange to remain at home if they wish it.'

'Captain Kenyon doesn't wish it, then?'

'I suppose not. But we must not talk any more now; it is high time for you to lie down and go to sleep.'

So Margaret went away, leaving Philip still a victim to baffled curiosity. He perceived that Captain Kenyon's departure was arousing no small amount of resentment; but he did not clearly understand why that officer should not go and kill tigers, or be killed by them, if the current of his ambition set that way. If it had been a question of the Bishop's or of Mrs. Winnington's incurring such perils, that would of course have been another thing; but what, after all, was Captain Kenyon to Margaret? Only a friend—and not a very interesting friend either, in his (the speculator's) opinion. It will be seen that Philip was not too young to be jealous.

Poor Hugh was innocent enough of any desire to quit his native shores, and not all the tigers in Bengal would have tempted him away, had he felt at liberty to consult his own inclinations; but there were more considerations than one which weighed with him when his battery, somewhat unexpectedly, received orders to hold itself in readiness to proceed on foreign service. In the first place, he was a poor man, and could not well have afforded the expense of an exchange; secondly, he had a mother and sisters whom he had accustomed to look for occasional remittances from him, and to whose comforts the double pay of the Indian establishment might be expected to minister considerably; thirdly—and this, it must be confessed, was what he thought of most—he had convinced himself that it would be better for him to dwell no longer than was necessary in the same quarter of the globe as Margaret.

The first two of these reasons were such as, in an ordinary man, might have been held to be sufficient, not to say creditable; but those who choose habitually to study the convenience of others rather than their own must be prepared to pay the

penalty which such an imprudent rule of conduct entails. Hugh, having cheerfully served his fellow-creatures all his life long, had ceased, in the eyes of most of them, to be a free agent; and Margaret, for one, though she was not unreasonable enough to desire that he should sacrifice his career in order that she might have an adviser and confidant always at her elbow, yet thought that friendship demanded of him some expression of regret and some explanation of the causes that were leading him to abandon her at a time when she stood so much in need of support. When, therefore, he announced in a brisk, off-hand manner that he was about to sail for India, and might be absent for a matter of half-a-dozen years or so, she felt that she had every right to be hurt and offended; and so it was that she treated the delinquent with marked coldness, and made the sarcastic allusions above mentioned to tigers and pigs.

The next morning, Philip espied Hugh smoking his pipe pensively on the lawn before breakfast, and attacked him point-blank with—

'Captain Kenyon, why are you going to India?'

'Why am I going, my boy?' echoed Hugh, looking down at the inquisitive little face which was turned up to his. 'Well, I am going because it comes in the way of my duty to go, if you understand what that means.'

'But Meg said you could stay at home if you liked.'

'Did she say that?' exclaimed Hugh, in an altered voice; and for a moment Philip experienced the uncomfortable sensation of one who has trodden upon a sleeping lion's tail. But it presently appeared that Captain Kenyon was not going to be angry.

'Ah,' said he, 'ladies won't understand that a man can't always do as he likes. Don't you let them put any notion of that kind into your head, my young friend, or you'll come to grief one of these fine days. One of the first lessons that men and boys have to learn is that they will very seldom be able to do as they like, and the next, that they may as well grin and bear it.'

Hugh, however, was not allowed to beg the question in that way.

'But you can do as you like about going to India,' persisted his cross-examiner. 'Meg said so.'

'Perhaps neither you nor Margaret know much about that,' answered Hugh, good-humouredly. 'At all events, I am not going to be bullied by any of you; and you'll see me back

sooner than you want me, I have no doubt. That's enough said about me. What *you* have to do is to grow into a big boy as soon as you can, and try to be some comfort to—to—to —the person to whom you owe pretty well everything. You have made a good start; keep it up. And mind you, it isn't enough to get prizes, and be at the top of your class, and all that. Not that study isn't a fine thing in its way; still, it's not all that's wanted. You are sent to school, I take it, not only to learn Latin and Greek and a smattering of mathematics, but to learn to be a gentleman and a good fellow. At Eton you will fall in with companions of all ranks and fortunes, just as you will in the world later on, and the chances are that you will have as much pocket-money as any of them; but don't let that make you forget that you will have to earn your own bread some day. Never pretend that you are anything but what you really are; never shirk either your work or your play; and never say a word behind a fellow's back that you wouldn't dare say to his face. That isn't an impossible system to follow; though it's a hard one, I grant you. You stick to it, and you'll have your reward in due time.

In this strain Hugh went on, expounding his simple theory of ethics between the whiffs of his pipe, and the boy listened to him with about as much attention as boys usually vouchsafe to the wisdom of their elders. The speaker's words gained something in impressiveness, it is true, when it transpired that this was a valedictory address, and that Captain Kenyon proposed to leave for Aldershot within a few hours. He would not actually sail for some time to come; but the little leave that he could hope to obtain after this must, he explained, be spent with his own family, and it was unlikely that he would be able to visit Longbourne again. 'So you see,' he concluded, 'this will be my last opportunity of lecturing all you good folks and telling you your duty; and I am making the most of it.'

But, although Hugh could be fluent enough in the presence of this small member of the household, he became a changed man under the eye of its mistress, and his eloquence entirely deserted him when the time came for him to hold his farewell interview with her. They sat facing, but not looking at one another in the library, she stitching at her embroidery, and he pulling his moustache and studying the pattern of the carpet; and, like the sentimental couple in the ballad,

> They spoke of common things,
> But the tears were in their eyes.

At length Hugh could stand this absurd constraint no longer, and broke out with—'I hope you don't think I am going to India for my own amusement. The boy said something to me just now which—he told me you had said I need not go unless I liked.'

'I fancied,' said Margaret, 'that exchanges were not difficult to obtain. But I don't know why you should not wish to go.'

'Ah, that is not like you! that is not quite honestly said. You must know that it can be no pleasure to me to leave—all that I shall have to leave, and that I should not go, unless I had a good reason for doing so. I *have* a good reason—several good reasons.'

He broke off, and looked at her half apprehensively. He was undecided whether to hope that she would understand him or to hope that she would not. But she looked up with a pleasant smile, and an evident unconsciousness of any deeper meaning than his words seemed to imply.

'Dear old Hugh,' she said, 'I know you have reasons, and I suppose I can guess what some of them are. I ought to know, if anyone does, that your own pleasure is about the last thing that you ever think of; and I beg your pardon for having been so disagreeable to you But I confess that the way you spoke yesterday made me unhappy, and vexed me. I thought you seemed glad to go.'

'No,' said Hugh, in a low voice; 'I was not glad.'

'Of course you were not; and even if you had been, one has not so many friends in the world that one can afford to quarrel with the best of them.'

'Quarrel!' cried Hugh aghast. 'My dear Margaret!'

'Well, I won't say anything about quarrels; it takes two to make one, doesn't it? But I dare say you don't know what a loss you will be to me. It seems as if I must lose everyone I cared for.'

Hugh was perfectly well aware that if she had cared for him in the way that he wished her to do she would never have said that. 'You won't lose me, if I can help it,' he answered, cheerily; 'and you have the boy, remember. He will very soon take my place—and more than my place, I'm afraid. His sun is rising, and mine is setting; and that is quite as it should be. Only don't let him put me altogether out of your memory.'

From which it may be inferred that, if Philip was inclined to be jealous of Captain Kenyon, his sentiments were not far from being returned.

'I don't know why you should say that,' cried Margaret, with some warmth. 'Is one only to care for one person in the world? You are not the less my friend because I have found a son in Philip. If Jack were alive, you don't think, do you, that I should care less to see you and hear from you?'

'Yes, I do,' answered Hugh. 'Why, it stands to reason that you would.'

'Then you don't know the meaning of friendship, that's all.'

'Don't I?' said Hugh, meekly. And then she begged his pardon again, and they both laughed, and Margaret cried a little; and before much more could be said, the butler came in to announce that the dog-cart was at the door. One of them was not sorry to have his adieux cut short. He promised to write often; and they shook hands, saying that they would certainly meet again soon.

So they two parted; and did not meet again for many a long day.

CHAPTER V.

THE YOUNG GENERATION.

TEN years make up a very respectable slice to take out of any man's life. Ten years advance the restless world so far in its eternal task of waste and renewal, bring such a vast accumulation of announcements to the first column of the *Times*, and witness so much laughing and weeping, learning and forgetting, that they cannot but leave perceptible traces upon bodies which at best are only constructed to endure through six or seven of such periods. Yet when, after protracted wanderings, we revisit familiar scenes, it is seldom change so much as the lack of it, that astonishes us. The houses are where they were; the church steeple maintains its position, looking down upon the well-known tombstones, with but a few additions to their number; everywhere are evidences of the mortifying fact that summer and winter, seedtime and harvest, have succeeded one another quite in the usual fashion, in spite of our absence. It takes nothing less than an earthquake, a conflagration, or a deluge, to give us the shock which we had half looked forward to. In individuals, too, as in places, the work of a twelvemonth is often more destructive than that of a dozen. We return, after ten years of not more than ordinary vicissitude, to find our friends a little greyer perhaps, a little stouter, a little less active, but

otherwise scarcely altered. They are busied with the same employments as of yore; they are absorbed in the same petty cares and amusements; we recognise the old tricks of speech and gesture, the old virtues and failings, and too often, alas! the old jokes. The only startling sensation we are likely to experience is the discovery that those whom we left in the nursery have in some unaccountable manner been replaced by young men and women. The reader must now be asked to renew acquaintance, after a supposed interval of ten years, with the personages parted from at the end of the last chapter; some of whom, as will be seen, have grown almost out of recognition in that lapse of time, while others have remained as nearly stationary as the laws of nature will permit, and two have quietly slipped off the stage altogether, and have already been all but forgotten by the survivors.

To Margaret this decade has given what, in the common course of things, it could hardly fail to do—a less impatient acquiescence in her lot as a rich woman to whom money is no blessing and a lonely woman who is seldom allowed to be alone; a clear understanding of the uses and drawbacks of wealth; and, in addition to these advantages, a considerable increase of employment for body and mind in the shape of certain responsibilities which shall be more fully dwelt upon by-and-by. Upon Hugh Kenyon, earning distinction, unaccompanied by notoriety, in desultory frontier warfare, and groaning over uncongenial office work as holder of a staff appointment in the sweltering heat of Madras, it has bestowed a fine crop of grey hairs, a heartfelt detestation of the East, and a brevet-colonelcy. To Mrs. Winnington it has brought a change of circumstances which, anticipated and discounted as it might have been by so far-seeing a lady, has not the less contributed towards souring a temper which was never of the sweetest. The truth is that, after the poor old Bishop of Crayminster's death and burial, his savings were found to fall far short of the amount which he had always led his wife to imagine that she might trust to inheriting; and Mr. Brune declared that, in the first agony of so cruel an aggravation of her bereavement, the widow was for countermanding that handsome marble effigy which adorns the north transept of the cathedral and keeps the virtues of Bishop Winnington before the eyes of a too forgetful public. Possibly, however, it was not Mrs. Winnington who defrayed the cost of the monument.

When these lamentable events occurred, Mr. Brune had

himself been for some time a widower. The fragile mistress of Broom Leas shivered out of the world one bitter January morning, and was regretted as much as, and missed perhaps rather more than, she deserved. Her place was supplied, so far as a mother's place can be supplied, by Margaret, who took almost entire charge of little Nellie, saw that the boys had buttons on their shirts and jackets on their backs, and in numberless other ways proved herself of invaluable service to a distressed elderly gentleman whose notions on the subject of household economy were of a most elementary kind.

That Mrs. Winnington and her only unmarried daughter Edith should take up their abode for a time with Mrs. Stanniforth, after circumstances obliged them to vacate the Palace, was but natural and proper. It was only a temporary arrangement, Mrs. Winnington was careful to explain. She herself disapproved on principle of joint establishments; and, although she was willing so far to comply with dear Margaret's wishes as to remain where she was until a suitable home could be found for her elsewhere, it must be clearly understood that she could never consent to inhabit Longbourne upon any other footing than that of a guest. Nevertheless, time went on, and, somehow or other, the suitable home could not be discovered. Sometimes Mrs. Winnington took lodgings in London for a month or so, sometimes she allowed herself a brief period of rest and relaxation at the sea-side, and her interviews with house-agents were constant; but nothing came of it all; and Mrs. Prosser, the housekeeper, respectfully begged to be informed whether she was expected to take her orders from visitors; because, in that case, she should be wishful to give up the situation, not having been accustomed to serve two mistresses.

Perhaps Mrs. Prosser was not the only person who would fain have sped the parting guest; for in ten years' time there had sprung up a generation of young people, whose views were clear and decided, as the views of young people generally are, and who did not hesitate to give expression to them among themselves. It is with this younger generation that we shall henceforth principally have to deal; and probably the best day on which to bring them under the reader's notice will be that of the Oxford and Cambridge cricket match, a day memorable on various grounds—memorable in the annals of cricket as having witnessed the defeat of Cambridge in a single innings; memorable to the Brunes and Stanniforths as being the crown and

finish of their respective representatives' Oxford's career; memorable, above all, as the day on which Walter carried out his bat, after having put together a score of 182, without giving a single chance from beginning to end.

Of the many thousands who strolled round and round Lord's ground during the two days of the match, not a few stood still to stare at a remarkably pretty girl, who, perched upon the box of a carriage, with her eyes fixed intently upon the players, was evidently unconscious of the admiration which she was exciting. A very small proportion of them—one in a thousand, perhaps—knew her name; for Miss Brune's visits to London were few and far between, and her acquaintance with fashionable society was confined to such members of it as dwelt within the limits of her own county. Nor, indeed, had she any present desire to enlarge that acquaintance, or to scrutinise the throng of celebrities and beauties collected in her neighbourhood, having little in common with the ladies who frequent Lord's rather with a view to be seen than to see. Everything at its proper time. Miss Brune had no objection to the pleasures of social intercourse as obtainable at the half-dozen or so of balls to which she was taken in the course of the year, or at the garden-parties which were the form of entertainment most in favour round Crayminster; but she went to Lord's to look at cricket, and it is certain that she was as capable a judge of the game as any man in the Pavilion. It was not for nothing that she had had her shins bruised and her finger-nails cracked by the bowling of a succession of brothers, all of whom had subsequently achieved renown on better-known fields than that of Broom Leas; and, although long skirts and conventional prejudices forbade her any longer to handle the bat and ball on her own account, there were few of the great annual contests in which she did not take a vicarious part. This particular University match—the last in which Walter was to figure—had occupied all her thoughts for weeks beforehand, and during the earlier part of it she had sat motionless upon her perch, her right hand supporting her chin and her left holding up her parasol, as inattentive to the ceaseless babble of her younger brothers as she had been unconscious of the flattering remarks to which her small regular features, her abundant dark hair, and her blue eyes were giving rise among the ranks of the bystanders.

But now the first day was past and gone, the morning of the second was wearing away; Cambridge, having followed their

innings, were making a bad fight of it; the result of the game was a foregone conclusion, and Miss Brune was able to bestow some notice upon the outer world, and to nod in a friendly way to a strikingly handsome and well-dressed young man, who lounged up to the side of the carriage and took off his hat to her.

'Rather poor fun,' he remarked, with a backward jerk of his head towards the field.

'Yes; isn't it horrid? I do hate a follow-on.'

'It is better than a draw, though, I suppose.'

'Oh, of course; but it's disappointing all the same. I wanted to see Walter go in again.'

'How inconsiderate of you to wish for such a thing on a blazing hot day like this! If I were Walter, I should be very well satisfied to rest upon my laurels.'

'Ah, but you don't care about cricket,' said Miss Brune, looking down pityingly upon her interlocutor, who had drawn a mat over the top of the wheel to protect his coat-sleeves, and was resting his elbows upon it, while he contemplated her with a sort of lazy complacency and approbation.

'I beg your pardon; I like cricket very well—in a mild way. I don't think it quite the only thing in the world worth living for, I confess.'

'No more does Walter,' retorted Miss Brune, with quick resentment.

'Who said he did? Don't be so peppery, Nell! Perhaps I wasn't thinking of Walter at all.'

'You meant me, then, I suppose. Now, Philip, if you are going to say disagreeable things, you had better take yourself off.'

'I shall do nothing of the sort,' answered the other, climbing deliberately into the carriage, which was empty at that moment, and kneeling upon the seat, so that his face was close to Miss Brune's elbow. 'I shall stay as long as I please, and say as many disagreeable things as I like.'

'You cannot force me to listen to you, at all events,' cried the girl, resolutely turning her back upon him.

'Very well; I'll endeavour to be amiable. I think cricket a glorious national pastime; and if I could play as well as Walter I should think it more glorious still. Will that satisfy you? You'll allow that it isn't a game for a bad player.'

'You could play well enough, if you chose to take the trouble,' answered Nellie, seriously; 'it's no use attempting to do anything without practice. But, I suppose,' she added pre-

sently, 'you like private theatricals and dancing and flirtation, and all that sort of amusement better.'

'Who's saying disagreeable things now? I never knew anybody so quarrelsome as you are. One would have thought that you would have been on your good behaviour for the first two or three days after meeting an old friend whom you haven't seen for so many months—but no! However, I don't mean to quarrel with you. In the first place, it is too hot; in the second place, we have the whole summer before us; and in the third place, public wrangling is unseemly.'

Nellie turned her dark blue eyes upon the speaker with a look of some alarm and contrition. 'I didn't mean to be disagreeable really, Philip,' she said.

'I forgive you,' replied the other, gravely. 'Try not to do it again, that's all. Now tell me all the Longbourne news. Between ourselves, I am sick of Oxford and sick of private theatricals; and, as for dancing and flirtation, I should imagine you were more proficient in those arts than I can pretend to be.'

But Miss Brune was not listening to him. 'Oh, what was that?' she exclaimed. 'Eight wickets down! How did he get out? I didn't see it at all, did you? This comes of talking, instead of looking at the game.'

'Oh, bowled, or caught, or run out, or something; *I* don't know. Anyhow, there's an end of him; and there will be an end of the whole business presently. Tell me about Longbourne!'

'There is no Longbourne news to tell. Nothing ever happens in our part of the world, you know; at least, nothing that you would care to hear about. Mrs. Stanniforth is looking tired and ill, I think. I wanted her to come up with us and see the match; but she said she could hardly manage it. Of course, if you had been in the eleven, it would have been another thing. How glad she will be to have you back again!'

'Dear old Meg! Any prospect of Mrs. Winnington's finding a house?'

Nellie shook her head and sighed. 'Papa says the only chance of getting rid of her would be for Mrs. Stanniforth to let Longbourne, and go away until she was settled somewhere. But, unfortunately, Mrs. Stanniforth doesn't want to get rid of her.'

'I wonder now,' said Philip, musingly, 'whether somebody couldn't be found to marry Mrs. Winnington?'

'Oh, I'm afraid not. Oh no; I should think there could not be the faintest shadow of a hope of that.'

'Well, one never can tell; a fool is born every hour. Do you know that Colonel Kenyon is expected home from India?'

'Yes; Mrs. Stanniforth told me. You are not thinking of him as a husband for Mrs. Winnington, are you?'

'No; hardly. Though, now you mention it, I don't know that he mightn't do. Perhaps it wouldn't be an altogether unsuitable match. He must be some years younger than the dear old lady, certainly; but I should imagine him the sort of man who would look about twice his age, whereas our beloved Winnington is still quite blooming by candlelight; and, at all events, they would have one point of resemblance, they are both bores.'

'Why do you think Colonel Kenyon a bore? Mrs. Stanniforth says he is one of the best men that ever lived.'

'You give me question and answer in the same breath. However, I admit that I am prejudiced. I dare say he isn't a bad sort of old fogey, when you know him. I don't remember much about him myself; only I can answer for the fact that he writes uncommonly long-winded letters, and then he has been held up before me all my life as a bright example. One can't feel very amiably towards people of that stamp. He is such a very, very white sheep, that I, who have a tuft or two of black on my fleece, have some difficulty in recognising him as a brother. Speaking honestly now, don't you think that, if it were literally true that the King could do no wrong, it would be about time to cut off the King's head, and despatch him into a world where he could feel himself more at home than in this one?'

But Nellie was spared the necessity of making any reply, for at this juncture one of the players hit the ball well up into the air, and the next moment a roar ran round the ground, to which Philip contributed his share by singing out, 'Well caught!'

'Well caught!' echoed Miss Brune, rather contemptuously; 'why, my dear Philip, how could he help himself! He might have caught it in his mouth.'

'Perhaps so; but I never saw the catch yet that did not fill me with admiration and amazement. If I had been in that man's place, the ball would inevitably have slipped through my fingers, and you would be inwardly joining in the hooting at this moment. I tremble when I think of the number of times that I shall be disgraced in your eyes before the autumn.'

'I don't believe you will play in a single match, unless Walter absolutely drags you on to the ground,' said Nellie.

And then Mr. Brune came up, followed by a small phalanx of young sons, and Philip descended from the carriage, and presently sauntered away.

He met with many greetings, and had to remove his glossy hat over and over again, as he made his way through the crowd; for Mr. Marescalchi was tolerably well known in London as one of the best amateur actors of the day, and his pleasant address had recommended him to the favour of a few great ladies, and consequently to that of numerous others who aspired to be great. At Oxford he had been in a good set; that is to say, that he had associated principally with youths of noble birth or noble fortunes; and as he had adapted himself to their manners and customs, had spent money freely and had always been cheery and in good spirits, he had ended by acquiring a popularity extending beyond University circles. Through the medium of his college acquaintances he had made his way into houses the portals of which Mrs. Winnington, for instance, with all her superior claims to recognition, had never succeeded in forcing; hence some severe observations about snobs and toadies were occasionally heard in the vicinity of Longbourne. Mrs. Winnington did not love this upstart; but society at large, which naturally did not care a pin whether he were an upstart or no, liked him very well, and petted him as much as his heart could desire.

He threaded his way among the carriage-wheels and luncheon-baskets and bright-coloured parasols and attendant flunkeys, basking in the moral and material sunshine, smiled upon by the world, and smiling back in return—a faultlessly appointed little figure, from the bouquet in his button-hole to the tips of his shiny boots; and doubtless many of those who watched his progress thought him much to be envied. There is a certain combination of youth, health, prosperity, good looks, and fine clothes upon which even the sternest philosopher can hardly help casting just one longing, lingering look. When the match and the shouting were over, and the released spectators were rushing towards the gates, jostling one another in accordance with the custom of all assemblages after a show, Mr. Marescalchi loitered on the ground, and let the stream pass by. He himself was seldom in a hurry, and disliked being pushed about and elbowed. And while, half-sitting upon his stick, he surveyed with placid compassion the foolish people who were making themselves so unnecessarily hot, a tall, broad-shouldered young man came striding across the grass behind him, and clapped him on the shoulder, with—

'Hullo, Philip! you're the very fellow I wanted to see. What train are you going down by?'

Marescalchi turned round, rubbed his shoulder, and looked up reproachfully at the new-comer. 'How you made me jump!' he exclaimed.

The other burst into a great laugh. 'Made you jump, indeed! one would think you were an old woman. This comes of ruining your nerves by smoking all day and sitting up all night. Perhaps you thought I was going to serve a writ upon you, though?' he added, in a more sober tone.

'My dear, good fellow, don't talk about such horrid things! So you never got a second innings, after all. Nellie was quite plaintive over it, and snubbed me savagely because I suggested that the weather was hardly suitable for athletics.'

'What a lazy little beggar you are! Well, you haven't answered my question yet. Are you going down by the 3.45 or the 6.20? Nellie and the others have gone off to look at the pictures, so I don't suppose we shall catch the express.'

Marescalchi had put a cigarette between his lips, and was stooping down to scrape a match upon the sole of his boot. 'I don't think I can manage to get down to Longbourne this evening,' he said; 'I've got a lot of things to do in town.'

'O bosh!' returned his friend; 'what can you want to do in London at this time of the year? You had much better come down with us.' He added, after a momentary hesitation, 'It'll be an awful sell for Mrs. Stanniforth if you don't turn up.'

Walter Brune the man was an enlarged duplicate of Walter the boy. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, fresh-complexioned, he bore no trace of resemblance to the Brunes, who were a small, dark, and wiry race. 'Walter is a Boulger from crown to heel,' his father used to say, 'and if I were not afraid of his giving me a thrashing, I'd disown him.' Walter, indeed, could have thrashed most men. He was not handsome, except in so far as he had the beauty of glowing health and a splendid physique; but his face was the embodiment of honesty and good humour, and he was certainly pleasant to look at.

Marescalchi, for reasons of his own, did not look at him now, but answered in an off-hand way: 'Oh, I shall turn up all right some time to-morrow. No; not to-morrow, by-the-by, but next day. I remember now that I promised to dine with Salford to-morrow.'

Walter looked dissatisfied. 'Throw him over, then,' he said,

curtly. 'He won't miss you, I'll be bound; and Mrs. Stanniforth will.'

'My dear Walter,' began Marescalchi, still smiling, but with eyebrows slightly raised, 'don't you think——?'

'Don't I think I had better mind my own business, eh? No; I don't. After dry-nursing you for so many years, I have a right to lecture you occasionally; and you can't say I claim it very often nowadays. I have never said a word against any other of your great swell friends—have I?—though I don't think you have got much good from some of them; but I do wish you would drop that fellow Salford. He's as thorough a blackguard as ever stepped.'

'Dear, dear! what has he been doing?' asked Philip, with an air of innocent wonder.

'You know well enough. For one thing, he is never quite sober, and I hate a sot. But that's not the worst of him. I don't think I'm particularly straitlaced, but there are some things that I can't get over. I have never seen Salford without longing to break his neck since that poor little girl from the pastrycook's disappeared. She was a silly little giggling thing; but there wasn't a bit of harm in her till you fellows chose to amuse yourselves by turning her empty head; and now she is irretrievably ruined, poor wretch! If you or I had done such a thing, we should have been called infernal scoundrels; but Salford is a marquis; so he's a fine fellow, and Miss Fanny is a deuced lucky girl. That's the way you look at it, isn't it?'

'There is one thing,' remarked Philip, imperturbably, 'that I have always noticed about people who go twice to church on Sunday; they get so puffed up that they can't believe in their neighbours' possessing a comparative degree of virtue. It's a proud boast, I know, to be able to sit out two sermons in a week; I couldn't do it myself, and I look with awe and reverence upon those who can; but it doesn't exactly confer upon you a monopoly of righteousness. Where's your Christian charity, my dear Walter? How do you know that Salford was the culprit? For anything he has ever said to me about it, he may be as innocent of spiriting Fanny away as I am myself. I wish the man, whoever he was, could have made it convenient to wait a few months, I know; for her successor was ugly enough to frighten one out of the shop.'

'I didn't think Salford made much of a secret of it,' said Walter. 'At all events, everybody put it down to him.'

'And do you believe what everybody says?'

'If you ask me, I do in the present instance. And I do not believe in Salford's possessing even what you call a comparative degree of virtue. And here he comes, blind drunk, as usual. Well; I shall be off.'

But Lord Salford had joined the two friends before Walter could effect his escape, and was offering civil congratulations to the latter, who received him as a badger receives a terrier. 'Never saw you in such form before, Brune; you made their bowling look pretty foolish. That's what I call real cricket, you know.'

'*Do* you?'

'I do, upon my word—first class. I mean to say, it was the *game* you know.'

Walter growled out something about hoping he always played the game.

'Oh Lord, yes, my dear fellow, I know you do; but everybody gets careless and makes mistakes sometimes—everybody, except you, that is. You never make mistakes, by George!'

Lord Salford was certainly not blind drunk, nor perhaps was he what a policeman would have called drunk at all; but it would be saying too much to assert that he had not been drunk the night before, and it is probable that he had been refreshing himself with liberal draughts of brandy and soda in the course of the morning. He was a red young man—red as to his hair, his complexion, his eyes, and his hands; and he was so singularly ugly that it must have required all the added halo of his marquisate to touch the heart of any pastrycook's assistant. As he stood talking, with his thumbs in his trousers' pockets, and his stick tucked under his arm, Walter looked him slowly all over, from head to foot, with an undisguised contempt which he could hardly have failed to notice, if he had been at all an observant person. But he was not very observant. He went on, in blissful unconsciousness of these withering glances:—

'Well, Marescalchi, what's going to become of you now? Going down in the country? Devilish slow work down in the country at this time of the year. I'm off to Norway to-morrow morning. Fishing, fresh air, early hours—all that sort of thing, you know. Doctor says I must go easy for a bit.'

Oddly enough, it was not Philip, but Walter who looked confused by this embarrassing announcement. That artless giant turned as red as Lord Salford himself, fidgeted, cast his eyes down, and altogether presented much more the appearance

of a detected liar than of one who has detected his neighbour in a lie. Marescalchi's calm was not in the least disturbed.

'*Going to Norway, are you?*' said he; 'I'm very glad you mentioned it. When you came up, I was just telling Brune that I was going to dine with you to-morrow evening; and I should certainly have gone to your club at eight o'clock, if I hadn't happened to meet you now. Are you quite certain you didn't ask me?'

Lord Salford stared. 'No, I ain't quite certain,' he answered, 'I don't remember anything about it; but I wouldn't take my oath I didn't ask you. Beg your pardon if I did, I'm sure.

'Oh, never mind,' said Philip, magnanimously; 'I dare say it was my mistake: I'm always getting my engagements all wrong.' And when Lord Salford had passed on, he added: 'I believe he did ask me all the same; but perhaps I haven't lost much. After all, Walter, I think you're not far wrong about him; he *is* a drunken sort of sweep.'

'Anyhow,' remarked Walter, who had recovered his cheerfulness, 'you have not got to dine with him now; so you may as well come home with me.'

But Philip explained that he really couldn't do that. Upon further reflection, he felt sure that he had some engagement or other for the following evening. If it wasn't Salford, it must have been somebody else who had asked him to dinner. He couldn't speak with any certainty upon the point until he should have been to his hotel and glanced over his notes.

'Well, then, go back to your hotel,' persisted Walter, 'and if you find that you are free, you will have plenty of time to pack up and join us at the station.'

Philip said, 'All right, old man;' and so Walter went away, knowing full well that he would search the platform in vain for his friend's figure, when the hour of departure arrived.

As soon as he was quite out of sight, Philip heaved a sigh of relief and walked off, humming an air from an opera.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WANDERER'S RETURN.

THAT Colonel Kenyon should make for Longbourne immediately after landing upon his native shores was quite natural and proper. Mrs. Winnington conceded as much, and Mrs. Win-

nington was admitted to be an authority upon matters of propriety. 'I think, my dear,' said she, 'that you ought to have Hugh here for a time when he comes back. Now that his mother is dead, he has no home of his own to go to, and perhaps you owe it to him to show him a little civility. You might send a note to Portsmouth to await his arrival, inviting him to come and stay with you for ten days or a fortnight. It would be as well just to mention the dates, because people who have been in India get such very queer notions of hospitality, and poor dear Hugh was always a little dense about knowing when to take himself off. I remember, in days gone by, when he used to call upon us at the Palace, how much help he required to get out of the room. Upon one occasion I actually had to pick up his hat and umbrella, and thrust them into his hand. Quite in a friendly way, you know, making a sort of joke of it; but if I had not done something of the kind he would never have moved at all. Yes; I think you should let him find an invitation waiting for him. He would feel it as a very kind piece of attention, I am sure.'

And Margaret did not consider herself called upon to state that such an invitation, minus the time-limit, as her mother described, had been written and despatched to Madras some months before.

Various circumstances had prevented Colonel Kenyon from breaking his long spell of foreign service by a return to England on leave. The battery of horse artillery to which he had been attached had been ordered home long ago, directly after the first of the little wars in which he had been engaged; but he had not accompanied it, as at that time he had had an opportunity of seeing some further service. Then had come in quick succession the marriage of his two sisters and the death of his mother, entailing a disruption of all direct home-ties; and, although when the fighting was over, and he had gained a brevet-colonelcy, a C.B., and a bullet in his left shoulder as his share in the results of the same, he might have got away for a time from a country that he hated, he chose rather, upon mature consideration, to accept the offer of a well-paid staff appointment, to serve out his five years, and then to turn his back upon India for good and all. To lay by money and provide himself with something like a competency was the chief object of his life; for he had ever before him a distant, bright ideal, towards the realisation of which this prosaic achievement was a small, yet absolutely necessary, step. A journey from

Madras to London and back is not to be performed without considerable outlay; therefore he had stoutly resisted his own longings and Margaret's frequent entreaties, and had patiently bided his time, comforting himself in moments of depression with an altogether illogical conviction that so much labour and self-denial must surely obtain their reward at last.

A more ardent lover might perhaps have acted differently, but a more ardent lover might have been less consistently faithful. Fidelity to a dream would appear to be about the toughest sort of fidelity of which we mortals are capable; and, according to enlightened students of human nature, all love, in the romantic acceptation of the term, partakes of the character of dreams. Nothing, say they, is so inevitably certain to dispel its illusions as daily intercourse with the adored creature; and in those rare cases in which men have remained true to their first love for a matter of ten years or more, it is almost invariably absence that has kept them so. Be that as it may, Hugh Kenyon was as much in love with Margaret Stanniforth all through his Indian career as he had been at the beginning of it. His love, it is true, was of a sober kind, as became a grey-headed man whose acquaintance had been chiefly with the seamy side of life; but it may have been to that very attribute that it owed its constancy. For the rest, nobody knew better than he did that his vision of happiness rested upon no more solid foundation than strength of will and a vague faith in poetical justice. Margaret's long letters, in which the cares and interests of her daily life were fully treated of, and most of the episodes of Philip Marescalchi's school and college career were duly set forth, had convinced him that time had passed a healing hand over her wounds; and he no longer feared, as he had once done, that in asking her to be his wife he might seem to outrage the memory of her husband and his friend. This was a comfort, so far as it went, but it did not go very far. He perceived that, if she was less forlorn, she stood in the less need of a protector; nor could he disguise from himself that his prediction was in course of fulfilment, and that Marescalchi already stood, to some extent, in the position which he had once occupied.

All this being so, it is scarcely to be wondered at that Colonel Kenyon should have made few new friends during the lengthy period of his exile, nor that he should have passed for a rather dull and morose fellow in the Madras Presidency. He possessed a photograph of Margaret, taken years before by the one Crayminster photographer, which, in the absence of its original,

served him as companion and friend. This work of art represented a simpering girl of sixteen, standing beside a top-heavy table, and dragging a wreath of paper flowers out of a leather-work basket. It did not even remotely resemble Margaret Stanniforth; but its owner considered it, upon the whole, a very satisfactory likeness—not complimentary, to be sure, still quite pleasing. It accompanied him through all his campaigns, it was gazed at with religious fervour every morning and evening, and Hugh never sat down to indite one of his voluminous epistles to Longbourne without propping it up on the desk before him to lend inspiration to his ideas. Sometimes he even stopped writing to talk to it for a few minutes, for the wisest and most sober of men will do silly things when nobody is looking on.

When at length the time came for our love-lorn warrior to exchange letters for speech, and doubt for certainty, he was by no means so overjoyed as he had expected to be. In his patient, matter-of-course sort of way, he had been rather unhappy for ten years; but his condition had not been so bad but that it might easily become worse, and at forty-five a man takes such possibilities into consideration. Perhaps he feared his fate too much: it cannot be said that his deserts were small. He did not rush home overland—there being really no need for hurry—but economically took passage in a troopship, and in due time disembarked at Portsmouth, accompanied by a few comrades in arms who, like himself, had been away long enough to look for no very enthusiastic welcome on their return to the mother-country.

Colonel Kenyon was so far more fortunate than they that he found at his club in London a very kind and cordial note, informing him that his Longbourne friends were anxiously expecting his arrival. Having despatched a postcard in answer to this, he took his ticket, on the following afternoon, for Crayminster, where a further and a wholly unanticipated compliment awaited him. For the first thing that he saw, when the train entered the station, was a tall lady, dressed all in black, who was eagerly scanning the carriages as they passed her, as if in search of some one whom she could not discover, and whose features and figure he would have recognised among a thousand.

Hugh's heart came up into his mouth. He had never supposed that Margaret would think of coming down to Crayminster to meet him, and her having done so filled him with

an absurd delight and elation. When her eyes rested upon him for a second, and then passed on, he was not hurt. 'No wonder she doesn't know my yellow cheeks and grey hair,' he thought to himself. Her own hair, as he noticed, in that momentary glimpse, had a streak of silver in it here and there; but her face—that pleasant, kindly face, which was to him the most beautiful the world could show—was unaltered, or had altered only for the better. She had a bright colour, and had the appearance of being in good health and good spirits; and he could not help being a little glad to see that her widow's cap had disappeared, though she still wore mourning. All these details he took in at one glance, and then the train glided on, and he lost sight of her. But, before it came to a standstill, Colonel Kenyon's head was thrust out of the window, his right hand was fumbling for the door-handle, and he was waving a greeting with his left, while he called out cheerily, 'This is really too good of you.'

The next instant he was thanking his stars that Mrs. Stanniforth's back had been turned towards him, and that she had neither seen his signals nor heard his joyous hail. For lo and behold! a very good-looking young man had jumped down on to the platform and was embracing her publicly, in total disregard of the customs of a self-restrained nation, and Hugh heard her cry, 'At last! I am so glad! I was afraid you were not coming after all.'

Colonel Kenyon collected his coats and umbrellas with the saddened and humiliated feelings of a man who has answered when he has not been spoken to. Fain would he have sneaked out of the station without making himself known; but this was hardly practicable, so he advanced, putting as good a face upon things as he could assume; and as soon as Margaret caught sight of him she knew him, and bade him welcome with a warmth which left nothing to be desired.

'Oh, Hugh!' she exclaimed, holding out both hands; and with that brief ejaculation her hearer was satisfied, understanding by it all that he was intended to do. He himself could find no more striking rejoinder than, 'Here I am, you see.'

'Yes; but why did you not tell us that you were coming by this train? You only said you would be down in time for dinner, and I was just thinking of asking Philip to wait in the town, so as to meet you. I needn't introduce you to Philip, need I?'

Colonel Kenyon intimated that no such introduction was necessary; and, as the two men shook hands, each inwardly passed a hasty judgment upon the other. Colonel Kenyon set Philip down as a swaggering young puppy; and Marescalchi said to himself that the newcomer was a solemn old bore, who looked as if he would be certain to make himself obnoxious in one way or another before very long. Of course, however, they smiled upon one another amicably, and said what the occasion appeared to call for; the younger man, who was the more at his ease, showing to greater advantage than the elder in this interchange of civilities. Marescalchi, indeed, prided himself upon always knowing the proper thing to say and do, and presently he gave evidence of his nice perception by a truly magnanimous offer.

'You two will have lots to talk about,' he remarked, when they had passed out of the station, and were standing beside the open carriage which was waiting for them. 'You had better drive up together, and I'll walk.'

'But it is such a long walk, Philip, and it is so hot,' said Margaret, irresolutely.

'Never mind,' answered Philip, with a rather plaintive look at the long stretch of sunny landscape that lay before him.

And then a bright idea occurred to Margaret. 'Suppose *we* were to walk?' she suggested to Hugh. 'We might go across the fields, you know, and it would be quite like old times. Would it be too much for you?'

Hugh said he should enjoy the walk of all things, and it certainly would not be too much for him. 'But will not you be tired yourself?' he asked. 'You said something about the heat just now, and it is a good three miles, as I well remember.'

'You must have forgotten other things if you think I am afraid of a three-mile walk. I like walking much better than driving; and, besides, I mean to go very slowly, so as to have as long a time as possible to talk to you in.'

Hugh could say no more; and the arrangement evidently met the views of Mr. Marescalchi, who got into the carriage without more ado, and was speedily driven away, leaning back luxuriously, and blowing a cloud from the cigarette which he had just lighted.

The two friends who were thus left to themselves had, no doubt, a great deal to say to one another; but they experienced the common difficulty of friends who have been long separated in not knowing exactly where to begin. During the first

quarter of a mile of their walk, which led them across pasture-land and through hop-gardens, little passed between them save questions and answers referring to the productiveness of the soil and the changes which time had wrought in the ownership thereof, occasional allusions to bygone years, and comparisons between the climate of England and that of India. Mrs. Stanniforth led the way, and did most of the talking. Hugh was contented to listen, to steal furtive glances at his companion while she walked beside him, and to study her full-length figure when, as sometimes happened, the narrowness of the path forced them to advance in single file. But when they reached a certain stile, beyond which stretched sloping fields of oats and barley, Mrs. Stanniforth, instead of getting over it, wheeled round, and, resting her elbows upon its topmost bar, attacked Hugh pointblank with :—

'Well; what do you think of him?'

There was no need to particularise the individual to whom her question referred. Hugh laughed and said, 'I think he has a very pretty suit of clothes on, and his hair is nicely brushed, and his moustache promises well. Also, I am glad to observe that he does not suffer from shyness, and that he pronounces the English language after the most fashionable style.'

Margaret looked a little annoyed. 'You know that is not what I mean,' she said.

'What do you want me to say? I only saw the young man for five minutes, and, considering that during those five minutes I was a great deal more anxious to examine you than him, I think I made a pretty good use of my opportunities. It seemed to me that I noticed all about him that there was to notice.'

This was so undeniably true that Margaret was silenced for a few minutes. Presently, however, she felt constrained to add, 'Some people attach a good deal of importance to first impressions. You don't, I dare say, because you are so sensible; still, I suppose you do have them.'

'I seldom take to strangers,' answered Hugh, evasively.

'Ah! I know what you think; you think him conceited. Well, perhaps, he may be a little conceited, but what of that? Almost all young men are so, and it soon wears off. And Philip has—I won't say more reason, but certainly more excuse—for being conceited than most of them. You have no idea how he is run after. I wrote to you, you know, about his wonderful acting, and the quantity of engagements that he always has in consequence; and latterly his acquaintance seems

to have grown larger. He has only just managed to escape from London, though he wanted very much to come down on the afternoon of the match. He has declined I don't know how many invitations for the next two months. It would not be very surprising if all that attention had turned his head just a little bit, would it?'

Hugh admitted that such a result was only what might be expected.

'But it hasn't done so really; to me he is just the same as he always was. You won't allow yourself to be prejudiced against poor Philip, will you, Hugh? I can't tell you what a disappointment it will be to me if you do not like him. He has had to fight against so much prejudice; and I sometimes think that, with the exception of myself and Walter Brune, he has no real friends in the world.'

'I thought you said he was so popular.'

'So he is; but popularity of that kind is a poor substitute for the family affection which other young men have to fall back upon; and, although you might not suppose it until you knew him well, Philip is very affectionate and very sensitive. I don't think I should ever have cared for him so much as I do if all my friends had not set their faces against him so in the beginning. He is my ugly duckling,' she added with a smile.

'Oh, I don't think you could call him ugly!' said Hugh, generously. The truth is that esteem was the measure of Colonel Kenyon's notion of comeliness. He honestly believed all the persons whom he was fond of to be well-looking, and could never be brought to acknowledge that there was anything to admire in those whom he disliked.

Margaret laughed. 'No,' she said; 'his worst enemies could hardly bring that accusation against him. He isn't an ugly duckling any more now; he is a full-grown swan, and I am not afraid of any one's failing to do justice to his plumage. But after all, as good-natured people used to say to me in the days when I was a lanky girl and painfully conscious of my lankiness, beauty is only skin-deep.'

'Oh dear, yes! what does it signify whether a man's nose is straight or crooked? So Philip has made up his mind to be called to the bar, has he?'

'Yes: he is eating his dinners.'

'And working?'

'I believe so. At least he is a pupil in a barrister's cham-

bers; of course he could not do much in that way while he was at Oxford. Shall we walk on?'

They passed upwards, brushing their way against the whispering barley that clothed the hill-side. It was a lovely summer afternoon; shadows of light clouds were creeping over the woods; the pleasant English landscape was at its best. In the universal greenness, in the softness of the atmosphere, in the hazy blue distances, there was infinite refreshment for eyes that had ached under a tropical sun and had grown weary of gazing upon palms, and rice-fields, and parched yellow plains. Hugh soon ceased to think about Marescalchi and his prospects—a subject with which his correspondence for the past few years had dealt pretty exhaustively—and began building castles in the air on his own account. But his companion's thoughts, it appeared, were still running in the same channel. On the edge of the woods which bounded the Longbourne estate she halted again, and said abruptly:—

'Don't you think it is much the best and wisest plan to let a young man have perfect liberty of action?'

Hugh considered for a moment, as his habit was, before replying, 'Well; if I had a son of my own, I think I should be inclined to see what use he was likely to make of his liberty before I quite gave it up to him.'

'Yes, in theory that is all very well; but practically there are difficulties in the way of setting limits, especially for a woman. I doubt whether it would be wise to tie your son to your apron-string, if you could; but, as a matter of fact, you can't. Supposing you do establish a sort of surveillance over him, and make him understand that he must never absent himself for two or three days without some excuse, and ask him questions about where he has been and what he has been doing—what is the good? You only make him dislike you, and he takes his own way all the same.'

Hugh said there was something in that certainly. 'Has any one been advising you to establish a surveillance over Philip?' he asked.

'Oh, I am always being inundated with good advice; that is the inevitable fate of a lone, lorn woman,' she answered laughing, and walked on into the wood.

'What a treat it is to see oaks and beeches again!' Hugh exclaimed. 'Dear old country! I should like to go upon half-pay, and buy a cottage near Crayminster, and end my days there.'

'Oh, how I wish you would! Only of course you would hate it before a year was over. I have missed you so dreadfully, Hugh. Now that I have got you again, I intend to keep you for a long, long time. You do owe me a proper visit, don't you?'

'I'll stay as long as you'll keep me,' answered Hugh, smiling; 'and look here, Margaret, don't you let yourself be worried about Philip. We'll make a man of him between us; and if ever he should want a friend, he may count upon finding one in me—for your sake.'

Her face lighted up with pleasure. 'How good you are!' she cried. 'But I need not have doubted you. I might have known that you would at least give him a fair trial. Some people seem as if they could only see his faults. They might remember that we are not all faultless ourselves.'

'Tell them to mind their own business,' said Hugh. A natural association of ideas prompted him to add, after a short pause, 'Mrs. Winnington is still with you, I suppose.'

Margaret turned her head quickly, and gave him a half-deprecatory, half-suspicious glance. 'Yes,' she answered; 'and I hope to be able to induce her to remain with me permanently. At present she won't hear of it; but I think, little by little, I may accustom her to the idea. Of course it is a great thing for me to have her and Edith in the house, instead of living quite alone, as I used to do.'

'I am sure it must be,' said Hugh, in perfect good faith.

'And in some ways it is an advantage to them too. There is really no house in this neighbourhood that would do for them; and if they go away, there seems nothing for it but settling in London, which neither of them would like, or else in some watering-place or other. My mother, I know, dreads the society of a watering-place on Edith's account; and she is always so anxious to do the best she can for us all, that I quite hope she will come round to admitting that Longbourne is the only possible home for her.'

('Our dear Mrs. Stanniforth,' Mr. Brune remarked, on a subsequent occasion, to Hugh, 'expends an immense amount of wasted energy in the effort to persuade herself and others that her mother is not an infernally disagreeable old woman.')

Colonel Kenyon, as the reader may have noticed, was not very quick at receiving ideas, and he pondered over Margaret's last observation for some minutes before he came out with the following brilliant discovery: 'By Jove! Mrs. Winnington

must be looking out for a husband for Edith. Dear, dear, how time does go on!'

'Well,' returned Margaret; 'and if she does want her daughters to marry, and to marry well, do you suppose all mothers don't wish the same thing? I can't see what there is to be ashamed of in such a very natural ambition.'

'No, to be sure,' acquiesced Hugh, hastily; 'in fact, she would be neglecting her duty if she didn't look after her daughter's prospects. Only I should have thought London would have been a better place than Longbourne. Seeing so few people as you do——'

'Ah, but I see more people nowadays! The house is often full of visitors—friends of my mother's, you know—and I dare say it is very good for me to be obliged to come out of my shell. By-the-bye, I have a friend of my own coming down next week whom I particularly want you to meet—Tom Stanniforth. I think I wrote to you about him, did I not?'

'You told me in one of your letters that you had met him in London, and that you thought him a very good fellow.'

'I don't think I used those words, but they describe him accurately enough. He is exactly that—a thoroughly good fellow. Isn't it odd that with all his riches, and amiability, and love of society, he should have remained a bachelor for so many years?'

This time Colonel Kenyon's mother-wit showed itself more acute. He assumed an air of extreme knowingness, and ejaculated, 'Oho!'

And then Margaret laughed a little, and said, 'Well, it would be a good thing; don't you think so now? But most likely nothing will come of it.'

'H'm! I don't know,' said Hugh, meditatively; 'I wouldn't give much for his chance if Mrs. Winnington means——'

'What?'

'I say there is every chance of his falling in love with Miss Winnington if she at all resembles her sisters. But what about young Marescalchi? Isn't he rather a dangerous sort of customer to have in the house?'

'Philip? oh, no! I am glad to say that there is no fear of any complication in that quarter. You will think I am becoming a confirmed match-maker in my old age; but, to tell you the truth, I have a plan in my head for Philip's future also. You remember Nellie Brune—or perhaps you don't remember her, for she was a very small child when you went

away. Well, she has grown up into quite the prettiest girl in the county; and I feel in a sort of way as if she were a child of my own, for, since her mother's death, she has lived almost as much with me as at home. And so, in the nature of things, she and Philip have been a good deal thrown together.'

'I see. But hadn't Philip better be earning an income for himself before he thinks about taking a wife?'

'Oh, of course! They are both very young yet, and this is only a dream of mine, you must understand; I have never mentioned it to any one but you, and I don't even know that there is anything more than a brotherly and sisterly affection between them. Sometimes I have fancied that there might be, that is all; and perhaps the wish was father to the thought.'

By this time they had traversed the Longbourne park, and were in sight of the great house, rising square and red from among its surrounding lawns and flower-beds, its windows blazing with the light of the sinking sun.

'What a fine old place it is!' said Hugh, admiringly. 'After all, there is nothing in the world to beat an English country-house.'

'It is thrown away upon me,' said Margaret, with a sigh. 'I want a roof of some kind to shelter me, but I had rather it had been any but this one. I have never become reconciled to the idea of living at Longbourne, and I never shall. Unfortunately, too, the Brunes feel quite as strongly upon the subject as I do. They don't object to me, because they know that it is by no fault of my own that I am here; but they do object very much to my successor. I told Nellie, the other day, that we were expecting Tom Stanniforth, and she begged me at once not to ask her to come to the house until after he had gone. I only wish it were really my own property; for then I should leave it to Walter.'

'No, you wouldn't,' said Hugh, with a perspicuity which did him credit; 'you would leave it to Philip, and that would make things worse than ever.'

'Perhaps I might; I don't know. While I am wishing, I might as well wish that I were a capitalist, instead of a pensioner. Nature never intended me to be a rich woman, but sometimes I am afraid that she did cut out Philip for a rich man.'

And then they entered the house, and this prolonged dialogue came to an end.

Colonel Kenyon thought it over while dressing for dinner, and made a mental note of two things: firstly, that Jack's name had not once been mentioned in the course of it; and secondly, that Mrs. Stanniforth no longer desired to be rid of her wealth, but, on the contrary, would gladly have gained a firmer grasp of it, had that been practicable. Balancing the one consideration against the other, he was forced to conclude that a ten years' sojourn in foreign parts had been rather prejudicial than favourable to his personal chances of happiness.

CHAPTER VII.

COLONEL KENYON LOOKS ON.

Colonel Kenyon was not the only guest at Longbourne. There were other people staying in the house: people with high-sounding names; people whom he did not know, and for that matter—as he said to himself with a touch of ill-humour—did not want to know. He had caught sight of some of them playing lawn-tennis in the garden; he had heard the voices of others in the library, whither he had declined to follow his hostess, alleging that he was too dirty and dusty after his journey to face an introduction to strangers. There was something in the discovery that he was only to be one in a crowd, which chilled and disappointed him a little. Not that he had anything to urge in the abstract against Mrs. Stanniforth's filling her house with her friends, if she were so minded; still, he wished she had not chosen to do so at this particular time; and the contrast between her life as it appeared actually to be, and the secluded, charitable, uneventful sort of existence which he had always pictured her to himself as leading, struck him somewhat disagreeably. He shut himself up in his room; sat there, doing nothing, for an hour or more; and was dressed for dinner long before eight o'clock.

Mrs. Winnington was alone in the drawing-room when he went downstairs, and was very glad to see him, or, at all events, was kind enough to say that she was so.

'You are looking very old,' she remarked at once, with the pleasing candour of a friend of many years' standing; 'very old and worn out. I suppose India is quite fatal to health and appearance, especially in the case of officers, who always drink more than they ought to do in those hot climates, I

believe. It must be a detestable country. I was talking about it this morning to Lady Laura Smythe, who is staying with us for a few days. She spent a year out there, at the time when her brother was Viceroy, you know, and she describes the society of Calcutta as something too dreadful. Isn't there a place called Simla, where everybody goes in the summer months? —I don't pretend to be well up in the geography of those regions. She told me some odd stories of the things that went on there—very amusing, but really very shocking. From all that I could make out, the vulgarity of those people is only equalled by their immorality. No wonder you are such a wreck.'

'I don't think it is either drink or the vulgarity of Anglo-Indian society that has turned my hair grey,' Hugh said. 'You don't look a day older, Mrs. Winnington.'

'Oh, my dear Hugh!' cried Mrs. Winnington, not ill-pleased, 'that is absurd. After all that I have gone through, it would be strange indeed if I were not more wrinkled than I used to be; and I have grandchildren growing up fast, as you know. Now tell me, how did you think dear Margaret looking? Better than when you left her? Rather brighter and more cheerful? Ah! I am very glad to hear you say that, for I take it as a compliment to myself.'

'She said it was a great comfort to her to have you with her,' Hugh remarked.

'Poor dear! I do what I can, and I try to be with her as much as possible; but I have other duties; I cannot always be here, you understand.'

'I suppose not.'

'No; and now I shall look to you to help me out in my task and to take my place sometimes, when I am away,' said Mrs. Winnington, very graciously. 'Between ourselves, dear Margaret ought never to be left long without some trustworthy adviser and protector at her elbow.'

'Why?' asked Hugh, curtly.

'Oh! you will soon find out why; I had rather you made the discovery for yourself. You remember my old weakness; I can't bear speaking against anybody who is absent. But you can easily imagine the sort of dangers to which a woman of her generous and unsuspecting nature is exposed. Her servants, of course, rob her right and left; that I cannot help, for I make it a rule never to interfere in household matters. But, unfortunately, it is not only her servants who live upon her.

Servants, one knows, have not very exalted ideas of honesty, and one is prepared to take them as one finds them; but from people of one's own class one does expect a certain degree of pride and delicacy; and when it comes to giving a girl literally *all* her dresses —— However, if Mr. Brune does not object, I am sure it is no business of mine. You met young Marescalchi at the station, I hear.'

'Yes; I saw him for a few minutes.'

Mrs. Winnington shook her head and sighed so profoundly once or twice that all the garments in which her ample form was enveloped rustled and groaned, as in a soft chorus to their wearer's unspoken eloquence. Colonel Kenyon, however, expressing no curiosity as to the signification of these portentous heavings, the good lady was constrained to express herself with more distinctness.

'I greatly fear,' said she, 'that poor Margaret will have cause to rue the day when she set that beggar on horseback. One might have foreseen what would happen—in fact, I did foresee it; but that is a poor consolation. He is going to the dogs as fast as he can.'

'I hope not,' said Hugh.

'Oh! I don't ask you to take my word for it: use your own eyes and ears, and I have very little doubt as to what your conclusion will be. I should feel sorry for the young man, if he were not so absurdly self-satisfied. Nothing could have been more foolish and fatal than launching him into all the temptations of Oxford; but Margaret would take her own way.'

'Why, what would you have had her do?' asked Hugh. 'What alternative had you to suggest?'

'That is not the question,' answered Mrs. Winnington, employing a phrase which she had found very effective in controversies with the late Bishop, and which still rose instinctively to her lips in moments of embarrassment; 'that is not the question. And pray do not suppose that I am blaming poor Margaret for her infatuation; it has brought its own punishment, I am sorry to say. I happen to know,' she continued impressively—'this is between ourselves, and you need not mention that I spoke to you about it—but I happen to know that Margaret has paid his debts upon three separate occasions. Heavy debts; and that notwithstanding the fact that he has a most unwisely liberal allowance.'

'You don't say so! Well, that is very bad of course; but

such things have happened before now. I mean to say that it don't follow that, because a young fellow runs up bills at college, he must go to the dogs. Depend upon it, Philip will sow his wild oats like other boys, and turn out no worse than the generality of them.'

Mrs. Winnington, however, was not disposed to entertain this sanguine view of the case. 'Mark my words,' she was beginning solemnly; but she had to withdraw the conclusion of her sentence under cover of a cough, for at this moment Marescalchi himself appeared upon the scene, and was closely followed by Margaret.

Then the remainder of the house party began to drop in, singly and in couples: A fat countess, who was immediately engaged in confidential conversation by Mrs. Winnington; Lady Laura Smythe, a dowdy little woman married to a resplendent stockbroker; a pompous colonial governor and his wife; the senior partner of a well-known firm of solicitors, and sundry Winningtons of both sexes—uncles, aunts, and cousins—whose faces Hugh dimly remembered to have seen round the Bishop's table at the Christmas gatherings of long ago. It was Mr. Marescalchi who was obliging enough to join the stranger on the ottoman where he was sitting apart, and to classify for his benefit the people who were forming themselves into groups in different parts of the long room.

'A queer, incongruous sort of crew, are they not?' said he. 'Mrs. Winnington asks them down here, and she doesn't understand mixing her people any better than she understands mixing her colours, poor old thing! However, her intentions are good, and she has a reason for inviting every one of them. Lady Flintshire and Lady Laura Smythe entertain a good deal in London; they will be good for at least two balls apiece next season, and perhaps for an invitation to the country in the autumn. Sir Benjamin Wilkinson is here because Charley Winnington thinks he would like to be the old fellow's aide-de-camp when he goes back to the Cannibal Islands, or wherever it is that he hangs out. Hobson, the solicitor, has been asked in order that he may help Harry out with a brief or two some day. That is a piece of hospitality thrown away; Hobson stays longer than he is wanted, contradicts everybody, makes a horrible noise over his soup, and will see Harry further before he'll bother himself about him. It is rather hard upon poor Meg, who has to make all these people talk to each other, and to keep them from quarrelling. Half of them are furious at

having been asked to meet the other half; and one and all are wondering what the dickens made them come here. Most likely they will grow mellow and make friends after dinner; but then there is always just a hope of a free fight at one of these gatherings, and that enables one to bear up under the dreadful wearisomeness of it all.'

Hugh hardly listened to his neighbour's easy flow of talk. He was watching Margaret, as she moved hither and thither in the fading light, discharging her duties after a quiet, perfunctory fashion; and presently he rose unceremoniously and walked off to renew his acquaintance with Edith, whom he had recognised, not so much by anything about her that could remind him of the child whom he had once known, as by her remarkable resemblance to her eldest sister, Lady Travers. When he drew near enough to her to distinguish her features, he was still more struck with this family likeness, as well as with the girl's beauty, which quite surpassed what he had been led to expect. Edith Winnington—tall, slight, and extremely fair, with delicate, refined features, and eyes of a forget-me-not blue—represented the family type raised to its ultimate expression. Hugh, who remembered Lady Travers in the days of her youthful triumphs, and who remembered also that Lady Travers's marriage had turned out a notoriously unhappy one, felt a pang of pity for this victim, unconscious of her doom. While he was shaking hands with her, he was thinking to himself, 'Poor girl! I wonder her mother is satisfied with Tom Stanniforth. With such a face and figure as that, she might have been made to aim at something higher, I should have thought. I hope he'll marry her, though, for he is a decent sort of man, by all accounts, and at least he won't beat her.'

'You have been a long time away,' said Edith; 'you must be very glad to be at home again; I suppose it must be very hot in India. No; I am afraid I do not quite know where Madras is. I could find it on the map, I think.'

Her manner had a touch of shyness and hesitation which was not unbecoming; her colour kept coming and going while she spoke, and her eyes wandered over the room. She seemed to lend an only half-attentive ear to Hugh's geographical information, and answered his questions a little at random. From all of which signs that astute observer was led to conclude that the young woman was looking for somebody. Could it be Maresealchi, he wondered, whom she missed?

Presently Philip joined them, saying in confidential under-

tone that all these old ladies and gentlemen frightened him. 'I daren't speak to them; they are getting hungry; they are snapping and growling already; and if dinner isn't announced in a few minutes they will begin devouring one another. Where is Walter, by-the-bye? Meg said she had asked him to come up.'

Edith said that there had been a cricket-match at Craybridge that day; very likely Walter had not been able to get away in time. But at this moment the defaulter hurried in to answer for himself; and, after that, Miss Winnington's eyes became perceptibly less restless.

'I wonder which of them it is,' Hugh speculated within himself. 'I would bet any money that it's one or the other. That's the way with your over-clever people, they never see what is going on under their noses. Now, if I were an ambitious old woman, I should take precious good care to keep my daughter out of the way of those youngsters; but I suppose it comes to much the same thing in the long run. If there is a difference of opinion between that poor girl and her mother, it is easy to see who will go to the wall.'

'Will you take in Lady Wilkinson, please, and sit on the left side of the table?' whispered Margaret, interrupting his meditations.

He had ample leisure to resume and pursue them in the dining room, for Lady Wilkinson was sulky, and did not choose to respond to his well-meant efforts at starting a conversation. Poor Lady Wilkinson had played at royalty for so many years, and had grown so accustomed to taking the chief place at feasts, that it pained her to walk out of the room behind a Lady Laura Somebody, and to be herself escorted by a mere colonel of artillery. The treatment by the mother-country of its returned colonial governors seemed to her to be wanting in all propriety and decency; and, by way of vindicating the slighted dignity of the class which she represented, she thought fit to reply to her neighbour's advances with haughty 'Ohs' and 'Indeeds' and a liberal display of the cold shoulder. Colonel Kenyon accepted his lot with fitting philosophy. He had no anxiety to talk or to be talked to. The scene and the personages affected him with a vague bewilderment, being so unlike those shadowy visions of Longbourne and its inmates which had haunted his fancy in the East, and he wanted to familiarise himself with them. He ate his dinner (which was a very excellent and well-served one), and gazed about him at surrounding objects—at the

oval table, with its load of flowers and old Chelsea china, upon which a flood of light was thrown down from the shaded hanging lamps; at the servants, flitting noiselessly to and fro in the vast space of semi-obscurity beyond; at Margaret, leaning back in her chair between Lord Flintshire and Sir Benjamin Wilkinson, with a look of cheerful resignation upon her face; at Mrs. Winnington, voluble and smiling, playing the part of hostess rather too ostentatiously; at Mr. Hobson, eating voraciously, with his head bent down over his plate and his elbows on a level with his red ears; at Philip, making open and undisguised love to Edith; and at Walter, watching this couple with an inexplicable broad grin upon his honest countenance. Times were changed indeed since Margaret had complained of the misery of solitary repasts. Here was company enough to satisfy anybody; company, too, which, if not wildly hilarious, appeared to an outsider quite sufficiently animated. As Marescalchi had predicted would be the case, the guests were growing mellow under the influence of good cheer; and, with the exception of Lady Wilkinson, who still maintained a proud reserve, and of Mr. Hobson, who was otherwise engaged, everybody was contributing his or her share to the general buzz of speech.

'The island of Semolina,' Sir Benjamin was saying in a loud voice, 'requires only to be left to itself. All the troubles that have taken place there have arisen out of injudicious interference on the part of the home government. I was talking to the Secretary of State the other day, and I said to him, "*La Semolina farà da se.*" Many men have found the island a difficult one to govern—my predecessor, as you know, made a sad hash of it—but I have always got on perfectly well with the planters myself. The whole question is one of cheap labour, and is not at all understood in this country. You will recollect the agitation that was got up, a few years back, about the supposed wrongs of the coolies?'

Lord Flintshire, a mild-mannered little man, to whom these remarks were addressed, answered hazily, 'Oh, yes; to be sure. Niggers—slave trade—that sort of thing, eh?' and had to be set right at some length.

Lady Laura Smythe was shrilly advocating the claims of a Home for Adult Idiots which had lately been established under her patronage. 'We are terribly in need of funds to carry us on just now. No; I don't want donations, I want annual subscriptions. Let me enter your name among the ten-guinea subscribers; I am sure that won't ruin you. Mr. Hobson, I am

going to put you down as a subscriber to my Home for Adult Idiots. You shall have a prospectus to-morrow.'

'Don't trouble yourself, Lady Laura,' says Mr. Hobson, resolutely, with his mouth full. 'Very sorry, but I must decline. I have never felt any interest in idiots. Don't like 'em. Don't sympathise with 'em.'

'How unnatural!' ejaculates the lady in an audible aside. 'Oh! but you must sympathise with them, you know; you must be made to sympathise with them. Mrs. Winnington, your daughter has most kindly promised me a twenty-five guinea subscription; I hope you'll allow me to put you down for a like sum.'

'Oh, no, dear Lady Laura!' cries Mrs. Winnington, with a piteous face. 'Five guineas, please; I really cannot do more. You forget what a wretched pauper I am, and there are so many calls that one cannot turn a deaf ear to. Where did you go for your drive to-day?'

Mrs. Winnington was a trifle flushed, and exhibited symptoms of uneasiness and absence of mind. Every now and again her eyeglasses went up to her nose, and were furtively directed at the other side of the table, where Philip's dark head was in close proximity to Edith's blonde one. At last she could keep silence no longer, and called out, in a sharp voice, 'Edith, my dear, Lady Laura is very anxious to be shown the cathedral. Will you go with her to-morrow?'

'Quite out of the question, Mrs. Winnington,' answered Philip, gravely. 'Your daughter has a previous engagement; she has promised to ride with me.'

Mrs. Winnington scowled so fiercely at this that the girl looked frightened, and exclaimed hastily:—

'Nonsense, Philip! you know I never promised any such thing. Of course I can go, mamma.'

'Very well,' said Philip, placidly; 'we'll all go. Mrs. Winnington, why shouldn't you come too? You could sit down with Lady Laura and rest, while Edith dragged me to the topmost pinnacle of the temple. I have always meant to climb up there some day, but one wants a strongish inducement to overcome one's constitutional laziness.'

'We will keep to our original plan, if you please,' answered Mrs. Winnington, loftily. 'As for what you are pleased to call your constitutional laziness, I suppose that if Dr. Goodford could not cure you of that, Edith is not very likely to be able to do so. In any case, the task is not one which I should think

it worth while to confide to her. Your laziness would have been whipped out of you many years ago, if I had had anything to do with your education.'

To this Philip only replied, 'Now, now, Mrs. Winnington,' in a soothing voice, which had the effect of causing that lady's cheeks to assume a fine rich hue, and of eliciting an abrupt and startling chuckle from Walter, who looked very much abashed when everybody turned and stared at him.

After this little passage of arms there was a hollow truce, which lasted up till the time when the ladies left the dining-room; but later in the evening hostilities were resumed, and several sharp encounters took place; the advantage remaining in every instance with the younger and cooler combatant. Philip had dropped into a reclining attitude upon the sofa where Edith was seated, and for a quarter of an hour or so he amused himself by baffling Mrs. Winnington's attempts to force him or her daughter from this position; but at length, growing weary, apparently, of that form of provocation, he voluntarily changed his ground, strolled deliberately up to his enemy's arm-chair, and, leaning back against the wall with folded arms, struck into the middle of the conversation which she had been keeping up under difficulties with Lady Flintshire. Mrs. Winnington at first endeavoured to ignore him altogether; but he did not choose to be ignored, and very soon he had drawn upon himself as brisk and well-sustained an attack as he could have wished for.

Hugh, who had vainly attempted to get near to Margaret, and who had now nothing to do and no one to talk to, listened with some entertainment to Mrs. Winnington's onset, which certainly did not lack vigour. He heard Philip accused by no obscure implication of being a coxcomb, an adventurer, a spendthrift, and a libertine, and he could not help admiring the perfect good humour with which the young fellow met these charges. Not for some time did he realise what was actually going on, and why the little knot of silent spectators who had gradually come together in the neighbourhood of the unconscious lady's chair were exchanging looks of keen appreciation and amusement. Philip was audaciously mimicking Mrs. Winnington to her face. He had caught the exact pitch of her voice, the droop of her eyelids, the emphatic tapping of her left palm with the first and second fingers of her right hand, and the phrases with which she was in the habit of embellishing her discourse. When he ejaculated, "That is not the

question,' any one whose back had been turned might have sworn that it was Mrs. Winnington herself who was speaking. It was undoubtedly a very clever performance, and the more so because Mrs. Winnington's speech and demeanour did not, after all, afford any specially salient points for a caricaturist to seize upon. Philip's rendering of her was strictly faithful, free from any exaggeration, and, when taken in conjunction with the severe castigation which he was ostensibly undergoing, inexpressibly ludicrous. Fat Lady Flintshire was quivering with suppressed laughter from head to foot; Lady Laura Smythe was grinning sardonically; Mr. Hobson at one moment was threatened with an apoplexy, and had to walk away hastily to recover himself in the background; and the victim herself never suspected from first to last that she was being made a fool of, but was only uneasily conscious that she was not getting the best of it, when, by all rights, she ought to have been doing so.

The exhibitor knew better than to fatigue his audience with too protracted an entertainment. He desisted in due time, and, as he moved away, Mrs. Winnington had the mortification of hearing Lady Flintshire say:—

'Oh, Mr. Marescalchi, I hope you will be able to come to us for a week in September. We shall have a good many of your friends with us, and we are thinking of getting up a little acting for the young people.'

Philip civilly declined the invitation which his late antagonist had been angling for all day, excusing himself upon the plea of other engagements, and so his triumph was complete; and the initiated among those who had been listening to him no doubt felt that talent had met with its just reward. Perhaps, however, they had missed the best part of the joke after all; for it was only Hugh who had noticed that, under cover of the encounter above described, Walter Brune and Edith had quietly withdrawn into a secluded corner, and were enjoying a long and unmolested *tête-à-tête*.

'*Sic vos non vobis*,' muttered Colonel Kenyon, whose stock of classical quotations was somewhat limited. 'I suppose Walter must be the man; I knew it was one of them.' And he walked away, quite pleased with his penetration.

He strolled to one of the open windows and looked out. The night was warm and still; the silent lawns lay bathed in a soft and inviting moonlight. The wainscot was not a high one, and nobody was looking. Hugh yielded to temptation,

swung his legs over the sill, dropped on to the ground, and, walking round to the front door, got his hat and a cigar. Soon he had forgotten all about the little comedy which was being enacted within, and had reverted to the thought of his own love troubles. As he paced to and fro, he could hear the continuous murmur of talk rising and falling in the drawing-room; puffs of heated air escaped through the open windows; somebody was singing French songs in an absurd, cracked voice.

'How she must hate all this!' Hugh thought. 'How she must wish that she could give up her house to that confounded old mother of hers, and get away, and live her own life! But she can't give it up to her mother, and she won't give it up in the only way that it can be given up. Her pleasure is to sacrifice herself for others; no woman ever surrenders a pleasure of that kind. What is the good of my speaking? I had better hold my tongue, and go on hoping against hope, like the superannuated ass that I am, to the end of the chapter. It isn't very delightful staying at Longbourne under existing circumstances, but it is just a shade better than being sent away with a flea in my ear.'

'*Si vous n'avez rien à me dire,*' shrieked the invisible songstress; '*pourquoi venir auprès de moi?*'

'Oh, you damned old screech-owl!' muttered Hugh; and with that profane and improper apostrophe he turned on his heel, and sought a more sequestered place for meditation.

After a time, two dark figures came striding down the drive, talking and laughing; and one of them called out, 'Hullo! here's Colonel Kenyon; I thought he wouldn't be able to stand those delightful people much longer. Are you inclined for a walk this fine night, Colonel Kenyon? I'm going to see Walter home.'

When we are young, it flatters us to be asked to join our elders, but when we have reached middle age it flatters us a great deal more if our juniors express a wish for our company. Little as Hugh was disposed to like Marescalchi, he yet began to think that there might be good points about that very self-satisfied young gentleman, as he walked beside him across the long stretches of moonlit grass. Walter he did like. Walter was a youth after his own heart; a youth of thews and sinews, of fair average intelligence—Colonel Kenyon had no great love for very clever people—of obvious honesty and sincerity. He was a sportsman, too, and was deeply interested in hearing

about the pursuit of the big game in India. It was a thousand pities that such another had not chanced to be stranded on the Riviera at the time when Margaret had taken it into her head to go in for orphans.

Two out of the three men hit it off together excellently well; and as the third was of so pliant a character that it came naturally to him to fall in with any one's and every one's humour, their conversation did not flag until they reached the confines of the Broom Leas paddocks, where, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, Miss Brune was leaning over a fence, waiting for her brother.

'Whom have you got with you, Walter?' she called out, while they were still under the shadow of a hedge and she was in the full light of the moon. 'Has Philip actually exerted himself to walk all this way with you? What condescension! How did you get on at dinner? It was awfully heavy, I suppose. Did Colonel Kenyon turn up? and what do you think of him?'

'Colonel Kenyon,' answered Philip, gently holding Hugh back in the shade, 'turned up, as per arrangement, and he is all that your fancy painted him.'

'Ah, he has been snubbing you! I knew that at once by your voice. Come out of the dark, and tell me all about him. What sort of a looking person is he?'

'Well,' answered Philip, 'it's a matter of opinion. Here he is, so you can form yours as soon as you like.'

Hugh stepped forward, taking off his hat and looking a little foolish; while Nellie murmured, 'I beg your pardon,' and looked rather foolish too. There was a spice of the monkey in Philip's composition. He was not ill-natured; but he was himself a total stranger to false shame, and the spectacle of two full-grown fellow-creatures demeaning themselves towards one another after the fashion of a couple of shy children was to him so queer and entertaining a one that he could seldom deny himself the pleasure of bringing it about, when a good opportunity offered. He did not get much amusement for his pains upon the present occasion; for his indiscretion had the effect of causing Miss Brune to beat a hasty retreat, and in a very few minutes he and Colonel Kenyon were wending their way homewards.

'What a pretty girl Nellie—or perhaps I ought to say Miss Brune—has turned out!' the latter remarked.

'The prettiest girl in England,' said Marescalchi, with

decision. 'You couldn't judge of her properly just now; but when you see her by daylight, you will understand at once why the whole county raves about her. She is the only woman I know who has really dark blue eyes. Edith is pretty, very pretty; but she can't hold a candle to Nellie.'

'Upon my word,' cried Hugh, half amused, half angry at this dispassionate criticism, 'you are a very lucky fellow. Many a man would give his ears to be allowed to call two such charming young ladies by their Christian names.'

'People are always telling me I am a lucky fellow,' Philip remarked. 'I gave up protesting against the accusation—for it is a sort of accusation, you know—long ago. But only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.'

Hugh made no rejoinder, for it flashed across him that there could hardly fail to be a dash of bitterness in the lot of a waif and stray; and so the remainder of the walk was accomplished in silence. Philip, like many other persons who shine in society, was subject to occasional fits of depression when off the stage. One of these fits fell upon him now, and Hugh was quite startled to see how pale and haggard he looked when he bade him good night in the hall.

'Owes money, I expect,' the Colonel thought, as he went upstairs; 'I wonder what Margaret allows him.'

And then this good-natured and foolish gentleman actually began calculating the amount that stood to his credit in the hands of Messrs. Cox & Co. Hugh had felt the pinch of poverty so often himself that all his sympathies were stirred by a suspicion of embarrassed circumstances in others, and he had never in his life been able to refuse a loan when asked for one. It was to this unfortunate weakness that he owed the loss of more than one old friend.

CHAPTER VIII.

COOMASSIE VILLA.

COLONEL KENYON was not called upon to reduce his balance; nor, so far as he could judge, had his surmise regarding Marescalchi been a correct one. The heaviness which had oppressed that lively youth endured but for a night, and his troubles—if indeed he had any—exercised no visible influence upon his spirits in the morning. He appeared to great advan-

tage at breakfast, was loquacious and amusing, without being malicious, and exerted himself very creditably to help out Mrs. Stanniforth in the thankless task of entertaining a set of guests who showed no capacity for entertaining themselves. In answer to certain interrogatories, Hugh was able honestly to assure Margaret that he thought her adopted son a great social success.

'There is not one young man in a hundred,' Colonel Kenyon declared, 'who could make the best of an awkward position as he does.'

'How an awkward position?' Margaret asked.

'Well, it is awkward, you know; it can't be otherwise. He is obliged, in a way, to do the duties of master of the house, and yet he is not the master of the house. If he were really your son, for instance, he would take old Lady What's-her-name in to dinner; he would sit opposite to you, in the place which Mrs. Winnington——'

'I bought an oval table on purpose to avoid that difficulty,' interrupted Margaret.

Hugh smiled. 'You saw that it existed, then. I say he comes out of it uncommonly well. He doesn't assert himself too much, and he doesn't keep ostentatiously in the background. He looks the situation in the face, in short, and accepts it for what it is, as a sensible fellow and a gentleman should. At least, so it seems to me.' Considering that Colonel Kenyon was speaking of one whom he disliked, this was very handsome; but Margaret scarcely noticed the encomium.

'Do you think he feels it?' she asked eagerly; 'do you think it distresses him?'

'I can't tell. You ought to be a better judge of that than I. I know I should feel it, if I were in his shoes; and, from one point of view, I think it would be a pity if he didn't. He seems to lead a jolly life and enjoy it—small blame to him! But he will be a happier man when he has a profession of his own to work at, and rooms of his own to live in. I should impress that upon him, were I you.'

Margaret sighed, and answered rather irrelevantly, 'I wish all these people would go away; it is so much pleasanter when we are alone.'

In a few days' time she had her wish. The Flintshires were the first to go; and the remainder of the party with great promptitude and unanimity followed their leader. Longbourne, if the truth must be told, was not quite the pleasantest house

in England to stay at, nor was Margaret very successful as a hostess. To people who were poor, or sick, or in trouble, she was the kindest, the most unselfish, and the most unwearying of friends; but she had not the gift of small-talk, she could not always remember what to say and what to leave unsaid, and she was unable to feign an interest where she felt none. And of these deficiencies she was fully conscious.

'If it were not for Philip,' she said, as the last carriage drove away from the door, 'I should never succeed in inducing any one to come down here, and my mother and Edith would live in a howling wilderness.'

'Really, Margaret dear, that is a poor compliment to us,' cried Mrs. Winnington, who unfortunately overheard this remark. 'I hope *some* of our friends find our society a sufficient attraction.'

'You've put your foot in it again, as usual, Meg,' whispered Philip. 'When is the next batch due?'

'Oh, not for a long time, I hope,' she answered in the same subdued voice. 'Even Tom Stanniforth writes to say that he is obliged to postpone his visit for a fortnight; and I don't know of any one else who is expected.'

'Then,' exclaimed Philip aloud, 'let's be happy for a fortnight!'

And for a fortnight, or the best part of it, most of them were happy. In the absence of outsiders, the denizens of Longbourne and Broom Leas were habitually together morning, noon, and night. The younger people had been brought up as brothers and sisters; and although, for obvious reasons, it had been found impossible to maintain this fiction of relationship beyond a certain epoch in their lives, the outward forms and privileges pertaining thereto had not been suffered to fall altogether into disuse. If Philip happened to find himself at Broom Leas towards one o'clock, he took his place at the luncheon-table as a matter of course, and without anything being said upon the subject; and neither Walter nor Nellie thought it necessary to wait for an invitation before arranging to dine at Longbourne. To Hugh Kenyon the easy intimacy of this quiet life was like the realisation of a dream; and for ten days at least it seemed to him that he had reached the green oasis which had been ever before his eyes throughout those toilsome years spent upon the Indian plains. English oaks made a grateful shade for him; soft English clouds floated low overhead, tempering the heat of the summer sun; English

birds twittered for him on dewy mornings; and although the blithe tinkling of the mower's scythe, like the thumping of the flails on the threshing-floor, had passed away during his time of exile, never to be heard any more, there was still an abundance of pleasant rural sights and sounds to refresh the heart of a returned wanderer. If Kenyon was not happy, he ought to have been so. He and Margaret had many a long talk together, while the young folks played lawn-tennis or made excursions on horseback; old friends came up from Crayminster to chat over old times; the weather was glorious; and, best of all, Mrs. Winnington was laid up with the gout.

The poor lady had become subject of late years to periodical visits from that enemy of the human race, and suffered during their continuance as much as her best friends could have wished her to do. Stern Mrs. Prosser, who was cut out by nature for a Methodist, but whom the tendencies of the age had converted into an ardent disciple of Mr. Langley, attributed the present attack to an unholy indulgence in animal food on Fridays; the sufferer herself made her exertions in the entertainment of her daughter's guests responsible for it; but, whatever its cause, it is to be feared that no one, except Margaret, offered up prayers for its speedy termination. It came to an end, after having run its course, without any extraneous aid of that kind: and with it came an end of all harmless gaiety and laughter. With Mrs. Winnington stretched upon the drawing-room sofa in a quilted satin dressing-gown and a shocking bad temper, no one had the heart or the courage to be merry: even Philip was upon his best behaviour, talked little, and refrained from any irritating speeches. He obtained small thanks for his forbearance.

'That young man has either got into some mischief, or he is meditating some,' Mrs. Winnington took occasion to whisper impressively to Hugh. 'I always know that anything like self-effacement on his part bodes no good for poor Margaret's peace.'

And when, in the course of the day, Philip announced casually that he was going away for a week, the old lady threw a triumphant glance at her confidant, as who should say, 'Didn't I tell you so?'

'Why, where are you off to?' asked Hugh, innocently.

'I think,' said Philip, in deliberate accents, 'that we must be going to have a change of weather. The glass has been falling all day.'

The questioner felt very much snubbed and very naturally angry. It is not pleasant to be set down by a man of half your age, and it is still less pleasant to feel that the implied rebuke is merited. Of course one has no business to put direct questions, and Hugh remembered that Margaret had said something to him about letting young men go their own way. Still, distinctions ought to be drawn between intentional and inadvertent solecisms, and Hugh said to himself in his wrath that this impertinent puppy might go to the devil for anything he cared. Nothing more was said upon the subject at the time; but after dinner Mrs. Winnington, undeterred by the fate of her predecessor, chose to repeat the same query in a loud and authoritative voice; and she, at all events, was rewarded by an answer.

'I have received Her Majesty's command,' said Philip, sweetly, 'to attend her at Balmoral. I believe there is a probability of my being asked to form a fresh administration.'

Upon this, Walter, who was easily moved to laughter, broke out into a tremendous guffaw, which was followed by a deep and awful silence. Margaret began to talk very quickly, and soon afterwards Mrs. Winnington, who had closed her eyes, not deigning to make any rejoinder, was assisted off to bed by her maid.

Later in the evening, when the three men of the party were sitting in the smoking-room, Philip condescended to give a sort of reason for his departure, unasked. 'Mrs. Winnington and I are like buckets in a well,' he said; 'when one comes into sight away goes the other. Perhaps the dear old creature may have started off on a round of visits before I come back. The fact is that I promised to go and stay with some people about this time.'

'Then why the dickens couldn't you say so?' blurted out Walter. 'What's the use of making mysteries?'

Philip shrugged his shoulders. 'My dear fellow, I don't make mysteries; but it isn't always convenient to tell everybody where one has been, and where one is going. If you answer in one case you must answer in all. Suppose I were to ask you what you and Edith were doing, when you marched off to the farmyard this afternoon, and left us without a word of explanation? I don't want to know; but suppose I had the indiscretion to ask?'

'Well, I should tell you the truth. We were seeing the pigs fed. Now then!'

'Ah, I give in. I admit the superiority of your method, and in future I shall always try to be equally candid. So you went to see the pigs fed, did you? And to-morrow I am going to see the Smiths, or the Browns, or the Robinsons. Strictly true; and at the same time conveniently vague.' On the following morning, accordingly, Philip quitted Longbourne for some destination unknown, leaving behind him one trustful heart and several suspicious ones. Margaret made a rather lame apology to Hugh on his behalf.

'Philip is a little reticent sometimes; circumstances have made him so. He does not always tell even me what his plans are and how he spends his time; and I think it so much better not to force any one's confidence. I know he will always come to me when he is in trouble.'

'I dare say he will,' answered Hugh, drily. And immediately afterwards, fearing that he had said a terribly severe thing, he added, 'No one likes to be cross-examined. I don't like it myself. I remember how strict my poor old father used to be, and of course I concealed things from him. As for Philip, he will grow out of the habit of thinking his proceedings of such supreme importance to the world. Probably he is no worse employed now than in rehearsing for play-acting at some country house in the next county.'

At the moment when this generous conjecture was uttered, the subject of it was hailing a hansom at the Charing Cross station; and if the address which he gave to the cabman had been heard at Longbourne, it might have occasioned some misgivings there. 'Coomassie Villa, Wolseley Road, West Brompton'—it certainly had not an aristocratic, nor even a respectable ring, and it would have been difficult to give a satisfactory explanation of Mr. Marescalchi's presence in such quarters in the month of August.

Nobody, however, did hear it, except the cabman, and he didn't know where Wolesley Road was, and had to be guided thither by the umbrella of his fare. Coomassie Villa, when reached, proved to be a small detached house, situated in the very last street in London, and looking as if it had been built about the day before yesterday. To right and left of it were other dwellings of a similar size, but of great diversity of architecture, all surpassingly hideous and most as yet untenanted; the road which led to it was full of ruts and deep holes, and its windows looked upon a waste of cabbage-gardens and smoking brick-fields.

Philip caught up his portmanteau briskly, dismissed the hansom, and let himself in with a latch-key. No servant appeared to relieve him of his load, nor was there a sign of life about the place until he had shut the hall-door behind him with a bang. Then there came a sudden rushing and pattering sound from overhead, and an exceedingly pretty young woman flew down the narrow staircase, dragging her long silken skirts after her, and, throwing her arms round his neck, cried, 'Oh, Philip, how late you are! I had almost given you up.'

Philip kissed her, held her away from him at arm's length, and inspected her from head to foot, laughing softly to himself. She was a delicate, fragile little creature, with pink and white cheeks, and an abundance of fair hair, arranged in little curls all over her head. She was absurdly over-dressed, and was evidently conscious of being so; for she said, in a deprecating, half-frightened voice, 'I thought, as you was coming, I might make myself smart, Philip, just for once. I did so long to put on this beautiful gown; but it seemed a shame to be taking the wear out of it when there was no one but Sarah and cook to see me.' She passed her hands over her well-fitting body and stroked her olive-green skirt lovingly. 'Exquisite!—ain't it?' cried she, with childish glee.

'It is indeed,' Philip answered gravely. 'So I am late, am I? You see, I have had to drive from Dan to Beersheba. Upon my word, Fan, I think I shall have to move you out of this into some place within the limits of civilisation. I don't believe there would be any risk about it, and it would be a great deal more convenient.'

They were now sitting in a tiny drawing-room, which was furnished with more luxury and in better taste than might have been expected from the outward appearance of the villa.

'Oh, I hope you won't!' cried the little woman. 'That is, you do what you think best, dear; what pleases you will please me; but I'd rather be here than in a regular London street. I like the view, you see; it sort of puts me in mind of the country.'

Philip looked out at the dreary cabbage-gardens, the black, broken fences, and the brick-fields all simmering in a hot haze. 'Poor little Fan!' he said compassionately; 'it's a horrid shame to keep you mewed up here all the summer; but it can't be helped. Another year we shall be able to manage better, I hope.'

'Oh, I don't mind it!' she answered cheerfully. 'I am

very 'appy—happy, I mean—here; and now that you've come, dear, I wouldn't change places with the Queen on her throne. There's days when it's a little lonesome; but cook has given me a cat to keep me company, and what with my lessons and the pianner and the 'ouse—*house*keeping, I get through the days wonderfully. Now don't you fret about me, Philip dear; please don't fret—for my sake.'

'Well, if you put it upon that ground—I won't,' answered Philip, who sometimes indulged in a little mild sarcasm at his own expense, and found the sensation a rather refreshing and bracing one. 'There are undeniable advantages in living in this back-of-beyond sort of place, apart from its charmingly rural situation. Also I haven't paid for the furniture yet; and the upholsterer might get nervous if he found us flitting so soon. You don't stay indoors too much, I hope.'

'Not now. At first I used to be afraid of meeting people; but I've got over that; and now Sarah and me go out every evening. Oh, and who *do* you think I came across in Kensington Gardens last week?—nearly ran into his arms. Why, Salford. It did give me such a start!'

'Salford!' cried Philip, with a rather alarmed face; 'I thought he was in Norway. Did he recognise you?'

'Not he; he didn't have the chance. I put down my parasol, so as to hide my face, and he passed almost as close to me as you are, walking with another gentleman. I heard him say something about "beastly country—half starved—couldn't have stood it another week;" and then he began using awful language, like he always used to, you know, and when I peeped out he was gone. I'd have given anything to have spoke to him—just for the sake of old times.'

'My dear Fanny, you must never think of doing anything of that kind. Good heavens! it might be the ruin of us.'

'Oh, Philip! of course I wouldn't have done it; I should never disobey you. I didn't really care to talk to him either—not for himself. Don't you know how I always used to tell you I couldn't a-bear him?'

'*Bear* him, Fan. No; I remember he wasn't a favourite of yours; though I believe he thought you were desperately smitten with him. Did I tell you that all Oxford gave him the credit of eloping with you?'

'Him, indeed!' cried Fanny, with a toss of her head; 'well, I'm sure! They're very clever people at Oxford, but they don't know so much as they think. Why, I'd no more

have looked at him!—not if he'd offered to make me his marchioness. And that's what he'd never have done.'

'Not such a fool, eh? Fortunately or unfortunately—which is it, do you think?—some other men are less prudent,' said Philip, looking at her and laughing.

Mrs. Marescalchi, who had been holding up her left hand, the better to admire the wedding-ring which adorned it, flushed and then turned pale. 'Ah, my dear,' she sighed, 'the day will come when you'll repent of all your goodness to me. Maybe you're repenting of it just a little bit already.'

Maybe he was. He did not like to acknowledge himself inferior in worldly wisdom to Lord Salford, a man whom he utterly despised; and as to the abstract wisdom of marrying a young woman from a pastry-cook's shop, there could hardly be two opinions. He was not, and never had been, very deeply in love with poor little Fanny; but he had married because he had fancied himself so, because he hated to deny himself anything that he had set his heart upon, and because, if the truth must be told, she would not have consented to occupy Coomassie Villa upon any other terms. When he thought seriously of the step that he had taken, and of its inevitable consequences, he felt very uncomfortable: therefore he thought of it as seldom as possible.

'You little goose!' he said; 'I don't repent of anything.'

She went on, without heeding him: 'But when that day does come, you'll remember—won't you?—that it wasn't all my fault. You'll remember what a long time I held out against you, and that I only gave in at last because I loved you so. I'm afraid I shall never get to be like a lady—not a real lady. I do my lessons every day, as you told me; and when I'm alone I think I can beyave—well, *behave* then—as nice as any of them; but if you was to introduce me to Mrs. Stannifarth to-morrow I should be that flustered—oh dear! You won't let any of your people know that we're married for a long time, will you, dear?'

Philip unhesitatingly promised that he would not. He told Fanny that she was a dear little sensible thing, and that there was not one woman in a thousand who would have seen the necessity for concealment, and submitted to it as cheerfully as she had done. At this commendation Fanny brightened up; her pretty face broke out into smiles and dimples, and the tears which had been gathering in her eyes vanished. She did not mind concealment one bit, she declared. People might stare

and gossip as much as they liked—and, to be sure, cook was very impertinent at times—but what did she care? Let them chatter. 'You see,' she explained, 'it isn't with me as it might be with other girls. I've neither kith nor kin, except Aunt Keziah; and Aunt Keziah knows all about it, and saw us married with her own eyes. Bless you! I'm as happy as the day is long. I don't want for anything, unless it's to see you a little oftener, Philip.'

The vehemence of these protestations might have led some persons to suspect that the speaker was not quite as indifferent to the opinion of the world as she professed to be; but Philip did not appear to doubt her sincerity. He patted her on the head, praised her good sense again, and assured her that her patience would have its reward all in good time. Then, having had enough of serious conversation, he sat down at the piano, and began singing snatches of songs from the comic operas of the day, improvising an accompaniment for himself as he went on, while his wife listened in adoring admiration.

Philip had a remarkably sweet tenor voice, which he managed not unskilfully. It was one of the many gifts which he possessed, and which he had cultivated for a time, and then wearied of; for there was no pertinacity in his nature, and of all things in the world he abhorred drudgery the most. He was fond of music, however, and would sing in a desultory sort of way for an hour at a time, when he had no more amusing occupation at hand. The round, liquid notes filled the little house, and floated out through the open window into the sultry atmosphere beyond, causing the few passers-by to pause and listen, and falling gratefully upon the ears of Fanny's music-master, who reached the doorstep in time to hear '*O Catarina bella*' from beginning to end.

'God bless my soul, sir!' cried the good man, bursting into the room with scant ceremony, 'what a sad pity it is that you have not your daily bread to earn! There are thousands a year in that voice of yours, Mr. Marescalchi, if you only knew it.'

Philip laughed, and said he believed that his voice was destined to be utilised in other and less attractive quarters than the opera-house; and then, as he possessed an ear as well as a voice, and did not care about hearing poor Fanny worry her way through the 'Harmonious Blacksmith,' he took his hat and strolled out into the hideous wilderness that surrounded his wife's dwelling.

The hopeless ugliness, the solitude, the heat and the bad smells of that shabby-genteel suburb did not depress his spirits. Philip was one of those happy people who, while loving all beautiful things, can do very well without them for a time; and, after all, he didn't live at Coomassie Villa. He enjoyed his brief periods of residence there chiefly because they came in some sort under the head of forbidden pleasures. There was something that tickled his fancy, too, in the notion of being a married man and the owner of such a queer establishment; and he contemplated the half-finished houses, the dirty children playing in the middle of the road, and the clothes hanging out to dry in the back-yards, with an amused smile, as part and parcel of the humours of the situation. He was in high good humour, lounging hither and thither in the midst of all that unsightliness and squalor; and ever as he walked, the music-master's hasty exclamation kept measure with his steps in a pleasant, monotonous cadence of 'Thousands a year!—thousands a year!' 'Why not?' Philip cried aloud, at last; and echo returned no answer to this query.

That day was an altogether delightful one for Mrs. Marescalchi. She was informed that, subject to certain prudential restrictions, she might choose for herself in what way she would spend the latter half of it; and, after due consideration, she decided for a row on the river, dinner at the Criterion, and a visit to the Promenade Concert at Covent Garden to finish up with. At this season of the year such a programme did not seem too risky to be sanctioned, and in pursuance of it the young couple found themselves, about an hour before sunset, drifting lazily down stream towards Hammersmith.

'Fan,' said Philip, suddenly, 'I have hit upon an entirely new scheme of life.'

'Have you, dear?' responded Fanny, straightening herself up, and ceasing to dabble her fingers in the water; for the tone of her lord and master's voice appeared to call for an attitude of respect and attention.

'I have always thought,' Philip said gravely, 'that the finger of Fate pointed me rather towards spangles and tights than towards the woolsack. I am sure you will agree with me in thinking that I might easily become Lord Chancellor, if I were not above being at the trouble of earning that distinction.'

Fanny signified that she felt no doubt whatever as to that.

'The Lord Chancellor gets 10,000*l.* a year, which is very pretty pay as times go; but then one has to pass through a

deuce of a lot of bother and worry, and to grow an ugly old man, before one has a chance of drawing the salary. All things considered, I am not sure that it would not be preferable to put up with a smaller income—say a couple of thousand a year, or so—and begin to earn it, while one is in the prime of one's youth and beauty, as a *primo tenore* at the Opera.'

Fanny clapped her hands in delight. 'Oh, Philip, do you really mean it? How glorious! But I didn't know gentlemen ever went upon the stage.'

'In these enlightened days, my dear Fanny, a gentleman is allowed to exercise any trade that brings in a sufficient amount of money. I think I'll go and look up old Steinberger to-morrow and hear what he says. Supposing that he reports favourably—which he very likely won't do, mind you—I shall be much inclined to brave the home authorities, and go in for an independent career. There's a charm about independence—at least, I imagine that there is; for I have no personal experience to guide me in speaking upon the point. In the sense of freedom from supervision, it might be attainable pretty early in the business: freedom from pecuniary obligations would have to be postponed until a little later. Oh, my dear Fan, what an unmitigated rascal you have got for a husband!'

Fanny stared, shook her pretty head in bewilderment, and exclaimed, 'Why, whatever do you mean?'

'It would take rather too long to explain. How would you like to go to Italy for a couple of years?'

'Me? Go to Italy? Oh, laws!'

'Fanny, you shock me. You really should try to cure yourself of indulging in low ejaculations. You may say, "Oh, lor'!" when you want to intimate delight and surprise; I heard a duchess use the expression the other day, so it must be all right; but you must n't say, "Oh, laws!"—it's vulgar. Yes; I suppose, if I do go in for this business, it will be a case of Italy to begin with. There is no reason why you shouldn't complete your education there, and we should certainly be able to see much more of one another in a foreign land than we can here.'

That clinched the matter, so far as Mrs. Marescalchi was concerned. Visions of palms and orange-groves, of marble palaces and shady retreats, made for happy lovers, began forthwith to present themselves to her excited imagination. She could hardly enjoy the unwonted dissipation of the evening for thinking of it all; and Philip was very good-natured in helping out her crude dreams with sundry pretty fancy sketches of their

future life. No one knew better than he did how unlikely it was that fancy would in this instance prove the forerunner of fact; but no one had a clearer conviction than he of the harmlessness of fancy and the wisdom of indulging in it, upon occasion. It did not affect the future one way or the other, and it made the present agreeable. Philip's philosophy was of that practical kind which concerns itself chiefly with the present.

Everybody who is at all in the musical world knows Herr Steinberger; and so, for the matter of that, do a few thousands of people who are not. Years ago he established his reputation by introducing to the Parisian stage a young singer whose fame is now world-wide. Shortly after this lucky hit, he took up his residence in London, where he soon became the singing-master *par excellence* of society, and where he is to be seen most nights during the season, playing raging accompaniments to the drawing-room performances of amateurs of both sexes. He is a man of much energy, perseverance, and good-will; his successes have been many; and as he charges the highest permissible price for his lessons, and is said to be in the habit of addressing his pupils with the most cruel frankness, his popularity is unbounded, and during nine months at least out of the year he is as hard-worked and as well paid for his work as any toiler within the four seas.

Philip, who had a slight aquaintance with Herr Steinberger, from having met him here and there at theatrical and operatic entertainments, went to call upon him on the morning after his arrival in London, and found him in the act of packing up in preparation for a well-earned holiday. Steinberger, like a man of business as he was, wasted no time in preliminaries, and expressed no surprise at his visitor's choice of a profession, but proceeded to put him through his paces. His verdict was not particularly encouraging.

'Hah! very pretty—very goot for a leetle concert in a leetle room; but you know not how to sing at all—oh, not at all! not at all! You must forget all what you have learnt; that is the first thing. How old are you?'

'Twenty-four,' said Philip.

'So! There is no great hurry, then. Come to me again in the autumn, if you do not change your mind meanwhile. You have a voice; but whether it is worth anything—that is more than I, or any one else, can tell you yet. Work, work, work; and in two years', three years', time—perhaps—we shall see.

And before Philip could press the oracle for any more definite response he was gently pushed out of the room.

Fanny, who had been pacing up and down the street outside during this interview, was a little disappointed when she heard the upshot of it.

'I expect he's a silly sort of old man, after all,' she said.

But Philip reassured her. 'Steinberger's always like that: it's his way. He doesn't choose to let his praise be easily earned; and quite right too: nobody cares for a cheap article. If he hadn't thought pretty well of my chances, he wouldn't have told me to come back.'

Philip had taken it strongly into his head that he would like to become a second Mario; and that, according to the Italian proverb, was the surest means he could have adopted towards attaining his end. It had, at all events, the effect of making him very cheerful and sanguine for the time; for when he wanted a thing very much, he always made up his mind that he was sure to get it, hating disappointment, and being unable to bring himself to the contemplation of so disagreeable an eventuality.

Prophesying smooth things, and enjoying the glories of success in advance, he strolled along the shady side of Piccadilly, while the happy Fanny hung upon his words;—which thing he would hardly have dared to do, even at that advanced season of the year, had he had all his wits about him. And before very long his neglect of ordinary precautions was brought home to him in a way which he did not like; for as the couple turned into the Green Park, who should come striding out, and almost run up against them, but Colonel Kenyon?

The encounter was over, and Colonel Kenyon round the corner and out of sight in an instant; and Philip, who would have given a great deal to know whether the recognition had been mutual or not, continued his walk in a state of painful uncertainty. He comforted himself by reflecting that the old fellow was just that sort of duffer who would pull up and shake hands with a friend, no matter under what circumstances he might chance to meet him; but for all that, he inwardly cursed his own thoughtlessness, and resolved that no one should ever meet him in the streets of London with Fanny again.

Two days afterwards he went down to stay with some friends in Gloucestershire, whence he immediately despatched a letter to Margaret, giving her a very entertaining description

of a ball at which he had not been present, and stating that he had been so busy with rehearsals ever since his arrival that he really had not been able to find a minute for writing before.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS BRUNE'S PARTNER.

THE great fire which consumed two-thirds of the Duke of Retford's historic mansion in Yorkshire, reducing to ashes about a quarter of a mile of indifferent pictures, together with much ancient and valuable furniture and many curiosities and heirlooms impossible to replace, was an event deeply deplored by his Grace, still more deeply deplored by the insurance offices, and declared by the newspapers to be nothing less than a public calamity. Still, as is the case with most calamities, public and private, there were not a few people who found their profit in it; and among these were persons of all ranks dwelling round about Crayminster. For, although the work of reconstruction was set on foot with all the speed which a magnate of the Duke of Retford's resources could command, it had barely been in full swing for two years, and was consequently very far indeed from approaching completion, when the young Marquis of Craybridge came of age; and thus it became necessary that the festivities which ought to have gladdened the north of England upon that occasion should be held at Craybridge Hall, a residence little liked and seldom visited by the family. The festivities in question were, it was rumoured, to be celebrated upon a scale unprecedented in the annals of the county. They were to last through the best part of a week; they were to be marked not only by the ordinary features of triumphal arches, oxen roasted whole, bonfires, fireworks, and the like, but by a revival of sundry old English sports, intermingled with such modern ones as cricket, polo, and lawn-tennis, and they were to include a ball which a prince of the blood royal had promised to grace with his presence.

All this enforced hospitality would have possessed little interest for our friends at Broom Leas—for Craybridge Hall was situated some fifteen miles away from them, and its inmates were not upon their visiting-list—had not the heir-apparent, who had been Walter's fag at Eton, happened to meet his old schoolfellow at a cricket-match on the Crayminster

ground, and taken that opportunity for renewing acquaintance with him. This chance encounter had led to an introduction of both Walter and his sister to the Duchess, who had been very civil and friendly; and for some days afterwards Nellie had cherished a faint hope of being invited to the great ball. Nothing, however, came of it; and when Walter was asked to take part in the cricket-match, and to dine and sleep at Craybridge afterwards, she ceased to think about the matter, perceiving that her dream of dancing in the same room with royalty was not to be fulfilled upon that occasion. All the greater, therefore, was her delight when, at the eleventh hour, Lord Craybridge rode over to Broom Leas, bearing a hastily-written, but kindly, note from his mother, in which Miss Brune was begged, if she would pardon the informality of the invitation, to stay at the Hall, not only for the night of the ball, but for the entire week. Every hole and corner in the house had had its occupant allotted to it weeks before, the young man explained; it was only that morning that one of the invited guests had sent an apology, and had left free the room which it was hoped that Miss Brune would consent to use. His mother would have called herself; only the truth was that she was in such a state of fuss and flurry that she hardly knew whether she was standing on her head or her heels.

'I don't suppose there is such another abominable house in England. Nothing could make it habitable; and we have got to cram at least twenty more people into it than it will hold. The whole business will be acute misery for us. But I dare say it won't be bad fun for the lookers-on, and we'll do the best we can to amuse you, Miss Brune, if you'll come.'

Miss Brune required no persuasive speeches. She answered, with the frankness which was her habit, 'Thank you; I should like of all things to go; but I am afraid I mustn't give an answer until I have seen my father. Would it do if I wrote by to-night's post?'

Lord Craybridge intimated that a demand for instant decision had not formed part of his instructions; and after apologising once more, and declaring that he should await the arrival of the post-bag the next morning with the greatest anxiety, took his leave.

'Undoubtedly you must go,' said Mr. Brune, when his sanction was requested later in the day. 'We will forgive the Duchess's want of ceremony, because much must be pardoned to duchesses. Moreover, Nell, it is quite clear to me that you

are upon the threshold of a great opportunity. Only play your cards skilfully, and who knows whether you may not become a duchess yourself one of these days? I am grieved that you should not have had the presence of mind to press Lord Craybridge to stay to luncheon.'

'That boy!' cried Nellie, with fine disdain; 'why, he must be three years younger than Walter, at least. Besides, I would rather die than marry a man above me in rank. Fancy being like Lady Travers, who doesn't dare to ask her own relations into her own house! If I thought any one could suspect me of such pitiful designs, I wouldn't go to Craybridge at all.'

'Perhaps nobody will suspect you,' Mr. Brune answered gravely; 'indeed, there seems to be a very good chance that nobody will. Pray don't refuse this invitation hastily. Consider what you owe to your family: consider what will be the position of your poor father if there is another bad harvest, and the hops turn out a failure again; and if that won't move you, picture to yourself the impotent wrath of Mrs. Winnington when she hears that you have gone to stay a whole week with a duchess.'

It must be acknowledged that this last consideration would have had some weight with Nellie, even if her mind had not already been made up; for she had had many things to bear from Mrs. Winnington in the way of patronage and criticism, and hers was not a meek nature. But she had more than a sufficiency of other motives, less open to exception, to influence her decision; and she went to bed that night with a heart so full of joyous anticipation that there was no room in it for malice or uncharitableness.

Nellie Brune was fortunate enough and unsophisticated enough to possess the faculty of enjoyment to its fullest extent. Her life had been so healthy and natural a one, she had dwelt among such simple and honest people, that she had learnt nothing of that wearisome habit of introspection which is the curse of the present generation, and enjoyed the good things of this world without bothering herself to analyse her emotions. Margaret's care, and perhaps also a share of hereditary good breeding, had preserved her from growing up into a hoyden; but at the age of eighteen she much resembled Horace's Lydè—

> Quæ, velut latis equa trima campis,
> Ludit exsultim.

High spirits and the customs of a large family may have made her a little indiscreet at times, a little too prompt in forming judgments, and rash in giving utterance to them; but these are faults which time seldom fails to soften down, and it is only sour-tempered people who would quarrel with them, when accompanied by all the physical and mental charms of youth.

Nellie achieved a signal success at Craybridge Hall, where she speedily became a universal favourite. Happily for her comfort, the young heir did not fall in love with her, his budding affections being engaged elsewhere at that time; but both he and his mother showed her every possible kindness and attention, and she rewarded them, on the last day, by declaring that she had never spent such a happy week before in her life.

'It has all gone off so splendidly, hasn't it?' she said.

The Duchess smiled, and said, 'I am very glad you think so.'

'Oh! everybody must think so; there hasn't been a single failure. The cricket might have been better certainly; but that was partly the fault of the ground. Now there is only the ball to-night, and then there will be an end of everything. I should like to have it all over again from the beginning.'

'I should not,' said the Duchess, laughing. 'I am glad, for your sake, that there is still the ball to look forward to; but I shall be very thankful, for my own, when I can look back upon it. Out of all the host of people who have been asked, I believe scarcely a dozen have refused. You must not expect to be able to dance.'

'Oh! we shall manage,' answered Nellie, confidently. 'I mean to dance all night. That is, if I get partners enough,' she added, as a modest afterthought.

If a sufficient supply of partners was all that was required, Miss Brune ran no risk of having a moment's repose until after sunrise. She made her appearance in the ball-room rather late, and was at once besieged by a multitude of acquaintances, old and new, insomuch that she speedily got out of her reckoning, and had engaged herself two or three times over for every dance upon the programme before she knew where she was. She was, in truth, a little dazzled by the brilliancy of the scene around her. Notwithstanding the Duchess's disparaging criticism of it, the picture-gallery, which had been made to do duty for a ball-room, was spacious enough to answer the required purpose, and with its beautiful old crystal chandeliers, its banks of hothouse plants, and its miniature fountains playing in every

recess, was in Nellie's eyes something closely approaching an earthly paradise. Nearly the whole of the expected company was assembled; for the invitations had been issued 'to have the honour of meeting their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Middlesex,' and punctuality was consequently indispensable. All the diamonds of two counties were sparkling and twinkling upon the persons of their fortunate owners; and never before had Miss Brune been privileged to gaze upon so varied a collection of magnificent toilettes. Taking stock of these, one by one, she presently became aware of Mrs. Winnington and Edith, whom she had not expected to meet, and whose surprise at the encounter was evidently not less than her own.

'Oh! how do you do? I did not know you were to be here,' said the former, not very graciously. 'Who brought you?'

'I have been staying here for a few days,' Nellie answered, with a demure enjoyment of her triumph; and Walter, who was standing by, added explanatorily:—

'The Duchess was good-natured enough to ask Nell over for the week.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Mrs. Winnington, looking very black. 'Your father did not mention it when I saw him yesterday. Rather odd not to have invited him too, was it not?' She was scrutinising Nellie from head to foot through her eyeglasses, and now asked abruptly, 'Is that the dress Margaret gave you?'

'Yes; is it not lovely?'

'It fits atrociously in the back,' Mrs. Winnington was beginning; but this well-meant shot missed fire, for the opening words were drowned in the crash of the orchestra striking up 'God save the Queen,' and all eyes were instantly turned towards the doorway, through which a procession of august personages was seen approaching. The Duke of Middlesex, who had a country-house in the neighbourhood, had arrived within five minutes of his time, and was leading his hostess up the room, followed by some German Serenities and a galaxy of minor stars whom he had brought with him.

By the time that Nellie had recovered to some extent from the excitement into which she had been thrown by the passing of this little pageant, the throng had effectually separated her from her amiable old friend, and she had been taken charge of by her first partner, a stranger whose name she had failed to catch. He seemed to be a good deal amused by the girl's

unconventional talk and artless admiration of the big-wigs at the other end of the room.

'Is this your first ball, Miss Brune?' he asked, smiling.

'Oh, dear no!' answered Nellie, much offended. 'What put that into your head?'

'I beg your pardon, I'm sure. It is so many years since I was young myself that I have almost forgotten what it feels like; but I know there was a time when it used to make me very angry to be taken for less than my age. Nowadays I often have to complain of exactly the opposite error; and I assure you it is a great deal more painful to be set down as an old man than as a very young one.'

Nellie looked up at him. He was a tall man, with a bright, good-humoured face, a fair moustache, and closely-cut reddish beard; his eyes were clear, and his hair—what little there was of it—unmixed with grey. Decidedly he was not old; but probably he was not far off middle age. Nellie was upon the point of saying, in a generous spirit, 'I should put you at about forty,' but thought better of it. After all, these delicate subjects were best not meddled with, and some people, she knew, became bald early in life.

'I have been to plenty of balls before,' she said, reverting to the original topic; 'but I never was at one of this kind until now. Nearly all the faces are new to me. I am not accustomed to associating with princes and princesses, either, as I dare say you are.'

'They are very much like the rest of the world, when you come to know them.'

'They may be. But I cannot possibly come to know them; so they are not at all like the rest of the world to me. I shall be talking about this evening for years to come most likely, and I want to hear who everybody is. Are there many celebrities in the room, and do you know them all?'

'I know a good many of them by sight, at all events. The great majority of them are relations or connections of the house—lords and ladies—celebrities in a certain sense. I don't think there is any one present whom I should call exactly a distinguished person; but then I'm a Radical, and my ideas of distinction are not likely to be the same as yours. That fine-looking old fellow, with the white hair, is Lord Aintree, the great racing man. He is immensely popular on the turf, and he deserves to be so; for there isn't a more honourable or straightforward man in England. The lady whom he is talking

to is Lady Carlton, whom you may have heard of. She gives a great many big parties in London, and is supposed to render invaluable services to the Tory party.'

'She looks a very forbidding sort of old woman,' Nellie remarked.

'Do you think so? Well, perhaps she is a little hard-featured; but she is a good old soul, for all that. I happen to know that she gives away thousands a year in charity; and there are not many people of whom that can be said.'

He went on describing the guests, one after another, in this way; and the odd thing was that, although he told some amusing stories and had some queer personal characteristics to point out, he did not make a single ill-natured observation from beginning to end.

'Why, according to you, they are all delightful!' Nellie exclaimed at last; 'you haven't a bad word for anybody.'

'Why should I use bad words? Most of these people have shown me kindness, at one time or another; and what is the good of picking one's neighbours to pieces? It's a shocking bad habit. One may just as easily look at a man's good points as at his ugly ones; and, if the truth were known, I suspect it would be found that we are all tarred with much the same brush.'

'One must have likes and dislikes, though. I hate some people; and so do you, I suppose?'

'Upon my word, I don't think I do. I don't even hate my own political chief, though he is always snubbing me, and invariably walks out of the House when I get upon my legs.'

'Are you in Parliament, then?' asked Nellie, with an increased respect for her partner; 'and do you make speeches?'

'I do indeed,' he answered, laughing; 'only too many of them. But I am a man of hobbies, I must tell you; I generally have some measure on hand that I want to force through, and unless I make a nuisance of myself, there wouldn't be the least chance for me. So I go on pegging away, session after session, and sometimes, after a great deal of fighting and abuse, I carry my point.'

He looked so strong, so good-humoured and honest, that Nellie felt irresistibly drawn to him. 'It is a great pity that you should be a Radical,' she said gravely.

'Oh! but I assure you Radicals are not so black as they are painted, and, as for me, I am a very mild specimen of the race. I don't want to abolish the Queen, or the House of Lords, or even

the Church. In fact, at this present moment, I don't want to abolish anything, except vivisection. That is my hobby just now. I want total abolition of vivisection; and I hope I shall get it, too.'

'I am sure I hope you will!' cried Nellie, warmly; 'I am quite on your side there.'

'What! are you for total abolition? You won't be satisfied with a commission of inquiry, or with careful supervision of the practice? You don't think that headlong legislation is a thing to be deprecated upon all grounds, and that we may safely rely upon the evidence of men of science, whose devotion to the welfare of the human race is notorious?'

'I'm for total abolition,' answered Nellie, firmly. 'The human race must shift for itself; we can't hear the dogs' evidence.'

'Ah! then you must be a Radical at heart. A Radical, you know, is an obnoxious person who insists upon going to the root of things, and looks upon all compromises with suspicion. I hope, after this, you won't hate all Radicals.'

'You will allow me to hate vivisectionists, though?'

'No, I won't. You may hate their practice as much as you like. Take my advice, Miss Brune, and hate things; don't hate people. But I'm keeping your next partner waiting, and he is throwing glances of unequivocal hatred at me. Will you give me another dance later on, and then you can tell me who the unfortunates are whom you detest?'

Nellie nodded; for her new acquaintance rather interested her, and as she was already so deeply engaged that it would be necessary for her to throw over somebody for every dance, she thought she might as well disappoint two people as one.

She took advantage of a pause in the waltz to ask her present partner who the tall man with the beard and the bald head was; and after a moment's hesitation, he answered boldly, 'John Bright.'

'That he certainly is not,' returned Nellie; 'even I know better than that. Why, John Bright is a Quaker.'

'So he is; you're quite right. And Quakers don't dance, do they? Dear me! what on earth is that man's name? I know it as well as I do my own; but I can't get hold of it. If he isn't Bright, he's somebody of that kind. Plimsoll, or Sir Wilfrid Lawson, or somebody.'

Trustworthy information was evidently not to be looked for from that vague person, and Nellie decided to reserve further inquiries for her next partner. But those inquiries were never

made; for now a most important and unexpected event took place; nothing less, namely, than an intimation that his Royal Highness desired to dance with Miss Brune; and in the perturbation consequent upon this announcement Nellie forgot for a time the existence of her new friend. She was a great deal more alarmed than pleased by the honour conferred upon her; and, proud as the retrospect of having been whirled round the room by a live prince might prove to be in after years, the present sensation of dancing in a vast unoccupied space, while the rest of the assemblage stood still and stared, was far too embarrassing to be enjoyable. She passed through the ordeal, however, creditably enough. The Duke of Middlesex was very good-natured and not at all formidable, and he was so obliging as to mould his conversation in such a manner that an occasional 'Yes, sir,' was all that seemed requisite to support it. When Nellie was allowed to return to her native obscurity, she was almost immediately joined by the Unknown, who came up to claim his promised dance, and who congratulated her upon her conquest of royalty.

'You will be glad to hear that you have produced a most favourable impression upon his Royal Highness. He was talking about you just now to the Duke of Retford, and I heard him say—no; I won't tell you what he said; but it was very complimentary. I hope the approbation was mutual.'

'I don't know,' said Nellie. 'I thought he was very nice; but I couldn't tell you what he talked about if my life depended upon it. I managed to keep my wits about me just enough to dance my best and answer when I was spoken to; but that was all. I never lifted my eyes from the ground. I hadn't even the satisfaction of seeing Mrs. Winnington turning green with jealousy at my triumph.'

'Mrs. Winnington? Is she one of the people whom you hate?'

'Yes; she is,' answered Nellie, emphatically. 'I have no hesitation in saying that I hate Mrs. Winnington. And so would you, if you knew her.'

'But I do know her.'

'Well?'

'Well, our acquaintance is rather a recent one; but I haven't discovered anything hateful about her so far. She struck me as a very civil and amiable old lady.'

'Mrs. Winnington civil and amiable! Your acquaintance with her must be recent indeed; or else you must be quite

incorrigibly amiable yourself. I don't believe even her own daughters would call her that—at least, two of them wouldn't. I can't answer for the third, because she is like you; it isn't in her to hate anybody.'

'At any rate, she may be excused for not hating her own mother.'

'I don't know. We are told to love our enemies; but do you think any one really does?'

'The question is whether we have any. My own idea is that very few men or women have enemies, unless they have done something to deserve them.'

'Thank you very much.'

'Now I have put my foot in it. But I really did not mean to say that you deserved Mrs. Winnington's enmity; I only meant to suggest that perhaps, after all, it didn't exist. However, I know nothing about it; so I can't judge. What is the next name on the black list?'

Nellie considered for a short space. 'Now that I come to think of it,' she said slowly, 'I am not sure that I actually hate any one, except Mrs. Winnington. There are the Stanniforths, father and son, of course.'

'Poor Stanniforths, father and son! What have they done? and why are they to be hated as a matter of course?'

'Oh! it is much too long a story to tell,' Nellie answered; 'and, besides, it would not interest you.'

The stranger, however, declared that it would interest him beyond everything; and eventually Miss Brune was induced to give reasons for her bitter animosity against two men whom, as she confessed, she had never even set eyes upon. The whole history of the purchase of Longbourne, and of the subsequent ill-gotten gains derived from the railway company, was related; the low cunning of the Manchester merchant, and the uncomplaining magnanimity of his dupe, were dilated upon in glowing language; and Mrs. Stanniforth's avowed disapproval of the transaction which had placed her in her present home was not forgotten. The waltz, during which the first part of the above colloquy had taken place at intervals, was at an end; and it was upon a balcony overlooking the Duchess's rose-garden that Miss Brune told the story of the family wrongs.

Her hearer, meanwhile, resting his elbows upon the broad balustrade, looked out into the night, and allowed her to finish her narrative without a word of interruption. Then he said:—

'You have run away with an altogether mistaken notion,

do you know. I have been acquainted with old Mr. Stanniforth all my life, and I can assure you that he is the last man in the world to drive a hard bargain or take an unfair advantage. Vulgar he may be, according to your notions of vulgarity; but no one has ever accused him of being dishonest. He is a man of business; and a bargain, you know, is a bargain. If I go into the market to buy an estate, or a horse, or whatever it may be, I must use my own judgment as to the value of my purchase. If I didn't think it worth the price asked, I shouldn't give that price. In fact, the chances are that I shouldn't give the price, unless, in my opinion, it were worth a little more.'

'I once heard of a man,' said Nellie, 'who bought what appeared to be a glass bead from a pedlar for a few shillings, knowing it to be a valuable diamond. He was what you would call a man of business, I suppose. If Mr. Stanniforth is a friend of yours, I am sorry I mentioned his name; but I am afraid I shall continue to dislike him nevertheless.'

'You would not dislike him, if you were to meet him.'

'I would not meet him for the world!' cried Nellie. 'Luckily, there is not the least chance of my ever doing so; and as for his son, Mr. Tom Stanniforth, who is coming to stay at Longbourne very soon, I shall take good care to keep out of *his* way.'

'Isn't that rather hard lines upon poor Tom Stanniforth?'

'I dare say it won't distress him very much,' answered Nellie, drily.

'But, indeed, if you carry out your threat, it will distress him extremely. I happen to be the Tom Stanniforth in question; so I can speak with some authority as to his feelings.'

Nellie blessed the friendly darkness which veiled her confusion. Every word that she had said about the elder Stanniforth's dishonesty and plebeian origin came back to her memory with horrible distinctness; she was furious with herself for her stupidity, and if the mischief had not seemed to be past all mending, she would have begged her companion's pardon in the humblest language she could command. Unluckily, however, he broke out into a great jolly laugh; and that was more than her pride could brook.

'It was all your fault!' she exclaimed.

'I know it was. I ought to have told you my name long ago; but the temptation to let you go on was too strong for me. Will you forgive me, Miss Brune, and shall we shake hands upon it?'

But Miss Brune was no longer in a mood either to accept or to offer apologies. 'I should like to go in now, please, Mr. Stanniforth,' she said, with much dignity. 'You can leave me beside Mrs. Winnington.'

And as soon as they had re-entered the ball-room, she withdrew her hand from her late partner's arm, and, with a little cold bow, gave him his dismissal. He lingered near her for a moment, as if he had something more to say; but, as she turned her head resolutely away from him and began talking with great rapidity to a bystander, he moved off presently, with a half-amused, half-concerned look upon his face, which Nellie saw out of the corner of her eye, and which did not serve to diminish her wrath.

She watched his tall figure skirting the space reserved for the dancers; presently she saw the Duke of Middlesex arrest his progress by a familiar tap on the shoulder; she observed the easy deference with which he talked to the prince, and consoled herself with an inward sneer at the pliability of some people's Radicalism. Shortly afterwards she caught sight of his long legs extended beside Mrs. Winnington's ample skirts, and she thought to herself, 'Now he has gone over to the enemy.'

All this was most unjust and unfair; but those who amuse themselves by setting traps for their neighbours must not expect the entrapped ones to judge them with strict impartiality. If Nellie could have overheard what was passing between Mr. Stanniforth and the lady at whose side he had chosen to seat himself, she must have admitted that the second of her charges at least was an unfounded one.

'Yes; that is the girl's brother dancing with Edith,' Mrs. Winnington was saying. 'He is a shade less objectionable than his sister; but that is not high praise. They are anything but a nice family. So shockingly brought up.'

'Oh, come!' cried Mr. Stanniforth, 'I'm sure you don't mean that.'

'If I did not mean it, I should not say it,' rejoined Mrs. Winnington, tartly; for several things had occurred to put her out of temper that evening, and under such circumstances she could not always retain command over her tongue. Recollecting, however, that she was not yet this gentleman's mother-in-law, she made haste to add, in a more charitable spirit, 'One must not be too hard upon them; a widower's children are much to be pitied, and Mr. Brune has allowed his to run wild

all their lives. They are not well brought up—I cannot pretend to consider them so—but the fault is not altogether their own, perhaps.'

'You told me that they had been brought up almost entirely by Margaret,' Mr. Stanniforth remarked; 'otherwise I shouldn't have doubted your sincerity. For my own part, I think Miss Brune does Margaret infinite credit. I have not met such an honest, unaffected girl for a long time. She seems to me to have a good deal of character, too; and as for her looks—well, one ought not to praise anybody for possessing good looks, I suppose, however much one may be under their influence. Beauty is a great power, nevertheless. Upon my word, Mrs. Winnington, if I were twenty years younger, I believe I should fall desperately in love with Miss Brune.'

Mrs. Winnington's eyeglasses fell from her hand. She turned, and stared at her neighbour, half horrified, half suspicious. Could he have guessed at the projects which she had formed for his future domestic bliss, and was he amusing himself at her expense with an unseemly jest? She almost hoped that it might be so. But no; the broad smile that lighted up his good-humoured face had not a shade of malice in it; it was obvious that he was expressing his thoughts quite frankly; and poor Mrs. Winnington was within an ace of losing her temper again as she looked at him.

'I can't congratulate you upon your taste,' she said curtly.

It really was enough to provoke a saint. At the cost of much pain, labour, and humiliation, she had obtained an invitation to this ball, simply and solely in order that Tom Stanniforth, who, as she had heard, was to be present at it, might dance with her daughter; and here was her reward! The wretched man had danced twice only in the course of the evening—only twice; and both times with the girl whom of all others she would fain have kept out of his way. For of course he would meet her again at Longbourne, and of course she was pretty; Mrs. Winnington was perfectly well aware of that. She was prettier even, perhaps, than Edith: though surely less refined, less aristocratic. But what did a horrid Manchester man care about refinement? Everything was going wrong. He had not asked Edith for a dance; he evidently did not now intend to do so; and meanwhile Edith was spending a great deal too large a portion of the evening with Walter Brune.

Alas! the world we live in is full of disappointment and discouragement; and what with straitened means, and the gout,

and old age creeping on apace, there are moments in which life itself seems but a doubtful blessing, and its prizes, such as they are, hardly worth the worry and weariness of struggling after. But Mrs. Winnington was not one to allow despondency to get the upper hand of her for long; and, as she had plenty of obstinacy, she very generally got her own way in the end. She contrived, upon this occasion, to get Mr. Stanniforth to dance with Edith before the evening was over; and that was something. Rome was not built in a day; middle-aged bachelors were game that required wary stalking; a boy like Walter Brune could not be any serious obstacle in the way of well-laid plans; Nellie was clearly marked out by fate to marry that odious young Marescalchi, who would break her heart, and go to the dogs. Such were the reflections with which Mrs. Winnington comforted herself, in the intervals of slumber, during her fifteen-mile drive home.

CHAPTER X.

MR. STANNIFORTH MAKES FRIENDS

At the age of three-and-forty, the member for Blackport was probably as contented a sample of humanity as could have been found from John o' Groat's to the Land's End. A man who possesses wealth, congenial occupation, a good digestion, and a clear conscience, must be a very extraordinary sort of man indeed if he be not happy; and Tom Stanniforth was by no means an extraordinary man. Some people thought him odd; but his oddity had never taken the form of such base ingratitude to Fortune as dissatisfaction with his lot, nor was he niggardly of his smiles to a world which had treated him so well. He liked the world, and the world liked him; and when he told Nellie that he had no enemies and hated nobody, he made a statement which was not only true, but which, considering the circumstances of the case, was almost a truism. He may not, perhaps, have deserved any great credit for being in love and charity with all men; but the fact that he was so was generally counted to his credit nevertheless; and this much may, at all events, be claimed for him, that he had not wasted his life, and that he had used his money and his abilities without stint in the service of his fellow-creatures. What he called his hobbies had all been generous hobbies; and if many of them had ended in failure and some had been extinguished by a cold shower of not un-

deserved ridicule, a fair percentage at least had borne good fruit. His shrugged his shoulders over his failures, shook the ridicule off his broad back, and plodded on his way, to an accompaniment of cheers and laughter. Had he been an ambitious man, a distinguished political career might have been open to him, for he had plenty of common sense; he had had a long experience of the House of Commons, he loved hard work, and he had that patient diligence in mastering the details of a subject which is one of the rarest and most useful of qualities; but he was not ambitious, and in truth cared not a jot for the game of politics. He called himself a Radical because, in a general way, he thought it was better to progress than to stand still; and he was not so amenable to discipline as he ought to have been; he had more than once taken upon him to play the *enfant terrible*; and thus office never had been, and was now never likely to be, offered to him.

In private life he had hosts of friends, comprising all classes of the community, from royalty down to the operatives, the chimney-sweeps, the discharged criminals, and others whose wrongs he had at different times undertaken to set to rights. No kind of society came amiss to him; and as his purse was always open, his good nature boundless, and his acquaintance with social shibboleths all that could be desired, he was welcome wherever he went. Yet, after something like a quarter of a century of hospitality given and received, he was still a bachelor, and, as some of his friends feared, a confirmed one.

It may be questioned, however, whether any bachelor of less than threescore and ten can be said to be confirmed in his bachelorhood; and perhaps he is never more vulnerable than at that precise period of middle life when mothers commonly give him up in despair. For it is then that the blanks caused by the death or marriage of old friends begin to be felt, and domesticity acquires charms never thought of before, and a new sense of loneliness weighs upon a man's spirits. Tom Stanniforth (no one, by the way, ever called him anything but Tom) was entering upon this critical phase of his career, and was experiencing the sensations incidental thereto, at the time when Mrs. Winnington made up her mind to select another son-in-law from the ranks of the plutocracy. It is needless to say that many kind efforts had been made before then to render his existence a less solitary one; but from one cause and another they had all proved abortive. With his great wealth, and with the knowledge of human nature which he had perforce acquired,

it might not have been surprising if he had resolved to lead a single life, as modest heiresses are said to do, from a conviction of the impossibility of ever knowing certainly whether he was loved for his own sake; but, as a matter of fact, he had formed no such determination. He had not married simply because he had never happened to fall very much in love; because accidents had prevented his following up a youthful fancy or two; because, in fact, he had always had plenty of other things to think about. Now, for the first time in the course of his busy and joyous life, he was asking himself whether it was not advisable that he should settle down, and provide his huge, desolate mansion in the Midlands with a mistress; and he was not unwilling to be vanquished by Mrs. Winnington, whose intentions he perfectly understood, and who, indeed, played her game after a fashion which could hardly have deceived the least suspicious of men. He thought Edith might do very well. She was of course by a great many years his junior, and he was not conscious of being at all in love with her; but these drawbacks—if drawbacks they were—need not prevent her from making him an excellent wife, nor him from blessing her with the best of husbands. So, since Margaret pressed him to pay her a long visit, and since he had for the moment no other engagements, save such as could be easily got rid of, he decided to make himself comfortable at Longbourne and wait upon events. He might, in the sequel, propose to Edith, or he might not; and again, she might accept him, or she might not. Either way he had no great mental disturbance to dread.

The popularity to which this fortunate man was accustomed did not fail to attend him in his new quarters. Philip—himself a popular person, though in a different way and from quite other causes—recognised in the new-comer a kindred spirit, and obtained without difficulty his co-operation in a project for private theatricals which Margaret had rather unwillingly consented to think about; Mr. Brune, who had never shared his daughter's antipathy for the race of Stanniforth, took a great fancy to him, and was pleased to find that he was unaffectedly interested in farming operations; and Walter's prejudices, which, if less outspoken, were not less deep than his sister's, were overcome at once and for ever when he walked across the park to Longbourne one morning, and found the member for Blackport in his shirt-sleeves practising cricket with the coachman and a couple of stable-helpers. As for the ladies, two at least of them were loud in their praises of him. 'He is so genuine,' said Mrs.

Winnington, who was fond of a stock phrase. And for many a long day her intimates heard much of the genuineness of Tom Stanniforth.

Nevertheless, there was one person who made up her mind that she would have nothing to do with the universal favourite, charm he never so wisely. For a whole week Nellie Brune held herself aloof, finding one excuse after another for absenting herself from Longbourne, privately upbraiding her brother with his apostacy and listening to her father's panegyrics in eloquent silence; and great was her disgust when, on the eighth day, Mr. Brune brought his friend and supplanter in to luncheon. To avoid speaking to him was hardly practicable, but she was determined not to be gracious; and she was so far successful that her father, who rarely scolded her, took her to task somewhat severely afterwards for her want of hospitality. But the provoking thing was that Mr. Stanniforth did not seem to notice it at all. If he had looked conscious or embarrassed, or had shown any signs of being ashamed of himself, her heart might have been softened towards him; but he did nothing of the kind. On the contrary, he totally ignored all previous passages of arms between them, alluded to the Duchess of Retford's ball just as if nothing of a painful nature had occurred on that occasion, and ended by boldly asking Miss Brune to walk round the garden with him and show him her flowers.

'We have no flowers worth looking at,' she answered, in a very chilling tone; but he declined to be chilled or to believe this assertion; and the upshot of it was that Nellie had to comply with his request.

She walked a few paces in advance of him, pointing out the various flower-beds with her sunshade, and showing by her manner that she was merely acquitting herself of a task and of an uncongenial one.

'Petunias flourish very well here; the calceolarias are a failure this year. This is the rose-garden. It is small, as you see; but the soil is considered good for roses, and my father has been very successful with them. He has taken a great many prizes. In fact, he could tell you all about them a great deal better than I can. Quite at the end of that path there is a magnolia-tree which people say is the finest in the county. You can easily find your way, if you care to go and look at it.'

Mr. Stanniforth laughed outright. 'I see you want to get rid of me,' said he; 'but I am too old and too thick-skinned to

mind a snubbing. And I am determined to be friends with you before I have done with you, Miss Brune.'

'Then please consider that we have made friends, and that you have done with me,' cried Nellie, with sudden irritability. 'I am sure I am not quarrelsome; nobody has ever accused me of being that. I don't think it was very kind or very polite of you to lead me on to make myself ridiculous the other night; but that is all over now, and we need not say any more about it. Probably we shall not meet often again; so it doesn't matter.'

'I don't call that making friends,' said Tom.

Nellie made no rejoinder for some minutes, and then said, with great deliberation: 'I should have thought you might have been satisfied with having made friends with everybody in the house, except me. What can it possibly signify to you whether I like or dislike you? I don't dislike you personally, if that matters: why should I, when I know nothing about you? But we can never be really friends; and you know why. We are hereditary enemies, as the English and French used to be.'

'Hereditary enemies!—because my father bought an estate of yours?'

'No; not because he bought it.'

'But because he chanced to make money out of it. I wish with all my heart that it had not so happened; but a fair bargain is no robbery, for all that.'

'We won't argue the question,' said Nellie, calmly. 'I have my notion of a fair bargain, and you have yours.'

Mr. Stanniforth reddened a little. 'I can't allow that this is a case about which there can be two opinions,' he said. 'Really you are very—very——'

'Wrongheaded?' suggested Nellie, smiling. Her equanimity began to return as her adversary's showed signs of disturbance.

'Well, I should not have ventured to use the word myself; but if you think it applicable——'

'But of course I don't. I think that it is I who am right and you who are wrong. You are much cleverer than I am, and I dare say that if we went on arguing you would get the best of it. Only that wouldn't make us any the more friends.'

'I suppose not. Very well, then, I will be the friend and you shall be the foe. It will be uncomfortable; but it can't be helped. In the meantime, I must go back to Margaret and tell her that I have failed ignominiously in my mission.'

'What mission?' Nellie asked.

'They want you to take a part in the play that young Marescalchi is getting up. Margaret maintained that you would never be persuaded to act on the same stage with me; but I made bold to say that I could persuade you. I could not suppose, you see, that you would pay me the compliment of cutting off your nose to spite your face.'

Now, had this question of the theatricals been broached ten minutes earlier, it is certain that Nellie would have repudiated all connection with them; but the wiliness of Tom's diplomacy had its effect upon her.

'I don't know what you mean by "cutting off my nose to spite my face,"' she answered. 'I promised Philip ever so long ago that I would act when the time came; and I always keep my engagements.'

So the envoy was enabled to state, at dinner that night, that no substitute for Miss Brune in the forthcoming entertainment need be sought for. Whereupon Mrs. Winnington remarked that in her young days it had not been customary to encourage school-girls to give themselves ridiculous and impertinent airs; and Philip, from the other side of the table, observed that one of the faults of the present system of education was the teaching of accomplishments which so many of the last generation had shown themselves capable of acquiring without any aid.

This graceful sally was Philip's sole contribution to the harmony of the evening. He was silent and preoccupied and unlike himself; and Margaret, watching him furtively, feared that he must be ill. The fact was that Colonel Kenyon, who had been absent on a visit to some members of his own family, had returned that afternoon; and the sight of the Colonel's face put Philip disagreeably in mind of that encounter at the corner of the Green Park which he had almost succeeded in banishing from his memory. He was reminded of it in a still more direct and unpleasant manner in the smoking-room afterwards, when Hugh attacked him suddenly with—

'By the way, didn't I see you walking in Piccadilly the other day?'

Philip shook his head. 'I haven't been in London at all since I saw you last, except just to drive from one station to another. London in August is rather too hot for people who haven't lived in Madras.'

'Well, I could have sworn it was you,' persisted Hugh.

'In fact, I should have spoken to you, if you hadn't been walking with a—lady.'

'A lady!—and in August! For heaven's sake, Colonel Kenyon, don't make these awful accusations when Mrs. Winnington is present, or I shall have to write to Gloucestershire to prove an alibi.'

Hugh said no more; but he looked rather oddly at the young man; and then Philip knew that he had lied in vain. A moment's consideration, too, showed him that he had lied unnecessarily, which was worse. Why should he not at once have admitted the impeachment, accompanying his admission with a gentle insinuation that it is not always convenient to be recognised? Had he done so, Kenyon would have been convicted of a breach of good manners, and no slur would have been cast upon himself, save that of being a young man, like other young men. But this sensible reflection came too late to be of any use, and from that day forth Colonel Kenyon's name was added to Philip's list of persons suspected and disliked.

The compliment was in some degree reciprocated perhaps; but Hugh was not a man who made up his mind hastily for or against any one; moreover, he had promised to be a friend to Marescalchi, and meant to keep his promise. After the latter had left the smoking-room, Tom Stanniforth said, in his brisk, quick way:

'That is a clever young fellow; something ought to be made out of him. Margaret is doing her best to spoil him, though.'

'I don't know what more she could have done for him than she has done,' said Hugh, who, whatever his private opinion may have been, did not choose to hear Margaret criticised by others. 'I don't know what more any father could do for his son than to send him to Eton and Oxford, and allow him to choose his own profession.'

'But the difference between a father and Margaret is that a father would make his son understand that, when he has chosen a profession, he must stick to it; or at least that he must fix upon a profession of some kind.'

'Well, he has chosen the law, I believe.'

'He has changed his mind, it seems. He informed us in a casual sort of way at luncheon yesterday that he didn't mean to be a lawyer; and when somebody asked him what he did mean to be, he said he hadn't the ghost of an idea. Now, you know, that sort of thing will never do. I don't know Mar-

garet well enough to interfere; but you might say a word or two, might you not? Women don't understand the importance of time in these matters.'

'I will speak to the lad himself,' said Hugh, a good deal disturbed by this intelligence.

And next day, accordingly, he did take an opportunity of expounding to Philip his simple notions of duty. He made his lecture as little didactic as he could; but he knew that good advice is seldom palatable to youth, and was fully prepared to receive a civil hint to mind his own business. Philip, however, took his intervention in very good part, and disclaimed all intention of leading an idle life.

'I should never make my fortune as a barrister,' he said; 'it isn't my line at all. But there are many other excellent ways of earning one's bread. What should you think of the Church, now?'

'The Church! Well, really—if you ask me, I must confess I should hardly say you were fitted to be a parson,' answered Hugh, a little shocked; for he had an immense reverence for the cloth, and was not very quick at taking up a joke.

'Oh, don't you think so? This is very discouraging. I have always been given to understand that, though I might be a little deficient in power of close reasoning, I had great ease of language and a good turn for paradox—just the sort of gifts that are calculated to make a man shine in the pulpit and come to howling grief in a court of law. And I can't help thinking that I should look very nice in a short surplice and a coloured stole. "The Reverend Philip Marescalchi"—it has a fine ecclesiastical ring. Or perhaps we might say "Father Marescalchi," for I should certainly go in for what old Langley calls "advanced" Church teaching." How pleased Meg would be! But perhaps, after all, I haven't got a vocation; and the Stock Exchange might be more suitable upon the whole.'

'You know best what you are fitted for,' said Hugh, who began to have a dim suspicion that he was being laughed at. 'Take up any trade or profession that you please, so that you take up one or another. All that I meant to impress upon you was that you ought not to give Margaret a moment's uneasiness, if you can help it.'

'There was no need to impress that upon me,' answered Philip. And Hugh, watching him, wondered why he sighed and became grave and sobered all of a sudden.

The truth was that Philip's love for Margaret was the

strongest feeling of his nature. It was not strong, certainly, in the sense of exercising much influence over his conduct; but it was strong enough to afflict him with occasional twinges of remorse and sometimes even with wakefulness at night. Some uneasiness he had caused her in the past, and what he had done and proposed to do must needs cause her something more than uneasiness in the future. It was his habit to enjoy the present, and to live for it alone; but, every now and again, a chance remark or incident would bring his true position vividly before him; and when that occurred, he would fall into sudden and deep despondency, as he did now.

The two men had been to the stables, and were crossing the lawn towards the house. As they approached it, a carriage drove past, in which was seated a lady who bent forward to look at them. Marescalchi raised his hat, and Hugh mechanically did the same.

'Who is that?' he inquired.

'An old friend of yours,' answered Philip; 'Lady Travers. She pays us a visit of a few hours about twice in the course of the year—when she gets leave from her husband.'

'Dear me!' exclaimed Hugh; 'so that was Kate Travers. I should never have known her again.'

'Ah, I daresay she doesn't look as young as she did ten years ago. Old Travers leads her a deuce of a life. They say he sends for her and beats her whenever he feels one of his bad fits of gout coming on; I don't know whether it's true or not. Anyhow, he won't let a single one of her relations enter his house. For some years, I believe, he devoted all his energies to picking a quarrel with Mrs. Winnington; but she wouldn't be quarrelled with at any price; and the story is that at last, in despair, he offered her five hundred a year upon condition that she would swear by all she held most sacred never to speak to him again as long as she lived. You ought to hear the dear old lady talk about him. "Poor George! Such a constant sufferer, and yet such a marvellous constitution! The doctors say he may last for many years yet. I wish I were able to help poor Kate more in nursing him; but with all my other duties, you know," &c., &c. The joke of it is that she doesn't know whether to wish for his death or not; for he assuredly won't leave her anything in his will, and it isn't absolutely certain that she would manage to get five hundred a year, or the value of it, out of the widow.'

Philip's fits of dejection seldom lasted long. The incident

of Lady Travers's appearance was quite sufficient to divert his thoughts and to enable him, subsequently, to take his full share in the entertainment of the new arrival.

Mrs. Winnington was talking to her eldest daughter when Hugh entered the drawing-room. 'And how did you leave poor George? Not any better? How terribly trying it is for you! I wish it were in my power—oh, yes, my dear, I quite understand that he wouldn't like it; I know what gout is, and how irritable it makes the best of us. Such a charming ball at the Duchess of Retford's the other night; I half hoped you might have been there. Edith enjoyed herself immensely.'

Lady Travers, tall, thin, and pale, with blue eyes half closed, like her mother's, but with none of that lady's grandeur of presence, got up and held out her hand, saying, with a faint smile and a little sigh, 'Well; what have you been doing all these years?'

'I have been growing old,' answered Hugh, and then wished he had held his tongue; for in truth time had been far more merciful to him than to his questioner, and the rejoinder which she made was almost an inevitable one.

'Like all of us. But you at least are recognisable, which it seems that I am not. I knew you at once, when I drove past you just now; but you didn't know me.'

'You take no care of yourself whatever, Kate,' struck in Mrs. Winnington. 'A woman who neglects her personal appearance neglects her duty to society. If you go on as you have been doing, you won't be fit to be seen by the time you are forty.'

Lady Travers shrugged her shoulders slightly, and sank back again upon the sofa from which she had risen. She was a faded woman, whose beauty, once famous, was traceable only in the perfect mould of her brow and nose and in the classical ripple of her golden hair. The lips which Hugh remembered so full and red and constantly curved into smiles were thin now and nearly colourless; the contour of the face was rounded no longer; the chin was sharp, and there were hollows in the cheeks. Hugh's soft heart was touched by the sight of this melancholy wreck. He seated himself beside the friend of his youth, and began to chat familiarly about bygone days; but he failed to elicit any responsive cheerfulness from her. Perhaps the only privilege that Lady Travers had gained by her elevation in rank was that of not troubling herself to talk when she did not feel inclined: and apparently she did not feel inclined now. At luncheon she only roused herself



'WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING ALL THESE YEARS?'

from her apathy to snub Tom Stanniforth once or twice in a wholly uncalled-for and inappropriate manner; insomuch that Hugh's compassion became worn out at last, and he wondered whether she had driven twelve miles from the country-house where she was staying with her gouty lord merely in order to act the part of a general kill-joy and to say disagreeable things to the most inoffensive and good-humoured of men.

Before she went away, however, he heard from her own lips not only that her visit had had a purpose, but what that purpose was. It was late in the afternoon, and her carriage was waiting for her at the door, when she walked quickly across the lawn to the shady bench upon which he was lounging, and announced that she wanted to speak to him. There was a pink flush upon her cheeks, and her manner was as excited as it had hitherto been passionless.

'Hugh,' she said, 'I believe you might put a stop to this disgraceful business, if you chose to bestir yourself. I am powerless; and unless you make an effort to save the poor girl, nobody will.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' asked Hugh, staring.

'About Edith, of course; you surely don't mean to pretend that you don't know what is going on. Do you intend to sit still, with your hands folded, and see her married by force to that man Stanniforth, who is old enough to be her father, and whom she detests?'

'But, my dear Lady Travers, I don't think she does detest him. As far as I can judge, she likes him very much; and so does every one else for that matter. As for his age——'

'As for his age, Lord Travers is old enough to be my grandfather. Is that what you were going to say? I should have thought one such marriage was enough for the family.'

'It isn't exactly my business, you see,' said Hugh; 'but I am bound to say that I think Stanniforth is a capital fellow, and that his wife has every chance of being a happy woman.'

'That is what Margaret keeps on repeating. Margaret doesn't care; she is wrapped up in that theatrical boy of hers; and so long as he gets everything that he wants, she thinks the whole world ought to be contented. Besides, she is afraid of my mother, like the rest of us. Mr. Stanniforth may be a very decent sort of man; I don't say he is not. But if Edith does not love him, she will be miserable with him all the same. I ought to know something about the consequences of a loveless marriage, if anybody does.'

This was so undeniable that Hugh thought it wisest to ignore the observation. It also struck him that Lady Travers would have shown better taste if she had kept her domestic misfortunes to herself.

'Well,' he remarked, 'she has only to refuse him. Stanniforth isn't an ogre, when all is said.'

'Only to refuse him!' echoed Lady Travers, scornfully; 'that is so easy and simple, is it not? As if you did not know what we Winningtons are! We are as weak as water, the whole of us, and my mother has always made us do exactly what she pleased. In my case it was not altogether her fault; I wanted to be a countess; I thought it would be a fine thing; and I had my reward. Edith, poor child, is not so ambitious. All she wants is to be allowed to marry the man of her choice; and if by any means I can save her from such a life as mine has been, I will do it.'

'The man of her choice? There is such a person, then?'

'Never mind about that,' answered Lady Travers, laughing a little. 'Indeed, I don't know myself whether there is, or not. She writes to me sometimes, and from different things that she has said, I fancied that there might be somebody. But that, after all, is not the important matter.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Hugh; 'I think it is rather important. Because, if she didn't happen to care for any one else, it seems to me that Tom Stanniforth——'

'Oh, bother Tom Stanniforth!' interrupted Lady Travers, impatiently. 'I am sick of hearing of all his good qualities. I tell you that if he were an angel from heaven it would make no difference.'

Hugh rubbed his nose in perplexity. 'But what would you have me do?' he asked. 'Why do you come to me?'

'Because people always do come to you when they are in trouble, and because there is nobody else,' answered Lady Travers, conclusively. 'You can do a great deal to prevent it, if you will only try. You can get Margaret over to her side, for one thing, and that will be so much gained. You might speak to the man himself, too, if necessary; and you are not frightened of my mother, I suppose. I must not stay any longer. I am behind my time as it is, and I shall be made to suffer for it. Now remember, Hugh, I count upon you to do your best. Perhaps I may be able to help a little by-and-by; but I can't be sure. Good-bye.' And with that she hastened away to her carriage, leaving Colonel Kenyon to sink down

upon the bench again, muttering something that was not exactly a blessing upon womankind in general.'

'It is time that I made a stand against this kind of thing, you know,' said he to himself. 'If one lot of these good people mean to continue egging me on to defeat the designs of the other lot, a day will certainly come when they will fall upon me with one accord, and, after beating me to death, will shake hands over my prostrate body. Why am I to be singled out to do everybody's dirty work, I should like to know? Already this morning I have been preaching to one of them, and have got sneered at for my pains; and now, if you please, I am to interfere between mother and daughter, and, in all probability, to make myself offensive to the one person in the world whom I would cut off my hand sooner than offend. It's out of all reason to expect me to do it. At the same time, if it were in any way possible to out-manœuvre that old harridan——'

'Has Kate been with you all this time?' asked Mrs. Winnington, appearing suddenly from behind a clump of evergreens at his back. 'We were wondering how it was that we did not hear the carriage drive away. What have you been talking about?'

And Hugh, with a guilty air, answered vaguely, 'Oh, about all sorts of things.'

CHAPTER XI.

COLONEL KENYON GOES TO CHURCH.

The Reverend Ethelbert Langley was one of the many clergymen of the Established Church of Great Britain who serenely defy the law every day, with no fear of aggrieved parishioners and the Court of Arches before their eyes. Mr. Langley's parishioners never dreamt of considering themselves aggrieved, and would perhaps have been rather ungrateful had they so considered themselves. For so many years had he been rector of Longbourne; for so many years had he devoted himself, body and soul, to the welfare of his flock; so unweariedly had he visited the sick, and with so unstinting a hand had he ministered to the necessities of the poor, that it would have been shabby indeed—so these illogical folks argued—to dispute his right to assume certain positions at certain times in his own church, or to array himself, while in the performance of his sacred duties, in garments which varied in hue with the progress

of the seasons. A fine broad spirit of toleration prevailed in this rustic parish, where the benefit of possessing a spiritual guide at once well-to-do, open-handed, and a bachelor, was appreciated at its proper value, and where the looking of a gift horse in the mouth was justly held to be an unworthy and foolish action.

Toleration, however (as Mr Swainson, farmer and churchwarden, would often remark), was one thing, and bigotry was another. He didn't himself see no virtue in turning away from roast mutton of a Friday and blowing of yourself out with jam-tarts and such-like; but he hoped he knowed his duty to his weaker brethren, and if it made the missus feel better than her neighbours to let alone butchers' meat once a week, why what he said was, let her do it. Vestments agin was innercent kind of things as couldn't do no harm to no one, and incense was a beautiful smell, when once a body got his nose used to the tickling of it; but drat them daily services! How was a woman to get through her daily work and see to things like she oughter, if she was to be gadding off to church every blessed morning, same as if 'twas a Sunday? Nunno! them ways of going on was well enough for quality, as had nothing better to ockipy them; but farmers' wives had their home dooties to 'tend ter, and if Mrs. Swainson took to neglecting hers, him and parson should fall out, and that was all about it.

Probably good Mrs. Swainson was not very eager to attend matins at eight A.M.; and, truth to tell, the quality, despite the leisure with which they were credited, were scarcely more zealous than she in this matter. For it is evident that church at eight implies rising before seven, and, deeply as Mr. Langley was revered by the ladies of the vicinity, there were few of them who deemed it incumbent upon them to perform such a feat as that for his sake. Hence it was that the daily congregation usually consisted of Mrs. Stanniforth, of the village schoolmistress, of two or three old women who had an eye to tea and snuff, and of the gardener from the rectory, who rang the bell. The first of these was as regular an attendant as the rector himself. Summer and winter, fair weather and foul, Mrs. Stanniforth was sure to be seen kneeling in her place when the clock struck eight, unless by any chance she happened to be absent from home. She had formed and maintained the habit partly because it had been represented to her in the light of a duty, and partly because she particularly disliked early rising; for Margaret was a victim to that not un-

common form of religious fervour which finds solace in the wearing of hair shirts.

Not many of those who partook of the hospitality of Longbourne suspected that their hostess had been up and about three hours before she poured out their coffee for them at breakfast; but Hugh, whom a ten years' residence in the East had accustomed to ways which are said to ensure health, wealth, and wisdom, had seen her tall figure many a time flitting across the park on misty mornings, and had often longed to follow her. He had been withheld from gratifying this very harmless inclination by a dread of being thought intrusive, as well as by something of the same feeling which leads people to speak in a whisper on entering a church; but, on the day succeeding that of Lady Travers's visit, he overcame his scruples and set off after Margaret, thinking to himself that the end justified the means. Since he had taken upon him to persuade her of the iniquity of mammon-worship, it seemed wisest to attack her at a time when worldly prudence might be presumed to occupy the lowest place in her thoughts.

Through the sunny garden he followed in her track, under the branches of scented lime-trees, along a narrow footpath, and across the meadows where her feet had passed and had 'left the daisies rosy;' and it was characteristic of the man that, as he walked, he thought less of the opportunity of prosecuting his own love affairs than of lending a helping hand to those of a young woman who had not the courage to stand up for herself, and in whom—except in so far as that she was Margaret's sister—he felt no very lively interest.

It was not a part of his plan to overtake Margaret before she reached the church door. He slipped in behind her unobserved, and dropped on his knees, as she did, when the tinkling bell ceased, and Mr. Langley, after a few inaudible words of exhortation, proceeded, in a hurried, mumbling voice, with 'Wherefore I pray and beseech you,' &c.

The service was soon over—too soon, even, for one of those who took part in it. The peace and gloom of the little dark building soothed Hugh's senses; he would fain have lingered within its quiet precincts; he felt a nervous unwillingness to set about the delicate business which he had taken in hand, and to sow the seeds of discord in a community which had hitherto subsisted harmoniously enough. Full well he knew that whoever declared war upon Mrs. Winnington must reckon with no mean foe; 'and what,' he thought, 'if Margaret her-

self should turn me the cold shoulder?' such a calamity appeared by no means beyond the range of calculation.

Her face was grave and rather sad, as she passed down the aisle; but it broke out into smiles when she came upon Colonel Kenyon, standing, hat in hand, in the porch.

'You here!' she exclaimed. 'Did you come to meet me? I hope you did, because I want very much to have a talk with you, and somehow or other I never see you alone now.'

This was, at all events, a hopeful beginning. Hugh confessed that she had rightly divined the reason of his presence there. 'I came to meet you; I didn't come to say my prayers,' he acknowledged, laughing.

'There was nothing to prevent your doing both,' she rejoined. 'But perhaps the world is too much with you, as it is with Mrs. Prosser, who says she would be obliged to give up her situation if she had to forgive the housemaids their trespasses every morning before breakfast. Once a week, by making a good gulp, the thing may be done; but to wipe off all scores once in the twenty-four hours would be simply to court anarchy. So Prosser remains in bed.'

'I am willing to forgive because I want to be forgiven,' said Hugh. 'The fact is that I am going to do a little bit of trespassing myself. I haven't trespassed often upon your patience and good-nature during all this long time, have I, Margaret? I haven't interfered unwarrantably, or offered my opinion without having been asked for it, even though I have been in a sort of way your guardian.'

'You have always been all that was most kind and considerate, and I don't know what you mean by talking about interference. Surely I need not tell you that you may say anything and everything that you like to me.'

'Ah, yes; we all allow our friends that privilege until they make use of it. Interference is interference, call it what you will. I know you will think me meddling and officious; but there's no help for it, I said I would speak to you, and now I've got to do it.'

He looked so downcast at the prospect that Margaret was filled with surprise and compunction. 'Why, Hugh,' she exclaimed, 'what a foolish old fellow you are! You used not to be troubled with so many scruples, and indeed there is no necessity for them. I am quite prepared for the scolding which no doubt I deserve. It is about Philip, of course.'

Hugh shook his head; but she either did not see or mis-

understood this gesture of dissent. 'And it so happens,' she went on, 'that that is the very subject upon which I want to consult you. You mustn't think that his deciding to give up the Bar is not a great disappointment to me; but what can I do? I can't push him by main force into a profession which he dislikes; and surely it would not be wise to do so if I could.'

'It strikes me that a little coercion would be a very wholesome thing for him,' replied Hugh, thankful for this diversion. 'As for your not being able to force him, why, of course, you can force him into a profession of some kind. I mean to say you can simply stop the supplies. Are you quite sure that it is the Bar, and not work of any description, that he dislikes?'

'No,' answered Margaret, slowly; 'I am not sure: to you I don't mind saying that I am not sure. Some people feel pain more than others, and I fancy that some people, too, abhor drudgery more than others.'

'Oh, there are drones in every hive.'

Margaret continued, without noticing this severe interpolation. 'I have always had that feeling about Philip. He is like the lilies of the field, beautiful but useless. That is not his fault,' she added, turning suddenly upon Hugh, with a slightly defiant ring in her voice.

'It will be his misfortune, though; and no small misfortune to a penniless man. If that is the view he takes of himself, I am very sorry for him. You ought not to encourage it, Margaret; you ought not, indeed. It isn't a question of whether an idle life is or is not a miserable thing in itself; the fact of the matter is that some men can afford to be purely ornamental and others can't. Marescalchi should know that he is one of those who can't.'

'He does know it; but there are so many things that one knows to be true and yet cannot always realise. We all know that we shall die some day; but we don't behave as if we believed in the possibility of any such thing. When I die,' added Margaret, with a sigh, 'poor Philip will be cast adrift upon the world with only a very small fortune to help him through it. That is what troubles me so; for I haven't been able to save, Hugh, in spite of all my wise resolutions. I thought at first that I could easily lay by half my income; but, as things have turned out, it has been quite the other way, and it is all that I can do to make both ends meet. You did not think I was such a spendthrift, did you?'

'I know that your money is not spent upon yourself,' said Hugh, with a shade of indignation in his voice.

'It is spent in ways that please myself,' she returned, quietly. 'I can't claim any superiority over the people who pay thousands a year to their dressmakers, because I don't happen to care about dresses. Circumstances have obliged me to find my pleasure in the pleasure of others, and that is how my money goes. It sounds unselfish; but it is not so really; and the proof is that, if I had thought a little more about Philip's happiness years ago, I should not have accustomed him to a luxurious style of living. Now it has come to this, that I may die any day, and leave him in what to him would seem almost like absolute want.'

This affecting prospect failed to touch Hugh's feelings; but he was greatly alarmed at the suggestion of Margaret's sudden decease.

'What makes you say that?' he asked quickly. 'Is anything the matter? You are not looking at all well.'

'I never was better in my life,' she answered, laughing; 'but one can't tell what may happen. My lungs are not all right, as you know; and we are a consumptive family; and the insurance offices refuse to have anything to do with me, which is a great bore. In short——'

'In short, Marescalchi will have to work for his living, and give up lazy habits. And a very good thing too.'

'But really, Hugh, he is not lazy; he doesn't mind putting himself to any amount of trouble about theatricals, for instance, or anything in which he is interested. What I doubt is his power of applying himself to work in which he is *not* interested. I often think that he is best suited for some kind of artistic career—something independent, something exciting, something that might bring quick successes.'

'Then he had better put on spangled tights, and tumble in the ring. After all, I believe the stage is more in his line than anything else,' said Hugh, who was growing a little weary of discussing Philip's aptitudes, and who was far from suspecting how nearly his notions corresponded with that young gentleman's own upon this point.

'Don't be ill-natured, Hugh,' said Margaret; and he apologised at once.

'I didn't mean to be ill-natured; I am sure you know that. It slipped out. My bark is worse than my bite.'

In truth Colonel Kenyon believed that he was capable

of saying extremely sharp things upon occasion, and frequently took himself to task at night for having uttered some such withering sarcasm as the above.

The two friends had left the church far behind them in the course of their conference, and were now walking across the short grass of the park, which the sun had already dried. The time seemed to have come for Lady Travers's envoy to discharge himself of his mission; and he was knitting his brows and cudgelling his brains in the effort to find some artful method of leading up to the subject when Margaret took up the conversation with—

'Now I am going to inflict another of my troubles upon you. You remember what I told you, the day you arrived, about Tom Stanniforth and Edith?'

'Ah!' sighed Hugh, drawing a long breath of relief and satisfaction.

She glanced at him interrogatively. 'Have you heard anything? Did Tom speak to you about it?'

'No, but Lady Travers did. She took me into her confidence yesterday afternoon, before she went away.'

'Did she?' exclaimed Margaret, in a tone of some vexation; 'I wonder what made her do that.'

'I can't think. But she did; and, to tell you the truth, I wish she hadn't. I told her it was none of my business, and all that, but she had got it into her head that I could do what she couldn't; and so—there it was. She said I might get you over to Edith's side perhaps. I don't know why she should have imagined so; but——'

'Edith's side!' cried Margaret; 'but I am on Edith's side; and so, of course, is my mother, if Kate would only see it. She made us very unhappy yesterday by the things she said. Is it likely that my mother would wish for anything that would make her daughter miserable?'

Hugh was eloquently silent.

'You don't understand my mother,' Margaret resumed, after waiting in vain for a reply 'Because she is anxious that Edith should marry well, you think her mercenary and scheming; and yet, when a father tries to put his son in the way of becoming a rich man, you say he is only doing his duty. To a woman there is but one means open of obtaining riches, and every one allows that riches are desirable in themselves.'

'You used not to think so.'

'Nor do I now—for myself; but I am exceptional.

Generally speaking, parents wish their children to be spared the pinch of poverty; and if any woman told me that she would not prefer a rich son-in-law to a poor one, I shouldn't believe her. It seems to me that there can be no possible harm in giving a girl the chance of marrying a man who is not only rich but kind and good.'

'I quite agree with you; but you wouldn't have the girl marry a man because he was rich, and kind, and good, if she didn't love him.'

'No; only I think those would be very good reasons for loving him; and I am quite sure that it would be an excellent thing for Edith if she could care for Tom Stannifoth. He evidently admires her, and, to the best of my belief, she likes him. At all events, there is this to be said, that she does not like anybody else better.'

Hugh began to laugh. 'None so blind as those who won't see,' he remarked. 'Why, my dear Margaret, where have your eyes been, and what do you think is likely to happen when boys and girls are together all day long? I don't pretend to be specially quick-sighted in such matters; but even I could have told you and Mrs. Winnington that there was some risk in providing Edith with a good-looking young man for a constant companion.'

Margaret stood still, and clasped her hands nervously. 'Oh! what do you mean?' she exclaimed. 'Surely it isn't Philip!'

'No, no, it isn't Philippe le Bel, Philip the Eternal and the Inevitable—it isn't Philip this time. There, I beg your pardon; but really, you know, Philip is not the only good-looking young man in the world. There's no accounting for tastes; and, for my own part, I confess that I think Walter Brune the handsomer of the two.'

'Walter Brune!' repeated Margaret, incredulously; 'he is only a boy. Walter cannot be thinking of marrying; he has really no prospects whatever, poor fellow. Mr. Brune is not at all well off, as I dare say you know; and he was telling me, the other day, that he very much regretted now that he had not brought Walter up for some profession. It has always been a sort of tradition with them that the eldest son should do nothing, and the idea was that Walter should remain at home and occupy himself with farming until, in due course, he succeeded his father as owner of Broom Leas; but it seems that of late years the farm has not even paid its way, and, with all that

family to be provided for, you may imagine what chance there is of poor Walter's being able to support a wife. I feel sure that you must be mistaken about him.'

'I may be—only somehow I don't think I am. Young people usually fall in love first, and turn their attention to ways and means afterwards. It is a pity that it should be so; but we must take human nature as we find it.'

Colonel Kenyon spoke a little drily; for he was disappointed at finding that Margaret viewed this incipient romance from so commonplace and conventional a standpoint. It would have been more like her, and more womanly, he thought, to have at once espoused the cause of the needy lover; and, had she done so, he would have been quite prepared to argue upon the other side, to expatiate upon the folly of long engagements, and to point out how impracticable it was to live upon love. As she said nothing, but walked on with her eyes fixed upon the ground, he felt bound to continue in the same strain as he had begun.

'Supposing that I am right in my conjecture, and that Mrs. Winnington discovers a hitch in her programme, I hope she will remember that she has only herself to thank for it.'

Margaret shook her head sorrowfully. 'No,' she said; 'it is my fault. If there is anything between Walter and Edith it is my stupidity that has brought it about. To you it must seem as if my stupidity had been very great indeed; but you don't know how difficult it is to realise that a few years convert children into men and women. Philip is different; he has always been old for his age, and he has seen so much of the world. But Walter is a big schoolboy in all his habits still. It was so much a matter of course that he should be continually in and out of the house that it never occurred to me to make any change when Edith and my mother came to live with me, or to suppose that he would think of Edith, or she of him, in that way. I knew it was essential that she should marry money, and I always expected to hear that some one had been found for her in London. I had my own hopes about Philip; I know—or, at least, I think I know—who will be his wife some day; and Walter—well, I suppose I forgot that, as you say, people will fall in love, whether they can afford to marry or not. I am the one who is to blame.'

'That is to say that you are the one who will be blamed—which is not quite the same thing,' remarked Hugh.

'Oh, as far as that goes, I shall never cease to blame myself.

Nothing can come of this attachment, you know, if it exists—nothing good, that is; nothing but tears and disappointments, and perhaps quarrels. Even supposing, for the sake of argument, that my mother could be brought to consent to an engagement, Mr. Brune never would.'

'Well, I don't know about that. You seem to think that he will be willing enough to let his daughter engage herself to a young gentleman with extravagant tastes, no money, and no career. My own impression is that when once Mrs. Winnington's opposition is broken down the battle will be as good as won.'

'Do you really wish to make a battle of it, then? and are you, of all men, going to proclaim yourself the champion of two silly lovers?' asked Margaret, laughing a little. 'I should have thought lovers were the last people in the world to arouse your sympathy.'

At this Hugh winced slightly, and probably she saw that her words had hurt him, for she made haste to add, 'I know you sympathise with everybody who is in tribulation, though; you would like to make the whole human race happy, if you could. That is the difference between you and me; you serve others without thinking about yourself, while I do the same, or make a feeble effort at doing it, because it pleases myself. But, Hugh, there would be no kindness in showing sympathy—active sympathy I mean—with these two. Just think of it. The utmost that they could hope for would be a vague prospect of being married some day; and "some day" could only mean after Mr. Brune's death—nothing else that I know of could put them into possession of a sufficient income. Don't you see what the end of it would be sure to be? After a few years it would all be broken off; and though that might not be an irreparable misfortune to Walter, I am afraid it might very easily be so to Edith. In such cases it is always the woman who suffers.'

'Ah!' said Hugh; 'it's a crooked business, look at it which way you will.'

'Every business that I meddle with goes crooked!' cried Margaret, with a sudden burst of despondency. 'I don't know how or why it is; but so it is. I suppose I must deserve to fail, or I should hardly fail as invariably as I do.'

'Oh, but you must not reproach yourself so far as this affair is concerned,' said Hugh, all his inclination towards sternness melting away at the sight of her distress. 'After all, we know nothing. Lady Travers and I may have been too hasty in

jumping to conclusions. Anyhow, you have done the best that you could do for the girl; you have given her a capital chance of establishing herself, and if she is so perverse as to like the poor man better than the rich one, it is no fault of yours.'

'I ought not to have allowed her the chance of liking the poor one,' Margaret sighed. 'How everything comes round to a question of money! I used to think that the one great blessing of being rich would be that one would not need to trouble oneself with that detestable subject; but somehow it seems that there is no escape from it. My money has never done any good to me, and sometimes I am afraid that it has done no good to other people either.'

'You wanted to get rid of it once,' Hugh remarked, with a faint smile.

'So I do still; I have not changed. And, indeed, I do get rid of it,' she added, glancing at her companion with a half-deprecatory laugh; 'only I am not sure that anybody is the better off. The older I grow the more plainly I see that wealth is the source of all evil. You told me long ago that it would at least give me independence; but it has not done anything of the kind. Some people, you know, are not fit to be independent; and evidently I am one of them. I want somebody to order me about, and to tell me when I make a fool of myself.'

'You want somebody to take care of you and protect you, perhaps,' said Hugh, with a slight tremor in his voice.

'That is a prettier way of saying the same thing. However, no one seems inclined to undertake the task, except Mr. Langley; and Mr. Langley, unfortunately, won't do. At one time I thought I would try it; but when I found that he would be satisfied with nothing short of unconditional submission, I had to beat a hasty retreat, and I don't think he has ever quite forgiven me. A director is a comfort in some ways; but then he must not be an absolute tyrant.'

'Ah! I should not be so exacting,' murmured Hugh.

She did not in the least guess his meaning; but, seeing how serious he looked, it occurred to her that he might fancy himself slighted by that bygone craving for priestly guidance.

'I don't mean to say that I ever thought of consulting Mr. Langley as a friend or a man of the world,' she explained. 'You know that you are my one and only friend and adviser. But one is not obliged to take advice, you see; and when it is good advice one very seldom does take it. What I want, in order to keep me from doing foolish things with my eyes open, is

authority; and if I could have brought myself to believe in Mr. Langley's claims to obedience, I dare say I should have been preserved from the commission of many injudicious actions; but he tells me I have no right understanding of the apostolic succession. The upshot of it is that I must go bungling on in my own way.'

Hugh was not listening to her. His sober brain was in a whirl; he hardly knew how much he had said or implied. Accident—a sudden feeling of great compassion, an inward revolt against the falseness of his position—had led him to the very verge of the leap at which he had been craning for so long, and now he had lost his head a little, as timid riders will in such situations. He might have chosen his time and place ill; calamity might be waiting with grinning jaws to swallow him up on the other side; but the control of events had slipped out of his grasp, and the only thing clear to him was that jump he must. His companion and he had crossed the park, and had reached a gate which separated it from the garden. He had stepped forward to let her through; but, instead of doing so, he wheeled round abruptly, and faced her.

'Margaret,' he began, in an odd, hurried voice, 'I have something to say to you, something that I have been wanting to say any time these ten years. Ah! it is more than that—it is a great deal more than ten years since I first loved you. I don't know whether this is any news to you; but you need not give me an answer now. You can think it over. You won't decide in a minute, when you remember that it is all my life, past and future, that is standing up for judgment. Oh, I don't expect you to be *in love* with me—an old fellow like me! I am not such an ass as that. And yet I am sure that I could make you happy. If I were not sure of that, I should never have dared to speak. I am asking you to give up a great deal; but wealth is not what you care for, and I have saved a little—we should not be what is called exactly poor. And something I can give you: I can give you a home, and rest from all the worries that have troubled you, and—and a heart—a heart which——'

He pulled up just in time to save himself from floundering into absolute bathos. Hugh had not the gift of unpremeditated eloquence. He had at least declared himself in a manner which could not be misunderstood, and in the eagerness of the moment the fashion of his declaration seemed a matter of minor importance. It is not until darkness has fallen, and we have our

pillow for our confidant, that we recall the idiotic speeches of the day with groanings that cannot be uttered. As for Colonel Kenyon, his part in this scene might have been more impressive, but would assuredly not have been more successful, if he had rehearsed it for weeks beforehand. His heart sank when he glanced at Margaret's face; for he read there not only astonishment and pain, but something more, which looked terribly like disgust.

'I never would have believed this of you,' she said in a low voice. 'Will you let me pass, please?'

Hugh started back, and threw open the gate. He had failed, and his failure did not surprise him; but he was not going to be spoken to as though he had done something to be ashamed of. Therefore, he said, with a great show of determination, 'You will give me an answer, Margaret. It shall be given when you please; but I have a right to an answer.'

'There can only be one answer,' she replied, without looking at him. 'How could you think—but if you have not understood, there is no use in talking about it! Only I think *you*, at least, might have known that I am not the less Jack's wife because he is dead, and that to speak to me of—of—love is to insult both him and me.'

'You don't mean that, Margaret; you must know that it is not so. A widow is not a wife, and there is no insult in an honest man's offer of his love and name.'

'Coming from any one else, there might not be; but coming from you, there is.'

'That is a very cruel and a very unjust thing to say,' cried Hugh.

'I think it is you who are cruel,' she returned.

They walked on for a few paces in silence, and then Margaret stopped short suddenly, and exclaimed, 'Let us try to forget all this; let us never say another word about it as long as we live! I think I can see how it has happened. It was my fault, because I grumbled about being lonely, and about things going wrong. You thought there was only one way of escape for me, and you were ready to sacrifice yourself, as you always are. You did not understand; but I suppose men never do understand how women feel. All men forget after a time.'

Hugh shook his head. 'I at least am not a man who forgets easily. If you knew all, you would acknowledge that. I never loved, and never shall love, any woman but you. I loved you long before you ever saw poor Jack Stanniforth. I could

not speak in those days, and afterwards I would not, because I feared to offend you. At the end of ten years I was surely entitled to open my lips. Is it because through all that long time I have done my utmost to serve you, and to behave towards you like a friend and nothing more, that you accuse me of insulting you when I confess the truth at last?'

'Oh, don't go on!' she exclaimed, holding up her hand with an imploring gesture; 'you don't know how dreadfully it pains me to hear you talk like that. It seems as if—as if——'

'As if what?'

'As if it had been all a pretence—your friendship, I mean. Why did you not tell me of this long ago?'

'Would it have made any difference if I had?'

'It would have made this difference, that there would have been no deceit.'

'I never was accused of being deceitful before in all my life,' cried Hugh, with some warmth.

'I did not mean to accuse you of that,' she answered, a little ashamed of herself. 'I don't want to make any accusations, and I beg your pardon if I have hurt you by anything that I have said. The best thing that we can do is never to refer to the subject again. I am very, very sorry, Hugh,' she added, holding out her hand to him; 'but what you wish for is quite impossible.'

He took her hand meekly enough. He felt that he was being very badly treated, that he was being forgiven without having sinned; but he was a man accustomed to be roughly used by Fortune, and at that particular moment he dreaded a permanent breach with Margaret as the worst disaster that could befal him.

'You are not angry?' he said humbly, and, it must be admitted, rather weakly.

'No,' she answered slowly, 'I am not angry; I have no right to be so. I am rather disappointed, that is all. Do what we will, things can never be quite the same again.'

'I suppose not.'

'Ah!' she said, pausing on the doorstep to deliver the last shot, after the manner of her sex, 'we are like the purblind people in the parable; we have been so busy trying to remove the mote from Edith's eye that we never noticed the beam that was in our own.'

Thinking over this not very apt illustration afterwards, Hugh was forced to the conclusion that the plural number had

been made use of in it merely as a concession to politeness, and that it was not in Margaret's eye that the beam was supposed to exist.

CHAPTER XII.

PHILIP EXEMPLIFIES A THEORY.

MARGARET STANNIFORTH, as the perspicacious reader will hardly require to be told, was not a strong-minded woman. Such claims to love and admiration as she possessed—and Hugh Kenyon was by no means alone in deeming her entitled to both—were assuredly not based upon any element of strength in her character, but rather, perhaps, upon the evidences of that weakness which used in old-fashioned times to be considered a woman's strength. She did not always know her own mind, and was painfully aware that she did not know it; without being what is called impulsive, she was yet much under the influence of impulses; and in all things she was prone to be guided less by her head than by her heart. Of the latter the best part had been given away to her lost husband, and had not been recalled. With rare fidelity and imaginativeness she had kept constantly before her eyes the image of the man who had been so long dead, and it may truly be said that she never decided upon any course of action without first asking herself what his wishes would have been with regard to it. That her interpretation of his supposed wishes should have been for the most part devoid of all probable accuracy was but natural: she would have been a far more remarkable woman than she was, had it been otherwise. It is tolerably certain, for instance, that Jack Stanniforth, who had had the common sense of his family, would not have advised the adoption of our young friend Marescalchi, nor the frequent payment of that very expensive youth's bills; nor, it may be assumed, would he have held his widow called upon to provide a home and a liberal income for his mother-in-law; but, happily for Margaret, she was not troubled with disturbing doubts upon these and many other points, and seldom failed to convince herself that she had received a silent sanction for her least prudent proceedings. The process by which she arrived at this comfortable persuasion would have been found, if analysed, to take the form of a beautifully simple syllogism. Such and such things appeared to her, upon mature reflection, to be right; Jack was always right; therefore, Jack would have

approved of her doing as she proposed. Thus, in perfect good faith, she invested her imaginary lord with the attributes of a constitutional sovereign, and proceeded from deliberation to action, fortified by a perfunctory formula of *Le Roi le veult.*

Now nothing could be more clear than that Jack would have been greatly displeased at any man addressing her as Colonel Kenyon had done; still more would he have been displeased had he foreseen that Colonel Kenyon, his friend and executor, would be the man to offend in such a manner. Therefore, Margaret, although she had declared that she was not angry with Hugh, could not but feel that she had just cause for anger; nor was her anger at all lessened by consciousness that, according to the generally received standard of conduct, the culprit had been guilty of no offence at all. People do marry again. The practice may be a reprehensible one, but it is not uncommon; and, upon the whole, Margaret found that her chief grievance against Hugh was that he had so misunderstood her as to suppose her one of those people. When your friends begin to misunderstand you, you may forgive them; but you are not far off from the point at which they must cease to be your friends any more. As Margaret had said, 'it could never be the same thing again;' and Hugh, for his part, was not long in reaching a similar conviction. There was no quarrel. On the contrary, vigorous efforts were made on both sides to avoid even the semblance of a coolness; but in spite of these exertions—perhaps, to some extent, in consequence of them—the coolness existed, and made itself felt. Indeed, it would be difficult, under any circumstances, for a rejected suitor to remain with comfort in the same house with the lady who had rejected him; and before a week was out Colonel Kenyon entertained no doubt as to the expediency of his quitting Longbourne. In the nick of time the Horse Guards considerately provided him with an easy means of retreat by promoting him to the command of a field battery at Shorncliffe. So the Colonel departed; and as soon as he was gone Margaret's heart became softened towards him.

The absent, it is said, are always in the wrong; but the absent enjoy also this counterbalancing privilege, that with the withdrawal of their persons the memory of their wrong-doing loses sharpness of outline. Margaret desired nothing more earnestly than to forget, if that might be, Hugh's unfortunate lapse from the path of duty, and there were times when she very nearly succeeded in doing so. She thought of him and

missed him greatly through the long summer days, while Mrs. Winnington, groaning over the heat, worked a huge fan with irritating rattle from morning to night; while soft-footed Mr. Langley came and went, bearing appeals for charity to the drawing-room or priestly counsel to Mrs. Prosser, of whose conscience he was the keeper; while the laughter and wrangling of the young people, rehearsing for the coming theatricals, rang through the house, and the hammering of the carpenters, who were knocking up the stage, was incessant.

After a great deal of discussion, and the usual difficulties with over-ambitious spirits, Philip had got his company together, and was laboriously drilling and coaxing its members into subordination. The piece that he had chosen was a comedy of modern life, the general drift of which was one that has served for many comedies, new and old. There was a young couple in it, who had become estranged, as young couples do in plays and sometimes in real life, for no particular reason, except that they were 'half angered with their happy lot'; there was a wicked and fascinating man of the world, who harboured fell designs against the lovely bride; there was a clever lady, who, after promoting this intrigue through two acts and a half, flirting desperately with the injured husband, and bringing about all sorts of painful situations, came out in her true colours in the *dénouement*, when she unmasked the villain and joined the hands of the erring and repentant pair; finally, there was the guileless husband of the above lady, whose mission it was to make the audience laugh by his mingled jealousy of, and admiration for, her, by his bewildered queries, and by the meekness with which, upon all occasions, he obeyed her impatient command to 'go away somewhere and smoke.'

The play, when first read out by Philip, was fortunate enough to meet with general approval, the only dissentient voice raised being that of Tom Stanniforth, whose notion of acting was dressing up, and who protested that a play without powder and patches was only half a play; but as to the distribution of the parts there was less unanimity. Miss Brune was to take the part of the clever woman—everybody agreed as to that; and we have seen in what manner she was subsequently induced to accept it.

'So far so good,' said Mrs. Winnington, holding up the book, and surveying it through her glasses; 'but now about the rest of the characters.' She knew, if Tom Stanniforth did

not, that masquerading is by no means the chief object of drawing-room comedies, and her eagle eye had at once detected the opportunities which this particular one might be made to afford for the furtherance of other and more important ends. 'Mr. Marescalchi will of course be the unprincipled man of fashion,' she went on. 'Young Mr. Brune might do for his sister's husband. Very suitable, both those parts. Then we come to the young couple; evidently Edith and Mr. Stanniforth.'

But Philip said, 'Oh, dear no! that cast wouldn't do at all. How, for instance, could you expect poor Walter to throw any animation into his acting, if his cue was to be blindly in love with his own sister?' And then, to the general astonishment, he announced that he himself proposed to fill the part for which Walter was stated to be ill-qualified, while the latter was to play Strephon to Edith's Amaryllis, and Mr. Stanniforth—of all people in the world!—was to be the villain of the piece.

'Utterly preposterous and absurd!' cried Mrs. Winnington; and for once the chorus was with her.

But Philip answered imperturbably, 'Not in the least absurd. Now, my dear Mrs. Winnington, I'll explain to you, if you will allow me, the principle upon which all good casts are formed. Your idea, which is that of the uninitiated public, is that every one is best able to represent the character which most resembles his own. Nothing could be more erroneous; exactly the reverse is the true state of the case. A man can't imitate himself; all the little peculiarities of a person of his own stamp seem to him so natural that he never notices them; whereas, the characteristics of his opposite will strike him at once, and he will accentuate them in his acting. That is what one has to bear in mind in assigning parts to performers. Now, supposing, for example, that you yourself were to do us the honour of wishing to appear on the stage with us, do you think I should ever dream of asking you to accept the part of an amiable and benevolent lady? Never! On the other hand, if I wished for any one to interpret faithfully the character of a selfish, hypocritical old sinner, I should think of you directly.'

'That is nonsense,' said Mrs. Winnington, turning rather red.

'I am very much disappointed to hear you say so. I thought you would agree with me so cordially that I was unfit to represent a knave, as soon as I had expounded my theory to you.'

'Your theory is nonsense,' repeated Mrs. Winnington, with decision.

'Really, Marescalchi, I am afraid it won't hold water in the present instance,' chimed in Mr. Stanniforth. 'I take it that I am about the worst actor of the lot, and you have given me the most important part in the piece.'

'Nobody can say which is the most important part until the piece has been played,' answered Philip, oracularly. 'We are all going to do our best; but we can't do justice to ourselves if the square pegs are put into the round holes.'

Further protests were entered from various quarters; but as Philip stood firm, and declared that unless he were allowed to have his own way he would not act at all, he carried his point in the end. As the council broke up, he took an opportunity of whispering to Walter, 'There, old man; don't say I never did you a good turn.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Walter.

'Of course you don't,' returned Philip, laughing, and walking away. That Philip had meant by this strange allotment of *rôles* merely to carry out his whimsical theory was what nobody believed, nor did it occur to any one that he had been actuated by a good-natured desire to give two young lovers the occasion of playing husband and wife; but what was indeed his object seemed somewhat obscure. Only Margaret had formed a surmise upon the matter; and it was one which was not displeasing to her. She told him afterwards that he ought to be ashamed of himself.

'You have spoilt the play,' she said, frowning and smiling upon him; 'and Nellie will not thank you, you may be sure. If she was to have a fictitious husband for one evening, you surely need not have objected to Walter's being the man.'

Philip seemed greatly amused. 'Oh, Meg, Meg,' he cried, 'what a designing old match-maker you are becoming! I haven't spoilt the play a bit; it will be the greatest success that ever was known; and in the meantime you are as good as a dozen plays, all of you. What criminal folly are you allowing your brains to hatch, you improvident woman? Do you know she won't have a penny, ma'am?'

'Ah, Philip!' sighed Margaret; 'money is not everything.'

'No; nor is love everything. One wants a happy combination of the two, I suppose, and that is not easy to achieve. Not that I am in love with Nellie Brune; and Heaven forbid that I should suppose her capable of falling in love with so un-

worthy an object as myself. Don't you see that I can't afford to fall in love with her?'

'A man can always make an income for himself,' said Margaret.

'Can he? I think I know some men who have a fatal power of spending twice as much as they are likely ever to earn. Don't build castles, Meg, it's a shocking bad habit. Or, if you must build them, build them for yourself, not for other people. Otherwise they will come tumbling down about your poor ears, roofs, and battlements, and all, one of these fine days; and when I come to dig you out of the ruins, you will turn and revile me, and say it was all my fault.'

She shook her head. 'No; I shall never say that.'

'Ah! you don't know what you will say. Let us get back to our play *acting*; it's a thousand times more satisfactory a game than real life.'

Whether satisfactory or not to the majority of the performers, the fashion after which Philip had chosen to conduct his play-acting was productive of immense amusement to one at least of those who attended the subsequent rehearsals. Mr. Brune perfectly understood, and to some extent participated in, the half good-humoured, half malicious, pleasure which Marescalchi derived from the spectacle of incongruity; and in truth, Tom Stanniforth, pacing the stage with creaking boots, and giving utterance in a loud hearty voice to the most outrageous and immoral sentiments, was a legitimate subject for mirth of the quieter kind. Tom had thrown himself into his task with all his wonted energy; he had learnt by heart every word he had to say; he was submitting with much docility to be educated into the semblance of a base deceiver; and there really seemed to be every chance that he would eventually pull through quite as successfully as a painstaking man without a vestige of histrionic talent could be expected to do. He had, however, a way of frowning and shaking his head after each cynical soliloquy—as though he felt it incumbent upon him to offer some gentle reminder that it was a purely fictitious personage, not by any means Tom Stanniforth, who was speaking—which was irresistibly comical. Mr. Brune would sit in a corner, watching this conscientious actor and laughing softly to himself, by the hour together.

One afternoon Mrs. Winnington joined him, and asked him whether he did not think it was a great deal too bad that everybody's pleasure should be interfered with, and a good play

turned into a positive farce, only in order to gratify the whim of a spoilt boy. 'Mr. Stanniforth is so accommodating and kind that he would do anything that he was asked to do,' she said; 'but it is easy to see that he has been forced into accepting a thoroughly uncongenial part.'

'But he does it so well,' Mr. Brune remarked.

'Do you think so? Well, I can't agree with you. He is doing his utmost certainly; he would be sure to do that. But for Mr. Stanniforth to attempt to personate selfishness and duplicity is quite absurd. He is too—too—what shall I say?'

'Genuine?' suggested Mr Brune, resignedly.

'Exactly so: he is far too genuine for that kind of thing. Now young Marescalchi——'

'Oh, but he is genuine, too—in his way. He is a genuine humourist; you must allow that.'

'How so? I don't quite understand you. To my mind, he is simply mischievous and malevolent. To put the play upon the stage in the way that he is doing is to insult the intelligence of his audience.'

'On the contrary he is paying a high compliment to the delicacy of your perceptions. He is going to offer you a really fine piece of comedy in the place of a rather dull play; and you ought to be grateful to him.'

'It appears that your notions of comedy and humour differ from mine,' said Mrs. Winnington, who disliked Mr. Brune, and suspected him, not without reason, of sometimes laughing at her.

Nevertheless, when the day of representation came, Mrs. Winnington was compelled to add a grudging contribution to the general plaudits, and to confess that the result belied her anticipations. Philip had done wonders with his somewhat unpromising [illegible]. Patiently and carefully had he drilled them, day after day, and evening after evening, and now his labour met with its just recompense. Nellie Brune, who was a very fair actress, and had had some previous experience to guide her, would have done well even without coaching; and as for the others, if their instructor could not give them talent, he had at least taught them how to stand and sit, how to manage their voices, and how to get off the stage. He had also taken much pains with the subordinate personages, whose names and characters need not be particularised here, showing them every opportunity of making a point, and gently fanning their self-love with many a judicious word of surprise and admira-

tion. And all the time he had held his own part in reserve. His duties as general instructor had furnished him with an excuse for reading rather than acting his share of the dialogue, and perhaps he had designedly kept himself in the background up to the last moment; for he had not a soul above small effects. Even the country gentlemen who, with their wives and families, made up the bulk of the audience, and whose critical faculties were scarcely likely to be of a sensitive order, could not but perceive and wonder at the skill with which he transformed a ludicrous and undignified part into a pathetic one; and that without missing a particle of its humour or being guilty of the smallest exaggeration. Those who applauded so loudly could not have given very definite reasons for their applause perhaps; but it was vaguely borne in upon them that they were being treated to the spectacle of a *tour de force*, and it put them in good humour, and made them feel how clever they must be to have discovered that much.

It was one of Philip's rules to study every part that he undertook from observation of some living model: all true artists adopted that plan, he declared, and all art was nothing but imitation. In the present instance he had been pleased to select Colonel Kenyon as the ground-work of his conception of a fond and foolish husband; and Margaret, who believed herself to be alone in detecting this detail, and who was somehow a little pained by it, was compelled to acknowledge that the portrait was both a faithful and a suggestive one. Poor Hugh! it had never occurred to her before, but now it seemed obvious enough, that he was just the man to be led by the nose all his life by some woman. What a dismal instance of the irony of Fate that she, who wanted to be led, and had no capacities for leading, should be that one! Once or twice it flashed across her with a thrill of alarm that Philip might have some inkling of what she earnestly desired to keep secret for ever. In her heart of hearts she was mortally afraid of being laughed at by Philip: and what son can hear without more or less of covert laughter that a man has been making love to his mother? She turned these things over in her mind while Philip tugged at the long moustache which he had affixed to his upper lip, while he stretched out his legs, stuck his hands in his pockets, and debated simple propositions with an exact reproduction of Hugh's slow and sapient smile; and at the end of the first act she was as nearly being angry with her adopted son as she had ever been in her life. Mr. Brune, who was sitting behind her,

leant over the back of her chair, when the curtain fell, and startled her by remarking abruptly—

'And yet there are people who won't be convinced that we are all descended from apes.'

'Don't be unkind,' pleaded Margaret.

'Why not? I object to monopolies. Why should that very clever and diverting youth have things all his own way?'

'I know what you mean; but it isn't meant for unkindness. There is nothing in it that could hurt any one's feelings.'

'H'm! I am not sure that Kenyon would quite agree to that. However, he is not here, so we need not trouble ourselves about him. Let us be charitable, and assume that he would like it. For my part, I admit that I am enjoying it hugely.'

'Then don't call people apes,' said Margaret.

'Apes are very cheerful little beasts, and some of us, you know, make great pets of them. I will say, for yours, that he is an admirable specimen of the race.'

Margaret sighed impatiently. 'I thought you had given up saying disagreeable things about Philip. You know how it pains me to hear you talk like that.'

'You ought not to mind what a sour old man says. Do you know that all my hops are mildewed, and that I shall be hundreds of pounds out of pocket by the end of the year? Let me have a little latitude of speech for one evening. Philip can't hear me, any more than Kenyon can hear him; and I am speaking to a lady who is not easily prejudiced. Do you remember how desperately I offended you by the language I used about your *protégé* on the first evening of his arrival, ever so long ago?'

'Yes, I remember; why do you remind me of it? I thought you very unkind and unjust; and I still think that you were so.'

'I dare say I was. Partly so, at all events; for I certainly should not accuse our young friend of lacking courage nowadays. I wonder, though—speaking quite in the abstract, you understand—whether it is possible for a first-rate actor to be a thoroughly honest and straightforward man. Don't come down upon me with Macready and other honoured names, please; there must be exceptions to every rule; and, besides, honesty is a relative term. I know many highly respected and respectable persons whom it would be unsafe to take literally; they couldn't be absolutely candid if their lives depended upon it.'

'I don't know what you are driving at,' said Margaret, who, however, knew perfectly well.

'I am not driving at anything; I am drifting agreeably upon a sea of doubt and speculation. Given a man with an extraordinary power of personating characters different from his own, wouldn't it be rather a strange thing if he never made use of it off the stage?'

'If you mean Philip, I can only say that he is always candid with me,' declared Margaret, with some audacity.

'Ah, you won't stay in the regions of the abstract. Well, you ought to know whether Philip is candid or not As for me, I am only a spectator; and perhaps I don't see so much of the game as I fancy I do. He is not particularly candid with me; but then a man does not forfeit his claim to straightforwardness by exercising a little reserve towards individuals. Moreover, he doesn't like me.'

'That is entirely your own fault,' Margaret was going to say; but she bethought her that, if matters turned out according to her wishes, Mr. Brune would some day be asked to accept Philip as his son-in-law; so she substituted: 'I am sure you are mistaken. He may be a little afraid of you, perhaps; many people are, you know.'

Probably there is no man living who is not secretly pleased at being told that he is feared. Mr Brune smiled, and remarked that he had not supposed himself so alarming. Then the curtain rising upon the first scene of the second act put a stop to conversation, and Margaret returned to contemplation of the figure upon the stage which interested her the most. Philip's excellent mimicry of Colonel Kenyon provoked her no longer; she had fallen into a fresh train of thought, in which Hugh had no part; and while the plot of the comedy was unfolding itself, she was wondering whether the open-mouthed adoration with which Philip was regarding Nellie could be altogether assumed.

He had told her emphatically that he was not in love with Miss Brune: but he had given her to understand that he was not in love because he did not deem it prudent to allow himself to be so, and that seemed almost tantamount to a confession that only prudence held love in check. Moreover, notwithstanding the assertion which she had just made that Philip was always candid with her, Margaret very well knew that she did not possess his whole confidence. She was sometimes tormented by terrible fears on his behalf. He had no vices, she

thought—for extravagance cannot fairly be called a vice—but it is not always vicious men who make the most hopeless shipwreck of their lives; and, oddly enough, one of the chief dangers which she dreaded for him was precisely that which those who took a less partial view of his character would have declared him utterly unlikely to incur—that of a hasty marriage with some one inferior to him in rank. Philip's character, like that of most people, was marked by some apparent inconsistencies, and, also like that of most people, presented but few traits upon which any plausible theory of his fate could be built. One certain thing about him was that he would never be the victim of a hopeless passion. It was not in his nature to love those by whom he was not beloved, and on the other hand it was so delightful to him to be worshipped that he was likely to fall, at least for a time, completely under the dominion of the worshipper, whoever he or she might be Thus much Margaret understood; though she did not put the case to herself quite in these words. She would have substituted generosity, impulsiveness, and quick sympathies for the vanity and selfishness with which some of his intimates credited him; but the peril remained the same; and it was, among other reasons, because she discerned it that she so anxiously desired to make use of Nellie Brune as a beacon to divert Philip's eyes from the flickering will-o'-the-wisps that flank the path of all young men. It must be added that she conscientiously believed this fate to be an entirely honourable and blissful one for Nellie, whom she looked upon in some sort as her daughter, and loved with all her heart.

If the young lady who was thought worthy of being entrusted with such high responsibilities had been in the secret of Mrs. Stanniforth's scheme, she could have done no more towards the promotion of it than she was doing that evening. Everybody agreed that Miss Brune was charming. 'She has been well coached,' said her father, who hardly recognised Nellie in the brilliant and witty woman of the world whom she represented; but Philip, who admired all pretty women, and had always admired this one excessively, declared openly that she was irresistible, and told her in so many words that he wished to goodness he could summon some benevolent fairy to convert their mock destinies into a reality. More than once in the course of the proceedings he said to himself if Nellie had had a large fortune, and if Fanny had married the greengrocer, as she ought to have done—if, in short, he had not been an unlucky

beggar with whom all things went askew—he could have wished for no happier lot in life than that fictitious one which was his for a couple of hours.

There had always been a sort of intermittent flirtation between Philip and Nellie. During his school days the former had been over head and ears in love with the pretty little tomboy who used to ride and fish and play cricket with him, and he had plainly declared his intention of making her his wife some day—an arrangement which she had promised to consider of. Later on, when Mr. Marescalchi had fallen under the sway of other feminine influences, his affection had assumed a more brotherly character, and he had been wont to make Miss Brune the *confidante* of the passions which had from time to time ravaged an inflammable heart. He had, however, been in the habit of returning to his loose allegiance at regular intervals, and had frequently given Nellie to understand that, despite some passing infidelities, there was but one woman in the world with whom he could seriously contemplate spending his life. Nellie took these periodical fits of devotion very much for what they were worth. To the best of her belief she was not at all in love with Philip, and her eyes were open to all his failings; but she had a strong affection for him; she was proud of what she considered her influence over him; and, upon the whole, she liked him better when he was pretending to be in love with her than when he was pretending to be in love with some one else. She understood him sufficiently well to be aware that with him nearly all emotion was pretence, of a conscious or unconscious kind.

To-night he was in one of his most lover-like moods. When the theatricals were over and dancing had begun, he publicly laid down the unreasonable proposition that those who had been united in the play which was at an end ought to remain partners for the rest of the evening; and before the dissentient groans which responded to him had died away he had passed his arm round Miss Brune's waist and whirled her off, whispering, 'Just for this one evening, Nellie. You owe me some reward, you know, for all the trouble I have taken to help on your triumph.'

Nellie laughed, and did not say 'No.' There was no one else present whom she particularly cared about dancing with, and Philip was beyond all comparison the best waltzer in the county. So, through three consecutive dances, this couple enjoyed an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*, while Margaret looked on

with contented eyes, and good-natured people remarked what a handsome pair they were, and ill-natured ones wondered what Mr. Brune could be thinking of to allow that sort of thing.

Meanwhile the member for Blackport was not in his usual state of happy acquiescence in the course of events. He had danced once with Edith, who had said 'Yes' and 'No,' and 'Oh, really?' when he had addressed her, and who evidently had not heard one word in ten of his conversation. He had then resigned her to Walter Brune, and had stood with his back against the wall, wrapped in somewhat sombre reflection. He began to think that, after all, Edith would hardly do. She was a sweet girl, and she had a pretty face, and that little, timid air of hers was attractive enough for a time: but she was not interesting: perhaps she was a trifle insipid. Just as he arrived at this conclusion he caught sight of her engaged in animated discourse with Walter, and, for the first time in his life, he experienced an uncomfortable impression that he was growing old. After which he glanced at Philip and Nellie, and felt older still. Finally he said to himself, rather inconsequently, that he didn't see why the young fellows should have everything their own way, and, crossing the room with the firm stride of decision, planted himself in front of Miss Brune:

'May I be honoured with a dance?' he asked.

Fortune favours the brave. Nellie hesitated for a moment, looked him straight in the face, and then gave a little bow. What she meant him to understand was that he had no business to make such a request; but that, since he had thought fit to make it, she would not be rude enough to meet him with a refusal; but it is doubtful whether he gathered so much as that from her face.

'I was afraid,' said he, after he had twice made the circuit of the room, and his partner had signified to him that she was out of breath, 'that you would dismiss me with ignominy. I wasn't quite sure whether our truce was to last up to bedtime, or to terminate when the curtain fell.'

During the rehearsals, when Mr. Stanniforth had been compelled to meet his implacable foe every day, it had been agreed between them that, for the comfort of all concerned, it would be best that they should behave as friends for the time being, and out of this convention had sprung a considerable degree of intimacy which Nellie now felt that it would be rather absurd to put a stop to.

'You seem determined to reopen that disagreeable subject,' she said.

'I? Indeed, Miss Brune, I should only be too glad to dismiss it for ever. Is it peace, then?'

'Well,' answered Nellie, slowly, 'I suppose so. If, after all my rudeness and ill-temper, you care to make peace with me, I don't think I ought to refuse.'

'Ah!' cried Stanniforth, with rather imprudent exultation; 'I told you we should be friends before long.'

Nellie drew up her slight figure, and looked displeased. 'Oh, but excuse me, I said nothing about friendship. There may be such a thing as peace between enemies, may there not?'

'A peace of that kind is not likely to be very durable, I am afraid. Still, it may last my time. I don't think I shall be much longer in this house, do you know.'

Nellie said, 'Indeed?'

'I think I shall be off in a day or two, and I am very sorry for it. I must say so, since you won't. Between ourselves, I fancy that Margaret wants to get rid of me.'

'Why should she wish that?'

'Ah, that is exactly what I should like to know, but I'm afraid there isn't much doubt as to the fact. Until about a week ago she was always begging me to stay on till the autumn; and, to tell you the truth, I had made up my mind to be persuaded, and had got down a lot of blue-books and reports to work at in the intervals of idleness; but latterly there has been a sort of awkwardness and constraint. I don't know what it is all about, I'm sure; only this morning, when I threw out a feeler by remarking casually that I thought I should have to be moving on next week, she expressed no consternation at all.'

'How mortifying?' exclaimed Nellie, unable to repress a slightly malicious laugh at the sight of his honest puzzled face. 'And so the blue-books will have to be packed up again.'

'It looks like it. I am not fond of thrusting myself upon people who don't want my company.'

'I am sure that is the last thing you would ever be guilty of,' said Nellie, demurely.

'You are very severe, Miss Brune. Happily, I am in a position to heap coals of fire upon your head. Do you know that your father has just given me an invitation to stay at Broom Leas, and that I have declined it? I don't mind telling you that it was a great sacrifice. You may guess why I made it.'

Nellie was a good deal taken aback and much more ashamed than the occasion warranted. 'I don't think that it could be much of a sacrifice,' she said; 'for you would be bored to death with us; but I should be very sorry indeed if I thought that anything I had said or done could make you imagine that you would not be welcome. Besides,' she added, 'I could easily go away. I have an aunt in Devonshire with whom I always spend a fortnight in the summer, and I know she can take me me at any time.'

'That,' said Mr. Stanniforth, gravely, 'is very considerate of you. Only, I think that if you were away from Broom Leas, I shouldn't much care about going there.'

A sudden shock of alarm sent the blood into Nellie's cheeks. Was it possible that the pertinacious friendliness of her hereditary enemy could be explained upon another and a less agreeable hypothesis than that of abstract philanthropy? In an instant she had dismissed the notion as ridiculous, and had inwardly laughed at herself for having entertained it. Still, it left her a trifle ill at ease.

'Of course it would never do,' she answered hurriedly; 'it would look so odd. You would be very uncomfortable, too; for there would be nobody to look after the house and see that you had eatable dinners.'

'And I am so particular about my dinner,' Mr. Stanniforth remarked.

'So that, if you should change your mind,' continued Nellie, opening and shutting her fan nervously—'I mean, if you really wished to see something of farming and to spend some days with my father—I hope you would not allow me to stand in your way.'

The invitation was not an over-cordial one; but Tom Stanniforth appeared to be quite satisfied with it.

'I'll tell you what,' he said; 'I wouldn't go straight from this to you, because you have all of you really had enough of me for the present; and I believe, too, that I ought to run down and see my father, who is getting to be a very old man, and who writes rather plaintively about his loneliness every now and then; but if you would have me for a day or two in September, I should enjoy it of all things. Without any humbug, I *am* anxious to get some hints about farming. I have a property of my own, upon which I mean to settle down one of these fine days, and I am ashamed to say that, at present, if I know oats from barley it is about as much as I do.'

'Very well,' said Nelly, smiling; 'then we shall expect you at harvest-time. Perhaps it might amuse you to see a harvest home.'

'Thank you very much indeed,' answered Mr. Stanniforth, with alacrity; 'that will be the very thing.'

It was thus that the traditional hospitality of the Brunes triumphed over prejudice, subdued animosity, and was in the sequel productive of much trouble to Mrs. Winnington and others.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. BRUNE GETS HIS HARVEST IN.

Mrs. Winnington had not lived for a matter of sixty-odd years in the world without having acquired a measure of philosophy. Experience had not, perhaps, taught her wisdom, but it had given her some knowledge of the nature of men and things, and it had devoted her with a certain dogged patience, which enabled her to put a good face upon temporary checks. When, therefore, Tom Stanniforth left Longbourne without making any declaration of his sentiments with regard to Edith, she did not for a moment give way to despair. Love at first sight was, as she was aware, an exceptional phenomenon and one which could not be counted upon as likely to occur in any individual case; nor indeed had Mrs. Winnington, in her most sanguine moods, expected to bring matters to a crisis within the space of a few weeks. So speedy a success would have been a rare stroke of fortune, just as it would be a piece of singularly bad luck if Mr. Stanniforth, who had remained a bachelor for more than half his life, were to yield to other fascinations before he saw Edith again. Mrs. Winnington accepted the chances of the game with all the outward equanimity of a practised player, and smiled sweetly upon her prey as she bade him good-bye, cordially re-echoing his wish that they might meet in London next spring, if not sooner. She hoped it might be sooner, she said, and added within herself an asseveration that it most certainly should be; but that the joyful reunion was to be brought about no later than in the following month, through the instrumentality of Mr. Brune, was more than she bargained for, Mr. Stanniforth not having thought it necessary to mention the circumstance.

It is often instanced as a proof of the good will of Providence

towards mankind that horses, elephants, and other domestic animals should be ignorant of their own strength: perhaps we ought to be no less thankful that ladies of Mrs. Winnington's stamp seldom succeed in gauging the measure of man's timorousness. It would be difficult to say why Tom Stanniforth should have been afraid of a fat, smiling woman who had no hold over him and could do him no possible injury; but the fact remains that he was so, and that, knowing what her wishes were, and having very nearly made up his mind not to gratify them, he drew a long breath of relief as soon as he had escaped from her presence.

Far, however, as that mature strategist was from being dismayed, she was a little disappointed and somewhat out of temper; and when Mrs. Winnington was out of temper those about her fared sadly. For several days she made the lives of the inhabitants of Longbourne a burden to them; after which she discovered that the state of her health absolutely required three weeks of Homburg, where, as she had seen by the papers, the fashionable world which her soul loved was at that time largely represented.

'It is a ruinously expensive journey,' she remarked to Margaret. 'Of course we shall travel like the paupers that we are, going straight through, and engaging a couple of rooms on the second floor of some horrible little public-house when we arrive. I am sorry for poor dear Edith's sake that everything will be so uncomfortable; still I feel that it is a positive duty to go.'

Mrs. Stanniforth did not accompany the travellers to Germany. Her share in the expedition was confined to the defrayal of its cost and to telegraphing to secure suitable lodging for her mother and sister at their journey's end. As the waters promptly brought the gout out of the former lady's system, and had the effect of keeping her (as she wrote) 'upon the flat of her back in screaming agonies' for ten days, it may be presumed that Miss Winnington had a bad time of it. Happily, however, the workings of human affairs are such that what is one person's loss is very commonly another's gain; and if Edith had to pass through a period of vicarious martyrdom, those whom she had left behind her at Longbourne enjoyed, by way of compensation, a brief taste of the blessings of peace.

Philip, who was much in Nellie's society at this time, declared to her that he had never been so happy before in his life. 'All things considered,' said he, 'I am inclined to think that

nothing suits me like domesticity. Meg and I lead a sort of Darby and Joan life, and we enjoy it prodigiously. We don't talk much; for there is an unspoken agreement between us to avoid all mention of absent friends and other unpleasant topics; we sit beaming at one another and hugging ourselves in a sybaritish contentment. She is very busy, as she always is, in a quiet, leisurely sort of way, with her correspondence and her charities and what not; and I twirl my thumbs and watch her, which is delightful. Did you ever notice what a soothing kind of person Meg is to watch? She is never in a hurry; she doesn't upset things, or catch her drapery upon corners of the furniture, and her dress doesn't accompany all her movements with a maddening swish-swish, like the dresses of some ladies whom we know. I should doubt whether there is another woman in the world so pleasant to live with as Meg. She never rubs you the wrong way; she never asks you whether you would like this or that; she knows by intuition what you want, and there it is always at your elbow.'

'She spoils you,' said Nellie.

'Just so; and if there is a thing I love it is being spoilt. I should like to go on existing in this way to the end of my days.'

'It wouldn't be good for you,' said Nellie, shaking her head wisely.

'Don't you think so? Perhaps you are right. Nice things never are good for one, and no doubt a little bracing is expedient from time to time. Well, we shall all be braced soon, when Mrs. Winnington comes back with renewed vigour to tell us about all the dukes and duchesses whom she has encountered at Homburg, and to ask me whether I have yet decided upon some means of making an honest livelihood. There is no complaint so tantalising as the gout. It is for ever threatening terrible things, but somehow or other it won't proceed to extremities—or rather it won't proceed beyond them. And yet there are so many vital points open to attack. Possibly Mrs. Winnington may not possess a heart, but I know she has a stomach, and, considering the reckless manner in which she often treats it, it certainly ought not to be an invulnerable one. Still, it is borne in upon me that she will die in a green old age, after having worried all the rest of us into our graves. Meanwhile, let us make the most of an interval of calm.'

'If you are so fond of a quiet life, why are you perpetually running away from it?' asked Miss Brune, pertinently.

'Business,' answered Philip. 'I have business sometimes, though you might not think it, to look at me. I shouldn't go to London at this time of year if I could help it.'

The answer was a moderately truthful one. It was indeed a sense of duty rather than inclination that led Mr. Marescalchi to pay occasional flying visits to Coomassie Villa at this season; and although, when once he was there, the mystery and fun of the thing pleased him well enough, he was never sorry to return to the superior luxuries and refinements of Longbourne. True to her established rule of conduct, Margaret asked no questions, thereby escaping the proverbial fate of those who thus court deception. When Philip remarked casually that he was going up to town from Saturday to Monday to do some shopping and get his hair cut, she did not remind him that Saturday afternoon is not a favourable time for making purchases in London, or point out that it was physically impossible that his hair could be any shorter than it was already. She said nothing; but went about her avocations with a smiling face and an uneasy heart, telling herself that in this she was but submitting to the destiny of all fond and wise mothers, and taking comfort from the lesson which experience had taught her, that as soon as her boy got into trouble of any serious nature, he would be tolerably certain to come to her in order to be helped out of it.

Thus the summer slipped quietly and imperceptibly away. The mornings and evenings became chilly; the fields grew ripe for the sickle, and patches of red and yellow began to show themselves upon the green of the woods. Then came harvest time, and the slaughter of the partridges. It was not until the middle of September that Mrs. Winnington, who had proceeded from Homburg to Switzerland (by the doctor's orders, she averred), reappeared, bringing her sheaves with her. She was one of those persons who think it their duty, whenever they visit the Continent, to encumber themselves with a store of cheap presents for those whom they have left behind them. It was not Mrs. Winnington's habit to give money to the servants at Longbourne; there were too many of them, she said; and, besides, they ought not to be led to expect tips from one of the family; still, she should like them to think that they had all been remembered. Consequently, on the evening of her return from abroad, she would sail majestically into the housekeeper's room, bearing an ancient leather bag, from whence issued a bountiful supply of thimbles, Palais-Royal jewellery, and the like, while at the bottom of this cornucopia there commonly

lurked some specially hideous gift, destined for the mistress of the house.

'It is so difficult to choose anything that dear Margaret will like,' Mrs. Winnington would often say; 'but I think one is always safe with some little ornament for the drawing-room table.'

This time, however, the drawing-room was spared, and it was the hall that was decorated with a loud-voiced cuckoo clock, which had been picked up a bargain at Interlaken. The slumbers of the entire household were disturbed by the periodical hootings of this delightful acquisition up to two o'clock at night, when it triumphantly gave forth its note thirty-six consecutive times; after which it suddenly ceased from troubling, and the weary had rest. Nothing would induce it to resume its labours on the following morning, and suspicions of foul play rested upon various persons; but, fortunately, Mrs. Winnington had come home in the best of humours, and was not disposed to quarrel with anybody.

At breakfast she gave, as Philip had predicted she would, a detailed description of all the exalted personages whom she had fallen in with at Homburg, and of how delighted they had been to see her again, and how they had been wondering, all through the London season, what could have become of her, and how Lady This and Lady That had inquired very kindly after dear Margaret, and had said what a pity it was that she should shut herself up so. And what made these reminiscences so cheering was that the great people had not confined themselves to empty civilities.

'Dear Margaret, I don't know what you will think of me. It seems very unkind to leave you again so soon, after having been away all this time; but I am afraid we cannot manage more than three weeks here at present. People laugh at me when I say that my time is not my own; and they won't believe that I would far rather remain quietly here than rush about visiting from house to house. Of course there is this to be said, that, for dear Edith's sake, I ought not to drop old friends; and with so many, you know, it is a case of out of sight out of mind. Very cordial and kind if they happen to meet one; but if they don't——' Mrs. Winnington finished her sentence with an expressive shrug of her ample shoulders. 'In any case, you may count upon us for Christmas,' she added reassuringly.

All this was very nice; but there was a cloud upon

Margaret's brow, a certain guilty unwillingness to meet her mother's eye, which that observant lady could not help detecting in the long run. As soon as breakfast was over, she took her daughter aside, and interrogated her affectionately:

'Now, my dear child, I do trust you are not feeling hurt at my running away from you. It really is a matter of duty. If it were not for dear Edith, I should ask for nothing better than to be always with you. I am sure you must be aware of that.'

Margaret, without intentional irony, assured her mother that she had never entertained the smallest doubt upon that point, and added that she was only too glad that Edith should have every opportunity of seeing the world and people. 'Especially men. It would be a great misfortune if she were to decide her fate, or if it were to be decided for her, too hastily.'

'Oh, my dear, I have decided nothing. Mr. Stanniforth would be suitable in a great many ways, but of course I don't mean to say that she might not do better. Indeed, I almost think that she *ought* to do better, if only one were not so cut off from all society! But if it is not that, what is it that is troubling you, Margaret? I know you have something upon your mind.'

'Indeed I have not.'

'Oh, but, my dear, I can see,' persisted Mrs. Winnington. 'I am sure that there is something.'

'No; at least, nothing of any importance. I was rather astonished this morning to hear that Tom Stanniforth had arrived at Broom Leas last night, that is all.'

'*What!*' cried Mrs. Winnington, who, however prepared she might have been to throw Mr. Stanniforth over if it should seem expedient to do so, had no idea of being thrown over by him; 'do you mean to say that he is actually staying in the the house, and never told you he was coming? Oh, I simply can't believe it!'

'I met Nellie at church this morning, and she told me,' Margaret said. 'I was a little annoyed about it, because I cannot understand why Tom should not have come to this house if he wanted to be in these parts at all; and also because—well, because, for many reasons, I think it is a pity that he should have come at this particular time. But Nellie says his appearance was quite unexpected. Her father gave him a sort of general invitation when he was here before, and yesterday they

got a telegram from him in the morning, saying that he would arrive in time for dinner, unless he heard from them to the contrary.'

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington. And, after a short pause—'Now I don't want to triumph over you, dear Margaret; I detest people who are for ever saying "I told you so," and I never do it myself. Still, I can't help just reminding you—what did I always tell you about that man?'

'I don't remember. Nothing that was not in his favour, I am sure. I thought you had such a very high opinion of Tom.'

'No, no; I don't mean him; I mean that Brune man. I am very seldom deceived in a face, and there is a look of slyness about his which has repelled me from the first. I warned you that he was not to be trusted, and now you see! As for the girl, she has been setting her cap at Mr. Stanniforth all along. I saw it plainly enough, but it really did not seem worth while to take any notice of it, particularly as I suspected that it was almost as much a desire to spite me as to catch him that was at the bottom of her behaviour. And now their telegraphing off for him on the very day of my return puts it beyond a doubt. Oh, yes, my dear Margaret, I know what you would say. You are so innocent yourself that you fancy everybody else must be like you; but you don't know the world, my dear, and you never will. Well, I confess I am astonished. Ingratitude one expects; but a deliberate, coarse insult!—for this is nothing less—to me there is something more shocking, more repulsive in vulgar-mindedness, than in any mere external vulgarity.'

Margaret did not smile, even inwardly. If her mother was vulgar-minded, she was unaware of the fact, or at all events was able to shut her eyes to it. She felt it incumbent upon her, however, to exonerate the Brunes from the charge brought against them, explaining that Nellie positively disliked Tom Stanniforth, and had gone rather out of her way to show that she did so.

'Oh, my dear child, what a stale old trick! I should not have thought that that pretence of a little aversion could have taken in even you. I don't for a moment suppose that the girl has a chance of success, but it is sickening to think that any one can behave in that way. Poor Mr. Stanniforth! don't you think it would be as well to ask him to come on here when he gets away from those people?'

'I would rather not,' answered Margaret, slowly. 'And,

besides, I doubt whether he could come. Nellie said he was only able to run down for a day or two, and that his object was to see their harvest home. I suppose they don't have harvest homes in the neighbourhood of Manchester

'Harvest home!' The depth of Mrs Winnington's scorn was not to be expressed in words. 'Of course,' said she, 'we shall be expected to attend this rustic festivity.'

'I was thinking that perhaps we might make some excuse.'

'Not for the world! They would think we were offended, which is the very last thing one would wish them to imagine No! you may do as you like; but I shall be there.'

And in the ring of Mrs. Winnington's voice, as she announced this decision, there seemed ample promise that she would not be there for nothing.

Nevertheless, when the time came, she showed herself under no aggressive aspect, and advanced to the attack with a great deal of affectionate sprightliness. She herself would have said that she was too well-bred to behave otherwise · but the truth was that she felt no serious alarm, and thoroughly despised her enemy. She was a woman of very limited perceptions, and could never really believe that there were people in the world whose tastes and opinions differed from her own. When she encountered any such, she usually set them down as mad or dishonest. Now, Mr. Stanniforth being neither the one nor the other, it was impossible that he should entangle himself with Nellie Brune—a person in whom Mrs. Winnington could see but little to admire—when so beautiful and charming a girl as Edith might be his for the asking. Consequently there was no cause for agitation. The Brunes, to be sure, had been guilty of gross insolence, and should be duly chastised for it at a fitting opportunity; but this was only a matter of detail.

The Longbourne party walked over to Broom Leas late in the afternoon, and found Mr. Stanniforth, clad in white flannels, and playing a vigorous game of lawn-tennis with Walter and two younger members of the Brune family, while Nellie and her father looked on. After the usual greetings had been exchanged, and the chances of the rain holding off till night exhaustively discussed, Mrs. Winnington bore down upon the culprit with ponderous playfulness.

'We are very much offended with you; we have a great mind not to speak to you at all. Of course we know that you must have been dreadfully bored when you were in this stagnant neighbourhood before; but we did think that if anything made

you wish to return to it, you would have given our house the preference, dull as it is.'

'But I wasn't asked,' answered Tom, with a side glance at Margaret, whose eyes were resolutely fixed upon a noisy flight of rooks overhead.

'Oh, Mr. Stanniforth, I am afraid that will never do! You must really find some more plausible excuse than that. Margaret, dear, I am telling this very uncivil brother-in-law of yours that we shall certainly not forgive him unless he promises to come to us next week, and stay until he is told to go away. She won't listen to me. Do you know, Mr. Stanniforth, I really believe she is a little offended. Of course I was only in fun; but, joking apart, I think dear Margaret is the least bit in the world hurt. She is very sensitive, and you know there are not many people whom she is strongly attached to. Do you think it was quite kind to come down and stay with comparative strangers, and not even to let her know that you would be here?'

Mrs. Winnington had stationed herself in the middle of the tennis-court, and had broken up the game: a circumstance which had perhaps escaped her notice, but which would not in any case have struck her as being worthy of attention. The two boys had strolled away towards the farmyard, grumbling under their breath. Walter was talking eagerly to Edith, whose colour was coming and going, and whose countenance wore that half-frightened, half-pleased expression which Hugh Kenyon had seen and understood long before. Philip had joined Mr. Brune and Nellie, and was making them laugh—doubtless at the expense of some one near at hand.

Margaret, standing alone, and marking the distribution of the groups, sighed softly, and then was seized with a sudden spasm of silent laughter. There was going to be trouble, she thought; trouble which, when it came, would be of a somewhat serious kind, and would create a lasting breach between some of those who were now conversing together so amicably. This was sad; still it was impossible not to perceive the humorous aspect of the situation. Who could see, without a smile, four blind men hurrying from the four points of the compass towards the same spot? One might sincerely grieve for them after the crash had come, when they had knocked their four poor skulls together, and were reeling backwards with groans and mutual recriminations; but the approach, at least, of the catastrophe must inevitably be comical. Margaret, whose eyes were now

open, could afford to laugh at the blind; though, to be sure, it was not so very long since she herself had been one of them. She had intended to give her mother a hint of the possible state of affairs as regarded Walter and Edith; she had intended also, at one time, to speak a few friendly words to Walter himself on the same subject, but her courage had failed her in both instances; and, for that matter, it is doubtful whether she would have done any good by hastening the crisis which nothing could have warded off. Now that her own vision was so clear, she saw, or thought she saw, rather more than Edith's blushes and Walter's absurdly happy young face. For one thing, she saw that Tom Stanniforth was lending a very small part of his attention to the blandishments of his companion, and that his eyes were never once removed from the spot where Nellie stood, laughing at Philip's inaudible facetiousness. Was there a clue here, then, to her brother-in-law's sudden and inexplicable interest in harvest homes? Upon the face of it, it seemed in no wise improbable; and it was when observation had carried her thus far that Margaret was overtaken by the disposition towards laughter above mentioned

'You look amused,' said Mr. Brune, who had approached her unnoticed. 'If you are thinking of anything likely to raise the spirits of a discouraged farmer, it would be kind to mention it. Three bad harvests in succession, and no hops to speak of! If this sort of thing goes on, you will grace no more harvest homes at Broom Leas with your presence; or at least, if you do, you will have another man for your entertainer.'

'Oh, don't say that!' said Margaret; for, circumstances being as they were, the prediction struck her as somewhat ominous. 'Whatever may happen, I hope *I*, at all events, may be with you next harvest time, and for many harvest times to come.'

Mr. Brune naturally did not follow the drift of her thoughts. 'Oh, well,' he said, 'I dare say I shall manage to keep out of the workhouse for another year or two; but you must allow me the farmer's prescriptive right to grumble, especially on a day of merry-making. By-the-bye, I trust you are prepared to go without dinner to-night, and to sit down to an indigestible supper towards nine o'clock. Poor as one's yield is, it takes a long time to get it in, and I don't suppose the last waggon will enter the gates till after sunset. Then, you know, we shall be in duty bound to look in upon the men at their supper, and to have our healths drunk and make speeches.'

'I don't think we must wait for that,' said Margaret. 'My mother ought not to stand about in the cold, and it is getting dusk already, and the dew is beginning to fall. Besides, I did not say anything to the servants about not being back for dinner.'

The truth was that she was anxious to get away as soon as might be. 'If we only can avoid sudden discoveries,' she thought.

'Your mother,' said Mr. Brune, 'will find a blazing fire in the drawing-room. Suppose we take her in there. The young people will let us know when it is time to come out and join in the shouting.'

It was thus that Mrs. Winnington was spared the pain of seeing her daughter and Walter walk slowly down the avenue, side by side, and disappear behind the belt of larches which separated the Broom Leas paddocks from the road. This couple was shortly afterwards followed by another.

'Walter has gone to see them load the last waggon, and Mr. Stanniforth wants to go too,' said Nellie. 'Are you coming, Philip?'

But Philip, mindful of the old adage as to the relation of odd numbers to company, shook his head, saying that he thought he would go round to the stables and smoke a pipe. He was not exactly jealous of Tom Stanniforth, but he thought that good-natured person a very great bore. Nobody enjoys retiring into the background to make room for others; and Philip perhaps disliked the sensation more than most people. Habit, and encouragement from various quarters, had led him to behave as though, and almost to believe that, he had a special right to Nellie's society. Sooner or later, of course, a day must come when he would have to publicly abrogate that pretension; but in the meantime it was pleasant to play the dog in the manger's part, and disagreeable to be ousted from it. So he strayed rather disconsolately about the stables and strawyard in the grey, chilly twilight, yawning, and saying to himself that he would not be able to stand this sort of thing long, and that he must positively go up to London, set to work with old Steinberger, and begin making some definite plans for the future. These thoughts, together with the saddening influence of the autumn evening, soon brought on one of his periodical fits of depression. He saw that things were going badly with him, and would probably go worse; the luck to which he commonly trusted seemed but a broken reed to lean upon; and finally he

fell to wondering whether, if the worst came to the worst, he would ever have the pluck to cut his throat.

He had already fallen to so dismal a depth in the process of self-communion that he was trying, quite ineffectually, to persuade himself that, since suicide was in itself a cowardly action, there could not properly be said to be any cowardice in the fear of committing it, when the slow trampling of heavy hoofs, the creaking of wheels, and the shouting of many voices, told him that the term of his solitude was at hand. These cheerful sounds came nearer and nearer, and at length there appeared against the pale sky a huge, dark, moving mass, crowned by sundry indistinct human forms. As the team was brought to a standstill a few yards from the spot where Philip stood, other dim figures became visible moving about the gravel drive; Mr. Brune and the two ladies emerged from the house, and the boys at the top of the load struck up a discordant chorus, in which those on *terra firma* joined with a will—

> Mr. Brune he's a very good man,
> He treats his 'osses as well as he can;
> We've once turned over and twice stuck fast,
> But we've got his harvest home at last.

This qualified song of triumph, bellowed out in a dialect which it would be difficult to reproduce by means of any wild arrangement of vowels and consonants, was followed by others equally to the point, each verse being received by a somewhat disproportionate amount of hooraying.

Then the waggoner stepped forward, whip in hand, and with much dignity delivered an oration, which, like the speeches of some other persons in a less humble rank of life, started well, but grew unmanageable as it progressed, and would probably never have come to an end at all if, after the first five minutes, some one had not hit upon the expedient of trying a little more hooraying. Mr. Brune made a brief response; and with that the proceedings, so far as Philip and the ladies from Longbourne were concerned, terminated.

Mrs. Winnington was quite clear and decisive about returning home in time for dinner. She had accomplished the object of her visit; the ways and habits of rustics did not interest her at all, and to sit down to cold supper was what she could not contemplate without shuddering. She therefore expressed herself much gratified with the ceremony which she had witnessed, and prepared for departure.

'Now what has become of these young people?' she asked, peering out into the darkness. 'Edith dear, are you there?'

'I am here, mamma,' answered Edith, appearing at her mother's elbow, escorted by a tall and manly form.

'Oh! Well, I am afraid we must be going, much as I should have liked to remain a little longer. Dear Margaret is feeling rather tired. Good night, Mr. Stanniforth. I suppose we may shake hands again now that we have made up our quarrel,' she added, extending her hand to Walter, who grasped it cordially, and remarked:

'Always glad to shake hands with you, Mrs. Winnington, though I'm not Stanniforth.'

'Oh! it's you, is it?' said Mrs. Winnington, with a perceptible change of tone; 'I didn't see. Where is Mr. Stanniforth, then?'

'Upon my word, I can't tell you. He and Nellie were walking together—where was it? Now I come to think of it, I don't believe I have seen them since we left the field. Perhaps they are there yet.'

'What? Then it is high time that somebody went to look for them, I should think,' said Mrs. Winnington, severely.

Despite his own ill-humour, this opening was more than Philip could withstand. 'Don't spoil sport,' he whispered; 'do you mean to say you haven't noticed that the millionaire is desperately smitten?'

'Smitten? What do you mean?' returned the agitated lady, rising most satisfactorily. 'I have noticed nothing of the sort—there is nothing of the sort. You are always imagining something abomin—improbable. Edith, my dear, you are coughing. And I told you so particularly not to walk on the damp grass in your thin boots.'

'But indeed it is not at all damp,' pleaded Edith, tremulously.

'Now, my dear child, what *is* the use of your saying that? You are positively drenched. If you have caught cold I shall be more than annoyed.'

'I told her she oughtn't to stand about,' put in Walter.

'Then why did you keep her out of doors?' retorted Mrs. Winnington, very snappishly. 'Come, Edith, you must walk home briskly.'

Edith meekly obeyed; and Walter, as he stood at the door, listening to their retreating footsteps, heard the careful mother's voice raised to scolding pitch the whole way down the avenue.

Stanniforth and Nellie heard her too. They were not so very far off, after all, having only strolled down to the end of the paddock to see the moon rise. The sky, it was true, was over-cast, and the almanack would have informed them that there would be no moon until after midnight; but perhaps they had omitted to consult the almanack. It would be hard to say exactly why neither of them spoke or moved when the departing visitors passed within a few yards of them. First came Mrs. Stanniforth and Marescalchi, walking quickly and in silence; Mrs. Winnington, breathless but eloquent, followed at a slower pace.

'Be so good as not to contradict me, Edith. You never pay the smallest attention to what I tell you; but at least you might listen when I am speaking. How can you possibly tell whether you have caught cold or not? I say that you have; and you know what an object you are when you have a cold in your head; besides which, there is always the risk of inflammation of the lungs, and you are all of you consumptive really. However, that is not what I mind. Now don't interrupt, please; you know very well what I mean;—that is not the *only* thing that I mind. When you were younger, your running wild with these young Brunes did not so much matter; but you ought to have the sense to see that it is both silly and unladylike to keep up that sort of thing now. Mind it does not happen again. Now don't interrupt, Edith, because'—&c. &c.

When distance had softened down this homily into a mere angry buzzing, the listeners had a little laugh.

'Poor things!' sighed Mr. Stanniforth, compassionately.

'Poor things! whom do you mean?' asked Nellie. 'Poor Edith, if you like.'

'Oh, I'm sorry for them both. The girl has the worst of it now, I grant you; but the tables are sure to be turned sooner or later, and I can imagine that it must be very aggravating to be listened to in absolute silence, when you want to be contradicted and have a good row and have done with it. Mrs. Winnington isn't a bad old woman, you know, as old women go.'

'I should be sorry to think that there were many like her,' said Nellie.

'Oh, I don't know; I have met worse. I was talking to her for some time this afternoon, and really I was rather pleased with some things that she said. She showed a good deal more feeling than I should have expected.'

'Feeling? What about?'

'Well—about vivisection, if you must know,' answered Tom, with a conscious laugh; 'but she wasn't humbugging me; at least I don't think she was. I will say that for Mrs. Winnington, that she isn't a humbug. Worldly, of course, but honestly worldly, which is something.'

'I wish I were as charitable as you are,' said Nellie, rather wistfully; 'it must be a very pleasant sort of sensation to like everybody. The only drawback is that you can hardly be able to care for any individual very much.'

'I assure you you are mistaken,' cried Tom, eagerly.

'Am I?'

Nellie had it upon the tip of her tongue to ask him whether he liked Edith very much, for she was rather curious to hear what his answer would be. But, upon the whole, she thought better of this and held her peace.

'Shall we go back to the house now?' she asked, presently. And, without waiting for a reply, she walked swiftly back across the grass, he following her in a meditative mood.

CHAPTER XIV.

PHILIP IN A NEW PART.

If Mrs. Winnington and her youngest daughter had a disagreeable walk home, owing to the absolute lack of any sympathy between them, the couple who preceded them across the wet grass and through the chilly mists of the autumn evening were in no such evil case, and found mutual solace for the troubles of life in one another's companionship. Philip was still in a downcast and chastened frame of mind, and at such times he commonly felt as though Margaret were the only true friend he had in the world; while she, perceiving his low spirits, and naturally connecting them with Tom Stanniforth's rather conspicuous attentions to Nellie, was half sorry that he should be in trouble, half glad that it should be the means of moving him towards a more than usually demonstrative affection for herself. The best love of the best women has always something of a maternal character, and everybody knows that a son can pay no greater compliment to his mother than to make her the recipient of his confidence, whether spoken or unspoken. Mar-

garet did not attempt any specific kind of consolation, being too much in dread of appearing intrusive for that; but she let her boy know, in a general way, that all his emotions, pleasurable and otherwise, were shared by her, and she further soothed him with such delicate forms of flattery as are conveyed for the most part by inference.

This process was so far successful that it had the effect of warming up Philip's self-esteem, which had fallen below freezing-point; and it was but natural that gratitude to so perceptive a benefactress should make him wish to do or say something that should be agreeable to her. So presently he came out with—

'Meg, I think I was in rather too great a hurry to decide on cutting the Bar. I don't in the least believe, you know, that I shall ever do any good as a lawyer; still, as I have put my hand to the plough, I might as well perhaps go on to the end of the first furrow, and if my being called was of no other use, at least it would please you, wouldn't it?'

'Of course it would please me,' cried Margaret; 'I can't tell you how much it would please me. You know I wouldn't for the world urge you to take up any profession that you disliked; but the fact of being called to the Bar would not commit you to anything, and it might perhaps lead to some appointment that might suit you. And then—you don't mind people saying disagreeable things about you, I dare say.'

'Not in the least, so long as I don't hear them.'

'But I am weak-minded enough to be made unhappy by them. And you see, I do hear them; I can't help it. You don't know what a satisfaction it will be to me to be able to tell one or two solicitous friends that you have no intention of leading an idle life.'

'Poor old Meg!' said Philip, with generous compassion for this womanly weakness. 'All right, then; that's settled. In two years' time you shall have a photograph of me, in my wig and gown, with which to confound the sceptical, and in the meantime I shall keep my eyes open, and try to discover some less objectionable way of earning my bread and butter.'

Margaret thanked him so warmly that he really felt for the moment that he was performing an act of self-sacrifice, and could not find it in his heart to inform her of his actual projects, as he had been very nearly doing five minutes before. Why vex her needlessly? he thought. It was not to be expected that she would relish the idea of seeing him behind the footlights of the

opera; and it was so pleasant to be patted on the back and told what a good, kind fellow he was. He began to think that he *was* rather good and kind—quite as much so, at all events, as circumstances would allow him to be; and, by way of showing how thoroughly in earnest he was, he declared that he would go up to London and 'set to work' no later than the very next morning.

Margaret was a little taken aback by this precipitancy; the more so as she recollected that the Michaelmas Term did not begin until the month of November. But that circumstance need not stand in the way of private study, she reflected, and perhaps it was best to strike while the iron was hot. One thing, however, she felt impelled to say:

'I hope, dear, you are not hurrying away for any particular reason.'

'Particular reason?' repeated Philip; and it was well that the darkness hid his alarmed face.

'I mean, you mustn't jump to conclusions. Tom Stanniforth is the Brunes' guest, you see, and they must be civil to him. I suspect that, if the truth were known, you would find that Nellie is very anxious for his visit to come to an end.'

Philip burst into a great laugh of relief. 'So you thought I was going off in a fit of jealousy! Now, Meg, I do think you might have known me better. Am I ever jealous? Do I ever covet my neighbour's house, or his wife, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is his? There is only one person in the world about whom I have ever felt jealous, and that is yourself. There used to be a time when I was horribly afraid that you would end by marrying the trusty Kenyon.'

'Then,' said Margaret, who now, in her turn, had reason to be grateful to the darkness—'we are quits; for you might have known me better than to think that of me.'

Philip left Longbourne the following morning, in a condition of comfortable self-approval, and no presentiment of the circumstances under which he was next to see the old place occurred to cast a gloom over his excellent spirits.

'Where shall I write to you?' Margaret asked, as he climbed into the dog-cart that was to take him to the station.

'Oh! the Club, as usual,' he answered.

He had never been in the habit of giving any other address than this, and, since he had become the tenant of Coomassie Villa, had often blessed the lucky chance which had preserved him from a less cautious custom. Margaret knew that he

sometimes went to an hotel, sometimes to rooms, and had not cared to ask for more precise information upon the subject.

Now although there was no particular reason of the kind that Mrs. Stanniforth had imagined to hasten Philip's departure, there was an approaching event which rendered his presence in London at this juncture, if not essential, at least desirable and becoming. On his arrival at Coomassie Villa he found Mrs. Webber (the Aunt Keziah to whom it may be remembered Mrs. Marescalchi had once made reference, as the sole representative of her kith and kin) in temporary possession of the house, and exactly twenty-four hours later a very diminutive gentleman was added to the list of Fanny's near relations.

It seems possible that readers may not, up to the present point, have become greatly enamoured of Philip Marescalchi, and perhaps—with a view towards raising him in the estimation of an important section of them—it may be well here to state that he proved himself a father of the most unexceptionable description. To the ordinary male mind an infant, both as regards its aspect and its habits, is a somewhat repulsive little creature. It has none of the soft prettinesses which belong to the young of the lower animals; it is both exacting and ungrateful; and the utter helplessness which is supposed to endear it in a special degree to one of its parents seldom arouses a corresponding sentiment in the breast of the other. Philip, however, was an exception to the general rule. From the first he manifested an immense interest in, and affection for, his baby, which was indeed an unobjectionable specimen of its kind, being neither red nor uproarious, but a tiny, waxen-faced thing which passed the best part of its days and nights in profound slumber. He purchased for it a cradle so lovely that Mrs. Webber threw up her hands in mingled admiration and dismay at the sight of it; and beside this expensive toy he would sit contentedly hour after hour, endeavouring by means of various expedients to attract the attention of its inmate, who would occasionally reward his efforts with a tipsy sort of smile.

Most ladies will be disposed to think that there must have been some good in a man who could so conduct himself; and it is possible that they may be right. Philip himself was a good deal puzzled and diverted by his own state of mind, and would often laugh gently at himself with that good-humoured indulgence which was his normal attitude in moments of introspection. He had no idea of shaping any particular course in life for himself, or of steering by the light of any fixed principle or set

of principles; he liked to let things happen to him, and to watch the results; and when these took unexpected forms, as they often did, he was interested, and sometimes greatly tickled. This experience of family life and paternity had for him the charm of novelty, mingled with a certain spice of unreality. He never forgot that he could escape from it all whenever it might please him to do so, and return to practical bachelorhood and the society of his equals, and in that knowledge lay, perhaps, the explanation of the fact that he was quite satisfied to remain where he was. And he was really fond of poor little Fanny, who was recovering very slowly, and upon whom feebleness and her newly-acquired matronly dignity had exercised a softening and refining influence. After a time, when she was able to leave the house, Philip used to hire an open fly, and take her out for drives, through miry lanes and byways, into the country, where they were as secure from recognition as in the heart of Central Africa, and where creeping mists, and falling leaves, and the pale light of watery sunsets affected her simple happiness with no chilly warning of change. Long afterwards Philip sometimes looked back upon those days with an aching feeling at his heart and a sigh over 'circumstances,' which he has always blamed, and always will blame, for the various misfortunes that have fallen to his lot.

Fanny's love and admiration for her husband knew no bounds. She was firmly convinced, and would frequently declare, that there was no one like him in the world—no one so kind, so unselfish, so uncomplaining. 'And to think of him living like this, after what he's been accustomed to!' Fanny would exclaim, with tears in her eyes. In truth, Coomassie Villa, owing to the disorganised state of the household, was by no means a comfortable place of residence at this time; and if there had not been a good deal of amiability in Philip's composition, he would hardly have been able to tolerate Mrs. Webber, who had taken upon herself the functions of nurse, and who occasionally showed herself to be a very unpleasant old person indeed.

Mrs. Webber, unfortunately, was not an Oxfordshire rustic, who might have been overawed by Mr. Marescalchi's gentility, but a shrewd woman, London born and London bred, whose husband kept a public-house in Islington, and whose views of life and humanity were of the coarser and more practical kind. She had never approved of Fanny's escapade, and did not disguise her opinion that her niece's husband was 'a slippery one.'

'When are you a-going to come forward, like a honest man, and let this poor child have his rights?' she asked, making a sudden descent upon Philip one afternoon when he was sitting alone in the dreary little drawing-room, and tossing the baby with a series of violent upward jerks while she spoke. She was a tall, stout woman, with sharp, black eyes and grizzled cork-screw curls, and she put her question in a determined manner.

'His rights? Well, really, Mrs. Webber, I think that at the present moment he may fairly claim it as one of his rights that he should not be made sick, as he certainly will be, if you go on hurling him into the air as you are doing much longer. You can't mean to tell me that any human being, of however tender years, can *like* that mode of treatment.'

'Don't you be imperent, young man. I haven't brought up ten children of my own, nor yet I haven't left my comfortable home and come here to do servant's work, for you to teach me what babies like and what they don't like.'

'Mrs. Webber, I feel that we have acted most selfishly in keeping you so long. Let us lose no time in engaging a nurse and restoring you to your neglected family.'

'Hah! make use of me so long as I'm wanted, and then show me the door—that's it, is it? But I'd have you to know, Philip, that I'm not one as can be treated that way. Are you a-going to do your dooty by my niece? Are you a-going to love, honour, and cherish her as your wife, and introduce her as such to your relations? For that is what you've swore to do at the altar, mind you.'

'It may be so; but I do not recollect that clause in the marriage service. In any case, the matter is one between Fanny and me; and highly as I respect you, Mrs. Webber, I don't intend to discuss it with you.'

'There's two must give their word to that bargain,' cried Mrs. Webber, with a defiant toss of her head and of the long-suffering baby. 'Now, listen to me, Philip; I don't want to have no trouble; let's sit down and talk over things quiet, as between friends.'

'Mrs. Webber, I am sorry to interrupt you, and it grieves me to say anything of a nature to hurt your feelings; but there is a trifling matter which I think it best to mention to you before we go any further. Twice within the last five minutes you have addressed me as "Philip." Don't do it again, please; I don't like it.'

The effect of this mild remonstrance was very remarkable.

Mrs. Webber sank down upon the nearest chair, dropped the baby upon her knees, and began to cry.

'Never did I think to be so spoke to in this house! Not to be allowed to call my own niece's husband by his name! Well, this *is* unkind!' she ejaculated between her sobs.

Philip was immensely delighted. He found himself the richer by a new experience, and mentally noted it down under the heading of 'How to deal with the lower classes.' Finding he was master of the situation, he proceeded, in accordance with the rules of war, to follow up his advantage and trample upon the fallen.

'My good woman, your intentions may be excellent; but you are meddling with matters which are too high for you. I may in time succeed in raising my wife to my own rank in society; but the process must be taken in hand slowly and delicately. As for her relations, I haven't married them, and it will be altogether out of the question, I am afraid, that we should receive them upon terms of intimacy.'

This was rather overshooting the mark. Mrs. Webber raised her head, and snorted wrathfully.

'Intimacy, indeed!' quoth she. 'Wait till you are asked for your intimacy. *I* don't want it, nor never did. I want my niece's rights. I'm standing up for them as won't stand up for theirselves.'

But at this juncture Marescalchi junior intervened appositely with a long-repressed howl, and had to be carried upstairs.

Philip, left in possession of the field of battle, stretched out his legs, whistled, sighed, and made a dismal grimace. He was not afraid of Mrs. Webber compromising his future in any very serious manner; but she certainly had it in her power to cause him much intermittent trouble and worry; and that was almost as bad. He could not help thinking how much better it would have been if he had married Nellie Brune, and how much—how very much better—if he had not married at all. Then he got up, shook himself, and walked away in the rain to his club, where, chancing to meet an acquaintance who was passing through town, he soon forgot all his sorrows in a game of pyramids.

In the month of October Herr Steinberger returned to London; and Philip lost no time in placing himself in the hands of that competent professor. Steinberger, this time,

was complimentary, and more encouraging than he had been upon the occasion of Philip's first visit to him.

'You have a goot ear,' he was pleased to say; 'and the voice—well, the voice is goot too; but you have not learnt to get him out. What for you want to go upon the stage, eh? That is no business of mine, you say.'

'I don't say so at all,' answered Philip, laughing, 'and I am quite willing to tell you. I want to make money.'

'Ah—so! It is no caprice, then. To make money?—well, that might be. At concerts, yes; upon the stage—perhaps.' He thought for a moment, and then said: 'I will undertake you, if you choose: but only upon the condition that you work hardt, and that you sing not anywhere in public until I gif you leaf. When you break one of these rules I make you my bow and wish you goot morning. Is that agreedt?'

Philip consented willingly, and was then admitted as one of Herr Steinberger's pupils upon terms much more moderate than the great man was in the habit of exacting from fashionable amateurs. For several weeks the new pupil worked as hard as could have been desired, and, finding that he made perceptible progress, enjoyed his work thoroughly. For in art of all kinds it is not *le premier pas qui coûte*; it is the weary second and third steps, when enough has been learnt to show how many more must be taken before proficiency can be reached, that discourage the faint-hearted and the indolent. To Philip, who was of an essentially sanguine temperament, success seemed not only certain, but close at hand, and he was proportionately joyous.

At Coomassie Villa, too, things were going pleasantly and cheerfully at this time. Aunt Keziah had not yet returned to native Islington; it being essential, as she said, that she should remain for a week or so, in order to watch the proceedings of the nurse, to whom she had resigned the care of the precious baby; but she kept herself much in the background, called Philip 'Sir' when she spoke to him, and was to all appearance disposed to accept the situation in the spirit of a sensible woman. Philip was so much pleased by this change of demeanour that, on the day before that fixed for her departure, he went out and bought her a massive gold bracelet, which peace-offering she accepted with many expressions of humble gratitude. It presently appeared, however, that she had not yet said her last word.

'Before I bid you good-night, sir,' said she, that same evening,

'I should be glad to have an answer to the question I made so bold as to arst you three weeks ago.'

'My dear Mrs. Webber, I thought I had given you an answer at the time.'

'You'll escuse me, sir, but that is just what you did not do. And a answer I am respeckfully determined for to have.'

'Oh, Aunt Keziah, *please*!'—pleaded Fanny, who was lying on the sofa, and who had become very pink during this speech.

'Now, my dear, don't you worrit yourself. I know my dooty, and your husband will see his, if it's put to him plain. For close upon a year I've held my tongue; but the time has come now for him to acknowledge you before the world, and I mean he shall do it too.'

Philip shrugged his shoulders wearily. 'My good Mrs. Webber, what is the use of your bothering me in this way; I told you before that I must decline to discuss the subject with you.'

'Very well, sir; then you will drive me to take measures which it goes against me to take them. To-morrow I write to Mrs. Stanniforth, and I tell her the whole truth. I have her address, you see, sir,' added Mrs. Webber, holding up an envelope which Philip recognised.

'Oho! so you've been reading my letters,' said he.

'A speech which no gentleman would make,' returned Mrs. Webber, with awful calmness. 'No, sir; I have not read your letters, nor wouldn't so bemean myself if it was ever so. But a henvelope is what all the world may look at.' And indeed the envelope in question bore the words Longbourne, Crayminster, in sufficiently large capitals.

Philip had thought it wisest to shroud the whereabouts of his home in mystery, but, with his usual carelessness about matters of detail, had left clear evidence upon the subject on his dressing-table.

'I suppose you know,' he remarked, 'that there is nothing to prevent Mrs. Stanniforth from cutting me off with a shilling whenever she pleases.'

'I don't think, sir,' answered Mrs. Webber, smiling, 'that she will do that.'

'Well, no; candidly speaking, I don't think she will. She has a weakness for a certain worthless individual, and upon that you appear to have calculated. I may as well tell you, though, that between forgiving me and receiving my wife there is a vast

difference. Mrs. Stanniforth, you must know, has a mother who lives with her—an old lady of whom you remind me in many respects, Mrs. Webber. She is quite as stupid as you are, quite as obstinate, and thinks herself quite as sharp. As a bully, she beats you. Make her your enemy, and you might as well try to get Fanny into heaven as inside the doors of Longbourne, so long as she remains there; and she will remain there, I take it, until she dies. Now, Mrs. Webber, I'll be perfectly frank with you. Your writing to Mrs. Stanniforth, as you propose, would give me about as much pain as anything could do. Mrs. Stanniforth is in a good deal of trouble just now, owing to various things that have occurred—that very letter which you are stroking your nose with was written a few days ago to tell me about them—and if this blow comes upon her as an addition to them, I believe it will very nearly break her heart. That would distress me, and wouldn't do you an atom of good. You probably know enough of your sex to be aware that she would set you down as an interested old schemer, and Fanny, at best, as a willing instrument in your hands. I grant you that she and her mother will have to make the best of what they will consider a bad business in the long run; but, if you will let me manage things in my own way, they may eventually consent to take Fanny by the hand; whereas, if you precipitate matters, the chances are that they will refuse to hear her name mentioned, and will use their influence to get me into the Australian police, or something of that kind. Now you can do as you like.'

'Maybe you are speaking the truth,' said Mrs. Webber. 'Lord knows whether you are or not; but what you say sounds like sense. I shan't interfere without you drive me to it,' she continued, after taking counsel with herself for a minute or two; 'but mind this: if ever you take it into your head to desert my niece——'

'Aunt Keziah,' cried Fanny, starting up from her couch with her cheeks aflame, 'I won't sit here and let you talk so! How can you say such wicked things! You don't understand my Philip one bit.' And she threw her arms round her Philip's neck protectingly.

He disengaged himself gently, saying, 'Lie down again, Fan, and don't agitate yourself. Imitate me: you see I am not agitated. Your Aunt Keziah takes a low view of human nature; which is to be regretted for everybody's sake, and especially for her own. Try, my dear Mrs. Webber, to rise to a higher moral

level, and bear in mind that, as Fanny justly remarks, you don't understand me one bit. That thought may make you easier at times when you are inclined to suspect me of being a consummate villain. Besides, you have got the address, you know.'

'Yes; I've got the address,' said Mrs. Webber, slapping the pocket into which she had thrust Mrs. Stanniforth's envelope.

'So that you will always have it in your power to throw the fat in the fire. That reflection also is likely to be a comfort to you. And now, as there seems to be nothing more to be said, suppose we have some of that mulled claret which you brew so admirably, and drink the baby's health.'

Thus Philip glided lightly away from a peril which had frightened him more than might have been supposed from his manner of treating it.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. WINNINGTON RECEIVES A SHOCK.

DURING the weeks which Philip had spent agreeably in perfecting himself in the parts of husband, father, and vocalist, time had not stood still at Longbourne. The period, indeed, had been an unusually exciting one in the history of that small world, and had brought about rebellions, battles, conferences, and treaties, all of which must now be in due course recorded.

Mrs. Winnington, whom we left administering a well-deserved lecture to her youngest daughter, was so little relieved by that exercise, and so much put out by the various incidents of the afternoon, that her temper entered upon one of its worst and gloomiest phases; and even the sudden retirement of Marescalchi, which at ordinary times would have given her great satisfaction, drew nothing more from her than a passing expression of her utter disbelief in his purpose of working either at law or at anything else. Nor did she at all enjoy being left in a great, silent house, with no one to speak to except her two daughters, neither of whom happened to be a person with whom it was possible to pick a quarrel. From sheer lack of a more worthy antagonist, she fell foul of Mrs. Prosser upon some point of domestic economy, and was routed with great loss; after which, to Margaret's infinite distress, she took to her bed for twenty-four hours, and sent for the doctor, who unfeelingly ordered her to get up forthwith and go out of doors.

Tom Stanniforth, as in duty bound, walked up, after a day or two, to call upon his sister-in-law; but, as ill luck would have it, Mrs. Winnington and Edith had selected that very afternoon to pay a round of visits, and consequently missed him. The elder lady's disgust at this *contretemps* was not lessened by the news that Mr. Stanniforth had been persuaded to remain on a few days longer with the Brunes. She still persisted in declaring to herself, as well as to Margaret, that his visit, whether long or short, could have no very serious consequences; still, having nothing else to think about, she allowed herself to brood over the subject until it became a torment to her, and at last—being a woman to whom inaction was unbearable—she made up her mind to go over to Broom Leas and speak a few words 'in a friendly way' to Mr. Brune. The words that had hitherto passed between her and that gentleman had not commonly been very friendly ones, nor was her feeling towards him of a very friendly nature; but that, as she pointed out to Margaret, who ventured upon a mild protest against her resolution, 'was not the question.' Accordingly, she requested the use of a carriage for the afternoon, and drove over to Broom Leas in state, not knowing very well, perhaps, what she was going to say when she got there, but feeling that at least it would be a satisfaction to her to be upon the spot.

That it is always well to be 'upon the spot' was a maxim which had been frequently in Mrs. Winnington's mouth in the course of a very fairly successful career; and in truth it was doubtful whether, if she had not been so palpably and unflinchingly upon the spot, in Whitehall and elsewhere, at certain times, her sons would have got on as well in their several professions as they had done.

Mrs. Winnington was by way of being short-sighted; but her eyes were capable of doing a good stroke of work when any sudden demand was made upon them; and it so chanced that, as the victoria in which she was seated turned briskly in at the gates of Broom Leas, she distinctly saw a manly form which was familiar to her standing at the entrance of the farmyard in close proximity to a small and girlish one which she also recognised without difficulty. She saw more than this, for she saw that she was seen; and she saw worse, for she saw Mr. Stanniforth, in the most barefaced manner, walk away and conceal himself behind an adjacent rick. Nellie came forward, and met her visitor at the front door.

'How do you do?' says Mrs. Winnington, alighting slowly,

and favouring Miss Brune with a full view of the lowered eyelids and faint smile which with her were the outward and visible signs of an inward and heartfelt superiority. 'Is your father anywhere about?'

'Impudent old woman!' thought Nellie; 'what does she mean by speaking to me as if she had come to buy butter and eggs?' She said aloud, 'Won't you come in, Mrs. Winnington? I don't know where my father is; but he went out with his gun some time ago, and I hardly expect him back before dark. Do you want to see him about anything in particular?'

'Oh, no,' answered Mrs. Winnington; 'nothing very particular. If he had been in, I should have liked to ask him whether he had heard anything about the *Octopus* being ordered to the West African station. You know my son has just been appointed to her as first lieutenant, and I understood that one of your brothers had also joined her lately.'

'The West African station!' exclaimed Nellie, in consternation; 'oh, I do hope not! No, I am sure we had heard nothing of the kind. When Harry wrote, he said they were to join the Channel fleet.'

'Perhaps it is not true,' said Mrs. Winnington, who had in fact invented this pretext for her call upon the spur of the moment; 'there are always so many absurd rumours going about. As you have heard nothing, it probably is not true. No, I won't go in, thank you; but, since I am here, I will just take a turn round the garden with you, my dear, if you can spare a few minutes. I should be rather glad of the opportunity of saying something to you which—which, in fact, I think you ought to be told.'

Nellie opened her eyes rather wide. Never before had she been called 'my dear' by Mrs. Winnington, and her imagination failed to suggest to her any clue to the significance of this portent.

'How neat and tidy your lawn always is!' said Mrs. Winnington, graciously. 'That is the advantage of a small garden. Now at Longbourne we find that it is next to impossible to keep the grounds in decent order at this time of year. The mere sweeping up of the leaves takes three men all their time from morning to night.'

'They must be three very lazy men,' remarked Nellie, who knew as well as anybody how much could be accomplished in a fair day's work. She could not refrain from adding, 'There is very nearly as much turf here as at Longbourne.'

'You don't say so! Well, I'm sure your gardener deserves every credit. And I notice that you always manage to have a few flowers, too, to make the place look bright. But perhaps Mr. Brune takes an interest in flowers. One so often sees the garden quite neglected in houses where there is no mistress; and that is such a pity.'

'There is a mistress in this house,' said Nellie, shortly.

'To be sure there is, my dear,' rejoined Mrs. Winnington, patting her on the shoulder quite affectionately; 'but she is a very young mistress, and not a very experienced one. I ought not, perhaps, to have used the word mistress; I was thinking rather of houses where there is no *mother*.'

'As far as gardening goes, I don't see why there being no mother should make any great difference,' observed Nellie. ('What in the world is she driving at? I hope she'll come to the point before I lose my temper and say something rude.')

Mrs. Winnington had her point quite clearly before her eyes, and, having executed these cumbrous preliminary circlings in the air, was now ready to swoop down upon it.

'As far as gardening goes!' she said. 'But, unfortunately, there are many other ways in which the loss of a mother is an irreparable one.' Nellie thought that, in the case of some people whom she knew, there might be considerations which would go far towards mitigating the bereavement alluded to; but she had the self-restraint to abstain from saying this: and Mrs. Winnington proceeded.

'I am so averse to anything that might have the appearance of meddling that I generally prefer to remain silent, even when I feel that a word in season might be of real service; but the question is whether that motive for silence is not really a wrong and selfish one—whether one ought not to think only of doing one's duty to one's neighbours—to point out to people when they make themselves ridiculous.'

'As you would they should do unto you,' put in Nellie, whose patience was fast ebbing away. 'If you don't mind my telling you in what way you seem to me ridiculous, Mrs. Winnington, I can't object to letting you do as much for me.'

'My dear, you must remember the difference in our ages. It would be hardly becoming in you to call me ridiculous, even if I were so; and that is just one of those things which a mother would enable you to see.'

'I suppose it would be no use to try and stop you, Mrs. Winnington, but I may as well tell you beforehand that, so

long as my father does not consider me ridiculous, I shall not trouble myself in the least about what you, or anybody else, may happen to think of me.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Winnington, 'that is just the spirit in which I expected to be met. That is exactly the sort of speech which a motherless girl would be sure to make. You do not understand now, though you will understand some day, that no one can afford to fly in the face of society. In the present instance your father would naturally be the last man in the world to hear what people are saying about you.'

'And what are people saying about me?' asked Nellie, stopping short and facing Mrs. Winnington, who, however, continued her slow progress across the lawn.

'Well, I must say that I blame your father a little; it is partly his fault. When one has a daughter of your age, one cannot be too particular, and he has been, to say the least of it, thoughtless. I should be sorry to hurt your feelings; but it is best to tell the truth, and you know one cannot follow up a rich bachelor in that persistent way without setting people's tongues going. I would not for one moment insinuate that either you or your father knew what you were doing; and as for Mr. Stanniforth, I think I may confidently say on his behalf that he would be very much amused at the idea of his name being coupled with yours. Still the fact remains that he is staying at your house, instead of at Longbourne.'

Nellie was too furious to do more than ejaculate '*Oh!*' under her breath.

'Of course,' continued her companion, benevolently, 'it does not matter to *him*; but I know so well what is invariably said in these cases. It is the poor girl who is pitied and laughed at, and——'

'Thank you; that will do,' interrupted Nellie, who had now found her tongue. 'My friends know perfectly well that I would die rather than marry any one of the name of Stanniforth; and as for other people, it makes no difference to me what they say. It might amuse Mr. Stanniforth to hear his name coupled with mine; but I assure you it would not amuse me at all. Impertinent and false things are said about everybody, I suppose: what I cannot understand is that any one should have the courage to repeat them to the person of whom they are said.'

Nellie was quite aware that, having thus delivered herself, she would best consult her self-respect by saying no more; but feminine nature got the better of her, and, after a short and

sharp struggle, she added: 'You need not be at all alarmed, Mrs. Winnington. Rich as Mr. Stanniforth is, he does not exactly belong to the class into which our family has been accustomed to marry.'

'Why, my good girl,' cried Mrs. Winnington, quite unaffectedly and coarsely, 'your mother was only a banker's daughter!'

There was thus a momentary risk of this interview coming to an end in a deplorably vulgar manner; but happily both combatants saw the danger, and controlled themselves. Mrs. Winnington left rather hastily, but without further loss of dignity, and was upon the whole very well satisfied with the afternoon's work. Had this rather dull-witted woman been a female Machiavelli, she could hardly have played her cards more adroitly, or have taken more certain means of gaining her end, than she had done; but, as a matter of fact, no credit for successful diplomacy was due to her upon this occasion. It would never have occurred to her to rescue her intended prey by stirring up Miss Brune's pride, because it would never have occurred to her to suppose that that young lady could have any pride—a luxury in which, according to Mrs. Winnington's notions, only the noble and wealthy could afford to indulge. In speaking as she had done, she had been actuated simply and solely by an amiable wish to make the girl uncomfortable. She had herself been made somewhat uncomfortable by Stanniforth's walking behind that haystack under her very eyes and by Nellie's virtual participation in this affront; and her desire had been to retaliate without delay, and further to let the young woman understand that, whoever might win or lose the prize, it would assuredly not fall to her share. She flattered herself that she had succeeded in both of these noble aims. As for Miss Brune's indignant repudiation of a possible alliance with any Stanniforth whatever, she took that for what she considered it to be worth. The impertinence of it had made her rather angry for the moment; but, as the thing could obviously have been only said with a view to impertinence, it was hardly worth remembering. The important point was that Mr. Stanniforth was not likely to be pressed to postpone his departure a second time, and that in a day or two he would be restored to his anxious friends at Longbourne. After that, Edith must be made to bestir herself more, and perhaps it might even be well that something in the nature of a conditional engagement should be entered upon before he left. It will be perceived

that Mrs. Winnington herself was not overburdened by any foolish pride.

When she reached home she found the drawing-room and library untenanted, Margaret and Edith having, it was to be presumed, gone out for a walk. Now it was a habit of Mrs. Winnington's, whenever she found the house empty, to prowl all over it, peeping into blotting-books, opening drawers, occasionally going so far as to read letters that might be lying handy, and—as Mrs. Prosser, who hated her with a perfect hatred, would say—'poking and rummaging about as any under-housemaid that I caught at such tricks should be dismissed immediate, and no character given.'

It is probable that Mrs. Winnington saw no harm at all in such pokings and rummagings. Her daughters, she would have said, had no secrets from her, or at all events ought not to have any. Nor had she any particular end to serve in entering other people's bedrooms. For some occult reason it gave her pleasure to do so, and the present occasion being favourable for the gratifying of her tastes, she proceeded to profit by it. First she made a thorough examination of all the reception rooms; then she went upstairs, and spent some time in overhauling the contents of Margaret's wardrobe; and then she passed on to the room at that time occupied by Edith, which opened out of a long corridor where the family portraits had hung in the days when the owners of Longbourne had possessed a family to be thus commemorated. This corridor had a peculiarity. It terminated in a small gallery, resembling a theatre-box, or one of those pews which are still to be met with in a few old-fashioned churches, whence you looked down upon a curious apse-like chamber, tacked on to the house by a seventeenth-century Brune for some purpose unknown. It may have been intended to serve as a theatre, or possibly as a private chapel: of late years it had fallen into disuse, being a gloomy and ill-lighted apartment, and was seldom entered by anybody, except by the housemaids who swept it out from time to time. Some one, however, was in it now. Mrs. Winnington, with her hand on the lock of her daughter's door, was startled by the sound of voices arising from that quarter, and it was a matter of course that she should at once make her way along the passage as stealthily as might be, and peer over the edge of the gallery to see what might be going on below.

She arrived in time to witness a scene so startling that she very nearly put a dramatic finish to it then and there by falling

headlong over the balustrade, which was a low one. Upon an ottoman directly beneath her, her daughter Edith was sitting in a very pretty and graceful attitude, her elbow resting on her knee and her face hidden by her right hand, while her left was held by Walter Brune, who was kneeling at her feet. And this is what that audacious young reprobate was saying, in accents which rose towards the roof with perfect distinctness:—

'Now, my darling girl, you must not allow yourself to be so cowed by that awful old mother of yours. There! I beg your pardon: I didn't intend to speak disrespectfully of her, but it came out before I could stop myself. What I mean is, you mustn't let her bully you to that extent that you daren't call your soul your own. Stand up to her boldly, and depend upon it she'll knock under in the long run. When all's said and done, she can't eat you alive.'

The feelings of the astounded listener overhead may be imagined.

'Ah, you don't understand,' sighed Edith. 'It is easy enough for a man to talk of standing up for himself; but you don't consider how different it is with us.'

'But I do understand—I do consider,' declared Walter, scrambling up to his feet. 'I know it's awfully hard upon you, my dearest; but wouldn't it be harder still to marry some decrepit old lord to please your mother, and to be miserable and ashamed of yourself for the rest of your life?'

At this terrible picture Edith shuddered eloquently.

'So you see it's a choice of evils,' continued the young man. 'Some people, I know, would think it was a great misfortune for you that you should have come to care for a poor beggar like me; but I am not going to say that, because I don't believe it is a real misfortune at all. How can it be a misfortune to love the man who loves you better than any one else in the world can possibly do, and who will always love you just the same as long as he lives?' ('Upon my word!' ejaculated Mrs. Winnington, inaudibly.)

'Of course,' Walter went on, 'we shall have troubles, and probably we shall have to wait a good many years: but we are young, and we can afford to wait, if we must. You won't mind waiting?'

'Oh, no; it is not the waiting that I shall mind,' said Edith, faintly.

'And we know that it won't be for ever, and that nothing can make either of us change. When one thinks of that,

all the rest seems almost plain sailing. The first explosion will be the worst part of the business. I shall tell my father to-night.'

'Oh, must you?—so soon? What *will* he say?'

'He? Oh, he won't say much, dear old man. I dare say he won't exactly approve just at first; but when he sees that I am in earnest, he'll do what he can to help me. And then, you know, my dear, you'll have to tell your mother.'

'Walter, I can't. I really *could not* do it. You have really no idea of what a coward I am. I always lie awake shivering all night before I go to the dentist's; and, indeed, I would rather have all my teeth pulled out, one by one, than tell mamma that I had engaged myself to you.'

At this juncture it was only natural that the young lovers should embrace; and if Mrs. Winnington had not been literally stunned and paralysed, she could hardly have maintained her silence any longer in the presence of such a demonstration. As it was, she neither moved nor uttered a word; and presently she heard Edith whisper pleadingly—

'Walter—dear—don't you think we could—mightn't we—keep it a secret just a little longer?'

The honest Walter rubbed his ear in perplexity: 'Well, of course, we *could*; but it would be only a putting off of the evil day, and I should like to feel that we had been perfectly straight with the old—with your mother. Look here; how would it do if I were to break it to her?'

'Oh, that would be a great deal worse! If only there were some means of letting her find it out!'

Hardly had this aspiration been breathed when a hollow groan was heard, proceeding apparently from the upper air. Edith started violently, and clasped her hands.

'Oh!' she shrieked, 'what was that? Did you hear it?'

'Yes,' answered Walter, who had himself been somewhat startled; 'it was nothing; it was only one of the cows outside. What a timid little goose you are!'

'Oh, it was not a cow! No cow ever made such a dreadful sound as that. I am sure this dismal room is haunted.—I can't stay here any more.' And Edith fled precipitately.

Walter lingered for a moment, looked all round him, looked up at the ceiling, looked everywhere, except at the gallery just over his head, and then hurried away after her.

The cause of all this disturbance was reclining in an arm-

chair, fanning herself with her pocket-handkerchief, and feeling by no means sure that she was not about to have a fit.

It is perhaps hardly to be expected that any pity or sympathy should be felt for Mrs. Winnington, who, nevertheless, was a human creature very much like the rest of us—better, possibly, than some, and no worse than a good many others. In the course of the present narrative her failings have necessarily been brought much to the front; but she was not one of those depraved persons—if indeed there be any such—who deliberately say to Evil, 'Be thou my Good.' She was not a religious woman (though she had always paid due respect to the observances of the Church, as beseemed a Bishop's wife); but neither was she a woman without clear, albeit perverted, notions of duty. That she was a miserable sinner, she was bound, in a general sort of way, to believe; but she certainly did not suppose that her sins were any blacker than those of her neighbours. According to her lights, she had done the best that she could for her daughters, whom she really loved after a certain fashion; and, according to her lights, she intended to continue doing the best she could for them. It is a fact that she thought a great deal more about them than she did about herself. Thus it was that she was every whit as much astonished and pained by what she had witnessed as the most virtuous mother into whose hands this book may chance to fall, would be, were she to discover her own immaculate daughter in the act of embracing—say the parish doctor or the poverty-stricken parish curate.

'I could not have believed it!' moaned poor Mrs. Winnington, as she sat humped up in her arm-chair, with all her majesty of deportment gone out of her. 'I could not have believed it possible! Edith, of all people! If it had been Kate, or even Margaret, I could have understood it better—but Edith! Oh, I am crushed!—I shall never get over this.'

She really looked and felt as if she might be going to have a serious attack of illness; but as there was nobody there to be alarmed, or to offer her assistance, she picked herself up after a time, and made her way down the corridor with a slow, dragging step. Being still in her walking dress, she thought she would go out and see what a breath of fresh air would do for her. She did not, however, get further than the front door; for, just as she was about to let herself out, who should run briskly up the steps but Mr. Brune!

'Is that Mrs. Winnington?' said he. 'How do you do, Mrs. Winnington? Do you know whether my boy Walter is here? Somebody told me he had gone up to Longbourne, and I rather want to see him; so I thought I would just look—— Why what's the matter?' he broke off, for the first time noticing the lady's woebegone face; 'has anything happened?'

'Your son is here,' answered Mrs. Winnington, in a deep tragic voice worthy of Mrs. Siddons. 'Yes, Mr. Brune; something has indeed happened. No, not an accident; don't jump about, there's a good man; my nerves are completely unstrung. As we have met, I may as well tell you about it at once. If you are not in a hurry, perhaps you will give me a few minutes in private.'

'By all means, Mrs. Winnington; but hadn't you better let me get you a glass of wine first? You look quite grey.'

Mrs. Winnington shook her head; but Mr. Brune thought it best to take the law into his own hands, and rang the door-bell. After a glass of port wine Mrs. Winnington's complexion began slowly to regain its normal florid aspect, and she was able to assume something of her customary stateliness of demeanour in motioning her companion to follow her into a small room on the ground floor which was sometimes used as a study by Philip, and where she could feel tolerably safe from intrusion.

'Now, Mr. Brune,' she began, seating herself opposite to him, 'I will say at once that I acquit you of all blame in this scandalous business. I feel sure that when you have heard what I have to tell you, you will be as much grieved and horrified as I have been.'

'It shall be my endeavour not to disappoint you,' answered he.

Mrs. Winnington paused. 'I can assure you,' she said at length, 'that I feel the—the disgrace of all this very keenly. Really I hardly know how to begin.'

'Suppose you take a little more wine,' suggested Mr. Brune, who had been alarmed for a moment, but who now began to suspect that nothing very terrible was the matter after all.

'No, thank you. It is very disagreeable to have to tell it; but you will understand, of course, that I am speaking to you in the strictest confidence, and I count upon your honour to let what I say go no further.'

And then Mrs. Winnington related what had taken place

between Walter and Edith in her presence, suppressing nothing, except that interchange of kisses which respect for her daughter forbade her to mention.

'Ah,' remarked Mr. Brune, coolly, when she had concluded her recital, 'I thought something of this kind would probably occur sooner or later.'

'You did?' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington, now quite restored to her natural self. 'Then I must say, Mr. Brune, that you have been rather—— Well, I did *not* expect to hear this!'

'What would you have had me do?' asked her interlocutor, perhaps rather enjoying the discomfiture of this veteran match-maker. 'Naturally I am sorry that Walter should have fixed his affections upon a penniless girl, for I cannot by any possibility find him a sufficient income to marry upon; but I never suspected anything until it was much too late for interference to do any good.'

This was a view of the case which had not presented itself to Mrs. Winnington. She had expected that Mr. Brune, if he did not make an absolute apology, would at least be apologetic in his manner, and, lo and behold! he was taking up a tone of complete equality. And the worst of it was that she could not very well see how he was to be put to silence; for it was certainly true that Edith was penniless.

'I need not point out to you,' she said, smothering her indignation, 'that a stop must be put to this immediately.'

'I suppose so. I am sorry for the poor boy—and for the poor girl too, for that matter; but we can only hope that they will both get over it.'

'Edith undoubtedly will. She is a mere child; she has been led into folly and deceit by one in whom I had unwisely placed implicit trust,' cried Mrs. Winnington, who could not refuse herself the satisfaction of making this rather unjust accusation. 'Of course,' she added, 'you will at once let your son understand that he is not to hold any sort of communication with her in future, beyond what is necessary in order to avoid exciting remark, and that, as far as possible, he must abstain from going anywhere where he is likely to meet her.'

'I am not sure,' answered Mr. Brune, 'that I am prepared to take such authoritative measures as that. Neither you nor I, Mrs. Winnington, desire this match; but you see, we don't happen to be the principal persons concerned; and if we can't be generous, we may at least be just. So far as one can see, there is no likelihood that these young people will ever be able to

marry, and, if they ask me my advice, I should recommend them without hesitation to give each other up; but supposing, for the sake of argument, that they chose to exchange promises of fidelity, and to wait for better times, I don't think that I, for my part, should consider myself justified in forbidding an engagement. You, of course, can do what you think proper; I am only speaking of my own possible action. Walter has been a good son to me, and I shall not cross him in any way that I can help.'

Mrs. Winnington started to her feet in a fury. 'I declare, Mr. Brune,' she exclaimed, 'I don't know whether to call you weak or wicked!'

'Call me what you please, my dear lady,' replied Mr Brune, who had also risen, 'or call me both, if you think it would relieve your feelings at all to do so. Vituperation, however, will scarcely help us to arrive at a clearer understanding; and indeed I believe we understand each other quite clearly as it is. So, unless you have anything more of a practical nature to suggest, I shall wish you good evening'

When he was gone, Mrs. Winnington sank back into her chair which she had just vacated, and raised her clasped hands to heaven.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'what a world we live in! Everybody is false, everybody is selfish, it makes one feel as if one would never be able to believe in any one but oneself again!'

The amusing part of it is that she was perfectly sincere.

CHAPTER XVI.

MATERNAL INFLUENCE.

When Mr. Brune escaped from the presence of the justly incensed Mrs. Winnington, he shaped his course for home without further delay. Under the circumstances, he no longer cared to search the house for his son, being in some fear of drifting into an embarrassing situation, and thinking, too, that it would be best to let the young fellow choose his own time for making any revelations that might have to be made.

He had not, however, proceeded very far on his way through the gathering gloom when he was arrested by a shrill whistle; immediately after which some one crossed the adjacent meadow at a slinging trot, and, taking the hedgerow in his stride, landed neatly in the muddy lane.

'Oh, there you are!' said Mr. Brune. 'They told me you were up at the house, but I couldn't find you anywhere about.'

'I saw you starting; so I thought I might as well catch you up,' answered Walter, passing his arm through his father's; and so they walked on for a couple of hundred yards or so in silence.

'I say——' began Walter at length.

'Well; what do you say?'

Facility of expression had never been among Walter's gifts. He thought for a little longer, and then made a fresh start with—

'I—er—I've got a sort of a secret to tell you.'

'Ah!' remarked Mr. Brune, 'you may well say a sort of a secret. A secret, I take it, is a matter known, at the most, to two persons; when a third is let in, it becomes, as you say, a sort of a secret; but when an interested party happens to have overheard the whole business from beginning to end, it is no longer any sort of a secret at all.'

'Eh?'

'You need not give yourself the agony of searching for appropriate words in which to tell your tale. I have heard it already—and several details which I fancy you would not have thought it necessary to communicate to me into the bargain. What possessed you to choose that room of all others in the house to make a declaration in? I remember that, when I was a boy, I used often to creep to the end of the corridor in hopes of seeing some exciting episode take place beneath me; but nothing ever came of it. Mrs. Winnington has had better luck.'

'Mrs. Winnington? Good Lord! She wasn't there when—when——'

'She was, though—didn't miss a word of it. And now that I begin to realise what the scene must have been, I can't help wishing that I too could have been concealed somewhere and watched her face,' said Mr. Brune, bursting into a hearty laugh.

'Oh, it's all very well to laugh,' remonstrated Walter; 'but this is serious.'

'The whole thing is undoubtedly serious,' answered Mr. Brune, recovering his gravity. 'At the same time, I don't know that the way in which Mrs. Winnington and I have come to a knowledge of it is not as good a one as another. It has saved a world of gradual explanations.'

'Is she awfully angry?'

'Well, yes; she is rather angry, I believe; but that should hardly surprise you.'

'Poor Edith!' muttered Walter; 'how she will catch it! I have a sort of feeling that I ought to go back to the house at once.'

'I have a sort of feeling that you will do no such thing, so long as I can hold you,' returned Mr. Brune, keeping a firm grip of his son's arm. 'My dear boy, you must allow parents and children to settle their differences between themselves. And, talking of that, doesn't it strike you that I may have a word or two to say to your marriage—or rather engagement?'

'Oh, of course. In fact, I was just going to tell you all about it. I know,' continued Walter, penitently, 'that I have no business to think about marrying at all; but—but, in short, I couldn't help it.'

'You have done what can't be helped now, at all events,' observed Mr. Brune. 'I don't blame you,' he resumed, after a pause. 'A son who has never troubled his father in any worse way than by falling in love with a girl who hasn't a sixpence, and who has an outrageous old mother, must be allowed to be a success, as sons go, and can fairly claim some indulgence. But, setting that consideration aside, it is a very open question whether I have any right at all to interfere with your plans, except as a friendly adviser. When you were a boy, you know, I used to make you obey me, and never allowed you to ask questions or begin your sentences with a But.'

Walter nodded. 'It's the only way,' he said.

'It is gratifying to me to have your approval,' said Mr. Brune, gravely. 'Well, so long as it was necessary that I should be master, I believe I was a tolerably strict one; but a time always arrives when the old bird's functions come to an end, and the young ones must fly for themselves and shift for themselves. There isn't room for you in the old nest, and you must feather a new one as best you can. Or again, if you prefer a nest without feathers, what can I say? I can give you the benefit of my experience as to the comfort of nests of that description; but it isn't much use for me to scold.'

'Bless you! you couldn't scold if you were to try for a twelvemonth,' said Walter, giving his father's arm a squeeze; 'you don't know the way.'

'Anyhow, I am not going to scold. Nor am I going to remonstrate. Indeed, if there came to be a question of remonstrances between us, I am half afraid that it would be for me to receive, not to utter, them. I have not done my duty by

you, Walter; though I believe I may say that I have intended to do it—if that is any excuse.'

'My dear old man, what are you talking about? You have been the kindest father and the best friend any fellow could wish for,' cried Walter, warmly.

'Ah, well! you have a case against me all the same. Things have not fallen out quite as they seemed likely to do when your mother and I agreed that you were to succeed me at the farm, instead of entering a profession like your brothers. To a certain extent I have been unfortunate—that is to say that I have neither made nor inherited what I expected to do; but, on the other hand, I have muddled away a lot of money. The upshot of it all is that, instead of being very comfortably off, I am a poor man and shall never be anything else. I hear people talk of making farming pay; but I can't say I have ever yet met a man who has accomplished the feat.'

'I defy any man to make farming pay in these days,' said Walter, confidently.

'Well; but don't you see what this brings us to? The only thing that could enable you to support a wife and family would be my death; and goodness only knows how long I may not live. I am as strong as a horse and barely past the half-century.'

'I only wish you may live another fifty years.'

'Thank you very much; but fifty years is rather a long period to propose to a young lady for an engagement. How are you going to get out of that difficulty?'

Walter scratched his head, and answered with much candour that he was hanged if he knew.

Then Mr. Brune pulled a letter out of his pocket. 'The afternoon post brought me this,' he said, 'and I was going to show it to you before I heard anything about your love affairs. It is from William Boulger—your uncle William, whom you have heard of, but never seen, and who is now senior partner in the firm of Boulger & Co.—and he writes to offer an opening in the bank to one of my sons. He means one of the younger ones, no doubt, and I suppose the fact of the matter is that he has been quarrelling with his own people. A few years ago I should have said No, thank you; but now things look so bad that I thought I ought at least to let you hear of the proposal before declining it. As far as I understand him, it is only a clerkship that he offers; but he alludes to "probable advancement in life," which, I conclude, means eventual partnership.

Now William Boulger is, or used to be, an infernally disagreeable fellow; but he is a man of business and a man of his word, and the chances are that, if anything, he means more than he says, rather than less. I think the matter might be worth your considering.'

'My dear father,' exclaimed Walter, 'it is the very thing. What a stroke of luck! Write off to the old boy, and tell him I'm his man. I don't mind confessing to you now that I *was* a little bit down about my prospects; but this will put everything right, depend upon it.'

Even in that uncertain light Walter could see that his father was looking at him in an odd, wistful way.

'What is it?' he asked. 'You think I shan't like the sort of work, eh?'

'My poor fellow, I don't think about it; I know you will utterly hate and abhor it. You, who love the open air and the smell of the fields almost as much as I do, and outdoor sports a great deal more than I ever did—you to sit upon a high stool in the city, totting up figures from morning to night! Even the prospect of your dying a rich man could never reconcile me to such a notion.'

'I should be doing it with an object,' said Walter, quickly.

'Well, yes; there's that. And you can always throw it up, and return to your crust of bread and liberty. I want you to promise me, my boy, that you will do that, if you find the life intolerable. But I think, upon the whole, you would do wisely to accept the offer. You would be none the worse off for having given the thing a trial, and living in London will give you an insight into the ways of the world which you could never have acquired if you had vegetated down at Broom Leas all the days of your life. Only pray bear in mind that you will always have it in your power to escape.'

'And Edith?' said Walter, smiling.

'Ah—that indeed!'

Mr. Brune did not choose to tell his son how very little belief he had in the successful termination of that affair; still less was he disposed to try and convince the young fellow that this world only exists by virtue of continual change, that when the course of true love does not run smooth it very commonly ceases to run at all, and that nobody is much the worse after a year or two. There are things that one does not say to women and children; and there are also things—this, at least, was Mr. Brune's view—that ought not to be said to young men.

Innocence is sacred; and should not the illusions and enthusiasms of youth be sacred too?

Quand j'ai connu la vérité,
J'ai cru que c'était une amie:
Quand je l'ai comprise et sen ie,
J'en étais déjà dégoûté.

Et pourtant elle est éternelle,
Et ceux qui se sont passés d'elle
Ici-bas ont tout ignoré.

As a man grows older he inevitably learns much respecting his own nature and that of his fellow-mortals which can hardly heighten his respect for the race; and probably few would care to surrender that sad knowledge; but who, on looking back, would wish that he had known at the age of twenty-three all that he knows now?

Mr. Brune, then, held his peace; and as for Walter, he spent the remainder of the evening in golden dreams, towards the realisation of which the obnoxious high stool was to act as a stepping-stone. The evening—if he had been in a frame of mind to pay attention to trifles—was not being passed in a very cheerful manner by the trio who sat round the fire near him; for Mr. Brune was silent and thoughtful, and Nellie, for some unexplained reason, thought fit to demean herself towards Mr. Stanniforth in such an exceedingly cold and haughty fashion that she succeeded at length in driving that good-natured and mystified gentleman clean out of the room to seek solace in tobacco. Walter may be pardoned for having failed to notice this by-play. He went up to bed in an exuberantly hopeful mood, and dreamt that he was senior partner in Boulger's bank, that he had just purchased back the estate of his forefathers, and that he was consulting Edith as to whether, when he got his peerage, he should call himself Lord Brune or Lord Longbourne.

The next morning, while he was smoking his pipe in the stable-yard after breakfast, a groom from Longbourne rode up, and delivered to him a note addressed in feminine handwriting, which brought his foolish heart up into his mouth.

'I was to wait for an answer, if you please, sir,' said the man.

Walter moved away a few paces and tore open his letter, which did not prove to be from Edith, as he had half hoped that it might be; nor were its contents of a nature to raise an

anxious lover's spirits. 'Mrs. Winnington presents her compliments to Mr. Walter Brune, and would be glad to see him for a few minutes, if he will be so good as to call upon her between eleven and twelve o'clock this morning.'

Walter faced about, and walked back to the groom. 'Say, Mr. Walter Brune's compliments, and he'll turn up all right.'

And shortly after having despatched this informal reply, our young friend set out in obedience to Mrs. Winnington's summons. He was not much alarmed, but rather amused, at the absurdity of her writing to him in the third person. It seemed to him that she could not have felt her position to be an impregnable one when she threw up that flimsy species of earthwork. The fact was that he had been so accustomed to hearing Mrs. Winnington laughed at and made a fool of by Marescalchi that he hardly did justice to the good lady's inexorable will and strength of purpose, and had got a sadly mistaken notion into his head that, if he were only firm with her, she would falter and give way.

Yet, for all his stout-heartedness, he felt his hands growing cold and a sinking sensation about the region of the waistcoat as he drew nearer to the house. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that the butler, who admitted him, knew all; and when he was ushered into the same small room in which his father had been engaged with the enemy on the previous evening, he knew that he was looking defiant, and by no means wore that aspect of calm and courteous determination which he would fain have assumed.

Mrs. Winnington was sitting by the fire, reading the *Times*, and at a short distance off, Edith, with her back turned, was gazing intently out of the window at a large spruce fir, the lower branches of which darkened the room. Walter had a moment of hesitation, not having been prepared to meet Edith, and being in some uncertainty as to the manner in which he ought to greet her. He got out of the difficulty by not greeting her at all—a course which she made the easier for him by never turning her head nor manifesting the slightest consciousness of his presence.

Mrs. Winnington rose with much majesty to her full height, and Walter, to show that he was not frightened, held out his hand, saying cheerfully, 'Good morning.'

But both the lady's hands were engaged in holding her newspaper, over which she bowed in a stately fashion, without speaking. Walter remained standing before her, thinking that

he would allow her to fire the first shot; but as she chose to maintain a frigid silence, he presently took upon himself to open the proceedings by plunging *in medias res* with—

'I'm afraid you're not best pleased with me, Mrs. Winnington.'

'Will you sit down?' she said, not deigning to notice his observation; and the young man took the chair pointed out to him, and sat with his elbows on his knees, twirling his hat, and wishing, perhaps, that the next quarter of an hour were well over.

'I need scarcely tell you,' began Mrs. Winnington, 'that it is not very pleasant to me to receive you, after what has occurred; but I have sent for you because it seemed to me desirable that our respective positions should be—er——'

'That we should know where we are, in short,' suggested Walter, by way of helping her out in a friendly spirit.

Mrs. Winnington gave him one glance of mingled disgust and disdain, but did not refuse to accept the interpolation. 'You will probably agree with me,' she went on, 'that what has to be said had better be said in the fewest possible words. I shall purposely abstain from any comment upon your behaviour——'

'I should like you just to admit, though, that I have done the straight thing as far as you are concerned,' interrupted Walter. 'You are displeased and disappointed, and I'm sure I don't wonder at it; but when you speak of my behaviour, I think you ought to allow that I have not been guilty of any deception.'

'Not guilty of any deception!' cried Mrs. Winnington, reddening. 'Well, I can only say that I think you have behaved as deceitfully and dishonourably as——' Here, however, she came to a full stop. She was aware that she could not lose her temper without at the same time losing something of her dignity, and the occasion was one upon which dignity must be allowed to have the pre eminence. 'But that is not the question,' she said, waving the subject away with a lofty sweep of the *Times*.

'Pardon me, but to my mind it is very much the question.'

'Not the question,' repeated Mrs. Winnington, with increased emphasis. 'It was not to put you upon your defence, or to listen to it, that I requested you to call here this morning. I am willing to take the most charitable view of the case, and to assume that you have, or think you have, a real

attachment for my daughter.' Mrs. Winnington brought out these last words with rather a wry face; but she had considered beforehand what she should say, and was resolute not to swerve from her line of attack. 'And if that be so,' she continued, 'you will certainly not wish to cause her any needless pain or distress. It surely cannot be necessary that I should even mention such a thing as the possibility of your becoming engaged to her; your common sense will tell you that no father or mother could sanction an engagement where there were neither means nor prospect of any on one side or the other. The whole thing is a foolish boy-and-girl scrape which I am sure we should all be glad to forget. Edith has expressed to me her sincere regret and penitence' (here Walter started, and glanced at the figure by the window, which, he fancied, shivered ever so slightly), 'and—in fact, it is a case of least said soonest mended. Fortunately very few people know of the affair. Your father has been told of it, and for several reasons I thought it best also to tell my daughter Margaret, who is very anxious that there should be no breach between us and your father's family in consequence; but it need never, I should hope, go further. I cannot truly say that we shall be glad to see you often after this, and probably your own good feeling will prompt you to keep out of the way; but occasional chance meetings between you and Edith can hardly be prevented, and I wish you to give me your honour in her presence that you will never, by word or look, recur to—to what is past.'

Walter was a good deal disconcerted. For anger and abuse he had been prepared, but not for the tone of studious moderation which Mrs. Winnington had seen fit to adopt, and remembering that, not so many hours before, he had called her an awful old woman in her hearing, and had kissed her daughter under her very nose, he could not but feel that her self-restraint placed him at a considerable disadvantage. He was conscious, too, that, according to all received ideas, her case was a strong one, and his own a deplorably weak one.

'I'm not much of a hand at argument,' he confessed at length, 'and I can't put things as forcibly as you do, Mrs. Winnington. All the same I have something to say for myself, and I dare say I shall manage to get it said, if you'll give me time. As to my having no money, I'm afraid that's undeniable; and yesterday I couldn't have pretended that I had anything in the way of prospects to look forward to either; but, oddly

enough, there has been a little change since then. My uncle—old Boulger, you know—has offered me a clerkship in his bank, and I've made up my mind to take it. I admit that that doesn't mean much pay for some years; but I believe he means to push me on, if I'm good, and I think I may fairly say that I have a chance of being comfortably off some day. I suppose I shall go up to London almost immediately, and never get away, except on Bank holidays, so there won't be much risk of those chance meetings that you mentioned.'

Mrs. Winnington could not repress a faint murmur of satisfaction.

'All this is awfully vague, I know,' Walter continued, 'and perhaps I ought not to expect you to sanction a regular engagement, but——' Here a short laugh from Mrs. Winnington arrested him, and he looked up inquiringly.

'Oh, go on, pray go on,' said she; 'it is quite diverting to listen to you. You would prefer an irregular engagement, I suppose.'

'What I was going to say was this: I must acknowledge that, under the circumstances, you have every right to send me about my business; but, for all that, I can't give Edith up at your bidding.'

'Really,' said Mrs. Winnington, 'I do not understand you.'

'Well, then, I must try to speak more plainly. I love Edith, and I know that she loves me; and, so long as that is so, I shall consider that we are bound to one another, though we may not be formally engaged. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Winnington, I have my doubts about her ever having expressed repentance to you in the way that you say she did. She may have told you that she was sorry for having vexed you, or that you should have overheard something of what passed between us yesterday; but that she ever said more than that is what I cannot believe.'

'You are very insolent,' returned Mrs. Winnington, coldly; 'but I suppose I must bear with you up to the end. Edith, my love, I wish I could avoid paining you; but I am afraid you will have to tell this—very extraordinary young gentleman that you wish to recall any foolish promise that he may have extorted from you.'

Upon this Edith at last turned round, and Walter eagerly scanned her features. She was very pale; but she had not been crying, as her lover half hoped, half feared that she might have

been, and when she spoke, it was in a steady, monotonous voice. She did not, however, once raise her eyes from the carpet.

'We must part, Walter,' she said: 'we have made a mistake. You know,' she added presently, 'I always told you that it was impossible—that it could not be.'

'It can be, and it will be,' cried Walter, who had now also turned rather white, 'if we only have the pluck to be true to ourselves and to one another. It is not of your own free will that you are turning me off like this. Edith, look at me!—listen! I don't ask you to bind yourself formally; I don't even ask to see you, or to be allowed to write to you. I only entreat you to have patience and to wait. That sounds like asking a great deal; but if you really love me, it is asking nothing. I won't give up hope until I hear from your own lips that you don't care enough for me to bear a time of uncertainty and waiting.'

'Edith!' said Mrs. Winnington, solemnly.

The girl looked up, cast an imploring glance first at her mother and then at Walter, and dropped her eyes again, but said never a word.

'Edith!' repeated the instrument of destiny by the fireplace, in somewhat sterner accents.

This time the victim responded to the call. 'It is quite true,' she said slowly, 'I don't care enough——' Her voice died away. Then, all of a sudden, she exclaimed passionately, 'Oh, why can't you believe what I say? Why don't you go away? You ought not to persecute me so!'

'I hope,' said Mrs. Winnington, quietly, 'that you are now satisfied.'

Poor Walter was not in a state to make any reply. The floor seemed to be rising and falling before him; the walls were spinning round; he had to clutch at the mantelpiece for support. There was a long minute of profound silence, after which he heard Mrs. Winnington's voice, as from the far distance, saying, 'Don't you think you had better leave us now?'

He made a strong effort to recover his self-command. 'Certainly,' he answered. 'I have nothing more to do here. It—it's a pity this wasn't said a little sooner. I had no intention of—persecuting anybody. Good-bye, Mrs. Winnington. Good-bye, Edith, and God bless you always!'

And so, somehow or other, he found himself out in the hall, and was aware that the butler was surveying him with an air of grave surprise.

'Good-bye, Wilson,' he said; 'you won't see me down here again for many a long day, I expect. I'm going up to London to make my fortune, Wilson.'

'Indeed, sir? I am sorry to hear it, sir,' answered the man.

'What, sorry to hear that I am going to make my fortune? You must know precious little of the world then, Wilson. Why, bless your soul, money is the only thing worth living for. There's nothing that money can't buy—houses, and lands, and friends—and wives, too, if you want them. Between you and me, Wilson, this world's going to the devil pretty quickly.'

Probably Wilson knew perfectly well what was the matter; otherwise he might have been inclined to suspect that young Mr. Brune had been drinking a little more than was good for him. And indeed Walter's gait, as he hastened across the lawn, was scarcely that of a sober man.

Before he had reached the boundary of the garden some one appeared suddenly from a by-path and caught him by both hands.

'Oh, Walter!' exclaimed Margaret, with the tears in her eyes, 'I am so very, very sorry.'

Possibly there may have been something like tears in the young fellow's eyes, too; for he winked violently, and cleared his voice several times, without being able to make any articulate reply.

'I know that I have been a great deal to blame for this,' Margaret went on penitently. 'I ought to have foreseen what was likely to happen; but somehow I never thought of it until—until a short time ago.'

Walter now managed to say that he had nothing to complain of, and blamed nobody. He had made a great mistake, and there was no more to be said.

Certainly there was not much to be said in the way of consolation. Had Walter declared himself determined to hope on against hope, Mrs. Stanniforth would have been ready to point out to him how wrong this was, and might even have been persuaded in the long run to write to him, every now and then, and let him have news of the beloved one's state of health—a point upon which he might reasonably be supposed to feel some anxiety; but as he chose to give up the game, it was not for her to quarrel with his submissiveness, and no doubt, matters being as they were, it was a good thing that he was about to vanish altogether from the scene. Margaret may have been inwardly a trifle disappointed; but she did not allow the

existence of any such feeling to be inferred from her manner, and Walter gave her no time to add much more, one way or the other. He made her a somewhat incoherent speech, thanking her for all her kindness to him in past years, and hoping that she would not forget him, and so departed.

Margaret watched him out of sight, and then returned to the house, where her mother met her with—

'All's well that ends well. But, Margaret dear, I can't help saying that I hope this will be a warning to you to be just a little more careful about making all sorts of people welcome to the house. If anything of this kind were to occur again, I am afraid it would be my duty to think seriously of settling down with dear Edith in a home of our own.'

CHAPTER XVII.

NELLIE SPENDS AN EXCITING DAY.

It is so common a failing, even among the wisest of mankind, to estimate what is probable by the measure of what is desirable, that Mrs. Winnington may be excused for having cherished a fond belief that all cognisance of the episode treated of in the last chapter might be confined to the five persons whom she knew to be already acquainted with it. No one, however, who has lived much in the country will suppose for one moment that a popular and widely-known young fellow like Walter Brune could leave the neighbourhood abruptly in order to seek employment in London, for which, both by tastes and training, he was notoriously unfitted—no one, I say, will believe that such a step as this could be taken without reasons, true and false, being speedily forthcoming to account for it. In this instance, the truth, or something not very unlike the truth, was known to the whole county in about a week;—in a space of time, that is to say, which would include one Sunday, one market-day, and at least one dinner-party, or other social gathering. Mr. Wilson, it may be assumed, would give his version of the affair to one set of persons, Mrs. Winnington's maid would communicate hers to another, while the groom who had ridden over to Broom Leas with the note for Walter would command the attention of a third. Starting from these humble sources the news would infiltrate by the usual processes into a higher layer of society, and propagating itself by the mere fact

of its existence, as the germs of certain diseases are said to do, would ere long penetrate into the most remote and least inquisitive quarters.

Thus it was that, within the brief period above indicated, a very general impression got abroad to the effect that poor young Brune had been abominably treated. His father, it was alleged, had turned him out of doors; Mrs. Stanniforth had forbidden him ever to show his face at Longbourne again; Mrs. Winnington had assailed him with a torrent of the coarsest abuse; and all this because, forsooth, he had ventured to raise his eyes to a girl who, after all, was in no way his superior, and who surely might have been contented with throwing him over when he had served her purpose of acting as a decoy-duck for more wary and wealthier suitors. It was unanimously concluded that the affair was discreditable to all concerned in it; and, as this is always a comfortable conclusion to arrive at, Walter's wrongs were discussed for a longer time and with greater relish than anybody's good fortune would have been.

It was well for Mrs. Winnington that she was both disliked and feared in the country, and that she had no friend within twenty miles sufficiently intimate to undertake the delightful task of letting her know what pleasant things were being said about her. She was perfectly at ease in her mind, feeling assured that those in whom she had confided would best consult their own interest by keeping silence; and what better security for discretion could she have than that? Mr. Brune, if she had known it, had taken upon himself to let a sixth person into the secret; but that person was a safe one, and moreover could hardly have been kept long in ignorance of what had taken place.

Nellie showed no surprise when her father related the circumstances to her, but expressed herself upon the subject with a bitterness which rather astonished him, declaring that Walter was well out of it, and passing a sweeping condemnation upon the entire Longbourne set, Stanniforths and Winningtons alike.

'How horrid they all are!' she exclaimed; 'Edith is not a bit better than the rest of them. Even Mrs. Stanniforth, good and kind as she is, is completely under the thumb of that detestable woman, and did not dare to say a word for poor Walter, whom they have driven into a choky London den, where he will pine, like a lark in a cage.'

'Walter had made his choice on that score before he knew that he was to be rejected,' observed Mr. Brune; 'and you must learn to moderate your language, Nell, or people will set you down as a little termagant. I give you over Mrs. Winnington; but you needn't curse the whole tribe of Stanniforths. There's Tom, for instance; I call Tom a capital fellow.'

'Do you?'

Yes; don't you? I thought you and he had struck up a firm alliance when he was here.'

'Oh!' said Nellie, 'I liked him well enough in a sort of way; but I have no doubt that, below the surface, he is just like the others. And then he is such a bore with his philanthropic schemes.'

'H'm! I may be very wrong; but I was under the impression that it was you who persuaded me, against my better judgment, to sign a petition for the total abolition of vivisection.'

'Well, I know I did. When people have hobbies, the only way to save oneself from being tormented is to give in to them; and I told you at the time that it didn't the least signify, because nobody would think of looking at all those signatures.'

'Yes, I remember that you made use of that remarkable argument. Poor Stanniforth! he won't worry you with any more hobbies; for I don't suppose we are likely to come across him again, unless, indeed, he pays them another visit at Longbourne. Do you know, I have sometimes thought that our worthy friend, Mrs. Winnington, would not be altogether displeased if he were to take a fancy to Edith.'

Nellie burst out laughing with much apparent heartiness. 'You dear, simple old father! Do you mean to say that you have only just found that out? Didn't you guess why Mrs. Winnington was so desperately anxious to keep things quiet that she didn't even forbid Walter the house, and has had us twice asked to dinner since Mr. Stanniforth has been there? I was so glad that we could not go! I don't think I could have borne to walk in the old wretch's triumphal procession, like the captives of the Roman generals. Why, Edith is either engaged to Mr. Stanniforth now, or will be in a few days.'

This conversation took place towards the end of September, at which time Mr. Stanniforth certainly had not compromised his future in the manner imputed to him. He had spent a week at Longbourne, and had then left with a precipitancy

which did not lack significance. But of Mr. Stanniforth and his deeds and fortunes, Nellie had neither seen nor heard anything from the day on which he had quitted Broom Leas. During the last few days of his stay she had been pleased, as we have seen, to treat him with a haughtiness, not to say incivility, for which her conscience now began to call her to account. Looking back upon this dispassionately, it did seem somewhat unjust, and perhaps even unworthy, to have vented her temper upon the poor man because Mrs. Winnington had suggested impertinent possibilities with reference to him; but Miss Brune was not more prone than are the majority of her age and sex to look at things dispassionately, nor had she anticipated that her guest would take this snubbing in the manner that he had done. If it had been in her power to look down into the depths of her heart, she would have made a discovery which would have surprised her; for she would have found out that what she wanted was that Mr. Stanniforth should inquire into the cause of her changed demeanour, and, without receiving any answer—for of course he could not receive any—should by some means or other have arrived at a comprehension of it. But he had done nothing of that kind. He had asked no questions, nor had he once taken the trouble to call at Broom Leas after his change of quarters. He had simply (so it seemed to Nellie) shrugged his shoulders, and walked off, as a sensible man might be expected to do when out of patience with the caprices of a silly schoolgirl. Now it was by no means in this latter light that Miss Brune desired to be regarded by Mr. Stanniforth or anybody else: hence possibly, the acrimony with which she had spoken of him behind his back.

During the succeeding six weeks Nellie had leisure enough, and to spare, for the duty of self-examination; but as this method of passing time is seldom satisfactory to young and healthy minds, she soon discarded it, and began to cast about her for occupation or amusement in one form or another. Of these two things there was now, as it happened, an unwonted dearth in her small world. Out of all her tribe of brothers not one was at this time beneath the paternal roof, some being at school, some at sea; even Walter was away in London, where Philip also was hard at work, studying law after the fashion known to the reader. Mrs. Winnington, in search of second and third strings to her bow, had carried off Edith into the west of England. The neighbourhood, too, which at the

best of times was not a remarkably lively one, had entered upon the annual period of torpor which separated the last of the garden parties from the first of the winter dances.

All this tended to produce a feeling of melancholy which the season of the year was well calculated to deepen. The leaden skies, the bare, brown fields, the yellow leaves that fluttered down in showers with every gust of wind, the chrysanthemums and dahlias all draggled and forlorn—these were dismal objects to contemplate, when one had little else to do the livelong day but to contemplate them. Every morning the low mists hung over the Cray valley, and every afternoon they crept slowly up to the higher ground, wrapping men and things in a moist and chilly embrace. Mr. Brune caught a bad cold in his head, and became a trifle querulous under the influence of it, declaring that this being out in all weathers would be the death of him, and that he missed Walter more every day.

'I shouldn't catch colds in my head if I were not in such confoundedly low spirits,' he asserted; 'and I shouldn't be in low spirits if I had somebody to talk to.'

Upon this Nellie eagerly suggested that she should accompany her father on his daily rounds; but he negatived the proposition despondently.

'You can't walk,' he said, 'and there's nothing for you to ride.'

'There's Wasp,' said she.

Now Wasp was a powerful young horse which Walter had bought some months before, with the intention of hunting him during the ensuing season. Nellie had been once upon his back; but he had given her so much trouble on that occasion that she had been forbidden to repeat the experiment.

'I won't have you riding Wasp,' said Mr. Brune; 'he is too much for you.'

'I should like to see the horse that was too much for me!' cried Miss Brune; and in truth she had a light hand and a firm seat, and had often been complimented upon her possession of these gifts.

'Very well, my dear, then you can look at Wasp as often as you please. I can't afford to have my children breaking their arms and legs in these hard times.'

Nellie said no more; for she understood how to manage her father. And the remainder of this chapter will be devoted, amongst other things, to showing how wrong it is of children to manage their parents, and how foolish of parents to let themselves be managed by their children.

On the following morning the wilful young woman, whose discomfiture will presently be related, privately ordered a side-saddle to be put upon Wasp; and when Mr. Brune went into the stable-yard after breakfast to mount his own steady cob, lo and behold! there was a diminutive person in a riding habit, perched upon a sidling grey quadruped of gigantic size, waiting for him; and he was immediately greeted with a triumphant

'There now! didn't I tell you so? You see he's as quiet as a lamb.'

Mr. Brune remarked that he was evidently getting into his dotage, and that the sooner he was dead and buried out of sight the better, since nobody any longer dreamt of paying attention to his express orders. He then sarcastically inquired whether a leading-rein had been provided for him; whereat the stable-helper, who was a young man of no manners or refinement, burst into a prodigious haw-haw, and had to be sternly rebuked by the coachman. Mr. Brune, meanwhile, had climbed a little stiffly into his saddle, and, after a few preliminary plunges on the part of Nellie's gallant grey, the pair rode off side by side, the old coachman hobbling out to watch them with a countenance expressive of admiration not unmixed with anxiety.

'Hope they won't meet any o' them blamed traction-engines,' he muttered. 'That there Wops he ain't the oss for a nervous rider, let alone a young lady.'

Wasp was certainly not a pleasant animal to ride. His notion of getting over the ground was a series of senseless and objectless shies; and his notion of shying was a tremendous spring from one side of the road to the other, followed by sundry snorts and capers, which seemed intended to signify to his rider that nothing except a strong sense of duty restrained him from making a bolt for it. Nellie, however, rather enjoyed, or said that she enjoyed, these light-hearted performances, and would not hear of going back and having the saddles changed, as her father humbly requested her to do. So they pottered about from field to field the whole morning, and had a gallop over a corner of the downs; after which the exuberance of Wasp's spirits subsided a little; insomuch that Mr. Brune was brought to confess that there didn't appear to be much harm in the brute after all. His confidence was at length so fully restored that, when they reached the bailiff's cottage, he was persuaded to dismount and look over some accounts which had been prepared for his perusal, leaving his daughter to wait outside.

Now waiting was what neither Nellie nor Wasp liked; and at the end of ten minutes one of them reached the limits of her stock of patience. She tapped on the window with her whip, and asked whether she might ride just a little way on the downs to keep herself warm, and come back again. Mr. Brune called out hastily, 'No, no; stay where you are. I'll be with you directly.' But perhaps his daughter did not hear him; for she quietly turned her horse's head away, and was soon cantering up the grassy slopes of a hill famed in those parts as offering a point of view whence the usual incredible number of counties can be distinguished on a clear day. She reined up her horse when she reached the crest, from which only one county, and not very much of that, was then visible; but if there was little in the way of scenery to attract the notice of the solitary horsewoman, she was rewarded, before many minutes were past, by the sight of something that caused her to jump, and cry 'Oh!' in accents of suppressed excitement which no landscape, however extensive, would have drawn from her.

Far away, beyond the misty valley at her feet, a small reddish-brown object suddenly flitted across the opposite hillside, and was gone; and almost before the above ejaculation was uttered, there were the hounds, streaming after the fox, and presently a few red coats appeared in the wake of the hounds.

'Oh,' exclaimed Nellie, '*how* I should like to be with them!'

An instant later she would gladly have recalled a wish which had been only too fully shared by another spectator of the scene. Wasp, whose cocked ears and trembling limbs had escaped the attention of his heedless rider, not only wished, but meant to be with them, and, in order to give the promptest effect to his intentions, he was tearing down the slope at a speed which showed little consideration for his own safety or that of his mistress. Nellie did not like it at all. She might as well have tried to stop an avalanche as to pull up a runaway horse in such a place as that; but she tugged as hard as she could, just by way of letting him know that she was there, and, finding that her efforts produced no effect whatever, made the best of what could not be helped, sat well back, and wished for the end. Even in that moment of dire distress, she found a grain of comfort in the reflection that she was in no danger of heading the fox. Thundering down a declivity almost as steep as the proverbial side of a house, with the ground flying from under her like running water, an aspiration flashed across her

mind akin to that in which the unfortunate bricklayer is said to have found time to indulge between the top of a Parisian scaffolding and the pavement of the street below—'*Oh, mon Dieu! pourvu que ça dure!*' 'If nothing happens between this and that!' she thought. By 'that' she meant the slope on the further side of the valley, where, supposing that she ever got there, she felt tolerably sure of being able to check her headlong career.

But, alas! Wasp had thought of that too; or, if he had not thought of it, instinct told him to head down the valley, and to round the base of the hill behind which the red coats had vanished. Somehow or other, he and his helpless load reached level ground; somehow or other—Nellie never knew how—they traversed a road, a ditch, and a small brook; and now they were racing across a stretch of open country, and were gaining upon the last of the horsemen. But, owing to some inequalities in the ground, only the heads and shoulders of these were visible, and in a minute or two the tops of their hats had disappeared. It was then that Nellie became aware of a new peril, and a more formidable one than any of those from which she had escaped. Directly before her was a ragged black hedgerow which looked both high and thick; and since nothing but a glimmer of grey sky could be discerned through it, it seemed evident that there must be a drop of unknown depth on the other side. Nellie took this in at a glance, and at the same moment a sickening suspicion of wire crossed her mind. Although this was her first experience of following the hounds (for Mr. Brune had old-fashioned prejudices with reference to the appearance of ladies in the hunting-field) she had often ridden across country with her brothers, and was not afraid of any obstacle of moderate size; but she knew that she had never been over such a big thing as this in her life; and, what was worse, she very much doubted whether Wasp ever had either. The brute was rushing blindly ahead; she made a despairing and fruitless attempt to steady him; then she shut her eyes. Immediately came a crash; a sensation as if the whole world was breaking up into fragments, a brilliant display of fireworks—and the next thing of which Miss Brune was fully conscious was that she was sitting in a ploughed field, with her hair hanging over her face, and the hills and sky revolving in a most extraordinary manner round her.

After wondering for a moment whether she was dead or alive, and satisfying herself that her head was still upon her

shoulders, she raised herself on to her knees; and perhaps some people would have profited by that position to return thanks for deliverance from sudden death. Nellie, however, must have inherited the instincts of a sportswoman; for the first thing that suggested itself to her mind was not this obvious duty, but the expediency of catching her horse, whom she saw at the other end of the field, trotting round with his head in the air, and in a state of bewilderment evidently quite equal to her own. Some people, again, would have been very willing to let that headstrong beast go his own way, and would not have cared to give him a second chance of breaking a Christian neck; but this was by no means Nellie's view of the case. She knew that Wasp would have had quite enough of running away for one day, and that, if by any means she could contrive to hoist herself upon his back, he would let himself be ridden home as submissively as could be wished.

To catch a loose horse is, however, one of those things which are more easily determined upon than carried into execution, and the difficulty is not lessened when the pursuer happens to be in a somewhat unsteady condition as to head and legs, and to be further encumbered with a torn riding-habit. Nellie plunged across the furrows as best she could, and when she got near her horse, called him by name; whereupon he cocked his ears, neighed, and waited for her to approach. He then flung up his head, and went off at a gallop. Nellie now proceeded to stalk him patiently and warily into a corner, he lending himself to the design and watching her movements with much apparent interest. When she was within a few yards of him, up went his head again, and away he cantered into another corner, whither she laboriously followed him. This manœuvre was repeated for the space of half an hour; at the end of which time Miss Brune's patience and strength alike gave way, and she felt very much disposed to sit down in the dirt and cry. Wasp, too, had seemingly become tired of the game. There was a gap in the hedge at the further end of the field which a less stupid animal would have taken advantage of long before. He now scrambled through it, and was promptly lost to sight. The thunder of his retreating hoofs was heard for a few minutes; and then there was complete silence and solitude.

'What *am* I to do!' exclaimed Nellie, half laughing, half crying. Her hat was a shapeless ruin, her habit was in rags, her face was bleeding from the scratches of the briery hedge, she was covered with mud from head to foot, and she was

a good five miles from home. As to what she was to do, that was a question which demanded no long consideration, there being only one thing to be done: she must make her way home on foot. But, although Miss Brune soon realised this necessity, she was not at all so sure that her strength was equal to the task that lay before her. She began to feel the effects of her fall in aching limbs and a swimming head, and the exercise which she had taken in the last half-hour had reduced her to something very like complete exhaustion. However, she stumbled out of the ploughed field, crossed a pasture, and ere long struck a faintly-marked track which she knew would lead her across the downs to Broom Leas.

The experienced novel-reader will perceive that the moment has now arrived for the introduction upon the scene of the *deus ex machina*; and sure enough before Nellie had plodded a quarter of a mile between the cart-ruts that marked her path, he duly made his appearance in the form of one whom she had supposed to be many miles away at that time. In her sorry plight, dignity and conventionality were burdens too petty to be remembered: accordingly, when the equestrian who was approaching her at a foot's pace pulled up, and exclaimed, in accents of stupefaction, 'God bless my soul! is that Miss Brune?' she replied with unaffected warmth—

'Oh, Mr. Stanniforth, I am so delighted to see you! I began to think I should have to lie down and die in a ditch.'

Mr. Stanniforth had at once dismounted, and was too busy inquiring into the nature of the accident that had befallen Miss Brune to give any explanation of his own presence. It was not until she had assured him at least a dozen times that she had received no hurt beyond a few scratches, and that all she at present desired was to find some means of reaching home before the spectacle of the riderless grey should have frightened her father out of his senses, that he consented to give an account of himself. He was staying at Longbourne, he said. He had come down quite suddenly, finding that he had a few days at his disposal; he had ridden out after luncheon, in hopes that he might fall in with the hounds, but had failed to do so, and was now very glad indeed that he had failed.

'I suppose Mrs. Winnington and Edith have come back,' observed Nellie, who had now had time to bethink herself of many things which the first sight of a friendly face had driven out of her remembrance, and whose manner had consequently become much more formal.

'No, they haven't,' answered Tom, glancing at her quickly; 'they are—somewhere or other. Margaret told me where it was, but I'm sure I forget. Why should you suppose they had returned?'

'Oh, I don't know; I thought perhaps they might,' answered Miss Brune, with ostentatious carelessness. 'I wish I could get home somehow; my father will certainly think I am killed. Can't you suggest something?'

'Well—unless you were to ride my horse. But you could hardly do that.'

'No, hardly. There is a farmhouse about a mile further on which I could easily find my way to; and if they only knew at home that I was there, they could send for me. Couldn't you ride on and tell them?'

'Yes, I could do that, of course,' answered Mr. Stanniforth slowly, and with evident reluctance. 'But I don't think you ought to be left alone here.'

'Why not?' inquired Nellie, turning an astonished pair of eyes upon him. 'What harm could possibly happen to me? I should be so very much obliged if you would go on as quickly as you can; it would be so much the best way.'

'If you tell me to go I must go; but I feel sure that your father would much prefer my seeing you into a place of safety. You really are not fit to walk without help, and if you will allow me to give you my arm——'

Nellie said she was perfectly well able to walk by herself, and required both her hands to hold up her habit.

'And besides,' continued Tom, 'my getting to Broom Leas a quarter of an hour sooner or later can make very little difference. Either your horse has gone straight back to his stables, in which case he is there by this time, or he has gone off in the other direction—which from your account seems more likely—and will probably be heard of next in Crayminster. Do let me take you as far as that farm, and I promise you that the moment I have handed you over to the farmer's wife, I will be off to Broom Leas like the wind.'

Nellie did not give her consent to this arrangement; but, as she did not withhold it either, Mr. Stanniforth let well alone, and said no more. They walked on, side by side, in silence for some little time, and then he took up the conversation at the point where it had been broken off.

'Did you mean to say just now,' he asked abruptly, 'that

it must have been in order to see the Winningtons that I had come here?'

'Really, I had not thought much about the matter. It wouldn't be very extraordinary if you had come here in order to see them, would it? I thought you liked them so much.'

'So I do,' he answered resolutely; 'I think they are very nice people—especially Miss Winnington. But it wasn't to see them that I came here, all the same.'

'Oh!'

'If you care to know why it was that I came——'

'Thanks; I don't care to know at all,' interrupted Nellie, hastily; for in an instant she had guessed what was coming, and she was determined to stop it, if she could. 'Where have you been since you left these parts?'

Had she known Mr. Stanniforth as well as some of his colleagues in the House of Commons knew him, she would have been aware that to stop that excellent man when once he had made up his mind to deliver himself of a statement was to the full as hopeless a task as to pull up Wasp in mid-career.

'All right,' he answered cheerfully; 'then I'll tell you, though you don't care to hear. I should have to tell you sooner or later, and why not now as well as at any other time? I came here because I hoped to see you.'

It was then that the impossibility of assuming a cold and majestic mien with a broken hat cocked rakishly over one eye, and a countenance disfigured by many scratches, made itself painfully manifest to Miss Brune.

'Well,' she said, laughing nervously, 'you have seen me now, and it is to be hoped that you are satisfied. I sincerely trust that no other stranger will see me for at least a week.'

'But you don't call me a stranger, do you?' asked Tom, reproachfully. And, getting no answer to this query, he continued, in a low and slightly hoarse voice, 'Miss Brune, I am generally considered to be a tolerably ready speaker; but there are some things that a man feels too strongly about to be able to express in the best words; and I don't know how to say what I am going to say to you, though Heaven knows I have thought about it often enough.' He paused for a moment. 'There is a great deal that might be said about difference of age and—other things,' he resumed, 'but perhaps you will understand, without my mentioning it, that I fully feel the force of all that, and that I am not making use of any conventional form of words when I say that I know myself to be not nearly

good enough for you. Only this I can say for myself, that I never loved any woman but you in my life, and never shall. It is rather odd for a man of my age to be able to make such an assertion; but I don't know, after all, why it should help me much. It all comes to much the same thing in the end. It's just a case of Yes or No.'

Having put the case in this very explicit manner, Mr. Stanniforth stood still, and paused for a reply.

Now to be driven into a corner is what no woman likes; and Nellie considered that she had especial reason for resenting such treatment.

'If I had supposed for one moment that you were going to speak in this way,' she said tremulously, 'I should not have allowed you to walk with me. I don't think you ought to—to have taken advantage of ——'

'But is it to be Yes or No?' persisted this somewhat peremptory wooer, too eager for his answer to notice the appeal made to his generosity. 'Only tell me that, and I won't say another word.'

'Oh, dear,' exclaimed Nellie, bursting into a rather hysterical laugh, 'how ridiculous this is! I wonder whether anybody in the world but you would ever have dreamt of choosing such a time as this to—to mention such a subject. I can't think of anything at all, except of how dreadfully tired I am. Is that the farm over there? Oh, I *hope* it is.'

'But, Miss Brune—Nellie—won't you just tell me whether it is to be No.'

'Very well, then,' cried Nellie, stamping her foot in exasperation, 'it is No—of course it is No! I didn't want to be disagreeable, but you will have it. It is No; I can't say anything more.'

It was true enough that she could not say anything more. The agitations of the day had completely broken down her self-control at last, and, despite all her efforts, the tears had forced their way into her eyes. It was all that she could do to avoid disgracing herself by bursting into audible weeping.

But Tom Stanniforth, who was looking straight before him, did not see these signs of distress. Not another word did he speak until they had reached the farmhouse and he had delivered his charge into the hands of the farmer's wife. But just before he mounted his horse, he held out his hand to Nellie, and said—

'Good-bye, Miss Brune. I shan't bother you by letting you

see me again till you have forgotten all this. I am sorry if I caused you any annoyance just now; and I know you are kind-hearted enough to be a little sorry for me too. It was quite true, what I told you about my never caring for anybody else. I hope you'll believe that, and that you'll forgive me if I have seemed a little presumptuous. I had to say it, you know.'

Nellie nodded, being unable to find her voice; and so he rode off, and was soon out of sight.

Late that evening Mr. Brune, who had scoured the country far and wide in search of his daughter, and had thus been spared the shock of encountering Wasp, who had trotted quietly back to the stables, remarked that Tom Stanniforth really seemed to have behaved with great sense and consideration.

'I shall always like Tom,' he said; 'a true gentleman in every way, whatever you may say about his pedigree. I can't understand what you find to dislike in him.'

'I don't dislike him,' answered Nellie, humbly; 'I think he is very kind.'

'But you look down upon him, Lord knows why! One gets odd ideas into one's head; I suppose it's a sign of old age creeping on,' continued Mr. Brune, musingly; 'but I couldn't help thinking to-day what a capital thing it would have been if you and he had taken to each other, and if he had married you instead of Edith. Don't make faces, my dear, I am only indulging in speculations; and, dear me! what a speculation that would have been, when you come to think of it! I suppose Tom Stanniforth will be one of the richest men in England; and, upon my word, I believe he will be one of the best husbands too. I don't grudge Mrs. Winnington her luck; but it must be confessed that she does have luck.'

Nellie made no answer, except to point out that it was long past bed-time.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PHILIP GOES INTO SOCIETY.

At the moment when Mr. Brune was giving way to mercenary aspirations, as recorded above, the subject of his regrets was sitting before a blazing fire in the smoking-room at Longbourne, smoking one of the excellent cigars of which a stock was always to be found in that well-ordered establishment, and enjoying, or appearing to enjoy, the creature comforts incidental to the

situation. It was his sister-in-law who had suggested to him that, as they were alone in the house, they should betake themselves to this cosy little apartment immediately after dinner, asserting, as kind-hearted ladies do sometimes (and Heaven only knows whether they are speaking the truth, or whether it is not an act of selfish brutality to take them at their word), that she liked the smell of tobacco, and that to spend the evening in the smoking-room, instead of in the drawing-room, was an unwonted treat to her.

It reminded her, she said, of old days, when she used to sit with Jack after dinner. Perhaps she wanted an excuse for talking about Jack; and on ordinary occasions Tom, who had had a sincere affection for his younger brother, would have been willing enough to gratify her; but this evening his thoughts were, not unnaturally, centred upon himself, and with a very little encouragement he would have related the whole history of his disappointed hopes. Thus these two people, who had become excellent friends, and who were both inclined just now to claim a little of the sympathy to which friendship is entitled, remained for some time at cross purposes, each throwing out hints to which the other failed to respond, until it became evident that some topic of common interest must be resorted to. This was in Tom's favour; for when the conversation languished, it was inevitable that the adventure of the day should suggest itself as the ground for a fresh start, and so he soon found an opportunity of remarking, in a casual manner, that he supposed so pretty a girl as Miss Brune would not be likely to remain Miss Brune much longer.

'I don't think she will be in a hurry to marry,' Margaret said. 'Nellie has a good deal of character, and she will be sure to think well before she chooses.'

'If she has not chosen already.'

'Yes, if she has not chosen already. There are perhaps half a dozen marriageable young men hereabouts, and I believe they are all of them devoted to her in an off-and on sort of way.'

'Is there anybody in particular, should you suppose?' inquired Mr. Stanniforth, staring up at the cornice.

Margaret poked the fire, and made no reply; so he went on, 'I used to fancy that young Marescalchi was paying her a good deal of attention, but perhaps it didn't mean anything.'

Margaret laughed; whereupon her interrogator withdrew his eyes from the ceiling with great promptitude, glanced in-

quizzingly at her, saw it all, and immediately dropped into a gloomy reverie.

'I am glad you noticed that,' said the unconscious Margaret, 'for I have always thought that those two were exactly suited to one another, and hoped that something might come of it some day. But I have given up match-making,' she added, with a shake of her head. 'I have made one or two attempts in that way, and the results have not been encouraging. I suppose people must be allowed to choose for themselves.'

But Mr. Stanniforth was no longer anxious to pursue the subject, and indeed had not distinctly heard the last few words. 'Oh, yes, certainly, I quite agree with you,' he said; and then began to talk very fast about habitual drunkards, in which unfortunate class of society he had been lately stirred up to take a keen interest. He had a comprehensive scheme for dealing with them in their double character of afflicted fellow-creatures and responsible members of the community; but as the carrying out of this project would have involved the expenditure of some millions of the public money, besides interfering with the liberty of the subject after a fashion conceivable only to enlightened Radical brains, the reader need not be wearied with its provisions. Margaret listened to them patiently, argued against them, was triumphantly silenced, and ultimately went to bed with a consolatory assurance that she had done what was expected of her.

At breakfast the next morning, Mr. Stanniforth, who had passed a bad night, looked up from a pile of opened letters that lay before him, and said that he was very sorry, but he was afraid he must be off. He had spent the first half of the recess in unwonted idleness, and would now have to work hard to make up time. The habitual drunkards, it appeared, were clamouring for attention; the anti-vivisectionists were about to hold meetings in various places, at which the presence of the member for Blackport would be indispensable; the insufficiency of railway servants, and consequent alarming increase of accidents, was likewise a subject that seemed to require looking into; so that, upon the whole, it came to this, that he would have to leave by the twelve o'clock train.

Margaret expressed her surprise and regret at this sudden change of plans, but was hardly so much afflicted by it as she might have been, had not the post brought her her own share of disquieting correspondence in the shape of an announcement from

Philip that he had finally made up his mind to abandon the law in favour of the operatic stage.

'I have been thinking about this for a long time,' he wrote, 'but I would not tell you until I was tolerably sure of success, because I wanted to spare you needless worry, and I knew you would be rather horrified at first. Don't breathe a word about it to anybody just yet—it would only set the whole pack of them baying at you if you did—but think it over quietly, and I am sure you'll agree that I might do worse. Old Steinberger (perhaps you have never heard of him, but he is a celebrity nevertheless)—Steinberger says my high notes only want practice to be as good as Wachtel's (I daresay you have never heard of Wachtel either); and, if all goes well, I ought, in a few years' time, to jump to the top of the tree in one bound. Is there any other profession in the world in which such a *coup* as that would be at all possible? As for the social position, anybody will tell you that great singers are received everywhere in these days; and between ourselves, my dear Meg, who am I to give myself airs? The nuisance of it is that living in London, and having the best masters, and all that, costs a lot of money; but I must economise, and I daresay I shall manage to get on somehow. The rapidity with which a five-pound note melts away here is awful. Cab-hire alone'—&c., &c.

The remainder of the letter contained a good many hints of this delicate nature, for Philip seldom asked directly for money, that being a course of procedure which went against his finer feelings.

Money, however, was what he was at this time in urgent need of; and, but for this circumstance, it is probable that Margaret would have been allowed to remain for some time longer in ignorance of his schemes. One reason in particular he had for desiring that his coffers should be replenished: namely, that he contemplated a change of domicile. The remote situation of Coomassie Villa—half a day's journey from the Club, as he would often pathetically remark—was causing him daily inconvenience, and he no longer dreaded the risk attaching to residence in a more frequented quarter; for he was beginning to feel convinced of the truth of the common saying that one is never so much alone as in a crowd. It was, however, quite certain that the suburban butcher, baker, and grocer would not suffer him to depart until their several little accounts had been defrayed; and therefore it was that he awaited Margaret's answer

with no small impatience, and that, when the answer came, he was a great deal more anxious to examine the figure of the cheque contained in the envelope than the accompanying eight pages of manuscript. But he did read the latter as soon as he had ascertained the satisfactory nature of the former, and was a good deal touched by Margaret's kindness and generosity.

Nothing, indeed, could have been more moderate than the tone of her reply. She did not deny that Philip's news had startled her, nor that she had certain misgivings as to the social position about which he had expressed himself so confidently; but she admitted that he was better able to judge of such questions than she could be, and further, that he had a perfect right to choose his calling in life for himself; the one essential thing, for him and everybody else, was to have a calling of some kind or other. She then went on to make some very true, if not very original, observations on the solaces of labour, which Philip skimmed over rapidly, and concluded by thanking him for having taken her into his confidence In a postscript she added that she was sure his expenses must be heavier than he could conveniently manage, and that she therefore enclosed a trifle, which she hoped would help to lighten them for a time.

There was a pleasing provisional sort of sound about the last three words which Philip did not fail to note and appreciate.

'Fan,' said he gravely, as he folded up the letter, 'if the baby should die, and I should be cut off in my prime, immediately after realising a handsome fortune on the boards of the Italian Opera, don't you take it into your foolish little head to adopt an orphan. Unless he turned out to be very unlike some other orphans whom I have heard tell of, he would be a burden to you all your life, he would take your last penny from you with absolute complacency, and at the bottom of his heart he would think you rather a fool for giving it to him.'

The awful possibilities foreshadowed in this speech were too much for Mrs. Marescalchi, who began to cry.

'Now, now, Fan,' remonstrated Philip, 'you ought to know me better by this time than to take every word I say so seriously. I'm not really such an ungrateful beggar as I make myself out; and as for dear old Meg, it's a positive delight to her to throw her money out of window. If I didn't pick it up, you may be sure that somebody else would—perhaps a less deserving person.'

'Oh, but Philip,' sobbed Fanny, 'how could you talk like that about—about your dying? And dear baby, too! I can't bear to hear you say such things.'

'Oh, is that it?' said Philip, much amused. 'I think you may feel reassured, then. In point of physical health I can safely speak of myself in the highest terms, and I don't see a symptom of anything wrong with baby, unless it's excess of fat. So dry your eyes, Fan, and I'll go out and search for lodgings in some more civilised district.'

Of this task Philip discharged himself with due circumspection. It might be permissible to be bold, but it would not do to be too bold; and therefore he decided to eschew such favourite localities as Clarges Street and the like, where people from Crayminster or the neighbourhood might at any time establish themselves next door to you for a week or two. The other side of Bond Street was quite as handy and less dangerous; and chancing upon a tolerably commodious first floor in Conduit Street, which at that season of the year was to be had for a moderate weekly rental, he agreed to take it. Thither, in the course of a few days, he transplanted his belongings, and there for a time he dwelt in prosperity and contentment, no man forbidding him.

When Philip walks down Conduit Street nowadays the smile with which he habitually faces the world and all that therein is fades from his expressive countenance, and as he passes a certain house, and glances up at its first-floor window, he does not fail to pay the tribute of a sigh to the memory of hours gone, never to return. He may have forgotten, as most of us do, when looking back upon the past, many a small rub, anxiety, or annoyance; but the fact still remains that his life during the first part of that winter season was one that agreed with his tastes to a nicety. The lodgings, though not actually luxurious, were as comfortable as London lodgings ever are; they were kept by a worthy couple whose hearts were at once conquered by the baby, who were kind to Fanny, and not as inquisitive as the servants at Coomassie Villa had been; and if the cooking left something to be desired, this was but a small drawback to Philip, since he was so frequently obliged to dine away from home.

It was not only to the Temple that he went when he thus absented himself, nor was the obligation in question by any means of a stringent nature; but, as Philip was careful to explain, it was not on that account the less real. It would never do for him to refuse invitations, he said, and to allow people to forget him. Social interest and social influences were of the greatest importance to a man who had to make his own way in the world, and counted for more in the profession that he had

chosen than the uninitiated might suppose. He gave instances of artists who had obtained the most lucrative engagements by securing the good word of a certain melomaniac nobleman, and of others who had met with all manner of slights and obstacles simply through having failed to please the same potent individual.

But, indeed, he need not have taken so much pains to excuse himself. Fanny was, in the first place, firmly convinced that her lord and master could do no wrong; and, in the second, she would have put up with any amount of personal inconvenience rather than have defrauded him of the least of his amusements. Any one who should have suggested to her that she was a neglected wife would have occasioned her quite as much surprise as anger. For her own part she had never been able to accustom herself to late dinner, and greatly preferred a cup of tea and some hot buttered toast at six o'clock. When the baby had been tucked up for the night, and the nurse, after an hour or so of pleasant gossip over the cradle, had also gone to bed, Mrs. Marescalchi would get out some of the books by means of which she was perfecting her education, draw up her chair to the fire, and prepare for a solitary evening, without the faintest suspicion that she was a person whose lot any one would venture to pity.

Sometimes Philip did not come in until long after midnight; for there were evening parties as well as dinners at which he felt it his duty to be present; but, early or late, he always found his wife sitting up for him on his return—a little pale perhaps, but ever in the best of spirits, and not in the least sleepy, as she unhesitatingly declared, if he remonstrated with her on not having gone to bed. There was a cheerful fire, there were his slippers and his velvet smoking-coat, and his particular arm-chair, all ready for him; on the table were the little cut-glass decanters which Fanny had purchased for him out of her own pocket-money, knowing that he liked pretty things, and the seltzer water, and a plate of sandwiches, in case he should feel exhausted after all the labours of the evening.

When Philip had made himself quite comfortable, Fanny would seat herself upon a footstool beside him, with her little flaxen head resting against his knee, and coax him to tell her about all the lords and ladies; and then he would indemnify himself for many hours of enforced self-restraint by taking off the little peculiarities of those to whose coat-tails and apron-strings he was clinging in the hope of being upheld by them until he should be in a position to dispense with such aid. His

keen sense of the ridiculous stood in need of some vent of this kind; and it was as much to amuse himself that he acted as to amuse Fanny, upon whom some of the finer touches of his mimicry were somewhat thrown away. Yet it is probable that her enjoyment of these midnight performances was greater even than his; and upon one occasion the old gentleman who lodged on the second floor came down in his dressing-gown to say that, if there was a joke, he should take it as a favour if he might be let into it, so that, since it appeared that he was to be deprived of sleep by the noise of laughter from below, he might at least have the satisfaction of being able to laugh too.

There was a time, not so very long ago, when London in the winter was a city of the dead, so far as people who wished to be considered fashionable were concerned; but all that is changed now. Society has greatly enlarged itself; people whose professions require them to spend the greater part of the year in the metropolis are allowed to call themselves fashionable in spite of that necessity; other people, who are in the proud position of requiring no profession, occupy their town houses every now and again, and receive their friends there: there is less of a crowd and bustle than in the spring, but there is more sociability; and a young man who has talents of a certain kind, and a sufficiently large acquaintance, need have no fear that his time will hang heavily upon his hands. Philip's talents were of the most popular order, being such as contributed directly to the amusement of his fellow-creatures, and it soon became understood that he was living in London, and that a note addressed to his Club would find him. Hitherto he had been chiefly known as a good-looking young man with a turn for amateur theatricals; he had now acquired a fresh claim to attention in the possession of a wonderful tenor voice; and this gift served him as a passport into many houses which would otherwise have remained closed to him. He accepted all invitations from great and small alike: and this would doubtless have been good policy upon his part, if he had been pursuing a policy at all; but the probability is that he was doing nothing of the sort. He was not really ambitious, nor was it in him to look far ahead. He went everywhere, because it amused him to do so, and because he had no particular leaning towards one class of society more than another. He did not inform his friends and patrons that he proposed eventually to appear upon the stage, judging that the time was not yet ripe for that announcement; but when some of them suggested to



PARIGI, O CARA!"

him that a voice like his ought to be public property, and that, if he decided to make it so, he might almost command his own price for it, he thanked them for their hint, laughed, and said—Well, perhaps that might be worth taking into account. In the meantime he was good-naturedly willing to eat their dinners and amuse their other guests and sing for them as often as they asked him to do so.

Herr Steinberger, whose avocations took him to most of the musical parties and private concerts that were going, did not altogether approve of all this. One evening, after hearing Philip sing a *duo* from the *Traviata* with the famous Signora Tommasini before some three or four hundred people, he caught his pupil by the elbow, and having led, or rather pushed, him into a corner, began to scold him roundly.

'What do you mean by this?' said the irascible little man. 'It is a preach of gontract! Did I not tell you I would not have you sing in public?'

'Don't be rude and disagreeable, Steinberger,' said Philip, who was now on terms of familiarity with his master and was not at all afraid of him; 'this isn't singing in public. I am here by invitation; and so, I suppose, are you.'

'I am noding of the sort,' returned the other. 'I am paid; and if I was not paid I would be smoking my pipe at home. Do you think I come out at night to hear you sing *Parigi, O cara*?'

'Well, well,' said Philip; 'I am not paid, at all events, and the question of payment was what our agreement referred to, wasn't it? I quite understand that you will expect to have a percentage off my earnings, when I make any?'

'I do not want your money,' growled the German, reddening; 'I want that you should be a *gredit* to me. And that you will never be, if you let yourself be flattered by the old Tommasini and spoilt by all these laties, and give up your work. You work no more as you did; you are getting lazy and gonseited—you will go to the teffel!' And he turned on his heel and walked off, fuming.

But when Philip went to take his lesson as usual, the next morning, Steinberger recurred to the subject.

'You think you learn to sing that way? You think, because they all clap last night, that you sing like the Tommasini? The Tommasini she is olt, she is past her day; but if she would have let out her voice, she would have lift the roof off that meeserable little room; while you!—one could not

hear you on the stairs. How often must I tell you to open your mouth wide—so!—as if you would *schwallow* the audience? When will you learn to do like this?'

And Steinberger opened his own great jaws to their utmost capacity, struck a terrific din out of the piano with his fat fingers, and attacked the same air that his pupil had warbled so sweetly on the previous night—'*Ba-harichi, o-ho ga-ra!*'

Philip burst into a shout of laughter. 'No, no, Steinberger, I shall never be able to sing like that.'

'Ah, you may laugh,' said the other, whose voice in truth was more powerful than melodious; 'but what is your English proverb?—"Let him laugh who wins." And we have a German proverb too, which says, "*Zeit ist Geld.*" And you will never win anything at all, my vrient, if you spend your time at evening barties.'

Philip did not allow his peace of mind to be disturbed by any such prognostications as these. He knew that Steinberger was fond of scolding, and would have found something else to grumble at in default of the present pretext. He himself thought he was getting on famously. And then it was such a jolly life! Nobody bothered him; nobody asked questions; nobody wanted to know where he lived, or what he was doing when he was not at the Club or in society. Even Walter, whom he saw occasionally, had not inquired his address. Walter, fortunately, was busy from morning till night, and was quite content to dine with his friend at the Club on Sundays, and refresh himself with a talk about Oxford and cricket. Philip, after having for many years of his life looked up to Walter with reverence and some little awe, now found their respective positions reversed, and was rather disposed to patronise his former protector, who was only a clerk in a bank, entirely 'out of it' as regarded the gay world, and ridiculously ignorant of London and its ways. Brune would get up and say good-night with a grave face when Lord Salford dropped in after dinner and proposed to Philip to adjourn to another Club, where they could play poker. No doubt he was thinking that Sunday evening might be better employed than in this manner, and that Philip could hardly have been worse employed, on any evening of the week, than in staking his slender purse against Lord Salford's inexhaustible one.

The latter young man used sometimes to allude to Fanny in a way which it could not have been very pleasant for her husband to listen to, and once he threw our poor hero into a cold

perspiration by suddenly fixing his little red eyes upon him, and saying, 'I believe you know more about her than anybody else, Marescalchi.' But this was probably only a random shot; and as Philip kept his countenance, and declared that he had neither seen nor heard of the girl for more than a year, the subject dropped, and there seemed little fear of his secret being discovered.

The discovery of such secrets as his can, however, only be a question of time; and considering how few precautions Philip had thought it necessary to take, it was rather strange that he should have been able to remain a matter of two months in Conduit Street without any of his friends suspecting him of being a married man. One old friend found him out at last in the simplest and most natural manner in the world.

Colonel Kenyon, after having been baked and enervated for ten years in the Madras Presidency, had been sent by a considerate country to recruit himself on the heights of Shorncliffe, where the wind is always in the east, except when it blows a strong gale from the south-west, and where the general aspect of things during the winter time is about as cheerful as that of a Central Asian steppe. Pinched and shivering in this high-lying region, and brooding daily over the puzzle of existence and the hardships of a soldier's life, the poor man would have been almost inclined to gratify several promising brother-officers by resigning his commission, had not a letter from Longbourne come from time to time to cheer him up. These communications were at first somewhat stiff and formal; but as the replies which they elicited were quite as constrained in character, and a great deal more awkward, it was but natural that Margaret should try to make some advance towards the renewal of a friendship so unhappily disturbed, and to show that she, on her side, was ready to forgive and forget. Thus by degrees the tone of this long-sustained correspondence slipped back into its accustomed groove, and before the year was out Hugh could look forward to receiving his weekly budget of news just as of old.

It was in the month of January that Margaret for the first time informed him of Philip's change of plans. She had not mentioned it before, she said, because she had not felt quite at liberty to do so; 'and I should not mention it now,' she added, 'only that I know I am perfectly safe in telling you anything; and I should so very much like to hear what you think of it all. Do you ever go up to London for a day or two? If you

do, I wish you would try to see Philip one day at the —— Club, and let me know how he is looking, and whether he seems in good spirits about himself. I don't like to bother him with questions; but I have felt uneasy about him lately. He writes very seldom, and he never came to see me at Christmas, though it had been arranged that he was to come down for a week. I give you full leave to laugh at me; but I can't help having a feeling that something is wrong,'—&c., &c.

Colonel Kenyon did not laugh. He thought it exceedingly likely that something might be wrong, and for his own part was not particularly anxious to find out what that something might be. It is not pleasant to pry into the private affairs of one's neighbours, nor is it pleasant to be the bearer of bad news. He did not, however, suffer these considerations to weigh with him, but, like the docile slave that he was, took a return-ticket to London, and presented himself at Philip's Club that same afternoon. Mr. Marescalchi was not there, and the Colonel, having only a few hours to spare, asked for his address. This was readily given to him by the porter, who had not been told to observe any secrecy in the matter; and so it came to pass that Colonel Kenyon reached Conduit Street just in time to see Philip step out of a hired brougham, followed by a young lady, who carried a baby in her arms. The young lady Hugh at once recognised as the same whom he had encountered in Philip's company on a former occasion. and the presence of the baby was a fact the significance of which there was no misinterpreting. The whole truth flashed instantly into the intelligence of the astounded spectator.

'Oh, you unspeakable young ass!' he muttered; 'you have done for yourself now, and no mistake. Mercy upon us! how am I to tell Margaret of this? I won't tell her—I'll be hanged if I will! Let the young beggar do it himself. The question is, shall I go and have it out with him, or shall I wash my hands of the whole business?'

While Hugh was standing doubting on the pavement, Philip and Fanny had entered the house. Neither of them had noticed, in the gloom of the winter afternoon, the tall figure that had remained motionless within a few yards of them as they hurried in out of the cold. The Colonel took two turns up and down the street, and considered of it. Finally he decided that he would not attempt to see Philip that day. It would hardly be fair, and it would certainly be most embarrassing, to walk straight into the presence of Mrs. Philip; moreover, a man

must have a little time to prepare himself for interviews of this disagreeable kind. No; he would come up to town another day, and try the Club again; and in the meantime surely he was not bound to tell Margaret what he had accidentally seen.

Now it so happened that a series of trivial accidents prevented Colonel Kenyon from carrying out his intention as speedily as he could have wished. To begin with, he was short of officers, having good-naturedly allowed too many of them to go away on leave. Then the General commanding the district took it into his head unexpectedly to hold a field-day. Then came three courts-martial within a few days of each other; and then occurred the vexatious case of Driver Jennings.

Driver Jennings, a mild-mannered man, having obtained permission to remain at Folkestone till midnight in order to soothe the last moments of an aged relative, returned to camp very drunk, at an advanced hour, and was seized with a notion that it might contribute to the general hilarity if he were to 'set the 'ole blooming place afire.' He accordingly collected many furze-faggots, piled them up as neatly as could have been expected from one in his condition, applied matches and paper to the bottom of the structure, and then proceeded to lie down upon the top of it himself, like an Indian widow. Here he would doubtless have perished miserably, had he not been dragged off by the heels, in a somewhat charred condition, by Colonel Kenyon himself, close to whose door this *auto-da-fé* had been kindled. A very pretty blaze was by this time lighting up the surrounding district; and although no great damage was done, the whole camp had turned out to extinguish the flames, and Driver Jennings was led away, weeping bitterly, to be locked up. The whole affair gave the good Colonel much annoyance; for the man had been his own servant, and between Jennings drunk and Jennings sober there was all the difference in the world. Moreover, Mrs. Jennings washed for him, and there were numerous little Jenningses. He therefore felt bound to remain upon the spot, and see what could be done in a quiet way towards mitigating the punishment due to so heinous an offence; and so, what with one thing and another, a fortnight slipped away before Colonel Kenyon again inquired for Philip at his Club. Once more he was disappointed of finding the object of his search; and this time the porter added that he had not seen Mr. Marescalchi for three or four days, and believed he must be out of town.

Hugh sighed, and walked straight off to Conduit Street,

inwardly hoping that the porter's conjecture might prove correct. Should it be so, he would have done all that could be required of him, and might write to Margaret explaining that he had failed to discover anything about the young man, good, bad, or indifferent.

However, the fat landlady who opened the door for him said, 'Yes; Mr. Marescalchi was at home.'

'And—er—Mrs. Marescalchi?' asked the Colonel, hesitatingly.

'Yes, sir; they're both in. But I don't know as they'd care for to see any one.'

The woman's eyes were red, and her tone was so lugubrious that Hugh naturally asked whether anything was the matter.

'Oh, dear me, yes, sir; they've had a sad misfortun', pore things. The dear little baby was took with convulsions day before yesterday, sir, and died in a few hours. Such a fine healthy child too!—but you never can tell how 'twill go with their first teeth; and 'tis the will of Heaven, which we must all submit to.'

'God bless my soul! I am very sorry to hear this,' said the tender-hearted Hugh, much concerned. 'It must be a terrible blow to—to the poor mother.'

He had had time to reflect, rather unjustly, that the calamity was not one which would be likely to afflict Philip very much.

'Ah, you may say that, sir. And to Mr. Marescalchi, too, poor gentleman!—he do take on terrible about it. Should I just mention as you was here, sir? It might cheer him up like to see a friend.'

'No, thank you—no,' answered Hugh, hurriedly. 'Under the circumstances it would be better not. No, I won't leave a card; I—it's of no consequence. Call again, you know,' and he retreated hastily, leaving the landlady with a strong suspicion in her mind that the 'millingtery-looking' gentleman was a dun in disguise.

It being now beyond a doubt that Philip Marescalchi was married, was it Colonel Kenyon's duty to write and inform Margaret of the fact? Readers may judge for themselves upon the point, which is one that seems to admit of a diversity of opinion. Hugh considered it carefully during a whole night and day, and then arrived at the conclusion that he might hold his peace. Rightly or wrongly, he had a very strong feeling that there was something underhand in surprising another

man's secrets; and he could not help hoping that, with a little judicious pressure, Philip might be induced to tell his own tale—which would be so much the better solution of the difficulty.

It was with this end in view that he penned a laboriously ambiguous missive, in which he told Margaret that he had not managed to see Philip, but that, from certain rumours which had come to his ears, he was inclined to think that there was ground for her misgivings, and that something had gone wrong. But she must not alarm herself, he added, nor imagine that things were worse than they were. It was quite possible that he might have formed a mistaken notion; and, in short, the best thing she could do was to write to the young man himself, and urge him to make a clean breast of it.

The perversity of women is at the root of nine-tenths of the worries which make this world such an uncomfortable place to live in. When Margaret read Hugh's well-meant letter, she said to herself that people had no business to make accusations, unless they were prepared to substantiate them; that she was not going to force herself upon Philip's confidence; that Hugh was a great deal too ready to suspect evil, and that she was sorry she had ever written to him about the matter. And for some time after this there was a marked coolness in the letters that were addressed to our patient Colonel at Shorncliffe.

CHAPTER XIX.

SIGNORA TOMMASINI.

THE old gentleman who lodged on the second floor in Conduit Street might go to bed as early as he pleased now, without any fear of his rest being disturbed by noise of laughter from below. Those merry evenings were gone and done with: they were as dead as the poor little dead baby who lay six feet deep in Kensal Green—as dead as the last century—as dead as yesterday. Life is nothing else than perpetual death and birth, gain and loss; 'that which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been.' Mirth and sorrow come and go, and are forgotten; and perhaps, if we would admit it, grief is the shortest-lived of all our passions.

But that is what no one can bear to acknowledge: and Philip and his wife were firmly persuaded that they would

never be merry together any more in the old fashion, never any more be tickled by the old jokes (which, to be sure, had not been intrinsically excellent), never recover the happiness, the thoughtlessness, the childishness, which had been so suddenly swept out of their lives. And it so chanced that they were right; though the causes of the present and future change were not what they supposed or could foresee. If the second-floor lodger had listened attentively in the silence of the night, his ear might have caught a faint echo of other and sadder sounds, arising from his neighbours' drawing-room, than those to which he had become accustomed. The landlady, who was not exempt from the failings of landladies in general, and saw no great sin in standing rather close to a shut door, told her husband that she could hear 'them pore Marescalchis crying and sobbing, night after night, as if their pore hearts 'd break,' and added that it broke her own heart to listen to them. Her heart, however, continued to perform its functions much as usual; as did that of one, at least, of the mourners, who stopped crying at the end of ten days or so. A man can't go on weeping for ever; and perhaps there are not a great many men in the world who would weep over a dead baby even for so long a time as ten days. Philip's temperament being what it was, sorrow was an emotion in which he could indulge just so long as there was something pleasurable in it, and no longer. When it grew painful, weary, monotonous, he began to seek for relief from it just as naturally as he would have looked about him for sticking-plaster if he had cut his finger. He picked up the thread of his daily life again where he had let it fall; and surely no reasonable person can blame him for doing what all reasonable persons urge their friends to do under such circumstances.

But poor Fanny was by no means reasonable at this time. Had she been in her ordinary condition of mind and body, she would have been the first to acknowledge that her husband's loss was not, and could not be, as great as hers; but she was out of health, her spirits were broken and her nerves shattered; and so it came to pass that community of misfortune, which often reunites estranged couples, had the melancholy effect of creating a breach between this husband and wife, who had hitherto been the best of friends. The original fault, it must be acknowledged, lay with Fanny. She made it a great grievance that Philip declined to wear mourning; although he pointed out to her how hazardous it would be for him to appear

in black without any ostensible reason for so doing. He ought not to have minded running that risk, she thought. She, who would have taken it as a matter of course if her husband had considered it prudent to pass her without recognition in the street; she, who had already, by reason of her ambiguous position, been forced to bear a hundred petty indignities which she never spoke of, could not forgive this imaginary slight to the memory of her dead child. In the same way, she did not complain, either in word or in thought, of being left alone all day; but it did seem to her a terrible and unnatural thing that her husband should be able to go to the Club, to resume his singing lessons, and to show himself at dinners and concerts just as usual. Philip, in short, ceased to be infallible in her eyes; and that was a pity for both their sakes.

If there was one thing that Mr. Marescalchi hated more than another, it was settled gloom. A violent outburst of grief he could understand and participate in; but a phase of affliction which expressed itself in gazing blankly for a whole afternoon at a baby's frock or a pair of tiny shoes was altogether beyond the range of his sympathies. It was by virtue of her constant cheerfulness that Fanny had maintained her hold upon him so long as she had done. Now that she was no longer cheerful, no longer cared to hear about the outer world, no longer laughed with him, and often forgot to flatter him, she became simply a dull and rather vulgar little woman, whose good looks were fading away daily, and who had absolutely no intellectual charms to supply their place. He did not actually say this to himself; but he felt it; and he felt, too, as he had never done before, what a terrible mistake he had made in marrying beneath him. He shuddered when he thought of the future which he had laid up for himself; for, careless as he was, he did sometimes think of this now. He could not help wondering how it would have been if he had done as he believed he might have done, and engaged himself to Nellie Brune. Margaret had been writing to him a good deal about her lately, mentioning with transparent artfulness that the girl seemed depressed and unlike herself. The inference was obvious, and it was not displeasing to Philip. Depressed?—well, no doubt she might be a little depressed; but it would be in a modified and interesting fashion, he thought. Nellie was not the girl to mope, like some others whom he knew of. Wasn't it essentially plebeian to mope? Well-bred people control their emotions, keep their troubles under lock and key, and do not

obtrude them upon the world, which naturally cares not a straw whether they have troubles or not; and Nellie was unquestionably well-bred. He had certainly been very much in love with her at one time; perhaps he had never really been in love with any one else. Now that he came to think of it, he was almost sure that he never had been. Supposing—there was no harm in supposing impossibilities—that he had been engaged to her now, how different everything would have been! What an interest she would have taken in his prospects! how she would have stirred him up to work! No one knew so well as Nellie did the way to apply that gentle goad of which his languid energies stood in need. And then, when the victory was won, and money was pouring in by the sackful on the gifted *primo tenore*, what a wife she would have made!—a wife of whom any man might be proud. 'Whoever Nellie's future husband may be, he'll be a deuced lucky chap, and I congratulate him in advance,' says Philip to himself, with much magnanimity.

He used to turn these things over in his mind as he sat by the domestic hearth, with Fanny staring at the baby's shoes opposite to him. When he was away from home he had other things to think about, and probably forgot that there were such persons as Mrs. Marescalchi and Miss Brune in existence. This outer life of his continued to be a gay one; though it also had its own troubles. The result of high play with Lord Salford and other young men of his calibre was what it generally is when earthen vessels essay to whirl down stream in company with brazen ones. Philip was not particularly unlucky; but when he won he spent his winnings, and when he lost there was apt to be a little difficulty about paying. He was not, of course, called upon to hand over the amount due in any hurry; but Lord Salford, who always paid punctually himself, was not so pleasant as he might have been to those who remained in his debt, and was given to reminding them of how matters stood in a businesslike way which Philip, for one, did not relish. Salford had a habit of pulling out a note-book every evening, as he sat down to the card-table, and beginning with: 'Now let's see, you haven't paid me for three weeks. I make out that I'm so and so to the good. Just look and see if that's right, will you?'

'Oh, it's all right, old fellow; deal away,' Philip would answer hastily; but Lord Salford would not be put off like that.

'Ah, but you look and see if you make it the same as I do,' he would persist. 'I like to start square; because sometimes

—don't you know?—fellows will tell you they don't remember things—don't you know?'

Philip used to long to kick Lord Salford when he made insinuations of this kind; but he couldn't afford to kick his friend, as perhaps that amiable nobleman was aware; so he had to grin and bear it. Considering how high the stakes were, he pulled through better than might have been expected. Fortune favoured him sometimes; and Margaret sent him another cheque—that being the most practical answer that she could discover to Colonel Kenyon's warning letter—which tided him over a bad week. And then, from time to time, he was favoured with a loan by a friend of whom a few words must now be said.

Signora Tommasini had been for so many years known to the public under that designation that her friends had long ago given up addressing her as Mrs. Thompson. It must be presumed that there had been a Mr. Thompson once upon a time; but no one had ever seen him or recollected to have heard his widow mention his name; nor perhaps was it generally remembered that she was an Englishwoman by birth; for in her wanderings about the world she had picked up many foreign customs and languages, and was indeed accustomed to say of herself that she was a cosmopolitan. Her great triumphs lay in the past; though she had not yet ceased to gather laurels, nor (which may have been a more important matter in her eyes) to receive handsome salaries. She had once had the finest contralto voice, and had been one of the handsomest women in Europe; and, though so much as this could no longer be said for her, there were people who still maintained that she was unapproachable in the *Huguenots*; while as for her face, there were no more wrinkles discernible upon it, when seen from beyond the footlights, than there had been twenty years before. The portliness of her person rendered her, it is true, a somewhat incredible Africaine to the artistic eye, but on the other hand she made a very imposing Azucena. In private life she was a most good-natured, lively, and agreeable person, fond of amusement, fond of society, given to a profuse style of living, and careless of her money, after the traditional fashion of great singers. Many a struggling colleague had had reason to be grateful for her generosity, and no one had ever accused her of jealousy of her younger rivals, towards whom she was accustomed to bear herself with a great deal of kindly sympathy. It would hardly, however, have been in human nature that she should take quite so hearty an interest in the

rising young women as in the rising young men, and it was as a member of the latter class that she had first noticed Philip and sought his acquaintance. The acquaintance, once made, ripened quickly into a warm friendship; insomuch that Philip, who loved feminine admiration more than anything in the world, had been encouraged to let Signora Tommasini into the great secret that he was studying for the stage. After this he had proceeded, as time went on, to tell her of other things—of everything, indeed, that there was to tell about himself, barring the trifling circumstance of his marriage—and had found her an exceedingly cheery and comforting confidante.

'She is in lofe with you, that fat woman,' Herr Steinberger would growl scornfully. 'One of these fine days she will marry you; and then you will work no more. No! you will live upon her money for a few years, and then her voice will go, and then you will both of you *starf* in a garret. Or perhaps she will grind an organ in the streets, and you will dance, instead of the monkey—ho! ho!'

There was a Teutonic heaviness about Steinberger's pleasantries which might have irritated some people; but Philip took them very good-humouredly. He rather prided himself upon being able to stand chaff; and, for that matter, Herr Steinberger was not the only one who rallied him upon the stout Signora's evident partiality, and predicted that she would either lead him to the altar or bring an action for breach of promise against him before all was over. He himself partly believed that she had a weakness for his handsome person, and used sometimes to laugh with Fanny over the extravagant compliments which she was in the habit of paying him, and which he rather unkindly repeated. After the baby's death, when things were so sad and dreary at home, he had solaced himself with a good deal of the Signora's society, and had even been led, as we have seen, to give her so true a token of friendship as to dip into her purse upon occasion.

Signora Tommasini was at this time fulfilling an engagement at Her Majesty's Theatre, where a winter opera-season was going on, and was living in a gorgeous suite of apartments on the first floor of a fashionable hotel. In these Philip spent much of his spare time, being sometimes alone with their occupant, who had graciously given him to understand that he was at liberty to knock at her door at any hour of the day, and sometimes one among a crowd of free-and-easy visitors. Philip availed himself liberally of the permission accorded to him; for the

Bohemian company which he encountered in this way diverted him immensely, and he had a sincere liking for his open-handed and impulsive hostess. In his heart he thought her rather an old fool; but then he thought that of so many people whom he liked.

One evening towards the end of January, Philip, having, for a wonder, no engagement, went to the Opera to see Signora Tommasini in the *Favorita*. He made his entrance between the first and second acts, and recognised many acquaintances in different parts of the house, though none happened to be seated within speaking distance of his stall. This he was not sorry for; for he was in a melancholy vein and did not feel disposed for social intercourse. He sat down, and began wondering what would become of him if a run of ill-luck which had pursued him for more than a week should continue much longer. He already owed a large sum to Lord Salford—a sum so large that it made him sick to think of it, and that he was almost inclined to resolve upon abandoning play altogether, when once he should have pulled back his losses. Unfortunately, this process of 'pulling back' was sure to be a slow and precarious one, and it might at any time be checked if Lord Salford should suddenly discover—as he was by no means unlikely to do—that he had had enough of London, and was going in for hunting by way of a change. That, Philip was very much afraid, would mean settling, or at all events a confession of inability to settle. Contemplated from any point of view, the outlook was not a cheerful one, and he was growing very mournful over it when the sound of his own name, pronounced close to his ear, recalled him to the present.

'Marescalchi—Philip Marescalchi, the man who acts, don't you know? They say he's going to marry the old girl.'

'Marry the Tommasini! Well, there's no accounting for tastes.'

'My good fellow, it ain't a question of taste. It's neck or nothing with him.'

'Oh, I see—wants the coin, eh? Who is Marescalchi, by the way? Know him at all?'

Philip glanced over his shoulder, and saw in the row of stalls behind him two specimens of the modern type of juvenile precocity, whose smooth, vacuous moon-faces, surmounting very stiff collars, were entirely unknown to him. He was rather amused, therefore, when the first speaker answered calmly:—

'Know him? oh, yes, I know him. He's the sort of man

who goes everywhere now. His father was—let me see; what was his father? Something in the City, I think. Left him thirty thousand pounds, which he made precious short work of. Hasn't a penny now.'

'What's he living on, then?'

'Oh, if you come to that, what are half the fellows one knows living on? He does a little bit of Mister Jew, I expect; but that sort of game can't be carried on long when you're nobody's heir, you know. Owes a good lot too, I believe, here and there. Salford has cleaned him out of something like ten thousand, and can't get him to pay up. I suppose Marescalchi thinks it's about time for him to marry his grandmother—no fool either!'

'Well, I can't understand a fellow selling himself like that,' says the second youth, who was perhaps a little less sophisticated than his companion.

'Oh, it don't do to be too particular. Tommy isn't half a bad sort, and she was a deuced good-looking woman in her time,' replies the other man of the world, who could hardly have been out of the nursery at the epoch alluded to. 'Got any amount of the needful, too. Careful old soul, old Tommy; been saving up these twenty years,' he continues. 'Gad! I'd marry her myself if she'd ask me.'

The rising of the curtain put an end to this dialogue, the greater part of which had caused Philip more amusement than annoyance. He had no objection to the innocent gossip of these young gentlemen; only that allusion to his losses at play had not been agreeable to him. 'What a cad Salford is,' he thought angrily. 'If only I can get it back to even money, I'll never sit down to a card-table with him again as long as I live.'

But it was principally in order to banish Lord Salford and cards from his recollection that Philip had betaken himself to the theatre; and feats of that kind were generally well within his capacity. This evening he achieved his object with the greater ease because he had a genuine appreciation of musical talent, and because Signora Tommasini happened to be singing her very best. Her rendering of *O mio Fernando* was worthy of her most palmy days, and by no one in the audience was she applauded more rapturously than by her young friend in the stalls, upon whom she had already contrived to bestow a gracious smile of recognition. The English public, which likes artists of well-established renown, and is kinder to favourites

who have grown old in its service than any other public in the world, never failed to accord a warm welcome to Signora Tommasini; and she was greeted with prolonged clapping from all parts of the house when she came before the curtain, at the end of the act, to bow her acknowledgments.

A lady to whose box Philip paid a passing visit handed him her bouquet, and begged him to throw it to 'that dear Tommasini;' adding, with a meaning smile, 'She will value it the more coming from your hand.'

'What, you too?' cried Philip. 'I have just overheard an individual who says he knows me intimately—though I never to my knowledge set eyes on him before—telling his brother-booby that I am about to espouse my dear old fat friend; and now you are going to put me to open ridicule by making me cast these flowers at her feet in the presence of a whole theatre-full of people.'

'I won't ask you to go through such an ordeal as that,' said the lady, laughing. 'Give me them back.'

'Oh, *I* don't mind,' answered Philip; 'I'm not shy.' And accordingly he did throw the bouquet at the end of the final duet.

It was quite true that he was not shy: yet he might perhaps have stayed his hand if he had anticipated the little scene that was to follow. He had intended that his bouquet should be launched just before the fall of the curtain; but in this he had calculated without the audience, which loudly demanded an encore; and when the Signora advanced, all smiles, to gratify this legitimate wish, what must she needs do but select Philip's flowers from among a host of others, and press them against that part of her ample bodice beneath which her heart might be supposed to be fluttering, while she threw a killing glance at the donor. The poor lady probably meant no harm by this gesture, which she must have indulged in many hundreds of times before; but under all the circumstances it was a trifle embarrassing. Philip was aware that during the succeeding few minutes he was being gazed at by a great number of inquisitive eyes, and he was not sorry when it was all over. He had, however, the gratification of turning round and facing the well-informed youth behind him, who had by this time evidently discovered the identity of his neighbour, and who looked exceedingly hot and uncomfortable.

Philip sauntered out, whistling 'O mio Fernando' softly, and presently went behind the scenes to congratulate Signora Tom-

masini on her triumph. After a time she came out of her dressing-room, and gave a cry of satisfaction on recognising him.

'Ah! this is lucky,' she exclaimed; 'you are just the person whom I wanted to meet. Let me drive you home, and we can talk as we go. I saw Lord —— to-day, and he was asking about you, and said he wished to make your acquaintance. You know he is a man who can do a great deal for people whom he fancies. He seemed to have an idea that you thought of the stage; I didn't tell him; but he said he had heard a rumour of it. He asked why you did not go to Italy. Why don't you go to Italy? I shall be singing at Naples and Florence in the spring; and if you were there at the same time I could introduce you to all the musical people, and to your native country into the bargain. You ought to see Florence in May; there is no city like it in the world. Were you pleased with me to-night? I suppose you were, or you would not have thrown me those beautiful flowers. I have brought them away with me, you see.'

Signora Tommasini's idea of conversation was of rather a one-sided kind. Her ideas moved even more quickly than her tongue, and she was for ever pouring out a stream of queries, without ever expecting any answer, or listening to it if she obtained one. However, just as she was stepping into her brougham, she put one question which demanded a prompt and definite reply.

'By-the-bye,' said she, suddenly, 'where do you live? You have never mentioned your address to me.'

'And don't mean to mention it now,' thought Philip. He said aloud, 'Oh, I'm not going home yet. You might set me down at the club, if it wouldn't be taking you too much out of your way.'

'How mysterious you are!' cried the Signora, reproachfully, as they drove off; 'you never tell me anything.'

'Never tell you anything! Haven't I laid bare the innermost secrets of my soul to you? Haven't I confessed to you what I have never breathed a word of to any one else—about my losses at cards, I mean?'

'Ah, those cards!' sighed the Signora, falling into the trap, and forgetting all about her immediate subject of complaint; 'how I wish I could induce you to give them up! You are going to your club to play now, I suppose?'

'Only for half an hour or so before I go to bed. According

to all the rules of chance, my luck ought to be on the turn now, and I can't afford to lose time.'

'I wish you would amuse youself in some other way; I wish you would not play with Lord Salford. He is not a nice young man, that. I hear more than you might suppose, and I hear that he says unpleasant things about you.'

'I know he does, confound him!' cried Philip; 'but what can I do? It's a case of pay or play; and as I can't pay, why——'

'You think you must keep on playing—I know! And when you have won your money back, if you ever do, he will want his revenge; and so it will go on until one of you is ruined. And it is not very difficult to guess which one that is likely to be. I am an impertinent old woman, am I not?'

'You are not in the least impertinent, and you are certainly not old,' said Philip.

'Don't talk nonsense,' returned the Signora, not ill-pleased. 'Anybody can see that I am old and fat; but I am glad you don't think me impertinent. I want to be your friend——'

'You have shown yourself to be so,' put in Philip.

'And friends must be allowed to claim some privileges. Now, will you make me a promise?'

'A hundred, if you like.'

'One will be enough for the present; only you must not break it. Will you promise that, if you should find yourself in sudden need of a sum of ready money, you will come to me? I am one of those people who always have lots of ready money—more than they know what to do with.'

'My dear Signora Tommasini——'

'My dear Mr. Marescalchi, if we are to be friends, one of us may very well accept a loan of a few hundred pounds from the other. You will owe the money to me instead of to Lord Salford, that is all. You will pay me as soon as you would have paid him; and in the meantime I shall not go about London telling everybody that you are in my debt. Here is your club. Good night; and don't forget our bargain.'

And the Signora, who had a powerful arm, pushed Philip out on to the pavement, and slammed the door of the brougham before he could utter a word of answer or protest.

He mounted the steps, half touched, half amused, saying to himself that women were strange creatures, and entered the club, where he found Salford and some others, as he had expected to do. They sat down to play at once; and if Philip,

with whom things went extraordinarily well, had gone home at the end of the first hour, he would have wiped off nearly the half of his debt. But he was unwilling to desert his luck, and stayed on for another hour, thereby losing all that he had gained. This would not do at all; so he remained yet another hour, and finally rose up the winner of a small sum.

'I hope, after this, you won't go on howling about your bad luck, Marescalchi,' growled Lord Salford, as they parted at the corner of St. James's Street. 'Never saw a fellow hold such cards in my life!'

'Good night,' answered Philip, curtly, too sick at heart and disgusted with the whole business to resent the very unfounded accusation brought against him.

He hurried home, and, letting himself in with his latch-key, stole upstairs, oppressed by that guilty sensation which even the least henpecked of husbands must experience in coming in between three and four o'clock in the morning. A thread of light proceeding from beneath the drawing-room door did not serve to diminish this feeling of compunction. He turned the handle softly, and peeped in. Fanny was lying in her arm-chair beside the empty fireplace, fast asleep. Her head had fallen back a little, and Philip could not help noticing how sharp the outline of her chin, which had once been so prettily rounded, had become. There were lines, too, about the corners of her mouth, and she moved uneasily in her sleep, uttering, every now and then, a low moan which went straight to the listener's heart. He drew nearer, and stood looking down upon her. One of her hands was hanging down by her side; the book which it had held had fallen from it on to the floor. It was not Lindley Murray nor the 'History of England,' as of yore; it was a child's picture-book, which Philip remembered to have bought, some weeks before, in the Burlington Arcade. He picked it up, and put it on the table beside a small heap of broken toys, a photograph, and a curl of fluffy golden hair that were lying there; then he laid his hand gently on the sleeper's shoulder.

She woke with a violent start, and, knitting her brows, looked about her for a moment in a scared, puzzled way. 'Oh, Philip, is that you?' she said at last. 'You were so long in coming, and I fell asleep; and now the fire has gone out, and you will be cold. I am so sorry!'

Then she caught sight of the little collection of treasures on the table, and swept them hastily into her work-basket. It

was an unlucky movement. Philip, who, a minute before, would have been ready to drop on his knees before this poor little neglected wife of his and implore her forgiveness, understood the meaning of it—the withdrawal of confidence and tacit reproach that it implied—and was offended.

'I am not cold,' he answered; 'but you are, and no wonder! You really must give up this ridiculous habit of sitting up till I come in. It is not often that I am so late as this; but it would be impossible for me to promise to be at home at any given hour; and I can't have you making yourself ill by doing without your proper amount of sleep. Don't do it again, there's a good girl.'

'Very well, Philip,' answered Fanny, meekly.

'And look here, Fan,' continued Philip, feeling that he was behaving rather badly, and therefore the more out of humour, 'I do think you might try to stop grieving over what can't be helped. If you mourn from now to the last day of your life, you won't bring the poor little man back: and what good does it do you to make others uncomfortable and wretched?'

Fanny shook her head and made no answer. The tears were running down her cheeks; but she had turned her back to Philip, and was staring at the black cinders in the grate; so he did not see this, and thought her obstinate.

'Oh, I'm awfully hard-hearted, of course,' he cried impatiently. 'I ought not to leave you alone all night and all day; but I can't help it. My good girl, don't you see that you simply drive me away? I should go mad if I were to sit here by the hour together without daring to open my lips.'

Fanny burst suddenly into loud weeping. 'Oh, I wish I was dead too!' she exclaimed. 'I wish I was!—I wish I was! You don't care for me any more—I have known it for a long time, and I don't blame you—what is there to care for in me? Only I wish I could go to baby. I feel as if he *must* want me; and nobody wants me here. Perhaps, if I prayed very hard to die, God would let me go.'

'Hush, hush, my dear!' said Philip, passing his arm round her waist and drawing her head down on to his shoulder; 'you mustn't talk like that, and you must never say again that I don't care for you; because it isn't true. I spoke crossly to you just now, and I am sorry I did; but you don't know how many things I have to worry me. Come, now, don't cry any more, Fan, and let us kiss and be friends.'

Fanny allowed herself to be soothed and comforted, like the child that she was; and Philip went on.

'You are upset and off your balance altogether, you poor little soul. You ought to get away and have a complete change. You would like that, wouldn't you? You would like to get out of this dismal, choking town into the fresh air?'

Fanny drew in her breath. 'Oh, how I should like it! But we can't go, can we, Philip?'

'Why not? I am sick of London myself, and I should ask for nothing better than to shake off the dust from my shoes against it, and depart—at all events, for a time. Signora Tommasini was mentioning Italy to me to-day; do you remember how we used to talk of going to live in Italy? What should you to say to Florence, now? Do you think a fine warm sun and blue skies would bring the roses back into your face?'

A pink flush had already mounted into Fanny's cheeks, and her eyes had grown brighter. 'I don't think I should mind where we went,' said she; 'any place would suit me that suited you, dear—any place except this dreadful London. But Italy!—oh, it would be like heaven! And perhaps, if we were there—perhaps——'

'Well?'

'Perhaps—don't be angry, Philip,' murmured Fanny, glancing up into his face as she twisted one of his coat buttons nervously between her thin fingers; 'but I was thinking that perhaps, if we were there, you wouldn't have such a great many friends, and then——'

'And then I shouldn't always leave you to your own devices, as I have done lately. Ah, Fan, I have been a selfish brute, I'm afraid; but I'm going to turn over a new leaf now, and we'll forget all our troubles, and go and live in Arcadia—you never heard of Arcadia, did you? Well, my dear, it's the place where the Dresden china shepherds and shepherdesses live when they're at home—a delightful country, where it is always spring, and the sheep trot about with broad blue neck-ties on, and everybody goes to bed at sunset, and love is eternal, and latch-keys are unknown. You won't discover it in your atlas; but I dare say you and I may manage to find our way there if we try.'

Philip went on talking this pleasant nonsense until he succeeded in making his wife laugh for the first time since her great sorrow. He was perfectly sincere at the moment, and

was greatly enamoured of the notion of escape from all the vexations and vanities of a cold-hearted metropolis; but of course, when he thought it over in the prosaic daylight, he perceived that nothing short of a miracle could render such escape possible. Who was to defray the cost of a journey to Florence? Who was to pay the tradesmen's bills? Above all, who was to pay Lord Salford?

So, although he continued to talk in a vague way about Italy, no preparations for immediate departure were made: but he did so far redeem his promise of turning over a new leaf that for ten successive days he contrived to reach home before midnight, and he was so kind and thoughtful and like his old self that, during those ten days, poor Fanny lived in a fool's paradise. It was a sort of St. Martin's summer—the last gleam of pale sunshine that was to fall upon a life which had hardly had its fair share of brightness.

CHAPTER XX.

FREE.

PHILIP MARESCALCHI, like some other adventurers who have thrown the dice with Fortune for more important stakes, had a vague confidence in his star. He had so often been upon the verge of a catastrophe, and had been preserved just in the nick of time by some lucky accident or other, that he more than half believed that chance must have a favour for him, and that in his case the worst would never really come to the worst. In luck, and out of luck—that was his theory of life; and the one state must in the long run follow the other, just as the red must eventually follow the black at roulette. But now for a long time his star had been under a cloud; one stroke of bad luck had been succeeded by another, and at last the dreaded climax came.

'Look here, Marescalchi,' said Lord Salford, meeting him one morning at the club and taking him aside; 'this sort of thing's utter rot. You haven't paid me for Lord knows how long, and all the time I've got to pay other fellows, don't you see? If you can't settle, say so, and then I shall know where I am.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Philip; 'of course I

shall settle. I haven't got the money in my waistcoat pocket. One hardly expects to be dunned in this way.'

'I ain't dunning you,' returned the other. 'All I know is that when I lose I have to pay; and I don't see why other fellows shouldn't do the same. Of course, if they *can't* pay, they can't. Only when that's so, I think it ought to be known.'

'All right; you shall have your money in two or three days,' answered Philip, desperately. 'You don't expect me to sit down and write you a cheque straight off the reel, I suppose.'

Lord Salford smiled in a peculiarly exasperating manner, stuck his hands in his pockets, looked up at the ceiling, and whistled a tune. 'Let's see,' he said presently; 'this is Wednesday. Shall we say Saturday morning?'

Philip nodded, left the club, and walked straight off to Signora Tommasini's hotel with the resolute step of a man who has made up his mind to have a tooth out, and feels that the sooner the operation is over the better. There were, as he plainly perceived, but two alternatives open to him: he must apply either to the Signora or to Margaret; and he chose the course which seemed likely to be productive of the least misery to himself.

The Signora was at home and alone; and in the course of about an hour Philip had made his predicament fully known to her. He did not at once state the object of his visit, nor disclose the whole amount of the sum which he would have to raise by hook or by crook before the Saturday morning, but allowed these details to be drawn from him little by little, bewailing himself bitterly the while, calling himself by many opprobrious epithets, and vowing that he would have nothing to do with Lord Salford for the future. When he had quite done, the Signora, who had listened to some parts of his recital with a rather grave face, thanked him for having fulfilled his part of what she was pleased to call their agreement.

'I told you I would help you,' said she, 'and I will, with all my heart. Only, to be candid, I did not think you would want quite so much at one time. I don't say that to blame you, or because I shall have any difficulty in providing you with what you require, but because it will be necessary for me to see my stockbroker before I can give it to you.'

Philip groaned dismally.

'Now, now, now,' said the Signora, 'you are not to make a fuss about it. What is money meant for except to be spent?

And surely I, who have not a near relation in the world, may invest my money as I think fit. But for all that, I am a woman of business; I know what things are worth, and I mean to have an equivalent for my loan.'

Philip looked interrogatively at her broad, good-tempered face.

'You say,' she continued, 'that you don't intend to play cards with Lord Salford any more. Now you are in my power, and I shall make you go further than that. You must give up play altogether.'

'My dear Signora Tommasini, you may impose any conditions you please upon me except that. If I give up cards, how in the world am I to repay you your loan?'

'You will repay me, with interest at the rate of five per cent., when you are receiving as large a salary as I am now. I look upon your voice as excellent security; but I am not going to allow you to encumber the property any further. See what a woman of business I am! There is no occasion for you to thank me,' she added, as Philip began, rather shamefacedly, to stammer out some expressions of gratitude. 'It is true that I am doing you a small service; but I am giving myself a great deal of pleasure at the same time.'

This singular woman was radiant. Nothing could be more obvious than that she was about to make a free gift of a sum which very few people in England could part with and not miss; but we mortals are so constituted that even the most clear-sighted of us can easily be brought to shut our eyes to humiliating facts, and it is by no means certain that Philip did not leave the house with an impression that the Signora knew what she was about, and was placing her money, if not advantageously, at least securely.

Two days later he called upon her again, by her request, and found her waiting for him, with a cheque for four figures, duly written out and signed, before her.

'It's all wrong, you know; I have no business to be taking this from you,' said he, at the same time allowing the slip of paper to be thrust into his hand.

'Give it back to me, then,' she answered calmly. 'Perhaps, after all, I should do better to invest it in the Funds.'

'I am quite sure you would,' said Philip, with a long face; and he held out the cheque, which, however, the Signora did not take.

'No,' she said; 'it would not be worth while to trouble

my broker again. As you have got it, you may as well keep it.'

'And suppose I were to drop down dead to-morrow?'

'I should still have enough to buy mourning with. And, besides, I hope I should be too sorry for the loss of my friend to think much about the loss of my money.'

Philip sighed deeply, but pocketed the cheque. 'I don't know how or why it is,' he remarked meditatively, 'but women have been awfully good to me all my life. I believe you are superior to us men in every way. You are certainly more generous than we are.'

'And less just,' said the Signora, with a laugh and a shrug of her fat shoulders. 'Bah! we are generous to-day and shabby to-morrow. Take care how you let a woman get you into her power. That is good advice; but it is thrown away upon you, for you will always be in the power of some woman, my friend.'

'You told me the other day that I was in yours,' observed Philip, smiling.

'So you were, for the moment; and did I not take advantage of my opportunity? But I am what they call *bonne diablesse*; I wish you may never fall into worse hands than mine.'

'So do I, with all my heart,' answered he, fervently.

Lord Salford, to his evident surprise, was paid in full on the following morning; and, as Philip descended the steps of the club, after discharging his debt, he promised himself that he would hardly take the value of his subscription out of that establishment for the future. Henceforth his evenings should be spent at home. From card-playing he was debarred by a promise which he was determined to keep; and he resolved also to renounce evening parties, or at all events only to attend such of them as it would be really wrong, in view of ultimate professional advancement, to neglect.

'I see the woods of Arcadia looming in the distance, Fan,' he said, the same night, to his wife, after dining contentedly with her off burnt mutton chops and rice pudding; and she smiled faintly, and answered, 'Do you, dear?' in that patient, pathetic way which had lately become habitual to her.

Perhaps it was the removal of the pressure of debt from his mind, perhaps it was his increased leisure, that enabled Philip to notice something which he might have noticed long before, and which now began to cause him serious anxiety. Fanny

was growing paler and thinner every day; she had no appetite, slept very little, and, in spite of all efforts to appear cheerful, there was a listlessness in her every movement which would have told its own tale to a less observant spectator than her husband. He, now that his tardy apprehensions had been roused, was even more alarmed than the occasion seemed to warrant, and would not listen to her assurances that there was nothing the matter with her. He insisted upon calling in the doctor, who, after a somewhat lengthy examination, had no very satisfactory report to give of his patient.

'There is not any definite disease,' he said; 'but I should be wrong if I did not warn you that there may be something definite before long. In cases of this kind drugs are of very little service. I have, however——' and here the usual two half-sheets of note-paper scrawled over with hieroglyphics were handed to Philip. 'What I should advise,' continued the doctor, 'would be complete change of air and scene. You should take Mrs. Marescalchi down to the sea-side, or better still, to the Continent. Italy, for instance, would be a good country to go to at this season of the year. In her present state a chill might be a serious matter.' And so forth, and so forth.

As soon as the doctor was gone Philip went straight into his dressing-room, locked himself in, and gave way to despair. At that moment he felt firmly persuaded that Fanny was going to die, and the bare idea of such a catastrophe overwhelmed him with grief and remorse. There had not been much sympathy between them of late, and it was not so very long since he had been lamenting his folly in having ever married her; but for these very reasons his pain was the greater now. He was in no mood for self-scrutiny; but if he had got to the bottom of his emotion he would have found that it was not so much the dread of his possible loss as intense pity for Fanny herself that was bringing the tears into his eyes. Death was to Philip the greatest of all possible ills, the one misfortune for which no consolation could be found, the end of everything. If he had been offered his choice between death and penal servitude for life, he would have accepted the latter alternative without an instant's hesitation, and immediately begun calculating his chances of getting out on a ticket-of-leave. And if, indeed, this terrible thing should happen to poor Fanny, would it not be in a great measure his fault? What evil spirit had prompted that doctor to mention the word 'Italy'? Italy! as if

a journey to Italy were as simple a thing as taking a hansom to Oxford Street! What inhuman brutes doctors were! 'Idiot that I was!' thought Philip; 'why, while I was about it, didn't I ask the Signora for another thousand pounds, instead of telling her the exact amount that I had to hand over to Salford the next day? I can't go back to her and ask her for more now. No, hang it all, I *can't* do that. And my poor little Fan must die because I haven't the money to pay for railway tickets! There's Meg—but she sent me money only a week ago; and what excuse could I make?'

At this moment there came a tap at the door, and presently Fanny herself entered.

'Philip,' said she, quietly, 'the doctor thinks I shall never get any better, doesn't he?'

'Never get any better!' cried Philip, immediately assuming an air of great cheerfulness; 'my dear child, what rubbish have you been taking into your head? He says there is nothing in the world the matter with you.'

Fanny smiled. 'You need not be afraid of telling me,' she said; 'I don't mind.'

'I do, though, whether you do or not—at least, I *should* mind. But I give you my word of honour that he assured me you had no disease at all, and one can't die without a disease, can one? What he said was that you were out of sorts, and wanted a change. He spoke of the sea-side, or—well, he suggested Italy, oddly enough.'

And then Philip broke out into lamentations. Italy, he said, was out of the question. He had not liked to say so before, but he had been thinking it over, and he had found that Italy would be altogether beyond them. He had been careless and extravagant, and there were a number of small bills hanging over him which he could not well leave the country without paying. And, worse than that, the money-box was pretty nearly empty. He was going on to express much self-reproach; but Fanny interrupted him, and relieved him greatly by saying that she, too, had been thinking things over, and that she had come to the conclusion that she would not at all care about Italy just now. There was no pleasure in travelling when one was out of health, and she dreaded the fatigue; and, in short, a week at Margate, if that could be managed, would suit her a great deal better.

Philip had not contrived to deceive her, but she was perfectly successful in deceiving him. Her first glimpse of his

face, as she came into the room, had shown her his distress, and it was not to be thought of that he should distress himself on her account. She therefore addressed herself to the task of convincing him that her illness was an imaginary one; and the task was easy enough, seeing that he asked nothing better than to be convinced. Perhaps he suspected that the activity which she displayed during the next few days was the result of an effort, that her loquacity was scarcely natural, and her laughter a little forced; but what then? If she was struggling to free herself from the state of lethargy into which she had sunk since the child's death, so much the better. Was not her sickness, after all, rather one of the mind than of the body? Women were like that; their spirits always told upon their health. It did not take Philip long to reach the point of laughing at his first fears.

In the course of the following week he took Fanny down to Margate according to her wish, and the effect of the change was so speedily beneficial as to be almost startling. Margate is hardly what most people would consider a cheerful spot in the winter-time; but the clear air, the broad stretch of sea, and the sight of the breakers tumbling in were full of life and refreshment to a country-bred girl, who for twelve mortal months and more had had nothing but bricks and mortar to look at, and only the smoke-laden atmosphere of London to breathe. It chanced, also, that there came in this month of February, as there often does, a fortnight of mild, spring-like weather, so that it was even possible to sit out on the sands in the sunshine, and if the bathing-machines had not been hauled up out of sight, it would not have seemed an absolutely outrageous thing to contemplate a dip in salt water. There was now no longer any occasion for Fanny to make believe. The fresh breezes brought the colour into her pale cheeks; she felt her strength returning day by day; she was able to take long walks with the best and kindest of husbands; insensibly she was becoming reconciled to her great sorrow; she, too, began to see glimpses of the woods of Arcady. Doctors are not always reassured by these very rapid improvements, which have something in common with the quick rise of the barometer after a fall; but neither Philip nor Fanny knew much about doctors and disease, and were as anxious as everybody is to keep such subjects out of their minds.

It was a very pleasant and a very successful holiday, as far as it went; but it did not go very far, nor could it last very

long. Lack of money; the remonstrances of Steinberger, who could not for the life of him understand what his pupil wanted to do at Margate at that season of the year; a sudden shift of the wind into the north-east, with flying grey clouds and cat's-ice in every puddle—all these things combined to sound the recall, and to warn the wanderers that London, though it might have been forgotten, had not moved from its position, and was waiting to receive them back into its grimy embrace. That bleak north-easter accompanied them on their homeward journey; it made its way through the ill-fitting windows of the railway carriage, chilling the travellers to their bones; and it was the means of providing poor Fanny with a very definite complaint in the form of a sharp attack of bronchitis.

For a short time after their return to Conduit Street it seemed as if this attack was not likely to prove a serious one; but afterwards the symptoms became more acute, and it was soon evident that the patient was in for a long and perhaps dangerous illness.

'Ah,' said the doctor, who had again been summoned, 'you ought to have taken my advice, Mr. Marescalchi; you ought to have left England. I warned you, as you may remember, of the risk of these spring winds.'

'It is a pity that you did not insist more upon the point,' said poor Philip, meekly; 'but there is not much good in talking about that now. The question is, will she get over it?'

'Now, my dear sir,' remonstrated the doctor, who was certainly a very irritating person, 'what an unreasonable thing that is to ask! How can I possibly tell what turn an illness may take? Your wife's age should be in her favour; on the other hand, her state of debility is such that—that, in short, we must consider it an anxious case. Careful nursing may do much for her.'

This latter need was supplied by the advent of Aunt Keziah, who now once more took up her abode under Philip's roof; and it must be said for Aunt Keziah that she came out strong under the circumstances, sitting up all night, taking but a few hours' rest during the day, and absolutely refusing all professional assistance.

'None of your 'orspital nurses for me,' cried she, with the inveterate prejudice of her class. 'No stranger shall come near my sister's child so long as I have the use of my arms and legs, and that's flat. So you'll be so good as not mention the subjeck again to me, Philip, if you please.'

Philip no longer objected to be addressed by his Christian name. He was a great deal too miserable to pay attention to such trifles, and Mrs. Webber herself was moved to pity a man whom she secretly despised by the sight of his utterly woebegone aspect. He was not allowed to be much in the sick-room, where in truth he did no good and only got in the way; he could not bring himself to go out, and probably the hours that he spent in these days, standing at the window of the dingy drawing-room in Conduit Street and staring blankly at the passers-by and the cabmen on the stand below, were the most wretched of his whole life. He told Mrs. Webber that he only wished he were dying too; and though she did not believe him, she was sorry for him, and she confided to the landlady, with whom she had struck up a friendship by the bedside of the sufferer, that she would say for that 'nevvy' of hers that he had a feeling heart.

It was not, however, in the man's nature to grieve long after this fashion. A slight improvement in Fanny's condition afforded him an excuse for recovering his spirits, for declaring that she would pull through now and be as well as ever again, and for resuming his neglected singing lessons. Throughout her long illness he alternated thus between the depths of despair and extravagant hopefulness; but, as time went on, the latter became his usual state of mind. It was so much pleasanter to hope than to despair, and, as Mrs. Webber sagely remarked, hope was a thing as did harm to nobody.

Philip, then, began to go about and to see his friends much as before. He looked in at the club occasionally; had Walter Brune to dine with him once or twice, 'lest Meg should fancy that something had happened,' he said to himself; he called at certain houses where he did not wish to be forgotten, and was persuaded to sing at a few afternoon entertainments. One person, however, he persistently avoided. It has passed into a proverb that the surest way to lose sight of a friend is to lend him money; but it was not an overburdening sense of obligation alone that caused Philip to steer clear of Signora Tommasini, inventing heaven knows how many cunningly devised fables to account for his neglect, and despatching them to her by post. He was afraid that if he were to find himself alone with this sympathising and generous ally, she might get his secret out of him. His nerves, he knew, were not to be depended upon at this time, and a kind word might cause him to betray himself in a manner which he would probably after-

wards regret. Philip had seen more of women than of men during his life, and had perhaps learnt to understand some of their peculiarities. He hardly believed in the common report that the Signora harboured matrimonial designs upon him; but at the same time he felt very sure that she would not be pleased to hear that he was already married. Therefore he judged it best to keep out of danger's way.

Meanwhile Fanny was growing slowly better. Better, that is, in a certain sense; for, although all risk from the bronchitis was over, she was still too weak to get up. Those who watched her said that she would be up in another week; then, when that time had elapsed, they put the event off for yet another week, and after that the subject of her leaving her bed was dropped altogether. She herself was well aware that she would never leave it alive; and one morning she said as much to Philip, begging him not to be angry with her for telling the truth.

Philip, nevertheless, made a great show of being angry, scolded her for giving way to gloomy fancies, pointed out that, if she were as ill as she supposed, she would never have got over the bronchitis, and declared that she was doing all that she could to retard her recovery by allowing herself to think that there was any doubt about it. But she laid her thin hand on his arm, looking up at him deprecatingly, and his voice died away.

'We can't always go on pretending, can we, dear?' said she. 'I know you will be sorry at first; and I should like to stay with you—for some things. But I don't mind going. Before I was so ill—at the time just after dear baby died—I used to be very miserable, and sometimes I fancied that you—well, that you did not care for me quite so much as you once did. But that is all over, and we won't talk about it. I used to be wicked enough to think that you would be rather glad to get rid of me; I don't think that now. But, Philip, while I have been lying here I have thought over a great many things, and I can see that it is better—oh, ever so much better!—as it is. You will think so too, some day.'

Didn't he almost think so already? The question flashed across Philip's consciousness, and was gone before he had time to fix it there.

'Some day,' Fanny went on, 'you will see that it would have been impossible ever to change me into a lady. Though I think I have improved a little,' she could not help adding;

'I don't leave out my h's now, do I? And my hands are not red any more—but perhaps that is because I am so ill.'

'Fan!' exclaimed Philip, half laughing, half crying, 'you are the greatest goose that ever lived. You break my heart when you talk like that. Did I ever accuse you of not being a lady?'

'No, dear,' she answered consideringly; 'I don't know that you ever did. But of course I thought about it a good deal; and then Aunt Keziah used to go on about silk purses and sow's ears. Poor Aunt Keziah! we should have had to cut her, I suppose; and I don't think I could have borne to do that. Nobody knows how good and kind she has been to me all this time.'

Philip dropped on his knees by the side of the bed, exclaiming, 'Oh, hush, my darling! you are not going to die; you are not going to have any more trouble. I will work all day for you, and you shall have everything you can wish for, and your Aunt Keziah shall be welcome whenever she chooses to come to us, if only you will get well and be my own bright little Fan again.'

Perhaps he would not have been so overcome, perhaps he would not have said so much as this, if he had not felt that there was no hope. Fanny, for her part, was not at all overcome. She looked at him half wonderingly, and with a great kindness and pity, as she passed her wasted hand over his hair. Already the hand of death was upon her, and she saw the world with the clear eyes of those who are passing for ever beyond the reach of its pettinesses. She understood her husband better now than she had ever done in the happy days that were past; but she did not love him the less because she understood him. There was a certain helplessness about the man which endeared him to all women, and made them hate to see him suffer, even though they might know that his suffering would not last long.

'It is much better as it is,' she repeated. 'We have had a very happy time together, my dear, and there's nothing to regret—no quarrels nor cross words; nothing except baby's death. And now I am so glad—oh, so *glad* that I have not left him behind me.' Her face lighted up and the tears came into her eyes as she thought of this. 'And, Philip, you must not make yourself miserable about me after I am gone. You must see plenty of people, and be always busy; and then after a time if you wished—if you thought that you——'

She broke off, and glanced up inquiringly.

'I mean, if you ever thought of marrying again, you must not suppose that I should mind. I think I should like you to have some one to take care of you; I think, perhaps, some day you will marry that Nellie Brune whom you used to talk to me about sometimes. Your people rather wished it, didn't they?'

'My people?' said Philip, 'I have got no people. Meg—Mrs. Stanniforth, you know—has an idea of something of the kind, I believe; but I don't want to marry Nellie—or anybody. Besides, she has no money.'

'Hasn't she?' said Fanny, dreamily. 'But you will make money; and it would never do for you to marry a woman for the sake of her fortune; she would find it out, and then you would both be miserable. No, you will marry Nellie Brune: and you needn't tell her anything about me, and so it will all pass away and be forgotten.' She repeated several times 'all be forgotten—all forgotten.'

Philip stood silently watching her for a long time. Once or twice she murmured Nellie Brune's name, and once or twice his own, and so fell asleep with a smile upon her lips.

After this day many weeks elapsed, during which Fanny grew apparently neither better nor worse. She suffered no pain, slept a great deal, and during her waking hours seemed quite content to lie still and listen to Aunt Keziah, who had produced a well-thumbed Bible, and would read long extracts from it in a loud, unmodulated voice. Seeing her so calm, Philip, too, became easier in mind. The violence of his first grief had spent itself, and was beyond his recalling; he began to admit, as Fanny had done, that all was for the best. Acquiescence in the inevitable was with him not so much a part of philosophy as of nature; and when one thing was past hoping for, he could not for the life of him help turning his eyes towards something else. There even came a time when he almost wished for the end of the present state of affairs. The doctor apprehended no immediate danger, would not yet say that the case was an absolutely hopeless one, thought it quite possible that his patient might linger on through the spring and summer months, and so forth; and in the meantime Philip's bills were mounting up; Margaret was writing anxious and urgent letters, begging him to come down and see her, if it were only for a few days; Walter Brune, too, seemed to suspect that there was some mystery afoot. Perhaps it was hardly strange that Philip should half long for the liberty that might be so near. He only half

longed for it; he was ashamed of the thoughts that would sometimes force their way into his mind, and a chance word or look from Fanny sufficed to convert him, for the time, into as heart-broken a husband as Aunt Keziah could have wished to contemplate.

After all, he had not long to wait for the end. When it came, it seemed to have come suddenly, though, in truth, nothing could have been more gradual than its approach. Little by little the dying woman's brain had been giving way, for some days she had scarcely recognised any one, and had been somewhat excited at times, 'talking a deal of rubbitch,' as Mrs. Webber said, and asking constantly for her baby to be brought to her. Still, it was not supposed that she was much worse than she had been until one evening when she began to complain of being cold, and nothing that they could do would warm her; and then Mrs. Webber, who, as she mentioned with a sort of pride, 'had seen many a one die afore now,' knew what was coming.

'She'll go off quite quiet, you'll see,' said this person of experience, nodding at Philip, who was holding Fanny's hand; 'they mostly in general do. There's some as die hard, as you might say, and there's some as die easy; there's them as is ready to meet their Maker, and them as didn't ought for to feel so. But, lor, dear me! when it comes to the last, 'tis much the same with them all.'

But Philip was not listening to the results of Mrs. Webber's observations, for he had felt a sudden pressure of his hand; and now Fanny's eyes were opened wide, she was looking at him in a troubled way, and was evidently trying to say something. He bent down his head to catch any faint whisper that might pass her lips; but all at once her voice came back to her, and she spoke quite loud, though with long pauses between the words.

'Dear—I wanted to say—I'm so sorry—I let the fire out—that night.'

'She's a-wandering, poor dear!' said Aunt Keziah. But Philip understood what that fond and foolish little wife of his was thinking of. With her feet upon the very brink of the dark river, she had been confusedly trying to examine her conscience, and it had accused her of no worse offence than this.

Those were her last words. She closed her eyes as soon as she had uttered them; and so faint was her breathing that neither of the bystanders could have told the precise moment at which her heart ceased to beat.

They buried her beside her baby in the saddest, dreariest cemetery in the world, not excepting Père-la-Chaise. A fine, drizzling rain was falling while the brief rite was hurried through; and as Philip turned away from the grave he shuddered from head to foot, muttering, 'I shall never be able to come back here again.'

'I don't think as you ever will come back, sir,' said Mrs. Webber, quietly.

Mrs. Webber was quite respectful now; and if there was any sarcasm in her speech, it was only sarcasm of that deferential kind which inferiors may permit themselves to use towards their superiors. Philip was Mr. Marescalchi again now; he was no longer her nephew, no longer a man over whom she had the smallest hold; and, being a sensible woman, she recognised the change.

Philip walked hastily out of the burying-ground, and hailed the first hansom that he met. The sun burst out as he was whirled through the crowded streets back to London, back to the world, back to life and liberty. He tried to feel unhappy, but he could not. His spirits rose in spite of himself; a great weight was off his mind; he was free! When he reached Conduit Street the blinds had been drawn up, the sun was streaming through the open windows into the shabby little drawing-room, which had been swept and made tidy during his absence. There was nothing here to remind him that he had ever been a husband and a father; all poor Fanny's things had been carried away by Aunt Keziah; Aunt Keziah herself was gone back to Islington, never to cross his path again. He was like the widower in the ballad, 'a youth light-hearted and content.' Truly his star had been favourable to him. He had done a foolish thing, but no disgraceful one. At that moment Philip was not very far from thinking that he had had such wonderful luck because he had deserved to be lucky. Would not any one who had heard the history of his relations with Fanny have said that he had behaved like a gentleman throughout? How many men would have married a girl from a confectioner's shop? How many, having married her, would have remained true to her from first to last, risking detection for her sake, risking ridicule, risking social ruin, and hardly giving so much as a thought to these dangers?

Then, while he yet exulted, there came upon him a sudden and complete revulsion of feeling. He remembered that he was alone; that it was not in the least a question of what others

might say of him, but of what he might be able to say of himself to himself. For one moment he saw the truth—saw that he was glad that Fanny was dead; glad that that kind and faithful heart would never flutter with delight again when he came home at night to recount his triumphs; glad that he should never again throughout all eternity hear the sound of the childish laughter which had once been so sweet to him. He saw that he had never really cared for her—nay, that he had never really cared for any single person or thing in the wide world but himself.

There is something so hideous, so revolting in utter selfishness, that it is a very good thing indeed for some of us that it usually brings mental blindness with it. Philip was so scared by the spectre which he had raised, that the thought of spending an evening alone with it was one that he could not by any means face. Therefore he dined at his club, and afterwards went to the opera, where he saw and spoke to Signora Tommasini for the first time for many weeks.

'I have been ill,' he said shortly, in answer to her pertinacious inquiries as to where he had been during all this long interval; and she believed him, for, in truth, his face looked pale and drawn, and he seemed altogether unlike himself.

CHAPTER XXI.

TWO FLATTERING OFFERS.

LIFE in the country generally, and life in the neighbourhood of Crayminster somewhat more particularly, is seldom remarkable for abundance of incident; and upon the principle that the safest thing for a sailor to do with his head, when in the heat of action, is to thrust it through a hole made in the side of the ship by a cannon-ball, it may be assumed that, after such an eventful day as that through which Miss Brune had just passed when we took leave of her in the month of November, nothing more of a startling nature was likely to happen to her for some time to come. To be run away with, to be thrown from one's horse, to receive and reject an offer of marriage, all within the twenty-four hours, is indeed to draw rather recklessly upon one's fair average of excitement; and Nellie, who, as it may be remembered, had been a good deal bored and eager for any small

trifle in the way of novelty before these things had taken place, was abundantly satisfied with what she had got, and asked for nothing better than a further period of repose and dulness in which to recover herself.

Such a period did in due course follow, and lasted for a matter of six weeks; but at the expiration of that time a truly remarkable piece of experience fell to Nellie's share—a piece of experience such as no woman ever quite forgets, and which is looked back upon with a certain degree of pride by all and with heartfelt regret by a good many. It was towards the end of December that the county was roused to a high pitch of interest and expectation by the reappearance of the Duke of Retford, who, being still shut out of his Yorkshire mansion, had selected Craybridge to pass Christmas at, as being upon the whole the least comfortless of the many country houses that belonged to him. He came down in quite a patriarchal fashion, accompanied or speedily followed by numerous relatives, and among these was his eldest son.

Now this young man had greatly liked and admired Nellie during his stay at Craybridge at the time of the festivities consequent upon his coming of age; and so sincere had been his admiration that he had not at all forgotten her, although five whole months had passed away since he had bidden her farewell. One of the first things, therefore, that he did upon finding himself once more within reach of her was to ride over to Broom Leas, where he was so kindly received that he discovered a series of pretexts for repeating his visit three times in little more than a week. About Christmas-time his parents, as in duty bound, gave a ball at which he danced a great many times with Nellie—thereby exciting much surprise and envy, and not a little spitefulness. After that there came a ten days' frost, which afforded additional opportunities for neighbourly intercourse; and the outcome of it all was that, while the new year was still young, the Most Honourable the Marquis of Craybridge made a formal offer of his hand and all the contingent glories belonging thereto to Miss Brune.

It may be asserted without ill-nature—and, in truth, there is nothing ill-natured in the assertion—that the number of women in England who could relinquish without a pang the prospect of becoming a duchess may be counted upon the fingers of one hand. Nellie Brune, at any rate, was not one of that select and high-minded few. She would have liked very much to be a duchess, and to be rich and powerful, and to hold out a

helping hand to her brothers in their several professions, and to wear the famous Retford diamonds, and to step at once and without an effort from the respectable but obscure ranks of the country gentry into the inner circle of the highest society of her native land. All this would have been exceedingly pleasant to her; and yet she felt that she could not marry Lord Craybridge. She refused him with an honest sigh, but she did refuse him.

The young man was very much astonished, which was natural enough—and rather angry, which showed a want of proper feeling on his part, but was also, perhaps, not unnatural. Of course, in a manner of speaking, Miss Brune was worthy of an imperial throne; but contemplating things from a common-sense and every-day standpoint, she really was hardly in a position to treat marquises as though they were made of mere common clay. This marquis had been willing to set the wishes of his parents at defiance, and to brave the displeasure of his entire family for her sake. He had thought rather well of himself for being so independent, and it certainly had never entered into his head that any opposition to his desires could come from her. He was a very young man and a somewhat hot-tempered one, and he could not help letting her see something of what he thought respecting her conduct in this matter. Thereupon she, too, became angry, and told him he had a vulgar mind; and so high words passed, and the interview was nearly ending in a mortal quarrel. Lord Craybridge, however, regained his self-control in time to avert so undignified a parting. He confessed that he had forgotten himself, begged for forgiveness, and was forgiven. Would there be any hope for him at any future time? he asked. Nellie replied that she was very sorry, but that there never could be any hope for him at all. He then observed that he didn't care what became of him now, and departed declaring that he should live and die a bachelor, and expressing a hope that his demise might speedily ensue. And about three weeks afterwards he proposed to the beautiful Lady Hilda Montacute, by whom he was accepted; and they were married with great pomp at Westminster Abbey in the spring, and lived happily ever afterwards.

The foregoing episode, having only an indirect bearing upon the course of the present story, has been somewhat condensed in narration; but the various workings of it occupied a large portion of Nellie's time and thoughts during the winter, and it was the means of exalting her beyond measure in the estimation of her neighbours; for it need hardly be said that the whole

county heard all about it, the news having leaked out and been promulgated in the usual mysterious way. Ladies are not supposed to reveal the names of their rejected suitors (as a matter of fact they generally do reveal them, but that is neither here nor there), and in the present instance Nellie was as reticent as the strictest code of social ethics could have required her to be. Besides her father, she only communicated the circumstance to Mrs. Stanniforth, who was almost like a mother to her; and every lady is allowed to have one confidant. Margaret, again, was anything but a garrulous person; but when Mrs. Winnington sneered openly at Nellie for having so signally failed to 'catch poor Mr. Stanniforth,' how was it possible to resist the temptation of proving that a much more eligible *parti* than Tom Stanniforth had been declined by the young lady? Proving is perhaps hardly the right word to use, inasmuch as there could be no tangible proof adduced in support of the statement, and indeed Mrs. Winnington declared at once and without hesitation that she didn't believe a word of it. Nature, however, was too strong for Mrs. Winnington, and despite her expressed incredulity, she could not help treating Nellie from that day forth with a wondering respect which its subject was puzzled to account for.

As for Margaret, her joy over the discomfiture of Lord Craybridge was extreme. There could be but one reason, she thought, for his rejection; and, being quite satisfied now as to the state of Nellie's affections, she became more than ever anxious for Philip to return. Philip, his doings and his prospects, were the most frequent subject of conversation between the two ladies. It was a comfort to the elder to have some one within reach who understood and appreciated that paragon, while the younger was glad to be able to speak without repugnance of one, at least, among the persons in whom her kind friend was interested. Mrs. Winnington, back from her autumn manœuvres in the west, and upon the whole not ill-pleased with the results thereof, was more than usually out of sympathy with them both at this time. When Margaret hesitatingly informed her of the career which Philip had chosen for himself, she remarked drily that she was not at all surprised, but that for her part she did not care about including a mountebank in the list of her acquaintances; and to Nellie she made herself objectionable by intimating in no ambiguous language that Tom Stanniforth's engagement to Edith might now be looked upon as very nearly an accomplished fact. She had encountered Mr. Stanni-

forth, it appeared, in the course of her peregrinations, and had —or said she had—been given to understand pretty clearly by him what his ambition was. 'I have not breathed a word upon the subject to dear Edith; I would never interfere in such a matter. I fancy, though, that I can foresee her answer, and I really think that in many ways she will have chosen wisely. Rank, after all, is not everything, and dear Mr. Stanniforth is so good—such a thoroughly sterling and genuine character.'

Nellie, albeit not unprepared for this intelligence, was profoundly disgusted by it, and said some bitter things to Margaret about the ease with which Edith had got over her attachment to poor Walter. Not even to Margaret had she ever disclosed what had passed between her and Mr. Stanniforth on that memorable November afternoon, but in her heart she condemned him no less severely than the young woman to whom he had so promptly transferred his allegiance. To be sure, she did not want to marry him herself, and it was nothing to her whom he might choose to marry; but she thought he might have had the decency to wait a little longer. He had taken rather a liberty in asking her to be his wife at all; but that he should have asked her in that sort of way, simply because he wanted a wife—any wife—was just a little bit too insulting. One is sorry to have to record weaknesses on the part of one's heroine; but it is a fact that when Edith complained that Nellie Brune never met her now without sniffing at her, she was not going far beyond the limits of truth.

There were thus many little daily pin-pricks which served not only to strengthen the friendship which had subsisted for so long between Margaret and her young neighbour, but to narrow the stream of their common interests into one channel. If some people thought that Philip would lower himself and those connected with him by singing for his supper, like little Tom Tucker, that was by no means Miss Brune's opinion. On the contrary, she applauded his resolution with a heartiness that quite reassured Margaret, who, as we have seen, had had some misgivings upon the point at first. Why, Nellie pertinently inquired, should it be considered a more honourable occupation to plead the cause of murderers and forgers than to afford innocent pleasure to people of refinement? Did anybody dare to look down upon artists nowadays? And was not a great singer just as much an artist as a great painter? What was really disgraceful was to eat the bread of idleness; and that was what she had sometimes feared that Philip might

be contented to do. Now she said she should always feel proud of him.

Speeches of this kind were very soothing and encouraging to Margaret, and went far towards consoling her for the uneasiness which she felt at Philip's protracted absence. He was always writing to say that he meant to come and see her as soon as ever he could find the time, but somehow or other he never did find the time; and a vague rumour connecting his name with that of Signora Tommasini trickled down to Crayminster, and gave Margaret (who had never seen the Signora, and supposed her to be a young and fascinating creature) a terrible fright. At length, however, there came a letter to announce that Philip proposed to revisit Longbourne at Easter, and that he hoped to be able to remain there for some weeks. This joyful news was at once transmitted to Broom Leas by Margaret, who mentioned with regret that the same post had brought her a refusal from Tom Stanniforth. 'I hoped he might have been able to run down for Easter too,' she said; 'but he tells me he will be busy all through the recess.'

'Oh, what a good thing!' exclaimed Nellie, clasping her hands involuntarily.

Her ejaculation had been called forth by the latter piece of intelligence, but Margaret naturally set it down to gratification at the former. And, in truth, Nellie was very glad to see Philip again. He arrived, looking very pale and fagged, as he might have been expected to do after a long spell of hard labour, and was made much of by the ladies whose admiration he chiefly coveted. Margaret, of course, would have petted him under any circumstances; but he was not prepared to meet with so kind a reception at the hands of Nellie, having found her on previous occasions more of a critic than a sympathiser. Now she was amiability itself. She made him sing to her; she praised his voice in terms more enthusiastic than any that had yet flattered his ears (poor Fanny had hardly known one note from another); she prophesied a triumphant success for him, and listened with much interest to all that he would tell her about his life in London.

This sort of thing delighted Philip, and so, for that matter, did everything connected with Longbourne and the ordinary course of existence there. He had been for so many months without the small luxuries and refinements which go with wealth, that he had almost forgotten what they were like, and

valued them doubly now that they were once more within his reach. Even such trifling matters as a constant supply of clean towels in his bedroom, and the finding of his clothes ready brushed and laid out for him when he wanted them, were productive of a great deal of pleasure to him; and he sometimes found himself marvelling how he could have put up so cheerfully with the wretched discomforts of Coomassie Villa and Conduit Street. But it was not often that he thought of Coomassie Villa and Conduit Street, or of his residence there, at all. That era of his life already belonged to the past, and had been pushed into a pigeon-hole of his memory, to be looked at occasionally, or to be forgotten altogether, as chance might decree. His thoughts now were occupied entirely with the present; and a very agreeable sort of present it was, taking it all in all. Plenty of well-drilled servants to minister to his wants, good things to eat, the best of wines to drink, soft-voiced, well-bred women to talk to—these things sufficed, at least for the time being, to satisfy his soul. The season of the year, too, was delicious. The white, bright sunlight of spring was rousing the sleeping earth to life; the chestnut buds were bursting; the fruit-trees were covered with starry blossoms, which fell like miniature snowstorms before every puff of the soft west wind; the thrushes and blackbirds could be heard in the cool mornings; all nature was preparing for a fresh start; and what could be more fitting than that the heart of this young man should lightly turn in the usual direction?

It must not, however, be supposed that Philip had learnt so little from experience as to think in any serious fashion of paying his addresses to Nellie Brune. He said to himself, with a smile, that Margaret would never induce him to do that, charm she never so wisely. Of the pinch of poverty he had had more than enough to last him his lifetime, and to convince him that matrimonial happiness was quite irreconcilable with straitened means. He was nevertheless—so he believed—deeply in love with Nellie. He had always suspected himself of being so; and now various subtle influences, some of which have been enumerated, turned his suspicion into certainty. All this being so, a delicately scrupulous youth might have thought it his duty to keep out of the maiden's way, lest perchance he should delude her with hopes which could never be fulfilled; but Philip, it is scarcely necessary to say, did not pursue any such course. What he did was to resume his chronic flirtation with Nellie just where

he had left it, throwing a little more ardour into his words and looks as beseemed the increased reality of his passion, and, for the rest, allowing himself to drift down stream, in accordance with his old habit, with a languid, pleased curiosity as to what might be going to happen to him next.

One morning, about a fortnight after his return, he made his appearance at Broom Leas in an evident state of suppressed excitement, and hardly gave himself time to say good morning before he attacked Miss Brune with a direct question:

'I say, Nellie, is it a fact that you refused Craybridge last winter?'

Nellie, who at that moment was standing in one of the paddocks, trying to induce a shy young colt to accept a lump of sugar from her hand, whisked round abruptly, and threw her lump of sugar away.

'Who told you of that?' she asked. 'Was it Mrs. Stanniforth? She promised me that she would not mention it to anybody.'

'No, it wasn't Meg. I heard it last night at the club at Crayminster.'

'The club?—how disgusting! How do people find these things out? I wish they would mind their own business.'

'Everybody knows everything; it can't be helped,' said Philip. 'I must confess that if a duchess had proposed to me, and I had refused her, I should immediately publish the fact abroad myself. You really did refuse him then?'

'Yes, I really did. Wonderful, wasn't it?'

'Upon my word,' answered Philip, looking at her curiously, 'I think it was rather wonderful. Why in the world did you do it, Nellie?'

Nellie laughed. 'Why did I refuse him? Well, for the best of all reasons; I didn't care enough about him to marry him.'

'And you call that the best of all reasons!' ejaculated Philip, with uplifted hands.

'Ah!' said Nellie, with a touch of scorn, 'you can't understand any girl's resisting the eldest son of a duke.'

'I could only understand it upon one supposition,' answered Philip, slowly: 'that there was some one else whom she liked better.'

He pronounced the last words in a low voice, keeping his eyes on the ground as he spoke. He raised them just in time

to encounter Nellie's, which were blazing with anger, while a fine rush of colour had overspread her face.

'Philip,' she cried, 'you are very impertinent!'

'What a little spitfire you are, Nellie! Surely such old friends as you and I may say anything to each other. However, I apologise humbly, and beg leave to withdraw the remark, since it makes you so angry.'

'I am not a bit angry,' returned Nellie; 'but I don't think anybody ought to say a thing like that. To begin with, it is quite untrue; and besides——'

'What besides?'

'Well, I hate that sort of thing being said about me. What business have you and your friends at the Claymister Club to discuss me at all? I thought ladies' names were never mentioned at clubs.'

'Gracious goodness! what could have made you suppose that? All the same, you might have known that I should not discuss you, nor allow you to be discussed, in any club of which I was a member. A man happened to mention to me that there was a rumour to the effect that you had refused Claybridge, and asked me whether it was true; that was all.'

'Very well; I don't want to hear any more about it. Let us change the subject.'

Philip did as he was bid; but although he ceased to speak of the subject, he did not by any means cease to think of it; and, at the risk of lowering him still further in the esteem of the reader, it must be confessed that he shared in some degree in the respect which Mrs. Winnington felt for a girl who did not care about becoming Duchess of Retford. For this he shall be despised as much as the reader may think fit; but it would be hardly fair to blame him for believing that the astonishing sacrifice in question had been made for his sake. Margaret had no sort of doubt upon the point, and did not hesitate to say as much when consulted; while Nellie's confusion and wrath had seemed to tell their own tale in tolerably plain language. No wonder that Philip should have concluded that the prize—if prize it were—might be his for the asking. And from that day forth he began to think that perhaps he would ask for it. After all, there was nothing to deter him from doing so, except the dread of privations; and was it not a matter of certainty that in a few years' time he would be in receipt of an income nearly, if not quite, as large as Signora Tommasini's? At the same time he was not inclined to do anything hastily.

It has been said before that Philip was fond of a certain careless method of self-study, and it would have been strange indeed if he had not found out this much about himself, that none of his passions or desires were very deep-rooted. He certainly would not have broken his heart if Nellie had married Lord Craybridge; he did not suppose that his heart would break if she were to do so even now; though the notion of her belonging to any one else was an excessively painful one to him. Delay, then, could do no harm, and might possibly be productive of good; and so he came round to his old comfortable determination to wait upon events.

It will be obvious to any one who cares to be at the trouble of thinking over the situation that only a very small event was required, under these circumstances, to overcome Philip's prudence and hurry him into a declaration: and such an event came to pass, not many days later, on the occasion of a dinner-party at Longbourne. It was a large dinner-party—one of those dinner-parties which are given only in the country, where anything like a selection of company is not to be thought of, and where, if the table be big enough, everybody must be asked on the same day, lest unworthy suspicions should arise of a second division of guests having been invited to eat up the leavings of the first. All the magnates of the surrounding district and various clerical dignitaries from Crayminster were present at it; and, as some of them did not happen to be upon speaking terms, Mrs. Winnington had large opportunities for the display of tact, and enjoyed herself very much.

Philip also had been accustomed to derive a good deal of quiet enjoyment from these periodical feasts, which, indeed, were rich in humorous incident to the appreciative spectator; but this time he was not amused at all. In the first place, there was nobody to laugh with him, Margaret being too busy, and Nellie otherwise occupied; and then he was disagreeably conscious of being overlooked. In London he had always been somebody; people had thought him very clever and diverting, and had listened to him when he talked; he had also been a celebrity in a small way by reason of his well-known talents. But the fame of these had not penetrated so far as Crayminster, or, if it had, was not thought much of there. The squires and the canons, with their respective wives, who met round Mrs. Stanniforth's dining-table, knew Mr. Marescalchi only as a dependant of hers, and, if they noticed him at all, considered him rather a poor sort of fellow. He had no claims

upon the admiration of any of them. He had not distinguished himself at Oxford, he was not seen in the hunting-field; and, for all that, he gave himself airs and looked conceited. Philip, therefore, was thrust completely into the background. But perhaps he would not have minded that so much if Nellie Brune had not received such marked recognition from all quarters; and that again he would not perhaps have minded so much if the younger men of the party had been less assiduous in their attentions to her. Some of these young men were rich; one, in particular, had just come into an estate which was said to be worth ten thousand a year, and he was a good-looking fellow into the bargain. It was he who took Miss Brune in to dinner; and when Philip saw him devoting himself to her in a most conspicuous manner, and Nellie accepting his devotion with every appearance of complacency, he began to be assailed by the pangs of jealousy. If he had used his reasoning powers, he must have perceived that, having triumphed over the rivalry of a future duke, he could have little to fear from a mere country gentleman; but when a man is in love—and Philip, it must be remembered, was really in love—his reasoning powers are seldom at their best. Besides, what he experienced was not so much a dread that Nelly might marry the eligible youth as intense dislike to seeing her monopolised by anybody but himself. In the drawing-room, after dinner, things were very nearly as bad. Nellie was then surrounded by a compact body of men, young and old, married and single, and there was no getting near her. So he retired in disgust, and tried to get a rise out of Mrs. Winnington by making violent love to Edith; but here again he was doomed to failure. Edith sat bolt upright in her chair, looking absolutely blank and not listening to a word that he said, and Mrs. Winnington was no longer to be drawn by that threadbare stratagem.

The evening was long and dull, as such evenings must inevitably be, and probably no one in the room was more bored by it than Philip. It ended, however, with one of those strokes of luck which fell to his share so frequently that he had come to look upon them as in some sort his birthright. Mr. Brune, who had been obliged to go up to London for the day, and who was to return by the last train, had arranged that the brougham which was to bring him up from the station should proceed to Longbourne afterwards and fetch his daughter. But as this could not be much before midnight, as the last of the guests

departed while the clock was striking eleven, and as there was a brilliant moon outside, Miss Brune took it into her head that she would prefer to walk, and anticipated the proposition that was on Philip's lips by asking him point-blank to see her home.

It was thus that Philip, having thrown the reins upon the neck of events, found himself gently hurried by them along a path which he was not unwilling to follow. The time and the hour had evidently come; the *mise en scène*, as he said to himself with a little inward laugh, was quite what it ought to be. Here were silence, solitude, a sleeping world bathed in the mysterious silvery light of the moon; here was the beloved object tripping by his side across the broad black shadows of the lime-trees; it only remained for him to say what he had to say in as pretty and apposite words as he could command. And long before the lodge had come in sight he had said it. His heart beat a little more quickly while he waited for his answer, but only a little more quickly—seeing that he had not really any doubt at all as to what that answer would be.

Apparently it was Nellie Brune's fate to astonish her suitors. She astonished Philip very much indeed; for she not only walked on without replying, but she did not even look at him, or turn away her head and allow him to gain possession of her hand, or signify her consent in any fashion whatsoever. He was obliged at last to repeat his question; and then she answered, as coolly as if she had been remarking that it was a fine night, 'I was thinking.'

After that she walked on for several yards in silence, and then said, 'Philip, are you quite sure that you wish this?'

'Nellie!' he exclaimed reproachfully.

'I mean, do you really wish it very much? Because, unless you do——'

If there was an art of which Philip was complete master, it was that of love-making. He was always so thoroughly in earnest for the moment. He begged and implored now as humbly as if he had not felt certain in his heart of success; he protested—believing firmly in the truth of the statement as he made it—that Nellie had been the one love of his life; he reminded her of the vows which they had exchanged as children, and assured her that he had never in reality swerved from his allegiance. He acknowledged that she had every right to think him fickle; he had, as she knew, had many other fancies; but they had only been fancies. In short, he had been a boy; and now he was a man, and knew his own mind. All this, and a

great deal more, he said; winding up with a candid avowal that he had not intended to tell her of his love so soon. He had felt that he ought not to speak so long as he had not a home and an assured income to offer; and this was why she had perhaps fancied him lukewarm.

'That was not quite what I meant,' answered Nellie, as soon as he had done. 'I have known for a long time that Mrs. Stanniforth wished this very much, and lately I have thought that you wished it too—in a way. Only it struck me that, if you were not very much set upon it, it would be so much nicer to—go on as we are. I can't explain exactly,' she went on, speaking more rapidly; 'but, do you know, Philip, I am afraid sometimes that I have no heart. I am fond of you; I have been very fond of you all my life. You always came next to Walter.'

'Next to Walter!' ejaculated Philip, in doleful accents.

'I am very sorry; I can't help it,' said Nellie, penitently. 'I thought I ought to tell you.'

The blow to Philip's vanity was so severe and so unexpected that he could not help laughing a little, though he felt very sore.

'The long and the short of it is,' said he, 'that I have been ass enough to flatter myself that you cared for me as I do for you, when all the time you have had nothing but a sort of sisterly affection for me. I have brought this upon myself, and I must try to make the best of it, that's all.'

She saw that he was hurt, though he spoke so lightly, and she looked up at him with a humble, deprecating gaze which rather puzzled him. 'It isn't only a sort of affection,' she said; 'it's a great deal more than that.'

Suddenly it flashed across Philip that here was a new variety of the genus woman. He had heard of girls who could not acknowledge to themselves that they were in love until they were taught to do so; he believed that in the early years of the century all women were like that, or were supposed to be so. Might not this one, who was country-bred, be a survival of that bygone type?

'Nellie!' he exclaimed triumphantly, seizing her by both hands, 'I believe you do love me, in spite of all you say! Tell me one thing: did you ever meet another man whom you could by any possibility have thought of marrying?'

'No,' she answered promptly and decidedly; 'certainly not.'

'Then——!' cried Philip.

'Ah, but,' she interrupted, drawing back from him, 'I don't

think I love even you enough to marry you. At least, I don't think I love you in the right way. I wish I did; but I'm afraid I don't.'

'Nellie,' said Philip, gravely, 'don't throw away your happiness and mine like this. I won't ask you for a final answer to-night; but to-morrow, or the day after, if you like, you shall tell me whether I may hope for all that I care to live for, or whether I am to go straight to the dogs—as I certainly shall, if I have nothing in life to look forward to.'

She caught at this respite eagerly, promising that, if it were possible, it should be as he wished; but entreating him not to conclude that, because she had not said No at once, she might not be forced to do so afterwards. She did not understand herself, she said, and could not expect that he should understand her.

But Philip understood perfectly well that the battle was as good as won.

CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. PROSSER'S SENSE OF DUTY.

THERE are few states in life more vexatious and humiliating than that of not knowing one's own mind. It is also absurd, for what should be easier than to discover whether one personally desires a thing or not? When the wishes or advantage of others have to be taken into consideration, some degree of indecision may be pardonable; but Nellie Brune could not plead any such complications as an excuse for her inability to solve the problem set before her. She knew perfectly well that she might send Philip about his business without any fear of permanently blighting a fair existence, and she very properly concluded that all she had to do was to satisfy herself of her own inclinations in the matter. It was therefore especially provoking to one of her rather impatient temperament to find that this was what she could not accomplish, and that after many hours of shilly-shallying she was not only in as much doubt as ever upon the main point of whether she could accept the man or not, but also puzzled to account to herself for a very decided feeling of anxiety to accept him if she could.

In this perplexity she resolved to adopt a course which, if not wise, was at any rate calculated to put an end to suspense. She went to Mrs. Stanniforth and begged for enlightenment and

advice. From the responsibility thus cast upon her it may be well supposed that Margaret did not for one moment shrink. She began by embracing Nellie, and saying how delighted she was that things had all come right at last, and then proceeded to laugh heartily at the girl's misgivings. Lookers-on, she remarked with much originality, saw most of the game, and it was a very long time since she had begun to watch this one, and to perceive the signification of all its moves.

'Poor Philip!' she said compassionately; 'I can quite understand now why he has kept away from us all these months. Philip has more pride than people think, and of course he would rather not have spoken until he had some thousands a year to lay at your feet. But the thousands will come all in good time; and if you have to begin with the hundreds—what of that? You must remember that you are my children, both of you, and that it is a mother's privilege to help her children out, when she can. As for you, my dear Nellie, you are simply made up of pride, or you wouldn't mind acknowledging the truth. Why, you silly child, you have been in love with Philip all your life, and I could prove it to you without any difficulty if I chose. But I will only ask you one thing. Why did you refuse Lord Craybridge?'

'Oh, I couldn't have married Lord Craybridge!' answered Nellie. 'That was different.'

'Of course it was different,' cried Margaret, triumphantly; 'there was all the difference in the world between the two cases. Don't you understand that it is quite possible to feel some doubt as to whether you love a man, but that you cannot be in any doubt at all when you don't.'

Whatever this reasoning may have been worth in the abstract, Nellie had little to urge against it as applied to herself. She had had recourse to Margaret's counsel in order to be convinced, and was not disposed to criticise the shape in which conviction might be brought home to her. Nor, when once she had cast away all hesitation from her, had Philip much reason to complain of her coldness. She was not quite as demonstrative as he would have liked her to be; but she welcomed him gladly at all hours; she seemed to be happy in his presence, and she made a point of gratifying every whim and caprice of his with a pretty little air of submission which was the more charming to him because in all their previous intercourse she had shown herself anything but submissive.

Philip, indeed, had nothing to complain of, unless it were

the reception accorded to him by his future father-in-law, which was not marked by any excess of cordiality. Mr. Brune had his own opinion of Philip, and had objections to him as a son-in-law quite apart from that of insufficiency of means. The latter, he was sure, was a strong one enough for all practical purposes, and had the advantage of being one that could be openly urged; but Mr. Brune did not succeed in making much out of it. How is a father to prevent his daughter from marrying whom she pleases? Mothers may do these things; but when it comes to an ultimate trial of strength, fathers are helpless. So at least Mr. Brune averred, with a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders. Did he or did he not wish that his daughter should be happy? Margaret desired to be informed; and when he replied that the prospect of her marrying Philip was objectionable to him precisely because he doubted whether it would conduce to her happiness, Mrs. Stanniforth asked him, with compassionate disdain, whether he really supposed that he was the best judge of that.

'I had had the effrontery to form some such idea,' Mr. Brune replied meekly; 'but no doubt it is better to yield before one has been ignominiously defeated than after. Have your own way; and then, when all manner of trouble comes of it, blame me. One condition I do, however, feel myself strong enough to stand out for. There shall be no marriage until Philip can show me that he is in receipt of a reasonable income, and one that is likely to be permanent.'

If Mr. Brune carried his point in this particular, it was perhaps less owing to his firmness than to the fact that he had no great amount of opposition to contend against as regarded it. Mrs. Stanniforth would have liked to see the young couple united forthwith, and hinted that the means to provide them with a modest home should not be lacking; but both Philip and Nellie displayed a commendable prudence in the matter, and declared that it would never do for them to start upon an income of nothing a year. They were both young, they observed; they had all their lives before them, and they were very well satisfied with the existing state of things. Philip added that he was determined not to be a burden upon dear old Meg any longer than he could help.

'A most becoming sentiment,' said Mr. Brune, when this speech was duly reported to him by Margaret; 'and if he postpones his wedding until he is quite independent, it is probable that I shall no longer be here to mar the ceremony by

acting the part of wet blanket. Meanwhile I must trust to the chapter of accidents. In two years' time—I think you said it would take Philip two years to become a millionaire—many things may happen. The poor fellow may die, or he may elope with a pretty actress, or——'

'I wish you would not talk like that,' interrupted Margaret; 'you know you don't mean what you say.'

'My dear Mrs. Stanniforth, I am like the Barber of Seville; I laugh because I don't want to do the other thing. And we know that life is uncertain, and actresses are often fascinating. By the way, Philip was saying something the other day about going to Italy to perfect his voice. What an excellent plan that would be! He must study somewhere of course, and Italy would be in so many ways preferable to London.'

'I suppose it would,' said Margaret, thoughtfully.

'Oh, I don't think there can be a doubt of it. Florence, now, is a good place—especially in winter. There is a nice bracing *tramontana* there which blows down from the Apennines, and which has been found very effective in many cases, I believe. But then, again, much might be hoped for from the sanitary arrangements at Naples. At both places there should be an ample supply of beauteous *ballerine*, and others. Now I do trust, my dear Mrs. Stanniforth, that you will urge him to lose no time in becoming acquainted with the land of his birth. Ah, dear me!—and to think that, but for you, he might have been living a contented and picturesque life there at this moment as a strolling player, or a brigand, or an *improvisatore*, or something of that kind.'

Margaret did not like to hear Mr. Brune make such speeches as this, but she consoled herself by reflecting that it was only his way. After all, he was tractable enough as regarded essential points, and a great deal less severe than her mother.

Mrs. Winnington, when told of the engagement, observed that it was no affair of hers, and that she should abstain from making any comment whatever upon it; but, just as a matter of curiosity, she would be glad to know one thing: upon what —or perhaps she ought rather to say upon whom— did this precious pair propose to live?

Margaret, with a rather guilty air, replied that Philip had at least as good a chance of succeeding in his profession as other young men.

'Oh! I was not aware that he had a profession,' returned

her mother. And as Margaret judged it best to make no rejoinder, and to go on stitching silently at a gorgeous chasuble destined eventually to adorn the back of the rector of the parish, Mrs. Winnington was compelled, after a time, to recur to the subject uninvited.

'Dear Margaret,' said she, 'you know how very seldom I allow myself to interfere with you in any way. I see many foolish things done for the best motives; I see you imposed upon constantly—I might almost say every hour; but I hold my tongue. It is not always easy; but I think it is right—I *hope* it is right. Let me just for once break through my rule, and ask you whether you have considered what you are doing in encouraging this wild scheme. Surely you must see that these two and their family—for of course they will have a family, and an enormous one; people without a sixpence always do—you must see that they will be dependent wholly and solely upon your charity. Now, is that desirable? Is it even practicable? By stinting yourself and your own—ahem!—by stinting yourself you may, and I have no doubt you will, manage to give them every luxury so long as you live; but we must look at contingencies, and we must remember at your death you will be able to leave them next to nothing; and what will come then? Penury—starvation—the workhouse!' Mrs. Winnington's voice and gestures as she drew this prophetic outline were quite dramatic. 'As I said before,' she resumed, 'I shall not interfere, nor shall I offer any comment; but of all the barefaced piracies that I have seen practised upon you yet, this does strike me as——'

'You don't understand, mother,' broke in Margaret in her quiet voice. 'Philip would not allow me to support him, even if I were able and willing to do so; and Mr. Brune expressly stipulated for a long engagement in order to avoid any risk of the kind you mention.'

But Mrs. Winnington's only reply took the form of a sound resembling the snorting of a dog at a closed door. Such transparent professions were not likely to deceive her. Mrs. Winnington knew the world, and was not so simple as to believe that it contained any sincere or conscientious people, except herself.

Margaret, for her part, had not expected much sympathy from her mother, whose watchful care of her interests appeared to her very natural and excusable; but at the same time it was disheartening to meet with opposition from all sides, and

she began to wonder whether Hugh would show himself less prejudiced than others. Upon the whole this seemed so improbable that she resolved to write nothing to him upon the subject as yet.

The dialogue just recorded had one remarkable result, in that it caused Margaret to do a thing which she had not done before in the course of close upon a dozen years of patient forbearance—namely, to lose her temper with Mrs. Prosser. Mrs. Prosser, it must be confessed, was enough to try the patience of any mistress, and to drive a harassed one out of all power of self-control. She was always in the right, but she was not contented with that, unless she could respectfully prove somebody else to be in the wrong; she always got her own way; but in order to derive any satisfaction from doing so she was compelled artfully to stir up and overcome some preliminary opposition. She had received a great deal of kindness, first and last, from Margaret, for whom she had conceived a proportionately strong dislike. It was Mrs. Prosser's custom to present herself for what she was facetiously pleased to call her orders in the dining-room every morning; and on this particular morning it was evident that she had brought an exhilarating grievance with her.

'Well, Prosser, what is it now?' asked Margaret, resignedly, perceiving, from several familiar signs, what was in store for her.

'I beg your pardon, ma'am!' said Mrs. Prosser, with a face expressing many deferential notes of interrogation.

'You have got something to complain of, and I am rather in a hurry. Please say what it is at once, and let us get it over.'

'Oh, it's of no consequence, ma'am, not if it was to put you out so. There is a matter which I should feel it my duty for to mention it to you; but I should prefer to wait till to-morrow, rather than to annoy you.'

'I will hear it to-day, please.'

'Eight-and-forty years have I lived in this house girl and woman——'

'Oh, Prosser, I know all that,' interrupted Margaret, with a short, vexed laugh. 'Do come to the point.'

'And never till now was I asked to sit down to my meals with a Dissenter. Neither of my poor masters that's gone was what you could call a bigot; but——'

'By all accounts, they were anything but that,' struck in

Margaret, who usually allowed such references to pass without comment, but whose nerves were now in a state of unwonted irritation. 'I suppose it is the new housemaid who has offended you. Well, you may be reassured. She is a Churchwoman, and she told me so when I engaged her.'

'Ah, just so, ma'am. She were engaged without my knowledge, or perhaps a few more inquiries would have been made. But to Church she have not been, and it did come to my ears that her parents was Anabusters.'

'Were *what*? I suppose you mean Anabaptists.'

'Very likely, ma'am,' answered Mrs. Prosser, with a faint superior smile; 'I have never troubled myself to learn the names of such persuasions. The girl answered me very short and disrespectful when I put a few questions to her, and I give her to understand that she had best look out for another situation.'

'You know perfectly well, Prosser, that I never allow you to dismiss servants. I had a very good character with this girl, and I am not going to send her away because her parents are Dissenters—if they are Dissenters.'

Mrs. Prosser's face grew very dark. 'You'll excuse of me mentioning it, ma'am,' said she, with cold dignity; 'but I don't think this is what Mr. Langley would approve.'

It was at this point that Margaret lost her temper. 'Prosser,' she exclaimed, 'your impertinence is past all bearing! I cannot submit to be dictated to in this way either by you or by Mr. Langley. The truth is that I have given way to you a great deal too much, and now you forget yourself. Be so good as to understand, once for all, that I intend to be mistress in my own house.'

'Certainly, ma'am; and I'm glad to hear that such is your intentions,' replied Mrs. Prosser, meaningly. 'But if all authority is to be took out of my hands, it will be an impossibility for me to discharge my duties to your satisfaction, let alone my own. I feel that I didn't ought for to accept such a position, ma'am—though I shall be pleased to remain with you till you are suited.'

Margaret did not attach much importance to this threat of resignation, which had been uttered many times before, and which she knew was not meant to be taken seriously; but she was dissatisfied with herself for having been betrayed into so much warmth of language, and, besides this, she was very much afraid that the offending housemaid would have to go in the long run, after all. There is no disguising the fact that Mar-

garet's character was a weak one, and she herself was painfully aware of it.

'It is most humiliating to be such a poor creature; but I am afraid I am too old to reform now,' she said later in the day to Philip, whom she had informed of this domestic broil, and who laughed unmercifully at her.

'You make mountains out of molehills, Meg,' said he, 'and troubles out of blessings. What could be a greater blessing to you than that old Prosser should take herself off? But she won't take herself off. Perhaps, if you are very good, she won't even ask you to beg her pardon. I'll have a talk with her, and make it all right. Dear me, what a lucky thing it is that we are not all like you! If I had been, I should have worried myself into my grave long ago.'

There was assuredly no fear of Philip's life being shortened by worry. Young though he was, he had had troubles of the kind which trace wrinkles upon most men's faces; but they had left no more upon his than a passing gust of wind leaves upon the smooth surface of a lake. It was barely two months since Fanny had predicted that he would marry Nellie Brune, and but little more than a month since she had been laid in her grave, and prediction and prophetess were alike to all intents and purposes forgotten by Philip. He did not forget Fanny in a literal sense; he thought of her sometimes, but only when he could not help it. For it always made him sad to think of her: not with a dreamy, pathetic sadness, which he would have rather enjoyed; but with a sharp, twingeing pain, unpleasantly suggestive of a guilty conscience. This, he told himself, was absurd. It was a morbid feeling which ought not to be encouraged; and it must be owned he was very successful in his efforts to subdue it. Altogether, there was probably not, at this time, a more light-hearted creature in the whole county than Philip Marescalchi. His past life contained a great secret which might be divulged at any moment, and which, if divulged, would almost certainly alienate from him the affection of the girl whom he loved; he owed some thousands of pounds to a woman whom he half suspected of being in love with him and whom he did not in the least see his way to repay; his future career was as speculative and shadowy as anything could well be; but none of these things weighed upon his mind. With his present life he was entirely satisfied. The weather was perfection; so was the fresh country air; and so, above all, was Nellie.

In the latter he discovered fresh attractions every day. One of the most delightful things about her was that he did not quite understand her; and she was so prettily impatient when she was not understood. She was not particularly clever, or witty, or well-informed; but she had decided and original ways of looking at common things which would, he felt sure, render her the most charming companion for life that a man could wish for. He was with her now every day, and almost all day, and she never wearied him. He sauntered over to Broom Leas to meet her, as soon as he had left Margaret, and made for a certain spot in the orchard where she had told him that she would be. He caught sight of her from afar, as she stood under an apple-tree, reading a letter, and, stealing up softly behind her over the long grass, suddenly laid a hand upon each of her shoulders.

She started violently, and exclaimed, with a stamp of her little foot, 'Oh, I wish you would not do that! If you only knew how I *hate* people who make me jump!'

'Is that the way to speak to your future husband?' demanded Philip, gravely. 'And, oh, Nellie, what are you stuffing into your pocket in that guilty and utterly futile way? Don't you know that love-letters ought always to be read within four walls, or else boldly flourished in the face of the world?'

'It isn't a love-letter,' answered Nellie, looking a little alarmed; 'it's only from Walter, and—you can see it, Philip, if you like; but——'

'But it wouldn't increase my vanity if I did; isn't that what you mean? Walter disapproves; and between you and me, Nellie, I don't wonder at it. Walter, you see, knows me a great deal better than you do. I don't want to see his letter, because I can tell you exactly what he says without looking at it. "Philip has no business to think about marrying at all. He is a pauper, and he is so confoundedly lazy that he will never be anything else. Added to which he is not a tenth part good enough for you; and he has many small vices, such as flirting with other men's wives, and leaving his bills unpaid, and playing cards on Sunday," &c. The worst of it is that it's true, too.'

Nellie laughed. 'You are quite wrong,' she answered; 'he doesn't say anything of the kind; but he thinks long engagements are a mistake, and he is afraid you are rather too sanguine about making your fortune. Walter is very practical, you know; he always was so, and I think the atmosphere of the City is

having its effect upon him. How I wish he would give up that horrid bank! I don't in the least believe that Uncle William will push him on. Walter says he is an odious old man; but he dines with him once a week, and I have a sort of lingering hope that, as the old fellow has quarrelled with all his other relations, he may make Walter his heir out of spite to them.'

'Poor old Walter!' said Philip, compassionately. He guessed, from the haste with which Nellie had led the conversation away from the letter, that it contained expressions not very complimentary to himself; but he bore no malice. For a long time he had felt himself to be superior to Walter, and a sense of superiority engenders pity, which, as we know, is akin to love. It is not altogether true that the world delights in kicking those who are down. The world would dearly love to kick those who are up, if it dared, and even does so after a surreptitious fashion. To be successful is to insult your fellow creatures; but to fail is to administer a delicate compliment to their vanity, and to establish a large claim upon their indulgence. Only give people the right to speak of you as 'poor So-and-So,' and you will never lack friends.

Now Walter might certainly be considered a failure. He had failed in love, and to all appearance he had failed also in life, having sunk from the position of a country gentleman to that of a banker's clerk. Philip forgave him from his heart, and the more readily inasmuch as he did not believe it to be in Walter's power to do him the smallest injury. If there were some things in Nellie which he did not understand, he understood at least this much, that when once she had put her hand to the plough she might be counted upon not to look back.

He passed his arm through hers, and they moved slowly away to the highest point of the orchard, whence the woods of Longbourne could be seen beyond fields and pastures. Just then the branches of the trees, which had hardly yet assumed their green summer garb, showed black and clear against the glow of the sunset; long shafts of light, streaming through them, lay across the meadows and fell upon little glistening pools. In the still evening air the tinkling of Mr. Langley's church bell, a mile and a half away, sounded close at hand.

'How beautiful and peaceful it is!' said Nellie. 'I don't wonder at your being glad to come down here again after all that time in London. I am sure I could never bear to live in a great city. Doesn't this seem like Arcadia to you?'

The phrase suggested memories to Philip which were not wholly pleasing. 'Arcadia would be a slow sort of place to live in, I should think,' he said; 'as slow as Bœotia. Both countries might be very well in spring and summer time, but what would they be when the leaves were off the trees and all the nymphs and dryads were hybernating? You are really not made for a country life, Nellie, whatever you may say; and when you have once become accustomed to London you will feel as if you were only half alive away from it. I suppose we shall live in London; but then, you know, we shall be always travelling about—to Paris and St. Petersburg and Madrid, and I don't know where else—according to my engagements. I dare say we shall be abroad as much as in England.'

'Oh, I was not thinking about that,' answered Nellie, hastily; 'that will not be for a great many years; we needn't trouble about it.'

'Well, I don't know about a great many. Two years—three years perhaps.'

'Oh, I should think it will be at least five. You will not be able to appear on the stage at all, you know, for two or three years. You said so the other day. I wonder what opera you will make your *début* in. I think I should like it to be *Faust*, because the dresses are so pretty, and you know you are fond of pretty dresses. Tell me about all the operas that there are. I have only seen three in my life.'

The opera and the lustre destined to be reflected upon it by Mr. Marescalchi took up a somewhat undue share of the conversation of these lovers. It was Nellie who usually brought forward the subject; but it was not in any way objected to by Philip, who could talk contentedly about himself for a considerable length of time, provided that he was listened to with proper interest. He talked about himself now until it was time for him to go, and apologised to Nellie, as he said good-night, for having wearied her with his egotism. But she answered quite truthfully that he had not wearied her at all; and indeed every one must have noticed that egotists are not always bores, though bores are always egotists.

Philip, not at all suspecting himself of being either the one or the other, started on his homeward way, whistling softly as he went, and was amused to see a stout figure, arrayed in black silk, stationed outside the rectory gates, and evidently waiting for him.

'Old Prosser has got into a funk this time,' thought he,

'and is going to ask me to intercede for her. Shall I do Meg a good turn, and make the old sinner eat humble pie? I think I will.'

Mrs. Prosser dropped a curtsey, and said 'Good evening, sir.'

'Well, Mrs. Prosser—been to confession? It won't do, I'm afraid. Your priest may forgive you, but your mistress never will. Why are you such a cross-grained, cantankerous old woman? You can't expect people to go on having patience with you for ever.'

Philip had always been a favourite with Mrs. Prosser. Her hard features contorted themselves into something that was meant to do duty for a smile as she answered, 'Oh, I am well aware, sir, that if me and Mrs. Stanniforth has not got on as well together as could be wished, there has been faults on both sides. I hope I can forgive and forget as well as another, and I don't bear no sort of ill-feeling against Mrs. Stanniforth. But it's doubtful whether I can remain much longer in her service.'

'Don't be such a pig-headed old idiot, Mrs. Prosser. There are plenty of good housekeepers to be had for good wages; but you won't find such another place as Longbourne in a hurry.'

'I didn't say nothing about leaving Longbourne, sir,' observed Mrs. Prosser, with quiet emphasis.

'Do you mean to give Mrs. Stanniforth notice to quit, then?' asked Philip, laughing. 'I believe you are capable of it.'

'Well, sir, I don't know but what I am. I have been waiting here, Mr. Philip, some little time for to take the opportunity of telling you something which weighs upon my conscience. If you would pardon the liberty, sir, I would make bold to walk as far as the house alongside of you. Being twilight, and most people gone home to their teas, you would perhaps be so kind as to overlook the freedom.'

'Come along, Mrs. Prosser; I should be proud to be seen by the whole parish in such respectable company.'

'You are so kind as to say so, sir.'

Mrs. Prosser cleared her voice, and then proceeded with great solemnity: 'What I am going to tell you, sir, has been told to no living soul, except under seal of confession, for a matter of twenty years. Twenty years have I kept silence; but the time has come that I can't reconcile it with my sense of right for to do so no longer. But before I say any more, sir, I must ask you to give me your word that you won't let it go no further till I'm proved to be right or wrong.'

'Mrs. Prosser, you may rely on my absolute discretion.'

Mrs. Prosser cast a sharp side glance at Philip. 'Tis no joking matter, sir,' said she, slightly offended. 'Mr. Brune must not know of this, nor yet Mrs. Stanniforth must not know, nor yet Miss Nellie must not know—leastways until it's necessary that everybody should be told.'

'Go on, Mrs. Prosser; you excite my curiosity greatly. I'll swear not to breathe a word to a creature till you give me leave. Will that do for you?'

'Thank you, sir; that will be sufficient. I don't know whether you ever heard tell of my old master, Mr. George Brune, sir, Mr. Noville's brother that was. He was a fine-spirited gentleman, though sing'lar in his ways, and terrible extravagant. Always a-rushing about he was, from one furrin land to another, and never could abide his own home; though he come back there to die. "Prosser," he says to me when I went to meet him at the door, "Prosser," he says—I remember it as if 'twas yesterday—"I've come back to Longbourne to die, you see." Oh dear, oh dear! it give me such a turn!'

'I am sure it must have been a great shock to you. Well; and so he confided an awful family secret to you on his death-bed. I don't want to hurry you, Mrs. Prosser, but it's getting rather late.'

'I shall not detain you long, sir. As I was a-saying when you interrupted me, sir, Mr. George were always on the move, and we was never told how long he was to be away, nor when we was to expect him back. Sometimes he'd stop a month, and sometimes only a couple of days; and once we was for two years without seeing or hearing of him. He were in Italy at that time, as I understood. Now, sir, I dessay you're aware that there's a many things which servants hear of and don't mention, and it did come to my ears, through Parsons, Mr. George's man, that there was a lady in Italy. Parsons, he were always a very close man—been dead now—let me see—going on for fifteen years it is since Parsons died, and never told no more about it; but it did come out in the course of conversation, you understand, sir, that there were a lady. At first I thought it were one of those connections which I didn't ought to speak about nor think about; but when poor Mr. George were a-dying I changed my opinion, sir. Myster'ous, indeed, is the decrees of Providence, and His ways past finding out! Little did I think, as I listened to that poor gentleman's ravings, that I should be repeating them to you, sir, twenty years later in this park!'

'Mrs. Prosser, I would not for the world spoil your climax;

but I can't help seeing what is coming. I have no strawberry-mark on my left arm. And now, where is Mr. Brune's marriage certificate?'

'Reely, sir, if you fluster me so we shall never get on. If there had been any marriage certificate, do you think I should have ventured for to conceal it? I don't know nothing for certain; and what I do know must be strictly betwixt me and you, sir, if you please, for the present. I nursed poor Mr. George, night and day, through his last illness, and what he said in his delirium, it was impossible for me to shut my eyes to it, sir. He kep' on talking very excited about a marriage, and "They can't dispute it," he says; "'twas all reg'lar," he says. And when I ask him what marriage, and where did it take place, and so forth—just to soothe him like, you understand, sir—he opens his eyes wide, and says, "Why, at Florence, you fool, and that brat's the heir." After that he didn't say no more—not to be intelligible; but once I heard him muttering, "I'm sorry for poor Neville; Neville's in the wrong box;" and once, if you'll pardon of my repeating the expression, sir, he calls out, "What a damned ass I was!" I ought to have mentioned that just before he was took so bad he made me fetch a box full of letters and burn them before his eyes. They was mostly letters written in a furrin language; but there was no envelopes, so I couldn't tell whether they was from Italy or not. And "Prosser," he says to me, "you're a faithful creature," he says, "and you'll find I've not forgot you in my will." And then he lies back on his piller, and laughs. He had a very cur'ous laugh, had Mr. George; and to be sure there was never any will found. Now, sir, you know all that I know, and you can judge whether it's your interest to look into it or not.'

'Upon my word, Mrs. Prosser,' answered Philip, who was a good deal more startled and excited than he chose to appear, 'I don't see that it is. Have you any reason at all, beyond the fact that I was born in Italy, for supposing me to be the brat to whom your master so politely alluded?'

'Look in the glass, sir,' replied Mrs. Prosser, 'and you will see a very good reason. How you can have lived here all these years and no one noticed that you was the moral of Mr. Neville, barring the eyes, is what I can't comprehend. But I never felt no doubt in my own mind from the very first. Moment as I heard the name of Merryskulker, I says to myself, "'Tis him!"'

'I do not quite follow the deductive process; but it is possible that there may be something in it. I should like to know, by the way, why you have never said anything about all this before.'

'Sir,' answered Mrs. Prosser, gravely, 'it have been a point of conscience with me. Were I justified, I have ask myself, in betraying things as I were never meant to hear, and as come to my knowledge almost in an unfair way, as one may say? And then, I says to myself, What is the good? If 'tis true, depend upon it truth will out, without my meddling; and why am I to do an injury to the family as I owe everything to under Providence? For, you see, sir, you may be a Brune, or you may not; but I could never feel to you quite the same as I do to Mr. Neville.'

'Creditable, Mrs. Prosser, if a trifle casuistic. And then, I suppose, the temptation to turn Mrs. Stanniforth out of house and home was too much for you.'

'That, sir, is a speech which your poor father would have known me better than to make. No; my motives was very different. When I heard how things was with you and Miss Nellie, my dooty come more plain to me. Thinks I, Mr. Philip and Mr. Neville will settle it amicable now, as betwixt father and son; them Stanniforths can have their purchase-money back by degrees, and 't won't be so very much as will be owing to them when you take off what they got from the railway; and so no one won't suffer, and the family will come by its own again. That's what I thought, sir; and Mr. Langley, he approve cordial, and, "Better late than never," he says; "though——'

'Mr. Langley! Do you mean to say that Mr. Langley has known of this all along?'

'Under seal of confession, sir.'

'By Jove! Do you know, Mrs. Prosser, I am not at all sure that you and Mr. Langley have not been compounding a felony under seal of confession?'

'Not a vestige of proof, sir, if you'll please to recollect. Nothing but the ravings of a dying man to go by, and no names mentioned even in the course of them ravings.'

'Very true. I dare say you have found a mare's nest, after all.'

'Perhaps so, sir. But I think it might be worth your while for to look into it. Florence, you will remember, sir, were the place, and the year would be 1853 or 1854. From

taking one thing with another and counting back, I think as we should be safe in putting the date somewheres between March and June 1853. I questioned Parsons very hard about what they was doing that year and about the Italian lady; but I couldn't get no satisfaction out of him. Sometimes I thought he didn't know so much himself as he pretended; for Mr. George would often send him away for a week or more at a time, to order rooms or hire villas, or such like, and 'tisn't to be supposed as he would want to acquaint Parsons with his marriage, if so be as 'twas a marriage.'

Philip took out his note-book, and wrote down 'Florence: March to June 1853.' But this precaution was hardly needed, for the date remained clearly before his eyes through the greater part of a restless night; and the more he thought over Mrs. Prosser's revelation the more he became convinced that her surmise was well founded. He had taken her advice of looking carefully in the glass while dressing for dinner, and had certainly discerned in the small, finely-cut features and the dark complexion reflected therein a decided resemblance to those of Mr. Brune. The expression was as different from his reputed uncle's as it could possibly be; and perhaps it may have been owing to this circumstance that the likeness had never been noticed by those who were best acquainted with the two men.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PHILIP AT FLORENCE.

THERE are people who would rather admit any imputation in the world than that of being favoured by Fortune; people who, if told they are looking well, will remind you reproachfully that they had a very bad cold in the head the week before last; people who grumble at coming into a fortune because of the payment of legacy duty entailed thereby, and who could not accept a first-class embassy or a seat in the Cabinet without sighing over the arduous duties attached to such posts. But Philip, whatever his defects may have been, was not one of those ungracious and ungrateful specimens of humanity. He had always recognised the fact that his luck was exceptional; and his first reflection, on waking out of the short sleep into which he had fallen towards morning was an acknowledgment that in the present instance, as in so many previous ones, the stars in

their courses were fighting for him. Characteristically enough, he was less struck by the strange turn of fortune which promised to change him from a penniless nobody into a highly respectable landed proprietor than by a concurrence of circumstances which seemed likely to render the task of investigation natural and easy. Of all cities in Europe Florence was the one to which he could betake himself at this time with the least fear of exciting remark or suspicion. In the ordinary course of things he would most likely have moved thither before the autumn; and latterly both Mr. Brune and Margaret had been hinting to him that he ought not to lose time in bringing the period of his musical education to an end. Herr Steinberger, too, who had not approved very cordially of the Italian plan, would probably prefer that his pupil should take leave of absence during the busy time of the London season than later in the year. He could, in short, go where he wanted to go, and at the same time tell the literal truth as to his destination—which was something of an unwonted luxury for him. He had quite made up his mind that the mystery should be solved, if by any means he could solve it; and really the solution did not seem likely to present any difficulties whatever.

After breakfast, therefore, Margaret was led out into the garden, and was informed that Philip proposed to hasten the fulfilment of his programme by a few months. 'Everybody says that May is the time for Florence,' he remarked; 'and I suppose, if one wants to get all the good one can out of a place, one should take it at its best. That old Signora Tommasini whom I told you about will be there soon, and will give me introductions that may be useful to me. Moreover, it is high time for me to be setting to work again, Meg. Capua is very delightful, but stern duty seems to motion me towards Tuscany.'

'Capua! where is that?' asked Margaret, who had not the educational advantages enjoyed by the young women of the present day.

'It is within sight of the towers of Crayminster cathedral,' answered Philip; 'and it is a dangerous residence for lazy people who like being spoilt. It isn't everybody who appreciates it at its proper value, though. I don't believe you care a straw for this dear old place, Meg; you would go off and leave it to-morrow without a single regret.'

'Oh, no; indeed I should not!' said Margaret. 'It has taken me a great many years to get fond of Longbourne; but I am very fond of it now, and of all its associations. I leave

home so seldom, too, that I have become like a limpet on a rock, and I should feel utterly lost if I were dragged off it, and thrown out into the world again.'

This was not at all the kind of reply that Philip had wished and expected to receive. He made haste to change the subject. 'By the way, Meg,' said he, 'didn't you tell me once that my father and mother were married at Florence?'

Margaret threw a quick glance of apprehension at him. 'I think so,' she answered; 'I think it was at Florence; but it is so long since I was told about it that I cannot be quite sure.'

The truth was that she was far from feeling as certain as she had once done that this marriage had ever been solemnised at all. The improbability of Countess Marescalchi's story had become more apparent to her with the lapse of years; and from the same cause sundry little touches of sincerity about the dying woman's utterances, which had carried conviction to Margaret's mind at the time, had lost distinctness. Philip had not alluded to his father or mother half a dozen times in the last ten years, and she was sorry that it should have occurred to him now to make inquiries about what might prove to be undiscoverable.

'Being in the place, I should rather like to see the church where they were married. It seems odd to know so little about one's parents,' Philip went on. 'I suppose you don't remember the name of the church, Meg?'

Margaret shook her head, and looked rather shamefaced. It struck her for the first time that she had hardly done her duty towards the unfortunate woman whose child she had appropriated. In her anxiety to treat Philip in all respects as her own son, she had forgotten a little what her wishes would have been, had she been in the situation of poor Countess Marescalchi, and had taken no pains to keep the mother alive in the memory of the *bambino* whom she had so loved.

'I don't think I ever heard the name of the church,' Margaret answered. 'Indeed, I am almost sure I never did. I am afraid I have been very selfish, Philip,' she added penitently. 'I ought to have talked more about your mother to you; and I am sure you must often have wanted to know about her. Why did you never ask me before?'

Philip suddenly burst out laughing, and then as suddenly checked himself, turning his head away for a moment. If there was a person in the world whom he loved, it was Margaret; he never deceived her without a greater or less degree of pain; and

the contrast between the true cause of his inquiries and that to which she attributed them had flashed vividly across his mind, as his impressions always did, and had faded away, leaving the echo of that inappropriate laugh as the trace of its passage.

'Why do you laugh?' asked Margaret.

'I don't know. I don't believe in instinctive affection, do you? How can one really care for a person whom one hardly recollects? You are my real mother, Meg; and as for my father, I have small reason to revere his memory, by all accounts. I should like just to know who he was, though. One feels a little pardonable curiosity upon such points.'

'Yes,' agreed Margaret, with some hesitation; 'but I should hope—I should think, at least—that he must be dead. I have your uncle Signor Cavestri's address in Florence somewhere, and I can give it you, if you like. That is, I have what was his address twelve years ago: I have never heard a word of or from him since.'

'Give me the address, Meg, and I'll look the old fellow up. Perhaps he may know something; and, if he doesn't, it can't be helped.'

'I almost hope he may not,' said Margaret.

Philip was not prepared to go quite so far as that; but he offered the general observation that it was a queer world, to which Mrs. Stanniforth signified her assent; and with that the subject dropped.

A few days after this Philip set out for Italy, with the good wishes of all his friends to speed him on his way. Some of them drove down to Crayminster station to bid him farewell; and the last thing that Philip saw, as the train began to move, was Nellie, waving her hand and nodding to him, with the brightest of smiles upon her face.

'Hurray!' exclaimed Mr. Brune, as he turned to leave the platform. 'My dear Nellie, may I be permitted to say hurray?'

'You may say anything you like, papa,' answered she, with due submission.

'Thank you, my dear. How I do dislike that young man!'

'Ah; but you would dislike anybody who wanted to marry me, wouldn't you?' said Nellie, taking her father's arm and giving it a squeeze.

'Well, well; perhaps so. I can't bear the sight of Marescalchi, I know. However, we've seen the last of him for the present, and long may it be before we see him again! It is

my firm belief that you don't care a brass farthing for him, Nell.'

And perhaps the very vehemence with which Miss Brune repelled this accusation may have confirmed her father in his opinion.

It is certain that Nellie did not shed any tears, and was in no way cast down by her lover's departure; nor, for that matter, was the lover himself cast down. Philip's powers of amusing and enjoying himself were quite unbounded; and the pleasure he got out of a railway journey from England to Florence was as great as the discomfort entailed thereby upon common mortals—which is saying a good deal. The odd types that he encountered among his fellow-travellers, the novelty of the scenes that flitted, like dissolving views, past the railway-carriage windows, the ever-increasing warmth of the sun and clearness of the atmosphere, as the express rushed southwards—all these, and a hundred other trifles, contributed to divert and exhilarate him. A fresh sensation awaited him after the passing of the frontier, namely, a vague and pleasant stirring of long-buried memories. Those sallow faces, those high-pitched voices, those unshaven chins, those stout and brilliantly-dressed ladies, had he not known them all in some previous state of existence? The mulberry-trees, the maize-fields, the trailing vines, the ragged beggars who loitered and whined outside the railings of wayside stations, were not all these familiar, and yet strange, to him? Even certain faint odours, in which garlic and bad tobacco had a large share, seemed to recall shadowy experiences through which somebody had once passed. Philip really could not have sworn that he had passed through them himself. He felt half inclined to shake hands with the people who got into the railway carriage; for surely they were all old friends, though their names had somehow escaped him. He studied their features with a puzzled smile; whereupon they smiled back, as Italians are always ready to do, and promptly entered into conversation. Philip had some knowledge of Italian, and his quick ear soon picked up the intonation of that easiest of tongues: perhaps, too, memory came to his aid again here. He managed to make himself agreeable; he scraped acquaintance with various entertaining persons; and so arrived at his destination at length, not tired, in a very cheerful frame of mind, and without troubled his head once in the course of his journey bject.

But when he had established himself comfortably in an hotel overlooking the Arno, and had had a bath and an ample breakfast and a cigar, he began to think it was time to attend to business, and, strolling out into the sunshine, inquired his way to the Via di San Giorgio.

The directions that he received were not very precise, and he had some little difficulty in following them; but he was in no hurry. He spent a very agreeable hour in admiring Giotto's Campanile, in loitering down the sunny side of broad thoroughfares, in staring in at shop-windows, and in exploring a network of narrow byways. At length, more by chance than intention, he hit off the street of which he was in search, and, drawing a slip of paper from his pocket, compared the address inscribed upon it with the number of the house before him. 'Via di San Giorgio, No. 34, *terzo piano*.' Here, sure enough, was No. 34; and a very dismal and poverty-stricken habitation it looked. As Philip climbed the dirty stone staircase, he had leisure to reflect that an uncle who lived in such quarters would be a very likely sort of uncle to make demands upon the purse of a nephew possessed of landed property; but parsimony had never been one of Philip's vices, and he said to himself that, if things turned out well, some sort of provision should be made for this needy relative. It presently appeared, however, that Signor Cavestri was no longer in a position to request or require human aid.

'Signor Cavestri!' cried the dishevelled servant-of-all-work who answered Philip's ring. 'Eh! signore.' And she raised her right hand and suddenly allowed her head to drop upon it sideways, as if it would roll off her shoulders.

Philip had never seen this gesture employed before; but its meaning required no explanation. 'Do you mean to say that Signor Cavestri is dead?' he asked in some dismay.

'*È morto—è morto—sì!*' answered the woman, nodding a great many times, in apparent determination that there should be no mistake as to the fact of her late master's demise; and she went on to state that it was three years and more since he had been laid to rest, and to give some particulars of his last illness, to which Philip paid little attention.

'What a bother!' he muttered. Then he said aloud: 'I regret this exceedingly. I have come all the way from England to see Signor Cavestri upon a matter of business which I had hoped might prove advantageous to him. Do you know whether any relations of his are living in Florence?'

'*Sicuro!* His daughter, the Signora Bonera, and her family inhabit the floor upon which your Excellency is standing,' replied the woman, upon whom Philip's well-to-do appearance had not failed to produce some effect. 'With permission, I will go and call the signora.'

But, before Philip could make any answer, a third person had come to the front, in the shape of an obese, dark-haired lady in a rather dirty white dressing-gown, who may perhaps have overheard the previous colloquy.

'I am the Signora Bonera,' quoth she, with a sweeping curtsey and a fascinating smile. '*Favorisca, signore.*' And she led the way into a scantily-furnished and carpetless sitting-room, and requested the stranger to do her the honour to sit down.

'So you are my cousin!' thought Philip, as he seated himself with precaution upon a decrepit arm-chair; 'and you have got a family, and be hanged to you! All things considered, my dear cousin, I shall not reveal my identity to you until I am obliged.'

He therefore made known the nature of his errand with much circumlocution and a great deal of pretended difficulty in expressing himself in Italian. Signora Bonera became immensely interested and excited when she heard what it was that had brought the stranger to Florence; she was very inquisitive and asked numberless questions; but the greater part of these Philip affected not to understand. He soon found out that she was not likely to be of any assistance to him, and that she knew little or nothing beyond the fact that her aunt had been married to a wealthy Englishman, who had deserted her.

'But,' said she, 'my uncle Filippo, who lives at Bologna, would be able to furnish you with every particular. He was at the marriage himself, as I have often heard him tell, and he can prove, if that is what is wanted, that it was a good marriage. I will write to him this evening, and beg him to come here and meet you. *Lo zio* is growing an old man—and there is the cost of the journey. But doubtless the signore has the means——'

An expressive pause seemed to call for some rejoinder from Philip, who bowed and said there would be no difficulty on the score of legitimate expenses.

'I will write by the very next post,' cried the Signora Bonera. 'And what name shall I have the pleasure of mentioning to my uncle?' she asked insinuatingly.

Philip declared that he could not think of putting the lady to so much trouble. Only let her oblige him with Signor Filippo Cavestri's address, and he would himself undertake the rest. This proposition did not at all meet the views of Signora Bonera, who pointed out that it would be a great deal easier for her than for her interlocutor to compose an Italian letter; but Philip said he had no doubt he should be able to make himself intelligible with the help of a dictionary. Thereupon a long and lively debate ensued; but in the end Philip carried his point, and escaped without having given his name. He promised to call again before long, at the same time throwing out some pacifying hints as to a possible change in the fortunes of the Cavestri family, and so made his way out into the air and sunshine again, not ill pleased, upon the whole, with the result of his afternoon's work. It would have been more convenient, and probably less expensive, to have had to deal with one person than with a whole family, and he could have wished that his cousin had been a rather more presentable individual; still, he reflected, it might have been worse. These people were evidently too poor to be very troublesome, and it was a far cry from Longbourne to Florence. Taking everything into consideration, he was inclined to put down the whole Cavestri clan at an annual expenditure of from three to four hundred pounds; and really they would be cheap at the money, if they could supply him with the information that he wanted.

When he returned to his hotel, the sun, sloping towards the west, was flooding the Lung Arno with mellow light, and illumining, among other persons and things, a very smart landau, which was waiting at the door. Philip was indulging in a moment's idle curiosity as to who the owner of this showy equipage might be, when the porter hurried out, cap in hand, to hold open the door. Then came the swish of voluminous skirts; a shrill exclamation rang through Philip's head, and immediately both his hands were being grasped in the tightly-gloved ones of Signora Tommasini.

'You, of all people in the world!' she exclaimed. 'Well, I am glad! I had really begun to think I was never to see you again.'

'Nor your 5,000*l.* either,' thought Philip. And simultaneously it occurred to him that, if he should indeed prove to be the heir of Longbourne, this and other debts might be discharged within no very long space of time. This enabled him to welcome Signora Tommasini with less of mental reserve than he might otherwise have done.

'You can't be more glad than I am,' he answered. 'You are more surprised, I dare say, because I fully expected to meet you here, and have been looking forward to doing so for a long time.'

'Have you? I don't believe you a bit; but it is polite of you to say that. Why have you never written to me? Are you staying in this hotel? Are you really going to study here?' went on the Signora, asking questions with her usual volubility, and pausing for no answers. 'Come for a drive with me. I am going to the Cascine, where it is delicious at this hour, and where you will meet all the world. I am singing at the Opera here, you know, and am received *tant bien que mal*. But I don't like these Florentines; they are very different from my good English public. They are cold; they are critical; they make no allowance for a poor old woman with a cracked voice, who is doing her best to please them. Ah, well, every dog has his day. The Florentines would adore you; they love a handsome face as much as a sweet voice. You ought to make your *début* here. But I suppose old Steinberger would object to that. Not that you would ever be able to make yourself heard beyond such an orchestra. The public taste is becoming ruined in Italy, as it is everywhere else. In old days they loved singing; now they only care for noise. I was singing in *Don Carlos* last night, and they insisted on having the march three times, the idiots! All that is rather a help to old stagers, like myself, who don't mind a hubbub which covers deficiencies; but it would be fatal to you. Where have you been since you left London? Down in the country all this time? I thought you hated the country. Give an account of yourself and of all that you have been doing.'

'I will, if you'll let me get in a word,' answered Philip, laughing.

He had been seated in the landau beside Signora Tommasini long before this, and they were within the gates of the Cascine by the time that she had ceased speaking. The carriage had fallen into a line of others, which were proceeding at a snail's pace along the shady drive, meeting a stream of returning vehicles, some shabby, some resplendent, all, or nearly all, badly horsed. Many hats were raised and many hands waved to the popular *prima donna*, who acknowledged these greetings with a bow from her waist to the ladies, a bob of her head for the men, and a broad, good-humoured smile for everybody. Her time was so taken up with receiving and returning salutations that she could pay but little attention to her companion,

and at last ordered the coachman to drive on to a more secluded part of the gardens.

'It is impossible to talk or to listen in this crowd,' said she; 'and I want to talk to you, or rather to hear you talk.' And when the fashionable world of Florence had been left behind, the Signora proposed that they should get out of the carriage and walk a little way. 'I am obliged to take some exercise every day to keep down my fat,' she said, with a laugh. 'I haven't succeeded very well, you'll say; but then there's no telling how much worse I might have been if I had been lazy. Now, what has brought you here? Wasn't it rather a sudden resolution?'

'I always talked, you know, of coming to Italy for a time,' answered Philip; 'and it so happens that I have reasons for wishing to be in Florence just now, besides the desire to take a few lessons and to enjoy the pleasure of your society.'

At that moment he felt a strong impulse to be candid with Signora Tommasini. Philip, like many other persons who habitually distrust their kind, was subject to irresistible leanings towards confidence in the case of certain individuals, and particularly of such as he thought likely to prove of service to him. Signora Tommasini was emphatically one of these. He knew that her affection for him was sincere; he had found her also to be a shrewder woman than was generally supposed, and he had a notion that shrewdness might be a very necessary quality in dealings with the Cavestri family. Added to this, he was naturally anxious to let the Signora know that there was so fair a probability of her 5,000*l.* being handed back to her before she was much older. Such being his state of mind, it may well be supposed that within the space of about half an hour the Signora knew all that there was to know about her friend's parentage and adoption, and about the flattering tale which Hope and Mrs. Prosser had whispered in his ear. She would have been in possession of the facts a great deal sooner if she had not interrupted the beginning of the recital by many queries and ejaculations, and if she had not stopped Philip to scold him roundly for five minutes when he alluded to the prospect of his being able soon to refund the advance which she had so kindly made to him. But after that she became more and more grave and silent, and her final comment upon what she had heard was the unexpected one of 'Well, it is a great pity.'

Philip looked at her, looked up at the sky, looked around him at the trees on either side of the shady alley along which

they were pacing, and, spreading out his hands with a gesture of patient expostulation, addressed himself to space. 'Now, did you ever—I ask you, *did* you ever—hear anything like that? I have seen something of women; I have lived amongst them more than most men do, and I flattered myself that I understood the queer nature of them to some extent; but after this I give the subject up, it beats me altogether. Oh, it's Balak and Balaam over again, you know. I bring her out here to congratulate me, and behold, she puts on a long face, and says it's a pity! Now, I should like to know why it is a pity. In what possible way can it be a pity?'

'It seems to me,' answered the Signora, 'that it is a pity in every way. The story will turn out to be true, I'm afraid; and I tell you frankly that I'm very sorry for it. I had had great hopes of you. With labour and patience I do believe that you would have become a famous singer some day; and I am quite certain that the life of a famous singer would have been the one above all others to make you happy. You will not be happy at all as a country gentleman with a limited income, and you will go to the bad, most likely, for the want of something to do and somebody to look after you. More than that, I think it is a pity—we are friends, you know, and you mustn't be angry if I speak my mind—I think it is a pity that you should be turning the lady who has been the making of you out of house and home.'

Philip was not easily offended; but this outspoken censure touched him in a sore place, and the blood mounted to his forehead as he answered, 'That is a very unfair way of putting it. It is true that Mrs. Stanniforth may have to leave Longbourne; but is that any fault of mine? She won't be a penny the poorer, remember, and all that she will lose will be the house. And let me tell you that, if you knew her, you would be aware that she is the very last person in the world to grudge me a piece of good fortune.'

'Then why didn't you tell her what you were coming here for?'

'What would have been the use of troubling her, when I knew nothing for certain? Besides, I promised Prosser that I wouldn't say a word to any one.'

'I don't care a snap for that malignant old hag of a housekeeper; and you don't care a snap for your promise. You have broken it already in telling me; break it again, and write to Mrs. Stanniforth by to-night's mail.'

'My dear Signora Tommasini, I have the most sincere respect for your opinion; but I do think I may be the best judge of what ought to be my conduct towards Mrs. Stanniforth.'

'Well may you say that you don't understand women!' cried the Signora, with some impatience. 'Oh, you foolish fellow! can't you understand such a simple thing as this?—that Mrs. Stanniforth would forgive you for turning her out of her home, or even for taking her purse out of her pocket; but that she will never quite forgive you for deceiving her. You have made a very stupid mistake as it is; but you may undo it partly, if you write by to-night's post and explain everything. She will think you found writing more easy than speaking; many people do. Come along back to the carriage; we haven't a minute to lose.'

And this energetic lady caught Philip by the arm, and hurried him away, paying no head to his protests.

'You are quite wrong,' he said. 'She'll tell her mother, and then there'll be the deuce to pay. And a pretty fool I shall look if the whole thing turns out a myth.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' returned the Signora; 'she won't tell anybody; and if she does, it is better to look like a fool than like something else. Don't you play fast and loose with your best friends. You can't afford it, I tell you.'

All the way back to Florence the Signora lectured and Philip argued; but the end of it was that he did write the letter, as he was bid, and posted it at the same time with one addressed to Signor Cavestri at Bologna.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LETTERS AND TELEGRAMS.

THE Post Office, as brought to its present state of efficiency, is doubtless one of the glories of the age and an institution for which everybody ought to be thankful. That the facilities for speedy communication afforded by it give us all an immensity of needless worry is, however, indisputable; and this chapter will show how a mighty pother was brought about among one set of insignificant people by the postal machinery during the space of a single short week.

Possibly things might have fallen out differently but for the accident of Philip's having chosen to leave Longbourne for

Italy on a Monday; which was the day invariably set apart by Mrs. Stanniforth for the despatch of that weekly budget to Shorncliffe which has been already more than once referred to. For several past Mondays Margaret had contrived, with no small difficulty, to keep her own counsel upon the subject which chiefly engrossed her thoughts; for she had felt certain that Hugh would consider the engagement between Philip and Nellie an imprudent one, and would say so; and she had heard this said so many times already that it seemed almost better to hold her peace altogether than to expose herself to a repetition of it from a fresh quarter. But on this especial Monday, when all the agitation of leave-taking was still upon her, it was inevitable that she should write about Philip, and scarcely less inevitable that, in writing about him, she should tell the whole truth. This was the conclusion to which she came, after tearing up three abortive attempts at mystery. Either she must disburden her soul, or Hugh must do without his letter. Her own inclinations and regard for the feelings of her friend alike urged her to adopt the former alternative; and accordingly she did adopt it—with a result which will have been foreseen by readers with good memories.

On the Wednesday morning Mrs. Winnington, sitting opposite to her daughter at the breakfast-table, and receiving a pat of butter in her tea, instead of a lump of sugar, formed the not unnatural conclusion that some news of a disquieting nature had reached the mistress of the house.

'Dearest Margaret,' said she, when the above trifling mistake had been mentioned and rectified, 'I trust you have not had any unpleasant letters.'

'Nearly all letters are unpleasant,' answered Margaret, with a tremble in her voice and a very unsuccessful imitation of a laugh. She added something incoherent about business letters and begging letters, and laid down the one which she had been perusing.

But as soon as her mother, who had a fine healthy appetite, had ceased to scrutinise her, she picked it up again and finished it, her face growing paler and paler, as she read.

'My dear Margaret' (Hugh wrote)—'I can't tell you how astonished and grieved I was to hear by your letter of this morning that Marescalchi had engaged himself to Miss Brune. It is such a bad business that I hardly know how to tell you what is the real state of the case; and yet it is certain that you must be told. I wish with all my heart that I had

not been such a fool as to conceal what I have known for the last three months; but I acted, as I thought, for the best, never doubting but that the young fellow would confess it all to you himself, sooner or later. Latterly, indeed, I have fancied, from your never saying anything about him in your letters, that he had done so.

'It is useless to try and break these things gently: the miserable truth is that he is married already. Unfortunately, there is no room for the shadow of a doubt as to the fact. You may remember that you wrote to me in January last, asking me to go up to London and see Marescalchi, who, you feared, was in some trouble; and it was then that I discovered that he was living in Conduit Street with his wife, to whom he must have been some time married, as there was a baby. I happened to see the whole three of them entering the house, and I am bound to say the young woman appeared to be a modest, respectable sort of person, though certainly not a lady. I hesitated to speak to Marescalchi at the time, as perhaps I ought to have done; and when I was next able to call, I heard from the landlady of the lodgings that he and Mrs. Marescalchi were in great distress, owing to the sudden death of the child; so that it was really impossible for me to intrude upon him. Had I had the smallest idea that he could be such a scoundrel as he evidently is, I should not have been so scrupulous. I need not say how much I have felt for you all this time; and I may add that I have also wasted some good pity upon him. Poor little Miss Brune! this is a sad beginning for her life.

'If I can be of any help to you in any way, you know that you can command me. I could get leave, if necessary, and a *journey to Italy* would be quite within my power. I dread to seem interfering and officious; but there are emergencies in which a strong arm is a useful thing, and there are persons who understand no other argument.

'I am writing in some haste; and, besides that, I thought you would rather I said what I had to say as briefly as possible; but, of course, if you wish it, I can give you fuller particulars. For the present I will only add that, if you can think of any way in which I can serve you, and will tell me of it, you will confer a true kindness upon

'Your affectionate friend,

'HUGH KENYON.'

There were certain passages in this letter which were

scarcely judicious, and the whole composition was pervaded by a subdued 'didn't-I tell-you-so?' flavour which Margaret would certainly have noticed and resented, had its subject-matter been less appalling. As it was, she could only repeat to herself, 'This is not true. I can't believe it. Hugh must have made some mistake.' But there was very little comfort to be got out of telling herself that she couldn't believe it, when she knew all the time that she could, and did. She read the letter over again, and was unable to discover any loophole for escape. There was no getting over the landlady's allusion to 'Mrs. Marescalchi;' nor was it conceivable that Philip should have allowed any woman to pass as his wife, unless he had been really married to her. Margaret did not ask herself whether it was conceivable that Philip should contemplate bigamy. She had not yet had time to weigh probabilities, and was so stunned and bewildered that, if Mrs. Winnington had chosen to question her further, the whole story must infallibly have come out in the course of a few minutes.

It chanced, however, that Mrs. Winnington's mind was engaged with other matters at the moment. Mrs. Winnington had been reading letters of her own—letters from London—letters in which mention was made of balls and dinners and State concerts, and all the other unvarying incidents of that life for which her soul yearned. Mrs. Winnington had tasted these delights many a time and often, and for her assuredly there could be no new thing under the dim London sun; but, as she was very far from desiring anything new, such philosophical reflections were powerless to console her, and it was with a profound and pathetic sigh that she restored her letters to their envelopes. Margaret did not appear to notice this signal of distress; so Mrs. Winnington sighed more loudly, and, again failing to attract attention, rose, walked to the other end of the table, and placing her hands affectionately on her daughter's shoulders, kissed her on the forehead.

'Dearest Margaret,' said she, 'you are looking very pale. Don't you think you ought to have a little change?'

'Oh, no,' answered Margaret, hastily; 'I am perfectly well, and I hate going away from home. Longbourne suits me better than any other place in the world.'

'My dear, are you sure of that? Constitutions differ, certainly; but I cannot help thinking it very unlikely that a place which invariably makes me ill after three weeks can agree with you all the year round.'

'But it really does,' answered Margaret, with provoking obtuseness.

Mrs. Winnington moved to the window, and looked out upon the terrace, where her younger daughter was to be seen walking up and down in the sunshine. 'Poor Edith!' she murmured; 'I do feel so very sorry for her, poor child!'

'Sorry for Edith?' repeated Margaret, absently. 'Why should you be sorry for her?'

'Oh, my dear,' cried Mrs. Winnington, with some asperity, 'you are not the only person in the would who is to be pitied. Other people have their troubles too; and naturally, at Edith's age, it seems hard to be buried down in the country, when all her friends are enjoying themselves in town.'

This direct appeal proved effectual. Margaret roused herself, got up, and joined her mother at the window. 'How selfish of me never to have thought of that!' she exclaimed penitently. 'Of course she ought to be in London, and so ought you. Do take her there at once; you must not hesitate about leaving me.'

But Mrs. Winnington shook her head. 'No,' said she decisively; 'I determined, once for all, last year, that I never would spend another season in London lodgings. To begin with, it is more than I can afford.'

'But, mother——'

'Dearest Margaret, you are always so kind; and I know you would gladly help us out with our rent; but rent is really the least thing. There are carriages, and dresses, and flowers, and a hundred other necessaries, which would swallow up the whole of my wretched little income in a few months. Besides which, living in lodgings is objectionable in every way. I felt it so very strongly last year, and I made up my mind that I would never do it again. If one wishes to hold up one's head in society at all, one must entertain. It need not be upon a large scale, and it need not cost much; but there is just the feeling, you know, that one can have a few people to dinner sometimes, and that one has a decent house to receive one's visitors in. I have thought very often lately that I have acted rather unfairly to Edith in remaining unsettled, year after year, as I have done. It is so difficult to see one's duty plainly! I believe now that what I ought to have done would have been to establish myself in a small house at the far end of Belgrave Road, or some other cheap place. It would have been very nasty; but it would have given her an oppor-

tunity of sometimes catching glimpses of civilisation. There is no help for it now, though. To hire a house in London for the season would be out of the question; and to lodgings I will not go. As I said to Lady Laura Smythe the other day, going into society in that sort of way is almost like living upon the charity of others—a thing I could never consent to do.'

If Margaret did not answer immediately, it was because she was half afraid that it was not in her power to make the only answer that could be considered at all to the point. That a childless woman, with fifteen thousand a year and the simplest of personal tastes, should ever be in want of money may sound somewhat incredible; but it is said by those who ought to know that there are people with twice Mrs. Stanniforth's means who are not unacquainted with the pinch of poverty. However that may be, it is certain that Margaret was not, in the true sense of the word, rich. From various causes, which need not be entered into now, she was seldom able to keep a large balance at her bankers', and it has been shown before what excellent reasons she had for desiring to lay by a certain sum every year. Still, she felt that, if she remained long silent, her mother's delicate scruples would be aroused, and poor Edith would get no London season. Therefore she only hesitated a moment before declaring cheerfully that the London house ought to be her affair, and that she would give instructions about securing one forthwith.

Mrs. Winnington could not hear of such a thing. No! she knew too well how many people had claims—if you could call them claims—upon poor dear Margaret, and what it cost to provide young men with unlimited travelling expenses and the best singing-masters in Italy. No! if dear Margaret had wished to take a house in London for *herself*, that would have been another thing; but Mrs. Winnington could not accept, and would not accept, even from her own daughter—and so forth, and so forth, for ten minutes, without a break. In the course of these ten minutes it did, indeed, transpire that there was a small house in Park Street, belonging to a particular friend of Lady Laura Smythe's, which was now to be had; but the rent asked for it was quite too ridiculous—which was a pity, as the situation and the very modest dimensions of the house might have made it suitable in other ways. 'But,' added Mrs. Winnington, 'no doubt it will be snapped up at once. Lady Laura asked me to let her have a reply by return of post. So absurd of her! As if I could possibly afford such an expense!

But I never can get people to understand that your purse is not mine.'

The remainder of the argument need scarcely be chronicled. Of course Margaret protested that all that was hers was her mother's, and of course Mrs. Winnington pointed out that, however justifiable such a theory might be upon abstract grounds, it was impossible to make it fit in with the conditions of a sophisticated state of society. The generous dispute was a prolonged one; but it was not so unduly prolonged as to prevent Mrs. Winnington from dashing off a few hasty lines to Lady Laura Smythe in time to catch the midday post.

Margaret breathed more freely as soon as this question was disposed of. In the impending catastrophe her mother's sympathies would not, as she well knew, be with her; and it would be best for her to be alone when the terrible disclosure had to be made. It should not be made before an answer should have come from Philip: she had now so far recovered her scattered wits as to have decided upon that much. She would write to him, enclosing Hugh's letter, and she would not condemn him until he should have had an opportunity of giving his version of the story. Who knew but that he might be able to exculpate himself? Even a prisoner who has been caught in the act of entering a dwelling-house by the area-window at midnight is held innocent until he has been proved guilty; and was she not to extend the same measure of bare justice to poor Philip? She had already begun to think of him as 'poor Philip,' it will be observed. Perhaps in his case, as in that of the suppositious burglar, it was upon the absence of 'felonious intent' that she built her vain hopes.

But, as the day went on, it became more and more apparent to her that she could never live through the long interval of suspense that must take place before a reply could be received from Florence. This, she calculated, could not, at earliest, be before the fifth day; and to exist in a state of torment through four mortal days and nights was an ordeal not to be faced, if by any means it could be avoided. She longed to telegraph, but could not see her way to doing so, consistently with prudence; for Longbourne was not one of the houses where telegrams are received and despatched so frequently as to give rise to no remark; and, besides that, it would be impossible to frame a message which should be at once intelligible to Philip and unintelligible to the clerks at the Crayminster post-office. It was while pondering the latter difficulty that Margaret thought of a

very simple expedient for overcoming it. Why should she not word her telegram in a foreign language? The notion pleased her so much, and her desire to be put speedily out of her pain was so strong, that she resolved, at last, to run the risk; and in the course of the afternoon she set out to walk across the fields to Crayminster, and to write the momentous question with her own hand. She did not care to let the servants know that she was in such haste to communicate with Mr. Marescalchi, and she would not drive, for she knew that if she did so her mother would accompany her.

The young gentleman who snatched Mrs. Stanniforth's telegraph-form out of her hand—(is it because postmen always have the gratuities of Christmas before their mind's eye, while post-office clerks have nothing connected with that season to look forward to, except an increase of labour, that the former are so subservient and the latter so outrageously offensive in their demeanour towards the public?)—this young gentleman was as satisfactorily puzzled as could have been wished. Margaret had written distinctly the following words in German, having had doubts as to the trustworthiness of French in this age of universal accomplishment: 'Is it the case that you are not free to marry? Pray telegraph the exact truth. Hugh has been in Conduit Street.' This message, after much preliminary frowning and muttering, was accepted and paid for; and when Margaret had asked three times at what hour it would be delivered, and had been answered at last by a curt, 'Can't say, 'm shaw,' she started on her homeward way.

It was a long up-hill walk, and the sun was hot and scorching, as it often is in the month of May. Margaret, weary in body and mind, had lost all thinking power, and, fortunately for herself, was unable to suffer in anticipation of a terrible future. Her one anxiety, then and throughout the remainder of the day, was that the reply to her telegram should reach her after her mother and sister had gone to bed. It would have puzzled her to give any account afterwards of the manner in which she had got through that interminable afternoon and evening. But somehow or other the time passed; and Fortune was very kind to her; for hardly had Mrs. Winnington, and Edith wished her good-night, and gone upstairs, than a ring at the front-door brought her heart into her mouth; and a minute later the wished-for yellow envelope was in her hands.

She tore it open, devoured its contents, and then, covering her face with her hands, burst into tears of joy. Philip's

answer was brief and to the point; and he had not thought it necessary to employ any language but his own. 'All right. Free as air. Very natural mistake of Kenyon's. Will write about this and the other matter shortly.'

It was very well to be thankful; but it was unfortunate, though not perhaps very surprising, that Margaret's thankfulness should have been mingled with a strong feeling of wrath against the luckless Hugh Kenyon. 'How like Hugh to jump to conclusions in that way!' she thought. 'Hugh would believe anything bad of Philip; and he never considers what misery he inflicts upon me when he makes such cruel accusations.'

This was, no doubt, extremely unjust, since Colonel Kenyon was about the last man in England to jump to conclusions, and certainly the last to inflict needless pain upon those whom he loved; but that he was ready to believe anything bad of Philip was true enough, and it was probably this predisposition which Margaret found it most hard to forgive. She sat down forthwith, and scribbled off a hasty letter, which would have gone near to breaking Hugh's heart if he had ever received it. But he never did receive it; for his correspondent, after relieving her feelings by saying some very cutting things, wisely tore up what she had written, and went to bed at peace with all mankind, forgiving her friends as well as her enemies.

It was not until the following morning that she began to wonder what might be that 'other matter' to which Philip had made allusion; but it did not occur to her to attach any importance to the phrase. He might have intended to refer to his engagement to Nellie, or to his plans for remaining at Florence—most likely to the former. Thursday, therefore, was a day of rest and freedom from care for Margaret; but upon the Friday morning she found, beside her plate at breakfast-time, the letter which had been written at Signora Tommasini's instance, and which had been posted before the telegram from Longbourne had reached its destination. The substance of this letter astonished and perturbed Margaret a good deal; but it by no means filled her with consternation, as Colonel Kenyon's had done. Considering the haste with which it had been written, it was a not unskilfully worded epistle. It was—so Margaret thought—quite unnecessarily contrite in tone, and it explained to her full satisfaction Philip's previous silence. It was both natural and becoming that, upon the first blush of the thing, he should have held himself bound by his promise to

Prosser, and it was a proof of his heart's being in the right place that, after more mature consideration, he should have found it impossible to keep any secret from herself. As to the main point, her sympathies and hopes were entirely upon the side of her adopted son. Most willingly would she retire from Longbourne to let him enter there as master, and most thankful would she be if the respectability of his birth could be proved beyond a doubt. Not having had time to contemplate possible side-issues, she was inclined to hail the news, so far as it went, as thoroughly good news.

'A letter from Florence?' asked Mrs. Winnington, insinuatingly, across the table. 'All well, I hope?'

'Philip has got over his journey safely,' answered Margaret, with pardonable equivocation.

'So glad! Now, dearest Margaret, don't you think you might come up to London to us for a time? We would not keep you a day longer than you wished to stay; but I really believe you would enjoy yourself, when once you were there.'

What reply Mrs. Stanniforth would have made to this kindly pressure to partake of her own hospitality will never be known; for at this moment Edith, who had been looking out of the window, turned round to say that one of the cows had got into the garden, and was eating up the roses.

'*Oh!*' exclaimed Margaret, and flew out on to the terrace, followed by her sister.

An exciting chase, subsequently joined in by two gardeners, ensued, and lasted for a matter of ten minutes, while Mrs. Winnington looked on from the window with a face of strong disapproval. It did not accord with her views of propriety that ladies should rush about and make themselves hot, when they had a large staff of retainers handsomely paid to do that for them. Such behaviour, she thought, lowered one in the eyes of one's inferiors, and encouraged them to take liberties. Possibly with a desire to spare herself the sight of so degrading a spectacle, she turned away, and began carelessly glancing at the letters which Margaret had imprudently left on the table. It has been said before that Mrs. Winnington's notions with regard to the sacredness of other people's letters were of a liberal order; and she did not for a minute hesitate to draw these from their envelopes. And so it came to pass that when Margaret returned —flushed and breathless, but triumphant—she found her mother extended rigidly upon her chair, with the soles of her feet well exposed to view, her head falling on to her shoulder, and her

arms hanging helpless by her sides like those of a rag doll. What had happened was only too evident; and Margaret, for once, lost all control over her indignation.

'Really, mother,' she exclaimed, 'this is too bad! Why do you read my letters?'

'Oh, Margaret,' answered Mrs. Winnington, in a hollow voice, 'do not—*do* not speak of such trifles at a moment like this! How you can scamper after cows, when you may be upon the brink of being turned out of your house, is more than I can comprehend. This is what one gets by adopting orphans and pampering them! But for your infatuation, this wretched boy might have died years ago.'

'Nonsense, mother! it is not in the least certain that I shall be turned out of my house; and I don't care if I am. You ought not to have looked at my letter, and you have no business to know anything about this. The least that you can do now is to behave as if you knew nothing about it.'

'Very well, my dear; if you think that is a proper way to speak to your mother, I can say no more. In my opinion, letters that are left open upon the table are as much public property as newspapers; and I must say I should never have supposed you wished to conceal anything from me. Pray do not imagine that I shall interfere in the matter, directly or indirectly. It must be sifted, however,' continued Mrs. Winnington, assuming a more erect attitude. 'The woman Prosser must be sent for at once, and made to tell all that she knows.'

'I cannot allow it!' exclaimed Margaret. 'The secret is Philip's, not mine, and it would be most ungenerous in me to betray him. It would not do any good either; for, naturally, Prosser could tell us no more than she told him.'

'It would do this good,' answered Mrs. Winnington, 'that it would set my mind at rest. I don't believe a word of this story, mind you—not a word of it! It might be easy enough for that woman to deceive a silly, vain boy; but she will not find it so easy to deceive me, I can tell her.'

The issue was inevitable. Mrs. Winnington had taken the bit between her teeth, and Margaret knew full well that argument would be thrown away upon her. Indeed, the good lady herself confessed as much. She was not going to interfere in any way, she said; but at the same time she could not blind herself to her plain duty. She could not sit still and allow a monstrous fraud to be concocted under her daughter's roof; and, in short, if the mountain would not come to Mahomet, Mahomet

must go to the mountain. In other words, Mrs. Winnington expressed her intention, in the last resort, of betaking herself to the housekeeper's room, and doing battle there.

As a choice of evils, therefore, Mrs. Prosser was summoned, and probably derived much satisfaction from the spectacle of her enemy's discomfiture. Mrs. Prosser, it need hardly be said, was victorious all along the line. Her evidence was not to be shaken by the most searching cross-examination; nor did she allow herself to be moved for one instant from the placid respectfulness of her bearing. Mrs. Winnington she ignored altogether, addressing her replies exclusively to Margaret, and, it must be confessed, producing a rather favourable impression upon the latter by her straightforwardness. When pressed to say why she had not told her story before, she answered that that was a matter 'betwixt her and her conscience,' and she must 'decline for to enter upon it again.' She had 'already spoke to Mr. Philip upon the subjeck.'

'It all seems to be the most preposterous rubbish!' cried Mrs. Winnington, at length. 'At all events, the question cannot be set at rest without a lawsuit; that is certain.'

'I don't think, ma'am,' observed Mrs. Prosser to Margaret, 'as Mr. Neville would wish to go to law, if Mr. Philip's rights was proved to his satisfaction; and I believe there is nobody else who could do so.'

'Of course there could be nobody else, Prosser,' answered Margaret. 'It is a pity, I think, that you did not speak sooner; but I quite believe all that you have told us. It does not prove anything——'

'Nothing at all, ma'am.'

'Still, it may help us to find out the truth. You can go now, Prosser. For the present, I hope you will say no more about this to any one.'

'If you remember, ma'am, my own wishes was that you should not be told yourself, as long as 'twas uncertain,' replied Mrs. Prosser, scoring this final hit as she dropped a curtsey in the doorway. 'If 'tis known far and wide before the week is out, 'twill not be through me, ma'am, you may depend.'

CHAPTER XXV.

CONSULTATIONS.

Mrs. Prosser exceeded the limits of justifiable innuendo when she hinted that the disclosure which she had made would be known far and wide in the course of a week. Mrs. Winnington was not the woman to publish abroad anything that might hereafter tell to her own or her daughter's disadvantage; nor did she at all allude to the subject when paying a round of calls upon neighbours whom she could not refuse herself the pleasure of informing that she had taken a house in Park Street for the season. But, on the other hand, she talked of nothing else in the family circle. She soon made her peace with Margaret, remembering that something was due to one who had behaved with so much liberality in the matter of that Park Street house; and although she could not acknowledge that she had been guilty of any impropriety in reading Philip's letter, she went so far as to say that she was sorry for having done so, since Margaret's feelings had been hurt thereby. Margaret willingly accepted this apology, such as it was, apologised on her side for the hasty expressions which she had used in the heat of the moment, and only begged that the whole question might be suffered to remain in abeyance until further particulars should be forthcoming.

Mrs. Winnington said no doubt that would be best; that was exactly what she herself would advise; for what could be the good of discussing a story which would in all probability turn out to be false from beginning to end? After which, she went on to discuss it in all its bearings. In all such of its bearings, that is, as seemed likely to affect her own family; for it was with these alone that she troubled herself. Old Mr. Stanniforth would be none the worse off, whatever might happen; but Margaret was in danger of being deprived of her home without a halfpenny of compensation; and the truly grievous part of the business was that she would have in a manner created her own despoiler, since it was tolerably certain that Philip would never have been heard of in England but for her ill-judged charity. The good lady's thoughts were thus so engrossed that she quite overlooked the circumstance that the chief sufferer would be Mr. Brune, who would assuredly be

called upon to refund the purchase-money of an estate which had never been his to dispose of. When, however, Margaret drew her attention to this aspect of the affair, she admitted that the poor man's case was a hard one.

'And that,' said she, 'makes me the more anxious that you should consult him without loss of time. In fact, I think it would be hardly honest to keep him any longer in ignorance of his danger.'

Margaret said that was not her feeling at all. She would much rather say nothing to Mr. Brune yet.

'Well, my dear, if you feel any hesitation about speaking to him, I should not mind doing it myself. I do not like Mr. Brune; his manners are very uncouth and abrupt, and I have no doubt he will be rude to me. Still, we must not consider that. If you can spare me the carriage this afternoon, I will just drive over to Broom Leas, and have a few words with him.'

Margaret groaned. 'I thought you agreed with me,' she said, 'that the best thing we could do was to hold our tongues?'

'Unquestionably the best thing—it is the *only* thing that we can do. But that is not to say that we should neglect any means of gaining information. Mr. Brune must have known more about his brother than we can do, and it is quite possible that he may have been aware of the existence of this Italian lady, and may be able to tell us who she was. At least it can do no harm to ask him.'

'I think it may do a great deal of harm,' Margaret protested.

But she could neither gag her mother nor lock the door upon her; and so, in the course of the afternoon, Mr. Brune, who was enjoying himself in his shirt-sleeves, lopping off the straggling branches of a laurel hedge on his domain with a billhook, was startled by the apparition of a lady whose visits were never very welcome to him.

Mrs. Winnington's customary bland smile of greeting was tempered by a mournfulness which it was impossible to ignore. 'So sorry to disturb you,' said she; 'but I was told that I should find you here, and as I wanted to speak to you rather particularly——' Here a natural feeling of curiosity caused her to break off, and inquire, 'Do you really *like* doing that?'

'I really do,' answered Mr. Brune, resuming his coat with some reluctance. 'The only objection to hedging and ditching is that, when one is employed in that way, one is scarcely in

trim to receive visitors. But I dare say you will kindly excuse me from shaking hands with you, Mrs. Winnington. You were saying that you wanted particularly to speak to me.'

'Yes, indeed!' replied Mrs. Winnington, with a great sigh.

'Has Philip Marescalchi broken his neck? If he has, don't mind saying so; I can bear to hear the worst.'

Mrs. Winnington sighed again. 'Oh, no,' she said regretfully; 'he has not broken his neck. But it is about him that I am anxious to consult you.'

And then the tale was told, and was listened to without a word or a sign of interruption. Mrs. Winnington was a good deal put out by the calm way in which every one, except herself, seemed to take the disquieting prospect that was opening out before them.

'Well, Mr. Brune?' she said impatiently, when she had waited for some seconds in vain for her companion to speak.

'Well, Mrs. Winnington?'

'What do you think of all this? Do you believe that there is any truth in it? Do you think your brother was a likely man to make a clandestine marriage?'

'My dear madam, is it possible for me to answer such questions to any purpose? Yes; all things considered, I should say it was probably true. I see no reason why Prosser should have invented the words which she says she heard; and the dates appear to be correct, and there is a suggestive similarity between the names of Brown and Brune. Oh, yes; the chances are all in favour of its being true. As to whether my brother George was a likely man to act as he is said to have done, I really can't give an opinion upon the subject. In one sense nobody is likely to do such a thing, and, in another sense, anybody is. One is never surprised at hearing that a man has been married on the sly; but I take it that no one has natural proclivities that way.'

'But, dear me!' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington, 'aren't you going to do anything? Do you mean to sit still and allow yourself to be plundered? Can't you make any inquiries?'

'I shall write to my brother's lawyers, and ask them whether they know anything. It appears that Marescalchi's mother was accustomed to receive remittances from her husband's lawyers.'

'H'm—yes; it would be well to do that, certainly. I feel that we ought to be bestirring ourselves. It would be a terrible blow to poor Margaret to be driven from her home.'

'I shall be only too happy to talk things over with Mrs. Stanniforth, if that would be any comfort to her.'

'Well, the truth is that dear Margaret rather shrinks from speaking about the matter at all. But if you can suggest any way in which *I* could be of service——'

'You are most kind. No; I don't know that you can do anything,' replied Mr. Brune, thinking of Diogenes and Alexander, but patiently refraining from applying the precedent to the present case.

A pause of some minutes supervened, during which Mrs. Winnington fidgeted irritably, and Mr. Brune looked wistfully at his billhook. It was evident that the man did not choose to be communicative; and it only remained for his visitor to leave him, consoling herself as best she might with the hope that something—or rather that nothing—might come of the lawyers' letter.

This hope was fulfilled some days later, when Messrs. Hobson & Jobson wrote to say that, to the best of their belief, their late client had lived and died a bachelor. They had, at all events, never transacted business on his behalf with any Italian lady. So far so good; but Mrs. Winnington, as may possibly be remembered, had a personal acquaintance with the senior member of the firm, and she could not resist writing to him in a friendly, informal manner, to beg for his candid opinion upon this most distressing subject. His answer made her rather uncomfortable.

'DEAR MADAM (wrote Mr. Hobson),

'We have already been in communication with Mr. Brune with reference to the matter upon which you consult me, and I have nothing to add to the reply sent to him. Speaking generally, however, I may say that, supposing such a marriage as you mention to have taken place, it would in my opinion be in the last degree improbable that Mr. George Brune, or any other man similarly situated, would have let his family lawyers into his secret.

'Faithfully yours,

'SAML. HOBSON.'

'And this is the man who has dined with us over and over again, and has stayed in the house upon three separate occasions!' cried Mrs. Winnington, very angry with Mr. Hobson for having written so curtly, and still more angry with him for having

suggested such unpleasant doubts. 'I will never trouble myself to be civil to a solicitor again as long as I live.'

In the meantime Margaret had heard once more from Philip, who filled three pages with a description of Florence, mentioned incidentally that he expected soon to have an interview with his uncle, Signor Cavestri, who was coming from Bologna to meet him, and said not one word about the subject of Margaret's telegram until quite the end of his sheet. 'I meant to have told you all about that Conduit Street business,' he wrote; 'but, after all, I think it will keep until we meet. There are some things which it is just as well not to commit to paper, and one is not at liberty to tell everything even to one's best friends. But, my dear old Meg, how *could* you suppose that, if I had had one wife living, I should think of marrying another? I am not a bit angry, you know; but I am rather amused, I confess, and surprised that you should not know me better. Colonel Kenyon, no doubt, thinks me capable of all manner of iniquity. Even he might have given me credit for some small amount of prudence, though.' And then he added in a postscript: 'If you have spoken to Nellie of what you have heard, and if she feels at all uneasy or dissatisfied, of course I will write to her more fully. Otherwise I think least said soonest mended for the present.'

It was not because this explanation struck her as insufficient that Margaret wrote a line to Hugh Kenyon, requesting him to run down for a day or two and see her. She held—and she was doubtless right in holding—that it was worse than useless to bestow confidence by halves, and that, if she believed Philip at all, she must believe, without requiring further elucidation, that he was entirely innocent of the offence imputed to him. But with Mrs. Winnington buzzing about her, like a great blue-bottle, at all hours of the day, with Mr. Brune and Nellie holding aloof as if they were offended, and with her own uncertainty as to what course events would take, and what development she ought to hope for, she did feel a strong wish for a little sympathy; and, that being so, it was natural that she should turn her eyes towards that quarter whence sympathy had been forthcoming for so many years.

Hugh, it is needless to say, obeyed the summons with alacrity. Despite the melancholy character of the occasion, he arrived in Longbourne in better spirits than he had enjoyed for many months past. Margaret's note had led him to hope that

he was to be reinstated in that post of confidential adviser which he had forfeited by his untimely declaration, and which, notwithstanding many friendly assurances to the contrary, he was well aware had never been fully restored to him. She was coming back to him, he thought; she had turned to him instinctively in the time of her trouble; and, although he did not now expect that she would ever consent to be anything more than his friend, it would be a great deal to be received again upon the old terms. Without exactly rejoicing over Philip's downfall, he yet could not help feeling that if that young deceiver were cut off with a shilling—(the traditional shilling being represented by a few hundreds a year)—his most dangerous rival would be removed.

He was therefore not a little taken aback by the first words that Margaret addressed to him.

'Hugh, what made you give me such a dreadful fright? You were quite mistaken about my poor boy.'

'Mistaken! how mistaken?'

'There was no truth whatever in that—report about his being married.'

'You mean that he denies it, I suppose.'

'Yes. I telegraphed to him at once, and had an answer the same night, and since then I have heard from him. He says it was a natural mistake on your part, but it can all be easily explained.'

'God bless my soul! what explanation does he give?'

Margaret was obliged to confess that nothing very explicit had reached her from Philip beyond a bare denial; but that, she said, was quite enough for her. His word was sufficient, and she could perfectly enter into his reasons for disliking to put upon paper what might very well be communicated by word of mouth. Letters, unfortunately, were sometimes read by people to whom they were not addressed, and very likely Philip had thought of that. 'It was wrong of me to distrust him at all,' she concluded. 'For you, of course, it was different; but, as he says, I ought to have known him better.'

'Oh! is that all he says?'

'You can see his letter, if you like,' answered Margaret, handing over the sheet in question. 'I don't know whether you will find it convincing, but it is quite so to me.'

Hugh read the short paragraph which has been quoted above, and drew down the corners of his mouth. 'It strikes me as a shuffling sort of statement,' he remarked. 'It's all very

well to say, "How can you believe that I should be such a blackguard as to do so and so?" but that's no answer to a man who saw you do it.'

'It is an answer to me, at any rate. And don't you think, Hugh, that you were rather in a hurry to take things for granted? You never made any inquiries, you know.'

'But, my dear Margaret, I had the evidence of my own senses. I saw the woman enter the house with him. I called in Conduit Street afterwards, and found they were living there as husband and wife. I heard the landlady speak of her as Mrs. Marescalchi. What more would you have?'

'Oh, I admit that it is mysterious,' said Margaret; 'but what of that? So many things are mysterious until they are explained. Might it not have been to serve a friend in some way that he allowed that woman to pass as his wife for a time? I think that is conceivable.'

'I don't,' said Hugh, shortly.

'And you don't believe him on his word?'

Hugh looked up uneasily. 'There is no one on earth whom I trust more implicitly than I do you,' he said; 'but if you were to tell me that your name was not Margaret Stanniforth, and that you didn't think it necessary to say any more at present, but would explain it all some day or other, how could I bring myself to believe that you were speaking the truth?'

'Ah, well,' said Margaret, 'women have more faith than men, I suppose. I should believe you if you told me black was white. But never mind. I am as certain as I am of my own existence that Philip will be able to clear himself all in good time; and we won't say any more about it now, especially as I have something else to tell you, which I have been thinking of a great deal more during the last few days.'

Colonel Kenyon's astonishment was only equalled by his disgust when he was informed of the fresh complication of which Philip Marescalchi was the central figure. 'Confound that fellow!' he exclaimed; 'I wish to heaven his mother had scragged him when he was a baby! He seems bound to bring perpetual trouble in one way or another. And the provoking part of it is that you don't mind it a bit. I believe you rather enjoy it.'

This little outburst of impatience had the happy effect of making Margaret laugh. Upon which Hugh laughed too; and thus friendly relations, which for a moment had shown symptoms of becoming strained, were re-established.

'Now tell me,' said Margaret; 'do you think Philip is really Mr. George Brune's son?'

Hugh was compelled to acknowledge that the story had a horrid air of probability about it. 'To tell you the truth,' he added, 'I noticed his likeness to the family long ago; but I set it down to mere coincidence.'

'Yes; is it not strange that I should never have remarked it? I see it so plainly now; and not only that, but I can trace a decided resemblance between his character and Mr. Brune's.'

'There I can't go along with you.'

'That is because you like Mr. Brune, and you have never liked my poor Philip. But perhaps it is not so much a similarity in actual character that I mean, as in ways of speaking and looking at things. I know exactly what Mr. Brune will say in certain cases, and it is just what Philip says, and often in the very same words. Both of them have a way of pretending to laugh at everything, and both of them are really as tender-hearted as women. I wish you knew Philip as well as I do. You can't think what a penitent letter he wrote me about this journey of his to Florence, and how grieved he is at the idea of my having to give up Longbourne. As if it was any fault of his that he is his father's son!'

'Well, I am glad to hear that he is penitent,' said Hugh, getting up, and walking about the room. 'As for your leaving Longbourne, I don't know about that, I'm sure. It will be a case for the lawyers, I fear.'

'Why should it be? If once it can be proved that Count Marescalchi and Mr. George Brune were one and the same person, there can be no more to be said. I am sure Mr. Brune would not go to law with Philip.'

'Perhaps not; but it's rather an intricate question. You see, old Mr. Stanniforth made a gift of the estate to Jack, and the title-deeds are now in the hands of the trustees. I know no more of law than I do of Hebrew; but I suppose we could not surrender them at all events until the purchase-money had been refunded.'

'But then there is the compensation paid by the railway company.'

'Yes; but I don't know whether old Stanniforth would disgorge that without making a fight for it. He is a sharp old fellow—or used to be. It is a most unmitigated nuisance, look at it which way you will.'

'It will all come right in the end,' said Margaret, confidently.

'I am not at all so sure of that. I would much rather it went wrong in the beginning, I know. I wonder, now, whether there is any hope of that old Prosser's having trumped up a plausible story to serve some ends of her own. It is difficult to believe that a woman could keep a secret like that entirely to herself for a dozen years and more.'

'She had the safety-valve of confession to her parish priest, you see.'

'What, to old Langley? Do you mean to say he has known this all along, and never said a word?'

'I suppose he has. He has not been here since the disclosure, and I suspect he is rather afraid of facing us.'

'Well he may be, the old Jesuit! I shall look him up this afternoon, and hear what he has to say for himself.'

'You won't be rude to him, will you, Hugh? You must remember that he has only done what he would consider to be his bounden duty in keeping Prosser's secret.'

'Oh, I won't be rude to him,' answered Hugh. 'I only want to find out how much he knows. I suppose he'll tell me the truth anyhow.'

The result of this determination was that Colonel Kenyon formed one of a congregation of three at evensong, and, waiting for the rector afterwards, put the reverend gentleman, as he mentally expressed it, 'through his facings.'

'Yes, yes,' Mr. Langley said; 'an unfortunate affair in many ways; but let us hope that some arrangement may be come to. I am glad the woman has at length made up her mind to tell what she knew. I have been urging her to do so for years past.'

'But why didn't you make her speak out? Couldn't you have withheld absolution, or something?'

Mr. Langley smiled. 'I think you hardly understand the case,' he said. 'There could be no question of absolution, the woman having committed no sin. What she revealed to me was in the nature of a strictly confidential communication, made to me as her priest.'

'She said it was under seal of confession.'

'Ah, yes; a slight confusion of terms not uncommon among the uneducated. It is true that she first divulged the matter to me as a part of her confession; but I pointed out to her at the time that she was wrong in doing so. Of course I could

not do otherwise than regard what was imparted to me in such a manner as sacred. Since then I have lost no opportunity of impressing upon her what I believed to be her duty; but she is, unfortunately, a very obstinate person. I should not have felt myself justified in laying a positive command upon her so long as she held it a matter of conscience to keep silence.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Hugh, twirling his moustache; 'I should have thought you might have brought a little more pressure to bear; but it's not much use talking about that now. You believe, then, that old Brune really said all that?'

'I have not a doubt of it; and I may add that I have very little doubt as to young Marescalchi's being the son.'

'It's a horrid bore,' remarked Hugh. 'I expect I shall have a lot of bother over it; and I'm afraid our friends at Broom Leas will suffer.' And he went on to explain some of the difficulties which he anticipated, and which were likely to interfere with the amicable family arrangement to which Mr. Langley, as well as Mrs. Prosser, appeared to have looked forward.

Mr. Langley could only express his sympathy and regret, adding, as a moral to be deduced from the whole affair, that if the late Mr. Brune had been a sound Churchman, all this trouble would have been avoided. 'In such a case, he would have sent to me upon his death-bed—which I am sorry to say that he did not think fit to do—and the truth would have been revealed.'

'What, even if he had made it the subject of a strictly confidential communication?' Hugh could not help saying.

'Unquestionably. Concealment of marriage, and the leaving of a child destitute, would be deadly sin; whereas it might very well be a question with many people how far they were entitled to make public words spoken by one in a state of delirium. But perhaps I had better not weary you with definitions,' said Mr. Langley, rather coldly. 'I trust,' he added, 'that there is no feeling of soreness as regards me in my dear friend Mrs. Stanniforth's mind.'

'Oh, she'll forgive you,' said Hugh; 'she'd forgive anybody for doing anything.' And as he walked away, it occurred to him that there was only one person in the world towards whom he had ever known Margaret to display an unforgiving spirit, and that that person was himself. Which seemed a little hard.

Trudging pensively homewards along the deep lanes, he heard himself, on a sudden, called by name, and was presently

overtaken by Nellie Brune—a person whom, under the circumstances, he would much rather not have encountered.

'Have you come down about this business, Colonel Kenyon?' she asked. 'Is it really true that Philip is Uncle George's son?'

'Ah, that's just what I want to know, Miss Brune,' answered Hugh. 'If I were not afraid of making you angry, I should say I hope he isn't.'

'Oh, but I hope the same thing,' said Nellie, quickly.

'Why, I thought the great wish of your life was that Longbourne should come back into the possession of your family.'

'But I don't want Mrs. Stanniforth to be turned adrift. And, besides, I could never feel as if Philip were one of us.'

'You ought not to have much difficulty in feeling that,' said Hugh, looking at her kindly. His honest heart was so full of pity for the poor girl that he hardly knew how to speak to her without betraying himself. He could not doubt that Philip was a married man, and he had already formed an indefinite resolution that he would prove him to be so, and thus at least save Miss Brune from the danger of an irreparable calamity. But what in the world was he to say to the girl now?

She allowed his allusion to pass, and asked: 'Do you suppose that Philip knew of this before he went to Florence?'

'Of course he did; it was the old housekeeper who told him, you know. In fact, I imagine that he only went to Florence in order to get at documentary proof of Mr. Brune's marriage.'

Nellie tightened her lips, and nodded. 'I suspected as much,' said she.

'Ah, you're beginning to find the young rascal out,' thought Hugh, with some satisfaction. But, feeling that the devil ought to have his due, he said aloud: 'I am not sure that you can exactly blame him, you know, for not saying anything about it before he started. It seems that he did write without loss of time.'

'He need not have said what was untrue, though. He told us all that he was going there to study.'

'Well, perhaps he is going to study.'

'Yes; I dare say he is,' agreed Nellie, hastily, thinking perhaps that she had said too much. 'Will you give my best love to Mrs. Stanniforth, please?'

'Certainly I will,' answered Hugh; 'but why don't you come up and see her? She thinks you are offended with her about this unlucky business.'

'Oh, no!' exclaimed Nellie; 'what possible reason could I have for being offended with her? I have kept away lately because—because——It is rather difficult to explain; only don't you know how disagreeable it is to talk over things with people when you don't quite agree with them, and when they—think you ought to agree with them?'

And, having given utterance to this somewhat vague sentiment, Miss Brune took her leave rather hurriedly.

'I wonder whether she really cares for that worthless fellow,' mused Hugh, resuming his walk. 'I don't believe she does; and I am sure I hope she doesn't. It was Margaret who got up the match, I suspect. What a pity it is that she will insist upon making people happy in her own way, whether they wish it or not!'

And, as soon as he reached the house, he delivered Nellie's message, adding carelessly on his own account: 'She doesn't seem to pine for her absent lover to any alarming extent. Is she very much in love with him, do you think?'

'More so than you might suppose,' answered Margaret, smiling. 'Nellie shows her feelings very little; but I understand her, and I know that she has never cared a pin's head for any one but Philip. It is a very long-standing attachment on both sides; but want of money has prevented matters from coming to a climax. I am so very glad that the engagement took place while Philip was still a poor man; I think they will both be glad to remember that afterwards.'

'But even if he gets Longbourne he will be a poor man.'

'He will be well enough off to marry, I suppose;' and, then, I hope I may be able to help them out a little.'

To this Hugh made no answer, except to shake his head gravely; and as Mrs. Winnington came in at that moment, eager to hear whether anything fresh had been elicited from Mr. Langley, the subject dropped.

He had no further opportunity for private conversation with Margaret that day. The whole evening was occupied by an amicable contest between her and her mother with reference to the latter lady's move to London; Mrs. Winnington protesting that she could not bear to leave her daughter in the midst of so much trouble, while Margaret declared that she was in no trouble at all, and that it would distress her beyond everything to deprive Edith of her season. Hugh, knowing what the outcome of the discussion was certain to be, took

little interest in its progress, but sat silently twirling his thumbs and heartily wishing that Mrs. Winnington were in London already. Every now and again he was appealed to—'Candidly now, Hugh, do you think dear Margaret ought to be left quite alone?' and so forth. He answered somewhat at random; which was of the less consequence since his answers were never listened to. Edith remained as silent as he throughout, and was to all appearance quite as indifferent. Once, when, just by way of saying something, he asked her whether she was not looking forward to having a great deal of dancing, she replied that she never danced in London, and volunteered the additional information that she hated London at all times, and particularly during the season. Whereupon Mrs. Winnington glanced sharply over her shoulder, exclaiming, 'Edith, my dear child, how can you talk such nonsense!' and Edith at once collapsed.

It was close upon midnight before Mrs. Winnington acknowledged herself vanquished, and laid down her arms. 'If you put it in that way, my dear,' Hugh heard her saying, 'I suppose I ought not to refuse; but I shall be longing to be with you all the time; and I do trust that you will write or telegraph for me at any moment, if you want me. Unless you promise me that, I positively will not go. You see,' she continued, turning to Hugh with a deprecatory smile, 'how weak I am. I had fully determined to give up all thought of London for the present; but dear Margaret makes such a point of our going that I feel I should have to yield to-morrow if I did not do so to-day. I am quite ashamed of myself; for I must confess that a few hours ago I should have said that nothing could shake my resolution.'

As, however, she left at ten o'clock on the following morning, it must be assumed that her maid was endowed with the gift of prophecy, and had packed up in anticipation of the event. Her last words to Hugh, as she stepped into the carriage, were: 'Well, good-bye, dear Hugh. If you should be coming up to London, you must be sure to call on us in Park Street. I hope you understand that I should not be going away now if I thought I could be of any use here. But I really do not believe I could.'

'Not the slightest use in the world,' answered Hugh, whose stock of patience, large as it was, had not been quite equal to the demand made upon it by the needless waste of his only evening at Longbourne. His duties compelled him to return

to Shorncliffe the same afternoon; and it was a little mortifying to him to perceive that Margaret was rather relieved than otherwise when she was told that he, too, must leave her.

He attributed this to his unfortunate inability to sympathise with her upon the subject that was nearest her heart; but it was probably quite as much due to a sensation of embarrassment on her part at finding herself alone in the house with him. It had been comparatively easy to bury the past in oblivion when writing to him, or when other people were at hand; but now that they two were face to face, and free from all chance of interruption, she found it impossible to keep a certain day in the past summer out of her memory; and what was worse, she saw that he was labouring under precisely the same difficulty. Besides which, he had a patient, half-reproachful way of looking at her which made her shy and uncomfortable; and this, in its turn, made her angry. There was something ridiculous, she thought, in a woman of her age being subject to such girlish afflictions; and, after the manner of women, she visited her anger in some degree upon its innocent cause.

Upon the whole, Hugh felt, as he drove away, that his visit had not been a success; and the same reflection was at the same moment passing through Margaret's mind, while she stood on the doorstep watching the departure of her guest.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PHILIP FINDS OUT ALL ABOUT IT.

Thanks to the good offices of Signora Tommasini, Philip found Florence a very delightful place of residence. There, as in all other European cities to which her avocations led her from time to time, the Signora had a large acquaintance, and there, as elsewhere, she led a merry and a busy life. She only sang three times a week, and on the alternate nights she either received her friends in an easy, informal manner, or, with that strange hankering after the familiar scene which is common to all who make their livelihood upon the stage, she went to the Opera, and listened to the performances of her colleagues. Either method of passing the time was equally agreeable to Philip, who loved society in any shape, and was greatly pleased with the reception accorded to him by the incongruous assem-

blage of young Italian nobles and actors and professors of music, and wandering Englishmen who frequented the Signora's ever-open *salons*, or jostled one another in her dingy little box at the theatre. His voice was extravagantly praised; and, as he was generally understood to be a wealthy amateur, the manager of the Opera and others felt no hesitation in assuring him that he was capable of outshining Mario. He did not, of course, take any steps for securing the services of the professors who were so civil to him. Under existing circumstances, it did not seem likely that he would ever be called upon to spend weary hours in practising scales again, and the delight of absolute idleness, which had always been very dear to him, was doubly so in the land which is proverbially the best fitted for its enjoyment.

One or two disagreeable emotions prevented his happiness, during the ten days which intervened between his arrival and that of Signor Cavestri, from being quite complete. Margaret's telegram gave him a shock and an uneasy afternoon. The brief episode of his married life had dropped so far back into the mists of memory that he had long since ceased to think of it as a possible source of trouble, and it may be supposed that his feelings towards Hugh Kenyon, when he heard of that officious person's behaviour, were not of the most charitable kind. Again, he could not shake off a haunting dread of what Margaret might say or do upon hearing the true nature of his business in Italy, and if he could have recalled his confession five minutes after he had committed it to the charge of the post-office, it is certain that he would have done so. But in due time a very kind and affectionate letter from Longbourne set his mind at ease upon both of these points; and he had the justice to thank Signora Tommasini for the good advice that she had given him. 'I shall always come to you in future when I am in any difficulty,' said he; and she answered, 'Upon my word, I think you might apply to a worse person.'

In writing to Signor Cavestri Philip had found it unavoidable to acknowledge his identity, and from this it resulted that, as he was breakfasting one morning, the Signora Bonera rushed into his room like a whirlwind, enveloped him in a highly perfumed embrace, kissed him on both cheeks, and reproached him shrilly for having concealed the fact of their relationship. Signora Bonera, when arrayed in her best clothes, was not a cousin to be received enthusiastically by persons of fastidious tastes. Her hair, which was liberally oiled, was arranged in a

towering curly mass above her forehead; upon the top of this was perched a yellow bonnet adorned with large red roses; she wore a silk gown of a tartan quite unknown to the Highlands of Scotland; and she diffused for many yards around her person an odour of patchouli powerful enough to have sickened a fox.

Her heart, she said, had spoken the moment that Philip had entered her door. She had felt that this was no stranger. She had experienced an irresistible impulse—— Here she started to her feet, and Philip, fearing lest the impulse might be coming on again, rose hastily, and placed the table between himself and his visitor, as a measure of precaution.

'My dear Signora Bonera——' he began.

'Don't say Signora Bonera; say Lucia.'

'Well, my dear and warm-hearted Lucia, let me implore you not to give way to impulse. You must remember that I am an Englishman, and in England we do not give way to impulse; we dislike it very much. Perhaps you would not mind my mentioning another of our peculiarities. We never kiss our cousins.'

'Is it possible?'

'Never, I assure you. In fact, we consider it quite a scandalous thing to do. We are not,' continued Philip, speaking slowly, and watching the effect of his words upon the lady—'we are not in any way a demonstrative people. When we like our cousins very much, we do not embrace them, but we endeavour to improve their circumstances.'

Signora Bonera nodded, as though to imply that that form of acknowledging the ties of consanguinity struck her favourably.

'But then,' Philip went on, 'our cousins must not be troublesome or intrusive people. Indeed, such is our eccentricity that, in a general way, the less we see of them, the more likely we are to be liberal towards them. I myself have been thinking that if I should succeed in establishing my claim to the Brune estate—a very poor estate you will be sorry to hear—it would be one of my proudest privileges to increase your annual income, my dear Lucia. After what I have said, you will understand that I could only do so subject to the restriction I have hinted at. In point of fact, if I ever saw or heard of you again, I am afraid you would lose your allowance. Now, what should you say to 2,500 *lire* a year?'

Signora Bonera, who had shown no signs of taking offence

at this plain-spoken offer, shrugged her shoulders, spread out her hands, and made a hideous face. Philip rightly interpreted this pantomime to mean that the sum was paltry, but that she would accept it, if she could not get more.

'Lucia,' said he, 'I fear that you are greedy. And that is a pity, because it lessens my interest in you. You see, there really is no reason at all why I should increase your income.'

'When one is ashamed of one's relations, one must pay to get rid of them,' remarked Signora Bonera, quite good-humouredly.

'Just so; but as you will not come to England, and as I can very well exist without visiting Florence again, I can virtually get rid of you gratis. There is the post, you will say. Well, I offer you 2,500 *lire* a year not to write me letters; and I consider that a very fair price. Think it over, my dear Lucia, and I am sure you will consider it so too.'

Philip would hardly have dared to be so impertinent if he had not seen by the woman's manner that impertinence was not likely to affront her. She answered him by another shrug and another grimace, and then held out her hand to him frankly.

'It shall be a bargain,' said she; 'only you must say nothing about it to *lo zio*, or——'

'Or he will want it all for himself. Do not alarm yourself, he shall be kept in ignorance. And, by the way, when is that estimable uncle going to make his appearance? He has already kept me waiting a week.'

'Eh! he is an old man; and what was the hurry? I had a letter from him this morning, saying that we might expect him to-morrow. I was going to ask you to come in the evening and meet him; but since you are so proud——'

'I assure you I am not in the least proud, and I shall be delighted to spend the evening with you some other time; but perhaps *lo zio* and I could hold our first conference more comfortably if he would do me the honour to dine with me here to-morrow.'

'As you please,' answered the accommodating Lucia. And when she was gone Philip began to think that she had got her promise of a hundred a year upon tolerably easy terms. 'I would have promised her more, though, if she had stuck out for it,' he said to himself laughing; 'I shouldn't much care about introducing these noble Italian relatives to Nellie. What will the old man be like, I wonder? I hope *he* won't kiss me.'

But when Signor Cavestri was announced, the next evening,

Philip perceived at once that there was no fear of his doing anything of that kind. He was a dapper, consequential little gentleman, with grey hair, a dyed moustache, carefully-brushed threadbare clothes, and a snuff-box. He paused at the door, drew himself up to his full height of five-foot-six, and bowed. Then he advanced a few steps, and bowed again. Finally he held out his hand in a somewhat patronising manner, and said it gave him infinite pleasure to find himself in the presence of his sister's son. He was so dignified, so affable, and declined with such inexorable suavity to speak a word upon matters of business until he should have eaten his dinner, that Philip was charmed with him, and thought to himself that, if this relative wanted to be pensioned off, he was playing his cards unskilfully.

'He would pass muster anywhere. "My uncle, the Marchese Cavestri"—it sounds very well, and I don't know why he shouldn't be a marchese; he looks like one, and he is pompous enough to be a grand-duke. I daresay he manufactures Bologna sausages though, when he's at home.' Philip, to whom any new type of humanity was a godsend, was so well entertained, during dinner, by studying his uncle, drawing him out, and taking mental notes of his peculiarities, that he felt no impatience to begin questioning him upon the subject which he had been brought thither to discuss, and it was Signor Cavestri himself who first introduced it.

'You wish, as I understand,' said he, 'to have a proof of the legitimacy of your birth. It gives me much satisfaction to be in a position to furnish you with that proof. In my presence, on the 25th of April, 1853, Signor Bruno was married to my sister, the late Lucia Cavestri, at the church of Sant' Onofrio, in the city of Florence.' And, having delivered himself of this announcement with the air of one who challenged contradiction, Signor Cavestri crossed his legs, threw back his head, and took snuff.

'You said Signor Bruno, I think,' observed Philip, his heart beating a little more quickly.

'Signor Bruno; or, as you would say in English, Meestare Braoun. He afterwards, as you are aware, assumed the title of Count Marescalchi.'

'The difference of Bruno and Brown is of some importance. I presume there is a register kept at the church.'

'At Sant' Onofrio? Certainly there is; and with your permission we will examine it together to-morrow morning.

Sincerely rejoiced shall I be, my dear nephew, if I can be the means of restoring to you your family estates. That I have a disinterested wish for your welfare I have, I think, already shown,' continued Signor Cavestri, grandiloquently. 'I resigned you—not without a pang, believe me—to that wealthy English lady whose name is so extraordinary a one that I will not attempt to grapple with it—I resigned you, I say, to her, feeling that I was best consulting your happiness in so doing. My own means, alas, suffice barely to provide me with the necessaries of life; and for myself, when I am powerless to offer assistance, I withdraw—I do not intrude upon those whom I cannot serve. Thus I saw but little of your lamented mother during the last years of her life; and for the same reason I have refrained from even writing to inform myself of your health and prosperity throughout this long period of separation.'

He did not mention that he and his brother had received handsome sums of money from Margaret in acknowledgment of their written promise that they would at no future time attempt to exercise control over their nephew's education or liberty.

Philip said he fully appreciated this delicacy, and Signor Cavestri resumed: 'It is at the cost of some personal sacrifice that I am here at this moment; but it is painful to speak of such matters. Poverty is an evil to be borne with fortitude. To conceal it is impossible; to parade it is unworthy.'

'Shall I?' thought Philip, 'or shan't I? Really, I think I will.' He produced a bank-note, and began hesitatingly: 'It should be a matter of course that any expenses incurred on my behalf—I hope you will allow me to——'

In another moment the note was in Signor Cavestri's pocket.

The old gentleman took it with an air of such kind condescension that Philip could not help thanking him. 'I am sure I am very much indebted to you——'

'My dear nephew, do not distress me by mentioning it. I am entirely at your orders. Early to-morrow morning I will give the necessary notice, and at eleven o'clock the register of Sant' Onofrio shall be ready for your inspection.'

Shortly after this Signor Cavestri retired, wishing his entertainer good-night with a happily-blended mixture of respect and avuncular affection. The next morning, punctually at the appointed hour, he reappeared; and after a short drive, which

seemed rather a long one to Philip, the pair were admitted into the sacristy of the church of Sant' Onofrio by a black-browed priest, who was awaiting them.

All at once it flashed across Philip that he had reached the crowning and decisive moment of his life. In one word of the open volume there on the old oak table lay all his future, inexorably predestined and waiting for him. 'Either I am somebody or I am less than nobody,' he thought. 'I am a Brune, or I am only a doubtful sort of a Brown. I am to have a fresh start and a fair fortune, or I am to drop back into the old life of obscurity and drudgery and debt, and to be laughed at for having made a fool of myself into the bargain. Two wretched little letters of the alphabet to settle it all, one way or the other!' He positively did not dare to look; his heart stood still. The dim sacristy, with its old carved oak presses, the vault-like chill of the air, the faint, musty smell of dust and stale incense, the old man and the priest gazing at him curiously —all these, for one bewildering instant, seemed part of a night-mare which he would have given the world to be able to shake off.

Then he held his breath and looked—and broke out into an irrepressible exclamation of joy. There, on the page before him, in a large, distinct handwriting was the signature of 'George Brune,' surmounting that of 'Lucia Cavestri.' 'And it's all right, by Jupiter!' shouted Philip, unable to control himself; 'and I can pay every penny I owe, and Meg shall live with me, if she will, and the stage may go to the devil! Hurrah! "The gates are passed, and Heaven is won!"'

The priest, who naturally had not understood a word of this excited declamation, looked slightly scandalised, and crossed himself, while Signor Cavestri took snuff, and laughed a short, dry laugh.

'Allow me, my dear nephew,' said he, 'to congratulate you in advance upon coming into your fortune, and myself upon having been the humble means of leading you towards it.'

Philip shook hands warmly with the old gentleman; he shook hands also with the priest; he emptied his pockets of all the money that was in them, and poured it into the various boxes which the church contained, so that the poor of the parish received an unusually large donation that week, and his Holiness the Pope benefited to the extent of five napoleons in the form of Peter's pence.

'Eh, eh!' exclaimed Signor Cavestri, who had watched this

prodigality with raised eyebrows; 'it seems, then, that your estate is a large one, my nephew.'

'No; it is not large,' answered Philip, laughing a little to himself. 'I shall not be a rich man. I suppose that, strictly speaking, arrears will be due to me; but I should never think of claiming them.'

Signor Cavestri smiled half benevolently, half compassionately. 'Such generous sentiments do you immense credit,' said he; 'but justice, we must remember, is justice. Might I venture to suggest that the half only of these arrears should be claimed?'

'You don't understand,' replied Philip. 'Mr. Neville Brune is a great friend of mine—a very particular friend. It would be out of the question for me to make such a demand upon him. Besides, he couldn't pay.'

'Ah!' said Signor Cavestri, with an expressive drooping of his head and hoist of his shoulders.

'And now,' Philip resumed, 'let us take a copy of this entry in the register and be off. I must write to England immediately.'

He took leave of his uncle at the church door, and hurried back to his hotel, treading upon air. He had never known how much he had desired this thing until it had come into his possession. He had never known what a weight those five thousand pounds that he owed to Signora Tommasini had been upon his mind until he saw a near prospect of his being able to return them to her. For he had never dared to think much about it before, and, as we know, he had a remarkable power of putting away from him all reflections that were disturbing to his peace.

'Dearest Meg,' he wrote, 'I have been to the church of Sant' Onofrio, and there it is in black and white—"George Brune" and "Lucia Cavestri." I know you will give me joy. You don't need me to tell you that Longbourne will be your home as long as ever you like to make it so, and I am quite sure that Nellie will say the same. Isn't it just like the end of a fairy-tale?—Longbourne in the hands of the old family again; you with all your dreams about to be fulfilled; nobody a penny the worse (for of course I shall not let Mr. Brune suffer any loss, beyond what can't be helped); and your unworthy correspondent an independent man! I can hardly believe it all, and have to keep looking at the copy of the register which lies beside me to convince myself that I am awake. Now that it

is all over, I may tell you in strict confidence that I never half liked the idea of exhibiting myself upon the stage; and you, I know, always hated it. However, all's well that ends well,' &c., &c.

It is perhaps hardly necessary to quote the letter at full length. Philip scribbled on for the best part of an hour, and, with a thrill of pleasure and exultation, signed himself, for the first time, 'Philip Brune.'

On returning from her drive that afternoon, Signora Tommasini found Mr. Marescalchi extended upon one of the armchairs in her gaudy *salon*; and as soon as she saw his face, 'Ah!' she cried, 'I know what is the news you have brought me.'

'I have brought you good news,' said Philip. 'At least, I hope you will think it so.'

'You know I do not think it so,' returned the Signora, pettishly; 'I am disappointed and disgusted, and I don't mind telling you as much. I wish that meddling old housekeeper had been hung before she did all this mischief! Don't expect any congratulations from me; I never was more sorry for anything in my life. Your career is spoilt, and I have lost my friend.'

'Do you know, I am not so certain that I had a career to spoil? And as for your friend, since you are good enough to call me your friend, I promise you that you will never lose him, if you care to keep him.'

'You couldn't very well say less than that; but it doesn't alter the fact, unfortunately. Will you ask me to go and stay with you at Longbourne? I should like to see you attempt such a thing! No; the day will come when you will think that you have done a great deal if you shake hands with me after a concert. I know what English society is. I might be invited to stay with dukes and duchesses, and grandees of that sort; but to a house such as yours will be—never in the world! The people amongst whom you are going to live never heard of the Tommasini; or, if they did, it was only as a woman who sings at the Opera, a person whom they would rank a little above their upper servants, and decidedly below the village doctor. You would not be allowed to know me, if you wished it; but you will not wish it. You will always be what those about you are; and you will become a caricature of a country squire, whereas you might have been a famous singer. It is a thousand pities. Well, what are you going to do next?'

'I suppose,' said Philip, smiling, 'that the next thing for me to do will be to go back to England, bearing my sheaves with me.'

'Your sheaves? You haven't got your sheaves yet; and I shouldn't wonder if you had to wait some little time before you did get them. I don't know what Mr. Brune and Mrs. Stanniforth and the rest of them may be inclined to do; but it strikes me that, if I were in possession of a nice property, you wouldn't get me to drop a curtsey and hand it over to you by flourishing the copy of a register before my eyes. I wonder, by the way, whether there could be any hope of that precious old uncle of yours having played tricks with the register?'

'How disagreeable you are!' exclaimed Philip, laughing outright. 'My venerable uncle may be capable of committing forgery—indeed, I should not imagine him to be the man to stick at a trifle—but no one but an Englishman ever wrote that "George Brune." Besides which, the ink was quite faded, and there was no trace of an erasure. Melancholy as it may be, I am afraid there is no disputing the genuineness of the entry.'

'You will have to prove it, though, and a good deal more besides, I suspect, before you can enter upon your inheritance. Were I in your place, I should go and see the English Consul, and ask him what is the proper course to pursue. If you ask me my candid opinion, I should say you were in for a long lawsuit.'

The Signora was so put out that she would predict nothing but unpleasant things; and although her prophecies were evidently inspired rather by annoyance than conviction, Philip's exuberant spirits were a little damped by what she said, and he willingly left her when she exclaimed, after looking at her watch, that she had only just time to dress.

'Are you coming to hear me sing to-night?' she called after him, as he was leaving the room; and Philip answered, 'Yes, of course.' He did not, however, keep his promise. Upon thinking things over, he decided that it would be just as well to follow the Signora's advice, and see the British Consul before starting for England; and, accordingly, he wrote to that official, stating the circumstances of his case, and inquiring whether there were any formalities which might be gone through while he was on the spot. He would call on the following afternoon, he added, for his answer. It took him some little time to compose this missive, and when he had finished it and despatched it by a messenger, it was almost too late to go to the theatre; so,

feeling an urgent need to talk to somebody about the subject which was uppermost in his mind, he strolled off to the Via San Giorgio, and spent the remainder of the evening with his relatives there.

They, at all events, did not discourage him. Signora Bonera was amiable and respectful, her husband was subserviency itself, and Signor Cavestri beguiled the time by relating anecdotes of the late Mr. Brune, whose oddity appeared to have been equalled only by his arrogance, and who, as the old gentleman very candidly admitted, had never allowed his wife's relations to come near him after his marriage.

'Once,' said he, 'I was in the neighbourhood of Naples, and I thought I would go and see my sister, who was living at that time in the villa that her husband had purchased there. I have never been one of those heroes who adore danger for its own sake, so I refrained from entering the house. But I had not been five minutes in the garden when out came Signor Bruno, and caught me. "What the devil do you want here?" says he; and before I could answer a word, he had gripped me by the collar, and was pushing me before him towards the gate. "Now, let me see your ugly face here again," he called out, "and"—I give you his very words, I assure you—"and I will break every bone in your skin!" He would have done it, too; for though he was a small man, he had the strength of a horse and the temper of a fiend. *Eh! che animale!* Pardon me, my dear nephew, for speaking so of your father; but you will allow that I had provocation.'

'You shall not be treated in that way when you come to see me at Longbourne,' said Philip.

But Signor Cavestri declared that he was much too old to think of leaving Italy now; and so the evening passed away pleasantly enough.

The foreign custom of making a light breakfast off coffee and rolls immediately after rising was a very congenial one to Philip's tastes. By means of it, and of taking a long time over dressing, he managed to dawdle away the morning with little more exertion than if it had been a part of the night. At half-past twelve he partook of a more solid repast, which occupied him agreeably for another hour and a half; and so, towards three o'clock, he strolled leisurely away to the Consulate.

He was at once shown into the presence of Her Britannic Majesty's representative, who looked up from his writing, and said: 'Oh, Mr.—er!—Brune?'

Philip bowed.

'I have been looking through the papers relating to the year 1853, and I am sorry to say that I can find no record of the marriage which you mention in your note.'

'I have already got a copy of the marriage certificate,' answered Philip, holding out the document in question. 'The marriage took place at the church of Sant' Onofrio, in the month of April.'

'Oh, that,' said the Consul, tossing the paper carelessly on one side—'that is of no use whatever.'

'How do you mean, of no use?' asked Philip, rather startled.

'Why, a marriage of that kind is no marriage at all, legally speaking. Of course, I don't say that the parties may not have acted in perfect good faith; I know nothing about that, but in the eyes of the law such a ceremony could not make them man and wife.'

'But, my good sir, they were married in church.'

'Exactly so. They were married in church, when they ought to have been married at the Consulate or the Embassy. This is by no means the first case of the kind that has come under my notice. It seems hard, no doubt, that such a severe penalty should attach to ignorance; but if people will not take the trouble to inform themselves of the law, they must suffer for it; and the law is that, when a British subject wishes to be married abroad, he must be married under the British flag.'

Philip dropped into the nearest chair, and sat speechless. He could hardly believe in the possibility of such a grievous stroke of bad luck as this having befallen him. It would not have surprised him to have learnt that his father had gone through a mock marriage, or that he had never been married at all; but that the man should have intended to act fairly, and should have failed to do so through mere carelessness and stupidity, was simply heartrending.

'Perhaps,' he said at last, 'they may have been married at the Consulate before or after the religious ceremony took place.'

'Yes; I thought of that, and I have already made a thorough search. I am sorry to tell you that no person of the name of Brune has ever been married here.'

'Well, I shall not give it up,' said Philip, rising, and addressing his informant as defiantly as if that obliging gentleman had been a personal enemy. 'If they were not married here they may have been married somewhere else; and I suppose time and place are not of much importance.'

'Well, no. A marriage contracted within a certain period of time would serve your purpose, no doubt. Of course you are aware that subsequent marriage does not legitimise children born out of wedlock.'

With that parting word of caution ringing in his ears, Philip stumbled down the staircase and out into the sunny street. The game was not up, he kept repeating to himself, as he made his way back to the Lung' Arno; there was Naples, and there was Rome, and there were many other places to be visited before he would abandon all hope. In the sequel he did institute investigations in all these cities; and, indeed, he has not yet given up a habit of searching the archives of any consulate within reach of which he may happen to find himself; but never, to this day, has any record been discovered of a marriage between George Brune and Lucia Cavestri.

Probably, if Philip had felt any real hope at the time, he would not have found it necessary to buoy himself up with so many inward asseverations that there was no reason to despair. When he reached the hotel, he shut himself up in his bedroom, and gave way utterly. It was too bad—it really was too bad—he thought, to be shipwrecked in this way within sight of port. And he had meant to make such an excellent use of his money, too, and to turn over a new leaf, and to promote everybody's happiness! It was almost a question now whether the human race deserved that any trouble should be taken to promote its happiness. A world in which there could exist such criminals as men who would not be at the pains of ascertaining whether they were married or not, and such laws as to render a *bonâ fide* marriage no marriage at all, was indeed a miserable sort of contrivance to call a world. 'Good heavens! how I wish I hadn't written that idiotic letter to Meg last night!' he exclaimed. 'Of course she will tell everybody; and a precious fool I shall look when the truth comes out! I can see that old harridan of a Winnington grinning from ear to ear at me. I won't go back and face them all—hanged if I will! I'll go and drown myself in the Arno.'

Instead of adopting that extreme measure, Philip went downstairs, after a time, and poured forth his sorrows into the ear of Signora Tommasini, from whom, as might have been expected, he received but scant commiseration.

'The very best thing that could possibly have happened to you!' cried the hard-hearted Signora. 'Sant' Onofrio shall have a pound or two of the biggest wax candles that money can buy

for this. Now there is some chance of your enjoying life and making it enjoyable for others, instead of being an utterly useless and miserable member of society, as you were in a fair way towards becoming.'

'Oh, go on!' said Philip; 'if anybody wants to kick me, now is his time. I shan't resent it; I am far too crushed to resent anything. I haven't a grain of spirit left in me.'

'You ought to be ashamed to say so!' cried Signora Tommasini, warmly. 'Crushed indeed! Crushed because you turn out to be yourself, and not somebody else!—crushed because you have to make your own way in the world, instead of finding it made for you—crushed because your talents will not be wasted, and because a brilliant career is open to you, in the place of a wretched, torpid existence among English rustics? Don't try to make me believe that you are such a poor creature as that!'

The Signora strode up and down the room while she declaimed, and adorned her discourse with appropriate gesticulation. Even in that moment of deep dejection, Philip could not help watching her with some slight amusement. 'What scolding powers you possess!' said he. 'You are a positive virago.'

The Signora went on scolding for some time; but very likely she did not mean the half of what she said, and was only scolding with a view to rousing her friend from his state of moral collapse. If so, she was unsuccessful. Philip sat in a lump on his chair, his arms falling, his head sunk on his breast, and only smiled faintly, every now and then, when the speaker struck a specially dramatic attitude, or indulged in some particularly lofty flight of eloquence. Had she known him better, she would have left him alone, in perfect assurance that another twenty-four hours or so would see the mercury of his spirits rising again. She did, however, know him well enough to be aware that, when scolding would not do, petting might be employed with advantage; and so, after a time, she changed her tone, sat down beside him, told him how very sorry she was for his disappointment, agreed with him that his case was in many respects a very hard one, and comforted him after much the same fashion as a nurse comforts a baby. And then some casual visitors dropped in; and in the course of about five minutes Philip was laughing and talking with them quite as usual.

From that day forth Signora Tommasini began to exercise

an influence and authority over him to which he submitted half willingly, half apprehensively. It was very pleasant, and saved a deal of trouble, to have things settled for him, to be told good-humouredly—but peremptorily—what he was to do, to be provided with a singing-master, and with occupations as well as amusements; and it was a great blessing to have a resolute friend, able and willing to deal with the incensed Cavestri clan in a more or less summary style; but Philip had an uncomfortable and increasing feeling of doubt as to what might be the true meaning and nature of all this affection. He was very much afraid indeed that it was not of a maternal character. Never a word had he breathed to the Signora of his engagement to Nellie Brune. He had abstained from telling her at first because, as he said to himself, one's women friends never do like to hear of such things, he kept silence now because he really dared not speak. Had his circumstances been other than they were, he might have laughed at the notion of this fat woman's being in love with him, and might even—such is the pitilessness of youth—have amused himself by leading her on to make herself ridiculous; but the thought of the five thousand pounds that he owed her made him feel that this might be no laughing matter. The memory of that horrid debt rose up before him in the silent watches of the night, and caused him to groan in spirit. There were moments when he felt almost ready to sacrifice everything—Nellie, Margaret, Longbourne, and all the past—to marry the Signora, and to start afresh in the world under those novel conditions. He had made an egregious failure of the old life, and it seemed to him as if nothing but worse failure was likely to come of a return to it. It was more in accordance with his system of philosophy to cast aside failures than to attempt to convert them into successes.

But it was only at night that such gloomy self-communings forced themselves upon him. During the day he was merry enough, and had little difficulty in ridding himself of dull care. After his triumphant letter to Margaret, he found it impossible at once to confess the extent of the fiasco; but he wrote to her evasively, saying that he had been too hasty; there was a slight hitch; the necessary proofs were not so easy to get at as he had supposed they would be; he must exercise a little patience, &c., &c. And he considered himself justified in so writing, since he had not yet received answers from the Consuls at

Leghorn, Naples, and other places, with whom he had put himself in communication.

In this state of enjoyment tempered by anxiety, Philip spent several weeks, during which time other persons, who have dropped out of sight for so long that it is to be feared that the reader may have forgotten all about them, were working out their several destinies under circumstances which must now be recorded.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WALTER GOES TO A BALL.

It is probable that, for the first few months after Walter's departure from home, the whole City of London did not contain a more thoroughly disconsolate young man than he. He had known that he would dislike sitting upon a high stool, that he would find the persons with whom he would have to associate uncongenial in most respects; but the reality far outdid his expectations. More than once he was sorely tempted to look back, like Lot's wife; especially as he was unable to detect any signs of a Zoar in the distance to compensate him for this toilsome march through a dreary waste of ciphers. Not only did he abominate his work; but it must be confessed that he did it badly. He had no head for figures, and indeed was not quick at acquiring any fresh branch of knowledge, nor did he receive the smallest assistance or encouragement from Mr. Boulger, a surly, burly old man with a red face, who seldom spoke to his subordinates, and, when he did speak to them, did so in such a manner that they would willingly have dispensed with the attention.

But, if Walter Brune was not dowered with a large supply of brains, he possessed no bad substitute for them in the shape of plenty of perseverance and a strong will; and so, in process of time, he conquered the first difficulties of the business which he had set himself to learn, and was rewarded by a grunt or two of approval from his uncle, who now began to take a little more notice of him. Every Thursday he was invited to dine at the large, cold, and uninhabited-looking house at Clapham, where the old banker had resided for close upon half a century, and where Walter's young face made an odd contrast to those of the half-dozen or so of elderly gentlemen who usually

completed the party. In private life Mr. Boulger was gruff, but not particularly ungracious. He seemed rather to like talking to his nephew, and Walter sometimes had a hope that mention might be made of him in his wealthy relative's will. As for the partnership of which he had once spoken so confidently, that appeared to be very far off indeed. Mr. Boulger never made the most remote allusion to the subject, and did not hesitate to give expression to the poor opinion that he had formed of his nephew's business capacities.

'You will never make a banker,' he said; 'you will never make a man of business at all. It isn't in you. But it will do you no harm to work. Slave away, morning and night, summer and winter—that's what I did at your age, and you see I am none the worse for it, and a good deal the richer. I am an old man now—I go with the century—and never had a day's illness in my life, sir, that I can recollect. It's your idle people who grow sickly; we busy men haven't the time. Why, I could walk from here to Lombard Street and back again now, and eat my dinner all the better for it afterwards.'

It was all very well for Mr. Boulger, who had been taken into partnership at the age of thirty, to boast of his health and wealth; but to a young man who had little prospect of the one to console him for the possible loss of the other, the career thus described was scarcely fascinating. Walter, however, was not discouraged. He could but do his best, he thought to himself; and even if nothing came of it at all, hard labour at least prevented him from brooding over certain private sorrows of his own that we know of. Moreover, he was becoming accustomed to the life, as every one becomes accustomed at last to everything in this world; and from time to time he came across a college friend, and had a refreshing talk over old days, which, together with those Sunday dinners, during the winter, at Marescalchi's club, made him feel that he was not altogether an outcast from civilisation.

Had it not been for such occasional glimpses as these of his own world, he would have led an existence of complete solitude; for the Brunes were not people who had a large acquaintance, and Walter had abstained from calling upon the few friends whom he possessed in London, being, like most young men crossed in love, in a temporary condition of enmity against the whole of the other sex. It was therefore with some surprise that, on returning to his rooms one evening in the beginning of June, he found upon his table a square envelope addressed in a

lady's hand, which envelope, when opened, proved to contain a formal invitation to dinner from Lady Travers.

Walter's first impulse was to write a refusal. He was shy, and he was rather afraid of the magnificent people whom he supposed that he would meet at Travers House. Besides which, he did not wish to have anything to do with any one who had ever borne the name of Winnington. So he sat down and wrote that Mr. Walter Brune regretted that he would be unable to dine with Lord and Lady Travers on the day named. Then he frowned thoughtfully on this missive for five minutes, and ended by tearing it up. It was true that Edith had shewn herself unworthy of an honest man's love; it was true also that he had himself got over a boyish affection so obviously misplaced. Still, he would rather like to know what had become of her. He had been too proud to mention Miss Winnington in his letters home; but the fact was that he did feel some curiosity upon this point, and no doubt Lady Travers would satisfy it without any questions being put to her. Accordingly, he took another sheet of paper, and wrote that Mr. Walter Brune would have much pleasure, &c.; and ten days later, exactly as the clocks were striking eight, Mr. Walter Brune was mounting the great staircase of Travers House. If he had learnt nothing else in the City, he had at least learnt to be punctual; whence it resulted that he had to spend a quarter of an hour by himself in a vast drawing-room, feeling very hot and uncomfortable, before Lady Travers came in and apologised.

'I am afraid,' she began, 'I have kept you waiting, Mr. Brune—or, may I not say Walter? I have been so accustomed to hear you talked about as Walter, that I can hardly think of you by any other name.'

Walter said that he much preferred to be called by his Christian name; he, too, was much more accustomed to that mode of address than to a more formal one. He added, rather disingenuously, that he did not know by whom Lady Travers could have heard him spoken of at all.

'By Margaret, of course,' she answered, laughing. 'Who else should have talked to me about you?'

And then she looked so hard at Walter that that bashful young man became very red, and said it was a hot day for the time of year. 'What an ass she must think me!' he ejaculated inwardly. 'Of course she knows all about it, and I believe she's laughing at me. I wish to goodness I hadn't come.'

But Lady Travers did not seem to notice his embarrassment,

and gave him time to recover himself by talking without intermission until the arrival of other guests obliged her to leave him. The room was soon full of people; and Walter lost his self-consciousness in pleasure and curiosity when he found himself close to a knot of celebrities, amongst whom were a Cabinet minister and two foreign ambassadors. He was not introduced to Lord Travers, a fierce-looking old man, who was wheeled into the drawing-room in a chair, but who did not appear at the dinner-table, his gout forbidding him to touch any of the delicacies set before his guests. At dinner Walter was placed next to a good-humoured lady who knew all about him, having had a son in the Oxford eleven, and who talked quite knowingly on the subject of cricket; so that, upon the whole, our young friend spent a pleasant enough evening; though he could not quite understand why he should have been asked.

'Going away, already?' said Lady Travers, when he went up to bid her good night. 'Why are you in such a hurry? I wanted to have a chat with you about dear old Crayminster; but you must come and see me again soon. You will be almost sure to find me any day between five and six, and I shall always be at home to you. It is so seldom that I meet anybody who belongs to our part of the world now. I suppose you know that my mother and Edith are in London.'

Walter said, No; he had not heard.

'Oh, yes; they have taken a house in Park Street for the season. By the way, I have a little dance next Thursday, and I shall be so glad to see you, if you care to come.'

Walter was completely mystified. Why all this excessive cordiality? And what did Lady Travers mean by talking about her mother and sister? One thing was certain, she could not be aware of the circumstances under which he had seen them last, and in any case he was determined not to run the risk of meeting Edith at this dance. He began some unintelligible excuse, which Lady Travers cut short without ceremony.

'I think you had much better come,' she said.

'I can't come,' answered Walter, in despair. 'If you will allow me, I will call upon you some day, and tell you why. I can't explain with all these people in the room.'

'Explanations are not required,' she answered, smiling. 'I know what your reason for refusing is; but it is such a bad one that I cannot accept it. Why, my dear Walter, if everybody felt the scruples that you do, society would come to an end,

because half the men in London would be afraid to go out anywhere lest they should meet—somebody whom they didn't want to meet.' She added in a lower voice, 'Don't be so faint-hearted.'

'What do you mean?' Walter began eagerly. But Lady Travers was already speaking to some one else, and only looked over her shoulder, as she shook hands with him, to say, 'I shall expect you on Thursday, then.'

Walter trudged homewards in a state of much wonder and excitement. If Lady Travers had meant anything at all, she must have meant that there was hope for him, and, if there was hope for him, Edith must have mentioned him to her; and if Edith had mentioned him——. But at this point Walter called common sense to his aid, and told himself that he was not going to believe anything of that sort. He had heard from the girl's own lips that she did not care enough about him to face any trial for his sake; that, surely, was conclusive enough to satisfy anybody. And then he recalled those fatal words, and went through the conclusion of that melancholy interview at Longbourne once more, as he had done many and many a time before, when he had been tempted to think that he had been too hasty, and that, after all, it might have been nothing but sheer terror of Mrs. Winnington that had induced Edith to dismiss him. Nevertheless, the more he thought of it—and he thought of very little else for the next few days and nights—the more he became convinced that Edith must have taken her sister into her confidence, and surely Lady Travers would not have been so cruel as to encourage him unless there were some real ground for encouragement. He made up his mind that he would speak to Edith—there could be no harm in his doing that; for Mrs. Winnington herself had admitted that they must speak, if they met—and then he would very soon find out the truth. In the meantime, he could not help admitting a delightful suspicion into his mind that Edith had taken the very first possible means of communicating with him that had come within her reach since their severance. Even if she only wanted to tell him that she was sorry for having treated him with so much heartlessness, that would be something. He pictured her seizing an opportunity to whisper a few hurried words of penitence to him in the ball-room, her colour coming and going as of old, and he could very easily imagine himself forgiving her. Walter was nothing if not practical; yet the thought of a

romantic leave-taking and of two faithful hearts destined to beat for ever apart was not without its charms for him.

He nursed these pleasing illusions up to the supreme moment when he accosted Edith on the Thursday evening, and then was robbed of them all at a blow; for her start of surprise and her face of consternation sufficiently convinced him that this meeting had been entirely unforeseen by her. She was looking radiantly beautiful; she was exquisitely dressed; she wore about her neck the magnificent pearls which had come to Mrs. Winnington by inheritance, and which had enhanced the charms of each of her daughters in succession; half a dozen men were pressing round her, begging for a dance, and Walter had time to say no more than 'How do you do?' before he was jostled beyond speaking distance, for the 'little dance' to which he had been invited was in reality a crowded ball.

Five minutes afterwards, the good-natured lady who had sat beside Walter on the night of the dinner-party said to Lady Travers, 'Would you like to see a banker's clerk in a towering rage? If so, just cast a glance at poor Mr. Brune. Has the girl of his heart thrown him over, or is it only that somebody has trodden on his toe?'

Lady Travers hastened to join her young friend, who indeed was leaning with his broad shoulders against the wall, looking as black as a thunder-cloud.

'What *is* the matter?' she asked, trying hard not to laugh.

'Why did you make me come here?' returned he. 'You knew quite well what it was that induced me to accept your invitation, and I suppose you knew, too, what I should get for my pains. Well; it was a capital joke, and I hope you are satisfied. Your sister stared at me as if she had seen a ghost, when I spoke to her; but the shock hasn't upset her much. You see she is enjoying herself immensely, dancing with that curly-headed fellow—whoever he may be.'

'My dear Walter, you must not speak so loud; and you are not to scold me in my own house, if you please. If you are so ungrateful and unreasonable, I shall send you about your business. Can't you understand that, if I had told certain people that you were to be here, certain people would probably have remained away? I have put your foot on the first step of the ladder; but I really cannot carry you up upon my shoulders. Now do, like a good, sensible fellow, watch your opportunity and take advantage of it, and don't make me a rebuke to the foolish

by standing sulking there till people ask me who you are and what is the matter with you.'

'I am afraid I was awfully rude,' said Walter, contritely; 'you have been very kind to me—I'm sure I don't know why—and I beg your pardon for speaking as I did. But look here, Lady Travers, I'm the worst man in the world at understanding hints. I wish you would tell me plainly whether there is any hope.'

'There is always hope for a man. If a man does not get what he wants, he has himself to blame; it is only women who are condemned to be hopeless. Women are very often obliged to say things that they don't mean, and to do things that they don't want to do; they have no choice. However, there is one thing that a woman can do—she can always throw over a partner in favour of some one else whom she likes better.'

Fortified by this hint, which, at all events, could not be complained of on the score of obscurity, Walter shouldered his way by degrees to the open window, where he could see Edith talking to the curly-headed youth whom he had mentioned so contemptuously, and hovered about within a few yards of her until the music struck up again, when he boldly advanced, and said: 'I think this is our dance, Miss Winnington.'

Edith gave him a scared look, turned pink and white, and white and pink again, and at last answered hurriedly: 'Oh, no; I think not. I think you must have made a mistake.'

'No mistake at all,' returned Walter, firmly; and he offered his arm, which she took, after a moment of hesitation.

'Oh, not into the room, please,' she said, with a little nervous laugh, as he began to follow the crowd. 'I can't dance with you under the eyes of my partner, and mamma would be so angry if she saw us. It was very wrong of you to claim me in this way, when you know you never asked me for a dance at all; but perhaps just for once, as we are such old friends——'

'Yes; let us do wrong for once—as we are such old friends,' said Walter, drily. 'Where can we go to get out of this crush?'

'That window opens on to a balcony; we might go out there for a few minutes. Only for a few minutes, though; I ought not to be speaking to you at all. How do you come to be here?'

'Oh, I assure you I was asked. It is very extraordinary that I should have been, no doubt; but fashionable society is getting so dreadfully mixed nowadays, you know,' answered Walter, for he had not quite expected to be greeted after

this fashion, and it struck him that there was a shade too much of patronage in Edith's tone.

'I don't think it is very kind of you to speak like that,' she said in a low voice.

They were out upon the balcony now, and Edith, who had removed her hand from Walter's arm, was leaning over the cushioned balustrade, looking down upon the passing vehicles in Park Lane, and upon the dark trees beyond.

'Kind?' returned Walter. 'No; I daresay it is not particularly kind. Perhaps, if you were in my place, you wouldn't be very much disposed to be kind. No; I didn't mean that! Don't go, Edith—don't be angry with me. You know I would not be unkind to you for the whole world. Of course my being here is odd; I never go anywhere; I haven't been to a single ball all the time that I have been in London, and I suppose I was a great ass to come to this one. But when Lady Travers told me that I should meet you here, how could I help myself?'

Edith, who had made a movement as if to return to the ball-room, had resumed her former attitude, and now stood silent, with her back turned to her companion.

'Won't you, at least, say that you are a little glad to see me?' he pleaded, after waiting in vain for her to speak.

'I am very glad to see you, Walter; I should always be glad to see you,' she answered quickly, without looking at him. 'And we *are* old friends, you know; though you don't seem to like my saying so. I thought you had forgotten me altogether. You never inquired whether I was dead or alive when you wrote to Nellie.'

'You did ask Nellie about me, then?'

'I seem to be losing all my old friends,' Edith went on, ignoring this interruption. 'Nellie will hardly speak to me now; I suppose I must have offended her in some way. Are you pleased about her engagement? I never thought she cared so much for Philip—did you?'

'It is not always easy to tell whom women care for. Nellie is a girl who knows her own mind anyhow. She wouldn't have taken him unless she cared for him; you may be quite sure of that.'

'Wouldn't she? She would have been very foolish if she had, certainly, considering that she is perfectly free to do as she likes. A great many girls are obliged to accept men whom they don't care for, and——'

'Edith, if you have accepted somebody else, for God's sake, say so, and let us get it over. You told me you did not care for me. Whether you quite meant that at the time, or whether you were frightened into saying it, I don't know; but it comes to much the same thing; for you could not have said it if you had really cared for me——'

'If you think that,' interrupted Edith, 'what is the use of alluding to the subject at all? We had much better not allude to it. I have not accepted anybody, and I think most likely I never shall; but that can be nothing to you. I did not expect that you would ever speak to me again. You have every reason to hate and despise me.'

'Ah, but I don't; I love you.'

'You must not say that, Walter. Even supposing that it were true——'

'I certainly should not say it if it were false.'

'But you must not say it at all. If we are to meet sometimes now, we must never talk about that; we must talk about other things. What do you think of this extraordinary discovery of Philip's? Do you believe he is really your cousin?'

'I don't know what to think. My father believes it. It is a bad look-out for us, I'm afraid. But I can't discuss Philip now. Edith——'

'I don't want to discuss Philip either; I would much rather hear about you. Are you getting on well? and do you dislike your work very much?'

'I can't say I like it; but it gives me something to do, and leaves me little leisure for thinking—which is a blessing.'

'Do you ever play cricket now?'

'No; I haven't the time. Edith, I don't want to take an unfair advantage of you; but you don't know what a difference it would make in my life if you could tell me that you still cared for me, ever so little?'

'You said I could not really care for you—— What a lovely night! Is it not, Mr. Lovelace? I came out here to get a breath of fresh air; it is so stifling indoors. Our dance?—and nearly over? I am so sorry; but if you had been searching for me high and low, as you say, you could not have helped finding me. I only left the room a few minutes ago. Good-night, Mr. Brune. Are you coming to lunch here on Sunday by any chance? Oh, I thought perhaps you might be.'

And so Edith was led away into the throng by her justly-incensed partner, and Walter understood that he was dismissed

for that evening. If he could have seen Lady Travers, he would have asked her boldly whether he might call upon her on Sunday; but Lady Travers was nowhere to be discovered, and the only familiar face that he came across in the course of his search was that of Mrs. Winnington, who stared very hard at him, and gave him an undecided sort of bow, as he brushed past her.

It was only just past midnight when he emerged upon Park Lane; and as he felt quite certain that he would not be able to sleep if he went home, he thought he would walk down to the New University Club, of which he was a member, and think things over there with the help of a pipe. Turning the corner of St. James's Street, he met a tall pedestrian of military bearing, who peered at him in the light of a gas lamp, stopped short, and then said, 'Is that Walter Brune?' And the next minute he was shaking hands with Colonel Kenyon.

'It is rather a piece of good fortune, my meeting you,' the Colonel remarked. 'I heard something to-day which I think you ought to know about. Could you spare me a quarter of an hour?'

Walter said, 'An hour, if you like,' and proposed that they should walk on a few steps to his club, where Colonel Kenyon said what he had to say at greater length than need be reported. In fulfilment of the resolution which he had made some time before, while at Longbourne, he had been to Conduit Street, and had heard from Philip's former landlady the whole history of Mrs. Marescalchi's illness and death. Thus the mystery was at last solved, and the only question was whether it would be right that he should make the matter known to Miss Brune, or not. It was upon this point, Hugh said, that he had been anxious to consult her brother.

'The business is not quite so bad a one as I was afraid that it might be; but, in all conscience, it is bad enough. Why, at the very time he proposed to your sister his wife can hardly have been dead a month! Can you imagine a man being such a heartless scoundrel?'

Walter shook his head. He had not spoken during Colonel Kenyon's recital, except once, when he had ejaculated under his breath, 'So that was what became of poor little Fanny! What an odd thing that I should never have suspected it!'—and although he looked a good deal vexed and distressed, he had hardly expressed so much indignation as his informant had expected that he would do.

'Somebody ought to tell Miss Brune,' said Colonel Kenyon, decisively; 'the more so as I don't for one moment believe that the fellow himself will tell her, unless he is obliged. I might write to Margaret; but the fact of the matter is that I have have given so much offence already by what I have said from time to time about this precious young rascal that—that, in short, I would much rather leave it alone. I think you would be the proper person to write to your sister.'

'I suppose so,' said Walter, doubtfully. 'Only, don't you think it would look rather like stealing a march upon Philip?'

'Stealing a march upon him!' repeated Hugh, scornfully. 'How is one to deal with a fellow like that, unless one steals a march upon him? I confess,' he went on, with some impatience, 'that I can't understand the weakness that all you people seem to have for Marescalchi. Here is a fellow who sneaks off to Italy to try and do your father out of his property, who coolly proposes to your sister when he hasn't a sixpence to bless himself with, who keeps a wife in London on the sly, breaks her heart, I suspect, and rushes off to engage himself to somebody else before she is cold in her grave—a fellow who laughs at you, and humbugs you, and tells lies right and left—by George! and upon my word and honour, I believe you think it's all right. If I venture to suggest to Margaret that it would be as well to look after him a little more closely, she turns her back upon me; and now, when I ask you to tell your sister a plain and simple fact which no gentleman in Marescalchi's place would have concealed from her, you talk about stealing a march upon him! I must confess that I can't make it out. It fairly beats me.'

Walter smiled deprecatingly. 'You see,' said he, 'we have known Philip all our lives, and—well, it is not very easy to make a stranger understand how we feel towards him; but the truth is that one can't help liking Philip. I never met anybody yet who didn't like him.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Hugh, with hearty emphasis; 'you have met one man who doesn't like him, never did, and never will.'

'Ah, well; you are the exception that proves the rule, I suppose. I quite agree with you that it would have been better if Philip had been more straightforward; but then, again, there are lots of people who would say that a man isn't bound to tell the whole story of his past life as soon as he becomes engaged. We don't know what he may have to say for himself either;

and I am sure you are wrong about his having broken Fanny's heart. Philip is just the same now that he used to be at school. He does a heap of things that he ought not to do; but he never intends to hurt anybody—he never means any harm.'

'Of all the noxious reptiles that crawl the earth, commend me to the man who doesn't mean any harm!' called out Colonel Kenyon, whose heat was greatly increased by the other's misplaced leniency. 'Well; do you mean to write to your sister, or don't you?'

'Oh, yes, I'll write,' answered Walter; 'there's no doubt that she ought to be told.'

'And I sincerely hope and trust,' said Hugh, getting up, 'that she will break off her engagement. There's no saying what she may do, though, or how she may take it. I don't profess to understand women myself.'

'They are curious creatures, certainly,' agreed Walter, thinking of his own experience of the sex.

'Most extraordinary,' said Hugh; 'most extraordinary. Well, good night, Walter. If you could see your way to telling this story without bringing my name into it, you know, I should be just as well pleased.'

And, having given this incidental proof that he understood something of the nature of at least one woman in the world, Colonel Kenyon struggled into his great-coat and went away.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TOM STANNIFORTH FINDS HIS MATCH.

If Walter had not been in such a desperate hurry to leave Lady Travers's ball, he might probably have been called upon to shake hands with an old acquaintance, in whose movements he had good reason to be interested. Tom Stanniforth, in this month of June, when public business was being rapidly pushed forward and philanthropic measures were in imminent danger of being shelved by an impatient Legislature, was too actively occupied a man to have much time for dancing; but between twelve and one o'clock he did manage to hasten up from Westminster to Travers House, and the first person to whom he spoke, on his arrival, was Edith.

'How late you are!' said she. 'I thought you were not coming.'

'So did I, I can tell you, at one time. I got away as soon as I could; but I was bound not to miss the division. When I saw Torkington get upon his legs, I gave myself up for lost; but happily he had forgotten his notes, so he treated us to a confused oration, which was quite short for him, and soon after that we were let out of school. I hope you got the flowers I sent you?'

'Thank you, yes; they arrived quite safely, and they were very pretty.'

'You have not brought them with you though, I see.'

'They did not match my dress. And, Mr. Stanniforth, I hope you will not take the trouble to go to Covent Garden, or wherever it is that you buy flowers, any more on my account. I am sure it must be a great tax upon you.'

'Good gracious me! I haven't the time to go to Covent Garden. I send out to the florist's to order them.'

'I see,' said Edith, with a quiet smile. 'But in future your servant might be spared the walk to the florist's. I don't think I care much for bouquets.'

'Don't you? Well, I rather agree with you. They are a barbarous sort of things in themselves, and they must be a great nuisance to carry about; but I thought——'

'You thought it would be the proper thing to send them, and I am sure you are very kind; but henceforth we will take the will for the deed. Don't you want to go and dance with somebody now? It is useless to ask me; I am much too tired and too hot to move from my seat, now that I have found one.'

It will be seen from the above that contact with the world had rubbed off a good deal of the shyness with which Edith was afflicted when we first made her acquaintance; but that she was still subject to timidity, under certain circumstances, was plainly shown when Mrs. Winnington came sailing up to say—

'Oh, Mr. Stanniforth, how kind of you to send those lovely flowers! I hope you will forgive me for not allowing Edith to bring them; but pink and green, you know! I have such a dreadfully sensitive eye for colour; it is quite a misfortune to me; and I really *could* not let her carry them with that dress on—though she was very angry with me about it. Weren't you, Edith?'

And Mrs. Winnington accompanied this query with a look which caused her daughter to cast all regard for truth to the winds, and to answer, 'Yes, mamma,' with the utmost promptitude.

'Miss Winnington has been telling me that she doesn't care for bouquets,' observed Tom.

'What nonsense!' Mrs. Winnington was beginning; but Tom went on—

'Nor do I, I must say. So we are agreed. I like nothing better than wild flowers myself.'

'Well, perhaps bouquets are rather stiff; still you could hardly walk into a ball-room with a bunch of buttercups and daisies in your hand. By the bye, Mr. Stanniforth, I want to tell you how very much interested I was in reading your speech of last night. So telling, and so perfectly unanswerable! The poor Home Secretary! I felt quite sorry for him; though I suppose you would say that he deserved it all. But I must not keep you from dancing.'

'I am not going to dance,' answered Tom. 'That is another point upon which your daughter and I are of one mind. We think it is much better fun to sit still and look on in such weather as this.'

It was quite the same thing to Mrs. Winnington whether this couple sat still or danced, provided that they remained together; so she only exclaimed playfully, 'Oh, you shockingly lazy people!' and passed on in high good-humour.

It would occupy rather too much space to record the gradual process by which Mr. Stanniforth had been brought, or had brought himself, to the point of paying serious addresses to Edith Winnington. When he had been rejected by the only woman whom he had ever loved, he had made up his mind, as a natural consequence of that disappointment, that he would remain a bachelor for the rest of his days; but since then he had seen reason to reconsider his determination. His father, who was growing alarmed lest the family of Stanniforth should become extinct in the zenith of its glory, and its wealth be distributed among distant collaterals, urged him frequently and piteously to take a wife without further loss of time; Tom himself began to think that it was almost his duty to do so; and while he was still wavering—these considerations alone being not quite weighty enough to decide him—came the news of Nellie's engagement to Philip, which clinched the matter. There was, of course, no good reason for its doing so, since he had abandoned all idea of gaining Nellie's love for himself; but the feeling was not, perhaps, an altogether unnatural one. Thus it came to pass that, when Mrs. Winnington let him know of her arrival in Park Street by an invitation to dinner, he not

only accepted this hospitality, but came to the conclusion that he might do a great deal worse than accept what was delicately offered at the same time; and from that day forth he set himself to prosecute his suit in the intervals of business. The House of Commons, the habitual drunkards, and the oppressed railway servants occupied by far the most important place in his thoughts (for he was firmly resolved to think no more of Nellie); but there still remained to him, under the head of relaxation, an hour or two out of every day to be devoted to Miss Winnington, whom he considered a very nice girl, and much improved in manner of late. He was not in love with her, and did not attempt to persuade himself that he was so; but he believed that he could make her happy, and that, in a comparative fashion, she would make him happy too. Indeed, so long as there were habitual drunkards and other such unfortunates in the land, he was not likely to be dependent upon domesticity for comparative happiness.

Mr. Stanniforth, then, became so marked in his attentions to the ladies in Park Street that Mrs. Winnington, feeling this bird to be well in the hand, began to beat the bush in search of other and rarer ones, and had fairly good sport with a few young peers, until their respective mammas turned upon her and gave her to understand that such poaching would not be permitted. Edith, for her part, gave Mr. Stanniforth no little encouragement. She had the weakness of will innate in her father's family; but she had also, as many weak persons have, a considerable power of passive resistance, when driven to extremities. Mrs. Winnington could lead her to the water any day with the greatest ease; but it was not quite so certain that she could be made to drink. Her present idea was to temporise; and this, she thought, could be best accomplished by allowing Mr. Stanniforth and others to suppose that she meant to accept him. She had measured quite accurately the extent of his affection for her, and knew that there would be no difficulty at all in staving off his proposal until the end of the session. If, in the meantime, she could use him as a weapon to keep other admirers at a distance, there would be that much, at all events, gained. And he was really a very pleasant kind of man to have for a friend. He knew all sorts of people, and could provide anything that was required of him at a moment's notice, from a box at one of the theatres to places in the ladies' gallery of the House of Commons. He had even, upon more than one occasion, procured invitations for Mrs. Winnington

and her daughter from ladies with whom they were not upon visiting terms—though this last was a proof of friendship with which Edith would willingly have dispensed.

Nobody, however, need hesitate about asking for an invitation for a man; and that was why, after Mrs. Winnington had left Mr. Stanniforth and Edith to entertain one another, as already related, the latter broke in upon the *résumé* which her neighbour was giving of the Prime Minister's speech, by saying—

'You know Lady Cecilia Caroll, don't you?'

'Oh, yes; I know her.'

'I want you to get me a card for her concert on the 5th. Do you think you can manage it?'

'But I thought you told me that you were going.'

'So we are. It was not for myself that I wanted the invitation, but for a friend of mine, who was here this evening—Mr. Walter Brune.'

'What, young Brune from Broom Leas? Dear me, is he in London? Well, I'll do what I can; but I rather expect I shall be snubbed. Old Lady Cecilia is not the most amiable woman in the world, and she prides herself upon never crowding her rooms. I was rather surprised at her——'

'At her asking us?'

'No, no, my dear Miss Winnington,' cried Tom, who may, nevertheless, have had some such thought in his mind when he checked himself; 'I was going to say that I was surprised at her asking me. Do you very particularly wish for this invitation?'

'I should have liked Walter to have it. He is very fond of music, and I don't think he often gets the chance of hearing any; but pray don't trouble yourself, if there is any difficulty about it.'

'He shall have it,' answered Mr. Stanniforth, confidently. 'I can bring pressure to bear upon the old lady through her son, who is a red-hot Radical, and looks up to me with admiring eyes. Will you give me Brune's address, or shall I send the card to you?'

'You can send it to me,' answered Edith; 'or, rather, you can give it to me the next time we meet. And, Mr. Stanniforth, you needn't mention it to mamma, please. She—doesn't much like the Brunes.'

'All right; I won't say a word. Do you ever—ahem!—hear anything of the Brunes now?'

'I saw Walter to-night for a few minutes. I hear of the others through Margaret every now and then.'

'And are they all quite well down there? Miss Brune in the seventh heaven of happiness, I suppose—that sort of thing,' said Mr. Stanniforth, with somewhat exaggerated carelessness.

'I don't know about that. She did not seem to me to be particularly happy when I saw her last; but I suppose she ought to be so. Mr. Brune is not much pleased with her engagement, I believe.'

'One could hardly expect him to be pleased, young Marescalchi having no money and no profession,' said Mr. Stanniforth, who of course had heard nothing of Philip's supposed claims to Longbourne; 'but that only shows all the more that it must have been a love match, don't you see?'

'Did anybody ever suggest that it was anything else?' said Edith, smiling. 'People may be in love and yet not be happy, you know. How tired I am! I wish it was time to go away. Would you mind hunting up mamma, and persuading her to move? I shall meet you here at luncheon on Sunday, shall I not?'

Mr. Stanniforth said that Lady Travers had been kind enough to ask him, and then went off in search of Mrs. Winnington, as he was told.

It will now be understood why Walter had not been bidden to this Sunday feast. A meeting between him and Tom Stanniforth might, or might not, be awkward; and as a matter of fact Lady Travers had at first fully intended to ask him; but, after witnessing his behaviour in the ball-room, she had perceived that he was not nearly man of the world enough to be trusted in a situation requiring some patience and self-control. She liked him none the less for his lack of these serviceable qualities; but she dared not run the risk of a scene—especially as Lord Travers was accustomed to honour her with his company in the middle of the day.

This last consideration likewise prevented her from including her mother in the party. Lord Travers, who hated a good many people, hated his mother-in-law more than his wife, his doctor, and his lawyer all put together—which was saying a great deal. He had not spoken to her for years, and had long ago given orders that she was upon no pretence to be admitted into his house at any time when there could be a possibility of his meeting her.

Mrs. Winnington was very forgiving about it. She went

to the large entertainments at Travers House, and sent Edith to the small ones, saying that one really could not bring oneself to cross or contradict poor George, who was such a constant sufferer; but that he held views upon religious subjects which she felt that she ought not to listen to without a protest; and therefore it was just as well that they should not often meet. Furthermore, she could not quite approve of Sunday entertainments for herself, though she was far from condemning others who saw their way to participating in them.

It may be taken for granted that this orthodox churchwoman was not missed by any of those who assembled at Travers House on the day in question; and probably by none of them was her absence less regretted than by the daughter whom she had dropped in Park Lane on her way back from church. It was not often that Edith escaped from her mother's tender supervision, and when she did so, she enjoyed her liberty to the utmost. She would have enjoyed this luncheon-party had it consisted entirely of elderly spinsters, instead of being composed, as it was, principally of very agreeable young men, who vied with one another in their efforts to amuse her. The talk was general, and was entertaining enough in its way, and there was a great deal of laughter, to which Edith contributed her fair share. The old man in the wheeled chair, at the other end of the table, did not act as a damper upon the spirits of the younger people. He had a few friends of his own around him, who talked to him about racing and the prospects of the moors —for he had been a great sportsman in days gone by—and he took not the slightest notice of his wife's guests.

'Here is your card,' said Tom Stanniforth, when luncheon was over and he had an opportunity of speaking to Edith in private.

'Oh, thank you!' she answered gratefully, taking the envelope and slipping it into her pocket. 'I hope you didn't have a great deal of trouble in getting it.'

'There would be no pleasure in obliging a friend, if it did not cost one a little trouble to do so,' answered Mr. Stanniforth, who indeed had carried his point after an interview with Lady Cecilia which had been almost too much even for his indomitable good temper. 'It is to be a very good concert, I am told, if Brune cares for that kind of thing. I didn't fancy he was musical.'

Edith looked rather guilty for a moment, but recovered herself quickly. 'I don't know that he is exactly musical,' she

replied; 'but he likes music; all the Brunes do. Nellie delights in it.'

'Does she? Perhaps that was one of the things that attracted her to young Marescalchi, who is going to be the great singer of the day, I hear. When is he expected back from Italy?'

'I don't know. Mr. Stanniforth, you saw a great deal of Nellie at one time; I wish you would tell me whether she really cares for Philip, or not.'

'Now, my dear Miss Winnington, is it likely that I should know that, if you don't? Have you any reason for doubting it?'

'Yes, I have a reason: but it is only a sort of a kind of a reason; and Nellie never tells me anything. I thought, perhaps, she might have been more communicative with you.'

'Oh dear, no! Miss Brune never liked me, I am sorry to say. Have you heard the rumour that there is a split in the Ministry?'

'Yes; you told me. At least, I don't quite remember; but I shall read all about it in the 'Observer' when I go home, I dare say. I never can take any interest in politics, and I daren't open my lips when people get upon these subjects, lest I should display my appalling ignorance.'

'I am afraid I must often have bored you beyond endurance,' said Mr. Stanniforth, with tardy compunction.

'By telling me of all those wonderful schèmes of yours? Oh, no; you have not bored me; only I cannot always make out what it is all about. Now, Nellie takes the greatest interest in everything of that kind, and has the whole Act or Bill, or whatever you call it, at her fingers' ends in no time. She was quite excited over that Anti-Vaccination Bill that you used to talk about—no; not anti-vaccination. What was it?'

'The anti-vivisection measure?' suggested Tom, wonderingly. The pertinacity with which Miss Winnington recurred to Nellie's name puzzled and rather annoyed him. He did not want to talk about Nellie; nor was it agreeable to him to hear comparisons drawn between the girl whom he wished and the one whom he intended to marry. 'I find that all the ladies are with me upon the subject of vivisection,' he began, by way of gently leading the conversation towards generalities.

But Miss Winnington was not to be baffled. 'Nellie certainly would be,' said she, 'for she is so devoted to all animals—horses and dogs especially. I never heard the true history of that escape of hers out hunting. Wasn't it you who

cked her up, and dressed her wounds, and set her upon your vn beast?'

It was in this wily manner that Mr. Stanniforth was lured ito the beginning of a dialogue long before the end of which dith had found out all that she had wanted to, and knew s well as if she had been told it in so many words that her ompanion's heart was no longer his own to dispose of. For ore reasons than one, the discovery gave her a good deal of tisfaction; and she determined to use it for her own purposes, eeling no scruple in so doing. For what business has a man o be paying court to one lady when he is manifestly and idiculously in love with another? Edith had no manner of loubt but that her admirer would throw her over ruthlessly, Nellie were free and willing to accept his hand; and that, hought she, was a game at which two could play.

Before she went away, she found out Walter's address from ier sister, and posted the card which had been given to her for iim, writing the initials E. W. in the corner of the envelope in order to prevent misconceptions. It was quite possible that Walter, who knew so little of London life, might be surprised at receiving an invitation from a total stranger, and might have the stupidity to decline it.

As for Tom Stanniforth, he left Travers House that afternoon more disposed to be in love with Edith than he had ever been before. He was astonished to find how much he had enjoyed talking to her, and how quickly the time had passed. She had been lively, she had been loquacious, she had actually, once or twice, been amusing. And she really was a good girl. How kindly and pleasantly she had spoken about Nellie! And how very seldom it is that you hear one woman praise another in that hearty and unreserved way! The poor man is hardly to be blamed if he fancied that it was the sunshine of his presence that had caused this shrinking flower to expand so charmingly, and he should surely be praised in that he resolved, for the hundred-and-fiftieth time, to think thenceforward more of her and less of Nellie.

It was a few days after this that Walter thought the time had come for him to call upon Lady Travers, whom he was fortunate enough to find sipping her afternoon cup of tea alone, and who began to laugh as soon as she saw him.

'Now I do wonder what you are laughing at,' said he, rather crossly.

'I am laughing at you, Walter,' she answered; 'so now you know.'

Walter sat down, and looked indignant notes of interrogation.

'Don't you think you are very funny?' asked Lady Travers, still laughing.

'I think you are making fun of me, if that's what you mean.'

'No, I am not; but why do you march into the room in that defiant way, looking as if you were not to be trifled with and wouldn't stand any nonsense.'

'I suppose I look as I feel,' replied Walter, curtly.

'But you really must not feel like that. Of course, if you choose to go at things in a hammer-and-tongs style, and demand a plain Yes or No to every question, you will get your answer. You will get a plain No, if that will do for you. If you want the answer to be Yes, you must try to be a little more humble.'

'Lady Travers, I will be as humble as you please; I am ready to kneel down in the dust before her. But I won't be played fast and loose with; I won't be flirted with for a season and then pushed on one side and told that I ought to feel very thankful for having been admitted into the society of my betters. Either Edith loves me, or she doesn't. If she doesn't, well and good; I have no right to complain. But if she does, I think she ought to say so.'

'I have had to do with a good many dense and obstinate people,' remarked Lady Travers; 'but never yet have I met your equal. I am not at all sure that I should not do more wisely to send you away and encourage Edith to marry some decent old man with plenty of money, who would buy pretty things for her and get on well with my mother. By the way, my mother is laid up with the gout again.'

Walter said he was sorry to hear it.

'Yes; I thought you would be sorry. You will not have the pleasure of meeting her for some time now; and I suppose I shall have to act as Edith's chaperon.'

At this Walter grinned; but presently heaved a deep sigh. 'It doesn't make much difference to me,' he said despondently; 'I don't live in your world. She sent me this,' he added, pulling an envelope out of his pocket. 'It's an invitation to a concert from a Lady Somebody Something whom I never heard of. I've a great mind not to go.'

'I wouldn't go, if I were you,' said Lady Travers, calmly. 'I would display a proper spirit by remaining away, and sulk-

ing like a great baby, and showing Edith how stupid it was of her to move heaven and earth to get an invitation for you which has been refused to hundreds of people. That is the way to make yourself appreciated at your right value.'

Walter lifted both his hands to his head and rumpled his hair despairingly. 'What are you driving at?' he asked. 'What would you have me do?'

'I would have you remember that it was not Edith who enticed you out of your seclusion. You have no right to stalk up to her looking like an angry turkeycock, and ask "Why did you send for me, if you have nothing to say to me?" You might also remember that you are not yet in a position to marry.'

'I admit all that,' answered Walter; 'and if you tell me that I have no right to think of marrying Edith, I shall not contradict you. The only right that I do claim is that of being told whether I am to hope or not. I care for Edith a great deal too much to enjoy the chance of an occasional flirtation with her on the sly. I would rather never see her at all than be allowed, as a great favour, to see her sometimes in that way.'

'If I were not the most patient woman alive,' cried Lady Travers, 'I should wash my hands of you. You are impracticable. You ought to understand that it is not always possible to state things in such very plain terms as you seem to require. But I am exceedingly patient; and I don't wish Edith to be as unhappy as—as some people are who marry for position and wealth. You must be aware that that is the sort of marriage which she will be forced to make, unless somebody holds out a helping hand to save her. Now, you know, Walter, I like you very much, in spite of your bad manners, and I should be delighted to do anything that I could to oblige you; but you won't mind my saying that it was not out of pure affection for you that I took the trouble to discover where you lived and to drag you into society by the hair of your head. I thought that you and I could save Edith between us; and I think so still—though you are most discouraging. How am I to make you understand things? Try to imagine yourself in Edith's place—frightened to death of somebody whom we need not name, in daily peril of receiving an offer which you could hardly dare to refuse, miserably unhappy at home, and longing above all things to escape from it—don't you think you would feel as if it was not much use to fight against fate? But if you knew that there was some one who cared for you a great deal, and that he was con-

tent to wait patiently for better times and trusted to you to be patient too, and if you could see his face from time to time, to give you a dose of courage—then, perhaps, you would be able to go on fighting.'

'Ah! but will she be content to wait patiently?'

'That depends very much upon you, I should think. I can't say whether she would or not; but I am afraid she might not, if you were rough with her and frightened her. You don't know, and you are a great deal too stupid, my poor Walter, to take in, how brave and how cowardly women can be. You yourself, I suppose, are afraid of nothing. You would like to settle all difficulties, literally and metaphorically, with your fists. But we don't fight with those weapons, you see, and they would be of no use at all to you here. If you must fight, fight in another sense. Fight your way up in the world: that is what I should do, if I were a man. I should make up my mind that I would be a partner in Boulger's bank, for instance.'

'That is easy to say,' observed Walter.

'And if it is not easy to do, let it be done with difficulty!' cried Lady Travers, intrepidly. 'A man can have anything in the world that he wants, if he will only determine to have it. Look at Napoleon; look at Washington; and—and——'

'And Whittington, thrice Lord Mayor of London,' said Walter, laughing. 'Well, if trying is any good, I'll try; you may be sure of that. And, Lady Travers, you'll let me see her as often as you can, won't you?'

'Yes; but not too often. And you are not to take things too much for granted, please, or to expect her to throw herself into your arms, or to look black when she talks to another man.'

All these injunctions Walter promised that he would faithfully observe; and so, after a little more good advice, he was dismissed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

'PECCAVI!'

MARGARET STANNIFORTH was sitting in the library at Longbourne enjoying the repose of solitude and of a lovely June afternoon. She was enjoying these things, that is, as far as it was possible to her to do so; for, unluckily for her, she was not

one of those people who are good company for themselves. In order thoroughly to appreciate the charm of being alone, persons of her temperament must be very happy or very much the reverse; and at this time she was neither the one nor the other. She had, moreover, various causes for disquietude and anxiety, and these were apt to rise up before her in dismal array when she had nothing else to do than to think about them. Philip's letters had of late been few and short: it was only too clear that things were not turning out in accordance with his wishes; and what was worse than this was that Nellie appeared, most unreasonably, to cherish a grudge against him on account of the course which he had seen fit to pursue, and persistently changed the subject when his name was mentioned. It was chiefly on Philip's behalf that Margaret felt ill at ease; but there was another small matter which disturbed her peace a good deal in these days, and which was certainly not among the annoyances to which any one would have supposed her likely to be liable.

'Exceeding her income!—exceeding fifteen thousand five hundred a year!' exclaimed old Mr. Stanniforth, when Hugh journeyed to Manchester for the express purpose of making a singular communication to him. 'Then all I can say is that she must have a nest of first-class robbers under her roof!'

The old gentleman had, however, made no great difficulty about authorising his co-executor to sell out certain securities; and in this manner the cost of Mrs. Winnington's residence and entertainments in Park Street had been defrayed.

Given a proportionate style of living it is not much more difficult to exceed fifteen thousand than fifteen hundred a year; and poor Margaret's financial talents were of the slenderest order. During the first days of her wealth, when it had seemed to her that her income was practically boundless, she had responded liberally to every appeal for charity that had been made to her, and she would not now reduce subscriptions which were really out of all keeping with her resources. Later on, the charity which begins at home had been forcibly brought to her notice by her mother, who knew how far money would go, if any one did, but who not unjustifiably argued that Margaret was quite the richest woman of her acquaintance. The expense of living at Longbourne this economist assessed at about one-third of her daughter's income, leaving a balance of at least 9,000*l.* per annum to be devoted to the relief of the deserving. As a matter of fact, Longbourne cost Mrs. Stanniforth very nearly double the sum assigned thereto by her mother; and

when to this was added the maintenance of such very expensive persons as Mrs. Winnington herself and Philip Marescalchi had become, it will be seen that not much margin was left for unforeseen calls.

So it came about that Margaret, instead of laying by money, often found herself pinched for the want of it; and this it was that caused her pangs of self-reproach, and, among other things, made solitude distasteful to her. She moved about the room restlessly, wondering—as she had so often done in the course of her rather unhappy life—why responsibilities which she was utterly incapable of exercising should have been cast upon her, and whether, upon the whole, it would not have been a great deal better for everybody if she had never been born.

'I wish somebody would come and see me,' she thought; 'I wish Hugh would come. And, oh! how I wish Philip would come back!'

She was standing by the window when she uttered this last aspiration aloud, and hardly had she done so when her eye was attracted by a slowly-moving black object which was advancing far away across the sunny expanse of the park. This, by degrees, took the distinct shape of one of the ramshackle flies from Crayminster station, and as it drew nearer it became evident that there was luggage upon the box. Then Margaret drew in her breath, while her face lighted up with joyous surprise; for who but one person could be driving up to Longbourne provided with two large portmanteaus and a hat-box?

All doubt was soon at an end. The fly rolled up over the gravel, and stopped at the door; a dusty traveller descended; and in another minute Mr. Marescalchi was in Margaret's arms. Philip wore a rueful countenance. When the first inarticulate sounds of welcome and salutation had been interchanged, he dropped down upon a sofa, made gestures intended to simulate the rending of his clothes and the heaping of dust upon his head, and began in a lamentable voice:—

'Where's the fatted calf, Meg? Send for the ring and the new garment, and let us eat, drink, and be merry. Walk up, ladies and gentlemen, walk up, and see the show. Hero's your fine old genuine prodigal; there's no deception. I've wasted my substance in a far country, I've lived among—well, we won't push the parallel too far. Meg, I have come home to confess my sins. I am no more worthy——'

Margaret laid her hand upon his lips. 'Hush!' she said. 'I don't like to hear you make fun of the Bible.'

'Fun—I make fun!' groaned Philip. 'Oh dear, oh dear! you little know how far I am from being in a jocose humour. I am trying to stave off the evil moment, that's all.'

'There can be no evil moments now that you have come back to me safe and sound,' said Margaret, quickly.

'Yes; that's the proper spirit in which to receive the prodigal. And yet the evil moment has to be got through. I have made a mess of it, Meg—a thorough, complete, and satisfactory mess of it. I was within a hair's breadth of being the owner of Longbourne; but the laws of England, which look favourably upon the splitting of hairs, won't allow of their being swept away altogether; and so I am landless and nameless, and my parents were never man and wife, because they forgot that the Union Jack was flying within a stone's throw of the church in which they were married.'

Philip then related how and why he had failed to attain the object of his journey to Florence, and basked for a while in the warmth of affectionate sympathy.

'I do think it is most abominably unjust,' exclaimed Margaret. 'What more can people do than be married in church? As if a mere contract made in a Consul's office could be as important as that! Tom Stanniforth, who is so fond of taking up other people's grievances, ought really to bring this one before Parliament.'

'On public grounds, I dare say it might be a good thing if he did. As far as I am personally concerned, no amount of Tom Stanniforths or Acts of Parliament could help me. I am a failure, Meg; and, what is worse, I have made myself into a ludicrous failure. Do you know that for some time I was strongly tempted to disappear and never let you hear of me again?'

'Oh, Philip!'

'But I thought better of it, you see. The prodigal, you know, thought better of it when his money was all gone, and it came to be a case of husks or starvation. But I don't suppose that he put things to himself in that coarse way. I should imagine, judging from analogy, that what he said to himself was something more like this: "What an ungrateful brute I am! Here have I been receiving every imaginable kindness all my life, and scarcely troubling myself to say thank you for it, thinking of nothing and caring for nothing but my own gratification—and now I have my reward! I am ashamed of myself and disgusted with myself. I can't undo the past; but I

will go home and cry *peccavi*; and then, if my father chooses to turn me out of doors, let him do it. I shall not complain." So he packs his portmanteau, and pays his hotel bill, and off he goes to the station without saying a word to anybody, and—and—here he is, wishing very much to make a clean breast of it, but in, oh! such an awful funk that he doesn't know how to begin.'

'Am I so formidable?' said Margaret, smiling and giving Philip's hand an encouraging squeeze. 'My dear boy, if you have anything unpleasant to tell me, tell it me at once; and don't think that I shall scold you. I am a great deal too bad myself to condemn my neighbours. The only way in which you could really pain me would be to conceal your troubles from me; and that you have never done in your life.'

'Ah, Meg; it is just what I have done. I don't want to make excuses for myself; but I can't help thinking that it is more difficult for me to be honest than to most people. Walter, now, couldn't tell a lie to save his life; if he did, he would get so red and look so guilty that it wouldn't be of the slightest service to him. But I don't suffer in that way. I can tell a lie with the utmost facility; and that, I suppose, is why I have been telling you lies of a more or less direct kind ever since I can remember.'

'Oh, don't say that!' exclaimed Margaret.

'You had better not tempt me,' answered Philip, with a rather bitter laugh, 'or I may take you at your word. My poor, dear old Meg, I could go on throwing dust in your eyes to the end of the chapter; but I won't. I want to turn over a new leaf—upon my soul and honour, I do! Only, before I can do that, I must swallow a dose of nauseous physic; and if you only knew how I hate the idea of raising it to my lips, you would beware of interrupting me. Now don't say a word; I am going to drink.' Philip made a gulp and a grimace, and then said very quickly: 'What Kenyon told you was true. I was married for rather more than a year; and all last winter I lived with my wife in Conduit Street, where she died only a few months ago. She was a girl from a pastrycook's shop in Oxford.'

Margaret turned very white; but she did not remove her hand from Philip's shoulder, where she had laid it when she sat down beside him on the sofa.

'Oh, how did it happen?' she exclaimed. 'I am sure it was all her fault.'

In the midst of all his discomfort and humiliation Philip could not repress a short laugh. 'No, it was not her fault,' he answered. 'She was as good a little woman as ever breathed; and—well, I was very fond of her.'

'Fonder than of Nellie?' asked Margaret, hastily.

'No; not nearly so fond. At least I believe not—I can't tell. Will you have the whole truth? *I don't remember.* Oh, dear me!' exclaimed Philip, bursting out laughing, 'when I do go in for telling the truth, I believe there's no one like me. I wonder how many men there are living in this world of weathercocks who would have dared to say such a thing as that!'

It certainly was not very wise to say such things to Margaret. She tried to look as if she was not pained and shocked, but made an indifferent success of the attempt.

'I don't wonder that you did not let me know about it at first,' she said. 'Of course you *could* not let me know, and it is not telling an untruth to remain silent. Perhaps, for everybody's sake, it was kinder to remain silent for a time. I can see how it was, you intended to enlighten me, and then you put off, and put off, as one does. Wasn't that it?'

'I was having her educated and made presentable,' answered Philip. He perfectly understood that Margaret was arguing with herself quite as much as she was making excuses for him; and it did not appear to him that she was likely to get the best of the argument. He would almost rather have been reproached a little.

'Poor thing!' Margaret said, presently.

'Yes, you may say "Poor thing!" now, without a mental reservation. I wonder how it would have been had she been still living, and I had brought her down here to introduce her to you. She used to talk about "beyaviour"; and if Mrs. Winnington had snubbed her, it is more than probable that she would have burst out crying in public. Would you have said, "Poor thing!" then? No; you would have said, "Vulgar little wretch!"'

'I hope I should not.'

'Wouldn't you? You would have thought it, though; and so should I, perhaps. I was awfully unhappy when I thought that she was going to die; I don't know when I have been so unhappy in my life. But as soon as she was gone I began to see that whatever is is right. Tell me now—because I should like to know what you really think about it—was that human nature, or was it only *my* nature?'

reproachfully. 'You ought to have known that I should never think twice about giving you anything that you wanted, so long as I had it to give.'

'I did know it; but it was a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, you see; and, little as you might suppose it, Meg, I have still some feelings of shame left. I couldn't bring myself to ask you for more money; so I lay awake, and brooded over my sins. I suppose that nobody can come to a realising sense of what a sinner he is until he takes to lying awake at nights. It was that lying awake that showed me how abominably I had behaved to you, and how I had deceived you: and at last I could stand it no longer. I resolved that I would strike while the iron was hot, come straight home, and tell you all about—about the other thing, you know. And, having resolved upon that, it seemed best to make a full confession of everything—as I have done.'

Thus far, as regarded essentials, Philip's veracity had been unimpeachable; but he had been guilty of a slight suppression of truth in attributing his hurried departure from Florence to the stings of an awakened conscience alone. His suspicions with regard to the Signora had deepened into something very like certainty as the days had gone on. He had found himself falling more and more under her sway. Her good-humoured, authoritative trick of ordering him to do this and that had extended itself to matters of the smallest detail, and, favoured by his indolence as well as by his sense of obligation, had reached such a pitch that at last he felt that he could hardly call his soul his own. It seemed to him that he was in some sense the Signora's property, and she treated him as if he were so in every sense. Matters came to a climax one evening when he was driving back from the theatre with her, and when she asked him in so many words whether he did not think that it was much better for some men to marry women older than themselves. The wretched Philip stammered out an incoherent reply, shrank back into his corner of the carriage in mortal terror, and, as soon as he reached the hotel, rushed upstairs, packed his belongings, and fled the country precipitately. Such alarm may seem a little exaggerated, but probably Philip understood the danger of the situation better than anybody else could do. He believed that the Signora was capable of ordering him to marry her, and he knew that, under sufficient stress, he was capable of consenting to anything.

The wisdom of the step which he had taken was at any rate

amply justified by the event, when he found himself sitting, with all his sins confessed and forgiven, and his troubles as good as over. Margaret's pardon had been so readily accorded that he was encouraged to hope well of his approaching interview with Nellie, albeit much disinclined to walk over to Broom Leas forthwith, as he was urged to do.

'Mightn't I have a night's rest first?' he pleaded.

'You will rest so much better when you have done your duty. Why put off till to-morrow what might be done to-day?'

'Why do to-day what might be put off till to-morrow? However, if I must, I must.'

Philip got up, sighed, and moved towards the door; but before he reached it, it was thrown open, and Miss Brune herself walked in.

Margaret and Philip exchanged quick glances of dismay; but the former was equal to the occasion. She stepped forward, and kissed Nellie, who had stopped short, with a cry of surprise, on recognising the new arrival, and 'Here is somebody,' said she, 'whom you would rather see than me, I think. I have some letters to write, and I am going to the drawing-room to write them. You can send for me when you want me—or I should rather say *if* you want me.'

But Nellie had seized Margaret by the arm, and retained a firm grip of it. 'Please do not go away, Mrs Stanniforth,' she said. 'It was to see you that I came. I have had some very disagreeable news.'

And then she looked pointedly at Philip, with whom she had not shaken hands, and who promptly made a move in the direction of the door. 'I'll go,' he said; 'only will you tell me one thing first: does this disagreeable news relate in any way to me?'

Nellie turned her eyes upon him. He did not look at all like a whipped hound, as he ought to have done. His face wore a slight smile, a faint expression of curiosity, which may have been genuine or assumed, but which in either case would have sufficed to harden her heart against him. 'Yes, it does,' she answered shortly.

Margaret glanced apprehensively from one to the other, and caught the girl by both hands. 'Oh, Nellie!' she exclaimed, 'I think we know it all already. It's about somebody who who is dead, is it not? And Philip has come back on purpose to tell you everything, and to say how sorry he is. You won't judge him until you have heard him, will you?'

'He can have nothing to say that I should care to hear,' answered Nellie; 'and I dare say he will be glad that somebody else has spared him the trouble of an explanation.'

'I have my dear friend Colonel Kenyon to thank for this,' muttered Philip.

'It was Walter who wrote to me,' said Nellie, 'if that makes any difference. I came here to tell Mrs. Stanniforth that of course our engagement must be at an end. There is nothing more to be said that I know of.'

But Margaret thought that there was a great deal more to be said. 'Dear Nellie,' she began, 'don't be hasty. It is quite natural that you should be angry——'

'I am not angry at all; it is not worth being angry about,' declared Nellie, who was very angry indeed. 'I am glad I found out in time, that is all.'

'He was just going to Broom Leas to tell you.'

'Because he could not help himself. He told you why he had gone to Florence when he could not conceal it any longer.'

'That has all come to nothing,' said Margaret, quickly.

'Of course it has come to nothing; I did not believe the story for a moment. And now the engagement to which I ought never to have consented has come to nothing too. I hope I shall never hear the subject mentioned again in my life.'

Margaret was still holding Nellie's hands, as if in that way she could obtain control over a will stronger than her own. She threw an imploring glance at Philip, who was leaning back against the mantel-piece, with his hands in his pockets, and who merely raised his eyebrows, drew down the corners of his mouth, and shrugged his shoulders in answer to her appeal. It was evident that he had no intention of fighting his own battle; so she had to go on fighting it for him.

'Nellie,' she pleaded, 'we must all forgive sometimes. I know that you have a great deal to forgive; but, for your own sake, as well as his, you must try.'

'Oh,' answered Nellie, with a short laugh, 'I shall be able to forgive him without trying very much. There are some people to whom one forgives anything and everything, because——'

'Because one loves them,' broke in Margaret, eagerly.

'No; because—— But I won't say what I was going to say; and I won't pretend that I can quite forgive Philip yet. It is not so easy to forgive an insult as an injury. If only I

can avoid seeing him for a few months, I have no doubt I shall be able to like him again as well as I ever did.'

'Oh, Nellie!' murmured Margaret, with her eyes full of tears.

'Dear Mrs. Stanniforth, don't cry!' exclaimed the girl, softening suddenly; 'he is not worth it—I mean we are not worth it; and I can't bear to hurt you. I haven't been quite honest about this; I should have broken off the engagement in any case. Perhaps, as you say, I should have forgiven Philip at once, if I had loved him; but I don't love him, and I never have. I did try—no one knows how I tried—but I was perfectly miserable the whole time; and it was such a relief when he went away! I knew then that I never could really marry him; and I suppose that I ought to have said so. This morning when Walter's letter came, I felt as if I had been reprieved from a sentence of death. You see how impossible it would have been for me to do as you wished.'

This was not very pleasant hearing for our irresistible friend in the background, who had been a great deal more mortified and crestfallen throughout than he had chosen to appear.

'After that,' said he, 'I think the best thing I can do is to retire gracefully.' And he was out of the room before Margaret could say a word to stop him.

'How glad I am he is gone!' exclaimed Nellie.

But Margaret sighed, 'Poor Philip! oh, *poor* fellow! It was cruel of you to speak of him like that when he was still in the room.'

To this Nellie made no reply; and indeed it must be confessed that, during the remainder of the interview between the two ladies, the younger displayed a great deal more forbearance than did the elder. To be magnanimous was, perhaps, easier for Nellie, who had an excellent case, than for Margaret, who had no case at all; but it is somewhat trying to a proud and quick-tempered girl that her magnanimity should meet with no recognition. More than once Nellie was upon the point of making a sharp retort; but she bit her lips and kept silence, knowing how severe was the disappointment which had fallen upon the kindest of her friends, and feeling that her own conduct in this matter had not been quite as straightforward as it might have been.

'What can I say?' she exclaimed at length. 'I think Philip insulted me by coming straight down here from his wife's deathbed and asking me to marry him; I suppose anybody

would consider that an insult. But I don't want to convince you that he has behaved badly; and I'm afraid you can't convince me that he has not. The best way is to say no more about it. Even *if* Philip had been able to prove to us that all this was a calumny, and that he had never had a wife, I still could not have married him. I understand now that I never could have cared for him as one ought to care for one's husband.'

'It is rather hard upon him that you should not have found that out before you accepted him,' said Margaret.

Nellie did not remind her critic of the doubts which had been made light of in that very room at the time alluded to, nor did she quote certain words of Margaret's which remained very vividly in her memory. 'I am quite willing to take my share of the blame, if there is to be any blame,' she said humbly; 'but if I had consulted you, you could not have advised me to do anything else than break off the engagement, now that I know for certain that I don't love him.'

This was unanswerable, and Margaret felt it to be so; yet she was not altogether silenced. She went on fighting, though she knew that the battle was lost; and Nellie listened patiently and sadly. There came a moment when the two women were very near quarrelling for the first time in their lives; but that passed away. One of them was too sweet-tempered to allow matters to come to such extremities, and the other was too keenly alive to the pity of their falling out over so unworthy an object. They parted at last with tears and embraces, but with a cloud between them of which both were conscious.

The cause of the strife, meanwhile, was walking about the garden, trying to pluck up his spirits, which declined to answer to the spur. He could not brave the thing out. If Nellie had wished to punish him, she had discovered the right way to do so. The loss of her love was a real misfortune to him, but for the moment the loss of her respect seemed an infinitely greater one. It had often happened to him to speak and think of himself contemptuously; but that was a very different thing from hearing himself contemptuously spoken of by others. Nellie had told him in the plainest of language that she despised him; and he could not help seeing that Margaret, without being herself in the least aware of it, despised him too. He had no feeling of anger against either one of them; but he did feel exceedingly uncomfortable and horribly humiliated. Under the circumstances, there was but one thing to be done: he must get away with all possible despatch from the scene of

such painful experiences. He would go up to London, he thought, and place himself in Steinberger's hands once more, and court oblivion; which, to be sure, never needed much wooing on his part. And then he thought of the five thousand pounds which he would soon be able to pay to Signora Tommasini's bankers, and that consoled him a little.

After a long time Margaret came out of the house with red eyes, and walked quickly across the grass towards him.

'Well, Meg,' he said smiling, as he passed his arm through hers, 'so it's all over. Confession made, but absolution deferred; isn't that the way Mr. Langley would put it?'

'You know that if you needed any absolution from me, you had it at the first moment,' she answered; 'but that is not what you want, my poor boy. It is not against me that you have offended--if you have offended. And I can do nothing for you.'

'Do you call five thousand pounds nothing?'

'Oh, that,' said Margaret, who had entirely forgotten this trifling detail in the more serious trouble that had overtaken them both, 'that is easily provided. But, Philip dear, I can give you no hope about Nellie. I have done all that I could do, and it has been quite useless. I am so very, very sorry.'

'What a dear old thing you are! But you mustn't be sorry, Meg; it can't be helped. It is a bitter pill; let us swallow it down and make no faces.'

'It seems heartless to try and comfort you,' said Margaret presently; 'still there always is comfort—for a man. You will find interests in the world—occupations—plenty of things to divert your thoughts from the one subject.'

'I think it quite possible that I may,' answered Philip, gravely. 'And I must really be setting to work again in earnest now,' he added, after a pause.

'At the law, do you mean?'

'I am afraid it would be a long time before Hobson & Jobson would give me a brief. No; I have only the one talent, and I must not bury it. Duty points to London and Herr Steinberger and scales, Meg.'

'But you told me that you really did not like the idea of going on the stage,' objected Meg, looking at him with eyes full of pity.

'I am not sure that I do like it; but I intend heroically to lump it. I don't know what Steinberger will say to me, I'm sure; but I haven't altogether wasted my time at Florence,

and perhaps he may allow me to try my wings by a little preliminary flight before the season is over. Anyhow, I ought not to put off seeing him any longer than I can help. Do you still rise with the lark to attend divine service, Meg? If you do, you may catch a glimpse of me before I start to-morrow morning.'

'Couldn't you stay just a few days with me, Philip?'

'Do you think it would be wise? When one has been kicked downstairs, one looks rather foolish if one persists in sitting upon the doorstep.'

'I wish you would not say such things. You have not been treated in that way at all.'

'Not by you; but I have been kicked, all the same; and I feel uncommonly foolish. I really couldn't stay here, Meg. If there were nothing else to drive me away, the commiseration of Mrs. Prosser would be enough in itself. Give a man time to recover his self-conceit a little.'

'It is just possible,' said Margaret, after a few minutes, 'that I may not be here myself much longer. I am rather thinking of letting Longbourne for a time.'

'Letting Longbourne!' ejaculated Philip. 'Since when have you taken that notion into your head?'

'Oh, I have been thinking of it for a long time. I really want a change, and——'

'Meg, I don't believe a word of it!' exclaimed Philip, interrupting her. 'You never dreamt of letting Longbourne before this afternoon; and you want to cut down so as to be able to find me that money. But I'm not going to take it. Merciful heavens! I am not quite such a despicable fellow as that yet—whatever Nellie may think of me. I may have earned as much as that for myself before another year is out—who knows? But I'd rather go to the Jews for it than that you should be deprived of a single comfort.'

'Pray, pray don't do that, Philip!' cried Margaret, in great alarm. 'I don't know much about money-lenders, but everybody says that when once you get into their hands, you are never free again. Promise me that, whatever happens, you will have nothing to do with them!'

'All right,' answered Philip, laughing; 'I'll promise. The more willingly as I very much doubt whether they would have anything to do with me.'

Thus reassured, Margaret was able to join in his laughter, and to add: 'Your self-conceit, as you call it, must be coming

back to you already if you think I am going to cut down my establishment to pay your debts. What is five thousand pounds to me? Nothing! I want to get away from Longbourne for many reasons. It is lonely now, and I am tired of it; and my mother is ill again, and will have to spend the summer in Germany most likely. Perhaps I shall join her there. Altogether, I don't know when I may have so good an opportunity again for escaping from all my chains for a time.'

If this pious fraud was confessed to Mr. Langley on the following day, it may be hoped that he was not too hard upon its perpetrator. To raise a sum of five thousand pounds, over and above her current expenses, would have been at this time as impossible a feat for Margaret as for Philip himself to perform. She was indeed able to hand over a cheque for the required amount; but, having done so, it would have been out of her power to continue her present rate of living without considerably overdrawing her account before the end of the quarter. The only solution that suggested itself to her was to strike out the item of personal expenditure altogether from the budget; and no sooner had she seen Philip drive away from the door with his cheque in his pocket, than she took prompt measures to carry out this plan. She gave orders to the astonished Prosser to pay off and dismiss her staff of underlings forthwith; she wrote the necessary instructions to the house-agents in London; and then set out with a light heart, to walk down to the Rectory, having a certain proposition to make which she had reason to hope would be favourably looked upon there.

CHAPTER XXX.

A FIASCO.

THE hall table of the little house in Park Street was almost concealed beneath the shoal of cards and notes that were laid upon it every day, for Mrs. Winnington had never in her life let slip an opportunity of making a useful acquaintance, and was unwearied in her pursuit of such acquaintances when made. It may seem somewhat strange, therefore, that Edith, who could have procured half a dozen invitations to balls for Walter in the course of a week, should have put herself to considerable pains to get him asked to a private concert, a class

of entertainment which affords few facilities for uninterrupted conversation. Edith, however, had her reasons for adopting this course. She wanted very much to meet Walter again, but she did not at all want to meet him in such a manner as she had done at Travers House. He frightened her with his downright ways; she saw that, if he were to find himself five minutes alone with her, he would infallibly make a demand to which she could return but one answer, and that then he would go away in a huff, and the breach between them would be complete. But at Lady Cecilia Caroll's she would be able to talk to him with a pleasant feeling of security against any outbreak on his part.

Lady Cecilia's concerts were rather solemn functions. 'A concert,' that lady was wont to say, 'should be a concert. I don't ask people to my house to chatter and giggle, and sit on the stairs, and talk through the songs. What I wish is to give them an opportunity of hearing the best music and the best singers in a comfortable room with comfortable chairs in it. I only ask those who understand music; and not many of them, for I won't have a crowd.' The boast was not always a truthful one, for it is certain that a large proportion of the favoured guests knew no more of music than they did of the Chinese language; but that part of it which related to the comfort of the rooms and the excellence of the performers was justified by facts, and Lady Cecilia's invitations were always eagerly sought after—perhaps because it is a part of human nature to desire anything that is difficult to obtain: perhaps because, as she herself would say, with a sardonic grin, 'People will go a long way to hear for nothing what they would have to pay two or three guineas to hear elsewhere.'

Walter, who very excusably thought that a private concert and a musical party meant much the same thing, and who had found out that punctuality is not practised in London society, arrived rather late on the evening to which he had been looking forward with so much anxiety, and was surprised to find that he would not be permitted to enter the room in which the company were assembled before the conclusion of a fantasia upon the harp, of which the subdued tinkling could be heard through closed doors. He waited outside, at the top of the staircase, in company with some other tardy guests, until the doors were thrown open, and then entered a long, dimly-lighted room full of people, who had very much the appearance of being in church. They were seated, with their backs turned

towards him, upon rows of arm-chairs; and at the far end of the room was a sort of stage, occupied at present by a grand piano, a harp, and a fat little harpist.

Walter did not know Lady Cecilia when he saw her, and, as nobody advanced to welcome him, he presumed that he did not see her now; but he soon descried what interested him a good deal more, namely, the back of Edith's head some few yards away from him. The poor people who had been forced to sit still and silent for the last ten minutes were indemnifying themselves now by moving about and talking their loudest. Walter pushed his way through them with the ease which a man of his inches and breadth of chest could command, and perceiving to his great joy an empty chair beside Edith's, unhesitatingly took possession of it.

'Oh! you have come?' said she, allowing him to hold the tips of her fingers for a moment.

'Of course I have come. You asked me, didn't you?'

'It was Lady Cecilia who asked you, I suppose. But I am glad you have come, because it is such a good concert.'

'There was "E. W." in the corner of the envelope, at all events,' said Walter. 'So it's a good concert, is it? I don't know much about music myself; but - '

'*Hush!*' interrupted Edith, in an agony; for, indeed, Tom Stanniforth was standing close by, and Walter's voice was a loud one.

'Why, what's the matter?' asked the astonished culprit. 'Have I said anything awful?'

'Yes; you mustn't say you don't know anything about music. Everybody is supposed to like music in this house.'

'Oh, all right! I'm glad you told me. I should like anything so long as I was allowed to sit here. It was awfully good of you to keep a place for me.'

'Oh, I couldn't have done that! but you can stay here for a little; it is somebody else's place.'

'Then somebody else must drag me out by the collar of my coat if he wants his place again. Oh! how do you do, Lady Travers?'

'You are very kind to notice me,' said Lady Travers. 'Perhaps, in order to avoid the scandal of the police being called in, I had better give you *my* place.' And she rose as she spoke.

'Oh, but, Lady Travers, upon my word;—I couldn't think

of such a thing. I was only joking, I assure you,' protested Walter, quite shocked.

'If you are really sure that you were only joking, perhaps I may venture to return,' said she; 'but in the meantime you may as well keep my chair for me. I want to speak to some one on the other side of the room.'

Walter took her at her word; and the first thing that he did, after having effected this change of position, was to whisper to Edith, 'And who is Somebody Else?'

'Let me see—who was it? Mr. Stanniforth, I think,' she answered, somewhat disingenuously.

Now, in days gone by, Walter had guessed enough of Mrs. Winnington's designs to be aware that Tom Stanniforth was a more or less dangerous person; therefore his brow clouded over at this careless announcement. But he remembered his promise to Lady Travers, and only said, 'I should like to see Mr. Stanniforth again. He was a very good fellow.'

'Yes; I think he is very nice,' Edith agreed hurriedly. 'Have you heard from home lately?'

'I had a letter from Nell the other day. She says it is dull work down there now that we are all scattered to the four corners of the earth, and only she and my father are left to count the empty places. I suppose we shall never be all together again as we were in the old days. Jolly old days—oh dear!'

'I suppose you miss the cricket, and all that?'

'Exactly so—the cricket and all that. Do *you* ever think of old times now? The new times are better fun for you, aren't they?'

Edith sighed and looked down at her fan, upon which was represented a group of impossibly-costumed shepherds and shepherdesses dancing. It was a *chef-d'œuvre*, painted upon parchment, and signed by Watteau himself.

'What a pretty old fan!' said Walter, admiring the work of art, without suspecting its value. 'Where did you pick it up?'

'I don't know. That is, Mr. Stanniforth gave it to me.'

'Mr. Stanniforth! What the dev—ahem! Is it true that ladies accept all kinds of presents from men nowadays?'

'I'm sure I don't know. One can't very well refuse things if one's friends take the trouble to ransack the curiosity-shops for them. I don't care for *rococo* fans myself, and I should like to hand this one over to Kate, who does; only I suppose that would look rather ungrateful. Oh! they are going to begin

again. How much pleasanter concerts would be if the music were left out! We mustn't talk any more now.'

'Why, I haven't said a word to you yet!' exclaimed Walter, in dismay. 'You don't mean to say that Lady Travers is coming back!'

'No; she is sitting down over there. What is it going to be now? Not another instrumental performance, I hope and trust. We have had the harp; that's one comfort.'

'And are the flute, sackbut, and psaltery to follow?' asked Walter, glancing over Edith's shoulder at the programme which she held. 'No,—"*duo*, Signora Tommasini and Signor M." Who's Signor M., I wonder?'

Edith, who had raised her eyes to the daïs at the end of the room, was in a position to answer the question. 'Oh, Walter, look!' she exclaimed, in astonished accents.

Walter looked, and gave vent to a low whistle. 'By Jupiter!' he ejaculated under his breath. 'Who would have thought of his turning up like this? I wouldn't have written that letter if I hadn't supposed he was safe in Italy. Here's a pretty kettle of fish!'

But he gave no explanation of these mutterings in answer to Edith's inquiring glance, and they both turned their eyes towards Philip, standing with a roll of music in his hand beside Signora Tommasini, who was all ablaze with diamonds. It was Philip's first appearance in a professional capacity; it was the first occasion on which he was to exhibit his talents and gifts to an audience in consideration of something more substantial than applause; and this loss of freedom may perhaps have deprived him of the self-confidence which is so essential to success; for in one sense it is easier and far pleasanter to give away one's possessions than to sell them. Be that as it may, he was visibly nervous. His hands shook a little, his cheeks were rather pale, and he looked as if he would have liked very much to run away.

But Steinberger, with his legs tucked under his music-stool, was already punishing the piano; the Signora had kicked out her train, hoisted up her fat shoulders, and distorted her features into that extraordinary grin which, for some inscrutable reason, is held to be indispensable by all public singers; and Signor M. had to take up his allotted burden and trudge, whether he would or no.

He had still a few minutes in which to recover himself. First, Signora Tommasini went through some astonishing vocal

exploits—'letting off a lot of fireworks,' as the ignorant Walter said; then the two voices blended harmoniously together for some bars; and then came the trying moment when Philip had to interpret Donizetti alone and unaided. It was no very formidable achievement that was required of him; but there was a certain high note which would have to come out before he had done; and Philip felt an awful and sickening conviction that come out it would not. And, sure enough, it did not. There was an instant's pause, during which the singer suffered the condensed agonies of a lifetime; then, in despair, he expanded his lungs, and out came a note which was loud enough and clear enough for anybody, but which, alas! was not *the* note.

A quickly-repressed shudder shook the Signora's whole person; Steinberger made a horrible face, bent over the keys, lifted his great hands above his head, and brought them down with a crash-bang which drowned all subsequent deficiencies, and the performance came to an end without further hitch.

Probably not more than one per cent. of the audience knew that anything had gone wrong. The young *débutant* had had a momentary difficulty, but he had surmounted it at once; and his acquaintances, of whom there were a great many among the company, were quite ready to congratulate him upon his success. But a very different verdict was given by those whose approval was of more importance.

'*Gott in Himmel!* it was the yell of a wild beast,' shouted Steinberger, who was in a furious passion. 'Make such another exhibition of yourself, and I wash my hands of you. What have I always told you? Why must you run off to Italy, and ruin your voice by exerting it too soon? You are a hundred—tousand times worse now as you were last year!'

But Philip, apparently unmoved, laughed, remarked 'Better luck next time,' and strolled down into the room, where Edith was saying to Walter, 'Hasn't he improved wonderfully? I had no idea he could sing like that. Do you think he saw us?'

'I hope not,' answered Walter.

'Why do you hope not? I thought you and he used to be such friends.'

But Walter was not put to the necessity of explaining himself, for the words had hardly passed Edith's lips before Philip was shaking hands with her.

'So you have come to hear my lamentable breakdown,' said he.

'What do you mean?' Edith asked, in all sincerity. 'I thought you sang splendidly.'

'I wonder whether you say that out of politeness, or whether your ears were really not pierced by that awful sharp note. No one can have suffered more acutely from it than I did myself, if that's any consolation. Well, Walter, old man, how are you? Here I am back again, you see, and all the worse for my journey, Steinberger tells me. I didn't know you had gone in for frequenting the gay world.'

If Philip had been nervous upon the stage, when there was really no reason for his being so, he was quite at his ease now, and did not seem to think that any of the events which had taken place since Walter and he had parted need produce a coolness between them. 'How are things in the City?' he went on. 'Old What's-his-name hasn't died and left you all his money while I've been away, has he?'

'No; he's all right,' answered Walter, who, for his part, was very obviously embarrassed and uncomfortable. 'Have you only just returned? I suppose you haven't been to Longbourne yet? I just want to speak to somebody for a minute. Back directly.' And Walter turned tail and fled; nor did he return to Edith's side until he had satisfied himself that Philip was at a safe distance.

'Never felt so small in my life,' he declared, speaking afterwards of his behaviour upon this occasion. 'Knowing that, only a few days before, I had sent off a letter robbing him of his character behind his back, I couldn't sit there and pretend to be as good friends with him as ever. Nobody could. I simply had to make a bolt for it.'

Meanwhile Philip, who had perfectly understood the meaning of Walter's abrupt retreat, and was not a little amused by it, had taken possession of his friend's vacant place, and was making polite inquiries after Mrs. Winnington.

'Meg tells me she is down with the gout again,' he said. 'You really ought to impress upon her the duty of taking more care of herself, for all our sakes.'

'You have been to Longbourne, then,' said Edith. 'Of course you saw Nellie.'

'I did. I may as well tell you that all is over between Nellie and me. Don't try to look distressed. You know that you think, as everybody else does, except Meg, that she is well rid of me. At the same time, if you feel disposed to admire my fortitude, I don't forbid you to do so. In me, Edith, you see

that sublime spectacle, a good man struggling with adversity. By a most unkind freak of fortune, I have failed to establish my right to call myself Brune, and I am by no means clear that I have not lost my old name in the attempt. I return home in broken spirits to be told by Nellie that, upon further consideration, she finds that she never cared a brass farthing for me. I come up to London, and make a hideous fiasco of my first public appearance. It now only remains for me to be robbed and murdered on my way back to my lonely lodging to-night, and the tale of woe will be complete.'

'But is this really true, Philip? About Nellie, I mean.'

'It is too true. I am assuming a light tone, you will understand, in order to conceal a deep emotion. That also is true, though you don't believe it. Ah, well; let us talk about something else. Here comes Mr. Stanniforth, looking the benevolent legislator all over. I wonder whether he could be induced to hatch a scheme for the sustenance of unsuccessful public singers at the national expense.'

Tom Stanniforth greeted Marescalchi with all the cordiality that could have been expected of him, and with considerably more than he felt. He said: 'Everybody is prophesying a great career for you. They tell me that we shall be hearing you at Covent Garden before this time next year.'

'Everybody is very kind,' answered Philip; 'but it is a mistake to prophesy, and especially to fix dates. You can't go far wrong if you foretell that the world is coming to an end; but if you say it will come to an end in 1881, people don't think much of you in 1882. I only wish I were as sure of singing at Covent Garden some day as you are of being returned for Blackport at the next general election; but even that isn't an absolute certainty, I suppose. Haven't you been proposing to lock up all habitual drunkards, or something of that sort? Some of your constituents must look upon that as a rather uncalled-for interference with the amusements of the sovereign people, I should think.'

'That young man is—what shall I say?—not very far removed from a conceited young puppy,' remarked Mr. Stanniforth, with unusual severity, as Philip lounged away. For the truth was that the Habitual Drunkards Bill had been very coldly looked upon both at Blackport and in the House of Commons.

'Don't be too hard upon him,' said Edith; 'he has had a great deal of disappointment lately, and I don't think he is at all satisfied with the way he sang to-night.'

'Then,' said Tom, who perhaps would have been more mollified if he could have conjectured the nature of the disappointment alluded to, 'he may do. If he is dissatisfied with himself, there is hope for him. Hitherto, I fancy, he has rather come to grief from just the opposite cause. It is very good of you to stick up for him, though,' he added.

'Oh, very,' said Edith, laughing. And then Lady Travers came back, and asked what had become of Walter.

Poor Walter, who had been watching his love from afar, was at this moment making his way back towards her in the hope of regaining possession of the chair in which Lady Travers had just sat down. She did not offer to cede it to him a second time when he approached, nor did Mr. Stanniforth display any inclination to move; so, as he could not remain where he was, without standing upon the toes of the people behind him, he was presently forced to retreat to the doorway, where he spent the rest of the evening in a rueful mood.

A dishevelled violinist was in possession of the daïs, and continued in possession of it for a very long time. Then Philip again came forward, and sang a pathetic ballad with much effect, and shortly after that the proceedings terminated. By dint of determination and some exertion of physical force, Walter managed to be on the doorstep at the right moment to help Edith into her carriage; but that was all he got out of the opportunity which had been provided for him with so much forethought, and of which he had hoped such great things. Taking it altogether, it had hardly been a successful evening; and perhaps the only one of our friends who had thoroughly enjoyed it was Tom Stanniforth. He, having had a long talk with Edith during the latter part of the time, had found her so amiable and kind that he really began to think he might be falling in love with her at last; and said to himself that, in any case, he would not much longer postpone the offer which he had now quite determined to make.

Tom Stanniforth was so much a man of business that when he had formed a clear intention he was uneasy until he had executed it. In this matter of his marriage he had shilly-shallied an unconscionably long time, because he had not felt perfectly sure of his own wishes; but now it seemed to him that he had done all that was necessary in the way of preliminaries, and that it would be well to get the whole business settled and done with, so that he might be able to devote his whole mind to habitual drunkenness for the remainder of the session.

So the very next morning he betook himself to Park Street; and his air, as he marched into the little drawing-room, was so plainly that of a man with a purpose, that Edith knew quite well what had brought him there before he opened his lips.

As soon as he had made the inquiries which politeness demanded, and had expressed his grief at hearing that Mrs. Winnington was still in a good deal of pain, he wasted no more time in beating about the bush, but went straight to the point.

'I don't know whether you have guessed what has made me call at this unusual hour, Miss Winnington.'

Miss Winnington couldn't imagine.

'Well, I came because I hoped to find you alone, and because I wanted to speak to you upon a subject of great importance—of great importance to me, I mean. I think you must know already what my wishes are, and sometimes I have ventured to hope that you might not consider me too old and ugly to make a passable husband. I certainly have no reason to flatter myself that you are what is called in love with me; but the longer I live the more I become convinced that happy marriages do not depend upon there being love on both sides.'

'You think there ought to be love on one side, then?'

Mr. Stanniforth, whose countenance wore the smiling and complacent expression which it was wont to assume in the House of Commons after he had disposed of a difficulty, replied that he would not go so far as to assert even that—which rather took the wind out of Edith's sails.

'You look very much pleased with yourself,' she was provoked into exclaiming. 'Are you much in the habit of proposing to people, that you know so well how to put your case?'

'I suppose no man has had less practice at that kind of thing than I have,' answered Tom, still radiant. For, indeed, it seemed to him that he had put the case very neatly and concisely.

'Have you never proposed to anybody before?'

Mr. Stanniforth made no answer, but looked down and smiled, as if he thought the question was hardly a fair one.

Thereupon the pitiless Edith repeated it, and he was obliged to speak.

'Well, if you insist upon my telling you,' he said, 'I have. Only once, though.'

'Dear me! only once? And that was long ago?'

'Oh, come, Miss Winnington, I don't think we need go into

dates! If you'll take me, such as I am, you shall ask me what you please afterwards, and I'll promise to answer you truthfully. Only, don't you think it is much better to let bygones be bygones?'

'Oh! if you are sure that they are bygones—— But, Mr. Stanniforth, I must ask you just one more question: what makes you ask me to marry you at all?'

'My dear Miss Winnington, what reason could I have but one?'

'Do you mean me to understand, then, that you are in love with me?'

The timid Edith's composure of tone was not a little disconcerting to Mr. Stanniforth, who now behaved in a manner inconsistent with his whole past history by taking refuge in prevarication. 'Should I have been here if it were not so?' he asked reproachfully.

'And you are certain that you are not in love with anybody else?'

'Anybody else? I don't quite understand. Why, it stands to reason, you know—how could I be?'

'Oh, Mr. Stanniforth, what a poor actor you are! Do you remember how badly you did your part in those theatricals at Longbourne? I can't pretend to be a very good actress myself; if I had been, I should have accepted you first, and told you something afterwards which would have made you wish you were dead.'

'My dear Miss Winnington!'

'I really should—unprincipled as it might have been. But now, if I do you a good turn by refusing you, will you do something for me?'

Tom rubbed his head doubtfully, for he not unnaturally conjectured that Edith contemplated eloping with a detrimental, and was going to ask for his assistance in the matter.

'I hope you won't think me over cautious,' he answered, 'if I say that I hate making promises in the dark. I should be only too glad to be of use to you in any way, Miss Winnington; but I'm afraid I couldn't help you to do anything that—that might seem to me likely to bring you unhappiness.'

'Don't be alarmed,' said Edith; 'it is nothing very out-of-the-way that I want you to do for me. It is only'—and here she also began to show signals of distress—'it is only to behave as if—that is, not to mention to my mother that I have refused you, for a few weeks—just till the end of the season.'

'Oh, I'll promise that!' answered Tom, cheerfully, understanding well enough the reason of the request; 'and I only hope that, before the end of the season, some more worthy man may stand where I hoped to have stood. I won't say anything about my own disappointment.'

'No; I don't think I would, if I were you,' said Edith, drily. 'And now let me tell you that it is all over between Philip and Nellie. I heard it from Philip himself last night; his own words were that she had told him she had never cared a farthing for him. And I can't help thinking it might be worth your while to try again with the lady to whom you proposed at an unknown date.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

TOM STANNIFORTH GIVES SOME TROUBLE.

More soothing than paregoric, more invigorating than all the waters of Vichy, Homburg, and Kissingen, were the deep tones of a man's voice, ascending from below, to Mrs. Winnington, as she lay outstretched upon the sofa to which her old enemy had pinned her down. For no less than an hour and a half had Mr. Stanniforth been in the drawing-room with Edith, and still he was talking on, as if he never meant to go away. In a certain sense he never would go away: Mrs. Winnington was quite sure of that. She knew very well that there is but one errand which can excuse a man for presenting himself directly after breakfast and staying until the luncheon hour is at hand; and although for some time past she had been in little doubt as to Mr. Stanniforth's intentions, she was too well acquainted with the slippery ways of men to be thoroughly comfortable so long as the fatal words remained still unspoken. Certain it was that they had been spoken now; and Mrs. Winnington, despite the horrible throbbing of her foot, smiled with the seraphic smile of a martyr at the stake.

The long struggle was over, then! There need be no more scheming and plotting, no more grateful accepting of invitations ungraciously given, no more flattering of dull-witted men, no more ignoring of the sneers of insolent women—no more painful eating of dirt, in short. Henceforth there would be a quiet sunset time of peace, in which the weary combatant might lay down her arms—not unthankfully after so many and

great labours; a time which might be devoted a little more to thoughts of that long rest which could not now be very many years distant, and which hitherto there had not been much leisure to contemplate, except during a portion of Sunday morning.

It was thus that Mrs. Winnington sang her *Nunc Dimittis*, little guessing of the infamous projects which were being concocted beneath her feet. The worst part of her attack was over, as she knew; the enemy was retreating after his usual fashion, with an occasional savage onslaught to show that he had not yet quitted the field; and at such times Mrs. Winnington always felt in a low and chastened frame of mind. She was a woman of no small courage and endurance, caring little for pain, and fighting it, as she always fought, with a stubborn determination not to give in; but when the pain began to go, her spirits also began to droop; and just now she felt very old and tired and inclined for rest. Had she been in her usual health, she would probably have at once set to work to torment herself with doubts as to whether she might not have made a more brilliant capture than that of Tom Stanniforth; but now she was disposed to give thanks for what she had got. Tom Stanniforth was not only a very rich man already, but would on his father's death become one of the richest commoners in England; and nowadays wealth was a more important thing than title. Besides, there was no reason why the one should not lead to the other. It was a pity, in some ways, that he should be a Radical; but if the Radicals were to govern the country for the next twenty years, as everybody said they were sure to do, they would want to be better represented in the Upper House than they were at present; and so opportunity might come to the wealthy and deserving. And when Mrs. Winnington reflected that it was within the range of possibility that these Democrats might solve the question by sweeping away the hereditary branch of the Legislature altogether, she breathed an ardent prayer for the preservation of that bulwark of the Constitution.

One can't think of everything; otherwise Edith might have remembered that her prolonged interview with Mr. Stanniforth could not fail to be commented upon, and to be productive of some embarrassment to her in the near future. This detail had escaped her while she indulged in pardonable exultation over her own adroitness and her acquisition of a staunch and devoted friend. That Tom Stanniforth meant to prove himself such a

friend he assured her again and again. Nothing could exceed his gratitude, unless it were his profound admiration of the insight which had enabled her to discover what he did not really know himself. He had quite given up thinking about Nellie for a long time, he declared. Well, he had given up thinking of her in that way, at all events; and as for hope, he had abandoned all shadow of that from the very first. Even now he could hardly believe—and so forth, and so forth. It is not necessary to give a full report of all the puerilities uttered on this occasion by one who, through a long career of public usefulness, has ever been held to possess a stock of common sense above the average. Did Miss Winnington really think there could be a chance for him? he asked (for about the twentieth time). Would it be a good plan, now, if he were just to run down to Longbourne from Saturday to Monday, and see how the land lay?

Miss Winnington did not think that would be a good plan at all. 'I know exactly what you would do,' she said. 'If you saw her, you would march straight up to her and repeat your offer in a money-or-your-life sort of tone, just like—like so many other matter-of-fact people. And then, of course, she would refuse you again. Nellie is a great deal too proud to throw over one man and accept another almost in the same breath.'

'Yes; there's that, certainly. I didn't think of that.'

'And, besides, aren't you rather forgetting your promise to me?'

'Dear me! yes, to be sure! I do wish, Miss Winnington, that there was somebody whom *you* wanted to marry, and that there was a difficulty about it, so that I might be of some assistance to you.'

'You are very kind,' said Edith, laughing; 'but my ambition, you see, is to remain single, and there is a difficulty about that which you can assist me to overcome.'

'Just so. Well, you may rely upon me to do my best. Only, you know, that kind of deception can't be kept up very long.'

'Sufficient unto the season is the evil thereof,' said Edith. And then she began talking about Nellie again, until three loud raps overhead caused her to start and turn pale.

'Oh, do look at the clock!' she exclaimed in dismay. 'I must go up to my mother at once.' And she hurried her visitor away.

There was no more humane man in England than the member for Blackport; but, as he walked down the street, he could not help thinking to himself that it would be a blessed thing if the gout were to remove Mrs. Winnington to another sphere of activity.

No such summary interposition on the part of Providence took place; and when Mr. Stanniforth called in Park Street two days later, in order to consult Edith upon a certain subject, he not only found her, but also her mother, in the drawing-room. It is to be supposed that Edith had contrived, by some stratagems, to evade the anxious lady's queries and to still her misgivings; for Mrs. Winnington held out her hand with the sweetest of smiles, saying:

'You will excuse my not getting up to receive you. I am still a cripple, you see.'

'But no longer a prisoner,' observed Tom. 'Oh! you're round the corner now; you'll soon be all right again,' he added, encouragingly.

'It is only a question of time,' replied Mrs. Winnington, who had not shaken off the depression of convalescence. 'A few more attacks like this, and there will be an end of me—and it will be just as well so. We all of us have a mission to accomplish, Mr. Stanniforth, and, when once it is accomplished, the sooner we get out of other people's way the better. I wish I could feel that I had accomplished mine!'

Not being quite sure of the nature of the mission referred to, and fearing that the subject, if pursued, might develop itself into a perilous one, Tom made haste to change it.

'Do you know,' he asked, 'that Longbourne is to be let?'

Mrs. Winnington clasped her hands, let them fall upon her knees, closed her eyes, and nodded a great many times, as signifying that she could say a good deal, but, for charitable reasons, abstained from doing so.

'I never was so astonished in my life,' Tom went on. 'I was walking down Oxford Street yesterday afternoon, when I happened to glance into a house-agent's window; and there, as large as life, was a photograph of Longbourne. It is to be let for a year or more, they told me. What is the reason of it?'

'Ah!' answered Mrs. Winnington, after more dumb show, 'you may well ask the reason of it. *I* don't know. Poor dear Margaret! she really is so very extraordinary. I have had a letter from her, giving a sort of explanation of the

step which she has seen fit to take. I cannot say that it is a satisfactory explanation to my mind, but of course she is mistress of her own actions.'

'She is not—not going to be married, is she?' asked Tom, hesitatingly.

'Oh no! it is not so bad—not so serious, I mean—as that. But it seems that Mr. Langley—a most excellent man, but rather too extreme in his views—has been putting notions into her head; and now she wants to go into a sort of retreat for several months. She is rather mysterious about it, but I imagine that she is thinking of entering some sisterhood for a time; she always had a leaning towards that kind of life. She gives me no address, and her letters are to be sent to Longbourne Rectory. Why she should have thought it necessary to let her house I cannot understand.'

'But can't you induce her to reconsider her decision?' asked Tom, to whom this explanation seemed even less satisfactory than it had done to Mrs. Winnington. 'People really ought not to be allowed to disappear in that way; one can't tell what may happen to them. There must be something under all this that you don't know of.'

Mrs. Winnington shrugged her shoulders and spread out her hands. 'I have protested,' said she; 'I can't do more. Speaking quite frankly, as between relatives, I must say that I think a little more consideration might have been shown for me. As you know, I have made my home with Margaret for many years, not wishing that she should be left quite alone; and the result of her acting in this precipitate manner is that in a very short time I shall find myself without a home to go to. Fortunately, it so happens that my health will oblige me to spend the summer in Germany and Switzerland; but after that I really don't know what is to become of us. It is not so easy to find a house and furnish it in such a hurry, and I do think dear Margaret might have considered that.'

'But what does she propose doing herself? She doesn't intend to remain in retreat all that time, I presume?'

'No; she speaks of joining me in the course of the summer or autumn, and of our spending the winter together somewhere abroad; but it never seems to occur to dear Margaret that I may have plans and engagements of my own. By the bye, what do *you* think of doing this year?'

'I? Oh, I haven't formed any plan as yet!' answered Mr. Stanniforth, looking a little guilty; for the truth was that he

had a plan in his head, and had called in Park Street for the express purpose of taking Edith's opinion with reference to it. 'I haven't decided upon anything definitely, at least,' he added, by way of quieting his conscience. And then, turning to Edith, 'Shall you be at the Botanical *Fête* this afternoon, Miss Winnington?' he asked.

'Kate offered to take me,' answered Edith; 'but I am not sure that I shall go. It is so hot.'

This was not very honest on the part of Edith, who had private reasons for fully intending to be present at the show in question; but when one has more than one intrigue in hand, the threads are apt to become inconveniently mixed, and it did not suit her purpose that Mr. Stanniforth should be there too.

'You must certainly go, Edith,' said her mother, with decision. 'It is not at all too hot, and I shall trust to Mr. Stanniforth to find you a seat in the shade. I suppose you are going, Mr. Stanniforth?'

Tom looked at Edith, who made a face at him which he did not understand. He wanted to have a little conversation with her, and this opportunity seemed as good a one as another.

'I'll go, if you'll go,' said he, flattering himself that he was playing his part very cleverly.

Edith could only answer, 'Oh, very well!' but she did manage, while shaking hands with her visitor, to whisper, 'How *stupid* you are!' which sent him away much disconcerted.

It was Lady Travers who had written a line to Walter, telling him to be at the Botanical Gardens that afternoon, and who had afterwards mentioned to Edith what she had done. The latter had received this intelligence with a proper amount of outward indifference, but with inward satisfaction; for she foresaw the approaching day when Mrs. Winnington would once more have the full use of her lower limbs; and when that day came, there would be a difficulty in arranging meetings with Walter, if, indeed, such meetings did not have to cease altogether. It was, therefore, excessively tiresome that Mr. Stanniforth should have declared his intention of joining himself on to the party; but Edith consoled herself with the hope that Walter might not be able to get away from the City until late in the afternoon, before which time she thought she could contrive to give her other friend a hint to take himself off.

Fortune, apparently, was on her side; for when she and her sister drove up to the entrance of the gardens no Walter was in sight. Mr. Stanniforth, however, was waiting patiently for them in a beautifully-fitting suit of clothes, with a glossy hat, and a flower in his button-hole. Has anybody noticed the characteristic circumstance that a good Conservative takes instinctively to the wearing of old coats after a certain time of life, whereas your Radical is always a smartly-dressed man? Tom, brilliant and beaming, advanced to meet the ladies; and presently, Lady Travers having stopped to speak to an acquaintance, he led Edith out of the crowd to a comparatively sequestered spot, behind a clump of rhododendrons, where two chairs had been left, as if on purpose for them.

'I am afraid,' he began at once, 'that I made some mistake this morning. Why did you call me stupid?'

'Why did you insist on dragging me here on such a broiling afternoon?' returned Edith. 'You are not at all quick in seeing what people want, do you know.'

'You didn't give me a chance of seeing until it was too late; and really I don't call it hot at all. But, to be perfectly honest, I believe I was thinking rather of what I wanted myself than of what you wanted. Since yesterday I have been turning over in my mind a project which has occurred to me, but I would not take any steps before consulting you; and that was really why I hoped I might see you this afternoon. I humbly apologise for my selfishness.'

'It is of no consequence,' answered Edith. 'What is your project?'

'It is about Longbourne. How would it be if I were to take the place, and spend the summer there? In that way, you see, I should be living near her, and I might do things by degrees, as you suggested. On thinking it over, I quite agree with you that hurry would be fatal. It strikes me also that the arrangement might be a convenient one in some ways for Margaret.'

Edith laughed. 'I think everybody would know pretty well what brought you,' she said. 'Bachelors don't usually take large country-houses for the summer.'

'But I'm not exactly like the general run of bachelors. I have a large country-house of my own in Staffordshire.'

'Which you never inhabit. That seems rather an odd reason for taking another one.'

'Oh! well, it is impossible to round things off with such

absolute neatness; one can't create exactly the situation that one requires. Even supposing that she did guess why I was at Longbourne, it wouldn't so much matter. I should be very humble and meek, and never go over to Broom Leas unless I were asked. I really think the thing might be worked so as to give it an air of probability. Margaret wants to go abroad, but doesn't care to leave her house in the hands of a stranger; I agree to look after the place in her absence; nobody need know even that I pay rent for it—don't you see? Why shouldn't I wish to have a house in the country as much as anybody else? Perhaps the air of Staffordshire doesn't agree with me. And of course I shall have people down to stay. I had a hope that I might induce you and your mother to honour me so far.'

'Oh, that would never do!' exclaimed Edith, hastily. But after a minute she began to think that it might do rather well. 'I wish we could,' she said wistfully; 'but unfortunately we shall be at those horrid German baths all the summer.'

'Then why not come in September or October? Mrs. Winnington said she would be puzzled to know what to do with herself at that time.'

'It certainly would not be pleasant in London just then. I suppose the whole world turns out of London during those two months, doesn't it? Everybody has a holiday—members of parliament, and merchants, and bankers, and shopkeepers, and all.'

'I don't know about everybody,' answered Tom, laughing; 'the bankers and merchants give themselves a holiday, no doubt.'

'And then do they shut up their banks and places?'

'Not as a rule; but the banks and places get on very well without them.'

'The poor clerks stay and do the work, I suppose. How hard that seems!'

'Oh! they all get their month at one time or another, I take it. But about my plan: you think I may venture to write to Margaret, then? And you'll try and persuade your mother to pay me a visit in the autumn?'

Edith, who was wondering, at that moment, whether Mr. Boulger's slaves were allowed to choose their own time for absenting themselves, answered somewhat irrelevantly, 'The question is whether September would be the month.'

'Oh! September, or October, or November, any time that suited you best. The only thing is, Miss Winnington,' continued

Tom, with a graver face and some hesitation of speech, 'that by that time I am afraid—or perhaps I ought rather to say that I hope—and yet I have no business to hope. What I mean is that I don't see how it would be possible to keep your mother in the dark so long as to—to——' Tom left his sentence unfinished, for, although he quite understood the part that Edith wished him to play, it was a little awkward to allude to it in plain language.

'Our agreement was only to hold good up to the end of the season, you know,' she answered, with a faint smile. 'I can't look beyond the end of the season. I hate looking forward at all, it always makes me so miserable,' she added; and Tom, glancing up suddenly, saw that her blue eyes were swimming in tears.

This spectacle distressed him beyond measure. 'Upon my soul, it's too bad!' he exclaimed involuntarily; and then, 'Miss Winnington, I do wish I could help you in any way.'

'You can't help me, Mr. Stanniforth; nobody can help me,' answered the girl despairingly; and the tears overflowed from her eyelids and ran down her cheeks.

'Now, now, you mustn't—you really mustn't give way!' cried Tom, in great perturbation. 'Keep a good heart, my dear Miss Winnington, and it will all come right in the end. I think I can partly understand what your trouble is; but nobody can force you to do what you don't want to do, if you will only stand at bay and defy them. And—and it can't last for ever, you know,' added Tom, forgetting, in his desire to console the afflicted one, that he was cheering her with the prospect of her mother's ultimate demise.

Had he been a little better versed in the ways of women, he would have known that he had but to sit still and hold his tongue, and that Edith would presently recover herself; but he was ignorant of this fact in physiology, and so he went on with his well-meant efforts at comfort. 'Now, don't cry, pray don't; it really isn't so bad as you think it is'—and so forth. Bending forward in the fervour of his entreaties, he grasped Edith's hand, which was lying passively on her lap, and which she did not withdraw.

It was at this most inopportune moment that Walter emerged from the trees, and, halting abruptly on recognising the couple before him, became, as it were, turned to stone.

The effect of this apparition upon Miss Winnington was very incomprehensible to Tom Stanniforth, who had his back turned

to the intruder. In the twinkling of an eye she had snatched her hand away; her tears were gone, a cheerful and guileless smile illumined her features, and, except that she was a little red in the face, there was nothing about her to indicate that only a second before she had been a prey to such poignant emotion.

'Oh, here is Mr. Brune!' said she. And she got up, holding out her hand, and saying, 'How do you do, Walter?' in the most matter-of-course manner in the world.

Walter, who had no such aptitudes for self-repression, made a grab at his hat, growled out something quite unintelligible, and glared at Mr. Stanniforth as if he meant to devour him, body and bones, forthwith.

'Oho! now I understand!' thought the latter, who, to be sure, could hardly have helped understanding. He was a good deal amused by Walter's angry face, for the fact of a man's being himself in love does not necessarily debar him from enjoying the absurd figure cut by his neighbour in a similar predicament; but he saw that it would not do to let his amusement appear. Evidently nothing beyond the very smallest provocation would be required to bring about an appeal to physical force, and Mr. Stanniforth was not inclined for public brawling.

'Hadn't I better go and tell Lady Travers where you are?' he suggested. 'She may be looking for you; and I suppose I may leave you in Brune's charge for the present, may I not?'

He did not wait for an answer, but lifted his hat and walked away, leaving the lovers to fight it out.

'What *is* the matter?' asked Edith, after waiting in vain for Walter to open fire.

'The matter? with me, do you mean? I don't think I said anything was the matter with me, did I?'

'No; but you look all sorts of dreadful things.'

'I am afraid I can't help my looks. I must apologise for having interrupted you, and driven Mr. Stanniforth away. As I am going away myself directly, perhaps I had better look for him, and send him back to you.'

Edith raised her eyes for a moment to Walter's face, and then let them drop again, and began drilling holes in the turf with the tip of her parasol. 'If you won't ask me anything,' she said presently, 'of course I can't explain.'

'Really,' answered Walter, with a short, angry laugh, 'I don't think I care particularly about explanations. You don't owe me any; and if you did, it would make very little differ-

ence. There are some things which even you would find it rather hard to explain away.'

'Even I!' exclaimed Edith, stung by the injustice of the innuendo; 'I don't know what you mean by that.'

'I only mean that you are rather clever at explanations. I don't much like them myself; I prefer that there should be nothing to explain. But I suppose you would not find that at all amusing.'

'You are very rude, and very unfair!' cried Edith. 'If this is all I get by—by——'

'By taking some trouble to lead a fool into displaying his folly, you won't do it again? Well, I hope you won't, I'm sure. I can answer for one fool who will decline to play the game any more, at all events.'

'You are quite right, Mr. Brune,' replied Edith, coldly; 'you had certainly better give up "playing the game," as you call it, since you have no control over your temper.'

'I could keep my temper well enough if all this were play to me, as it is to you. But what proves me a fool is that I have been in earnest. It won't happen again though, that's one thing. I don't understand the ways of the world that you live in nowadays, and it is not at all likely that I should ever get accustomed to them. Of course I ought to see that bankers' clerks are only an inferior class of beings, who may think themselves uncommonly lucky if they are flirted with, and that the men to be married are millionaires, like Stanniforth. But, unfortunately, I don't see it, so I am not fit to play the game, and the sooner I leave the ground the better. Good-bye, Miss Winnington.'

Walter bowed with great dignity, and prepared to suit the action to the word. He did not, however, walk away quite so quickly as he might have done, and he must have been listening very attentively to have been arrested by the extremely faint sound which presently reached his ear.

'I beg your pardon,' said he, stopping short; 'did you call me?'

'No,' answered Edith, in a chilling tone; and he said, 'I beg your pardon,' again, and resumed his deliberate retreat.

'Walter!'

There was no doubt about the summons this time; and Walter promptly faced about and obeyed it. 'Have you anything to say to me?' he asked.

'I only thought that, after what you said just now, I had

better tell you that I am not going to be married to Mr. Stanniforth. Mr. Stanniforth is going to be married—or at least he wishes to be married—to quite another person. It was about her that he had been talking to me when you came up.'

'Is this true?' asked Walter, hoarsely.

'I am not in the habit of saying what is not true; but you need not believe me, unless you like. If you see Kate as you go out, will you tell her where I am, please? I don't wish to be left quite by myself among all these people.'

'Oh, Edith, I beg your pardon! I quite forgot that I was leaving you alone. Will you forgive me, just this once? I am so awfully miserable, and—well, you'll allow that it was enough to make any fellow lose his head. What was I to think when I saw the man holding your hand?'

'I can forgive you,' answered Edith, with a sigh; 'but I wish you were not so—I hardly know what to say.'

'So jealous, I suppose you mean.'

'Ah, Walter, you must not talk about being jealous! You know, I told you that I could only meet you as a friend.'

'And I told you that I would rather not meet you at all than meet you upon those terms. Lady Travers made me promise a lot of things; but I find I can't keep my promise. I can't look on without hope. To-day I made a mistake; but it would only be the same thing some other day, and then perhaps it wouldn't be a mistake. If you don't marry Stanniforth, you will marry somebody else.'

Edith shook her head.

'Then, why am I to be only a friend? Why won't you give me one word of comfort? Why won't you let me have something to live for and work for?'

'You know why. I treated you badly once; but I won't do it again. Sometimes I think I may manage to end my days as an old maid; but that is the utmost that I ever dare to hope for. Will you come and see me sometimes when my hair is grey and I am living in lodgings with a cat and a canary?'

'I don't know how to talk to you, Edith,' said Walter. 'You speak as if you wished me to believe that you still cared for me; and yet it seems to me that I should be very foolish if I did believe it. Perhaps I am more dull than the rest of the world; but I do like to have things put plainly and to know where I am.'

'You are in the Regent's Park,' answered Edith, laughing, 'and you are attracting attention by your authoritative man-

ners, and here come Kate and Mr. Stanniforth in search of us. Do, please, try to look like other people for a little while.'

'Do you know that it is nearly dinner-time?' said Lady Travers. 'Perhaps Mr. Brune would be kind enough to go and find the carriage for us.'

And when Walter was gone, she whispered to Edith: 'What a goose you are not to marry Mr. Stanniforth! He is worth a dozen of the other.'

CHAPTER XXXII.

PHILIP BEFORE THE PUBLIC.

In the whole course of his life Philip had never discharged a debt with more heartfelt satisfaction than that of the 5,000*l.* which had been lent him by Signora Tommasini. The Signora, not at all affronted by his unceremonious flight from Italy, had let him know her address immediately upon her arrival in London; and the very next morning Philip presented himself, with a neat little speech carefully learnt, and a cheque for 5,125*l.* enclosed in an envelope.

'What is this,' cried the Signora, indignantly, after examining the slip of paper tendered to her.

'Don't speak like an angry cabman,' returned Philip, laughing. 'It is your money, principal and interest, as per agreement; and I have been endeavouring to express some sense of my obligation; only you wouldn't listen to me.'

'I call this most unfriendly,' said the Signora.

'Never did I hear the just payment of a debt described in those terms before. If there is any error in the amount, kindly mention it, and it shall be rectified.'

'What nonsense! Do you take me for a Jew money-lender, that you hand me 125*l.* more than I gave you? I shall certainly not accept it.' And the Signora tore the cheque up, and tossed it into her waste-paper basket.

'That makes a penny more that you will have to accept,' remarked Philip, blandly. 'My dear Signora Tommasini, don't be ridiculous. You know it was agreed between us that I should repay you with reasonable interest; and of course the sooner I could repay you the better it was for me.'

'I said you were to repay me when you had made your fortune upon the stage. As for the interest, that was rubbish. You could not have supposed that I meant to drive such a bargain as that.'

'And could you have supposed that my self-respect would have allowed me to accept your help upon any other conditions? I am sure you could not—knowing, as you do, what a high sense of self-respect I possess.'

'I shall not take the interest,' replied the Signora. 'I must take the principal, I suppose; but it is very annoying. You won't work any more, I know—unless, indeed, you get into difficulties again. You are always slipping through my fingers in one way or another, and I feel now as if I had lost my last hold upon you. Where did you get this money from? But of course I know. I have a great mind to write to Mrs. Stanniforth and tell her that she will be the ruin of you, if she doesn't cut you off with a shilling. Just as I had arranged everything so beautifully too! I meant you to have sung at Lady Cecilia Caroll's concert next week, and I had seen Steinberger about it, and all. I believe you know that I want to do all I can for your good, and you are so determined to go to the bad that you are frightened of me. No doubt that was why you rushed away from Florence, without even taking the trouble to say Good-bye to me.'

'I am not at all frightened of you now,' replied Philip, with perfect truth; 'and you are quite mistaken about my intentions, for I mean to work like a galley-slave. Furthermore, I shall be delighted to be done good to in any way that you may think fit, and I will sing at Lady Cecilia Caroll's with the greatest of pleasure. I hope that is satisfactory.'

How Philip afterwards redeemed the latter part of his promise in a manner not wholly satisfactory either to himself or to those interested in his advancement has been already related. His failure was made light of by Signora Tommasini, who declared it to be due solely to nervousness; but Herr Steinberger did not take this view, and grumbled long and loudly at the folly of trying to make short cuts to fame. Steinberger had never, from the first, cared much about Philip as a pupil. He was a man who liked to make unexpected hits, to take audiences by storm, and strike critics dumb; and he knew that this could only be accomplished by practically ensuring success before the event. In Philip's case it was hardly possible to do so. He was neither poor enough nor ambitious enough to be patient; and his voice, unfortunately, was one of those uncertain ones which may be magnificent to-day and less than mediocre to-morrow.

'Goot for noting?' cried Steinberger, in his disgust—'you

are really good for nothing; and it was better you give up all idea of the stage.'

Philip made no rejoinder to this and other similar outbreaks. He was much inclined to agree with Herr Steinberger. He did not give up thinking of the stage—nor indeed did the irascible German intend that counsel to be taken quite literally—but it was very strongly borne in upon him that he was good for nothing. He felt that it was not in him to succeed in anything beyond a certain point; he was quite sure that it was not in him to succeed in the teeth of difficulties; and, worse than this, he was aware that it was not in him to care very much, even though he should fail. 'Know thyself' is a precept which has a wise sound; but if it were possible to act upon it, if we could all in truth know ourselves, how many of us would have the courage to go on living? Philip knew himself a great deal too well, and had long since recognised the futility of attempting to steer a vessel without a rudder. For some years of his life it had been amusing to drift, and certainly he had drifted in and out of some queer places; but now the edge of that form of enjoyment had worn off, and the lenient self-disparagement in which he had been wont to indulge was fast turning into self-contempt—which was by no means a change for the better. It was not so much that he was oppressed by the memory of sins which did not strike him as specially heinous ones, as that he was beginning to see that his was an ignoble, objectless life, and that it never would be anything else. Nellie despised him and—he thought—hated him; Margaret despised him and loved him; all he could do was to keep as much as possible out of the way of them both henceforth; and, as they happened to be the only two persons in the world for whom he cared a straw, the future was not a very bright one to contemplate.

Perhaps he would not have troubled himself much about the future, if the present had been agreeable; but it was not so. For the first time in his life, Philip was beginning to suffer from satiety, the disease of selfish men. He was leading just the same life that had seemed to him so delightful a year before. He had quite as many friends as ever; he dined out constantly; great ladies petted him, and Bohemia made him welcome; but somehow or other the flavour had gone out of it all. In old days he had been subject to occasional fits of low spirits; but now these fits had become almost permanent. He grew so alarmed about himself at last that he actually consulted a

famous physician, who told him that he had allowed himself to run down too much, and prescribed a strong tonic. The physician, being only a physician, and not a sorcerer, could not tell what was the matter with his patient; but Signora Tommasini understood the case better. In a half-friendly, half-motherly way, she took possession of this poor outcast, whose troubles—even including that of his rejection by Nellie—she had wormed out of him, one by one. He was rather glad to tell them to her. He made no objection to moving into the rooms which she had secured for him at her hotel. He had taken a great dislike to being alone, and it was impossible to feel dull in the Signora's company. It was true that she ordered him about rather more than was quite pleasant; but upon the whole he preferred being ordered about to being left to his own devices, and, besides, he did not always obey orders.

'I mean you to sing once in public before the end of the season,' the Signora announced decidedly, one hot afternoon.

Philip was lying full length on a sofa, smoking a cigarette: for he was allowed to do exactly as he pleased in this easy-going lady's drawing-room.

'Do you?' said he; 'you won't achieve it, I'm afraid. Steinberger wouldn't hear of such a thing.'

'Bother Steinberger! If I am not as good a judge as Steinberger, I know nothing of my trade. Music-masters are like finishing governesses; they would like to keep you in the schoolroom all your days. Your voice will never be better than it is now.'

'That,' said Philip, blowing a cloud of smoke, 'seems quite possible.'

'I mean you,' the Signora went on, 'to sing at the Crystal Palace in about a fortnight's time, and I will see Steinberger, and make him consent. Do you feel nervous about it?'

'Not the least,' answered Philip. 'I shall come to grief most likely, but it won't be through any nervousness.'

'Then you will not come to grief at all. At least, if you do, you would come to grief just as much next year, or the year after. We had much better know the worst or the best at once.'

'I don't envy you your interview with Steinberger. He'll give in, I dare say; but he'll abuse you like a pickpocket first. Hot weather has no effect on that man's energy.'

In spite of this prediction, the Signora had no great difficulty

with Herr Steinberger, who was very busy at the time, and who had almost abandoned all hope that Philip would prove the means of increasing his reputation. When he was told of the arrangement which it was proposed to make, he merely grinned hideously and went off into a long guttural laugh; and, on being asked for an explanation of his behaviour, he permitted himself such impertinent insinuations that the Signora would have blushed, if blushing had still been among her capacities. As it was, she only joined in Steinberger's laughter, like the good-natured soul that she was, and gave him a great push, which sent him reeling into the nearest chair.

'You give me leave to do what I please, then?' said she.

'Oh, take him away—take him away!' answered Steinberger. 'I make him a present to you. Only, when he is hissed from the stage, you will be so kind and not say as he was my pupil. That is all I beg!'

'The day will come when you will boast of having been his master,' retorted the Signora.

She had confidence in Philip's future. She remembered the time when she herself had been an aspirant of whom little was expected, and whose triumphs had not come all at once. Her own experience led her to trust the opinion of the public rather than that of the *cognoscenti*, and perhaps she forgot that her voice, if somewhat unmanageable at first, had always been an extraordinarily powerful one.

Philip allowed her to take her own way, to bustle about and to secure the engagement that she desired for him. He did as she told him, practised with unremitting zeal for a fortnight, and listened to her sanguine prophecies with a smile that was only half incredulous. The continual sight of so much energy and faith was perhaps the next best thing to the actual possession of those enviable gifts.

'Where did you learn the secret of remaining eternally young?' he asked her. 'It would be very amiable of you if you would communicate it to me; for I am growing old at such a deuce of a pace that I expect my dotage to come on every hour. Pop me into the caldron, Signora Medea, and let us see what kind of a stew will come of it.'

'That is exactly what I am going to do,' replied the Signora, with a triumphant laugh. 'You want a success. When once you have had that, you won't talk any more nonsense about growing old.'

'And suppose I don't get the success?'

'You *must* succeed,' replied the resolute lady, with a stamp of her foot which sent the chandelier jingling.

'I believe you will bully me into succeeding, whether I will or no,' said Philip, laughing lazily.

It was on a hot day in July that Signora Tommasini took the *débutant* down to Sydenham in her carriage, talking incessantly the whole way to keep his spirits up. Philip leant back and listened to her, much amused at these unnecessary efforts. He was not conscious of the smallest timidity, and only felt the least shade in the world of excitement. Lately he had adopted a soothing sort of fatalistic creed, which disposed of all worry and responsibility. If he was destined to be a famous man, he would of course fulfil his destiny; if he was destined to collapse he would equally of course collapse. 'Let us see what will happen,' said he; and among all the people who were talking of the new singer at the Crystal Palace that afternoon, there was probably not one who felt a more dispassionate curiosity upon this point than the new singer himself.

The concourse was a very large one, and this was in many ways an advantage. Looking down and around upon so vast a sea of human faces, Philip felt that he could be no more afraid of them than of so many ants upon an ant-hill; he found it impossible to think of them as individual critics. It was a pity, however, that the building should also be very large. He made these reflections while he was standing, with his music in his hand, ready to begin the first air that had been assigned to him. It was Signora Tommasini who had suggested what that air should be; and the sequel showed the accuracy of her judgment. There is nothing more certain to please the majority of English people than a well-known English ballad; and there was nothing to which Philip's special powers were better adapted than to the gratifying of this simple taste. Probably he had never sung better in his life than when he treated the multitude to 'Home, Sweet Home,' at the Crystal Palace on that July afternoon. He had a soft, caressing method of enunciation which had its own effect; he understood to a nicety the amount of pathos that the words could be made to bear; he sang without the smallest apparent effort—'like a nightingale,' as an enthusiastic lady in the front row declared.

Those who were seated further back were not so well pleased, and thought that a little more effort would not have been out of place. The notes that reached their ears were certainly very sweet, but then there were a good many notes which

did not reach them at all. However, the people who had heard all applauded vigorously; and those who did not applaud the singer applauded the song; and the residue applauded because others did so; and so Signor Marescalchi was called upon to bow many times, which he did with a grace that was much remarked and admired.

Then he received the congratulations of the other artists, whose friendship and goodwill he had for a long time enjoyed. 'But you must sing out,' said one of them warningly; 'don't forget next time that you must sing out.'

Philip shrugged his shoulders. He was not elated, and he flattered himself that he would not have been cast down if things had gone differently. He was still under the influence of that dreamy impression that he was only fulfilling his part in a fore-ordained programme; he thought that he was as free from emotion of any kind as it was possible to be; but probably there was room at the bottom of his heart for a certain feeling of self-glorification in that he was able to view matters so coolly.

After a time he had to advance once more to the front in company with Signora Tommasini, whose appearance gave the signal for a salvo of clapping and stamping, and who curtseyed and bobbed her head as delightedly as if such ovations had been quite a novel experience to her. Signora Tommasini was idolised by the multitude. While she was singing, Philip was enabled to discern what an amount of vocal power was required to fill the building. 'Heavens, what lungs!' he thought. 'I should simply burst, like the frog who wanted to be an ox, if I tried to produce such a sound as that.' Perhaps it was consciousness of his inability to perform the task demanded of him that caused him to let out his notes even more softly and languidly than he had done before; certain it is that he was all but inaudible. 'A Signor Marescalchi,' remarked a daily newspaper, which noticed the concert the following morning, 'was announced to share with Signora Tommasini in the execution of this charming *duo*; and as a young gentleman, standing beside her, was observed to open and shut his mouth at intervals, it must be assumed that the promise was kept. Had it not been for this circumstance, we should have been inclined to question the existence of Signor Marescalchi.'

The criticism, if ill-natured, was scarcely exaggerated. Philip sang sweetly and correctly; but, as far as the immense majority of the crowd facing him was concerned, he might

almost as well have spared himself the trouble of singing at all. Now the British public, which is a long-suffering public, will stand many things; and if the new aspirant to its favour had sung false, it is more than likely that he would have been pardoned; but what the British public will not stand is to be defrauded of its just due. It has paid its money to hear a noise, and a noise of some sort or kind it will have, or know the reason why. Therefore, when Philip's graceful pantomime succeeded the Signora's tremendous chest-notes, there arose a murmuring which, if he had stood alone, would probably have developed into some still stronger expression of disapproval. Even as it was, he contrived to rob the Signora of her legitimate reward; and he led her away amidst a little desultory clapping which was almost worse than total silence.

Philip had yet one chance of removing the bad impression created by this failure; but he did not take advantage of it. He got through the Neapolitan fisherman's song, which was the third and last performance entrusted to him, after a fashion; but he was not singing his best, and was so evidently taking no pains about it, that the patience of the audience gave way, and he was roundly hissed. He paused the moment that this hubbub began, and stood contemplating the intelligent public with a faint derisive smile until it had subsided; after which he calmly discharged himself of the remainder of his task, bowed, and retired. Anything that looks like a display of courage is always popular, and some of those who had hissed Signor Marescalchi were sorry for having done so when they saw how little he cared; others said that he could do much better if he chose, but that he was sulking because of his previous failure. In truth he was neither sulky nor indifferent; only despairing.

He kept up appearances, however. He chatted and laughed with his friends quite as usual, neither allowing them an opportunity of condoling with him nor assuming any unnatural hilarity; and it was not until he was once more in the carriage with Signora Tommasini and they had progressed some miles towards London that he alluded to what had occurred.

'Steinberger will be pleased,' he remarked.

'You did not try!' cried the Signora, who was deeply mortified.

'No; I didn't try—after the first. You wouldn't try to lift up this carriage and walk off with it under your arm. I saw that the thing was impossible; so I gave it up.'

'You let everybody see that you were not trying,' pursued the Signora, almost in tears.

'Yes; there was some satisfaction in that.'

'What satisfaction? I don't understand you.'

'There is always something flattering to one's self-love in the action of snapping one's fingers in a man's face. You don't frighten him much perhaps, but at least you are able to say to yourself that he hasn't frightened you.'

'But you want to make friends of these people, not to defy them. If you go on in this way, you will very soon be irretrievably ruined.'

'My dear Signora, I am not going on at all—neither in this way nor in any other. I am irretrievably ruined already. Do you think I like being hissed? I assure you I like it so little that I don't mean to expose myself to the risk of its happening a second time. You will never see me at the Opera now, unless it is from beyond the footlights. No; all that is over and done with, like so many other things. You have done the best that you possibly could for me, and so has Steinberger; and upon my word, I believe I have done the best that I possibly could for myself; but we couldn't accomplish the impossible. We have tried very hard to cultivate what doesn't exist; and now that our eyes are open, we will stop trying, please.'

'What will you do, then?'

'Ah, that is rather more than I can tell you. Waterloo Bridge, I think.'

'Don't laugh at me; I shall not be able to laugh for a week at least. I feel this a great deal more than you do.'

'I don't want to be contradictious,' said Philip, lighting a cigarette; 'but I doubt that.'

'Then, if you feel it, why are you so easily discouraged?'

'Now, Signora Tommasini, be honest; do you think I shall ever sing respectably?'

The Signora sighed. In her heart she did not think so; yet she could hardly bring herself to admit as much yet. 'Perhaps we were in too great a hurry,' she said.

'You didn't think that the other day. You told me, as you may remember, that if I failed now, I should equally fail two years hence; and I haven't a doubt that you were right. I have had so many failures lately that I can't burst into tears over this one; but I am crushed by it, nevertheless. In the course of the present year I have managed to lose everything in the

world that I cared for; and really I don't see anything for it now but to get out of the world.'

The Signora, who had started by being a little angry with her friend, began to feel sincerely sorry for him. She knew that he would not blow out his brains or jump over Waterloo Bridge; but she was not so sure that he might not take to drink, or otherwise commit moral suicide, if a helping hand were not held out to arrest him.

'Oh, come,' said she, cheerfully; 'you need not put an end to yourself because you have sung badly at a Crystal Palace concert, nor even because your cousin won't marry you. I have a dozen plans in my head which we must try yet, before we give up the game.'

And she began detailing these famous schemes, some of which were a little wild, as well they might be, seeing that she invented them as she went along; but they had at least the effect of making Philip laugh; and before she went to bed that night, the Signora felt comparatively easy about him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WALTER'S HASH IS SETTLED.

With July on the wane, and invitations growing fewer, and the term for which the house in Park Street had been hired approaching completion, Mrs. Winnington felt that it was high time for Mr. Stanniforth to speak out. That the man could mean to play her false, after all that had passed, she could not believe; and yet there were moments when a sickening suspicion of treachery crossed her mind. Why did Mr. Stanniforth studiously avoid meeting her? Why, when they did meet, did he assume so shamefaced an air? What was the meaning of the evident embarrassment with which he had told her that he had decided to take Longbourne for a year? Mrs. Winnington had no objection to his taking Longbourne. On the contrary, she thought it would be a very comfortable sort of family arrangement, and was quite disposed, not only to pay him a visit in the autumn, as he had suggested, but to make the house her headquarters, as of old, should her relations with its occupier prove of a nature to justify her in so doing. But his manner, while giving the invitation, had certainly been rather odd; and indeed

it was somewhat unaccountable that he should wish to take Longbourne at all. The more she thought of it the more she became convinced that there was some mystery connected with the affair; and Mrs. Winnington had so much leisure at this time to devote to the solving of mysteries that more than once in the course of her speculations she was within an ace of hitting upon the truth.

She had been lying upon her sofa for a whole morning, pretending to read the newspaper, and tormenting herself with divers disquieting conjectures, until at last further silence became impossible to her. 'Edith, dear,' said she, 'I know Mr. Stanniforth tells you everything. Can you guess what his object is in going to Longbourne? I feel sure that he must have some particular object.'

Edith started and looked frightened, as she always did when her mother addressed her suddenly. It was not, however, the first time that this question had been put to her, and she answered, as she had done on previous occasions, that she supposed Mr. Stanniforth liked the country.

'Oh, my dear, that is no reason at all. He has a place of his own, you know; and in the natural course of things one would expect him to be shooting grouse in August. It is just possible that he might be doing this to oblige Margaret.'

'Of course,' said Edith. 'Margaret would much rather have him in the house than a family of strangers, who would very likely have children and dogs, and smoke in their bedrooms.'

'But really, when you come to think of it, that is the sort of thing that no man would ever do. Kindhearted as Mr. Stanniforth is—and I must say that he is the most kindhearted man I ever met—I cannot believe that he would burden himself with a large country-house merely in order to save his sister-in-law a little trouble. I can't help thinking that those horrid people are at the bottom of it. No doubt they have their own reasons for wishing to get him into the neighbourhood again; and poor Mr. Stanniforth is so determined to think well of everybody that a child might impose upon him.'

'I don't think Mr. Stanniforth is easily imposed upon,' said Edith. 'What horrid people do you mean?'

'Oh, those people at Broom Leas, of course. I have always felt that that man Brune was not to be trusted. But I may be wrong. Has Mr. Stanniforth ever spoken to you

'He has mentioned them sometimes,' answered Edith, trying to assume a careless tone, and failing ignominiously.

Mrs. Winnington fixed a penetrating gaze upon her daughter. 'Edith,' said she, 'I hope you are not concealing anything from me.'

Edith's powers of concealment, so far as her mother was concerned, were small indeed. When it came to direct interrogation, she knew quite well that she was done for; and her relief was proportionately great when the servant came in at this critical moment, bearing a pile of letters, of which Mrs. Winnington took immediate possession.

Mrs. Winnington's creed with regard to the sacredness of her daughters' correspondence has already been mentioned more than once; and when, after tearing open and tossing aside several envelopes containing invitations and bills, she came upon one addressed to Miss Winnington, she merely held it up to the light, observing, 'A note for you from Kate,' and as a matter of course treated it like its predecessors.

'I hope it is not to say that she can't take me to Hurlingham to-morrow,' remarked Edith, who never expected to be allowed the privilege of opening her own letters when her mother was present, and who was not in the habit of receiving any that all the world was not welcome to read.

She was sitting by the open window, pulling the dead leaves from the smoke-begrimed geraniums that grew in the box outside, and consequently she did not see the startling effect produced upon Mrs. Winnington by a perusal of Lady Travers's note. The first intimation that reached her of something being wrong was a gasping sound proceeding from the room at her back, and, turning round, she beheld her mother, who was standing erect, forgetful of the gout, and holding an open sheet of paper in her hand. Mrs. Winnington's jaw had fallen, her eyes were dilated, and the expression of mingled wrath and horror upon her face was of a nature to strike terror into the stoutest heart.

'Edith,' said she, in a deep, tragic voice, 'what—*what* is this?'

Edith, with blanched cheeks and knocking knees, took the note extended to her and read it. It ran as follows:—

'Come to tea to-morrow afternoon. I shall not be in until late; but probably Walter Brune, whom I have told to be there, will manage to entertain you during my absence. It will be your last meeting with him in this house, I am afraid;

for I have just been told that we are to go down to the country in the beginning of next week. I suppose you will be very sorry for yourself; but I don't know that you are more to be pitied than other people, after all. I wish I could change places with you, I know!

'Your affectionate sister,
'KATE TRAVERS.'

Edith handed the note back to her mother, sank down upon a low chair, and waited. She could not have spoken if it had been to save her life. Mrs. Winnington remained standing; and for the space of a few minutes there was silence, during which the rattle of the passing vehicles outside and the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece sounded unnaturally distinct.

'You have not a word to say for yourself, then?' began Mrs. Winnington, at length. 'I may take it that you have been in the habit of meeting this man at your sister's house, and that you and she have taken advantage of my illness to deceive me in the cruellest way in which a daughter can deceive her mother?'

There was another short interval of silence; and then Mrs. Winnington also sat down, remarking that she had received her death-blow. Apparently, however, she had yet a few words to say before she died.

'For the last twenty years and more,' she groaned, 'I have thought of nothing but my children. I have indulged them, I have toiled for them, I have sacrificed everything that they might get on in the world; and now I have my reward! My sons hardly trouble themselves to write to me twice in the course of the year, and my daughters bring disgrace upon me. I only hope, Edith, that when you come to be old and ill, you may be spared the pain of being ashamed of those whom you have loved and trusted most.'

Edith made an attempt to speak, but could get nothing out but an inarticulate murmur, and Mrs. Winnington went on—

'How you can have the face to behave as you have done passes my comprehension! Your conscience must be seared with a red-hot iron. To think that while I was lying upon what might have been my death-bed you were making appointments with a man to whom I had forbidden you to speak, and whom you perfectly well knew that you could never marry!

I could not have believed that any one—least of all any child of mine—could have been so heartless and wicked!'

'I never made any appointment with him,' cried Edith, finding her tongue at last. 'Once I got an invitation to a concert for him; but that was all. I have met him once or twice since then, but it has only been by accident.'

'You need not add to your guilt by telling falsehoods,' said her mother, coldly. 'With Kate's note before me, I can judge for myself how far these meetings have been accidental. It is not pleasant to have to say such a thing of one's own daughter, but I hope it will be a long time before I see Kate again. She is a bad woman!' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington, her face reddening and her voice quivering. 'She has been a bad daughter, a bad wife, and a bad sister.'

Edith burst into tears. 'Don't say that!' she sobbed out. 'Kate has not been bad to me. I am very sorry—I know it was wrong—but it was not what you think. I always told him we could never be married—that we could only meet as friends——'

'It is easy to say that you are sorry, now that you are found out,' interrupted Mrs. Winnington, not at all appeased. 'If you want me to believe that you are sorry, you must give me some proof of it.'

Edith looked up, and brushed away her tears. 'What am I to do?' she asked despairingly.

'You may well ask what you are to do! I don't know what may not have happened while I have been shut up in the house. Very likely everybody knows about this disgraceful affair, and you may have ruined your prospects, as well as broken my heart. I can't tell you what you are to do. One thing, of course, must be done without delay: the man must be written to.'

Edith got up and seated herself at the writing-table without a word. By-and-by she began a note, under her mother's dictation. 'Dear Mr. Brune,—My mother desires me to tell you——'

'Stop!' said Mrs. Winnington, abruptly; 'that will not do. My wishes and authority evidently count for very little. You must write in your own name, and tell him in your own words that he is never to address you, directly or indirectly, again, and that, if he does so, you will refuse to recognise him. When you have written that, you can show me the letter.'

Mrs. Winnington lay down on the sofa and closed her eyes; while Edith, with a shaking hand, but with very little hesitation, dashed off the following missive:—

'My dear Walter,—I have just received a note from Kate, asking me to tea to-morrow, and telling me that you will be there. I cannot go; and I cannot meet you again there, or anywhere else. You know, I told you from the first that we could never be anything more than friends; but now it will be impossible for us even to be that. I need not give reasons; but you must see yourself that we could not have gone on meeting as we have done lately. I shall always feel grateful to you for having thought of me for so long as you have done; but I wish you to remember what I said to you at Longbourne, and to understand that it was the truth. I am sure that, after this, you will not attempt to see me or speak to me again.

'Sincerely yours,

'Edith Winnington.'

It was thus that Edith wrote her farewell to the man whom she loved; and whether she was a coward or a heroine, or a little of both, for so writing, shall be decided by the reader, according as his or her conception of human nature may dictate.

Mrs. Winnington was not pleased with the tone of the composition, but she allowed it to pass, perceiving that by no emendations could it be made to serve its purpose more thoroughly. 'I suppose,' said she, in icy accents, 'that I must take your having written this as a proof of repentance—you had better ring the bell and have it posted at once, by the way—a proof of repentance; but for anything I know, your repentance may have come too late to be of any use. You may have lost what you will never regain.'

'Yes, I have,' answered Edith, alluding to an obvious loss of which her mother was not thinking. 'Mamma,' she added abruptly, 'I have done as you told me now; I have given up everything. I shall never marry Walter Brune; but please to understand, once for all, that I shall never marry any one else.'

If such a thing can be imagined as a rabbit in the snake-house at the Zoological Gardens bidding a boa do his worst, some idea may be formed of Edith's aspect as she announced this unalterable determination.

'How dare you speak in that tone to me?' shouted Mrs. Winnington, in a rage. 'Am I, your mother, to receive orders from you? I know what is best for you, and I say that you shall marry a suitable person.'

'I won't,' returned Edith, tremulously defiant. 'You can't make me, and I won't.'

'I can make you, and I will!' Mrs. Winnington was going to exclaim, but she checked herself after the first two words, and adopted another system of tactics. 'Edith,' said she, in a piteous voice, 'do you want to kill me? You will kill me if you dismiss Mr. Stanniforth—for of course that is what you mean when you declare that you will never marry. What can I say to you? You treat me like an enemy. Because I love you—because I will not let you spoil your life—you hate me.'

'Oh, no, no!'

'You say, No; but I must judge by actions, not words. Will you not listen to reason? If I were self-seeking, as I know that you and Kate think me, why should I care what became of you? What difference could it make to me, an old woman with one foot in the grave'—here the foot referred to kicked convulsively—'whether you married Mr. Stanniforth or a pauper? Strangers may say or think what they please of me; one does not expect any charity from them; but it is very hard to be so misjudged by one's own flesh and blood. Edith, my darling, I implore you—I beseech you upon my knees not to refuse the man who loves you.'

There can be no doubt that Edith's proper course would have been to confess at once that she had already refused the man, and to add that he did not love her; but this was more than she dared to do. Her mother's genuine emotion had had some effect upon her; and, besides that, she knew full well that no sooner would Mr. Stanniforth have been proved ineligible than a substitute would have been selected and pursued. Therefore she replied, with deplorable casuistry:

'I am not at all convinced that Mr. Stanniforth cares more for me than for other people. If he ever told me that he did——'

'Yes?—well?' cried Mrs. Winnington, eagerly.

'If he assured me of that and begged me to marry him, perhaps then I might think of it.'

Instantly Miss Winnington was enfolded in her mother's embrace. She was kissed and forgiven and wept over; and,

if the truth must be told, she wept a little herself—having, indeed, some reason for weeping.

Upon this touching scene of reconciliation, in which it must be confessed that one of our heroines cuts but a poor figure, we may now drop the curtain, and proceed to a less aristocratic quarter of the town, in company with the postman who delivered the fatal letter at Walter's lodgings in the course of the same evening.

It so chanced that Walter would not in any case have been able to put in an appearance at Travers House on the following day, as he had been requested to do. For an event had occurred in the city the consequences of which seemed likely to be serious in more ways than one, and which must certainly prevent Walter from considering his time his own for the present. He had been sitting at his desk at the bank, early in the afternoon, when the head clerk had come out with a scared face, and had whispered to him that he was wanted at once in Mr. Boulger's private room. On obeying this summons, he had found his uncle lying back in his chair, snoring heavily and completely unconscious.

'We can't rouse him. Do you think we ought to send for a doctor?' asked the head clerk, hesitatingly: for Mr. Boulger had reduced his vassals into so perfect a state of subordination that he was very nearly in the same predicament as that King of Spain who was burnt to death because nobody dared to take the liberty of knocking his Majesty down and rolling him up in the hearthrug.

Walter did not scruple to take matters into his own hands; but the doctor, when he came, could do very little, and candidly said so. The old gentleman was lifted into his carriage, and his nephew drove with him to Clapham, where he resigned him to the care of the housekeeper, promising to let the other members of the family know what had happened, and to return himself the next day. Then he went back to his rooms; and if he speculated a little upon the contents of Mr. Boulger's will on his way, I suppose he only did what most of us would have done in his place.

The truth was that Mr. Boulger had of late let fall several hints which were of a nature to encourage speculation upon this subject. He had made little secret of the fact that he was a richer man even than he was generally supposed to be, and he had somewhat ostentatiously declared that his nephew John should never see a sixpence of his money. Besides this nephew

John, who, if he had behaved himself, would have been the natural person to inherit his uncle's wealth, there were sundry other Boulgers of whom Walter knew scarcely anything; but, as the old gentleman had for many years been upon bad terms with them all, it was impossible to avoid the conclusion that he had fixed upon some one else to be his heir. Walter was too honest to pretend to himself that his uncle's death would cause him any great grief. He did not want the poor old fellow to die; but he did, of course, want very much to come into a large fortune; and, as he made his way towards his lodgings in Bloomsbury through the heat and dust of a July afternoon, he realised with great distinctness what the possession of such a fortune would mean in his case. Already he saw Mrs. Winnington smiling benignly on the renewal of his suit; he received the congratulations of Lady Travers and heard the ironical comments under which his father would be sure to veil the thankfulness of a relieved mind.

And then he reached home, and found Edith's letter waiting for him, and ceased for ever to think about stepping into dead men's shoes. What could all the money in the world do for him now? Mr. Boulger might leave his to a hospital if he chose, Walter didn't want it. 'Wishes me to remember what she said to me at Longbourne, and to understand that it was the truth,' he muttered. 'Oh, I understand it well enough! I have understood it all along; only Lady Travers would insist upon knowing so much better than I did. It wasn't such a very hard matter to understand, after all. The girl cared for me a little, but not enough to put up with any hardship for my sake, and she told me so. Then she thought I was forgetting all about her, and she didn't quite like that; so she whistled me back. I came, like a fool as I was, and of course she immediately discovered again that she didn't care for me. Well; I'm not surprised. One thing is, I got through the worst of it long ago. She isn't worth my thinking about, and I'll be hanged if I will think about her any more.'

Resolutions of this kind are more easily made than carried out, and it would have been strange if Walter had been able to dismiss Edith from his mind as cavalierly as he proposed to do. Fortunately for him, however, he had many other things to think about. He had to put himself in communication with Mr. John Boulger; he had to write and inform his father of the bereavement with which the family was threatened; and he was wanted at Clapham, where decency seemed to require

that the sick man should have at least one relative in the house with him.

On the second day Mr. Boulger died, never having spoken since his seizure, and Walter could not help perceiving that the servants regarded him as the heir. It was to him they came for instructions as to the funeral and so forth, and he was a little puzzled how to act, until the arrival of Mr. John Boulger from the north of England relieved him of all authority and embarrassment.

Mr. John Boulger was a middle-aged man, who had probably quarrelled with his uncle in consequence of a too great similarity in their dispositions. He was not particularly cordial in his manner to Walter, nor, perhaps, under the circumstances, could he have been expected to be so; but he seemed disposed to make the best of an unfortunate business.

'The old man has not treated me well,' he said; 'but I don't complain. I didn't choose to truckle to him, and he told me plainly that he meant to disinherit me. If you have been more lucky, I shall not grudge you your luck.'

'I don't think I have ever truckled to him,' said Walter.

'Well, it makes no difference to me. I wouldn't count too much upon anything, though, if I were you. It would be just like my uncle to have left every penny to his housekeeper.'

Mr. Boulger was interred with all the pomp that the occasion appeared to call for, and his hearse was followed to the grave by many empty carriages and by a very respectable concourse of relations, of whom Mr. Brune was one. Walter had thought that his father ought to be present, and Mr. John Boulger had concurred in this view. Mr. Brune had journeyed up from Crayminster, and took his place in the drawing-room at Clapham among the other gentlemen who were waiting, with the exaggeratedly careless demeanour which every one assumes at such times, to hear the will read.

His name was among the first mentioned. His brother-in-law had bequeathed to him five thousand pounds 'as a small token of regard.' This legacy gave universal satisfaction. It cleared one competitor off the field; it seemed large to Mr. Brune, who had never expected anything; and it was too small to be grudged by anybody. A like amount went to two of the Boulger clan, who received the news of their good fortune much as a man who has bought a half-crown ticket in a State lottery, and has dreamt of securing the grand prize, receives the news that he has won twenty pounds. Then there was an almost

imperceptible pause; after which the name of Walter Brune was read out with an emphasis and deliberation which seemed to presage great things. 'I give and bequeath to my nephew Walter Brune'—another pause of a second, during which the ears of all present were pricked up—'the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand pounds.'

A profound sensation was caused by this announcement. Walter himself did not dare to raise his eyes from the carpet. He was not astonished, nor, at the moment, was he particularly delighted. He had felt sure that the old man had meant to do something of the kind, and the chief sensation of which he was conscious was the unpleasant one that all these good people must be regarding him as a robber and supplanter. He was so ill at ease that he hardly took in the sense of what the lawyer was reading, which was to the effect that the testator had desired thus to mark, not only his affection for 'the said Walter Brune,' but his sense of the injustice done in past years to the said Walter Brune's mother. Nor did he quite realise the important fact that the residue of the estate, real and personal, amounting to rather more than double his share, went, after all, to Mr. John Boulger, whose sterling worth and business-like qualities had, it appeared, been more highly appreciated than that gentleman had supposed.

'So you are a rich man,' said Mr. Brune to his son, as they walked away, across Clapham Common, arm in arm.

'Yes,' answered Walter. 'I don't know that I care much about it.'

'You ungrateful young beggar! Why, I am jumping with joy at the thought of my poor five thousand pounds. Your Uncle William must have been worth over half a million of money. Who would have thought it!'

'I am very glad he didn't leave it all to me,' remarked Walter. 'I was half afraid he would.'

'So, I imagine, was John Boulger; but both your fears and his were groundless, you see; so you can rejoice with a clear conscience. Why your uncle should have left you anything at all I don't know; but we must presume that the luck of the Brunes, which has been on the ebb for so many years, has turned at last. It certainly was about time.'

'My luck hasn't turned,' remarked Walter, gloomily.

'I wouldn't be too sure of that. I know what you mean—young fellows only mean one thing when they speak in that lachrymose voice; but, if you won't think me too cynical, I

would venture to suggest deferentially that money turns luck in more ways than one.'

'It won't in my case,' answered Walter, shaking his head. 'Mine is one of those hopeless cases which nothing can mend and there's no good in talking about it.'

After that he was easily persuaded to talk about it; and, indeed, talked about nothing else in the hansom which his father presently hailed, and which took them to Bloomsbury, where Edith's uncompromising letter was submitted to Mr. Brune's inspection.

'You see,' said Walter, 'there's no getting over that. She tells me in black and white that she'll have nothing more to say to me.'

Mr. Brune laughed. 'My dear boy,' said he, 'you are too literal. Do you mean to say that you can't trace the claws of the old cat in this? As I read the letter it simply means, "Mamma has sworn to shut me up in a dark room, and keep me on bread and water, if ever I speak to you again; and so, much as I regret it, I must beg you to cease following me about."'

'Perhaps that is what it does mean; but isn't that equivalent to saying that she cares very little about me?'

'I don't know, I'm sure. Go and tell her to-morrow that you have a matter of seven thousand a year to lay at her feet, and no doubt she will give you the desired information herself.'

'I shall not do that,' said Walter, decisively. 'I want her to care for me, not for my money; and supposing that she did accept me now how could I tell what her motive might be?'

'Ah, you are already beginning to find out where the shoe of Dives pinches. But cheer up; you are not so tremendously opulent, when all is said and done, and I have no doubt Edith could make a much better bargain for herself if she chose. I should be sorry to affirm positively that Mrs. Winnington will welcome you even now.'

'She won't have the chance,' said Walter. 'I have been played fast and loose with long enough, and I am sick of it. I shall never marry.'

'If there were the smallest chance in the world of your sticking to that resolution,' answered his father, 'I might perhaps hesitate to try and turn you from it; but as there is none, I think you had better marry your first love—always supposing that she will have you.'

Walter said he was convinced that she would not have him; but that, whether or no, he would not humiliate himself by asking her again; and he adhered to this determination so obstinately that his father, who sympathised with the young man's feeling, though he foresaw that it would not be a permanent one, ceased at last to press the point. In the course of the evening, however, he suggested a compromise.

'I mean to call upon our good friend Mrs. Winnington to-morrow,' said he. 'Being in town, you know, it will be only a proper act of politeness to do so; and if, at the same time, I can find out how the land lies, I suppose you won't be very angry with me.'

Walter, by way of reply, only shook hands with his father, who laughed and said, 'Don't mistake wounded vanity for pride, my boy. You are the least vain man I ever met, so I may say that to you. Now go to bed; and prepare yourself for a disappointment when I come back and tell you that Edith is engaged to a duke with a larger annual income than the whole of your capital.'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MRS. STANNIFORTH CAN'T CONTROL HER NERVES.

Colonel Kenyon was very patient and very steadfast; but his patience was not absolutely inexhaustible, and in the six-and-fortieth year of his age and the eighteenth of Margaret's reign over his heart, he was beginning to bethink himself that steadfastness had been of little service to him in the past, while it was certain that patience could not help him much in the future. What was the good of being patient when there was nothing to wait for and nothing to expect?

'Women,' said Colonel Kenyon, solemnly, one evening after mess, to the old friend who sat on his right hand, 'are the very deuce, unless you understand how to deal with them. Some men, you know, treat them as toys, and I believe that's the right plan; but if you can't manage that, why, the less you have to say to them the better. At least, that's my view; I don't know whether it's yours.'

The above disparaging estimate of the opposite sex was due in no small degree to the extraordinary behaviour of Mrs. Stanniforth, who, a short time before this, had written somewhat coldly to inform Hugh that Philip's engagement to Nellie

Brune was broken off—'which,' said she, 'you will consider good news, no doubt'—and who had at the same time mentioned that, as she was about to let her house for an indefinite period, and could not say exactly what her address might be at first, she would be unable to correspond with him quite so regularly as she had lately done. An urgent written request for more precise information had remained unanswered; and thus it was that Hugh had arrived at the pardonable conclusion that women are the very deuce.

But, although he tried hard to be angry, he made but a partial success of it. He knew that, however foolish might be Margaret's motives for desiring to shroud her movements in mystery, they would not be selfish ones; and when he learnt that Mrs. Winnington was entertaining fashionable circles in London, and that Marescalchi had been seen disporting himself in the highest of society, a painful suspicion crossed his mind that economy might be found to be at the root of this sudden wish for change. He had heard with much satisfaction of the collapse of Philip's grand scheme for turning things topsy-turvy at Longbourne; but this satisfaction had been tempered with anxiety; for, Brune or no Brune, there Philip remained, an expensive encumbrance, who would never earn a penny for himself to the end of his days, and who, as it appeared, was not a whit abashed by his failure, nor any less extravagant in his tastes than of yore.

Business and his destiny took Colonel Kenyon up to London in the last days of July. Business kept him at the War Office all the morning, and his destiny led him in the course of the afternoon to a place which it had never been one of his habits to frequent on week-days. He was walking down a certain street, on his way to his club, when an open church-door, through which a sound of subdued chanting escaped into the outer air, attracted his attention. He stopped and peered into the gloom. He thought it looked very cool and quiet and peaceful in there, and, after hesitating for a moment, he took off his hat and stole softly up the aisle on tiptoe. The service was nearly over, and Hugh had not been five minutes in church when the congregation, which was not a large one, was dismissed. He lingered awhile, thinking of that morning, nearly a year ago, when he had knelt behind Margaret in the little church at Longbourne, and wondering where she was now. Then he turned, with a sigh, to go away, and, behold, there she was, at his elbow!

She was still kneeling, and her face was hidden in her hands; but Hugh knew her at once, despite the rather strange garb in which she was attired. She wore a close-fitting black straw bonnet, without ornament of any kind, and a long black cloak enveloped her from head to foot.

'I thought as much,' muttered Hugh to himself. 'This is that old Jack-in-the-green Langley's doing. Now, if he has made her take vows, or any tomfoolery of that kind, hang me if I don't go down and wring his old neck!'

Then he remembered where he was, and moved hastily off to the porch, where he felt that he could with more propriety indulge in profane ejaculations, while waiting for Margaret. He had to wait some time. Once or twice he peeped in to make sure that she had not escaped by some side door; but she was still there, in the same attitude, and motionless; and Hugh was made uncomfortable by the verger, who eyed him at first inquiringly, and then suspiciously, as a responsible person, with valuable church plate under his charge, and a dread of swell-mobsmen before his mind, might be excused for doing.

At length Margaret rose, and made her way towards the door with a slow, dragging step. Hugh could see that she seemed to be steadying herself by the benches as she walked; but he could not distinguish her features until the sunlight fell upon them. Then he started back, with an exclamation of horror. She was extremely pale, there were black circles under her eyes, her face was drawn as after a long illness, and as she stepped out into the air she coughed in a manner which caused Hugh's heart to stop beating for an instant. Before he could speak, she had caught sight of him.

'Oh, Hugh!' she cried, 'have you come here to look for me? Oh, how glad I am! You must take me home, Hugh. I can't bear it any longer; and I feel so dreadfully ill, I think I must be going to die. What made you think of coming here for me?'

Her manner was very odd and excited, her voice shook, and she trembled so much that Hugh instinctively held out his arm to support her. His consternation was extreme; but he endeavoured not to show it, nor did he ask any questions, for he saw that Margaret was really ill, and that it behoved him to rise to the level of the occasion. The first thing to be done, he thought, was to get her home and send for the doctor; explanations might come later.

Therefore he lost no time in calling a hansom, and said, reassuringly, 'Yes, yes; I have come to look after you; and here's the cab, you see, waiting. You'll be all right now.'

Margaret laughed rather hysterically. 'You think I have gone out of my mind,' said she, 'but I assure you I am perfectly sane. Seeing you so suddenly startled me, and I began to talk nonsense. Of course you could not really have known that I was here. I caught a bad cold when I first came to London, and I went out too soon after it, and since then I have been trying to do things which are beyond me; and the consequence is that I have broken down altogether, and——'

'Never mind about all that,' interrupted Hugh. 'I have come just in time to pick you up, you see. Now, if you'll let me help you into the hansom, we'll be off.'

Margaret submitted without a word. It struck her as quite natural that her companion should take up that authoritative tone, and she rather liked it. He, on his side, in the midst of all his alarm and distress, was conscious of a certain inward exultation at her obedience. It seemed as if at last, after so many years, he and she had found their proper respective positions.

'Where shall I tell the man to drive to?' he asked.

This very natural request produced a curious effect upon Margaret. 'I did not think of that,' she murmured, shrinking back into the corner of the cab. 'I am staying at a Nurses' Institution. Oh, Hugh, do you know, I don't think I can go back there?'

Hugh, who was standing up with his back to the horse, uttered an aspiration with regard to Mr. Langley, which was unheard by Margaret, and which, it may be hoped, did not shock the cabman. He stooped down to say cheerfully, 'Of course you are not going back there. I was only doubting whether you would like to go to Mrs. Winnington, or——'

'Oh, no!' said Margaret, quickly.

'No, to be sure. Not to Mrs. Winnington. Then—let me see—where shall we go?'

'How silly you are!' exclaimed Margaret, half-laughing, half-crying; 'why do you talk to me as if I were an escaped lunatic? I had better go to lodgings somewhere, I suppose. Don't you know of any?'

Hugh at once thought of a certain quiet hotel, much frequented by the clerical dignitaries of Crayminster, where both he and Margaret had been known from childhood. He gave

this address to the cabman and then sat down beside Margaret.

'You are very good,' said she. And after a pause, 'I ought to explain my ridiculous behaviour. You know I wrote to you that I was going away from Longbourne for a time. The fact is, I took a fancy to learn nursing, so I applied to Mr. Langley, who got them to take me in at this Institution.'

'Brutes!' muttered Hugh, who was in a state of boiling indignation, which he had some difficulty in repressing. 'So they have been starving you and ill-treating you, have they?'

'Oh, dear no! they have been as kind as possible; it was all my own fault. They told me I was not the least fit for the work, and I am afraid they were right.'

Hugh grunted. 'And I suppose it was they who made you dress yourself up in this—this waterproof thing,' said he, looking with much disfavour at Margaret's long garment.

'It isn't waterproof,' she answered, with a little laugh. 'If it had been, perhaps I shouldn't have got wet through on the first day, which was the beginning of all my troubles. They couldn't let me wear their dress, you see, as I don't belong to the order; but of course they expect any one staying with them to adopt some unremarkable sort of costume; so I did my best. I am afraid I have not succeeded very well in making myself unremarkable,' she added ruefully.

'Not very,' Hugh agreed.

'That is the worst of being so tall; the more one tries to efface oneself the more certain one is of looking a conspicuous guy. Oh, Hugh, how delightful it is to see you again! I feel a thousand times better already. There is nothing the matter with me, really, and I believe I ought to go back to the Institution.'

'You may as well make up your mind at once that you will never cross the threshold of that establishment again,' answered Hugh. 'As soon as I have seen you comfortably settled in the hotel, I mean to go there and tell them that you have bolted. If that don't suit them, I can't help it.'

In moments of great perturbation Colonel Kenyon always felt a longing to go at somebody's throat, and he almost hoped to discover some proof of cruelty or neglect on the part of these charitable ladies, so that he might relieve his feelings by giving them an outsider's candid opinion of them and all their works. Meanwhile there were more important things to be thought of.

Rooms were obtained at the hotel without difficulty, and

Hugh explained to the landlady that Mrs. Stanniforth's visit had been rather hastily decided upon, and that her luggage might be expected to arrive before long. Then he ordered some tea, insisted upon having a fire lighted, though the thermometer stood at seventy-five degrees in the shade, and bustled about, opening and shutting doors and windows in some perplexity as to what ought to be done next.

Margaret sat passively watching him, too weary to question his proceedings.

'Where's your maid?' he asked abruptly.

'Oh, she is with her friends! I couldn't bring her with me, you know.'

'I never heard of such a thing. Give me her address, please.'

And in a few minutes a telegram was on its way to the young woman in question desiring her immediate attendance upon her mistress.

'And now,' said Hugh, 'I think I'd better go off to that in—ahem!—Institution, and get your things.'

The Lady Superior who received Colonel Kenyon was a stout person, whose habiliments closely resembled those worn by the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul. She listened to her visitor's communication blandly, and fully concurred in his observation that Mrs. Stanniforth ought never to have been allowed to go to such a place at all. It was, she added, quite against their rules to make these irregular arrangements, and she had only consented to do so in this instance as a particular favour to one whom she greatly esteemed. But she smiled in a rather provoking way when Hugh went on to assert that Mrs. Stanniforth had 'half killed herself.'

'I think,' said she, 'you will find that there is nothing very serious the matter. Mrs. Stanniforth appears to have a very highly-strung nervous temperament, and I believe she has been rather upset by what she has seen at the hospital. Probably a few days' rest will be all that will be required to set her right.'

'God bless my soul!' exclaimed Hugh, 'do you mean to say that you have been taking her to see people's legs and arms cut off? Well, this is outrageous!'

The Lady Superior continued to smile in a manner that was at once superior and ladylike. 'When people wish to learn nursing,' she remarked, 'the first thing they have to do is to learn to control their nerves. Otherwise they are not likely to be of much use. Mrs. Stanniforth, by her own wish, has begun

with the ordinary course; but she does not seem to have come to us with any intention of persevering in the work, and, that being so, it is of course better that she should leave us. Indeed, as I told you before, we should not have received her, if Mr. Langley had not made a personal point of it.'

'I shall make a personal point of giving Mr. Langley a piece of my mind the next time I meet him,' cried Colonel Kenyon, disappointed in his hope of coming to loggerheads with this urbane lady, who only smiled again, and looked at him as if she thought him a very foolish person indeed.

His next step was to go off for the doctor, who, as might have been anticipated, was not at home. He left a message for him, begging him to call on Mrs. Stanniforth the first thing in the morning, and then returned to the hotel, where he was pleased to find his invalid looking much more like herself. There was a faint colour in her cheeks now, and she had regained something of her ordinary serenity of demeanour; but she scarcely touched the dinner which, at her request, Hugh shared with her, and every time that she coughed the anxious Colonel became hot and cold all over.

I can't tell you how ashamed I feel of myself,' she said. 'I always knew that I was a poor creature, but I had no idea of how bad I was until they took me to see all those horrors.' And she shuddered at the recollection.

'Don't speak of it!' exclaimed Hugh. 'As for the man Langley——'

'Now, Hugh, you must not scold poor Mr. Langley, please. It was I who asked him to get me into some place of the kind, and he took an immense deal of trouble to arrange it for me.'

'The more fool he! He ought to have had the sense to see that your health would never stand that sort of thing. What could have tempted you to go in for it?'

'Well, I was obliged to find some way of abolishing myself for a time. If I tell you how it was, will you promise not to be angry with me?'

'I'll promise not to be angry with *you*,' answered Hugh, only laying a slight stress upon the last word, so as to be at the same time truthful and to reserve his future liberty of sentiment.

'I was getting into difficulties: that is the truth. If I had remained at Longbourne, I should have been in serious trouble before the autumn; so I decided to let the house, dismiss the servants, and live upon as little as I could for three months. I haven't quite carried out my plan, you see; but, as Tom Stanni-

forth has taken the place and all my expenses are so much reduced, I think I shall be able to get on now.'

'My dear Margaret, why in the world did you not apply to me? Of course, you could have had any money that you required,' said Hugh, bethinking himself that if difficulties had arisen with his co-executor, it would have been a simple matter for him to sell out a thousand or so of his own, and say nothing about it.

'Oh, I dared not do that! I felt that I was in disgrace with old Mr. Stanniforth as it was. And, besides, I should have had to ask for so much. I—there was a rather sudden call made upon me,' added Margaret, hesitatingly.

'I see,' said Hugh. And presently he inquired, with all the indifference that he could muster, 'Which of them was it, this time?'

Margaret made no reply; so he repeated his question, and then she looked up at him deprecatingly.

'Must I say?' she asked.

'Oh, not unless you like. Only I know it was one or other of them; so you might as well tell me which it was. As a matter of curiosity, I should rather like to know.'

'Well, it was Philip, then. It is so difficult to speak to you about Philip, Hugh; because you are always sure to be against him, and I know he has done many foolish things. But we all do foolish things sometimes; and what more can you expect of any one than that he should say he is sorry.'

'You might expect him to be sorry, perhaps.'

'So he was sorry. He was more than sorry; he was perfectly wretched, poor fellow! And if he has sinned, he has been punished. Even you will allow that the discovery which he made about his father's marriage was a terrible blow.'

'Oh, that was a great sell, no doubt.'

'And then there was his quarrel with Nellie, which was worse. I must say that I think his punishment has been severe enough. He came home on purpose to confess everything to me, poor boy; and, after all, it was nothing so very unpardonable that he had to confess.'

Colonel Kenyon, who considered Marescalchi altogether unpardonable, held his peace while the history of Philip's brief married life, and of the gambling debt which he had been so unfortunate as to incur, was being related. He held his peace, because he did not wish to vex Margaret; but it cost him no small effort to do so, and he changed the subject as soon as pos-

sible by inquiring after Mrs. Winnington, 'who must have been feeling very anxious about you, I should think,' said he. 'Did you tell her what you were doing in London?'

'Oh, no!' answered Margaret; 'I thought it better not to let her know that I was in London at all. It would only have spoilt her pleasure and Edith's.'

'But where did they think you were? I presume you must have told them something.'

'Well, I gave them a sort of a hint,' said Margaret.

'Oh, a sort of a hint! And with that they were quite satisfied, I suppose.'

Colonel Kenyon had to shut his mouth very tight to keep himself from saying more; and he was not sorry when the arrival of Margaret's maid gave him an opportunity for retiring without further mention of the names of Philip and Mrs. Winnington. But, as he walked away, he said to himself that if somebody would take those two persons and throw them neck and crop into the Thames, society would be rid of two of its most worthless members.

Colonel Kenyon, who did not hastily condemn his neighbours, was very thorough in his condemnation of them when once he had satisfied himself that they ought to be condemned: in like manner, being slow to wrath, his anger, if roused, was hardly to be appeased by anything short of blood-letting. A night's rest, therefore, brought about no change in his feelings towards that ungrateful pair, and he was still further incensed, in the course of the morning, by the doctor, who was pleased to couch his report in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

'Mrs. Stanniforth really requires careful looking after; she has had a narrow escape of a serious illness. I told her mother, years ago, that she was a person who might easily become consumptive; and consumption, as I need hardly tell you, is just one of those diseases which attack you when you are down. She tells me she has let her place, and I am very glad to hear it. Get Mrs. Winnington to go abroad with her, as she did before, and keep her abroad for the winter. She must be amused; and she really must not be allowed to play these tricks with herself.'

'I'll speak to Mrs. Winnington,' said Hugh, rather grimly.

'I think you had better do so; and impress upon her that, unless she wishes to lose her daughter, she must take more care of her. Mrs. Stanniforth is not a person who can take care of herself.'

'To lose her!' repeated Hugh, aghast. 'Do you think there is serious mischief, then?'

'There is a certain amount of mischief, which may be checked, I hope. She has had a bad cold and neglected it; but that is not exactly the cause of her present illness. She is suffering from nervous derangement; the result, no doubt, of worry or anxiety of some kind, seconded by a shock to which she ought never to have been exposed. There is no occasion to alarm Mrs. Winnington: but at the same time she should be made to understand that the case is one which requires care and attention.'

Such a verdict as this was not calculated to soothe Colonel Kenyon's ire, and Margaret had much ado to keep him from rushing off to Park Street, with peremptory marching-orders, before luncheon.

'It is all nonsense about my going abroad at once,' she said; 'and I am not at all sure that it would suit my mother to start directly. At all events, if I have to go, I am quite old enough to go by myself now. I don't think there is any necessity for your seeing her, Hugh.'

Margaret, in truth, was beginning to be afraid of what Colonel Kenyon might say or do, when he found himself in Park Street, and would gladly have gone thither instead of him, had she not been quite as much afraid of what her mother might say, on receiving the confession which would have to be made. She knew that, when once Mrs. Winnington set to work to ask questions, it would be impossible to conceal the fact that 5,000*l.* had recently been paid to Philip, and she shrank from the inevitable scene which must follow.

'I certainly shall go and see her,' Hugh said resolutely; 'and I should imagine that she will make her convenience suit yours. At least, if she doesn't—— However, I have no doubt she will.'

'If you do go,' said Margaret, after a pause, 'will you promise me something as a great favour?'

'What is it?'

'Only to say nothing about Philip. It would distress me very much if you did, and it would be rather unfair to him, I think. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you as much as I did last night, if I had had all my wits about me.'

Hugh considered for a moment, and then said, 'Very well; I won't mention his name if I can help it. By the way, where did you say that Marescalchi was living?'

Margaret knew that she had given no information upon this point, and she was not anxious to do so now. 'You are not going to see him, are you?' she asked apprehensively.

'Oh,' answered Hugh, in a careless tone, 'I thought I might look him up, perhaps, if I had time. But I suppose I can find out his address at his club.'

This was, unfortunately, only too certain, and Margaret saw that it would be unwise, as well as useless, to make a secret of what could be so easily discovered; so she said, 'He was staying at Johnson's Hotel in Berkeley Square when I last heard from him; but that is some time ago now.'

Hugh took a mental note both of the address and of the circumstance that Philip did not trouble himself to write often to his benefactress; soon after which he picked up his hat and stick, remarking that, if he didn't make haste, he should hardly catch Mrs. Winnington at home.

The last thing that Margaret said to him, after repeatedly cautioning him against making a great fuss about a small matter, was, 'You will be back again soon, won't you?' and the significance of this query gave Hugh matter for reflection which lasted him throughout his walk.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HONOURS DIVIDED.

THE ways of deceit are seldom ways of pleasantness; and Edith Winnington soon found that the part which she had set herself to play was so full of difficulty and discomfort as to be very nearly insupportable. In the first place, Mr. Stanniforth, who abhorred crooked dealing above all things, was as clumsy a fellow-conspirator as ever a poor girl was afflicted with. If he would have simply turned and fled whenever Mrs. Winnington entered the room, the maintenance of the plot would have been less hopeless; but this he would not do. He seemed to think that, having taken upon himself to delude a fellow-creature, it behoved him to make believe a great deal; and, instead of chatting naturally about vivisection, as of yore, he took to paying wild and improbable compliments, to jerking out pretty phrases too evidently learnt by heart, and to suggesting agreeable projects with an indescribably sheepish air, while Mrs. Winnington sat staring at him, as if she had some faint idea that he was going out of his mind.

Nor was this exasperating conduct the worst of what Edith had to endure at the hands of her well-meaning friend. From the moment of that meeting with Walter Brune at the Botanical Gardens, Tom had made up his mind to bring about the happy union of Miss Winnington with the young man whom he hoped some day to call his brother-in-law. This end, no doubt, might be achieved in many ways, it being evidently only a question of money; but it was important to ascertain, before proceeding to action, what Walter's tastes were, what career he considered himself best fitted for, and how a comfortable income could be provided for him without wearing too much the appearance of a gift. Mr. Stanniforth would have been very glad, therefore, if Miss Winnington would kindly have taken him into her full confidence, and the nods and winks and oracular speeches in which he indulged, by way of encouraging her thereto, were indeed enough to have tried the patience of Job. Edith could not tell him that she had broken off all relations with Walter; neither could she by any means make him understand that the subject was painful to her; and, what with Tom's provoking stupidity upon the one hand and her mother's suspicious acuteness upon the other, she began at length to ask herself whether it would not be a great deal better to hasten the inevitable hour, to sever the hair which sustained the impending sword, and have done with it.

The courage of despair came to Edith's aid one morning, when her mother had been subjecting her to a more than usually severe course of interrogation, and, with a calmness which astonished herself, she said:

'I think I had better tell you that I have refused Mr. Stanniforth.'

Mrs. Winnington immediately went through a sort of pantomime of dropping down dead. Verbal comment would, she felt, be absurdly inadequate to the occasion, and for some minutes she would do nothing but gasp and groan. When, however, she did recover the use of her tongue, she employed it with all that vigour of which she was a mistress. She scolded, she entreated, she wept copiously; finally she declared that Edith was a silly girl who did not know her own mind, and that she herself would make it her business to console poor Mr. Stanniforth, and to let him know that his rejection was not meant to be taken seriously.

Thus there was nothing for it but to explain that Mr. Stanniforth stood in no need of consolation; and so, by degrees,

the whole truth came out, and Mrs. Winnington received the crushing intelligence that not only was another to bear away the prize but that that other's chance of doing so was the result of Edith's officiousness in enlightening the wretched man as to the state of his own affections.

There is no saying what might not have happened to the offender after this, if a ring at the door-bell had not caused an abrupt suspension of hostilities.

'Not at home!' gasped Mrs. Winnington, from the sofa. 'Go and tell them, not at home!'

But either Edith was too late, or she thought only of effecting her own escape; for the next moment Colonel Kenyon was announced, and, striding into the room, beheld the foe with whom he had come to wage war prostrate upon her sofa, dishevelled as to her hair, and very red and swollen as to her eyes and nose.

'How do you do?' said Mrs. Winnington. 'I don't know why they let you come up. I am not in a state to receive visitors. I am very ill indeed.'

'Oh!' said Hugh, a good deal disconcerted; for he felt that the force of his attack must now be greatly weakened. 'What is the matter with you? Gout again?'

'I believe,' answered Mrs Winnington, impressively, 'that I am about to die.'

'Oh, I don't think so; you don't look like it at all,' said Hugh, with conspicuous lack of sympathy.

'I do not know,' rejoined Mrs. Winnington, 'what I may look like; but I know what I feel. However, I have no wish to weary you with my complaints. I have never talked about my health, nor taken care of it, as you are aware. Perhaps, if I had thought less of others and more of myself, as Cardinal Wolsey said, I should not be in the condition that I am in now.'

'I didn't know that Cardinal Wolsey had said that,' remarked Hugh; 'but to the best of my belief you have no reason to reproach yourself on that score, Mrs. Winnington. You haven't thought too much about Margaret of late, it seems to me.'

'Really, Hugh,' cried Mrs. Winnington, 'I am not prepared to be lectured by you. Margaret and I perfectly understand one another, and we do not require to be taught our duty by anybody. Dear Margaret would be the first person to protest against an insinuation that she had been neglected.'

'That may be; but her protesting wouldn't alter the fact that she is neglected. Why, you don't even know where she is!'

'I don't quite understand what you mean by taking up this tone, Hugh, and, if we were not such very old friends, I should be inclined to put a stop to it. I certainly do not know dear Margaret's address; but that is only because she has thought fit to conceal it from me. I must say that I think Margaret has behaved with some want of consideration for me; but I have never hinted that I felt this in writing to her, nor have I attempted in any way to interfere with her plans. To speak of my not having thought about her is nonsense. I suppose that no one but you would have brought such a ridiculous accusation as that against me. The truth is that I have been, and am, most anxious to know where she has been all this time.'

'Well,' said Hugh, conscious that the case for the defence was being conducted with some ability, 'I can give you the information that you are so anxious for. She has been in a Nurses' Institution; and I am sorry to say that she has made herself rather seriously ill. Yesterday, by a fortunate chance, I happened to meet her, and I was able to persuade her to leave the place at once. It was not a day too soon, I can tell you.'

'A Nurses' Institution! You don't mean to say so! How very extraordinary poor dear Margaret is! Of course you were quite right to take her away—especially if she is going to be ill. It is nothing catching, I hope.'

'No; you need not be afraid of going to see her. It is the old trouble again. At least, it is partly that and partly nervous prostration, the doctor says.'

'Dear me! Well, I don't wonder, I'm sure. What can you expect, if people will do such absurd and uncalled-for things?'

'She had her reasons,' answered Hugh, shortly. He was dying to say what those reasons were; but he remembered his promise to repeat nothing of Philip's iniquities, and though, for his own part, he thought there was not a pin to choose between Mrs. Winnington and the other delinquent, he could not conscientiously assert that the cost of the establishment in Park Street was the direct cause of Margaret's retrenchment.

'As for my going to see her,' Mrs. Winnington went on, 'I don't know how long it may be before I am able to manage that; I have not been out of the house for three weeks. But I will send Edith. Where is dear Margaret now?'

Deliberately and at some length, as his habit was, Hugh

stated the provisional arrangements which he had made on Margaret's behalf, gave an account of the condition in which he had found her, and reported the course of treatment recommended by the doctor. The interview was not passing off at all in the manner which he had anticipated. His firm intention had been to tell Mrs. Winnington plainly that she was an old monster of selfishness, and, if possible, to make her thoroughly ashamed of herself for once; but now he did not quite see his way to doing this. Mrs. Winnington was not in the least ashamed of herself, and spoke with so much affection and sympathy of poor dear Margaret that it seemed as if all hope of plain speaking must be abandoned.

'Of course you will prepare to take her abroad directly,' said he, in conclusion, half hoping that the old lady would make some objection. And in this she did not disappoint him.

'I don't know about directly,' she answered. 'I meant to have gone to Homburg as soon as I was able to travel; but things have happened which may oblige me to change my plans. As for remaining a whole winter out of England, that I certainly cannot do; and I am quite certain that dear Margaret will not be so unreasonable as to expect it of me.'

Already Mrs. Winnington had realised the necessity of discovering a successor for the faithless Stanniforth, and she felt that it would never do to waste the best part of a year in wandering through foreign lands. 'You must remember,' she continued, 'that Margaret is not my only daughter, and that I cannot always be with her. I have tried to leave her as little alone as I could; but it is impossible that I should be altogether at her disposal, and I have made some engagements for the autumn which I must fulfil. That is, if I live so long,' she added, remembering that she had just predicted her speedy dissolution.

'In other words, rather than give up a few visits, you would leave Margaret to the tender mercies of a doctor and a lady's maid, hundreds of miles away from all her friends.'

'What your object can be in saying rude and false things about me, Hugh, I cannot imagine. Of course dear Margaret must have some one with her, and if she were really ill I should go to her at once. But I don't think it likely that matters are as bad as you make out, and there would be no difficulty in finding some one to take my place. Why should not *you* go with her?'

This suggestion caused a slight flush to mount into Hugh's

sunburnt cheeks. 'I am afraid,' said he, 'that would hardly do. Aged as I am, Margaret and I could not very well travel about together alone.'

'I really don't know why you should not; you are almost like her guardian. But it would be quite easy to discover a third person; or Margaret might even engage a companion, if necessary. However, all these matters can be discussed later; just now I do not feel up to talking any more. Will you give my best love to dear Margaret, please, and tell her that if she will come and see me, I shall be so glad? Edith will go to her as soon as she has a spare moment.'

'Very well; I will give her that message,' answered Hugh, getting up; and as he went downstairs he tried to console himself by reflecting that he would probably have done more harm than good if he had succeeded in picking a quarrel with Mrs. Winnington.

'But the other,' thought he, 'is different. He is a man. I can deal with him, I think.'

Hugh did not ask himself whether any good purpose would be served by his quarrelling with 'the other.' His feeling was that these two people ought really to be made to see themselves in their true colours, and that, if he didn't do them this service, nobody would. So, in full confidence of the righteousness of his purpose, he marched off to Berkeley Square, and, on hearing that Mr. Marescalchi was at home, declined to send in his card, saying that he would go straight upstairs. Philip, he thought, should not have the chance of refusing to receive him. He was not asked to mount any higher than the first floor, and it added fuel to the flames of his indignation to be shown into a spacious sitting-room adorned with much gilding and crimson damask and many mirrors.

'You have dropped into pretty comfortable quarters here,' he remarked, almost before Philip had had time to say 'How do you do?'

Mr. Marescalchi, who had been lying on the sofa, smoking a cigarette, resumed his recumbent attitude, and blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. 'They wouldn't be bad,' he replied, 'if they were not so execrably furnished. It is pain and grief to have to sit in such a gaudy room as this. But one can't have everything; and the hotel is tolerably comfortable in other respects.'

'I have no doubt it is. Tolerably expensive, too, I should think.'

'Oh, of course. You can't live in a London hotel during the season for nothing; and from what I hear, I should say that this was about the most ruinous establishment of the lot. Still, when one has the means, you know——'

Hugh exploded like a bomb. 'The means! Deuce take it all, Marescalchi, this is rather too good a joke! Do you think I don't know where your means come from? Are you aware, sir, that Margaret has had to pinch and screw, and put down her establishment, and reduce herself to—to positive indigence, by George! in order to provide you with the means of lying on your back on that sofa and smoking your beastly cigarettes all day?'

'They aren't beastly, really,' said Philip, mildly; 'they're the best I can get. Won't you try one? These are not my rooms, by the way; they are occupied by Signora Tommasini, who kindly allows me to make use of them. I myself am lodged in a humble little apartment looking out upon the leads, where the cats sit and howl at me all night. You would feel quite sorry for me, if you saw it.'

Hugh was conscious that, in his haste, he had brought matters to something very like an anticlimax; but he didn't care much about that. 'I don't know about being sorry for you,' he said; 'I can assure you that it would rejoice me greatly to think that you were suffering a little discomfort.'

'You don't say so?—how very odd! There's no accounting for tastes; but, for my own part, I dislike nothing more than to see people uncomfortable. It is very nearly as bad as being uncomfortable oneself.'

'Is that why you have taken care not to see Margaret lately? She has been in discomfort, and something more than discomfort, through you. Well; I don't wonder that you have kept out of her way. It can't be very pleasant, I should think, to know that your extravagance has brought her to such straits that she has had to take to learning nursing in a sisterhood, by way of saving money, and that she has sacrificed her health by it. For anything that I know, she may have sacrificed her life too; for she is not in a state to do such things with impunity.'

Whether Philip was touched, or conscience-stricken, or alarmed, or whether he was perfectly indifferent, there was nothing in his face or voice to indicate. 'Don't you think you are just the least bit in the world unreasonable, Colonel Kenyon?' he asked. 'I knew that Longbourne was let; but

I knew nothing more, for the simple reason that Meg did not choose to tell me anything more.'

'I wish to God you wouldn't call her by that name!' exclaimed Hugh, with a sudden outburst of impatience.

'I am sorry that it should have the effect of irritating you so much; but, as I have never called her anything else all my life, I am afraid I must continue to do so, at the risk of being run through the body with your umbrella. I was saying that Meg kept me completely in the dark as to her movements. She gave me to understand that she didn't wish me to ask questions, and, naturally, I could only respect her wishes.'

'Oh, yes; that is Mrs. Winnington's excuse; but you'll allow me to tell you that, in my opinion, it is no excuse at all. It is just possible that Mrs. Winnington may not have known that Margaret had been exceeding her income; but you, at all events, were well aware of the demands that have been made upon her, and you cannot have had much doubt about the reason of her giving up her home. The very least that you could have done would have been to find out what had become of her. I shall not appeal to you to leave her in peace for the future, for I know that would not be of the slightest use; but you may as well understand that, after this, you will have to keep your expenditure within the limits of a fixed annual sum. I have determined to take matters into my own hands, and to put a stop to this system of wholesale robbery.'

'Colonel Kenyon,' said Philip, in a rather graver tone, 'you have always had the worst possible opinion of me, and you are heartily welcome to it. Pray believe that your opinion is a matter of the most absolute indifference to me. More than once you have taken upon yourself to interfere in my affairs in a helter-skelter, blundering sort of way, and I haven't complained. It is your nature to be like that, I suppose, and I don't quarrel with you for it, any more than one quarrels with dogs for delighting to bark and bite. Perhaps, however, it would be pushing forbearance too far to allow oneself to be called a wholesale robber; and therefore I must respectfully invite you to retract that expression.'

Hugh was stroking his moustache with lean brown fingers which trembled a little. At this direct throwing down of the gauntlet his eyes glistened. 'I won't retract a single word that I have said,' he replied, shortly.

'You won't?' returned Philip, deliberately swinging his legs off the sofa, and assuming a sitting posture, while he looked

his visitor straight in the eyes. 'You won't retract the expression? Then we must proceed to extremities, I'm afraid. I thought perhaps you might have insulted me without quite meaning it, for your temper seems to have got rather out of hand; but, since you choose to stick to your words, I can only ask you to give me your address, so that I may send a friend to call upon you to-morrow.'

'You young jackanapes!' called out Hugh, 'do you suppose I am going to fight a duel with you? I'll see you hanged first!'

Philip raised his eyebrows. 'You won't fight and you won't retract. I suppose you know what is generally said of a man who acts in that way.'

'I'll tell you what,' said Hugh, getting up; 'I won't fight a duel, because it's ridiculous, and nobody ever does fight duels in this country; but if you would like to call me a coward, you had better do it—and I'll give you such a hammering that you won't do it again for a year.'

Philip did not take advantage of this handsome offer. He looked at his angry antagonist for a minute with a certain amused curiosity, and then burst out laughing.

'What a ludicrous position we have got into!' he exclaimed. 'We both look rather foolish; but, vanity apart, I must say I think you look the more foolish of the two. My height is five foot nine; yours, I suppose, is about six foot two or three; and in weight and length of reach there is probably an even greater disproportion between us. Therefore I see nothing to be ashamed of in acknowledging that, if it came to a regular ding-dong tussle between us, you could thrash me. But I think it is just possible that there may be something to be ashamed of in insulting a man whom you know you can thrash, and declining to meet him upon equal terms.'

The sight of Kenyon's face, as he gradually took in this terse summing up of the situation, was enough to compensate Philip for worse things than having been called a wholesale robber. Longer and longer it grew, till, as Philip afterwards said, 'it almost reached the lowest button of his waistcoat,' and finally assumed an expression of the most woebegone penitence. It had not occurred to Hugh to look at the matter in that light before; but now it seemed clear enough that he had been acting the part of a bully; and what was left for him to do but to eat humble pie? It made him very miserable to recognise this duty; but it would have made him still more so to have shirked it.

'You are right, Marescalchi,' he said; 'I allowed my temper to get the better of me, and—I forgot myself. When duelling was done away with it was understood, I suppose, that a man would have to be more careful than ever in future about what he said, and I was certainly wrong in saying what I did. I withdraw the words that offended you, and I beg your pardon for having used them.'

Philip nodded. 'It is a pity that you dislike me so extremely, Colonel Kenyon,' he said; 'for I really have a sincere admiration for you. But we can never be friends, I am afraid.'

'I am afraid not. The fact is that I ought not to have come here at all, and the sooner I take myself off the better. Good morning to you.'

'I don't want to detain you against your will,' said Philip; 'but as you are here, and as you will most likely be seeing Meg in the course of the day, I think I might as well tell you something about myself, which I should have had to let her know before long. I wonder whether you could be persuaded to sit down for a few minutes and behave like a rational being.'

Perhaps Philip did not know how very offensive this impertinent tone was to the elder man. Hugh was too crestfallen to resent it. He sat down resignedly, and said 'Well?'

'I only wish to tell you that I am going to be married shortly. My future bride is Signora Tommasini, of whom I dare say you have often heard.'

Hugh could not repress a low whistle. 'You don't mean the—the singing woman!' he ejaculated.

'I do. And she is fat; and you remember her when you were a boy, and all that. But she isn't a bad sort of old woman, all the same.'

Probably Philip felt a good deal ashamed of himself; but it is not probable that he realised the intensity of his hearer's contempt for him. Hugh, however, had had enough of making personal criticisms for one day: he only remarked, in a low voice, 'This will be a blow to poor Margaret.'

'I suppose,' observed Philip, 'you wouldn't believe me if I were to say that it is partly on Meg's account that I have decided to take this step; but it will, at all events, be a satisfaction to you to know that I am off her hands. I shall always be a burden upon somebody; but I shall never be a burden upon her any more.'

Something in the speaker's voice found its way to a soft place in Colonel Kenyon's heart. 'I say, Marescalchi,' he

exclaimed abruptly, 'can't you get out of this? Are you irrevocably committed to it?'

'Oh, dear me, yes!' answered Philip; 'I am not sure that the banns haven't been put up already. Anyhow, I'm in for it; and, really, do you know, I don't mind it nearly as much as I expected to do. You'll just mention it to Meg, will you?'

'I will tell her,' said Hugh, reluctantly. 'In fact I shall hardly be able to avoid telling her. But surely you must see that you ought to go to her yourself.'

'Very well,' answered Philip; 'it will be painful for both of us; but what must be must. You might also mention to her that I didn't know the reason of her leaving Longbourne. Or, rather, no; don't say anything about that—what does it signify? No use asking you to stop and have some lunch, I suppose? Good-bye, then.'

'Good-bye,' said Hugh. He hesitated for a moment whether to hold out his hand or not; but finally decided that he would not. And so the two men parted, and have never exchanged words since. Their paths in life diverged from that day, and when they meet now—which does not often happen—they look the other way.

Hugh, walking sadly homewards, thought to himself, 'So that is the end of him! As selfish and cynical a young scoundrel as ever breathed; and yet, somehow, I am sorry for the beggar.'

But Philip, when he described the Colonel's visit a few hours later to the Signora, from whom he had now no secrets, said, 'There never was a more dear old high-minded, thick-headed ass! It was a case of honours divided, and I don't think either of us cared much who won the game. He is a gentleman, that long, thin gunner, if he isn't exactly a man of the world. I think Mrs. Stanniforth will end by marrying him—which is a pity: for he will never understand her.'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS.

It never rains but it pours. Hardly had Mrs. Winnington got rid of the visitor who had intruded upon her as related in the last chapter, before another, and an even less welcome one, was announced. When she heard the name of Mr. Brune, she not

unnaturally concluded that it was Walter who had pushed audacity to the point of bearding the lioness in her den, and she was so mightily stirred by this fancied outrage that she had much ado to restrain herself from hurling at the head of the father the denunciation intended for the son.

'You did not expect to see me,' observed Mr. Brune, who had marked the lady's evident discomposure.

'One does not expect to see anybody at this hour of the day,' answered Mrs. Winnington, with somewhat discourteous emphasis.

'I apologise. I have no doubt I have been guilty of a frightful breach of etiquette. Please set it down to my rustic breeding, and also to the great desire that I had to find you at home.'

Mrs. Winnington replied that she was always at home now, the state of her health not being such as to allow of her leaving the house. She added that she was not well enough to see any one, and that she wished servants would not be so stupid.

'I see,' said Mr. Brune, 'that I have been most indiscreet; and I would go away at once, if I had not a matter of real importance to us both to talk over with you. I dare say you may remember, Mrs. Winnington, a conversation which I had with you just before Walter left home.'

'I do,' answered Mrs. Winnington. 'I am not likely to forget it, I can assure you. And since you have introduced the subject, Mr. Brune, I think it as well that you should know that my daughter and I have been put to the most serious annoyance by your son's conduct during the last few weeks.'

'I am grieved to hear it, but perhaps it would save time and clear the air if I were to finish what I have to say. When I have done, we will sit in judgment upon Walter, if you feel inclined that way. You say that you have not forgotten our interview at Longbourne; so you will recollect my telling you at the time that I should not be disposed to look favourably upon my son's marriage with a penniless girl.'

'Mr. Brune!' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington, red and wrathful, 'if you have forced your way into my drawing-room merely in order to say impertinent things——'

'Now, my dear lady, why will you be in such a desperate hurry to condemn a man before the words are out of his mouth? What I was going to say was not impertinent; on the contrary, it was as pertinent as anything could be. I was about to remark that circumstances have caused me to alter my mind upon

that point. I am now ready to withdraw all opposition to my son's marriage with your daughter.'

It is to be feared that that unworthy delight which Philip took in stirring up the causeless wrath of his neighbours must have been hereditary in the Brune family. Mrs. Winnington was so nearly choked by anger that she could get out no more articulate reply than a sort of crow; and Mr. Brune, who was enjoying himself greatly, went on—

'You see, at that time there was really no prospect of an engagement resulting in anything, except disappointment. I remember to have mentioned to you that I should not feel justified in absolutely forbidding such a thing, but that I did not think it desirable; and then, you know, you saw Walter himself, and sent him to the right-about very quickly. All that was quite as it should be. But since then a change has taken place in the condition of affairs. Walter is now better off than he was; indeed I may say that he is in a position to support a wife and family comfortably; and there is no reason why your daughter and he should not be married as soon as you please.'

'Never!' exclaimed Mrs. Winnington; 'no, never in all my life have I—— But perhaps I had better say no more. Mr. Brune, I must request you to leave me.'

'Directly, Mrs. Winnington; but before I go, may I ask whether you have any objection to Walter as an individual?'

'The strongest! The very strongest!'

'Dear, dear! how unfortunate! I was hoping that it might have been only his poverty that repelled you; and, as he will now be in receipt of an income of from six to eight thousand a year—— However, there is no use in talking about what cannot be; and, much as I like and admire Miss Winnington, I am fully alive to the fact that Walter might do better for himself in a pecuniary sense. Well; it only remains for me to express my sincere regret and wish you good morning.'

'Please sit down again, Mr. Brune; I don't know why you should decide things in such an off-hand way. You must allow me a few minutes to think over this very unexpected news.'

'As many as you like, my dear Mrs. Winnington. To make things quite clear to you, let me say that my brother-in-law William Boulger, is dead, and has left 150,000*l.* to Walter. By living quietly in the country and exercising strict economy, I think a young couple might be able to manage upon that.'

Mrs. Winnington thought so too. The prospect thus thrown

open to Edith was a humble one in comparison with that which had lately seemed to lie before her; but with the false Stanniforth lost for ever, and with no one at hand to put in his place, seven thousand a year was by no means to be lightly rejected, and, to do Mrs. Winnington justice, the fact that Walter was the man of Edith's own choice counted for something with her.

'I never allow myself to be influenced by feelings of personal prejudice,' she began.

'I have noticed that you never do.'

'And although, after the manner in which your son has behaved of late, I cannot truly say that I think well of him, still——'

'Still, a rich man may do things which are not permissible to a poor one, and a handsome income covers a multitude of sins. I quite enter into your feelings.'

'Excuse me, Mr. Brune,' said Mrs. Winnington, not without dignity, 'but I very much doubt whether you do enter into my feelings. You are so very plain-spoken with me that I need not hesitate to speak plainly to you, and to tell you that, if I were choosing a husband for Edith, I should not choose your son. I think him a loud and unrefined young man, and it seems to me that he is not likely to find himself in that position in society in which I should like Edith to move. But I have always maintained that a parent's interference ought to be kept within certain limits. One has a right to insist upon birth, adequate means, and good character.'

'It would be impossible to carry moderation further.'

'But beyond that one is perhaps hardly entitled to go; and, as I believe there is nothing against your son's moral character, I feel that I ought not any longer to oppose Edith's choice.'

'I am delighted to hear you speak of Edith's choice as being made. Might I be allowed to see her before I go?'

'Oh, certainly, if you wish it!' answered Mrs. Winnington. 'I will ring and send for her.'

Accordingly Edith was summoned, and presently made her appearance, looking very pale and frightened. This was not quite what Mr. Brune wanted. He would have been glad to have had a few minutes' conversation in private with his future daughter-in-law, but evidently Mrs. Winnington did not think it necessary to accord him that privilege; so he revealed the nature of his errand in a few plain and direct words, said as many pleasant things as it was possible to say in the freezing

presence of the lady upon the sofa, and took his leave, having obtained permission for Walter to call later in the day.

The latter, who had been awaiting his father's return with no little impatience, was so overjoyed when he heard of his good fortune that Mr. Brune felt constrained to remind him that there was no rose without a thorn.

'Mrs. Winnington is your thorn,' said he. 'Don't attempt to sit upon her; it wouldn't be a success. If you will be advised by me, you will make up your mind at once to regard her as one of those inevitable evils which time alone can remove, and which it is not of the slightest use to fight against. Don't fight against her this afternoon if she insults you, as she probably will do. You have won the game, and you can afford to be magnanimous, or, if you prefer it, contemptuous.'

Walter declared that he was neither going to quarrel with Mrs. Winnington, nor to treat her with contempt. He was determined to make friends with the old lady, he said: whereat Mr. Brune laughed.

And yet the task did not prove so difficult a one as might have been anticipated. The fact was that Mrs. Winnington was not ill-pleased at the turn which matters had taken; and though it would have been unreasonable to expect of her that she should have acknowledged as much to Mr. Brune, she did not mind saying so to Walter. Full well she knew that Tom Stanniforths did not grow on every bush, and if there was any humiliation in the position of having to welcome to-day the man whom she would have turned out of her house yesterday, she was not conscious of it. Her own view of the case was that she had done her duty throughout, and had now been rewarded—not fully, still as sufficiently as could be hoped for in a world where rewards and punishments have no direct connection with desert. She received Walter graciously and patronisingly, and after a time walked upstairs without assistance, leaving him and Edith in possession of the drawing-room. The dialogue which ensued between these happy lovers may be left to be filled up by such readers as care to exercise their imagination in that way.

From thenceforth Mrs. Winnington talked no more about dying. Her health and spirits returned with surprising rapidity, and in a day or two she was able to go and see Margaret, who was by no means in so good a case either as regarded one or the other. The cough which had so alarmed Hugh was indeed better, but the patient's general condition was far from being

satisfactory. She was languid and nervous, and when her mother scolded her affectionately for her 'really too preposterous escapade,' she began to cry.

'I cannot understand dear Margaret,' Mrs. Winnington complained to Hugh. 'I suppose she is glad to see me; but really one would never imagine it from her manner. A short time ago she would have been delighted to hear of dear Edith's engagement, but now it scarcely seems to interest her. I cannot get her to talk at all. Has she anything on her mind, do you think?'

'It takes a little time to recover from a severe nervous shock,' Hugh answered. 'She ought to have a complete change as soon as it can be managed.'

'Well,' said Mrs. Winnington, 'I am quite ready to take her to Homburg as soon as she likes now. Of course, if dear Edith's wedding is to take place in the autumn, I cannot say how long I may be able to remain abroad; but dear Margaret may certainly count upon me for three weeks or a month.'

Hugh, however, had found out that Margaret did not wish to go abroad with her mother; so he answered evasively that he was afraid Homburg would not exactly do. Switzerland, perhaps, would be a more suitable place. Upon the whole, he thought that Margaret should make her plans irrespectively of Mrs. Winnington's. He did not care to tell that lady of the other wedding which was imminent; nor did he think it necessary to mention what he believed to be the true cause of Margaret's depression. He himself found it difficult to sympathise with his friend in this trouble. He was very sorry, but he could not say much. The fellow was so absolutely worthless! He had broken the news as gently as he could; he had dwelt as little as possible upon Signora Tommasini's age, and he had carefully abstained from saying a word about sordid motives; but he had not found himself able to make excuses for Philip. 'He'll make them for himself a deal better than I should for him,' the Colonel had thought, with a rather bitter laugh. 'If anybody can persuade Margaret that black is white, he is the man to do it.'

Perhaps Philip's confidence in his persuasive powers was not so great: certain it is that he never came to make those excuses. For three long days Margaret waited impatiently, expecting every hour to hear his step upon the stairs; but he failed to redeem his promise, and upon the fourth morning a

note arrived from him in which he stated plainly that he 'could not bring himself to face it.'

'What would be the use,' he wrote, 'of my coming to be forgiven—for of course I should be forgiven—and of our trying to persuade ourselves that things can ever be the same again as they used to be? It is wiser to make an end and finish of it at once, Meg; and if you can get yourself to think of me as if I were dead, that will be best. For a great many years I have been your lap-dog, and you have been wonderfully good and kind to me—only unfortunately you didn't know that all lap-dogs require whipping—and now I am going to be Signora Tommasini's lap-dog. I don't think you would care about the divided ownership, and I am quite sure that I couldn't endure it. You will set me down as ungrateful and heartless; and Colonel Kenyon will confirm your opinion, I have no doubt. So be it; only I think you will see, some day, that the best proof of gratitude that I could give you was to take myself off your hands and out of your life.'

In her distress, Margaret showed these words to Colonel Kenyon, who read them, and shook his head.

'I don't know what Philip means,' she said. 'Why should he talk about forgiveness? He has a right to marry whom he pleases, and he has done me no wrong, however sorry he may have made me. Why should he mind seeing me?'

'I don't want to hit a man when he is down,' answered Hugh; 'but it seems to me that all that is nothing but tall-talk, and that he only refuses to meet you because he shrinks from the humiliation of it. I know nothing about Signora Tommasini; but one cannot suppose that she would be a person whom you could receive upon terms of equality; and I presume that he understands that. It sounds a hard thing to say; but I can't help agreeing with him that it would be best if you could look upon him as dead.'

Margaret said very little more. It was not in her power to do as she was advised, though doubtless it might be expedient to make a pretence at doing so. The total failure of her life was very evident to her; but that did not make it any easier to forget the past and start afresh. 'What am I to do now?' she ejaculated to herself, after Hugh had left her; and all day long this question kept echoing and re-echoing itself in a tired brain. What was she to do?—what was she to do?

By way of practical answer came a kind letter from Tom

Stanniforth, who had heard something of her projects, entreating her to come down to Longbourne, and start a poor bachelor in the way of housekeeping and dealing with the tyrannical Mrs. Prosser, who remained in charge of the establishment. It might be a convenience to Margaret, he said, to be in her own house for a time before going abroad, and it would be a true charity to him if she would give him a few directions.

A somewhat similar invitation reached Colonel Kenyon, who was begged to understand that his right to make himself at home at Longbourne remained the same, although the house had passed out of the hands of one member of the Stanniforth family into the temporary occupancy of another.

It thus came to pass that, in the early days of August, very nearly the same party assembled round the Longbourne dinner-table as had met there a year before; for Mrs. Winnington and Edith had been induced, without much pressing, to avail themselves of Mr. Stanniforth's hospitality. There was only one absentee, and probably only one person missed him. Walter did say one evening that he wished poor old Philip could be there to keep them alive; but this remark was received with such emphatic silence that it was not repeated; and in truth, so far as he himself was concerned, Walter did not feel that the society in which he spent the greater part of his time left anything to be desired.

As the result of many family conclaves, it had been finally decided that Margaret was to engage a companion to accompany her to Switzerland, whither Hugh, whom a step in rank had deprived of the command of his battery and of all present employment, was likewise to travel with her. An advertisement was accordingly put in the papers, which had the effect of bringing numerous singular-looking persons down to Crayminster to be interviewed by Mrs. Winnington, and promptly dismissed as altogether unsuitable. Margaret was beginning to despair, when an excellent and unexpected substitute for a companion presented herself in the person of Miss Brune.

Nellie had been anything but pleased by Mr. Stanniforth's appearance as tenant of Longbourne; and she had thought fit to give him a very cool reception the first time that he walked over to Broom Leas. This, however, had not prevented him from calling again the next day, and the next, and every day; and his manner had been such as to leave her in no doubt that it was his intention to repeat ere long the offer which he had made without success upon a previous occasion. Now Nellie

was not ignorant of what had been taking place in London during the past few months, and her belief was that she understood Mr. Stanniforth thoroughly. He would have been glad to marry Edith if Walter had not interfered. Failing Edith, he would now be willing enough to marry her; and, failing her, he would have no objection, she supposed, to marrying somebody else. One could not be exactly angry with the man, since it was evident that he really meant no offence; but at the same time it was very disagreeable to be annoyed by the preliminary courtship in which he chose to indulge; and as there was apparently no hope of making him understand the futility of that process, the only thing to be done seemed to be to run away from him. Nellie, therefore, had decided upon paying a long visit to her aunt Elizabeth, an ancient dame who dwelt far away in the west of England, and it was without any idea of being taken at her word that she remarked one morning to Mrs. Stanniforth, 'Ah! I wish you would carry me off to foreign parts with you as your companion. I shouldn't ask for any salary.'

Margaret jumped at the suggestion. Probably she was the only person at Longbourne or Broom Leas who was still in the dark as to Mr. Stanniforth's purpose, and she was under the impression that Nellie needed change of scene almost as much as she did herself. Had not her clay-footed idol once been Nellie's idol too? The whole matter was arranged, Mr. Brune's consent had been obtained, and the travellers were off almost before the astounded Tom Stanniforth could draw his breath.

'Looked at in the light of a practical joke, I must acknowledge that this is a great success,' he said, in rueful accents, to Edith, who could not help laughing at his discomfiture. 'Here am I with a big house on my hands that I don't know what to do with, and I daren't shut it up and go away now. I feel exactly like a man who has taken a moor for the season, and finds, on the morning after his arrival, that all the birds are dead.'

'Your bird will come back,' said Edith, consolingly.

'Yes, but when? And when she does come back, what chance will there be for me? What am I to think of her going off like this the moment that I appear?'

'I know what I think,' answered Edith; 'I think you have scared her away. You made too sure of her, and I dare say you let her see it; which is not at all the sort of thing which Nellie

would like. 'But never mind. If she had meant to refuse you again, she would not have gone away.'

In happy ignorance of the unwarrantable deductions that was being drawn from her retreat, Nellie was at that moment seated in the corner of a French railway carriage, enjoying that exhilaration and sense of freedom which we alone among all nations experience when we leave our native land. We are generally very glad to get home again, and we complain with much bitterness of our discomforts during our absence; but who does not know the feeling of exultation with which that strip of tumbling grey sea, on the other side of which are all manner of worries and fetters, is left behind? Besides, some of us like to feel the warm sun on our backs for once in a while.

The small party, which travelled in a leisurely way from Paris to Dijon, and from Dijon to Bâle, and so up to the regions of purer air, which it was considered desirable that Margaret should breathe, grumbled at nothing—not even at the antiquated French railway system, which delights to throw stumbling-blocks in the path of leisurely travellers, nor at the horde of objectionable compatriots who jostled them at every halting-place. Nor did any of them express a wish to return home. The subject of home was, indeed, but little touched upon between them, and the names of those whom they had left there were seldom on their lips. It would not have been easy to speak of one without mentioning others, whose recent proceedings, it was felt, were best not alluded to. Letters reached them from time to time—letters from Longbourne and from Homburg; and one morning there came a newspaper containing an account of the nuptials of Signora Tommasini and an elaborate description of the bride's dress. Over this Margaret shed a few tears; but she was careful to conceal both the tears and the newspaper from her companions. They left her a good deal to herself, having discovered that that was what she liked best; and on sunny mornings, when Hugh was stretching his long legs in rambles over the hills and far away, and when Nellie had started on an excursion with some of the acquaintances who are quite sure to be met with in every hole and corner of Switzerland in the month of August, she would sit for hours in the shade, gazing at white threads of distant waterfalls, at slopes shaggy with the dark pines, at silver mists curling among the rocks and snow-fields above them—and thinking, thinking.

In that silence and peace and solitude her wounds were

gradually healing over—or so she believed. Long before, in London, she had realised the mistakes of her life; but these were no longer so painful to her that she could not bear to face them. It was best to recognise the truth. She supposed that her mother and Philip were rather selfish people. Hugh evidently thought so; and Hugh, who was much better and wiser than she, was always right. But when this was admitted, what more was there to be said, except that she might have spared herself some pain if she had admitted it a little sooner? To one of them, at least, she could not accuse herself of having done any harm; while she had so greatly injured the other by her foolish fondness that she had assuredly no right whatever to complain of him for turning away from her now. And if there was not much comfort in the latter reflection, she persuaded herself that there was—which is very nearly the same thing. Some comfort also she derived from the conviction that her troubles had taught her to appreciate the one faithful friend whose faithfulness and friendship she had always accepted too much as a matter of course, and whose gentle attempts to open her eyes she had so often resented. Poor Hugh! she had never liked hitherto to think of that offer of marriage that he had made her a year before, but now she did not mind looking back upon it. Could it be true, she wondered, that he had loved her, as he said, before Jack had come? Probably it was not quite true; for men always said that sort of thing, and Hugh had evidently put all thought of the subject away from him. She was half sorry that he should be consoled so soon; and yet she could hardly have wished it to be otherwise, for she was very certain that she could never have married him.

Hugh, meanwhile, was biding his time. He understood, to some extent, the gradual awakening process through which Margaret was passing; and, like a sensible man, he took long walks, and allowed Nature to do her own work in her own way. One day he took it into his head that he would like to go up the Finsteraarhorn; and during the night of his absence a terrific thunderstorm broke over the higher peaks, insomuch that Margaret, who could get no sleep for thinking of the perils to which the adventurous climber might be exposed, knocked up Nellie at one o'clock in the morning to take her opinion as to the advisability of despatching a search party across the glacier. On the following evening, however, Hugh came limping back, having triumphantly achieved his object, and having met with no worse disaster than a smart blow on the shin from a falling

stone; which little inconvenience was more than compensated for by Margaret's expressions of compassion and concern.

'You must not go up any more mountains,' she said decisively; 'it is too dangerous, and you ought not to risk your life in that foolish way. What would become of me if you were to tumble over a precipice and break your neck?'

'Are you beginning to think of yourself at last?' asked Hugh, with a smile.

'Hush!' she answered; 'you know very well that I have always thought of myself. But you will take care, won't you. I haven't so many friends that I can afford to lose one.'

Hugh promised that he would be caution itself for the future; but after that day Mrs. Stanniforth became restless and anxious to descend to a lower level of habitation. She had had enough of the mountains, she said; they were far more beautiful when seen from a distance. And it was getting too late in the year to linger in such high quarters; and the food was bad; and it was so miserably uncomfortable when it rained—and, in short, she would give her companions no peace until they had consented to go down into the heat and civilisation of Geneva.

But Geneva evidently would not do for more than a day or two, and it was soon agreed that a move should be made to Ouchy. This resolution was arrived at on the quay, whither our three friends had strolled out one evening after dinner; and while Hugh was pointing to the place where Mont Blanc ought to have been visible, a cheery and familiar voice called out behind them, 'So here you are! What a happy chance that I should have thought of taking a walk this evening! I meant to have started for the Aeggischhorn, the first thing in the morning, after you.'

'Tom!' exclaimed Margaret, in accents of extreme surprise. 'What in the world has brought you to Switzerland?'

'The Paris and Lyons Railway and the habits of a lifetime,' answered Mr. Stanniforth; and he might have added, 'the friendly counsels of Edith Winnington.' 'I almost always do go abroad at this time of year, you know,' he said.

This might or might not be true; but Margaret could not help concluding, from a certain hilarious self-consciousness on Tom Stanniforth's part, that there was more in this sudden appearance of his than met the eye.

'I do wonder,' she said to Hugh, later in the evening, when Nellie had gone to bed and Mr. Stanniforth had likewise

retired, after in the most matter-of-course way declaring his intention of accompanying the party to Ouchy—'I do wonder what can have made Tom think of joining us.'

'Ah!' said Hugh, 'what could it have been?'

'You don't mean to say——'

Colonel Kenyon began to laugh. 'Isn't it an extraordinary thing,' said he, 'that I, an innocent old bachelor, should always be the one to enlighten a person of your experience as to the love-making that is going on under your nose? Didn't I tell you about young Brune and Edith long ago? And now you see that there was another little affair in progress to which you were blind.'

'Oh, but,' answered Margaret, anxious to vindicate her character for insight, 'I was not altogether blind! That is, I thought at one time that he admired her a good deal; only——'

'Only you were determined at that time that Miss Brune's affections were to be otherwise engaged—not to speak of his. People have a troublesome way of choosing for themselves, though.'

'I am not sure that Nellie has chosen,' said Margaret.

'Well, we shall see. We may get some amusement out of watching them—you and I.'

CHAPTER XXXVII.

YES AND NO.

THE amusement which Colonel Kenyon had anticipated from watching the progress of Tom's suit was furnished to him in as liberal a measure as he could have wished on the following day, when the whole party took steamer for Ouchy. They all knew so perfectly well what Mr. Stanniforth was there for, they were all so determined to behave as if they didn't know, and were so conscious withal of their total inability to deceive one another, that their conversation throughout the voyage down the lake was of a most polite, formal, and unnatural kind. The two lookers-on were more than once upon the brink of an outburst of untimely laughter.

As for the principals, one of them was a great deal too much in earnest, and the other was a great deal too angry, to laugh. Nellie thought that Mr. Stanniforth had taken a decided liberty in joining them without having even troubled himself to find

out first whether he was wanted or not; but what angered her far more than this free-and-easy conduct was the good-humoured satisfaction of his face, which seemed to say, as plainly as if the words had been spoken, that he was quite confident of obtaining what he came to Switzerland to seek. She was also much displeased with Mrs. Stanniforth and Colonel Kenyon, who, after the first hour, kept on making the most desperate efforts to leave her alone with her persecutor. These efforts she was determined to defeat, and indeed did defeat; though at the cost of some personal loss of dignity, and of a considerable increase in the general absurdity of the situation. Nothing, she resolved, should induce her to quit Mrs. Stanniforth's side for a moment. If Margaret expressed a wish to go forward and enjoy the view which was partly hidden from the first-class passengers by an awning, Nellie at once became fired by a similar ambition; in the same manner she shifted about a dozen times from the sunshine to the shade and back again; and when at last Margaret, in despair, said that she was tired, and would go and lie down in the cabin for a little, Nellie immediately discovered that she also was tired, and would like to lie down. The other passengers must have thought that these four people were playing a game of follow-my-leader when they saw the elder lady perpetually starting up and walking quickly away, followed in hot haste by the younger, who, in her turn, was pursued by the two men.

But such tactics were, at best, but a sorry makeshift, and evidently could not be persevered in for long. They were so far successful that Mr. Stanniforth did not get a single opportunity for private conversation with Miss Brune on board the steamer; but once on shore it was easier for him to achieve his purpose, aided as he was by two unsolicited confederates, and before the day was over Nellie had walked unsuspectingly into a trap which was laid for her without any collusion on the part of her ensnarers. Margaret went into her own room to rest immediately on arriving at the hotel, and Miss Brune thought there could be no danger in assenting to Colonel Kenyon's proposition that they should stroll up and have a look at Lausanne before dinner. It was, of course, inevitable that Mr. Stanniforth should accompany them; but that she did not mind, so long as there was a third person present. What she had omitted to take into account was the malevolence of Colonel Kenyon, who, as soon as they had reached the top of the hill, said suddenly:

'By the bye, I have to go to the bankers', and I am afraid they may keep me some time. You had better not wait for me; I'll follow you down, when I've finished my business.'

'Oh, but we would much rather wait!' objected Nellie; 'it can't take more than five minutes to change a few circular notes. Or, perhaps,' she added, 'if Mr. Stanniforth is in a hurry, he would walk on, and *I* might wait.'

'I'll do anything I'm told, except walk back alone,' said Mr. Stanniforth, accommodatingly.

'Oh, you must really both of you go! Couldn't think of keeping you,' cried the perfidious Hugh, hurrying away to avoid further argument.

Thus brought to bay, Nellie recovered her courage. She reflected that it should be quite within her power to hold Mr. Stanniforth at a distance, and perhaps, after all, he would have the good taste not to seize this very early occasion of saying what she was afraid he meant to say sooner or later. Nevertheless, his first remark disconcerted her a little.

'You must all have been rather surprised at my coming abroad after having taken Longbourne with the express intention of spending the summer there.'

'Did you express an intention of spending the summer there?' she asked. 'But of course you were not bound to do so, unless you liked.'

'Well, no. And, under the circumstances, as you may imagine, I did not like.'

'I suppose it must have been rather dull after Mrs. Winnington and Edith went away.'

'Just so—after Mrs. Winnington and her daughter went away. Do you know, I never was more mistaken about anybody in my life than I was about your future sister-in-law. This time last year I was inclined to set her down as a rather insipid sort of girl, with a pretty face and no brains to speak of; but now I have quite changed my opinion of her, and I think her as clever as she is pretty. She and I struck up a great friendship in London.'

'So I heard,' Nellie could not help saying, in a tone which implied that she had heard of something more than friendship.

'Oh!' answered Tom · 'I know what you mean, and I am not going to make any secret of it to you. I proposed to Miss Winnington, and she refused me; and then it was that we made friends.

'I thought,' said Nellie, with her nose in the air, 'that one was supposed never to talk about things of that kind.'

'One is surely entitled to say that one has been refused. And, besides, I had a reason for mentioning it to you, Miss Brune. I wanted to explain to you how it was that I ever came to make that proposal at all. For, after what I said to you in November last, you must have thought it rather extraordinary in me to do so.'

'I did not know that you had done so,' answered Nellie, who was now posting down the hill at a great pace; 'and if I had, I should not have thought it extraordinary—not in the least extraordinary. And I hate explanations.'

'You will listen to mine, though, I hope. I won't make it long, and I should get through it so much more quickly if I might sit still instead of running. Here is a bench. Won't you sit down for a few minutes, Miss Brune, and let me say what I have to say?'

'As you please,' said Nellie, despairingly. She seated herself at one end of the bench pointed out to her, and laid down her sunshade lengthways beside her, so that only a small space was left at the opposite extremity for Mr. Stanniforth.

Of this he uncomplainingly availed himself, and began:

'I will confess at once that I acted very foolishly, and that, if I had been left to myself, I should have committed a mistake which I should have regretted for the rest of my life. My only excuse is that I had a sort of idea that it would be necessary for me to marry some time or other. My father went on bothering me about it, and I saw that it was a case of giving in then, or next year, or the year after, and I thought Miss Winnington was a very nice, amiable girl, and——'

'Really, Mr. Stanniforth,' interrupted Nellie, half laughing, 'you need not make all these excuses. I have no doubt that you and your father were quite right; but I can't see what concern this is of mine.'

'Well, I wanted just to explain to you how it happened. The woman whom I loved was engaged to be married to another man, and I didn't much care whom I married myself, so long as she was not a termagant. So, as I told you, I proposed to Miss Winnington, who not only refused me, but in the kindest way pointed out to me what a fool I had been to ask her. She got the truth out of me (which was the more easy as she had guessed it all beforehand), and then she told me that your en-

gagement to Marescalchi was at an end; after which she strongly advised me to try again. And so—here I am.'

'You and Edith seem to have thought that what you call "trying again" was a very simple matter,' observed Nellie.

'No, indeed! I did not think that it would be a simple matter to succeed; but of course what I had to do was simple enough. What more *can* I do than come and ask you whether I may hope? I told you last November—and I am sure you don't think that I would tell a lie—that I had never loved any one but you. I have not changed since then.'

'You seem to forget that you have been all but engaged to somebody else since then.'

'No, I don't. And you have been quite engaged to somebody else.'

'Mr. Stanniforth, I never met any one the least like you! You speak as if my case were the same as yours. I said to you that day, that—that——'

'You said "No" that day.'

'Very well?'

'And are you going to say "No" now? If you are, say it quickly, and I will promise never to persecute you again. I know you are too honest to trifle with me.'

After all, it was Hugh who got down the hill first. He had been sitting for a long time in the garden of the hotel when Tom Stanniforth joined him with a radiant countenance, and said he had come to be congratulated.

'It's all right, my dear Kenyon, and I'm the happiest man in Europe. I can hardly believe it's true!'

'Oh!' said Hugh, with a calm smile, 'I could have told you long ago that it was going to be all right.'

Mr. Stanniforth stared. 'The deuce you could!' said he. 'Then you knew more than she did herself; for she assured me that she fully intended to refuse me up to the last moment.'

'Ah, I dare say! Lookers-on, you know—I am condemned to be a looker-on all my days.' And Hugh sighed, and shortly afterwards went into the house, where he found that Margaret had already been informed of the news.

It was perhaps a natural consequence of the society of two blissful lovers that the patient Colonel should have become eager to know his own fate once for all. He did not speak at once; but a certain change came over him which Margaret could not but understand, and, when he did speak, she was not

only prepared for what he was going to say, but was prepared also with her answer

They were sitting in a shady nook of that garden of the Hôtel Beau-Rivage, so well known to the British tourist. Tourists were away now, the afternoon being a cloudless one, and these two had the garden to themselves. Tom and Nellie had gone out on the lake: their boat could be seen from between the trees, a black, motionless speck upon an expanse of calm blue water.

'Dear old Hugh,' said Margaret, 'my dear old friend, it can't be. I love you more than I do anybody in the world—more than Philip, or anybody; and I have thought a great deal about it, and tried to persuade myself that it might be possible; and then—I found that it was *not* possible. I can't at all tell you how sorry I am, and there is not much use either in saying that one is sorry. I wish with all my heart that I could avoid giving you pain; but I can't help it, can I? It isn't my fault that—that I can't forget.

'I don't ask you to forget,' cried Hugh, eagerly. 'I don't expect it; I don't wish it. You can't love me as I love you, or as you loved poor Jack: that, I know, is impossible. I don't say that I didn't hope it might be otherwise years ago; but as one grows older one looks at life in a very different way. Marriage isn't all romance, Margaret, and we know that boy and girl love can't last for ever. Think of all the happy middle-aged and old couples you know, and ask yourself whether it is possible that they can be "in love" with one another. If I didn't feel certain that I could make you happy, do you suppose that I should wish you to marry me? You see, Margaret, I have watched you so long, and I have thought about you for so many years, that now, I believe, I know you better in some ways than you know yourself. You are not fit to live alone. Some women can do it; but you are not one of them. You need some one to look after you, and you need, just as much, some one to look after. I want to save you from the dreadful loneliness of your life. Try to think of it in that way.'

'Ah!' she said; 'I have thought of it in that way. You need not speak to me of the loneliness of my life; for you cannot realise it more clearly than I do. It frightens me to think of the future. Hitherto I have always had some one to think about; but that is all over now, and naturally, as time goes on, I shall be more and more alone. And I know, too, that I am not fit to live alone. Ever since I have been my own mistress

I have been doing nothing but weak and foolish things, and I suppose it will always be the same. I am unstable as water—except, perhaps, in one thing,' she added, recollecting herself: 'I have always been true to Jack; and I could not be false now, if I would. Oh! I know all that there is to be said about second marriages. I have said it all to myself scores of times; but I can't bring myself to think about them in the way that people generally do. I must believe everything or nothing; and if I am to believe that we don't lose our identity when we die, and that we shall rise again at the last day with our bodies, then I must know for certain that it would make Jack sorry and angry to think that I belonged to another man as much as to him. You are laughing at me. It sounds ridiculous, I know, and I would not have said this to any one else; but I would rather tell you the truth, even if it does seem absurd.

'I was not laughing,' said Hugh; and indeed there was little mirth in his smile.

He could not tell her what was passing through his mind. He had known Jack Stanniforth intimately—a jolly, light-hearted fellow, fond of sport, fond of a good dinner, fond of most of the good things of this world, and not at all given to troubling himself with thoughts of another. It was as certain as anything could be that Jack would have turned out a very good husband, as husbands go, but that he would not have been in love with his wife for a twelvemonth, and that his ways would not have been her ways, nor his pleasures her pleasures. Had he lived but for a few years after his marriage, it was probable that his widow would have retained a very different impression of him and his wishes. But Jack had spoilt everything by dying before his honeymoon was well over; and it would be cruel as well as useless to tell Margaret now that her ideal had no existence and had never had any. So Hugh said nothing, but only pulled his moustache and looked broken-hearted.

'Oh, how sorry I am!' exclaimed Margaret; 'it is so stupid to be obliged to be such a marplot! If I could only say "Yes," we might all pair off, like the animals walking out of the ark, or the people at the end of a novel—you and I, and Tom and Nellie, and Walter and Edith—and live happily ever afterwards, and all would be well that ended well. But it won't end well; and I can't help it. I wonder whether you believe that I am sorry, Hugh.'

Hugh nodded rather dolefully. 'We can be friends, all the same,' he said.

'Oh, I hope so! What should I do without your friendship now? You are not angry with me about this, are you, Hugh?'

'No, indeed. Last year,' he added, looking up at her with a smile, 'it was I who had to beg you not to be angry with me; and you said——'

'Oh, don't!—don't remind me of what I said last year; you don't know how ashamed I have been of it since. Oh, Hugh, how horrid and selfish and unjust I have been to you, and how patient you have been with me! I can't think how you have been able to go on caring for me at all. But you will forgive, won't you? and we shall not love each other the less because—because——'

'Because you don't love me enough to marry me?'

'No, not that; but because I am not free to marry you or anybody. And surely there is nothing in this that need part us. You know, you said yourself that we were not like a girl and boy; the love that we have for each other is the love of friends; and we are old and grey-headed now. We can go on as we have always done, can't we, Hugh?'

She was so eager to insist upon this view of the case that Hugh would not disclaim the sober character of the passion attributed to him. 'Neither this nor anything else shall part us, with my consent,' he said, trying to put on a cheerful face; 'and we may certainly be friends, although I am afraid you can hardly call yourself old yet.'

'I am grey, at any rate, and I feel as old as Methuselah. I wonder whether we shall live to be quite old people. Sometimes I think that I shall die very soon.'

'Nonsense! you are getting strong and well as fast as you can. You look a hundred per cent. better than when you left England. What made you say that?'

'I don't know. I don't feel as if I were getting stronger at all, and we are not a long-lived family, you know. But there is nothing particular the matter with me that I am aware of.'

Any allusion to the delicate state of Margaret's health was sure to alarm Hugh immoderately; and perhaps she may have known this, and been not unwilling to take advantage of so good an opportunity for changing the subject. She allowed him to wrap a thick shawl round her, though the afternoon

was hot and airless, and presently yielded to his entreaties that she would go indoors and lie down till dinner-time.

It was just as well for Colonel Kenyon that he should have other things to think of, besides his great disappointment; and indeed Margaret's condition was such as to give some real cause for anxiety. For several days the poor Colonel was fidgety and miserable, and Tom Stanniforth unwittingly planted a dagger in his heart by saying, 'Do you know, Kenyon, I don't like Margaret's looks at all. To me she has all the appearance of a woman going into a decline.' It is true that Tom immediately ate his words, when he was asked savagely what he meant by that; but he could not do away with the sinister impression produced by them, and from that day forth Hugh's peace of mind was a thing of the past.

August passed into September with a rapidity quite unprecedented in the recollection of Mr. Stanniforth and Miss Brune, and before they knew where they were, September also was on the wane, and the formation of some sort of plan for the future became a matter the consideration of which could no longer be deferred. Tom's suggestion that Edith's wedding-day, which was fixed for the middle of the succeeding month, might appropriately be made the occasion of another similar ceremony, was scouted as out of all reason; and he withdrew it, with suitable apologies, when its absurdity was made manifest to him. He pulled a rather long face, however, on hearing Nellie's alternative proposition, which dealt in vague terms with a possible date in the next spring or summer, by which time, it might be hoped, Mrs. Stanniforth would be back in England. Nellie was determined, she said, that Mrs. Stanniforth should be at her wedding, and she could decide upon nothing until she knew what Mrs. Stanniforth's movements were likely to be.

The course of Mrs. Stanniforth's movements was settled for her only too speedily; for, lingering out of doors one evening when the dew was falling, she caught cold; and this brought on a return of her cough, a week in bed, a visit from two doctors, and a peremptory command from Hugh to hold herself in readiness for an immediate departure for the Riviera. She objected feebly that there was no one to go with her; but Hugh had already disposed of that difficulty.

'*I* am going with you,' he said, 'and I have telegraphed to your mother to come out at once.'

'My dear Hugh, how can you be so ridiculous? Have you forgotten that Edith is to be married in a few weeks?'

'They must put off the wedding,' answered Hugh, who, it must be owned, was rather too prone to consider that everybody's convenience ought to give way to Margaret's.

He was brought to his bearings by the receipt of a telegram so terse and characteristic that he could almost hear Mrs. Winnington's voice in his ears as he read it. 'Can't come. Most unreasonable. What are you thinking of? Get that girl to go. Will join you later.'

In despair, Hugh carried the message to 'that girl,' and made so piteous an appeal to her friendship that she could only express her willingness to do all that might be required of her, even to the extent of absenting herself from her brother's wedding. Upon this, the wires were once more put into requisition, and, Mr. Brune's consent having been granted, Colonel Kenyon was able to give marching orders to the small party under his command, of which it need hardly be said Tom Stanniforth had decided to form one.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AT BORDIGHERA.

THE sunny, sheltered strip of coast where Doctor Antonio lived and loved, and where so many English people go every year to die, is hardly what it used to be. Few things are what they used to be. As for the Riviera, it is beautiful still, since the colour cannot be taken out of the sea and sky, nor the hills carted away; but whatever can be accomplished by man, in the shape of hideous railway embankments and monster hotels, towards lessening its beauty has been conscientiously and thoroughly done. The hotels are full too, and the railway brings many travellers—which circumstances are looked upon in the light of additional attractions by some people. Attractiveness is, after all, a term dependent entirely upon the beholder, not upon the thing beheld; and to Nellie Brune, for one, this rather dusty, overcrowded, and conventionalised region appeared a paradise.

Hugh secured a villa for Margaret on the outskirts of Bordighera (a spot which it may be hoped that the spirit of Doctor Antonio is debarred from revisiting), and there three of the party ensconced themselves for the winter, Mr. Stanniforth taking up his quarters in an hotel hard by. In the month

of November Mrs. Winnington redeemed her promise, and appeared upon the scene, full of sympathy and maternal solicitude: but Mrs. Winnington did not like Bordighera and did not like the villa; and some of the inmates of the villa, as we know, did not like her. Nor, if the truth must be told, was her behaviour towards them of a nature to encourage forgiveness or forgetfulness of bygone passages of arms. Edith, to be sure, was married and settled, and the once-coveted Stanniforth might well be allowed to go his own way with the contempt and pity which he merited. Still it could not but be painful to a right-thinking person to witness the triumph of that Brune girl, whose wealth, alas! must soon be ten times as great as Edith's, and whose affectation of being desperately enamoured of a man old enough to be her father was really in the worst possible taste. Mrs. Winnington, in short, snapped and snarled a good deal, and everybody breathed more freely when an event occurred which, in her opinion, called for her prompt return to England.

It was Hugh who, while reading his newspaper one morning, came upon a paragraph headed *Death of the Earl of Travers*, and he at once communicated the sad intelligence to Mrs. Winnington, who, in well-chosen language, expressed all the grief which neither she nor any one else felt. 'Poor dear George!' she cried, taking the paper from Hugh's hands, and perusing the brief announcement with appropriate comments. 'Ah, yes, just as I expected!—"a severe attack of gout, complicated by other complaints of long standing"—yes, indeed, poor fellow, such a constant sufferer for so many years! . . . "cannot be surprised that an iron constitution should have at last succumbed"—no; one can't be surprised, and poor George's constitution was certainly something marvellous . . . "sufferings borne with admirable cheerfulness and resignation"—h'm! yes. "The deceased nobleman was in his usual health up to yesterday afternoon"—dear, dear! how terribly sudden! No doubt poor dear Kate was too overwhelmed to write. "If his death cannot be said to leave a blank in political circles, the loss of so genial" ——I hardly think this newspaper man can have known dear George; very proper though. . . . "long and keenly felt in society." Yes; well, I don't know that any more could have been said. I really think I ought to go to poor Kate. It is dreadful to think of her being quite alone; and I am sure she would wish me to come, though she might not quite like to ask it, which would account for her not having written, you know. It is difficult to see one's duty. Now, Hugh, tell me candidly:

do you think dear Margaret would be hurt if I were to leave her?'

'I am quite sure she wouldn't,' responded Hugh, heartily.

'Well, I don't know that you need be so very positive about it. Of course nothing but a feeling that it was an imperative duty to be with Kate would induce me to go; and perhaps, after all, I am more wanted here.'

'Oh, I think you ought to go,' said Hugh, who knew perfectly well that Mrs. Winnington meant to go. 'Think of poor Lady Travers all by herself. There are three of us here, you see, to take care of Margaret.'

'Yes, that is very true; and you could telegraph for me at any moment, if it were necessary. But dear Margaret is so much better now that I hope she will soon be quite herself again.'

'Quite herself again,' Hugh echoed.

So Mrs. Winnington went; and it is to be hoped that Lady Travers was as eager to welcome her as some other people were to speed her on her way. Her last words to Hugh, who saw her into the railway carriage, were to the effect that, since dear Margaret was so much better, she thought she would not come back unless she was sent for.

That Margaret was much better was an article of faith with the three friends who watched her day by day. They declared this, indeed, so often and in such decided terms as to suggest a suspicion that they were trying to convince themselves and one another of the truth of their assertion. They did not convince Margaret, who knew that she would never be better; but she was resolved not to say so yet. The time would come, she thought, when, for a reason of her own, she would be obliged to tell the truth to Hugh; but that time might be many months distant, and for the present it was far better to wear a smiling face, to laugh at Hugh's old-womanish precautions, and to encourage the others with hopes which could never be fulfilled.

A very little encouragement of that kind will generally be found to suffice. Death, from the contemplation of which humanity has always shrunk, has become a somewhat specially repugnant subject to a generation penetrated with more or less conscious agnosticism; and, besides, no sensible person wishes to meet trouble half way. Tom and Nellie were easily persuaded to look on the brightest side of things, and even Hugh, who was more observant and less sanguine, would not admit to himself that anything worse than a rather prolonged period of anxiety was in store for him. So they went on saying she was

better until it was impossible to say that any longer, and then they said she was no worse, and then that she would be better when the spring came.

It was after Hugh had made use of the latter formula, one rainy day in January, that Margaret at length spoke to him openly: 'I don't think I shall be here when the spring comes,' she said, 'and I know you don't think so either, Hugh. Please don't contradict me: we must make up our minds to it, and it is no such great misfortune, after all. There is no need to say anything to the others; but I must say this to you, because there is something that I want you to do for me. I wonder whether you will mind?'

'Mind! As if you did not know that I would do anything for you! But, Margaret, I don't think you are any worse than you were a week ago—I don't really. The weather is bad now, and you are feeling down. When the sun comes out again, you will see! We shall be laughing at these dismal notions when the spring comes.'

Poor Hugh's brave words were sadly belied by his face, which was not one trained to dissimulation. The tears do not come very easily at five-and-forty; but there were tears in Hugh's eyes now, and Margaret saw them.

'I can't—I can't give up hope,' he gasped out, half involuntarily.

'Very well,' she answered, smiling; 'we won't give up hope, then; but there is no harm in being prepared. And now for my request. I want you to write to Philip—here is his address—and ask him to come and say goodbye to me. I think, if you write, he will come; and, Hugh, if you have anything to forgive him, you will forgive—won't you—for my sake?'

Hugh nodded.

'I must tell you,' Margaret went on, 'that I did write to him some time ago, but——'

'Is it possible that he didn't answer you?' cried Hugh, firing up.

'He answered the second time. Don't be angry, please, Hugh; I quite understand how he feels. He said it would be painful for us to meet again, and that it was much better that we should break off everything than see each other now and then, and be reminded of how completely our lives are separated. I don't agree with him, but I think it is very natural

that he should have taken up that idea. He wishes to spare me pain, I fancy.'

Hugh fancied that he knew Marescalchi a little better than that. To him it was as clear as daylight that, since Philip could no longer get anything out of his benefactress, he no longer cared to be troubled with her. But this, of course, he did not say. He merely observed, 'You are not asking him to see you "now and then" though: you are only asking him to come once. He could scarcely refuse to do that, I suppose.'

'He will not believe that I am so ill. He says I have allowed myself to get depressed—just as you say, you know—and that I shall be all right again soon. I am afraid he might not be convinced even if I wrote a third time; but if you told him that I was—dying, I don't think he could doubt any more. And, Hugh, we must not put it off too long.'

The task laid upon Colonel Kenyon was one which did not come very easily to that honest man; but he discharged himself of it to the best of his ability, trying to infuse a friendly tone into his letter, and to avoid all allusions which might seem to savour of reproach. He could not bring himself to say that Margaret was dying, but he did say that she believed herself to be dying—'and, whether this be so or no,' he added, 'there can be no question that you must comply with her wish, and come to her. Let me have a line by return of post to say when we may expect you; unless you decide to telegraph, and start at once, which would be better, I think.'

Philip did not adopt the latter course; but the return post brought a somewhat lengthy reply from him. He said that Colonel Kenyon's letter had grieved him more than any words of his could express. Although, for everybody's sake, he had thought it best to break off all direct communication with Mrs. Stanniforth, he was sure that neither she nor Colonel Kenyon would suppose that he could ever forget her kindness to him, or that she was not constantly in his thoughts. He had quite hoped that the warm South would restore her to health again —'indeed, I hope this still, and so, as I am glad to see by your letter, do you. She has always fancied that she would not live long, and my own impression is that she is out of health and spirits, and has allowed this idea to get too much of a hold upon her. Now, as to my going out to Bordighera. Of course, since she wishes it, I will try and manage to do so. It will be a trial to me, as you will easily understand, when you remember of whom your party consists; but that, as our dear

Mrs. Winnington used to say, "is not the question." I have, however, a difficulty about leaving London at the present moment.' And then followed a long and rather incoherent statement, the upshot of which appeared to be that Mr. Marescalchi had pledged himself to sing at more than one impending concert, and that he did not quite see how he was to break his engagements.

Hugh ground his teeth in impotent rage when he reached the end of this disingenuous composition. He had been sitting in Margaret's room when the letter had been brought to him, and she guessed its purport at once from his face.

'He is not coming!' she exclaimed; 'I know he is not coming!'

'Yes, yes; he will come. Oh, yes; he will come,' answered Hugh, soothingly. He glanced at the fire, wondering whether he could venture to toss the letter into the flames before she asked to see it; but she was too quick for him.

'Give it to me!' she exclaimed excitedly; and he dared not refuse, lest he should increase her agitation.

A week had wrought a great change in Margaret. The little strength which she had had seemed suddenly to have deserted her, so that she could no longer even rise from her sofa without help, and she had become peevish and irritable for the first time in the course of her illness.

'He won't believe!' she cried, despairingly throwing down Philip's letter. 'Oh, how dreadful it is! How could you be so cruel as to tell him there was hope, when you knew there was none?' And she covered her face with her hands, and burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing.

Hugh dropped on his knees beside her, and began quieting her with loving words; but she would not listen to him.

'What shall I do—oh, what shall I do?' she moaned. 'It is too late now. I shall never see my boy again, and it is all your fault.'

'Oh, hush, Margaret!' cried Hugh; 'you don't think that.'

'I do think it. You are cruel to me. You did not want him to come, because you knew I loved him best.'

Poor Hugh got up without a word, walked to the writing-table, and scribbled off a telegram, which he presently brought to her to read. 'See,' said he; 'I am going to send this at once, and he will be with you in a day or two.'

Margaret glanced at the paper indifferently. 'It is no use,'

she said; 'he won't come. Please go away now, and I shall be better when you come back again.'

Hugh went away and despatched his telegram; but it produced no result. Margaret was right. Philip never came. After a few days another letter arrived from him, in which he said plainly, that, upon further consideration, he had decided not to comply with Margaret's wish. He was sure she would agree with him that, under all the circumstances, he was better away. And then he repeated a good deal of what he had said before, and wound up by declaring that while there was life, he, for his part, would never abandon hope.

It was in Margaret's presence, as before, that Hugh's daily batch of letters was delivered to him, and, as before, she asked to be shown the one which she knew was among them. Hugh handed it to her silently and not without trepidation; but he had no reason to fear any recurrence of her former outbreak, which indeed had been due as much to physical as to mental causes. She was calmer now, as well as more reduced in strength; and it was without any bitterness of intention that she said presently:

'After all, I think Philip is right; he is better away.'

Hugh looked at her with inquiring eyes; and she went on, a little wistfully: 'I should like to have seen him once more; but perhaps he knows best;—certainly it would have been uncomfortable for both him and for Nellie, if he had come. And it is always sad to say good-bye. Hugh, I am afraid I spoke very unkindly to you the other day.'

'You didn't mean it, my dear. I quite understood. Don't trouble to think about that,' answered Hugh, who, however, had been far more deeply wounded than he chose to show.

'No, I didn't mean it. Poor old Hugh! It was very hard upon you that you should have been worried for so many years with the vagaries of a woman; for you don't know how to treat women at all; you take them much too seriously. It is nearly over now, though. I wonder whether we shall ever meet again!'

'If I were not as certain of that as I am of my own existence, I would go and drown myself to-morrow!' cried Hugh, endeavouring, as many honest people do, to replace faith by vehemence of assertion.

'Ah, no! I have been a burden to you; and after a time you won't wish to have your burden back again. It has been a great blunder.'

'What has been a blunder?' Hugh asked.

'My life, I mean. And yet, if it were all to do over again, I should be just as weak, just as blind, and just as obstinate.'

'In all your life,' said Hugh, 'you have done nothing to be ashamed of; and surely there can be very few people who can say that.'

'But of course I can't say that. Even if I had nothing else to be ashamed of it would be bad enough to have murmured and grumbled as I have done. My life has not been an unhappy one really. I had a few months of perfect, absolute happiness, and I have been very happy during the last twelve years too; only I have always had a silly kind of feeling that I ought not to acknowledge it. All my misfortunes have come upon me through my own fault; and in a sort of way I foresaw them. Everybody knows the result of being too indulgent. It is no new thing that has happened to me.'

'All that you have thought of has been how to please those whom you loved,' said Hugh; 'and they have made use of you, and turned their backs upon you when they could make use of you no longer. That is no new thing, I suppose.'

He knew that it grieved her to hear the absent spoken of in that tone; he knew that she reproached no one, except herself, and that among the results of over-indulgence she had not meant to include ingratitude; but the pain and bitterness in his own heart were so great that he could not altogether conceal them.

He left her by-and-by, and went sadly downstairs into the brilliant sunshine outside; and, as he wandered among the orange-groves, he thought over his own life, which also seemed to have been something of a blunder. He had devoted the best years of it to contemplation and pursuit of a vision; for the sake of this he had separated himself a good deal from other men; he had neglected to lay up resources for himself; he had become solitary; and now on the downhill path, which might be a very long one, he was to be more solitary still. And meantime Margaret, too, had had her vision. That wholly unreal Jack Stanniforth whom she worshipped had stood between him and her from first to last, and, at the end of all, he had not even the poor satisfaction of thinking that she at all realised what his love for her had been and was. Neither he nor she had seen the truth, or desired to see it; and so, in

spite of all their friendship, they had remained at cross-purposes throughout. Perhaps there was nothing new in that either.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LAST WORDS.

Longbourne is once more possessed and inhabited by a Brune. Tom Stanniforth, on succeeding to the property, would gladly have made a free gift of it to his brother-in-law; but to this the latter would in no wise agree, and eventually a compromise was arrived at, Tom consenting to accept as purchase-money the balance of the sum paid by his father, after deducting that obtained from the Crayminster and Craybridge Railway, which he said he had at length become convinced was fairly due to the original owner of the soil. Mr. Brune shook his head over this arrangement, which he considered a very one-sided bargain; but Mrs. Tom Stanniforth is extremely angry if any one hints that her husband displayed generosity in the matter or deserves any credit, beyond that small amount which may be claimed by one who repairs, somewhat tardily, an act of flagrant injustice. She boasts, not without reason, that she has held but one and the same opinion upon the subject all her life; 'and,' says she, 'the proof that I was right is that Tom, who has the greatest contempt for my judgment in everything, has admitted it.'

It may be that Mr. Stanniforth has a contempt for his wife's judgment; but it is certain that he never commits himself to any enterprise nowadays without consulting her; and there are people who say that the member for Blackport has sadly deteriorated since his marriage. As, however, these people belong to the class which thrives upon the credulity of the benevolent, their verdict need not be taken as conclusive. Mr. Stanniforth is not less benevolent than of yore; but he is a little less keen about legislating for the benefit of aggrieved sections of the community; and he is so very rich, so hard-working, and has so large a store of varied information and experience, that Nellie, who is ambitious, thinks his benevolence ought to be devoted to the service of his countrymen at large, and is determined that he shall be a Cabinet minister before he dies. In the meantime, he is very well satisfied with his lot as an independent member, and is in no great hurry to exchange it for the shackles of office.

Mrs. Winnington is still on the look-out for a house. Until she discovers one—and everybody knows the difficulty of finding a thoroughly suitable home, and how foolish it is to decide hastily in a matter of so much importance—she is compelled to yield reluctantly to the solicitations of her daughters, and to divide her time between Edith and Lady Travers. Longbourne, she says, is full of painful associations for her; but a sense of duty—which, after all, is your only true support in the midst of the trials and difficulties of life—enables her so far to overcome her feelings as to spend something very like six months out of the year there.

Prosser remains among the fixtures at Longbourne, and rules Edith as she ruled her predecessor. She is not ill-disposed towards her new mistress; though she is often heard to say, with a sigh, that 'things is not what they was in poor dear Mrs. Stanniforth's time.'

One day, not long ago, a travelling carriage, arriving from the direction of Genoa, drew up at the door of the principal hotel at Bordighera, and out of it stepped a stout, cheerful-looking lady and a remarkably handsome young man, who, while their luggage was being carried in, took occasion to inquire where the cemetery was situated. Presently they were seen to start on their way thither—the stout lady talking volubly, while the young man sauntered along beside her smoking a cigarette, and not, apparently, paying much attention to her remarks.

'Poor thing!' the lady was saying; 'I should like to have known her.'

'You wouldn't have cared about her. She was not in your style at all. She was a quiet woman, who never spoke much, and who didn't get on easily with strangers.'

'I should have liked her all the same,' persisted Signora Tommasini (for by that name she is still known to the public, and her friends can never remember to call her anything else). 'I should have liked her because she was so fond of you and so kind to you. I wish you had gone to see her before she died.'

'So do I now. At least, I think I do. I remember that, at the time, my feeling was that I would rather die myself than go.'

'I wish you had thought of coming here sooner,' continued the Signora.

'Why didn't you tell me to come, then? You know I invariably do as I am told.'

'Except when you are inclined to do something else. I shall always think that, if you would have persevered, I should have made a great singer out of you some day.'

'I am afraid even you would never have done that. But perhaps, upon the whole, it is quite as amusing and less troublesome to be a little singer. And, after all, what's the odds, so long as you're happy?'

The Signora burst into one of her jolly laughs, and said, 'What, indeed?'

Then they both became silent and serious; for they had reached the cemetery. They soon found the white marble monument of which they were in search, and stood for some minutes looking at it. The flat stone was almost hidden by masses of cut flowers, which had evidently been placed there recently; and, as they went away, Philip had the curiosity to ask the old gravedigger at the gate who it was that had paid this graceful tribute to the memory of the English lady.

'Eh!' said he, with a jerk of his shoulders; 'who should it be? There is only one to do it.'

'And who is that?' Philip asked.

Upon which the old man replied vaguely that it was '*Quel signore che viene sempre.*' 'Do you not know him?' he went on. 'He comes here once, and sometimes twice, every winter—a tall gentleman with a long nose, who walks like this.' And the old fellow thrust his head forward, stuck his hands in his pockets, and took two or three exaggeratedly long strides.

'By Jove! it's old General Kenyon,' said Philip. 'What born actors these people are! I say—I don't think it's much good our stopping here till to-morrow. Suppose we take the train on to Monaco?'

So Signor and Signora Marescalchi slept at Monte Carlo that night, and the former enjoyed an exciting evening at *trente et quarante*; for his wife allows him to lose a certain sum at the public tables, it having been agreed between them that he shall forswear all forms of private gambling.

'Everybody has his little vices,' says the Signora, good-humouredly; 'but I believe my husband has fewer than most men.'

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