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A LOST WIFE.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON.

AUTHOR OF

"IN A GRASS COUNTRY,"
"A DEVOUT LOVER," "DECEIVERS EVER,"
"THIS WICKED WORLD," ETC., ETC.

"For 'tis a truth well-known to most,
That whatsoever thing is lost,
We seek it, ere it come to light,
In every cranny but the right."

—COWPER.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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A LOST WIFE.



CHAPTER I.

A MATCHMAKER.

“Get place and wealth, if possible with grace,
If not, by any means get wealth and place.”
—Pope.

I, FREDERICA CLIFFORD, twenty years of age, height five foot four, slim-waisted, fresh-complexioned, with grey eyes, a *retroussé* nose, and red brown hair tucked up into a loose shining knot at the top of my head, was standing with my back to the room, and my face to the window panes, whereon my impatient fingers were performing what is enigmatically termed a “devil’s tattoo.”

Mrs. Thistleby and I had been shut up together indoors the whole afternoon. Women, albeit the dearest of friends, cannot stand too much of each other’s uninterrupted society. Probably our tempers—Bella’s and mine—were none the better for the enforced *tête-à-tête* which had lasted from luncheon time till nearly six o’clock. My friend was playing one of Strauss’ waltzes. Her touch was what used to be called when we were at school together

"bangy." She was banging away ferociously now. I shrewdly suspected that she would very gladly be pummelling my head instead of the keys of her own cottage Broadwood; I therefore prudently kept my back turned to her and continued to stare out of the window.

The prospect was not inviting. The little green-shuttered lodging houses of the town blinked miserably at me through the driving rain; the bathing machines were all drawn high up in a row close under the sea-wall; the cliffs loomed an indistinct grey mass through the fog; the very sea was all but blotted out.

One or two umbrellas went jogging along the esplanade, but none of them came up so far as our house, which stood quite at the end of the little watering-place, isolated from the town.

The square plot of garden which divided the house from the beach, generally a smiling parterre of flowers, is to-day a scene of desolation: the gravel paths are rivers of water; the petunias and calceolarias are hanging their draggled heads in the mud; the scarlet geraniums in the stone vases on the terrace are almost washed away; whilst down upon the statue of the goddess Flora, in the centre, a stream of water trickles continuously, splashing monotonously in big drops off the end of her dirty stone nose.

Decidedly, of all dismal places in wet weather, Mrs. Thistleby's "marine residence" at Seacliff is the very dimmallest.

Suddenly, Strauss' waltz came to an end with a

crash, and my friend jumped up from the piano with an impetus which sent the music-stool flying half across the room.

"Freda!" she cried excitedly, "you don't mean to tell me that you care twopence for that old Curtis!"

"My dear Bella," I answered, turning round upon her with mild amazement, "what can you possibly mean?"

"Mean? Why that it's a sin and a shame for a girl like you to be thrown away on an old man, old enough to be your grandfather; why, with your beauty, you might marry any one, Freda—any one!"

"My beauty, as you are pleased to call it, ought, no doubt, to command a very high price in the matrimonial market," I replied, with a laugh, "supposing only that there were a market to convey it to. You forget, Bella, how very limited are the capabilities of Slopperton. Allow me to bring the stern facts to your notice. On the one hand there are the affections of Mr. Gibson, the curate, the half of his worldly goods amounting to about £75 per annum; also a lodging with the above-named divine, in a three-roomed cottage on the village green, commanding a view of a duck-pond in the foreground, and a fine airy distant prospect of clothes lines behind it, whereon the family wash of the village flutters gracefully in the breeze. These delights are tempting, no doubt; but then, on the other hand, there is my father's oldest friend, for whom I have a very true regard, to say nothing of Eddington Hall,

one of the finest old places in the county; and no end of money! Would any girl in her senses hesitate between the two, Bella?"

"I wouldn't have believed it of you, Freda. You are marrying the man for his money!"

"I am," was my tranquil rejoinder; which answer lashed Mrs. Thistleby into positive fury.

She started up and stalked up and down the room like a tragedy-queen, with her nose well in the air. Suddenly she turned round upon me and burst out impetuously:

"You are enough to provoke a saint, child! Any one would think you the most mercenary, shallow-hearted, worldly-minded, calculating, hateful ——"

"Bella—Bella!" I cried, laughingly stopping my ears.

"Yes, I mean it! and you are such a little fool, too! Are there but those two men in the world, child, that you must needs be in such a hurry to throw yourself away? You are not afraid of being an old maid, are you, at twenty? You are not going to spend all your life at Slopperton, I suppose? Why, in the name of all that is sensible, can't you wait?"

"That is just exactly what I cannot do," I answered, sobered a little out of my teasing mood by her angry impetuosity. "I cannot wait. Papa is an old man, and all the comfort and happiness of his life depends upon my marriage. He has been worried by money troubles all his life, and poverty comes hard upon the old. He looks to me to bring

him a little peace and comfort in the last years of his life. You are quite right, Bella, when you say that I am going to marry Mr. Curtis for his money—chiefly, that is to say—but you know very well for whose sake I am doing it.”

After which fine, filial speech I relapsed again into the congenial occupation of strumming upon the window-pane.

Bella apparently was seized with compunctions of conscience. She came up behind me, and cooed over me in a pretty, penitential manner, stroking my arm, and calling me her “dear little pet,” as if I were a small child instead of being a good head and shoulders taller than she is.

Then she said, with a big sigh, which made me laugh, so little did the occasion seem to require it:

“You are very good and self-sacrificing, darling, of course; but it’s all very fine for you to talk. If you were to fall in love with anybody else you would not marry Mr. Curtis; no, not for a dozen old fathers!”

“But, my dear girl, I am not in love with any one else, and seriously, Bella, I never saw the man yet I liked better than George Curtis. Surely, if I prefer him to any other man I have ever seen—surely that is enough.”

“Wait till you have seen Mark.”

“Aha! so that is what all this rhodomontade means, Mrs. Matchmaker!” I exclaimed, with an amused recollection of many of my friend’s well-known little schemes of like character for my benefit.

"And so you have asked this fascinating brother-in-law down here, all for me?"

"You will fall madly in love with him," she answered, with a solemnity which made me laugh long and loud.

"My dear, do recollect that my visit to you comes to an end the day after to-morrow. One clear day of Captain Thistleby's delightful society is hardly likely to be enough to reduce me to the desperate step of eloping with him."

"You are the very wife for him," persisted Bella, gravely.

"But he is not the husband for me. Besides, if he were, I am engaged to somebody else, and that surely ought to settle the question at once."

Then this wicked little woman suddenly changed her tone of voice.

"Freda, darling," she said, beginning to pet and coax me as if I were a small baby, "you will make yourself look nice for dinner, won't you? You will put on that pretty blue gauze dress that is so becoming to you, won't you, my pet?"

"What! all because this young man is coming? Certainly not! My old black silk that I have worn since the days of the Flood—that is what he will be treated to. Nothing more, nothing less!" And I brought down my closed fist on the little table in front of me with a strength and determination intended to intimate to Bella that wild horses and thumb-screws would be powerless to make me budge one single inch from this ultimatum.

Mrs. Thistleby heaved a resigned sigh.

"He will be here in another half-hour," she said, glancing at the clock.

"In that case I shall beat a graceful retreat to my own chamber."

Upon which Bella pursued me half-way up the stairs with renewed entreaties at least to put on some blue ribbons and make myself look a little bit nice! But I shook my head with obdurate hard-heartedness, and laughingly bolted myself into my bedroom to escape from her.

We were just like a couple of children together in those days, Bella and I; for although she was six years older than I was, her little *mignonne* figure and pretty childish manner always seemed to bring us to an equality in the matter of age.

Years ago we had been at school together, although, from the difference in age between us, we could hardly have been called friends at that time.

Almost as soon as she left school Isabella Morris married Mr. James Thistleby, and I lost sight of her for several years.

It was purely a love match, I believe, and they were very happy together, until one sad week, whilst they were travelling in Italy, when Mr. Thistleby caught a sort of low typhoid fever which happened to be very prevalent in Turin, where they were staying, and died after a few days' illness.

It was during the first year of her widowhood that I again met my old schoolfellow. She was at that time in very low spirits and in bad health. I did my best to cheer and comfort her, and after a time she recovered her strength, and with it her natural

cheerfulness and liveliness. She became warmly attached to me. We had now been fast friends for more than three years. Bella was very kind to me. She was a wealthy little widow, with a nice house in town besides the villa at Seacliff; and it was her greatest delight to load her poverty-stricken friend with presents and kindnesses.

Every year I spent as much time as I could spare from my old father with her, either in London or at Seacliff; and sometimes she paid us a visit, which, considering the many discomforts in my home compared with the luxurious plenty in her own, was certainly very good and unselfish of her.

Curiously enough, in all the time that we had been friends, although she talked of him perpetually, I had never seen her husband's youngest brother, Mark Thistleby. He had been a good deal abroad with his regiment, and when at home on leave I had never happened to meet him. But now he was coming down to Seacliff to stay with his sister-in-law, and this very evening I was to behold this paragon at last.

I never like other people's paragons. As a rule they do not answer in the least to one's own expectations, or to their friend's enthusiastic descriptions of them. They are generally perfectly commonplace and uninteresting, and one wonders what there can be to admire in them.

I did not in the least expect to find Bella's wonderful brother-in-law an exception to my usual experience in this matter; and yet as I proceeded with my toilette, arraying myself in the ancient black

silk I had so maliciously settled to wear, I was conscious of a certain amount of curiosity, and I fell to speculating vaguely as to what Captain Thistleby would be like.

I foresaw it perfectly. A cavalry officer! Did I not know the species well—too well?

Do they not all have long moustaches, a swaggering walk, a flippant manner, and very little brains? Do they not all set to work to make love—more or less sham love—to every decent-looking girl they meet? and then do they not go away imagining they have made a conquest of her, and that she is languishing for them ever after? I could see no reason why this particular man should be different from all others of his kind, for Bella, dear little soul! was just the sort of woman to be taken in by a man of that style, and to fall down and worship him.

Meanwhile I heard all the confusion of an arrival in the house. The door-bell rang, there was a hurrying of feet. Bella came flying out of her room along the passage to the hall. There were sounds of laughing and talking, and sounds of luggage being unladen and brought into the house. Presently I heard them come upstairs. Bella was apparently showing him his room. They passed close outside my door, both talking at once, and then more doors were slammed; silence in the house succeeded to the commotion, and I knew that the stranger was safe in his room dressing for dinner.

By-and-by, having completed my own toilette, I opened my door and peeped out. There was a dead

CHAPTER II.

THE PARAGON.

"I thank you for your company; but, good faith, I had as lief have been myself alone."

—SHAKESPEARE.

"MISS CLIFFORD—CAPTAIN THISTLEBY," says Bella, as I enter, "and here is dinner at the same time."

I bowed stiffly. I was conscious of crisp brown hair, a tall figure, and the flash of a wonderful pair of hazel eyes that met mine for an instant, also of a comical uplifting of Mrs. Bella's eye-brows as she surveyed my striking and somewhat grotesque costume.

"Now, how shall we manage?" debated our hostess. "Two ladies to one gentleman. I think, Freda, as you are the young lady of the party, that Mark ought to take you."

I drew back coldly.

"Oh, dear, no! as I am engaged to be married, I cannot be looked upon as a 'young lady' any longer." This I uttered with the most chilling coldness.

Captain Thistleby immediately offered his arm to Bella with perfect tranquillity, and I followed in the rear, feeling, it must be confessed, somewhat small.

As soon as we were fairly launched into the middle of soup, that dreadful Bella began her persecutions.

"My darling child, what a lovely lace fichu! Where did you get it, and how is it I have never seen it before? As I live, it's the best bit of Spanish I have ever seen! Mark, you are a connoisseur in lace, do look at Miss Clifford's scarf."

Thus adjured, Captain Thistleby vouchsafed to turn his eyes towards me, and gazed fixedly, not at me, but at my shoulder, during which inspection I became gradually of a fine deep peony colour.

"It's a very good specimen," he said, when he had finished staring at it; and turning round again to Bella, without so much as a glance at my face, by which slight I felt uncomfortably piqued. "It reminds me very much of that bit we bought at Rome, Bella, in that dirty little street behind the Via Babuini. Do you remember how eager you were to give the old woman her hundred and fifty francs, and how I kept interrupting you, and shouting to her seventy-five, not a sou more?"

"Yes; and how you dragged me out of the shop almost in tears at last, because you wouldn't let me be cheated, and how the old hag came running out after us when we were half way down the street, crying '*Prendete lo, signora,*' and flung it at my head wrapped in a dirty bit of old newspaper."

"Ah! but that was nothing to the bargain we got at Verona, in the little grocer's shop, where we had spied a heap of rags of lace in the corner of the window."

"Yes, and you would ask for candles, and coffee, and tobacco, and heaven knows how many other

smelling horrors, for fear they should find out what we really had our eye on. I thought you would never lead up to the subject."

"Didn't I get you the whole lot for five francs, you ungrateful woman?"

"Think, Freda!" turning to me, "five francs! It cost me £3 to have it mended in London, and it is the handsomest lace flounce I possess! Did you go to the old curiosity shop at Lyons, Mark, last time you came through?"

"No; I had not time. Do you remember, Bella, the first time we went there, and how angry poor old Jem was with us for wasting our money on that 'trashy tin plate' as he called my beautiful Limoges enamel."

And so on, and so on, through half a dozen more reminiscences of their foreign travels together.

I began to feel very much out of it. Decidedly I had wasted my Spanish lace and my indignation together upon this utterly impassive man, who simply appeared to ignore my existence.

I yawned and began looking about at the pictures on the walls, with all of which I was perfectly familiar, in a futile attempt to create an independent line of amusement for myself.

I began to think I need not have announced my engaged position with so much precipitation. Captain Thistleby did not seem inclined to pay me even the ordinary civilities of society. Perhaps, I mused, he does not care for tall girls, with reddish hair and grey eyes. Perhaps he prefers *piquante* little blondes, like Bella, with pink cheeks and round blue

aby eyes. Perhaps—and here he looks up and catches me staring at him, which sends my own eyes back to my apricot jelly and the colour hotly up into my tell-tale cheeks.

After dinner it is much the same thing. I go to the piano at Bella's desire, and she further requests her brother-in-law to come and turn my music over.

He excuses himself.

"I am very stupid at that sort of work," he says, without a sign of rising from the comfortable arm-chair in which he has ensconced himself. "I should be sure to make a mess of it. I think Miss Clifford would rather be without me."

I think so too; but as it would not be civil to say so, I merely remark that I never require anybody to turn over the pages of my music.

"What will you sing, Freda?" asks Bella. "What sort of songs do you like, Mark?"

"I don't think songs are much in my line," answers this extremely disagreeable man. "You know I was never sentimental, and I don't understand music. Young ladies' songs—*engaged* young ladies' songs—are all very sweet—roses, Cupids, true-lover's-knots, etc.—are they not, Miss Clifford?"

"Not all," I answered, feeling vicious; and straightway I sat down and began to sing that well-known, quaint old English ditty:

"Once I loved a maiden fair,
But she did deceive me."

I put into it all the vigour of which I was capable.

a gasp of relief, that he was going up with her. Indeed, when I came to think of it, what else should he do?

"I am so distressed, Freda, dear! Your very last day and all! What will you do to amuse yourself?"

"Oh, I shall do very well. I have my sketch of the boat-house to finish; I shall go and do that after breakfast; it's a lovely day, I shall not be at all dull. Don't make yourself unhappy about me, dear."

"Here is the fly—come along!" cried Captain Thistleby.

Bella hugged me as if she were going to South America, jumped into the fly, followed by her brother-in-law, and they drove off.

Left to my own devices, I leisurely finished my breakfast, and then, taking my shady straw hat and my drawing materials, I sauntered down through the garden on to the beach.

There was a flight of stone steps from the terrace leading to the shore, and in the triangular bit of shadow which they cast upon the beach, I installed myself with my back against the garden wall.

An old boat-house lower down formed the principal object of my sketch; behind were red cliffs and long lines of white sands and dark rocks stretching out to the blue sea beyond. The picture, if somewhat tame, was nevertheless a well-arranged bit of English coast scenery, and afforded full scope for an artist's fancy.

To-day it is at its best. The distance is all hazel gold, the sky is flecked with soft white clouds, the

sea is gently ruffled into a hundred varied lights and shades, and the boat-house stands out in richest sepia against the delicate tints of the background.

It was deliciously peaceful and quiet, and I began to enjoy myself exceedingly. The only sounds that broke the silence were the monotonous swish of the little waves upon the shore, and the occasional cry of a seabird sailing by on big white wings.

I had been working steadily at my sketch for at twenty minutes, when I was suddenly startled some one coming down the steps behind me.

It was Captain Thistleby.

"Well, I have seen Bella off," he said, cheerily; "oh a shave it was! I thought she would have missed the train—it was actually moving—she had time to take her ticket."

"But I thought you were going too!" I exclaimed, with, I fear, a very uncomplimentary air in my voice and face.

"What, up to London in August with such a day as this at Seacliff? No, thank you, not I! But I sorry to disappoint you, Miss Clifford," he added, laughing very much amused.

He uttered some unintelligible disclaimer, and went on with my sketch.

"Do you mind my finishing my cigar here?"

"Oh, not at all," with elaborate politeness. "I am quite used to smoke."

"What, does the idol of your dreams indulge in smoking?"

"Who?" I exclaimed, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Why, you did not tell me his name. The gentleman to whom you are engaged to be married."

A vision of George Curtis—stout, middle-aged, grey-whiskered—snuff-box, gold-rimmed spectacles, and all—flashed across my mind's eye; and the idea of his being called the "idol of my dreams" was so intensely comic that I burst out laughing.

"Good heavens, how ludicrous!" I cried. "Mr. Curtis is his name, and if you had seen him—But I wasn't thinking of him, I was thinking of my father."

"Oh!" and my companion puffed away at his cigar in silence.

He had thrown himself on his back on the beach beside me, but a little lower down, so that I could not see his face; his arms were thrown up under his head, and he had tilted his hat over his nose, shade his eyes. He seemed to me to have every intention of going to sleep. I devoutly hoped he would.

"Yes," he said, presently, removing the cigar from his mouth and contemplating its smouldering end with close attention—"yes, our friend Bel thought you would be very dull alone, so she has left me the charming task of entertaining you until eight o'clock this evening."

"I am exceedingly sorry you should have thought it necessary to stop here on my account," I said coldly.

He laughed slightly, but answered not.

"I am never dull, I assure you; and I am quite able to entertain myself."

minutes sooner. I was at the end of the passage, coming out of my door, too."

"I did not see you."

"No, I know you did not, you could not; I had blown out my candle, and the passage was quite dark at my side of the house; but the hall-lamp shone full upon you. I saw you perfectly. You stepped out and listened, drawing back your dress with one hand. There was a pretty indecision in your face; a white ruffle round your throat bordered your perfectly simple dress; there was no lace on your shoulders then. You evidently determined to wait a little longer, and I waited too. When you came down with that gorgeous lace wrapped round you, and that scornful look on your face, you were no longer the same girl I had seen on the landing. I knew directly that something had happened in the interval to upset you. Your very first words told me what it was. You were so feverishly eager to let me know that you were engaged to be married, that you were somebody else's property not to be made love to——"

"Oh, don't—don't!" I cried, holding my burning cheeks in my hands.

"You cannot complain of me, Miss Clifford," continued my tormentor. "You cannot but say that I took your hint. I did not press my attentions, did I?"

"No, you were dreadfully rude," I stammered.

"Yes, and though that is what you had wanted me to be, you were angry with me for it. So like a woman! Your song amused me exceedingly. I

could not help giving you that one little cut. Will you not forgive me?"

"I wish you would go away," I said, in great distress. "I have made a fool of myself, and—and I think I hate you," I added, somewhat incoherently.

"Oh, no, you don't," answered my companion, confidently. "Now, look here, Miss Clifford, we will say no more about last night; let us begin afresh. But we must first understand each other. Let us look our position in the face. Here are we two people left together for a whole day, to make the best of each other; now, are we to spend it in fighting and snarling like a couple of terriers, or in rational conversation, like reasonable beings?"

"Just as you like," I answered meekly, but with a dawning sense of the comic in the situation.

"Well," he resumed, "let us begin by sweeping away all Bella's mistaken little plans. You know as well as I do, doubtless, what a matchmaker my dear little sister-in-law is. She is very fond of me, and you are her dearest friend; what more natural idea than that, therefore, you and I are made for each other? Now this is ludicrous altogether; it is also very embarrassing. You are, as you took care to tell me, you know, engaged to be married; you therefore don't want me in the very least. I have resigned myself to the inevitable, and I am in no need of a wife. This is clear, is it not?"

I assented, but I winced a little too. A woman does not, of course, expect every man to be sighing for her, but that he does not ask her to marry him

is sufficient proof that he does not want her ; to be told so in so many words, is a little bit painful.

"When I have somebody's praises whom I don't know dinned into my ears, I always hate them beforehand, don't you ? Shall we clear away all the prejudice which Bella's injudicious praise has roused in our minds, and, as we have quite settled the matrimonial question, agree to be friends ?"

"With all my heart," I answered frankly.

"Give me you hand upon it, then ;" and he held out his own to me. It was big, and strong, and sunburnt—a manly hand that I think I could hold on to if I were in trouble. I placed my own in it, and he grasped it firmly for a second.

"Now let me look at your sketch, will you ? You have got your boat-house a little out of drawing. May I put it right for you ? Give me your brush—there, that is better. Your colouring is very good ; there is a great deal of poetry and feeling in your distance ; tone down your foreground a little more—a wash of cobalt will do it."

With half a dozen touches, he had put a finish and beauty into my little sketch that I could not have brought out in an hour's work.

"You understand painting better than music," I said, laughing.

"Much better ; and so do you, I fancy !" he retorted.

And over this congenial interest we became great friends. I was quite surprised when the luncheon bell rang from the house behind us to find that the morning had slipped away so quickly and so pleasantly.

CHAPTER III.

THE RISING OF THE TIDE.

"Praise the sea, but keep on land."

—HERBERT.

"WHAT shall we do with ourselves this afternoon, Miss Clifford?" asked Captain Thistleby, when we had finished our luncheon. "Take a walk?"

"No; it is too hot for walking," I answered, stepping out through the French window on to the lawn.

"A drive, then?" he suggested.

"Oh, of all stupid things a drive is the stupidest. Besides, there is nowhere to drive to; the roads are hot, and dusty, and shadeless; sea-side country is always hideous; real hedgerows are at least ten miles inland."

"What do you say to a boat, then?"

"That sounds better; but where shall we go?"

"Is there no object of interest along the coast I could row you to?"

"Um!—I know a bay——" I began hesitatingly.

"Where the wild thyme grows!" Let us go there."

"Are you fond of sea anemones?" I ask, doubtfully.

"Devoted to them, I worship them, adore them, would go miles after them!" he cried, rapturously.

"Then that settles it," I said, laughing. "In this bay there are the loveliest sea anemones all over the rocks, and such shells! It is about three

miles off; the prettiest little sandy cove imaginable, with red cliffs all round it. We might land there and explore it thoroughly, and row back in the cool of the evening. Shall we go?"

"Decidedly; nothing could be better. Get your hat, and let us go and charter a boat."

We soon found a boat to suit us, and declining the offers of the boatman to accompany us, were pushed off from the beach, as full of spirits as a couple of children on a half holiday.

"Will you take an oar, Miss Clifford?" said my companion, as he proceeded to divest himself of his grey tweed coat.

"I? Not for worlds!"

"Can't you row? I should have thought you were just the girl to row."

"Not a yard. What should make you think I can? Am I not 'bread-and-butter?'" I asked, maliciously.

"On the contrary, I begin to think you are of the strong-minded order."

"And so you divide all women into those two classes only, Captain Thistleby: the bread-and-butter and the strong-minded?"

"Girls I do, certainly—not women," he answered.

"You distinguish between the two, then? Are women a superior class?"

"They are different."

"And which am I, pray?"

"Upon my word, I don't know!" he answered, earnestly, looking up at me intently, as if he were really puzzled by me.

I laughed.

"One judges women by a higher standard than one does girls, you know," he said, by way of explanation.

"Is marriage, then, the portal to those higher realms of bliss from which the spinsters are excluded?"

"Generally, not always though. Bella is a girl in every sense of the word; but I am not sure about

'Well, I shall very soon be married, you know,' answered, airily; "and that, perhaps, will determine my status."

"Yes; you needn't remind me of that so very often," he said, testily.

I was rather surprised by the sudden change in his manner, and was silent.

Captain Thistleby had settled himself down to his work and was pulling well.

I don't know that a well-made man ever looks to better advantage than when he is rowing.

As I looked at my companion's broad chest, and the steady, easy motion of his muscular arms, at his well-shaped head, from which he had removed his hat, thickly clustered over by crisp, short curls, and set on to his shoulders with the grace and strength of an Apollo, I began to think that Captain

Thistleby was a very type of all that was perfect in manly beauty. I stole furtive glances at his face under the shade of my hat. I had not noticed until now what glorious eyes he had—eyes that, at times, drooped languid and sleepy beneath long

veiling lashes, and at times flashed out suddenly gleams of fire and energy. In the straight-cut nose and square chin were a subtle blending of strength and refinement; and though the mouth was all but concealed by the long tawny moustache, I could guess from what I saw that its lines denoted firmness and character. Decidedly Bella was right in calling her brother-in-law a handsome man.

We skim swiftly along over the face of the waters. A golden light ripples all over the waves, the boat cleaves her way through them with a fresh sounding swish at every stroke of the oar, followed by mellow gurgling after every onward bound she gives. Big white sails, some near, some far off, pass and re-pass in a solemn, silent procession between us and the blue line of the horizon; and now and then a trail of smoke in the distance tells us of some outward-bound steamer dropping "down Channel."

I lean back in the stern of the little boat, feeling at peace with myself and the whole world, and I wonder vaguely what it is that makes me so supremely happy to-day. The breeze ruffles my hair and flushes my cheeks. I hang one hand over the side and let the water trickle idly through my fingers. Ah! delicious day, why did it not last forever?

At length we reached the little bay to which we were bound. I had not belied its beauty. It was hollowed deeply out of the steep cliffs that enclosed it perpendicularly on three sides. Their weather-beaten faces were frowning and dark, and contrasted harmfully at low water with the yellow sands and

brown rocks, and the little blue pools of water at their feet.

“Now for the treasures of the deep!” cried Mark Thistleby, gaily, as we make for the shore.

We had some difficulty in finding a landing-place, and still more in selecting a safe harbour for our boat; there were so many little jagged rocks half in, half out of the water. At last we managed to fasten her up to one of them, and then we started forth on our ramble.

Of course we found no sea anemones—not one! Captain Thistleby declared I had brought him here under false pretences, but owned to being unfeignedly glad, as he had been haunted by an awful terror ever since we started lest I should request him to carry some home in his hat.

We scrambled about like a couple of children all over the slippery rocks, pausing to stoop over the shallow pools fringed with crimson feathery seaweed, to watch the strange manners and customs of baby crabs and scan transparent prawns at their gambols. I have always considered myself remarkably active and sure-footed in clambering about; but, apparently, Captain Thistleby must have thought me awkward and floundering, for he insisted on retaining a firm hold of my hand.

“You might fall, you know, and sprain your ankle,” he says; and as that is certainly a possible contingency, and I can see no very good reason against it, I acquiesce in the arrangement. So accustomed do I become to it, indeed, that I forget to let go of his hand, or he forgets to let go of mine,

even when the rocks are at an end; and so we wander, hand-in-hand, up the yellow sand to the cliffs.

"What a place for a pic-nic, Miss Clifford! Why are you going to-morrow? We might have a charming day here!"

"Well, it would hardly do for a whole day; the sea comes up to the cliffs at high tide."

"Really? I wonder if the boat is safe?" He looked back somewhat anxiously. "The tide is coming in."

"Oh! we have lots of time. We have still the cavern to see. Come!"

A low opening at the foot of the cliffs was before us. Mark had to stoop his tall head considerably to get into it; but after a few steps the roof rose suddenly, and we stood in a high vaulted chamber, lighted by a fissure in the rock above. The red sandstone was groined in regular curves, like the roof of a cathedral, and a carpet of whitest silver-sand was spread out under our feet.

And here—oh! wonder of wonders—were myriads of lovely twisted shells, such as I never saw there before, strewn about all over the floor, in countless numbers, of every shade and hue, from palest rose to deepest orange.

"How beautiful!" I exclaimed delightedly. "I never found shells here before. Where can they have come from in such quantities? It must have been yesterday's storm that brought them."

I stooped down and eagerly began gathering them up; I filled my handkerchief and Captain Thistleby's, and all our pockets.

"What on earth do you mean to do with them?" he said, laughing, but down on his knees, too, picking them up.

"I don't know in the very least. I shall probably throw them away before we are home again; but have them I must!"

"Let us take shots with them at that clump of brown seaweed up there," said my companion.

Happy thought, no sooner suggested than acted upon. We stand side by side, each with a handkerchief full of shells, and "take shies," as Mark expresses it.

My shots usually fall very wide of the mark; my companion hits it with unerring precision. I handicap him, to make the game fair. I stand five paces in advance, and he gives me thirty shots. The game is to be a hundred, and the one who loses is to carry the rest of the shells home. The cavern echoes with our ringing laughter.

"How cold it has turned!" I exclaimed, suddenly shivering.

Mark looks at his watch. "Good heavens," he said, "we have been here half an hour! Come!" He seized my hand, and we hurried out of the cave. The tide was coming in rapidly. A narrow strip of sand, not more than a dozen yards across, was all that now lay between the cliffs and the sea; and our boat was—where?

Still where we left her, apparently, but completely surrounded by the waves, and bumping violently up and down on the sharp apex of the rock, to which she was still fastened.

"She is quite safe," says my companion ; "I can easily reach her—the water will not be more than up to my knees. Thank Heaven, I fastened the rope firmly, or we might have been in a nice fix. But where shall I leave you? You will get wet here?"

I could see that he was more uneasy at our position than he liked to own; and indeed it was not exactly a pleasant state of things. The light breeze of the early part of the day had freshened considerably, and good-sized waves, white with surf, came rolling in at our very feet.

I knew that at high tide the water washed the base of the cliffs, and to stand where we were much longer was to risk being drowned. By the side of the cliffs there was no escape; they were perfectly inaccessible.

"I cannot leave you here," said Mark, in evident distress.

I looked round in despair at the sandstone wall behind us, and suddenly I caught sight of a small projecting ledge about four or five feet up the ledge of the rock. ds

In far less time than it takes to tell, Mark had picked me up bodily, and placed me there. It was not more than a foot in width; but it was well above the water line, and a tuft of thick grass growing out of a crevice a little higher up afforded me a firm holding to steady myself by. re

"You will be safe from getting splashed there," he said; but I could see that it was not of splashes that he was thinking. "I shall be back in ten minutes; I have not a moment to lose."

And with that he walked out boldly into the seething waves.

He had hard work, after all, to reach the boat. The current was strong, and several times he nearly lost his footing. By the time he got to it the water was nearly up to his waist.

I watched him breathlessly. He clambered into the boat, and at once unfastened the rope that held it to the rock.

So far I could plainly see what he was doing ; but his further proceedings were a perfect mystery to me.

First he stooped down, apparently to examine something at the bottom of the boat ; then, rising hastily, he tore off his coat and waistcoat, rolled the latter up into a small bundle, and put it down at his feet. I imagined that he was steadying the thwarts ; but it seemed rather a waste of time, whilst I was standing there shivering, with the tide rising every minute.

Presently he sat down, and pulled a couple of strokes in my direction. Then he stopped, looked round, seemed undecided.

Suddenly he got up, and made wild signs, which I was utterly unable to decipher ; and then, arching his hands round his mouth, he shouted out something to me ; but the wind was rising, and the surf was running noisily on the rocks below me, and I heard a single word.

Not knowing what else to do, I nodded violently, and waved my hand back to him. Apparently this seemed to content him, for he sat down again, and began to pull. But what is he doing ?

Good heavens! can I believe my eyes? He seems to be going straight away from me. No; it cannot be! There must be some strong current that draws him back. He must turn in my direction in another instant. But no; he is pulling hard—with all his might—and he is pulling away from me out to sea!

Ah! what can he mean? I call aloud with terror and despair; but he cannot hear me; only the waves and wind, catching my helpless cries, send them back in ringing echoes against the cliff behind me.

He is leaving me.

Farther and farther speeds the small black speck upon the grey, angry waters, till at length—oh, horror of horrors!—he rounds the corner of the bay, and is gone.

And I am left alone, clinging to a tuft of grass, on the bare ledge of a pitiless cliff!

CHAPTER IV.

A MODERN ANDROMEDA.

“To-morrow do thy worst, for I have lived to-day.”

For the first few minutes I was so overwhelmed with terror and despair that I seemed to take leave of my senses. Was I to be left to perish? Surely such fiendish wickedness was never before devised as to purposely forsake an unhappy girl in such a situation?

But presently my reason and my common-sense returned to me.

What nonsense! What earthly reason could Captain Thistleby have for encompassing my destruction? He did not look murderously inclined; on the contrary, recalling sundry of his words and looks during the past day, it struck me that, if he had erred at all, it was not in the matter of ferocity. Neither did I stand next-of-kin between him and a fortune, therefore he would not benefit in the very smallest degree by my untimely death. Putting all these things together, I began to perceive that, for some reason or other, utterly unfathomable by me, he had been unable to return to me by himself, but that he was gone for help, and would come back.

Nevertheless, my position was anything but an enjoyable one. The sea now washed quite up to the foot of the cliffs, and the spray danced up unpleasantly with every wave into my face. I was in no danger of being drowned; but I was very cold and very uncomfortable, and I dared not move an inch.

I begin to compare notes with Andromeda, and to wonder if she felt as thoroughly miserable as I do. I am very much in the same predicament as that ill-fated legendary maiden. However, I reflect that on the whole I had the best of it, for, to begin with I am decently, if not warmly clothed; there is no sea-serpent waiting underneath to devour me, and when my returning Perseus flashes upon my expectant gaze, the sight will in no way shock my maiden modesty, as I have not the faintest reason to doubt

that he will return in the same perfectly correct nineteenth-century raiment of grey tweed shooting-coat and "dittos" in which he lately departed. Decidedly I am better off than Miss Andromeda. That was a pretty ending to her story: how she and her Perseus went up to the bright stars, and sit there together throughout all ages, each in a shining constellation.

Not a bad fate, I think, gazing upwards to where "night's candles" begin already to glisten out one by one in the fast-darkening sky.

"Not a bad fate. I wonder how Mark and I should enjoy it?" I say, musingly, half aloud. "And how about George Curtis? Is he to sit up in the stars, too!" exclaims a voice, which is Conscience, I presume, pulling me up pretty sharply.

The idea of George Curtis sitting up aloft in a constellation is so irresistibly comic that, forgetting to scold myself for my previous very indecorous reflections, I laugh aloud. The laughter goes round and round me, from rock to rock in ghostly reverberations, that half frighten me. I determine to refrain from such unseemly mirth.

It is getting very dark. I wonder how long I have been here; an hour, at least, I should say. I am cold, and what is worse very cramped; and the perpetual seething of the water below me begins to make me feel sickeningly giddy. The wind howls round me in slow melancholy swirls. It carries off my hat, and I dare not put up a hand to save it. It dances off in the gathering darkness, and I see it no more. My thin cotton frock and blue serge

jacket, which were more than sufficient to keep me warm through the sunny, breezy afternoon, are now as flimsy as if they were made of silver paper; every gust of wind blows right through them, and meanders playfully down my shivering back.

I begin to feel drowsy. Once my head droops forward with a nod, which wakes me up, and sends a new terror to my heart; for suppose I were to fall asleep, and let go of my hold, and tumble off my perch down into the white surf below me?

The horror of this idea is sufficient to keep me awake; and then I suddenly begin to realise that soon my cramped, numbed hands will be unable to retain their hold upon the tuft of grass they cling to, and that if I let go I shall be too giddy to stand. Whether I will or no, by-and-by my hands will become powerless, and then I shall fall.

The question seems now to have become, not when will he come back; but shall I be able to hold on till he does?

I think this idea was the most ghastly of all the horrors that cold, and wind, and darkness had been able to conjure up.

It positively haunted me like a living fiend. I kept acting the supreme moment to myself. I pictured my hands loosening their hold, and myself falling forward, a short, gurgling struggle in the surf, and then I am washed away into the deeper water beyond.

I try to think of something else. I repeat all the words of my songs aloud, Watts' hymns, Tupper's Proverbial Philosophy, Little Bo Peep, and the Man

in the Moon, and every other intellectual and moral ditty of the kind that memory can recall.

All no use. My thoughts will not be distracted by these light amusements. Again and again the horrible programme acts itself out before my eyes ; so vividly, indeed, that I seem to see my own poor little corpse, white and draggled with the salt water, carried out to sea, beneath my very eyes.

I do verily believe that had I been left to wait there five minutes longer I should have turned light-headed, and this ghastly fancy would have become a reality.

But the flash of a lantern, the sound of oars, and the shouts of men recall me to life.

“ Here—here ! ” I cry.

And in another second Mark Thistleby—my Perseus, as I call him to myself—is below me. I let go of the tuft of grass and fell, not into the sea, but into his arms.

The boat was pushed off and I was safe ! Only half recovered from my bewilderment, I listened to Mark’s hurried explanations.

“ Did you understand what it was ? No ? Ah, what a brute you must have thought me ! I found the rocks on which she had been bumping had driven through the bottom of the boat ; she leaked awfully. I shoved my waistcoat into the hole, but it was not safe, with two of us she must have sunk. I did not know what to do at first ; it seemed horrible to leave you, but it was the only thing to do. I rowed for my life, but every five or ten minutes I had to stop and bale the water out with my hat.

You knew I should come back for you, didn't you? How brave you have been!"

"I could not help myself!" I muttered; but no honeyed compliment ever sounded in my ears with half such sweet flattery.

We were being rowed rapidly out of the bay, meanwhile; the two boatmen, whom Mark had brought with him, rowed us, and we sat together in the stern of the boat.

He had brought a warm, thick shawl with him, and was now wrapping it round me.

"I have nothing to fasten it with, and it will blow off your shoulders—do you mind my holding it?"

I don't answer, and presumably silence gives consent, for he keeps his arm round me, and somehow it happens that being very tired I rest against his shoulder.

"Poor little hands, how cold they are!" he says, and lays his over them. They are cold, and his is warm, and I do not withdraw mine.

After that we neither of us spoke for a long time.

Oh, divinest, happiest, blessedest night! It blows and it drizzles; the sea is rough, and it is bitterly cold; the boat is the crankiest, most uncomfortable of her species, yet never moonlight moments in velvet-cushioned gondola, under warm Italian skies, all fragrant with heavy-scented orange and citron flowers, was half so intoxicating as that boisterous hour upon the storm crisped waters of the Devonshire coast.

I am wildly, insanely, supremely happy! No more thought of George Curtis enters into my head than

if that good and worthy old gentleman had never been born.

I am alone in the night with Mark Thistleby—for the boatmen don't count, it is so dark we cannot see their faces—and I love him; if I did not acknowledge it then, I have known it well enough since. This man, whom yesterday I did not know, is to-day the best and dearest among men to me.

It is foolish, unmaidenly, wicked if you will, but to-morrow will be time enough to fight against my folly; to-morrow I will crush it out of my heart; to-morrow I shall go away, and neither see him, nor think of him more; but for this one evening I will let myself go down the current of those "enchanted waters"—for to-night I will be happy.

Despite the cold wind, the blood is coursing rapidly through my veins, and my heart is beating wildly. I glance timidly up at my companion. Has he any thought of me, I wonder? Oh, no—what a foolish fancy! His face is turned away from me, and I can just see its dark outline against the grey sky behind. He is not thinking of me, his thoughts are evidently far away.

Upon seeing this I grow bold, and, favoured by the darkness, take a prolonged stare at him. It is ill-bred to stare, I believe; at least, I was always told so as a child. I am inclined to think that it is even worse. I am inclined to look upon it in the light of a sin; for are we not positively told whatever sin we do to be very sure that sin will find us out? With the perversity to which frail humanity is prone, whenever I see anything or anybody pleasant to look

upon, I do look ; and as invariably, with the remorseless retribution that is supposed to attend that and all other bad actions, I am found out.

In the present instance, I sin, and I suffer for it. I stare, and I am caught at it. But there the simile ends. My punishment, it is true, follows immediately, but the punishment is even pleasanter than the offence.

Mark Thistleby draws his arm a little bit closer round me, and me with it a little bit closer to his side. I submit to my penalty with a resignation beautiful to behold.

Ah ! sweet witching hour of bliss, why did you not last for ever ? But alas ! it is well-nigh over ; the lights of the little town of Seacliff have already come in sight, and every moment brings us nearer to them.

"How quickly these fools have brought us !" muttered Mark, discontentedly.

And then suddenly, when we are but a couple of hundred yards from the shore, he bends his head down close to mine and looks into my face. It is so dark that I can hardly distinguish his features, and yet I seem to feel the light that is in his eyes and the thrill of passion in his voice.

"For once only ?" he whispers ; and before I know what it is he has asked of me, he has touched my cheek with his lips.

In another second the keel of the boat has grated upon the shingle among a crowd of men and women that is assembled to greet us. There are confused shouts, and questions, and answers, amidst which Captain Thistleby assists me out of the boat, and,

very stiff and cold, I begin scrambling up the beach towards the garden steps.

The boat had been landed just opposite our house, and as we reached the steps, Bella came running out of the brightly-lit room into the darkness to meet us, with mingled exclamations of dismay and delight.

"My darling child, I have been so frightened about you—thank Heaven you are back safe! When I came home an hour ago, I found nobody in, only a message sent up to the house by Mark when he came back for the boat. I was so upset to think of your having been left in such awful danger for so long. My poor pet, how cold and shivering you are!"

"Yes, Bella, she is cold and tired, and must be half starved; take her in and look after her, and don't make her talk till she is better."

Saying which Captain Thistleby stalks off and leaves me to Bella's care.

What a fuss they made over me that evening; and how nice it was, after dinner, to be installed in a big arm-chair by a bright fire, with two people making much of me, as if I had done something very wonderful.

Bella was never tired of asking questions. The whole story was told over and over again to her, and every recital brought forth fresh expressions of affection and pity, and fresh admiration for me, the unwilling heroine.

As to Mark, the respectful tenderness with which he arranged the cushions at my back and the footstool under my feet, and brought me my cup of tea,

made me feel terribly shy and conscious, and I blushed in a guilty manner every time that I met his eye. Needless to say there were some details of our homeward voyage in the boat which we did not think necessary to impart to our sympathising Bella.

I could not get the recollection of that swift stolen kiss out of my mind. I tried hard to be angry, to look upon it as an unpardonable liberty, as a deliberate insult, which every well-brought-up young woman ought to resent; but these fine, virtuous sensations refused to be conjured up at my bidding. I could only feel foolishly happy.

"Thank Heaven I shall be gone to-morrow!" I kept on saying to myself, as I furtively watched Mark's tall, graceful figure standing opposite me, leaning against the mantel-piece; and then I could not help smiling to think how utterly my thoughts had changed since last night, when he had seemed to me to be such an odiously disagreeable man.

Could it be only one day that I had known him? and was it possible that I had in so short a time actually lost my heart to this man? No; I could not believe it. True, one day, spent as ours had been, entirely together, and ended by so romantic an adventure, goes often further towards making people know each other, than whole months of ordinary humdrum acquaintance; but then, was I not engaged to George Curtis, and so reasonably supposed to be fenced about and protected from the charms of all other men, "charm they never so wisely"? And what a direful, miserable plight I should be in, were I, in this unwomanly and reprehensible manner, to

have allowed my heart to go out unsought to this man, so lately an utter stranger to me!

My heart?—perish the thought!—my *fancy* has been captivated; but my heart is safe, if not in George Curtis' keeping, at all events in my own. And as to Captain Thistleby, has he not proved himself to be exactly what I predicted of him when I had described him to myself as one of that race of men to whom long moustaches and indiscriminate love-making seem to belong as a prescriptive right? The only unintelligible thing to me is that instead of feeling angry and indignant at the love-making, I have enjoyed it, loved it, gloated over it beyond all things!

Decidedly I must be a very depraved young woman, and original sin must be strongly developed in me!

CHAPTER V.

FROM SEACLIFF TO SLOPPERTON.

"'Twas my father's promise, not mine,
I never gave my heart to thee."

—LONGFELLOW.

BED-TIME came, and with it the end of what I can honestly say was still, with all its terrors, the very happiest day of my life.

Bella and her brother-in-law wished me good-night at my bed-room door. Bella, with the rapturous embraces which always accompany my demonstrative little friend's expressions of affection, and Captain

Thistleby, who had carried up our flat candlesticks for us, with well-bred indifference, merely remarking, as he handed me mine, that he hoped I should sleep well, and have quite recovered the fatigues of the day by to-morrow morning. And then my room door was shut, and they passed on together to their respective rooms beyond.

Bella, who was the very beau-ideal of a thoughtful hostess, had had a fire lit in my room, and, although it was August, the long chill exposure to the winds and waves I had experienced made it a very grateful sight.

Her maid had packed my solitary box, and it stood there already strapped and labelled, to remind me unpleasantly of my coming departure, whilst an open travelling bag, half filled, threw a still further air of dismantled desolation over my cosy bedroom.

Partly the sight of these tokens of my approaching journey, and partly, perhaps, the reaction after the afternoon's excitement, made me feel thoroughly depressed and low-spirited. I leant my elbows on the mantel-piece and stared into the red-hot fire. I felt disappointed—I hardly knew why, and vexed with myself for being so. That cold, indifferent "Good-night," and the civil platitudes about my health, seemed such a descent into the commonplace prose of daily life.

I felt unreasonably irritated. I do not know what else I had expected; nothing else, surely, and yet I was disappointed.

All at once I was roused by a low tap at my door,

and a voice outside spoke my name almost in a whisper :

"Miss Clifford."

"Yes."

"Can you speak to me for one minute?"

I have already given it to be understood that I am a very badly-brought-up young woman. From my earliest infancy I have been accustomed to follow the primary instincts of my nature, leaving all the proprieties and conventionalities to take care of themselves. I know not whether I may not have, on that occasion, transgressed every known rule of feminine decorum; but certain it is that, with scarcely a moment's hesitation—which moment, be it known, was not taken up in any wavering debates with my conscience, but simply in rapidly smoothing my rumpled locks at the glass over the mantel-piece—I opened the door.

Mark Thistleby stood outside, and I leant against the door-post to speak to him.

Since our formal "good-night," some five or ten minutes ago, he had changed his evening-dress for a loose smoking suit, and I suppose he was on his way downstairs to discuss his nocturnal pipe.

The smoking-suit was of dark blue satin, with gold braided collar and cuffs, and its magnificence completely overwhelmed me. He looked splendidly handsome in it.

I cast one swift glance up at him, and then, finding myself utterly unequal to meeting his eyes, I hung my head shamefacedly.

"Well?"

"I could not say good-night to you without asking you to forgive me, Miss Clifford."

"What for?" blushing furiously.

"You know very well what for. I could not help it. I am very sorry—no, I don't mean that either, for I am not sorry, at all; but I would not offend you for anything. I am the last man in the world that had any business to do such a thing; but the temptation was very strong, and men never do resist a temptation of that sort, you know, if it is strong enough. You are not angry, are you?"

He spoke rapidly, and with a certain amount of agitation in his voice, which his half-jesting words could scarcely conceal.

I glanced up at him, and his eyes were fixed upon my face with a wistful, pleading look in their depths which I could not quite understand.

There is a strong element of the coquette about me. It is given to some women, I believe as a safeguard against man, their natural enemy.

I saw something in his face which made me tremble for his next words. At all risks, I must avert it.

I answered him lightly, with a little toss of the head:

"Yes; of course I am angry; but not half so angry as I ought to be with you."

It was, I suppose, like a wholesome cold water douche. The tender look was gone out of his eyes in a second, and I could see that I had sunk myself a very little in his good opinion.

"Very well; then it is to be peace, I presume,

Miss Clifford, until the next time of asking, eh?" he answered, in the most "chaffy" tone.

The danger was over; but was I any the happier?

"Good-night," I said, turning away, listlessly, and gave him my hand.

He held it between both his own.

"By-the-way, you need be under no apprehension concerning 'next time,'" he began, lightly; and then, after a pause of a second, with a sudden roughness, he added: "For I have sworn never to see you again!"

He dropped my hand, and before I could answer him was gone.

As far as the next morning was concerned, Captain Thistleby kept his oath. I saw him no more.

Breakfast, in consideration of my departure, was half an hour earlier than usual, and Bella was my only companion.

A message sent up by the footman to Captain Thistleby's room, to the effect that coffee and kidneys were getting cold, only elicited in reply:

"The Captain's love, ma'am, and you was please not to wait for him. He is very sorry as 'ow he 'as overslep' himself this morning."

"What a shame of Mark not to be down," remarked Bella, looking rather annoyed. "But he is sure to be ready in time to say good-bye to you, Freda. Another egg, darling? Do, you have such a long journey before you."

Breakfast was spun out as long as possible, and the fly, all ready, with my box on the top of it, waited at the door till the very last moment.

We neither of us said so, but Bella's motive-day is transparent, and I was weak enough to fall silent and into her tactics. But it was all of no use. Mrs. Thistleby's chamber remained hermetically sealed, although I believe that Bella, under pretence of fetching something from her own room, actually ran upstairs, and hammered at his door to hurry him.

To this manœuvre I was prudently deaf and blind. It was humiliating, and it produced no results whatever.

Bella's pretty baby face looked positively ill-tempered as she came downstairs again after this unsuccessful attempt.

"Bella, dear, I must be off."

"Yes, darling, I suppose you must;" and as she kissed me, she whispered: "What message shall I give him?"

"Who?—Captain Thistleby?" I answered aloud, with uncompromising frigidity. "Oh! you can wish him good-bye for me; and say I am glad he has slept so soundly, and I hope his next boating expedition will be pleasanter than his last."

And with my proudest and most unbending aspect, I gave Mrs. Thistleby a final embrace, and stepped into my vehicle—the old rickety fly from the "Bull Inn"—and was driven off to the station.

Late that afternoon I was at home again; back to my poor old father, with his thin, wan face, and his shabby, threadbare coat, and back, also, to my lover, who had come over to Slopperton to welcome me home, and who stood smiling benignantly at me over papa's shoulder as I was driven up to the door.

Miss Cliff Curtis was a very different-looking man he ay father; although, in reality, very nearly the same age, he looked much the younger man of the two. Prosperity and good living had, I suppose, made the difference, and the years which had turned the one into a shambling, careworn, gaunt old man, left the other stout, genial and middle-aged.

My lover had a round, red face, and pale blue eyes, smooth well-brushed grey hair, and compact little grey whiskers. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles, and was very particular about his clothes. He had a kind, pleasant face, and was as true-hearted a gentleman as ever breathed.

"Delighted to see you back, my dear," he said cheerily, bestowing a sort of peck upon my forehead by way of embrace.

"Come in," said my father, "and tell us how you have enjoyed yourself."

And then we all went into the library at the back of the house, where the two old gentlemen speedily forgot my existence, and returned to their studies together over a rare and ancient folio, which my arrival had for a few moments interrupted.

The library was the only pleasant and cosy place in our little cottage. Every other room in the house was poverty-stricken and dilapidated. The library walls were lined with books—books all arrayed in solid sombre calf; great dusty tomes, whose very names had become extinct with age; they were worn with constant use, and their margins were grey with pencil notes. They had that peculiar fusty smell which hangs about books that have been

printed a century ago, and which to this day is always connected in my mind with learning and scholarship, and my father.

Besides the books there was very little other furniture in the room—only a large dingy walnut writing-bureau, a couple of deep seated, faded leather chairs, and my own little basket-chair and work-table.

The windows looked to the back of the house: a narrow strip of ill-kept garden, a low moss-covered wall, an orchard filled with gnarled old apple-trees, and beyond it miles of pleasant, sunny fields and hedgerows, stretching away to the south, till they melted in the blue distance into a low range of chalk hills.

In this room it was that my father and Mr. Curtis held almost daily discussions over their dusty folios, whilst I sat by and listened. They were, I think, writing a book together—a sort of dictionary to all the other books upon scientific subjects which had ever been written. And every day either Mr. Curtis came over from Eddington to Sloperton or else my father trudged over to Eddington. It was two miles off; and to those two miles, dusty in hot weather, unsheltered in rainy weather, bitterly cold in snowy or windy weather, might be traced the main cause of my engagement to George Curtis. It came about in this wise:

The two compilers were growing old, the two miles were becoming daily a greater tax upon the strength of each. My father felt it most in the cold weather—Mr. Curtis in the hot.

One day they laid their heads together, and the

result of their cogitations was thus made known to me by papa, the same evening, as we sat cosily together after dinner.

"Freda, my love, my good friend George Curtis has charged me with a message for you."

"For me, papa? Why he was only here this afternoon."

"Yes, dear, and he spoke to me this afternoon about it."

"You are very mysterious, papa! What is this wonderful message?"

"George Curtis proposes to do you a great honour, my dear—a very great honour."

"He is very kind."

"He wishes to make you his wife."

"His wife? *Me!* Papa, you must be dreaming!"

"Not at all, my love; there is nothing so very extraordinary about it. It is true there is a great disparity of years—but that is all the more complimentary to you; for it is a very great compliment from a man of his learning and intellect—though he is not quite sound always in his deductions, not quite sound, too much dash perhaps; but still, as I was saying, that a man of his learning should want to marry a girl like you, ought to flatter you very much."

"Oh! papa, it is impossible—quite."

"Well, my love, I would never force your inclinations; but don't decide in a hurry—always weigh a matter of importance well in your mind—you need give no answer at all just yet; but I should just like to place the *pros* and *cons* fairly before you."

“Oh! papa, he does not care for me one bit.”

“There, Freda, you are quite wrong. He tells me he thinks you one of the sweetest-mannered young women he has ever met; and he admires you personally very much. You have your poor mother’s beauty, you know, my dear; and he thinks very highly of it. The advantages are not wholly on your side, as I told him; he quite agreed—quite. But then George Curtis always was the most generous-minded man—pity he is so unsound in argument! However, that doesn’t matter to a wife; because a woman can never argue; it isn’t in her, and she had better let it alone. Well, Freda, as I was saying, my old friend is most favourably impressed by you. He tells me he wishes to marry: a man of his wealth and property, you know, is in some sort obliged to marry—for the sake of—ahem!—a—posterity; and he will be a most kind and indulgent husband.”

“But, papa——!”

“Wait one minute, love. I wish to place it before you in a proper light. You see it is very irksome this going backwards and forwards, and if you will marry him he wishes me to live at Eddington with you, and there I should have no household cares nor expenses. Your future would be provided for—with nothing on my mind I could give my attention much more entirely to my studies. I could accept from my son-in-law what I could hardly do from my friend; besides I should not feel under any undue obligation to him, because it is all in the interests of the dictionary we are compiling.”

"In fact, I am to be sacrificed to the dictionary!" I exclaimed, bitterly.

"I don't know what you call 'sacrificed,' Freda; you are talking like an ungrateful girl. You would be the honoured wife of a very wealthy man, whose only wish would be to gratify your every whim; you would have the sole management of his house, and be able to entertain as much as you wished; he told me so to-day, he wants a wife to dispense the hospitalities which are expected by the neighbourhood from Eddington. You would have everything that the heart of a woman can desire, and a good kind husband into the bargain; and moreover you would rid me for ever of these grinding, worrying bills and duns, and perpetual struggles and money troubles which are wearing me to death, and which cramp the healthy action of my brain. I don't want to force you into anything repugnant to you, my dear, but I confess that were you to agree to this plan of our kind friend's, you would materially brighten the closing years of my life."

His last arguments had more power to move me than any other. I answered humbly that I would think of it.

She who hesitates is lost. The following day, stipulating only that I was not to be unduly hurried into matrimony, I laid down my arms and surrendered at discretion.

George Curtis, when informed of my decision, kissed my forehead, called me "his dear little girl," gave me a very handsome diamond locket which he hung about my neck with old-fashioned gallantry,

and then evidently considering that he had gone through everything that could possibly be required of him in the way of love-making, he retired to the library, and was soon as deep in his beloved books, with my father at his elbow, as if nothing unusual had occurred. And after a few days I became accustomed to the idea, saw much to reconcile myself to the arrangement, and did not regret my determination.

But all that was before I had seen Mark Thistleby.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. FEATHERSTONE.

"An open face may prove a curse,
But a pretended friend is worse."

—GAY.

ONE morning, soon after my return from Seacliff, I was perched at the top of the library ladder, dusting the books.

A big holland apron covering the whole skirt of my dress with a bib of the same, pinned up under my chin, preserved my not over-fresh blue cotton dress from the further ravages of dirt and dust.

Once a month, knowing that no servant was ever allowed to lay a profane finger upon papa's precious folios, and that if I did not dust them myself they would in time corrode and rot away under the accumulating filth of ages, I was in the habit of giving up a whole morning to the purifying of their ancient

bindings. Upon these occasions I resigned myself utterly to my fate, and "went dirty—not fit to be seen."

Having been for more than an hour at my work, my face, hands, collar, and cuffs had all darkened into one uniform greyness; dust lay thickly amongst the coils of my hair, until its original bright colour must have been quite undistinguishable; dust also floated in clouds down my throat and up my nose, so that I choked and sneezed incessantly. Altogether, I do not suppose that at any moment of my life there had ever been in my appearance fewer traces of that "beauty" which my friends were wont to ascribe to me.

Suddenly I heard papa's voice in the passage, saying:

"We shall find her here, I think; this way, if you please, Mrs. Featherstone; take care of the step."

The door is thrown open, and enter papa and Mr. Curtis, accompanied by a lady, a perfect stranger to me, but whom, from having just heard her name, I at once recognise to be Mr. Curtis's sister.

Would any one but a man and a father have placed an unfortunate girl in such an unpleasant position? Papa, who knew perfectly well that I had been grubbing away at his books for more than an hour, and that I must consequently be filthy, instead of keeping her in the garden or the dining-room, and sending a message to me to come, which would, at least, have given me time to have washed my hands and face, brings in this most formidable personage—a sister-in-law to be—to be introduced for the first

time to the penniless girl who is engaged to be married to her wealthy brother.

In the whole course of my life I do not think I have ever felt so thoroughly nonplussed as I did on that occasion.

I scuffled down from my exalted position on the top of the ladder, and stood before my visitor the very incarnation of awkwardness.

The contrast between us must have been sufficiently glaring. I in my rumpled yellow print dress and dirty brown-holland apron, with my unwashed hands and face, and Mrs. Featherstone in the most gorgeous toilette that a fashionable dressmaker could devise.

Her attire was indeed resplendent. Her taste in dress, as I afterwards learnt to know, was more striking than refined; she affected brilliant colours and showy materials with small regard to the suitability of the occasion to the splendours of her raiment.

She wore a crimson and black dress of cunningly mingled satin and velvet, deeply trimmed with heavy jet fringe, and a crimson velvet hat to match. She was a handsome woman of about forty. When younger she must have been very beautiful, and her figure was still slight and graceful. But her face was not a pleasant one. Her dark hair, cut in a stiff line across her brow, gave her a hard, and Dutch-doll-like appearance, and her eyes, also dark, and set rather near together, imparted a somewhat insincere expression to her face. The narrow black eyebrows, too, looked as if they knew how to scowl,

and there was an unpleasant compression about the corners of her mouth which impressed me unfavourably.

She stood in her gorgeous raiment in the middle of our dingy little library, like a plate out of a fashion book, and looked as much out of place in it as a Cape jessamine in a cabbage garden. I am not ordinarily over-awed by fine clothes; but standing there opposite to that splendid woman in red, a little dusty girl in a cotton frock, I clearly appreciated the vulgarity of mind, so far more unpardonable than any vulgarity of manner, that had made Mrs. Featherstone deck herself out so magnificently to pay her first visit to a country girl in her own shabby house. Yet I confess that I could not help feeling that I was taken at a disadvantage. Had I been only clean, I could have defied her; but how be dignified in a dirty print dress with one's whole person smothered from head to foot in dust?

There was nothing for it but to make the best of it.

"I am afraid I am not fit to be touched," I said, drawing back from the speckless tan suède glove that was held out somewhat hesitatingly towards me.

"Oh, my dear, you look *charming*," was the answer, with a beaming smile—"more charming even than George's letters had prepared me for."

Which, being clearly a falsehood, had the effect of making me feel more uncomfortable than before, and set me against her at once. I would sooner she had said: "You look like a pig," and then we could

have laughed off the situation together, and been friends over it.

"In that case my looks must belie my feelings," I answer, shortly; "for I feel filthy. Mr. Curtis," turning to my betrothed, "you should have told me you were going to bring your sister to see me."

"I came down by the last train yesterday, quite unexpectedly. George and I thought we would surprise you this morning, but some people do not like surprises," with a comprehensive glance from the apex of my ruffled auburn head down to the hem of my dusty cotton robe.

"Had I known of this honour, Mrs. Featherstone, I would have put on my *best* gown, I assure you," I answer sarcastically.

"How kind of you!" very sweetly.

"It is not very beautiful, perhaps; but still I do not usually dust papa's books in it."

"I would leave the dusting to the housemaids, dear, if I were you."

"I don't think you would if you knew the importance of books," with a polite laugh.

"But then I don't, I suppose——"

"So I should imagine," rather contemptuously.

Meanwhile, the two gentlemen stood comfortably chatting together, neither of them having the faintest idea that warfare was going on openly under their noses. It is wonderful how dense men are in the matter of female battles. My father and Mr. Curtis had evidently no idea that we were not conversing together with the most sisterly sweetness.

They turned towards us now with placid countenances.

"Can we not give Mrs. Featherstone some lunch, Freda?" asks my father, pleasantly, "if she will be so kind as to stay for it, now she has come to see us?"

Mrs. Featherstone turned with a bewitching grace. She was a systematic captivator of the male sex, and had to them all, young and old alike, a charmingly-flattering manner.

"Dear Mr. Clifford, how kind of you! Nothing I should like better—I shall be delighted."

"I am afraid we have not very much to offer, but if you will not mind our simple fare—just cold meat and an apple-pudding from our own orchard——" said my father, apologetically.

Mrs. Featherstone interrupted him eagerly. She doated on cold meat, she said; and as to apples, why there was nothing in the world she liked better! An apple-pudding was to her, the way she spoke of it, quite the most *recherché* luxury that Francatelli could supply.

With an excuse relative to the preparing of the above-mentioned dainties, I slipped away upstairs, and proceeded to change my dusty garments—not for any silken grandeur, but for a brown-holland dress of Quakerish plainness—clean as soap-and-water could make it. When I see an over-dressed woman, it is always my vanity to out-do simplicity itself. Having thoroughly removed all traces of the dusting, and smoothed my russet-brown head till it shone much like Sarah's copper preserving-pan, I

issued forth again from my chamber, cleansed, and, in my right mind, prepared to defy Mrs. Featherstone, in all her glory.

Our guests had been walking round the garden, and upon my joining them we all went in to luncheon.

Mrs. Featherstone stepped in through the French window, in a delightful state of enthusiasm with the view—the garden, the orchard, the gravel walks, the old wall, the chickens and the pigs, with everything, in point of fact, belonging to us.

My father followed her closely, evidently enchanted with her—his face was beaming with smiles. I could have shaken him !

We sat down. I was painfully conscious that the cold shoulder of mutton “turned over” was only the remains of our last night’s dinner, and of there being absolutely nothing else for the first course. No raised pies, no cold ham, no pressed beef, no mayonnaise of fowl ; nothing, in short, that constitutes luncheon, properly so called, in the eyes of the rich and well fed. For second course there was the *pièce de résistance*—the apple-pudding ; and with its arrival my feelings became calmer.

But through it all Mrs. Featherstone kept up an uninterrupted flow of delight.

“What delicious mutton, Mr. Clifford ! Where do you get such good meat ? George, yours is never half so tender.”

“Well, I believe it comes from my own park, Clara—at least, if you get it from Dickson’s in the village, Henry.”

"Ah, then it must be the cooking," resumed his sister, glibly, without being in the least disconcerted. "I never enjoyed anything so much; and what delicious lettuces, so much crisper than any we ever can get at Eddington. But my brother's gardener cares for nothing else but the vinery, Mr. Clifford; everything else is neglected. Now yours, I can see, pays proper attention to the vegetables."

"I am afraid old Davy has nothing else to attend to, Mrs. Featherstone," said papa, simply; "but I am very glad you like the lettuces. I am sure it is very good of you to be so pleased with all we can give you in my little cottage."

"Oh, but I love cottages! and yours is so pretty. I always think small rooms are so cosy, one loses oneself at Eddington. I assure you I am quite taken with your little house." This was said with the most gracious condescension.

I began talking to her brother. I really felt I could no longer bear to listen to the woman, and to watch papa's smiling and delighted face, as he responded to her insincere flattery.

I made, mentally, some sage reflections upon the extraordinary ease with which a man of sense and learning may be gulled by an artful and good-looking woman. A few pretty speeches, a little enthusiasm, a smile or two, and the deed is done, and the captive led off in triumph behind the victorious car of the captor.

When I heard Mrs. Featherstone, turning, at last, from the exhausted topic of the food, attack papa upon his weakest point—the dictionary—pouring out

a string of eager and pressing questions upon this much-loved hobby, then I knew that his conquest was completed, and that he was indeed a slave, chained and bound hand and foot.

"I had no idea that Clara took so much interest in books," said Mr. Curtis, aside, to me, looking at her curiously.

"I don't suppose she had any idea of it herself till just now," I answered.

It is to be presumed that George Curtis knew his sister tolerably well, and, although he evidently admired her in a quiet, fraternal way, he did not, perhaps, place that implicit faith in her which he might have done had he not been her brother.

"I hope you will get on with Clara, my dear Freda."

"I hope I may," I replied, in, I fear, a very unhopeful tone of voice.

"Clara, will you explain to Freda the object of our visit?" he said, aloud, turning to his sister.

"Oh, certainly. George and I came to ask you, Freda, if you and Mr. Clifford will come and stay at Eddington next week. I want to fill the house for the 20th, and to ask some of the neighbourhood to a little dance; and I hope you will come and join our party."

"Yes, my dear; we think it will be a good opportunity of introducing you to my friends as my future wife." And George Curtis laid his hand kindly on mine.

I hesitated. The prospect of the gaiety allured me; but the thought of thus publicly confirming

my allegiance, and proclaiming my engagement to the world, made my heart sink.

But whilst I paused for an answer that should be ambiguous and uncompromising, papa stepped in and accepted the invitation with delight and with eagerness.

"I shall bring up the books and manuscripts, George, and we can work away famously; for, of course, Mrs. Featherstone and Freda can entertain your guests."

"Yes, I shall certainly be able to entertain my brother's guests, Mr. Clifford," remarked Mrs. Featherstone, quietly. She made no invidious emphasis in that simple sentence, and her eyes were bent upon the diamond ring which she was twisting round and round upon her finger; but, being interpreted to my acute perception, the words meant:

"I shall entertain the guests. Your daughter will have absolutely nothing to say to it, and she had better not interfere with me!"

But the men, of course, saw nothing.

"That is a most charming woman!" exclaimed papa, when our guests had driven off and we were left alone.

I answered not.

"You are a very fortunate girl, Freda, to have such a delightful person for a sister-in-law."

"I am glad you like her, papa. I am not so sure that I do; and I am quite sure that she dislikes me."

* Papa stopped short, and surveyed me over the top of his eye-glasses with unfeigned amazement.

"You do take the most outrageous fancies, child, of any female thing I ever came across! Dislike you! What can you mean? Why, she was open-mouthed in admiration of you, I assure you! Whilst we were going round the garden before lunch, she said to me what a lucky fellow George was, and declared that she was quite in love with you herself. Those were her very words."

I could not help laughing. "My dearest father, in that dirty dress! Pray remember what an object I looked! And, by the way, how could you be so cruel as to bring her into the library, when you knew I was dusting the books? It was too bad of you, papa!"

"My dear, what was wrong about you? I am sure you looked exceedingly nice—in fact, you always do. There was nothing at all the matter with your appearance, was there?"

"Only that I was as black as an inhabitant of Central Africa!" I answered, laughing.

"Well, it did not signify at all, Freda. No one noticed it, I assure you. Mrs. Featherstone was much taken with you; and I am rejoiced to think, my dear child, that you are to have such a sister and such a companion. You have lived too much alone with old men, my dear; and a lady such as Mrs. Featherstone will be a real advantage to you."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST SKIRMISH.

“Where an equal praise of hope and fear
Does arbitrate the event, my nature is
That I incline to hope rather than fear.”

—MILTON.

A FEW days later I penned the following letter to Bella :

“MY DEAREST BELLA,

“Wonderful things have happened ; papa and I are going, on Tuesday, to spend a week at Eddington ; there is to be a houseful of people and a ball, and Mrs. Featherstone is to do the honours. I *can't* bear her ! she is handsome in person and considered charming in manner ; but unreasonable as it sounds, I have taken a perfectly causeless antipathy to her, which is, I am sure, reciprocated. For all that, I am looking forward to going to Eddington, it will be a change, and any variety is pleasant, to relieve the normal dulness of Slopperton. I shall write and tell you all about our visit.

“However, this is by no means all I have to tell you. Yesterday, Mr. Curtis asked me if I would marry him at the end of October instead of waiting for the new year. The fact is, both he and papa want to be settled before the winter, and our landlord has been here to tell papa he has found a tenant who will take the remainder of our lease off our hands if he can have the house by the 1st of Novem-

ber, as he wants it for the hunting season. It took away my breath at first, I would not hear of it; but papa told me it was quite wrong to let frivolous caprices interfere with everybody else's comfort and convenience, and that I was dreadfully selfish to wish to put off the marriage so long, and it certainly does seem a pity to lose the chance of letting the cottage so advantageously. In short, I suppose you will be very angry, Bella; but I have consented, and my wedding-day is fixed for the 24th of October, and it is now the 16th of August! After all, you know, there really was no object in putting it off; having decided to marry a man it is a pity to do it ungraciously; and papa is very pleased; for it will make a great difference in the comfort of the dear old man to be settled comfortably at Eddington before the winter sets in. Oh! Bella, what shall I say to you? I can almost hear all the angry things you will say of me! Do come to my wedding, darling; I shall want you to be with me so dreadfully. You know I can't help it; and I shall be very happy I daresay by-and-by. Write and tell me you do not think me hateful, and let me look forward to having you here to help me through.

"Your affectionate friend,

"FREDA."

By return of post I received this answer:

"No, Freda, I will *not* come to your wedding. I have no words to tell you how dreadful I think it that you should be *sold* to a man you do not even pretend to love; and as to your father——

Well, I had better, perhaps, not say what I think of *him*. Nothing would induce me to be present. I do not pretend to be particularly unworldly—and I value the good things of life quite as much as any woman—a great deal more than you do—but to see a young girl sacrificed, not to her own desire for a wealthy match—that I could at least understand—but merely to please the whims of two selfish old men, is more than I can bear. I assure you I am too fond of you to be an eye-witness of such a painful ceremony as your wedding would be to me.

“I have shown your letter to Mark, and he quite agrees with me. I have told him that if he can save you before it is too late he will be doing a good action. If you had stayed with me a few days longer I believe you would have found a more powerful argument in your own heart against this marriage than any I am able to use. I wish I could say more. I do not take any interest at all in your visit to Eddington. Pray do not write about it. If you will have the courage to break off this hateful match, come to me at once. I will receive you with open arms ; but till then don’t expect any sympathy from me.

“Yours affectionately,

“ISABELLA THISTLEBY.”

Now, in all this letter, only one sentence produced the smallest impression upon me, or seemed to be of the slightest importance in my eyes.

“*I have shown your letter to Mark, and he quite agrees with me.*” I read these words over and over

again. I pictured to myself the impatient way in which my letter had been flung across the breakfast-table for Captain Thistleby's inspection. Had there come any light into those dark eyes as they had rested upon my handwriting, I wondered, or any gloom upon that handsome face as he had read its purport? Did he give his opinion, that so entirely coincided with Bella's, calmly and dispassionately, as though giving judgment on a case in which he had no personal concern or interest? or had there come a trouble and turmoil into his heart as he read of my wedding-day—the day that was to divide me for ever from himself?

A sort of wild hope that he would save me yet flashed into my mind—that he would never let me go without an effort—that he would come to me, and bid me give up everything for him. And, if so, should I do so? Should I give up my rich husband, and break papa's heart—all for the handsome face of a man I hardly knew? Oh! yes; I thought I would. Let him only come!

I was glad that Mark Thistleby had seen my letter, although, when I wrote it, nothing was further from my thoughts than that he should read it. I lived for the next few days in a vague state of expectation; he would make some sign, I thought; he would come, or he would write. Involuntarily I listened for the sharp ringing of the gate-bell, and my heart beat when the postman came up the gravel-walk. But nothing happened; and time passed on as usual, till at last the day came for our visit to Eddington.

Eddington Hall is a very fine old place, and is one of the show-houses of the county. It is a red-brick Elizabethan mansion, mellowed by time into that delicious colour so dear to a painter's eye, which red-brick alone is able to assume. There are mullioned windows, and great stacks of chimneys, and a broad flight of white stone steps leading up to the terrace-walk in front; a tennis lawn and a bowling green to the right, and a quaint, straight-walked flower garden to the left, with a fountain in the centre of it. It is surrounded on all sides by a deer park, where the trunks of ancient oaks are half-smothered in a thick forest of fern, and a splendid avenue of gigantic elm-trees leads up to the house. You might look all England through, and fail to find such another model of a venerable and beautiful old place as Eddington.

Often as I had been there before I don't know that I was ever more struck by its beauty and its charm than when the modest Slopperton fly, which contained papa and me and our luggage, drew up in front of the door.

George Curtis came across the fine old oak-panelled hall to meet us with courteous words of gentle welcome, and then led us into the drawing-room, where his sister, resplendent in a black and orange satin tea-gown, reclined at full length on an ottoman in the oriel window.

Mrs. Featherstone made a show of welcoming me with cordiality, and then turned to my father with much *empressement* in her manner.

It surprised me that she should take so much

trouble to be pleasant to a prosy old bookworm like papa, but I had yet to learn that any man however old and uninteresting was to Mrs. Featherstone, at least, better than none. Poor papa! his star was not to be for long in the ascendant!

We were the first of the invited guests to arrive. Soon I learnt that several more were expected by the afternoon train. I inquired civilly whether Mr. Featherstone, of whom beyond the bare fact of his existence I knew absolutely nothing, was to be of the party.

"Oh, yes, he is coming, of course; he has been in Norway. I haven't seen him for six weeks."

"You will be delighted to see him again, I suppose?" I remarked, presuming that nothing more polite could possibly be said under the circumstances.

My future sister-in-law stared at me for a minute almost angrily.

"What do you mean? But ah! no," turning off with a short laugh, "of course you don't mean anything. What a dear little *ingénue* you are to be sure!" and she laughed heartily as if I had said something very witty.

"I cannot see what there is so very laughable," I began, somewhat nettled.

"Oh, no, of course not. Leave Mr. Featherstone alone, my dear; he is not interesting—husbands seldom are. You will be more amused by Mrs. Leith, who is coming; she is one of my greatest friends—a very jolly woman, not in the least pretty; in fact, very plain, really, between you and me—but

she is great fun, and will keep us all alive. Thank goodness her husband is not coming—he has got his constituents to look after; fortunately they seem to require an immense amount of talking to, so she isn't very much bothered with him. Then there will be Major Heywood, and Dick Macdonald, who are *my* men, and young Flower, of the Blues, who is Anna Leith's property. You, my dear"—with a playful nod—"have got George, and are amply provided for."

I felt dubious as to my chances of entertainment in this unequal division of the male beings.

"Is there no other lady coming, then?" I asked.

"No; only us three—quite enough to be a cosy party. One night we are to have a dance in honour of you, I believe; there will be women enough, then. The party from Chadley—Lord Holt's, you know—are coming. I don't know who is staying with them yet. I dare say Anna Leith will tell us; she always finds out everything. She is a walking *Morning Post*. It makes her so amusing. She really is very good company."

Evidently, my ideas of "good company" and Clara Featherstone's differed widely. I prudently, however, forbore from saying so. We continued thus on admirable terms together, she discoursing affably, and I listened submissively to the information she imparted, with a running commentary of thoughts to myself the while, until about six o'clock, when I retired to my room to avoid the arrival of the rest of the company, who were expected about that time.

When I came downstairs in my evening dress,

the long drawing-room was still empty. I went and sat in one of the low window seats in the deep recess made by the thickness of the old walls, which were sheltered by heavy brocaded curtains, and looked out of the window through the fast-gathering twilight. Close below the windows lay the smooth velvet turf of the bowling-green, which no desecrating tennis net had ever invaded, nor ever should, I mentally vowed ; but over which a couple of stately peacocks were slowly parading with conscious dignity.

Beyond was a flower-garden, and the tall, smooth trunks of giant beech trees. As I sat and gazed delightedly at the fair and lovely scene, women's voices, and the rustle of their silken garments, broke in upon my solitude.

"Is she the right sort?"

This enigmatical question was spoken by a shrilly-pitched voice.

"Oh, no! not our style at all," replied the deeper tones of my sister-in-law to be. "Very slow, and knows nobody, which makes her extra dull. However, I am bound to be civil, as my brother seems bent on marrying her, and it won't do for me to quarrel with Eddington. She hasn't a dress to her back, my dear, except cottons. You should have seen her the day I went over to call; she was a perfect scarecrow! as black as if she had been up the chimney. She was sweeping the room, I believe."

"Good heavens! Have they no servants?"

"Apparently not. I wonder George ~~shows~~ it."

"Is she pretty?"

"Oh, dear no! not what I call pretty at all. Oh! decidedly not; only the men are so queer, one never knows what they will admire; a may-pole of a girl, with round, grey eyes, a little turned-up nose, and with reddish-brown hair—very ugly I consider it—and I *think* she dyes it."

I laughed aloud, and jumping up from my low seat, stood before the discomfited pair.

"No, no, my dear Mrs. Featherstone, that is going a little too far! It may be ugly; but I assure you it is quite guiltless of hair-dye."

I don't think I ever in all my life enjoyed myself so intensely as I did at that moment. Every variety of expression: dismay, confusion, and rage, swept across my opponent's face, whilst I stood confronting her with all the beaming radiance of triumph in mine.

"Really, Miss Clifford," she stammered at last, summoning up offended dignity to her aid, and forgetting to address me by my Christian name—"really, I could not have believed that a lady could do such a thing as to listen to what she was not intended to hear."

"How could I help listening when you spoke so loud?" I retorted, shrugging my shoulders.

"You should have gone away."

"Not very easily. I could not get out of the window, and there was no other method of retreating. Pray do not distress yourself, Mrs. Featherstone. It was quite refreshing to me, and very amusing, to hear your opinion of my appearance. I am not the least offended, I assure you. Let us for-

get this little *contretemps*, and please introduce me to Mrs. Leith."

The introduction was gone through awkwardly enough, and then Mrs. Featherstone, turning to her friend, said :

"We must be very careful for the future, Anna, what we say when we come into empty rooms. One never knows who may be hiding."

There was a dangerous look in the woman's eyes as she said this, that should have warned me. But strong in the knowledge of my position, and flushed with my triumph over her, I forgot prudence and became foolhardy.

"Yes ; I would be careful," I said, with a mocking smile, "*especially* at Eddington."

After that speech, my reader, if a woman, will readily understand that my fate was signed and sealed. My character was as good as gone, and my reputation already torn to rags. From that hour there was to be war to the knife against me !

CHAPTER VIII.

A DINNER PARTY.

"Can't I another's face commend,
And to her virtues prove a friend,
But instantly your forehead frowns
As if her merit lessened yours."

—E. MOORE.

THE gentlemen had by this time assembled in the room.

Some sort of introduction took place between me and the new-comers ; and dinner being announced, I found that I was told off to the care of Mr. Featherstone.

Mr. Featherstone answered perfectly to his wife's description of him—he was very uninteresting.

He began by affably informing me that he had won a “pot of money” at Brighton and Lewes races.

“I don't mind telling you, you know, as you are going to marry the old boy”—with a sideways nod of his head in the direction of our host ; “and a deuced good spec for you, too ! And that you see makes you and me relations, after a fashion. Now I can put you up to a good thing. Tell me”—lowering his voice to a confidential whisper—“how do you stand for the Cambridgeshire ?”

“How do I stand ?” I repeat, marvelling.

“Yes ; what are you on?—the favourite ?”

“I have not bet anything—if that is what you mean,” I answer. “I don't know even the name of the favourite, nor when the Cambridgeshire races take place.”

At this astounding admission, Mr. Featherstone actually laid down his knife and fork to turn round and stare at me.

“By Jove !” he ejaculated, softly, below his breath. “What a rum sort of girl you must be !”

After that, considering me doubtless deficient in intellect, he wasted no more conversation upon me, but devoted himself assiduously to his dinner, with a serious and abstracted expression upon his face, as though revolving in his own mind the extraordinary

physiological problem, thus for the first time presented to his notice, of a fellow-creature who did not know, nor even apparently care, when the Cambridge-shire comes off.

I was thus at leisure to observe the proceedings of my neighbours.

Mrs. Featherstone reigned at the top of the table, with papa on her right and the man she had described as Dick Macdonald on her left.

Alas! for papa. He was as her sporting husband would have said, "nowhere!"

Mrs. Featherstone's "nods and becks and wreathed smiles" were all bestowed upon her left-hand neighbour. This gentleman, whose figure gave one the impression of being stuffed and subsequently trussed for roasting, had dark hair and a luxuriant beard, which had been evidently carefully anointed with subtle-scented washes and brilliantines; whilst a mingled flavour of Jockey Club, Ess. Bouquet, and other perfumes irradiating from his person, surrounded him, as it were, with an invisible nimbus of fragrant odours. In fact he appeared to have been lately translated from Messrs. Truefitts' shop window, where, as a living and practical advertisement of the art of the hairdresser and perfumer, he might have been of considerable use to that highly-eminent firm.

He is turning his face, which is permanently flushed—let us charitably say with exposure to the weather—towards his neighbour, and from the very low tone of his voice, and the careful way in which he shields his mouth with his hand lest any one

should catch what he is saying, and also from the fits of laughter with which they are both convulsed, I should judge his conversation to be of a very racy description.

Mrs. Leith, at the other end of the table, looks longingly towards them, and seems dreadfully bored by George Curtis's somewhat prosy civilities, under which she yawns openly. An evil chance has delegated her property, "young Flower of the Blues," to my side; whilst Major Heywood, as belonging to her friend, is not, I presume, available for herself. Moreover, that gentleman, whose distinguishing features are long, fair moustaches and an eye-glass, has fixed that implement firmly into his right eye, and is staring through it persistently at me.

"Who the deuce is that lovely gal?" I hear very plainly across the table.

Mrs. Leith says "Hush!" and proceeds to whisper the desired information with a side-glance at the master of the house.

"Awfully pretty—regular nailer!" replies the unabashed warrior, in a perfectly audible voice. Whereat Mrs. Featherstone, in the distance, pricks up her ears, and flashes a swift, scowling glance upon me.

Young Flower, whose looks I rather like—he seems a quiet and harmless youth, with an honest, boyish face—here comes to my rescue, with a laugh.

"Poor old Heywood is deaf, you know, Miss Clifford; he never hears anything he is saying himself. It's rather trying for you."

"Very," I answered, laughing too. "But I am

glad he is an unconscious offender, as I need not be angry at his too open admiration."

"He is a lucky fellow, I think. We others, who *can* hear our own words, may only think our pretty speeches, we mustn't speak them."

"I wish he wouldn't stare—an eye-glass always gives me cold shudders."

"Horrible things—they always glitter in the wrong place! Look at Heywood now, he appears to be squinting diabolically."

I look up; the unshielded eye of my opposite neighbour is wandering anxiously up the table towards his offended divinity, whilst the eye-glassed optic, by a vagary on the part of the chandelier, appears to be still fixed thoughtfully upon myself.

The effect is so ludicrous that we both laugh immoderately, and I am altogether beginning to enjoy myself somewhat, when suddenly I become aware that Mrs. Leith is regarding me severely.

It strikes me at once that I am guilty of piracy; for have I not been specially informed that Mr. Flower is appropriated to her, and is therefore not to be tampered with! There is a new version of the Tenth Commandment, well understood among the women of the present day, and which it is death and annihilation to transgress—"Thou shalt not flirt with thy neighbour's admirer." With her husband—yes, by all means, if it amuses you; but with one, be it the very least, of her followers—no, not at your peril!

I was becoming rapidly initiated into the mysteries of the new code of laws, and judged it prudent, if I

valued my peace of mind, to submit to them. So I left "young Flower" to his own devices, and Mrs. Leith smiled upon me once more.

I did not altogether dislike Mrs. Leith. She was loud-voiced and *prononcée* in her manners, and her conversation was singularly meaningless and silly, but she did not look bad-tempered, and unless I actively interfered with her, would not, I imagined, make herself in any way disagreeable to me. Without being in the least pretty, she had certain attractions in the shape of a small, well-shaped head and a perfectly neat and not ungraceful figure; and, moreover, she was very well dressed.

Good dressing, I have noticed, goes a long way towards making a woman thoroughly amiable and at peace with all mankind—and womankind too—*bien entendu!* No woman is ever awkward and ill at ease when her clothes are thoroughly well-made and suitable to the occasion. She has a comfortable inner consciousness of being "a success," which imparts a serenity to her mind compared to which the satisfaction of an unsullied conscience is utter disquietude. When a woman is easy in her mind about her dress, it follows generally that she is disposed to be indulgent and affable towards the peccadilloes of her less well-dressed sisters. I think Mrs. Leith might possibly have pardoned me for absorbing the attentions of young Flower; but she would never have forgiven me had I cut her out in the matter of dress.

Dinner over, without further *contretemps*, we three ill-assorted women, complying with the cus-

toms of a barbarous country, adjourned together to the drawing-room. Talk about the *mauvais quart d'heure* of the ante-prandial season, it is nothing to the misery which we wretched females have to endure when we are thus left alone to each other's tender mercies, in that dismal hour after the feast is over.

Then it is, that upon the heads of the younger and more attractive among us, are poured out the full vials of wrath. Then it is, we discover by little sneers and sarcasms, and scarcely veiled innuendoes, how far astray we have wandered in search of our own amusements from the beaten track which it is never safe to abandon.

The general conduct of young girls at a dinner-party is pleasantly discussed between Mrs. Featherstone and Mrs. Leith, who occasionally turn slightly towards me as though to include me in the conversation—thus:

“Lady Snobbingtown *never* asks girls to her dinner-parties now—she told me she considers them out of their place.”

“So they are, dear,” rejoins Mrs. Leith, who generally echoes her friend's observations *verbatim*.

“Nevertheless girls *must* dine,” I hazard.

Mrs. Featherstone looks over my head as though she had not heard me.

“I can't bear to see girls engrossing the attention of gentlemen at a dinner-table,” she says pointedly.

“Dreadful!” cries Mrs. Leith, with a holy shudder. “A girl ought only to speak to the man who takes her down—don't you think so, Miss Clifford?”

"That depends on the man," I answer.

"Oh, well, I am thankful no one could ever say of me before I married that I made myself conspicuous at dinner-parties," continues my sister-in-law to me, irrelevantly.

"No, indeed, dearest," murmurs Mrs. Leith, who was probably in short frocks and pinafores at that somewhat antediluvian period.

As I dislike being "talked at," I retire to the piano, and amuse myself by playing "Ten Little Niggers," with one hand, whilst my two companions, having succeeded in chasing me from the scene, sit down together and begin a long recital of the sayings and doings of all the women of their acquaintance, whose characters, by the time this dreary dispensation comes to an end, and the men re-enter, they have completely torn into ribbons.

The evening passes away dully enough. George Curtis, at the far end of the room, has spread out a perfect feast of some rare old manuscripts, which he has lately picked up in an out-of-the-way little bookseller's shop in the adjoining county town; and over which he and papa remain poring together in a sort of literary paradise, unconscious of the sayings and doings of us lower mortals. Mr. Featherstone goes to sleep in an arm-chair, with his legs spread straight out, his hands in his trouser-pockets, and his mouth wide open, and altogether looks such an ugly and revolting object that I wonder his wife can bear to allow him to remain so. Major Heywood, anxious probably to atone for his ill-starred admiration of myself at dinner-time, makes for Mrs.

Featherstone, and so and dry out of danger, the other pocket as the capabilities of the pond; and whilst she is admit of, begins an animated conversation to her side, number one sation with her. My friend, Mr.

duty," and Mrs. Leith, having come sheer feminine him in a snug corner, is evidently resolved to disagree him escape.

Under these circumstances, Mr. Macdonald, then us; ing sweetness as he approaches, bears down upon me.

He draws a chair close in front of the music-stool, upon which I am idly gyrating, and turning his back to the rest of the company, so as to make his attentions more pointed, stares up into my face with odious familiarity.

"Well, Miss Clifford, I am coming to have a little talk with you," he begins, condescendingly.

"Oh!" I reply, not encouragingly.

"You know I really am very fond of girls though they aren't 'the thing' now at all. No one talks to a woman unless she is married; but I think we all carry that too far—it's a mistake. Now I really quite enjoy a chat with a pretty young girl occasionally."

"How kind!" I answer, suddenly returning to the tune of the "Ten Little Niggers," every one of whom I envy from the bottom of my heart at this moment. Of us two, how fervently I wish that one, and that one Mr. Macdonald, would "choke his little self."

"Yes, that's right, play something, and then no one will hear what I am saying to you!" says this atrocious man.

"That depends on the man," bringing the "Nig-

"Oh, well, I am thankful not throwing up my hands
me before I married that. They burnt me.

at dinner-parties," say? You are a charming crea-
irrelevantly. a whisper, with a leer, which Mr.

"No, indeed! I suppose will captivate me.
was probably I get rid of this detestable man! I
somewhere in the room, hoping to catch Mr. Curtis's
At; but alas! no rescue is to be expected from that
quarter—only the top of his bald head is visible,
stooping over the manuscripts. Papa's hands are
tearing his own hair, by which token I perceive that
there is a dispute between them, and that it is as
vain to hope that my signals of distress may be seen
and answered by either of them as though I were
shipwrecked upon Arctic seas.

But if the two old gentlemen, my natural pro-
tectors, are in blissful ignorance of my situation,
Mrs. Featherstone is evidently most painfully alive
to it. I find that lady's eyes fixed upon me with a
mixture of rage and disgust that is absolutely comic.
She cannot attend to the soft nothings of the swain-
in-waiting, owing to her intense disturbance at the
attitude of the one who is straying from his lawful
allegiance. I can see that she is straining every nerve
to listen to what Mr. Macdonald is saying to me.
Poor woman! I feel quite sorry for her; it must be
so distressing to be perpetually striving to keep two
men at once under one's eye. Why was she so foolish
as to provide herself with a couple? She reminds
me of a hen trying to keep two ducklings under her
wing at once. Futile attempt! As fast as one is

safely secured, high and dry out of danger, the other has waddled off into the pond; and whilst she is trying to lure him again to her side, number one will be back into the water.

Seeing this, I laugh; and, out of sheer feminine malice, determine upon not being more disagreeable to my attendant knight than I can help. Mrs. Featherstone has chosen to make it war between us; let us see if I cannot fight her with her own weapons. I have good looks, and twenty years the advantage of her; it will go hard with me if I cannot discomfit her!

I turn to Mr. Macdonald with a pleasant smile: "Shall I sing you something?" If I sing, he must perforce hold his tongue, I reflect.

"Yes, do; you have a beautiful voice, I am sure. I can see it by your eyes."

"How remarkably clever you must be!" And then I begin without further preamble:

"Near Woodstock town I chanced to stray
When birds were blithe and fields were gay,
Till, by the glassy river side,
A weeping maiden I espied.
'Alas!' she said, 'my love's untrue—
Another damsel he doth woo;
Forgetting all the vows that he
To love's last hour would faithful be.'"

Every one listened in silence; and when I had finished there was a chorus of applause from everybody but Mrs. Featherstone, who, turning round to Major Heywood, said, in a distinct voice:

"I never care for theatrical ballad-singing in a

drawing-room; it is very seldom well done, except by professionals."

This remark, falling as it did upon the moment of silence which succeeded to the burst of applause from my audience, made everybody look very uncomfortable. It was so evidently meant for me; and yet it was so impossible for anybody to take up the cudgels for me without making the rudeness of it more apparent, that no one answered. Then it was that Mr. Curtis, who had left papa over the manuscripts alone, came up behind me, and laid kind hands on each of my shoulders.

"No one, not even a professional, *could* sing ballads better than Freda does, to my mind," he said.

There was a murmur of assent; and Mrs. Featherstone reddened, feeling, probably, that she had gone a little too far.

I looked up gratefully at him. Never, possibly, had I been nearer to loving George Curtis than at that moment.

CHAPTER IX.

"PET."

"Men are the sport of circumstances, when
The circumstances seem the sport of men."

—BROWN.

LET it not be supposed that I had forgotten Mark Thistleby all this time. Not all the delights of Eddington—not all the fascination which the pres-

pect of being the mistress of so charming a house could not fail to have over me, nor the sense of position and power so dear instinctively to any woman who knows herself to be young and good-looking, and which my position in the county as George Curtis's wife would give me—not any of these things could make me forget the face of the man who had exercised so sudden and so complete a mastership over my imagination.

It began to occur to me, in a manner more forcible than pleasant, not so much that I was not at all in love with Mr. Curtis, but that I was very much in love with somebody else. Ever since my return from Seacliff, sleeping or waking, I had been unable to banish Mark Thistleby's image from before my eyes, and the tone of his caressing words from my too retentive memory. The more I had striven the less I had been able to succeed. In vain, by a praiseworthy course of subtle arguments, I had endeavoured, with difficulty, to reconcile myself to the unalterable verdict of Fate.

I forced myself to contemplate calmly the perplexities of my situation, and I called my reason and my common-sense to my aid, and to assist in banishing my foolish and unprofitable dreams.

On the one hand, I said to myself, there is this Captain Thistleby—a cavalry officer, therefore, *ex officio*, a flirt—whose attentions during one day, however pointed, could have had no possible depth or significance; whose income, as I had always understood from Bella, was exceedingly limited, and who, moreover, to quote his own words, was "in no

want of a wife," and who, moreover, had sworn never to see me again.

On the other hand, there was my betrothed, dispensing riches to myself and papa, and entire satisfaction to everybody concerned—excepting myself. To exchange the one lover for the other was, to begin with, an utter impossibility; therefore, to reconcile myself to what was absolutely inevitable, and to get over my little fancy for Bella's handsome brother-in-law as quickly as might be, was not only my wisest, but my only course of action.

All these reflections were very sensible and very true; but, alas! I found them strangely ineffectual.

Two days passed at Eddington quietly, and, for me, not altogether pleasantly. I should not have enjoyed myself at all had it not been for the prospect of the dance, or rather the ball—for the entertainment kept on growing in size and importance—which was to take place at the end of the week. I was passionately fond of dancing, and looked forward with eagerness to this pleasant break in the dulness of my visit to Eddington.

For dull it was; the gentlemen were out shooting all day, and every day; and I was very glad of it, for though I rather liked Mr. Flower, and always hoped to be seated near him at dinner, I found Major Heywood intolerably dull, and I perfectly detested Mr. Macdonald. Papa and Mr. Curtis did not, of course, join the shooting party; but they spent most of the day in the library, poring over their beloved books. Thence they emerged only at meal-times with abstracted, absent faces, and had to

be asked several times what they would eat before they could be sufficiently roused to the vulgar necessities of life to appreciate the difference between roast mutton and cold chicken, until papa would soften somewhat under the influence of Mrs. Featherstone's blandishments; for, failing the presence of any better specimen of the male species, that lady exerted herself to the utmost to be civil and pleasant to him.

Luncheon swallowed rapidly, and as though every moment was of untold value, the two old men would retire again to their studies, and we women were alone together again until dinner-time.

They were not pleasant to me, those two women; they tacitly but determinedly ignored me—talking of mutual friends and united interests so peristently that I had no chance of joining in their conversations. They discussed persons utterly unknown to me; they spoke of scandals well-aired in the world of fashion, but of which I was perfectly ignorant; they avoided generalities with a perseverance which I must believe to have been intentional; and, in short, they made me painfully conscious of being perpetually in their way.

One morning, the day before the ball to which I looked forward so much, Mrs. Leith came flying into the room with an open letter in her hand.

"*Who* do you suppose is staying at Chadley?" she exclaimed, excitedly. "The dearest darling in the world? Such a friend of yours, Clara! Guess who. You will be so pleased."

Mrs. Featherstone, thus adjured, mentioned half

a dozen persons, all of them men, whom, I imagine, she considered in the light of "dearest darlings;" but none of her surmises were apparently correct.

"What do you say to *Pet*?" cried Mrs. Leith, triumphantly.

"What, dear old *Pet*? How charming! Why, he will be coming over with the Holt party to-morrow night. How delightful!"

"Yes; I had no idea he knew them at all. Mrs. Lowndes mentioned it in her letter quite at the end, where it's all crossed. I did not read it till just now."

"But, my dear Anna, we must positively get him away from there. He will be falling in love with Lady Margaret, or some such horror; besides, he would be much jollier with us."

"Can't you write, and ask him to stop when he comes to-morrow night? Send over a man with a letter."

"Yes; of course I can. Come, and let us write a note to him."

The two friends sat down together at a distant writing-table, with their heads together; and, to judge from the laughter which went on, I should imagine the note of invitation concocted between them must have been a highly humorous production.

Presently the bell was rung, and orders given that a groom should ride over at once to Lord Holt's with the letter.

Now, I could not help feeling exceedingly curious as to this unknown being, whose vicinity aroused such rapturous expressions on the part of the two

friends, and who rejoiced in the so endearing a cognomen as that of "Pet."

"Pet" was, I gathered from the above conversation, undoubtedly a male being, and presumably a full-grown man, although, had I not known the tastes and peculiarities of my friends, I might easily have imagined, from so caressing a name, that the possessor of it was some well-bred pug or Skye terrier, or, at the most, some captivating child.

But from the allusions to "Lady Margaret," whose incipient rivalry was to be thus timely crushed, it appeared to me that, beyond all doubt, "Pet" had obtained the years of discretion. Probably he was one of those little *duo decimo* editions of manhood whom women are so universally fond of, who, by their diminutiveness and their saucy speeches, win their way to greater privileges and freedoms than are generally accorded to their larger brethren; who sit at ladies' feet holding their skeins of silk, or playing with the charms on their chatelaines, enjoying the good things thus freely granted to them wonderfully, and exciting the envy of bigger and less-favoured men.

"Pet" was evidently a man after this fashion, his *soubriquet* spoke for itself. He was, I supposed, small, dandy, and curly-haired, with tiny, patent leather encased feet, and hands that took "ladies' sizes" in gloves. As such he would have, beyond being a physiological study, no sort of attraction for myself.

Nevertheless, I had a certain amount of feminine curiosity about him.

I gathered later on in the day when the messenger had returned from his errand to Chadley Castle, that "Pet," whoever he was, had accepted Mrs. Featherstone's invitation ; that he was to come over with Lord Holt's party to the ball, stay that night at Eddington, and go out shooting with the gentlemen of our party the next day.

The eventful day arrived at length. My dress—simple as it was, and relieved only from its dead whiteness by bunches of delicate ferns and rich-coloured exotic blossoms which I believe Charley Flower had ransacked all the hot-houses, and tortured the minds of all the gardeners, to procure for me—was nevertheless, I felt, a success. I looked my best.

Nevertheless, as the hour approached for the arrival of the guests, I felt unaccountably nervous, and creeping down into the big, empty ball-room, I ensconced myself shyly in the deep recess of one of the windows whence I could see and hardly be seen myself.

From my sheltered corner I watched the country squires and dames with their bebies of awkward or graceful daughters, and their, for the most part, ungainly hobbydehoy sons as they filed into the room. Some of them I knew slightly, but most of them were strangers ; for although we had lived for years at the Slopperton Cottage, that humble abode and its inhabitants had not been much given either to dispense or to receive hospitality, and we were as little known to most of the county magnates as though we had dwelt in Whitechapel.

The room was filling rapidly, when, with a little flutter of expectation at the doorway suitable to the importance of the guests, the party from Chadley Castle was announced.

I bent forward eagerly in my corner to watch their entrance, as Mrs. Featherstone, resplendent in ruby satin and diamonds, swept forward to receive them with gracious *empressment*; and even Mr. Curtis left off an interesting mineralogical discussion with an ancient scientist, whom he had button-holed into a corner, to attend to his duties as host.

First comes Lord Holt himself, a mild-faced little man, with a deprecating, apologetic air, as though he would perpetually be saying, "Don't be alarmed, good folks; although I am the biggest man in the county, I really don't want to frighten you. I assure you I am most gentle in my habits, and not even a child among you need stand in fear of me."

Not so his wife. Lady Holt is clad in importance and a Parisian gown, of both of which she is equally conscious, and which strike envy into the heart of every female beholder. Even Mrs. Featherstone appears to be subdued, and to tremble before her. To the world at large, Lady Holt appears to be saying, "Fall down and worship, oh, ye lesser mortals! and consider yourselves lucky that you are not blinded by the dazzling glory that surrounds so great a personage as myself."

Lady Margaret follows in the wake of her parents, and is a paler and plainer edition of her mother, whom she much resembles. After her follow two

couples whose names I have not caught, and whose appearance does not interest me.

"And now for 'Pet!'" I say to myself, bending forward.

The doorway darkens with a tall, broad-shouldered figure. I catch a glimpse of a close-cropped head, a long, tawny moustache, and deep hazel eyes that are not looking my way, and in another moment Mark Thistleby and Mrs. Featherstone are shaking hands heartily like old friends who are rejoiced to meet each other again.

CHAPTER X.

THE BALL.

"O, while all conscious memory holds her power,
Can I forget that sweetly painful hour."

—FALCONER.

AH! my tell-tale heart, will it never stop beating.

I shrink back into my corner and hope that no one will see me.

So *this* is their "Pet," of whom they talked with such familiar intimacy! What evil chance of fate has thrown him again across my path? *Is* it chance? or has he come to find me out? Ah! no; if he is here by design it is not for me—I dare not flatter myself that it can be for me; it is to worship at Mrs. Featherstone's shrine—it is for her that he is here! Already he is bending down towards her with that caressing manner which I remember all too well, and gazing with eager eyes into the bold,

handsome face that does not shrink from his ardent looks.

And she *is* handsome!—horribly, terribly handsome! I never recognised it so plainly before. It is for her he is here; he does not even know that I am in the room; he has not even seen me, nor even once looked round to seek me; he is utterly and wholly absorbed in his delight at meeting Clara Featherstone.

Suddenly a flash of memory carries me back to a stormy evening not a month ago. I hear the splash of the waves around me; I feel the gentle pressure of a sheltering arm that is round me, and the warm grasp of a hand in which mine is clasped; and then, oh! crowning humiliation! I seem to feel again the swift touch of his moustache upon my cheek. Remembering it, I shrink still further into my corner, crimsoning hotly with anger and with shame.

And then the music of the first quadrille strikes up, the people standing in front of me make way, and I hear George Curtis saying: "Where is she?" and he leads up Lord Holt, and introduces me to him.

"I hope you will not mind dancing a square dance with an old man for once, my dear young lady," he says, graciously, and conveys me off on his arm, amid the wondering gaze of the bystanders, towards the top of the room.

On the way he pauses for a minute, and introduces me to his wife and daughter, who both shake hands with me, and several other people speak to

me kindly. I begin to perceive that as the future mistress of Eddington I am a person of some importance, and that most of the county people are curious to inspect me.

As I move onwards, upon Lord Holt's arm, the skirts of my dress brush across Mark Thistleby's feet, but I hold my head very high, and look straight in front of me, as if I did not see him.

Oh! those dreadful Lancers. Would they never, I wondered, come to an end? I talked excitedly to my august partner, had I not talked I must have cried; of what we conversed I have not now the faintest recollection. I do not think that I heard or understood one word that he said to me, and yet I chatted excitedly—merrily, even—whilst my eyes were incessantly drawn, as by a magnet, to a broad back and a brown head in a neighbouring set, not a dozen yards off, dancing with Clara Featherstone.

The Lancers come to an end, and Lord Holt proceeds to walk me away down the room. I think he is telling me some anecdote of adventures in his younger days at a masked ball in Florence. He laughs a good deal, and I laugh too—out of sympathy I imagine, for I do not quite realise the point of the story. As we go, our royal progress is frequently impeded by dancing men clamouring for my card.

"The first waltz is ours, Miss Clifford," says Charley Flower; "and a friend of mine is most anxious to be introduced to you."

"You are going to give me a waltz, I hope?" shouts the deaf Major Heywood. And then several other men are introduced to me, and I scrawl ille-

gible hieroglyphics upon my dancing card. I sit soon nearly filled up.

"You are the Queen of the Ball," says Lig shiny-smiling gallantly, as the music strikes my ears, "I resigns me to young Flower; and when he stretches am glad—glad that Mark Thistleby should find me out-courted and sought after, so that he may not for a moment imagine that his going or his coming is of the slightest importance to me."

But as the evening wears away, and dance after dance goes by, and still he has made no sign, no token that he even sees me, my flutter of defiance dies away, and my eyes wander wistfully towards him.

Not once have our eyes met. Captain Thistleby has been dancing as much as myself, principally with my future sister-in-law, and the chances and changes of the ball-room have brought him more than once in close proximity to me, and yet never to my knowledge has he looked at me.

This line of action is so marked and so unnatural that I cannot believe that it is not intentional. A perfect stranger would, in all probability, have glanced at me occasionally; and as I am certain that he cannot have forgotten me, it follows that he must be avoiding me designedly. But why should he be so cruelly insulting as to ignore me altogether? Even as Bella's friend, if not as his own, he might have given me some, if ever so slight, a recognition.

The flush of excitement fades out of my face, and my heart turns sick with a nameless misery as I

watch him bending down to whisper into Mr. Featherstone's willing ear. At all events he is amusing himself very well, for he is flirting with her desperately.

"How pale you look!" says Charley Flower who is dancing with me. "You have been pretty well danced to pieces this evening."

"I *am* tired," I acknowledge. "Is not the next dance a polka? I think I will go and sit in the conservatory and rest a little. I believe I am engaged to Mr. Macdonald, but I don't want to dance. If I get away quietly he won't find me."

"Yes, let us come. You will let me sit out with you, won't you, Miss Clifford?"

Mr. Flower has been waxing dangerously tender during the last *post-supper* hour.

"Not for the world. What would Mrs. Leith say?"

"Oh, bother Mrs. Leith! Let me stop with you."

"No, please don't. I have such a headache. I want to be quite alone. You may come back and fetch me when the dance is over."

"I am so sorry. Can't I get you anything? A glass of sherry? Are you sure you like to be here?"

"Yes, quite sure." And he goes.

The conservatory does not open out of the ballroom, but out of the morning-room on the further side of the hall. Through the open doors I can hear the faint strains of the music, and see the whirl of white and pink tulle skirts and black coats going round and round on a never-ending treadmill.

It is large, and cool, and dimly lighted. I sit down on a bench in the corner behind a big shiny-leaved camellia-bush, which completely shelters me, and wearily close my eyes, feeling utterly wretched and worn out.

A quick step comes across the tessellated pavement, and some one says, in a quiet voice: "You have not one dance left, I suppose?"

"Not one," I answer, in the same tone, whilst my pulses start off at a wild gallop, and the hot blood rushes up into my face.

Mark Thistleby sits down beside me.

"Why have you behaved so rudely to me the whole evening?" I ask angrily.

He laughs softly, but does not answer the question.

"What a snug corner you have found for yourself, Freda!" He utters my name softly and caressingly, and his eyes look longingly at me. Can this be the same man whom I watched ten minutes ago flirting with Mrs. Featherstone?

"Why did you pretend not to know me?—why would you not look at me before?" I say, indignantly.

"I am looking at you now," he answers, tormentingly; and there is no doubt of it; he is looking at me so fixedly that I cannot raise my eyes to his.

"Answer my question. I *will* be answered!" I repeat, stamping my foot, and crimsoning hotly beneath his gaze.

Mark Thistleby laughs.

"You *will* be answered? Very well, then, listen. Once upon a time there was a rich man who owned

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Mark Thistleby laughs.

"You *will* be answered? Very well, then, listen. Once upon a time there was a rich man who owned

a pearl of great price. In the strongest room of his castle he concealed this treasure; the windows were closed up, the door was furnished with bolts and bars, with chains and locks of elaborate workmanship, and numerous warders were stationed around to guard the jewel from harm. Now there was a very poor man—a bad man—a blackguard—a thief, indeed, he may be called—who desired the rich man's pearl more than any other earthly good. He made up his mind to steal it, and, in the guise of a friend, he gained admission into the house. He had armed himself to the teeth with crowbars, skeleton-keys, pick-locks, etc., but wisely he concealed them. You would call that thief a great fool, would you not, if he had come in brandishing his crowbars and skeleton-keys about his head? Do you understand my little story, Miss Clifford?"

I understood it all too well, with a great guilty gladness, but I answered not. I felt his ardent looks upon me; every word that he spoke thrilled me from head to foot, and yet I was incapable of speaking a single word.

Seemingly he was satisfied with my silence, for presently he said, in a lighter tone:

"Do you know that I am stopping here to-night?"

"Yes."

"What time do they breakfast here?"

"About half-past nine generally. I daresay we may be later to-morrow morning."

"Nothing in the world would do you so much good as a walk before breakfast. I shall get up early, and be at the end of the avenue at eight o'clock; if you

feel inclined, come and take a walk with me. Here comes your partner to fetch you. Good-night."

He touched my hand lightly, and was gone ere Charley Flower, coming back to look for me, had reached my side.

"Do you know that fellow?" he asks, looking after the retreating figure of my lover.

"Slightly," I answer.

"Good-looking chap, isn't he? They say he is awful nuts on Mrs. Featherstone." Which was cheering intelligence!

CHAPTER XI.

MY MUDDY BOOTS.

"Morn,
Wak'd by the circling hours, with rosy hand
Unbarr'd the gates of light."

—MILTON.

How pleasant it is to be out at eight o'clock in the morning! Birds were twittering in the trees; the fresh breeze fluttered keen and sweet about us as we walked; the labourers at their work looked up as we passed, and wished us good-day; the children at their early rambles among the mushroom meadows shouted gaily to each other as we went by;—everything and everybody seemed glad to be awake to another day. Mark and I caught the general infection, and stepped along briskly side by side.

It was very wrong: I had no business to be tramping along the lanes at eight o'clock in the morning with

What had he to say to me? Why did he not speak openly, or else not speak at all.

"Are you happy, Freda?" he said, softly, bending down to look into my face—just as, I swiftly remembered, he had bent down last night to look into Clara Featherstone's. The recollection lashed me into fury.

"*Perfectly*, thank you," I replied, with my face set cold and hard.

He drew himself up stiffly.

"In that case I have nothing more to say."

"That is lucky, as you have also no more time to say it in. See, we are caught like a couple of naughty children!"

We were close to the house again, and a turn of the path brought us suddenly face to face with Mrs. Featherstone and Mr. Macdonald.

"We have been for a stroll in the shrubbery whilst waiting for you lazy people to come down to breakfast!" says Mark, almost before we had all shaken hands, forgetting the old adage, *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse*.

"Indeed! how *very* muddy the shrubbery walks must be, judging from the state of Miss Clifford's boots."

General attention was thus called to my feet, which, indeed, bore undeniable traces of our tramp through the narrow lanes.

I could not help laughing at Mrs. Featherstone's sharpness in finding us out, especially as Captain Thistleby improved matters by looking hopelessly confused.

"I am afraid my boots got muddy in the lane," I said, good-temperedly, thinking it best to put a bold face on a bad business. "I think I had better go in and change them."

"How extraordinarily free and easy the manners of the girls of the present day are!" moralized Mrs. Featherstone, with virtuous contempt. And so evidently was the remark meant for me to hear as I leave them, that I looked back and retorted laughingly:

"You see, we take example by the married women." Which defiant remark brought a fine tragedy scowl promptly into her beetling brows.

Breakfast after that was a painful ordeal. Mark Thistleby, who was a moral coward, as indeed most men are—specially with regard to women—had placed himself next to Mrs. Featherstone, and was apparently exerting himself to the uttermost to restore himself to her good graces—a servility which absolutely enraged me. Mrs. Leith was trying her hand upon Mr. Macdonald, who had evidently related my little misadventure to her delighted ears. Perhaps he meant to pay me out for having snubbed him on our first acquaintance. Mrs. Leith was delighted; she kept looking across the table, with an expression, partly horror, partly awe-stricken respect, at the girl who could so far dare to defy fate and decorum as to venture out for a walk before breakfast with Mrs. Featherstone's prime favourite.

"It really was very plucky of her," I heard her say; "but she ought to have covered her retreat better. Clara will never forgive her."

I was seated between Mr. Featherstone and my future owner, the master of the house. It was not a position that I should have coveted, but the wheel of Fate has a habit of trundling everybody into the wrong places at breakfast time.

George Curtis hoped I was not very tired after last night's dissipation, and that I had enjoyed myself, and added kindly that I looked very nice, and that many people admired me. Dear old George! if only you were my uncle, or my grandfather, or my cousin's husband, or anything, in short, save what you were to me, how easily I could have learned to love you!

Mr. Featherstone looked up from behind the *Sportsman*, to remark to me with solemnity that the odds were 7 to 4 on Highlander.

"You had better take my tip, Miss Clifford; to-morrow it will be too late," he added, with the air of an archangel pronouncing the doom of a sinner.

"But I really don't understand what 'the odds' mean," I replied, laughing. And Mr. Featherstone returned to his sporting paper with a heavy sigh.

Upon which Charley Flower leant forward, and tried to entice me into a tender conversation across the table, to which publicity I decidedly objected.

Breakfast was over at length, and in the general move from the table, Mark came to my side.

"You had better not speak to me," I said, viciously, in a low voice. "Mrs. Featherstone does not approve of it."

"Mrs. Featherstone is one of those women who

never do approve of one's speaking to any one but herself."

"I wonder you venture to incur her disapproval then."

Captain Thistleby laughed softly below his breath.

"Don't be spiteful, Freda—I beg your pardon,"—catching a look in my face—"I never can help calling you by your Christian name. I have heard it so often from Bella, you know, it comes natural to me; I always think of you as Freda."

The little confession mollifies me; it is sweet to know that he does think of me.

"I shall not see you again," he continued. "We are just going off; and as my things are to be sent to Chadley, I shall not come back here. How much longer do you stay at Eddington?"

"Till Saturday."

"Till Saturday? Then you go home, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Well, good-bye, then."

I touched his hand mechanically, without answering. I said to myself, in my anger, that if he had cared one iota for me he would have given up his day's shooting, and have stopped at home to see more of me.

Very soon afterwards we three women from the wide stone terrace speeded the shooting men off on their day's amusement.

Mr. Macdonald was wonderfully and fearfully accoutred with every variety of strap, belt, and pouch, and with a valet to carry every available luxury in

his wake, and yet it was whispered that it was but seldom that he had the good luck to hit anything. Major Heywood and Mr. Flower, whose outer man was less formidably got up, were good shots, and made up the bag between them.

"I wish I wasn't going; I wish I could stop at home with you," whispers Charley Flower, sentimentally; which of course is a fib.

"Why don't you, then?"

"If it wasn't for those women, I would," he answers, with a fine generosity which amuses me. Men take so very naturally to the grand Turk manner of dispensing their smiles to the attendant female population.

"You have forgotten 'those other men' you would also find left at home with me—my father and—Mr. Curtis."

Charley reddened up to the roots of his curly fair hair.

"You shouldn't take pleasure in reminding a poor wretch of his misery," he said, dolefully, at which I only laughed pitilessly.

I knew, by instinct—what woman does not know these things?—that "young Flower, of the Blues," as Mrs. Featherstone called him, had fallen desperately in love with me, and yet I felt no more pity for him than if he were a captured mouse or an impaled beetle. I was eating out my heart in wretched longing for the man I loved, but I was in no way softened by adversity into pity for the man who loved me.

At this moment he is whispering something else,

very tender and very despairing, into my ear, of which I hear not one single word, for I am straining every nerve to catch what Mark Thistleby and Mrs. Featherstone are saying in farewell to each other.

She leans against the open doorway, in a faultless costume of dark green velvet, and he stands close to her whilst she makes a feint of altering the buckle of his cartridge-bag. A wild passion of maddest jealousy scorches me like a living flame, as I watch her fingers brush lightly against his rough tweed shooting-coat, and rest for one instant caressingly on his arm.

"I must come and see you in town," I heard him say. "I have hardly had a word with you here."

"Why did you go off with that girl this morning, then?"

"How could I help it!" lightly shrugging his shoulders. "I had nothing else to do; you were not down."

And then they shake hands, and Mark wishes "good-bye" to the rest of the company, thanking Mr. Curtis for his hospitality, and paying Mrs. Leith a little compliment upon her fresh morning toilette; and lastly he comes to me, and holds out his hand without a word.

He looks at me wistfully, hungrily, with all his soul in his eyes.

Is he false, or is he true?—this man who can make love-speeches to two women at once, whose words say one thing and whose looks another!

They had gone, and we women and old men went back into the house.

"I must go and see after my maid, and tell her to pack up," said Mrs. Leith, who was to leave in the afternoon. She went upstairs, and Mrs. Featherstone and I were left alone.

"Freda, do you mind my asking you a question?"

"A dozen if you like," I answered, listlessly.

"Do you really intend to marry my brother?"

"Certainly I do!" I answered, looking up at her in surprise.

"Then if I were you, I would not flirt quite so openly with other men. It is a very bad compliment to pay to George, and I am quite sure he would not like it."

"Has he asked you to speak to me?"

"No; but——"

The library door opened, and George Curtis, with his spectacles pushed up on his forehead, shuffled across the hall towards the dining-room.

"Going out, my dears?" he said, blandly, looking at us with a smile on his kind old face.

"Come here, Mr. Curtis!" I called out, sharply.

"What is it, my love?"

"Your sister is accusing me of flirting."

He looked with such bewildered amazement from one of us to the other, that I could hardly help laughing, for all my anger.

"Freda's manners are rather too free," said Mrs. Featherstone, not without some hesitation. "I was only giving her a little friendly advice; she need not be so angry about it. I was telling her I do not think you would like your wife to flirt with every man she meets."

"I should like my wife to amuse herself in any way she pleases, Clara. I trust her too entirely to interfere with her, for I know perfectly that she will never compromise her own dignity nor mine."

How infinitely guilty I felt at that generous speech! How good this man was, and how unworthy I was of his affection!—knowing, as I did too well, how little my heart belonged to him.

I turned round to him in a sudden passion of penitence and gratitude.

"George—George!" I cried, catching hold of his hand, "you are too good—too generous! I am not fit to be your wife. Release me from my engagement. I had rather be your friend; I don't want to marry you."

Mrs. Featherstone's face was a study. She evidently thought that I had taken leave of my senses. That any woman should be in a fair way of becoming the mistress of Eddington, and yet make a deliberate effort to retire from that much-to-be-coveted position, was, in her eyes, little short of qualifying oneself for a commission of lunacy.

George Curtis looked infinitely distressed.

"My dear, pray don't say such things—after everything is settled too. I am sure that if Clara has said any little thing that vexes you, she is very sorry to have done so. Pray dry your tears, my dear Freda, and do not distress me by such words again."

He held my hand kindly in one of his, and patted my shoulder soothingly with the other.

I think, had I been alone with him, I should have thrown myself then and there at his feet, and told

him plainly that I could not be his wife, because I had learnt to love another man; but my enemy stood opposite me, cold, erect, and scornful, with a mocking sneer upon her dark, handsome face. I could no more have confessed my weakness than have put a knife to my throat. In another instant papa had entered upon the scene, and my opportunity was gone.

"Come and talk to this foolish girl, Henry; she fancies she is not good enough to be my wife."

"Freda—Freda! what does all this mean?" said papa, with mild reproach. "It is indeed an honour for a young girl to be chosen by a man of so much learning and talent. I do not wonder at the natural humility which prompts you to shrink from a position to which you are so ill-fitted, but our good friend is too generous not to make allowances for your youth and inexperience."

"Yes, indeed, my love, I wish to make every allowance for you. Your youth entitles you to every consideration."

"And you must remember, Freda, how materially, by your obedience and submission to our wishes, you are furthering our great and valuable labours."

They stood one on each side of me, as they uttered their little cut-and-dried platitudes, whilst Mrs. Featherstone, leaning against the mantel-piece, looked at us all with a scornful smile.

In what sort of estimation, I wonder, did those two short-sighted old men hold that most "holy estate of matrimony," which is not, we are told, to be "taken in hand unadvisedly and lightly"? and of what in-

infinitesimal account, in comparison with their dead and dusty folios, did they reckon a living human heart with its passions and affections ?

“ A very pretty piece of acting indeed ! ” said Mrs. Featherstone, as she swept by me up the staircase when her brother and papa had left us. “ A very nicely-acted little scene, Miss Clifford, which has quite answered its purpose ! I congratulate you ! ”

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE VISITOR.

“ Forebodings come ; we know not how, or whence,
Shadowing a nameless fear upon the soul,
And stirs within our hearts a subtler sense
Than light may read or wisdom may control.”

—A. A. PROCTER.

I WAS not sorry to be at home again. The party at Eddington had dispersed ; Mrs. Leith had gone to Yorkshire, Mrs. Featherstone to Sussex, and her husband to Newmarket ; whilst Messrs. Macdonald, Flower and Heywood had separated each on their several ways to “ seek fresh fields and pastures new.”

Presumably, Captain Thistleby had also left the country. I heard incidentally that the party at Chadley had broken up, and it was vain to suppose that he had not taken his departure with the rest.

In the course of the week, the supposition was confirmed beyond a possibility of doubt.

One day the yellow family chariot, which was to Lady Holt what a mitre is to a bishop, or a wig to the Lord Chancellor—a sort of insignia of office, to be assumed on all solemn and State occasions—drew up with a flourish before the lowly ivy-sheltered gate of the Slopperton cottage.

Thence descended her ladyship the Countess of Holt, followed by Lady Margaret.

They filled up the narrow doorway and the small flagged hall with their ample proportions and their pompous condescension.

“Now that you are about to be married to Mr. Curtis of Eddington, I have thought it appropriate to come and call upon you, Miss Clifford,” said Lady Holt, with a naïve admission of Mammon-worship which amused me.

“Your ladyship is very good,” I answered, with decorous humility. Lady Holt has sat just behind me in Slopperton church for many years, but has never done me the honour of a visit before. I am not one whit cleverer, nor better, nor handsomer, nor more of a lady than I have ever been. I am simply going to be rich! For so abject are the worshippers of gold, that they cannot await its actual presence, they must be up and stirring early to welcome its first indications. The coming money-bags cast their goodly shadows before them. To have called upon Freda Clifford, the daughter of a poor man, whose learning was undoubted, and who was a gentleman in every sense of the word, would have been unfitting to Lady Holt’s high position and name; but to visit the same Freda Clifford

owner-presumptive of ten thousand a year, was, as her ladyship most candidly remarked, "appropriate."

We are apprised in this generation not for what we are, but for what we have. What a poor compliment to our self-esteem, could we but look at it in that light!

Having made the above gracious little opening remark, Lady Holt proceeded to put me through a series of cross-questionings relating to my intentions, with regard to future entertainments at Ed-dington; whilst her daughter, raising a gold eye-glass to her eye, amused herself by taking stock of her surroundings, and made a minute inspection of the whole room, beginning with the topmost shelf of dingy brown books, down to the threadbare drug-get beneath her feet. Had she belonged to my own rank of life I should have called her singularly bad-mannered and ill-bred, but I suppose that an Earl's daughter is not to be judged according to the standard of ordinary mortals.

"I hope you will come over and lunch with us one day, Miss Clifford," said Lady Holt, when her ten minutes' visit was over, as she rose to go. "We are quite alone now; all our guests have left us, and we shall be delighted to see you and Mr. Clifford, if you will come over any day at two o'clock."

So that was how I came to know for certain that Mark Thistleby had left.

Was I glad or was I sorry? I hardly know. I almost think it was a relief to me to find that he was gone. Very sadly I began to perceive that Mark Thistleby had treated me cruelly—that I was

nothing to him but a sport, a mere pastime. Some passing caprice, chance, or perhaps, even as I had told him, the vicinity of Mrs. Featherstone, had brought him down to the neighbourhood of Eddington, where his sole object seemed to have been to disturb my peace of mind, and to raise hopes in me which he had not the smallest intention of fulfilling. I was angry and indignant with him for doing so. If he did not want me, why, oh! why had he come to trouble me? Why had he not let me alone? Without him I had been, if not happy, at least content. I had all the good things of this world within my grasp, and, truth to say, I did not desire to give them up. Had he never crossed my path I should have been happy enough. But the memory of the soft caressing voice and the tender words, and of the ardent looks in those deep hazel eyes, had stirred my heart to its very depths.

It was a showery morning, about a week after our return from Eddington. Short glimpses of sunshine had made me think of going out, but a succession of heavy storms, which came on every twenty minutes, and which had turned our little garden into a swamp, made all prospect of taking a walk an impossibility.

I had been dictating manuscript to papa till my head ached; and when at length I could be spared from the wearisome task, I escaped with a novel under my arm, and took refuge in the dining-room. I curled myself in a deep arm-chair in a window which looked towards the front door, and began to read. The novel was not a very exciting one. After

vainly trying to keep my attention to the loves and woes of a singularly beautiful maiden, who seemed to me the most insipid and uninteresting of her sex, I took to thinking instead about my own poor little love story. The novel slipped out of my hands, and I let my thoughts wander idly away to my own concerns and interests.

All at once there came a loud clanging peal at the gate-bell, which startled me out of my profitless dreams.

Who on earth could it be at that hour? "The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker," frequented the back door, and visitors would not come on foot at eleven o'clock in the morning in the middle of a downpour of rain.

My thoughts flew to Captain Thistleby, and like the fool that I was, my heart beat wildly with the hope that it might be he.

I thought old Sarah would never go to the door. At last she came forth from the back premises with her dress turned over her head to shelter it from the straight drenching rain.

She opened the door; outside I saw a small woman's figure wrapped in a waterproof cloak.

Down went my heart into my shoes with a thud of sickening disappointment! A mistake, a message, a beggar, I conjectured rapidly to myself, referring to the female without; but as Sarah still continued her parley at the open doorway with the stranger, I began to feel some sort of curiosity as to who or what she was.

All at once Sarah came rapidly back into the house.

"It is a strange lady, miss, inquiring her way. Might she come in and wait until the shower is over? she has no umbrella."

"Certainly, show her into this room," I answered, wondering.

She came in—a tiny woman, wrapped in a dripping dark grey waterproof, the hood drawn closely over her head.

"Pray come in and rest, till the shower is over," I said, civilly drawing a chair forward for her. "And won't you take off your cloak, and let it be dried at the kitchen fire, whilst you wait?"

She divested herself nimbly of her cloak, and gave it to Sarah, and then slipped off her hat, and looked ruefully at its dragged feather.

"It is so stupid that I came away without an umbrella," she said.

"Won't you sit down?"

She stood up for a minute, and surveyed herself in the mirror over the mantel-piece, before accepting the proffered seat.

"I look a dreadful object!" she said, with a faint smile, as she sat down.

I looked at her. She had a small sharp-featured face, and keen black eyes; her hair was worn in a dusky cloud over her brow, and tied up at the back in a loose knot, almost on the top of her head. Her dress was that of a lady, and was tasteful and well made.

Presently she drew off her gloves, almost, I think, with intent that I might notice, as I immediately did, the wedding-ring upon her left hand.

"I have come down here for the day; I am going back by the five o'clock train," she volunteered, seeing that I did not speak.

"Indeed? You should have taken a fly at Sloperton, there is always one to be had at the 'Green Man,' even if there were none up at the station."

"Oh, I hate flies," she said, with an impatient shrug of her shoulders. "Besides, I did not quite know where I wanted to go."

I looked at her in surprise.

"That astonishes you, I daresay," she said, gravely; and then with a sudden gleam in her face, she added quickly: "I daresay you can tell me; you live here, and are very likely to know."

"What, where you wanted to go?"

"No—no, of course not! But whether the person I am looking for lives anywhere in this neighbourhood. I will explain to you."

She looked up eagerly at me, puckering up her small white forehead with almost a ludicrous intentness.

"You know, I picked up an envelope in a cab, and I recognised the handwriting; the name was torn off, but the address was 'Chadley, near Sloperton;' it hadn't been through the post. It had first been torn off, as if it had been misdirected."

"Chadley? That is Lord Holt's place."

"Is it? I daresay; very likely. I had some trouble to find what Sloperton it was; there is one in Lincolnshire, I went down there first, but nobody had heard of a place called Chadley there."

She went on talking in a confiding manner, with

little solemn nods of her frizzy head at me, whilst every moment I became more and more bewildered.

"I don't understand you," I said. "Why was it necessary to hunt half over England because you found a torn envelope in a cab?"

"Don't you see? Why I knew the handwriting. I knew it perfectly, as well as I knew my own. It is the handwriting of the person I am looking for. Now do you understand?"

She looked at me sharply, with her head a little on one side, like an inquiring bird.

"Don't you understand?" she repeated. I shook my head.

"You must be very dense," she said, with perfect *sangfroid*. I shouldn't have told you all this, if I had not thought you would help me. If you have lived here some time surely you must know if he lives near here!"

"Who? You have not yet told me his name. It is a man, then, you are looking for?"

She nodded.

"Tell me his name; if he lives anywhere near here, I must have heard of him, for I have been here for years."

"His name is Thorne."

"Thorne—Thorne? I never heard of such a person!"

She sighed heavily, and looked down at her bony little hands lying in her lap.

"You must have made some mistake. I am quite sure I never heard of the name in this neighbour-

hood," I said gently, feeling sorry for her. She sighed again.

"At least you can direct me to Chadley?" she said, sorrowfully.

"Certainly I can: but I tell you that Lord Holt lives there, there is no Mr. Thorne there."

"He might have been staying there."

"I think not, I should have heard of him."

"Never mind, I can always inquire. See, the shower is over; I think I can get on now. How far off is it?"

She jumped up with alacrity, and began putting on her cloak again, which had been brought in from being dried at the kitchen fire.

"Horrid things waterproofs are, aren't they?" she said, as she drew the ugly hood down again over her hat. "They are so unbecoming."

I smiled. "Won't you borrow an umbrella? You can leave it at the gate as you go by to the station; you must pass it on your way back."

She did not even take the trouble to thank me for the suggestion.

"Oh, I can't tell what I may do—if I were to find him, for instance! No, I won't borrow an umbrella, it might be in my way."

"As you like."

She gathered up her skirts, and prepared to depart. I wondered if she would express any gratitude for the shelter she had received. At first I thought she was going away without another word, but as she reached the door she turned, and put out her hand to me suddenly.

"It's not your fault that you couldn't tell me anything. You would have helped me if you could, I am sure."

There was a mute pathos in the troubled little face, with its anxious eyes, that touched me strangely. I took the scrap of a hand that she stretched out to me, and held it in mine.

What strange, sad story, I wondered, was there about this pale, dark-eyed little creature, who looked at me with such a patient, wintry smile?

"I would help you gladly if I could," I answered earnestly.

She turned away with a little half-nod, and vanished under the ivy-shadowed doorway.

"Do you think that lady is in her right mind?" I said, turning to old Sarah, as she came back from closing the gate after her.

"Law, miss! whatever makes you think she isn't?" retorted that ancient abigail.

"She looks so queer and strange," I answered, musingly.

More than once during the day, I ran out to the door, and stood outside to look down the high road, that led to Chadley Castle, to watch for my queer little visitor's return to Slopperton Station. But if she passed back by our house I must have missed her, for I did not see her again.

For days afterwards I thought of her. I could not get the sad, anxious little face, puckered up into so many weary lines of care and trouble, out of my head. I puzzled out, over and over again, the broken threads of her story, which I had gathered from our

one short interview. Alas! the truth appeared to me to be plain enough: it was no doubt the old commonplace history of woman's weakness and man's faithlessness, that is for ever and ever repeating itself. Her childish eagerness to show me the wedding-ring upon her finger told me too plainly that she had no right to wear it.

I could not forget her, she haunted me with a persistency which was almost like a presentiment. It almost seemed to me as if that pale, sad little creature was in some way connected with my own fate, and was to be bound up in a mysterious and incomprehensible manner with my life. I laughed at myself for such fanciful and wild notions, and tried to rid myself of this extraordinary and almost ludicrous delusion.

I little knew how nearly these forebodings were to be realised, nor how powerful an influence that queer little dark-eyed stranger was destined to wield upon the whole of my future life!

CHAPTER XIII.

AUNT SELINA.

"I am to be married * * * *
* * * married past redemption."

—DRYDEN.

FROM time immemorial nobody ever was born or married, nor ever died in the Clifford family, without sending for Aunt Selina. It was not thought

possible to get through any one of these three primary events of life correctly without her support and assistance; she was as indispensable on these occasions as the parish clerk or the public registrar, and to send for Aunt Selina was as much a matter of course as to consult either of those gentlemen.

Under ordinary circumstances Aunt Selina dwelt quietly enough with her old husband in somewhat gloomy seclusion in Russell Square. Nobody ever heard how she employed herself, nor what were her daily avocations; but no sooner did any one die, no sooner were there distant rumours of marriages or of births than Mrs. Carr became a person of the very greatest importance, and emerged at once from privacy into public life.

Aunt Selina's opinion and advice were invaluable; she laid down the law with a clearness and decision which was perfectly convincing, and from her final judgment in a matter of etiquette or precedent, there was no appeal.

Exactly three weeks, therefore, before my wedding-day, according to the time-honoured family custom, Aunt Selina came down with her boxes, her ancient lady's-maid, her pet Skye terrier, and her page-boy, and took up her abode at the Slopperton cottage. She had not been there since the death of my mother, when she had appeared on the scene with precisely the same retinue; and it did not occur to her to be offended by reason of the interval of time which had elapsed since her last visit, as no trifling cause would have induced her to leave her own home.

Mrs. Carr was radiant with satisfaction at the happy event which she had arrived to celebrate. She smiled all over her fat, comfortable old face when she alighted at our door. She pressed me rapturously to her matronly bosom many times over, and called me by many tender names before even she looked round to see that Scruff, the Skye terrier, was safely following her.

“My darling child—such happiness!—may every blessing—such joy to me!—everything so satisfactory—longing to see him!” Such were the broken words that fell spasmodically from her lips, choked, as it were, with uncontrollable emotion, between the kisses she pressed repeatedly on my cheek; and though I thanked her, and returned the kisses with suitable affection, I laughed a little to myself, for I knew this was the wedding formula which the good lady had repeated for years to one and all of her nieces under similar circumstances.

The necessary display of sentiment over, Aunt Selina proceeded to business, for let it not be supposed that she had come to Slopperton for pleasure alone—pleasure, accompanied by Mr. Carr and her wedding garments, would follow in due time, and no doubt Aunt Selina meant to recoup herself for her labours when that eventful day arrived; but, for the present, stern business is the order of the day.

Behold us, therefore, Aunt Selina and I, seated in the dining-room on the morning after her arrival. A consignment of clothes which Mrs. Carr had herself ordered for me has come down from town with

her, and is lying piled up in heaps on the dining-room table and chairs.

I have been looking through everything, whilst my aunt, pencil and paper in hand, is making notes and remarks thereupon as we go.

"There! so far, so good! The trousseau is fairly forward. Madame Dentelle will send your wedding-dress on the twentieth at the latest, and your veil is to come in the same box. I arranged all that with her, and there is a grey cachemire for your going-away dress."

"But, aunt, I should prefer brown tweed."

"Impossible, Freda! it would be out of the question. A hat instead of a bonnet you may perhaps be allowed, for things have a good deal changed lately, but the grey is *de rigueur*. Now let us turn to other matters. Who are the bridesmaids?"

"I have no bridesmaids."

Aunt Selina laid down her pen and took off her spectacles to stare at me in horror.

"No bridesmaids! good heavens, child, who ever heard of a wedding without bridesmaids."

"They are not necessary to the ceremony, I believe."

"They are absolutely *indispensable*," says Aunt Selina resolutely, taking up her pen again. "Who are your friends?"

"My only friend is a widow," I answered, laughing.

"Don't be childish, Freda," says aunt, reprovingly. "If you have no friends I had better write at once

to your cousin Sophia's two daughters ; I daresay she will let them come ; they are fairly nice-looking, and are about the same height."

"But I have never seen them since they were babies," I remonstrate. Aunt Selina is like the ocean, resistless and relentless. She draws her writing-case to her and begins her note of invitation.

"We will write to Russell and Allen by the same post, and order their dresses ; something pale blue or coral colour will do ; we can safely leave it to them." She says it in a tone of decision which leaves me absolutely without voice in the matter.

"And now, about the breakfast," she continued, laying down her pen, and removing her spectacles from her nose in order to gaze at me with impressive solemnity as she broached this all-important subject. "What has your father said about it ?"

"The only suggestion I have heard papa make upon the subject," I answer, with becoming gravity, "was—tea and plum cake !"

Mrs. Carr waved both hands before her as though to deprecate anything like frivolity or jesting on such a topic.

"Your poor father was always eccentric. Of course, my dear, nobody would dream of consulting *him* about the eatables ; besides, you need not worry him about it at all. Your uncle and I are going to order the breakfast for you from Gunter's—that is quite decided."

"You are very kind, aunt."

"Not at all, my dear ; I always do something of the kind at my nieces' weddings ; and Mr. Carr

prefers it to be the breakfast, because then he is sure of getting what he likes himself. What I want to know is how many we shall be, and whom your father has thought of asking?"

A sigh of impatience escaped me. I could not rouse myself to take any interest in the matter; was not everything connected with the day, that was to divide me for ever from the man I loved, hateful, odious, unbearable to me!

"Oh, what does it matter?" I exclaimed, wearily, with hot tears gushing up into my eyes. "Ask any one you like, aunt; only for heaven's sake let it be as small a party as possible."

"Freda, I am quite astonished at you," said my aunt, looking at me reprovingly; "it is most childish of you to give way like this so long beforehand. A bride should make it a point of duty to keep up till the day arrives. You will be fit for nothing if you do not exercise a little self-control. And why, pray, should there be a small party? I never heard of any wedding where it was more essential that the breakfast should be a large and pleasant one, nor where it was more desirable that everything in the arrangements should be of the very best. A penniless girl marrying a rich man must not be given to her husband like a beggar; your own delicacy of feeling should suggest this. And here am I ready and willing to take all the trouble and expense of everything off your hands; all I want is a few simple directions from you. Now let us have no more tears or impatience, my dear child; let us make out a list of the people, and then you shall place yourself in my

hands, and I will see that everything is properly done."

I disputed no more with Aunt Selina; she had her own way in everything, and how she revelled in it has been a matter of amusement to me to reflect upon ever since.

She turned the whole house inside out; she hired furniture from the country town to make the long-unused drawing-room habitable; she ordered in china and glass recklessly; boxes came down from town by every train; the page-boy was kept running backwards and forwards to the post-office with telegrams all day long; and even old Sarah caught the infection of the general excitement, and almost forgot to cook our daily meals, in the perpetual ferment which Aunt Selina kept up in her head by giving her minute and contradictory orders a dozen times a day.

As to papa, he literally fled the house, and took refuge at Eddington for days together.

"Your aunt is a good woman, Freda," he said to me confidentially—"a most excellent woman, and we ought to be very grateful to her, for we never could have got through it without her. I remember she ordered everything for your poor dear mother's funeral—she's a wonderful woman—but then, you know, I never could stand a woman with a tongue; perhaps it's my fault, for your aunt is a most excellent person, but I never could."

And so, with his manuscript under his arm, papa trudged up daily to Eddington, and I was left to cope with Aunt Selina alone.

Once Aunt Selina and I went up in state to

lunch at Eddington in order to inspect my future home. It would be impossible to describe the good lady's delight on this occasion. She overpowered Mr. Curtis with questions and congratulations, both of which embarrassed him considerably. Her volubility was perfectly unrestrainable. She told him in one breath that Eddington was a home fit for a queen; that my father's ancestors came over with the Conquest; that a union between him and myself was the *summum bonum* of all earthly desires to all concerned, and that our posterity would rise up and call us blessed.

How much farther my good aunt's enthusiasm would have led her in the expression of these latter-named pious aspirations I know not, for with a wholesome dread of what her next words might bring forth, I arose from the luncheon-table and fled out on to the terrace.

I felt very miserable, but I tried to console myself by reflections over my future wealth. I said to myself, aloud :

"It is a lovely old place; I shall be able to do as I like with it. I can ask my own friends to fill the house. I shall have everything I can wish for. It is the dearest old house in all England. A woman must be hard to please, indeed, who could not make herself happy here."

But though I said the words, my heart would not go with them. I could only see, not a vision of future pleasures, but a memory of past happiness. Through the shrubby walks among the falling leaves, seemed to be wandering once more with

Mark Thistleby, or standing on the terrace by his side, looking out over the smooth lawn towards the now forlorn and dismantled flower garden.

From these melancholy retrospective dreams I was aroused by the voice of my aunt, calling out to me from a window above my head.

I went into the house. Mrs. Carr had been dragging the unfortunate bridegroom-elect from room to room all over the house. She was in a fever of excitement and fussy importance.

I found them in a little octagon-shaped room that had been the late Mrs. Curtis's boudoir. It was filled with dark, old-fashioned furniture which would have excited the envy and admiration of an antiquarian. The walls were hung with faded blue satin, and the chairs were covered with old brocaded silk, such as no money can buy in these days.

In this quaint old-world chamber I found my Aunt Selina discoursing, and suggesting, and giving her advice with eager volubility, whilst poor Mr. Curtis stood by with a mild and bewildered face of much enduring meekness, most ludicrous to behold.

"Oh! here you are, Freda!" cried my aunt, as I entered. "Just in time to hear what I am saying to dear Mr. Curtis about this charming little room. Of course, love, it must be your boudoir—it is made for it."

"I had thought so, too, aunt—that is to say, if Mr. Curtis——" I added, looking up at him with dutiful deference.

"My dear Freda, the whole of my house is at

your absolute disposal," said my lover, with courteous gallantry.

"Ah! what a lucky girl you are!" cried my aunt, uplifting her fat hands in admiration. "It is just what I was saying; and you must let me write at once to Maple, and have a man down to do it up. We want fresh paper, white and gold, or perhaps little bunches of rosebuds. I saw a sweet paper the other day at a house in Tavistock Square where I was paying a visit. It was all covered with little birds and pink roses, something quite new."

"Good heavens! Aunt Selina," I cried, uplifting my hands in horror.

"My dear, it would suit this room to perfection," continued Mrs. Carr, who never paid any attention to my interruptions, as she had but a low idea of my intelligence; "and with it we shall want a pretty, fresh cretonne, pink or turquoise blue, with cupids—appropriate to the joys of Hymen—eh, Mr. Curtis? Then we must turn out these old-fashioned, uncomfortable chairs, and replace them with some nice low well-stuffed sofas, and hang some pretty water-colours on the walls. We shall make it the brightest and pleasantest room in the house. Now, do give me *carte blanche*, Mr. Curtis. I am sure you would be charmed with the effect."

George Curtis looked helplessly at me.

"If Freda wishes it——" he began.

"I wish it! Not for worlds!" I cried. "Why, aunt, this room would be utterly spoilt if it were altered. It is quite charming as it is."

"Freda, you never had any sense!" answered my

aunt, with a sigh of despair. "Mr. Curtis, I know, quite agrees with me; but you were always an obstinate child, and brought up in the wilds of the country, as you have been, and with your poor father, too, always running his head into things. Ah! yes, I know, of course, Mr. Curtis, that he is very clever, and all that; but neither Henry nor my niece are in the least able to take care of themselves. It is a good thing I am able to come down and see after things a little! Now, Mr. Curtis, let me go upstairs and look through the bed-rooms."

The rest of the house was gone over. Aunt Selina, talking incessantly, admiring every room, suggesting alterations, laying down the law, and no doubt enjoying herself immensely, whilst George and I followed in her wake with mute resignation, and I made mental and most ungrateful notes as to never asking Aunt Selina to stay at Eddington after my marriage if it could possibly be avoided.

When at length we were in the carriage again on our way home, as we drove out through the lodges, Aunt Selina turned round to me and said, solemnly, with impressive fervour:

"Frederica Clifford, you ought to go down upon your bended knees and thank God night and morning, for giving you such a husband, and such a house!"

CHAPTER XIV.

PARTING.

"O, how this spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day;
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And, by-and-by, a cloud takes all away."

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE time was five o'clock in the afternoon—the scene Farmer Ricketts's six-acre field at the bottom of our orchard. Background—last summer's hayrick thatched with straw. Foreground—one threshing machine rampant, and one field-harrow recumbent, drawn up side by side, and resembling the skeleton ribs of huge mammoth animals. *Dramatis personæ*—two snow-white calves, with pink, watery eyes, being fed out of an unsavoury-looking bucket, an ancient matron in a rusty black gown, and a battered yellow sun-bonnet on her head, and a young lady stretched at ease upon her back, under the shade of the aforementioned hayrick.

The calves are both playful and greedy—they are possessed with an insane desire to get their two heads simultaneously into the bucket, a feat which, being a moral impossibility, Molly endeavours to frustrate, by presenting the bucket to each in turn with strict impartiality, which stratagem the twins resent by increasing efforts to upset it. Two or three ducks, attracted by the prospect of food, have waddled up from the farmyard, and stand grouped

around expectantly, and a couple of grey pigeons are whirling about round and round overhead.

Presently the calves, with convulsive gurglings in their throats, come to an end of their repast. Off goes Molly towards the farm-house in the hollow, bearing the empty bucket, and after her hurries the whole of the live stock—calves, ducks, and pigeons—and I am left alone on my back under the hayrick.

Papa has gone to Eddington, Aunt Selina has driven into Narborough upon a shopping expedition. I have a letter from Bella in my pocket, which I mean to read over again presently. It is a long letter, and tells me that she is going abroad immediately for three months, and wishes I was not such a fool as to marry, as then I could have gone with her. I wish so too. Three months abroad with Bella would be infinitely preferable to an indefinite period at home with George Curtis. Furthermore Bella tells me she will write again from Paris, and begs me to make use of her house whilst she is away if I want to be in London. It is this portion of Mrs. Thistleby's letter I intend to read over again from my couch under the haystack; but I am very idle, and I cannot rouse myself sufficiently from my reverie, even to the extent of putting my hand into my pocket and taking the letter out of it.

I lie quite still on my back with my arms folded into a pillow behind my neck, and my eyes cast up to the blue sky straight over my head.

It is one of those lovely days which one gets sometimes at the end of October, warm as summer, and still and balmy. There is hardly a cloud in the sky,

and a lazy little breeze comes softly sighing up from the west, that just stirs the hair upon my forehead with a soft, sleepy flutter. There are all sorts of sweet scents about me—a scent of freshly-turned earth from a ploughed field hard by, a scent of ripe apples from the orchard beyond, a scent of hay from the rick behind me, and then—all at once, a scent of what does not appear at first to possess any *raison d'être*—a scent inappropriate, unromantic, unlovely! yet which to a man's nose is ever refreshing, to a woman's eminently suggestive—the scent of a freshly-lit cigar.

This inexplicable odour, totally foreign as it was to the surroundings in which it suddenly developed itself, caused me to spring rapidly from the completely horizontal attitude into the partially recumbent. I sat up.

A shadow came round the corner of the hayrick and lengthened itself across the short grass at my feet.

"You don't look surprised to see me," said Captain Thistleby, as he seated himself leisurely by my side.

"I am not. I knew you were coming."

"How so?"

"I smelt you," I answered, gravely, with a corresponding upward sniff of my small nose.

He laughed softly after his wont—a little low laugh that had a peculiar fascination for me; it said so little, yet meant so much. He contemplated the end of his cigar for a moment, and then replaced it in his mouth.

For an instant we were both silent. Swiftly my

thoughts travelled back to that blessed day at Seacliff, when he had come unexpectedly as now, down the garden steps behind me, and had sat, as now, at my feet. I remembered with what a queer feeling of dismay I had realised that he was to be my companion through the day, and then how rapidly the fascination of his presence had wrought upon me, until ere the day was ended I had learned to love him.

And since then how many nights had I not fallen asleep with his name on my lips? How many days had I not awakened with his image before my eyes? And yet he seemed further—miles further from me here than he had done at Seacliff.

Evidently his thoughts, too, had travelled back to that first day of our acquaintance, for his next words were an allusion to it.

"I am not going to throw it away though," he said, in allusion to the cigar. "You like smoke, you know; you told me so at Seacliff. Do you remember?"

"I do not remember any of the silly things I said to you at Seacliff; it is so long ago," I answered, looking away from him.

"Ah! I wish I could forget them as easily. By-the-way, what an unkind message that was you sent me by Bella the morning you went away."

"You were very lazy," I said, laughing out of sheer gladness of heart; for the landscape seemed to be fairer, the sunshine to be brighter, and the sky bluer, since he had come to my side. "Why did you not get up to say good-bye to me, then?"

"Impossible to say," he answered, giving me a sidelong glance under his long lashes. "I cannot remember; perhaps I was sleepy."

"Oh! by the way, you had registered a very uncomplimentary vow the night before; you swore you would never see me again."

Captain Thistleby contemplated the burnt ash of his cigar.

"I kept that vow very well, didn't I?" he said with a smile.

"Remarkably."

"What a funny girl you are!" were his next words. "Do you know, you have never asked me what brings me here so suddenly, nor where I have come from."

"Have I not? Where do you come from?" I said indifferently, not caring much for the answer. That he should be here at all was enough for me. It did not occur to me to be critical as to why or wherefore.

"Well, I have been at Newmarket, where, with my usual luck, I have lost my money. I am on my way to town. I had to pass Slopperton Station; I thought I might as well stop an hour or so. I am fortunate in finding you. Your servant directed me to the field. I have called, you know, to see if you had any message for Bella, for I shall see her in a day or two."

"No; I have nothing to send to Bella," I answered, carelessly.

What did anything signify to me now, since he had so plainly come here for my sake, just to see

me. It almost irritated me to think he should frame so many elaborate excuses for coming.

I sat looking away from him, across the valley, in silence, with a great joy at my heart. Suddenly he bent down and looked into my eyes.

"Do you know that you cannot hide your thoughts one bit? everything shows in your face. Child, you look ever so glad to see me!"

"I am," I answered, simply.

He closed his hand upon mine, and held it tightly. I did not make even an effort to take it away from him. I was too happy.

Surely now, I thought, he must see that I love him. Surely now he will say: "Give up your engagement, and come to me."

I waited breathlessly, trembling from head to foot for his next words.

His next words were as follows:

"You are very foolish to sit on the grass in that thin dress; you will catch cold. There was a heavy shower this morning."

I jumped up hurriedly.

"Yes, you are right," I said, sharply, with a sort of discord in my voice; "the grass is damp, and I am very sorry I have sat here so long. I am going in."

And I walked rapidly along the narrow footway that led across the field towards the orchard, Captain Thistleby following me, since there was no room for him by my side.

The shallow stream that divided Farmer Ricketts's field from our orchard was spanned from bank to bank by a single plank.

"You have left your sunshade under the hayrick," said Captain Thistleby, as we reached it. "Wait an instant for me, and I will go back and fetch it."

It was too true. In my indignant haste I had forgotten it, and my companion had not been slow to take advantage of this point in his favour.

Common politeness forced me to stand still until he brought it to me.

I crossed the stream, and leant against the knotted trunk of an old apple-tree awaiting his return.

Great branches, heavily laden with crimson-flushed fruit, hung over my head, and swept down on every side of me to the ground, shadowing the blue of heaven, and screening me in a frame-work of greenery. Fallen apples, some rosy-red, some creamy-yellow, lay scattered over the short, thick grass at my feet, and the clear brown stream rippled on with a pleasant murmur in front of me.

Presently Mark Thistleby came back to me, across the rustic bridge, with my sunshade in his hand.

As he came up to me our eyes met suddenly. Captain Thistleby forgot to give me my sunshade; instead of doing so, he first took my hand, and then drew me close to him—so close that my head lay for one blessed minute upon his breast, whilst his lips touched mine.

Then he put me suddenly from him.

"It is hard to give you up," he said in a broken voice. "I ought never to have come here, Freda ;

I have done you a great wrong, I fear. When I came to stay at Chadley I was desperate, darling—so desperate that I had made up my mind that I would make you my own at any cost; but I have thought better of it since. I love you too well to drag you through trouble and disgrace.”

“Do you think I should care?” I broke in, passionately. “Do you suppose it would matter to me what was said of me?”

I longed to tell him that I loved him so dearly that to give up wealth and position for his sake would be no trouble, but only a happiness—that to be thought worthless and heartless by the world would not disgrace me so much in my own eyes as to marry one man whilst I loved another.

I longed to tell him this; but Mark Thistleby did not ask me for my love. He drew my head down again upon his shoulder, and softly stroked my hair.

“My little darling,” he said, tenderly, “I have come here to-day to wish you good-bye for ever. Had our lives been differently shaped, we might have been very happy together; but it cannot be. There are things between us that can never be swept away. Don’t cry, sweet love; you will be happy by-and-by, when all this is gone by. I wanted you to know that I really loved you, because sometimes I have been afraid that you have accused me of trifling with you. I am a bad man in many ways; but, believe me, when I tell you that my love for you has been, and will ever be, the purest thing in my life, and that is why I will not spoil your life for you.”

I clung to him, weeping.

"There is no disgrace—nothing that I would not bear for your sake," I said, brokenly.

He held me tightly to his heart in silence.

"How sweet,
After long grief and pain,
To feel my true love's arms
About me once again."

Alas! why did it not last for ever. Looking back upon that moment of joy in after years, I can truly say that greatly as I suffered later, that instant of happiness was cheaply purchased at the expense of all that was to come.

"Darling, I must go," he said, gently withdrawing himself from my arms.

"Ah! will you not explain to me?" I cried, despairingly. Since I had found my lover, it seemed so hard to let him go. "Mark, *why* must you leave me? I love you so!"

"Hush!" he interrupted, quickly, laying his hand upon my lips, "don't tell me so. I know it well enough, darling; but don't tell me of it; it would make it too hard to leave you. Believe me it is best. Nothing can alter what is, and I will not spoil your life. Perhaps, by-and-by, the day may come; but now I *must* go."

He took both my hands, one in each of his, and one after the other raised them to his lips, kissing them hungrily and lingeringly; and then he dropped them suddenly, and, turning from me, strode away through the apple-trees—a tall, strong figure in dark relief against the primrose evening sky; whilst I

sank prone upon the grass where he had left me, and wept as I have never wept again.

CHAPTER XV.

FLIGHT.

"Have you forgot all sense of place and duty?"

—SHAKESPEARE.

I NEVER quite knew how it came about, or why I did it, nor what were the immediate influences which drove me to commit the wildest, maddest, most indefensible action of my life.

It was a week before my wedding-day. I was sitting up very late at night alone in my little room. The window was uncurtained, the moonlight shone in and lay in a cold, pale stream across the shabbily-carpeted floor. I leant my arms upon the window-sill, and my chin upon my hands, and looked out.

The apple-trees in the orchard below were all in a dense, dark mass of shadow, save where the moonlight had here and there caught and silvered their topmost branches; the valley beyond was filled with a hazy light; the background of hills was shadowy and indistinct; only the great chalk-pit shone out in the distance, white and gleaming against the grey hill in which it was imbedded.

I was thinking of nothing in particular. I felt only a weary sense of isolation and hopelessness, like one who, tired of struggling against the strong tide

of a stream, lets himself glide on in the eddying waters, careless of where they may carry him.

There was an absolute silence in the air; not a breath of wind ruffled the trees; not a living creature stirred upon the earth; not a stick or a leaf dropped to the ground in the dark garden below.

Suddenly from afar, across the valley, came the long, faint sound of a railway-whistle. I listened to it heedlessly, idly, as one listens who hears not, until it died away. And then all at once, like a flash of lightning before my eyes, like a thunderclap into my heart, came a thought, a word—*escape!* Why should I not go while it was yet time? What a fool I was to sit still and await my destruction, when flight, and liberty, and perhaps even happiness was still within my reach.

Where was Bella's letter? What had she said about lending me her house? With trembling hands I flew to my dressing-table, and struck a match, and then ransacked the drawer of my little writing-table until I found it.

She had told me to go up to her house if I wanted to make use of it. Evidently her servants were there. She had said how gladly she would have had me for her companion abroad, and I knew her well enough to feel sure that these were no idle words. Bella loved me dearly; she would give a good deal to save me from a marriage to which she had always strongly objected.

She was now no further off than Paris. I would go to her; it would be easy for me to follow her there. I would go up to her house in Chester

Square, telegraph to her from there, and start as soon as possible. Only what I had to do must be done at once—at once.

If I waited till the morning my courage would fail, and another day would be wasted ; besides the opportunity to escape would perhaps be wanting.

In a few moments my plans were matured. I glanced at the clock, it was twenty minutes past twelve, and the express was due at Narborough at five minutes after two. Narborough was five miles off, but I was a good walker—I had been there on foot once before. It would take me a good hour-and-a-half to get there. I had no time to lose.

I thrust a few necessaries hastily into my travelling-bag, and a five-pound note, a present from my aunt, into my purse, dressed myself hurriedly in a dark woollen dress and jacket, and tied a black veil over my hat. And then I sat down to perform the hardest task of all. Drawing my writing-case towards me, I wrote, with a trembling hand :

“ DEAREST FATHER,—

“ Do not be very angry with me. I *cannot* marry Mr. Curtis. I have gone up to London to Bella Thistleby’s house for a day, and then I shall join her in Paris. You would not like me to be miserable, dear papa ; and I should be if I married Mr. Curtis, for, good as he is, I do not love him. I will write to him from Paris. Ask him to forgive me. Dear papa, don’t be anxious about me, I will come back in a few weeks.—Your unhappy child,

“ FRED A.”

Then, like a guilty creature, I put out my candle and crept out into the darkened, silent house. How the stairs creaked under my descending footsteps ! I stopped and shivered, hardly daring to breathe, as I passed my aunt's door. Half-way down, on a little square landing, was the door of my father's room. Softly I turned the handle, and stepped into the room. I do not know what made me go in. I might have left the note in his study ; but a certain remorse for the sorrow I was about to bring upon him stung my heart. I must see the old man once more before I went.

The moonlight shone in across the narrow, iron bedstead, my father lay still in deep, untroubled slumber. I stooped down over him, and fancied as I did so that he looked strangely grey and aged to-night. As I noted the worn lines round his mouth, the angular outline of his pale old face, the thin grey hairs scattered over his pillow, my heart almost misgave me at leaving him so selfishly ; but as in a moment of doubt, I stooped down and kissed him softly, the clock below in the hall struck half-past twelve.

Five minutes more and I should lose the train — my opportunity would be lost, probably for ever. I steeled my heart, and turned swiftly from the room.

The front door was locked and barred ; but many a summer's night in the years of my childhood had I crept out of the study window on apple depredations intent. I had not forgotten the way to softly unbar the shutter and to creep out through the French window. Five minutes later I was outside,

flying across the silent garden and through the shadowy orchard, undiscovered and safe. I was in the open meadows; a rapid scramble across a wet ditch and a gap in the hedge and I was landed in the high road, speeding along as fast as my swift footsteps could bear me, alone in the silence of the night.

I was very tired before I got to Narborough—very tired and footsore. Once I nearly gave in and turned back, so appalling was the lone darkness of the way, and so muddy was the road along which my tired steps plodded endlessly. It seemed as if I should never get there—as if it must be ten miles instead of five, and then if I were to miss the train, if I reached the station just too late, and had to come all the way back, if so, I knew I should never go through it all again! I should sit down and accept my fate, and marry Mr. Curtis decorously that day week, and be miserable ever after.

No; if I did not fly to-night I should never fly at all. And the bare thought of having to trudge all that weary way back again made me hurry on breathlessly, till at last the madness of the deed I was doing was lost in the sheer terror of being too late for the train.

The station was nearly deserted when at last, panting and weary, I reached its friendly lights. There seemed to be no passengers on the platform, only one sleepy porter, who stared at me very hard as I went into the booking-office to take my ticket.

"London, miss? Any luggage?" he said, peering rather curiously at me.

I drew my veil down lower over my face as I muttered an unintelligible reply.

Presently the white lights of the engine gleamed out in the distance, and the train rushed into the station. I jumped into it unnoticed in the confusion of its arrival, and in five minutes more the deed was done, and I was borne swiftly away into the darkness of the night.

I shall never forget the misery of that journey. In order to economise my slender means, I had taken a third-class ticket. A working man in a fustian jacket, and a woman with a crying baby and a big checked bundle, were my fellow-travellers. The man was unwashed and unkempt, and smelt of bad tobacco. The woman kept drinking every five minutes out of a black bottle which she carried in a basket, and which emitted a suspicious odour of gin.

Sickened and disgusted, I turned my face resolutely out of the open window, and tried to inhale the sweet night scents of the woodland country through which the train was rushing, till at last, wearied out with conflicting emotions, I sank back into my corner and slept.

When I awoke it was five o'clock, and the train was steaming into Euston Station. There was not a cab to be seen ; so weary and footsore as I was already, with my long walk into Narborough, I was, perforce, obliged to go forth on foot towards Bella's house in Chester Square. When I got there a fresh disappointment awaited me. I could not rouse any one in the house. In vain I rang and rang violently first at one bell and then at the other. I heard the loud

clanging through the silence of the morning, but no one from within answered my summons. Then I recollected that as Bella was abroad, the house was in all probability left under the care of one servant, and that she most likely slept in the attics, and could not hear my frantic peals at the hall-bell, more especially if her bedroom was at the back of the house.

As I stood thus, shivering and nearly worn out with fatigue, with hot tears of disappointment and misery welling up into my eyes, a policeman came up behind me, and asked me, somewhat suspiciously, what I was about. I hailed his appearance with positive rapture, and turned to him eagerly.

"Oh! do help me!" I cried, piteously, clasping my hands together. "How *can* I get into this house? I can't wake anybody up."

The man eyed me narrowly. I think he was debating in his own mind whether a woman found alone at five o'clock in the morning, ringing at a house door, should not, by every known rule of his order, be described as "drunk and disorderly," and be dealt with accordingly. But I suppose something in my dress and voice must have shown him that I was a lady, for, after a minute's hesitation, he answered me quite civilly:

"You'll not be likely to find anybody awake, miss, for the next two hours. You had best go to an hotel and wait."

"But I don't know where to go. Can you tell me?" I said, despairingly.

"Well, miss, I do know a respectable little family

hotel in the Strand, as is very likely to be open at this hour. Should I walk with you to a cab, miss, and give you the address?"

I jumped at the offer with alacrity, and presently we actually did find a cab, and I parted from the friendly policeman with exaggerated expressions of gratitude, which were not, however, a whit too strong for what I felt for him at that moment.

The "little family hotel" turned out to be a small inn, of a very dingy description. A sleepy waiter admitted me, and showed me into a cheerless little sitting-room, where, however, I was thankful to throw myself upon the hard horse-hair sofa, upon which I soon fell into an uneasy slumber.

CHAPTER XVI.

"WHY ARE YOU NOT GLAD?"

"Could it be so, my heart stood still,
Yet he was by my side.
I strove; but my despair was vain,
Vain, too, was love and pride."

—A. A. PROCTER.

I WAS roused by the sunshine coming in through the uncurtained window, and by the entrance of the same waiter who had shown me into the room, and who now came to ask me if I would take any breakfast.

I ordered something to eat, and then mechanically opened my travelling-bag, and sought my purse.

Imagine my horror when it was nowhere to be found ! I turned out all the contents of my bag upon the floor, and emptied my pockets. All in vain ! My purse was gone !

I had had a few shillings loose in a small inner pocket of my jacket, out of which I had paid the cabman ; of this there remained to me four shillings and sixpence—not a farthing more.

How I had lost my purse I could not imagine ; although I remembered now having opened my bag whilst in the train, and possibly my travelling companions, the dirty-looking man and the woman with the gin-bottle, had abstracted it whilst I slept.

What was to be done ? I knew that four-and-six would probably not even pay for the wretched room I was in and for the simple breakfast I had ordered.

I sank down upon the sofa in perfect despair, and then all at once I thought of what I would do.

I would send for Captain Thistleby. Even as I made the resolve I blushed hotly at my own boldness. But, after all, what else could I do ? Had he not said that he would help me and be my friend always, and to whom else could I turn in my

I started up, and rang the bell.

"Can you send out a telegram for me ?" I asked of the man who answered my summons.

"Yes, ma'am, I will take it at once for you."

"I am expecting a friend from Hounslow ; can I stay here, in this room, until he comes ?"

"Certainly, ma'am."

The waiter got me a telegraph form, and I sat down and wrote :

"I am in great trouble and distress. Will you come to me at once ?

"FREDA."

Having despatched the telegram, I felt that a weight was taken off my mind, and I sat down with some amount of appetite to eat my modest and not over tempting-looking breakfast.

It was twelve o'clock before any answer came to my summons ; but when at last, sick with anxiety and suspense, I watched a hansom dash suddenly up to the door, my spirits rose at once, for my lover was inside it.

"Freda ! what is the matter ! Good heavens ! what brings you here in this wretched place ?" he cried, as he entered.

He looked pale and agitated, as if my telegram had thoroughly frightened him, as, indeed, I believe it had. For all answer, I dropped my head down upon the table in front of me, and burst into tears.

Mark Thistleby stood by, looking the picture of misery and distress. He was very honourable was my handsome lover. He did not move a step nearer to me, or call me by any loving words, or attempt to comfort me in any way. I daresay he was longing, poor fellow, to take me in his strong arms, and to pillow my poor little sobbing frame against his breast. But he did not forget that, in less than a week, I was to be the wife of another man, and that it was too late for any demonstrative expressions of

sympathy. He simply stood there, opposite me, with the whole width of the table between us, and looked indefinitely distressed and miserable.

"What can I do for you?" he said, piteously; "for God's sake! tell me what is the matter?"

And then I looked up through my tears, and smiled at him.

"I am very stupid, am I not, to cry like a baby? It is only because I am tired and worn out, and because—oh! I am so glad to see you! Nothing very dreadful has happened. I am only like the naughty boys in story-books. I have run away from home, and I have lost my purse, and haven't got any money, and that is why I have sent for you. Rather prosaic, isn't it?"

"You have run away from home!" he repeated, looking at me with a sort of dismay. "And—and your marriage?—Mr. Curtis?"

"I am not going to be married. I will never marry Mr. Curtis!" I cry passionately. "I am going to Paris to join Bella."

Oh! why does he not look glad? Why does he not cry "Thank God!" and reach out his arms to me—the dear arms in which I long to take shelter? With a mute dismay I look at him and see no joy, no gladness in his face; only a pale, miserable face, and sad, aching eyes, that look at me with an ever-increasing despair.

"You have broken off your engagement, you mean?" he says, with a sort of dull bewilderment in his voice. "How foolish of you. What has induced you to do so? Why have you done it?"

"Why!" I cried passionately and angrily, for I could not understand his apathy and coldness—"why! How can you ask me? How could I marry the man? You know I did not love him. Oh! how cruel you are. You know, your *must* know, why I cannot marry him!"

I wrung my hands passionately together, and turned away from him to hide my crimson face.

"Is it for me, Freda, that you have given him up?" His voice was low, and suppressed, and shook with emotion.

"Yes, for *you*!" I answered, wildly and bitterly; "and you do not seem to care!"

"Not care! Oh, my God!"

The words were wrung from him with a groan. I turned quickly towards him, and saw that he was deadly pale, and could hardly speak.

I came close to him in wonder, and laid my hand upon his.

"Tell me why you are not glad? Am I not free now, and do you not love me?"

"Oh, child—child!" he cried, bitterly, "I did not know my selfishness had done you so cruel a wrong! I did not think that you loved me so much. I thought that I alone should have to suffer for my weakness and my wickedness. And now, how can I ever atone for the misery I have brought upon you?"

"Misery?" I echoed, trembling and terrified I hardly knew why. "What do you mean? I have been miserable indeed, because I had not the courage before to break off my engagement; because I was

base enough to think of the good things of this world, and mean enough to shrink from giving them up for my love's sake. But since I have known that you love me, sweetheart, since your own dear lips told me so, do you suppose that I have been happy day or night away from you? And your love has given me courage, Mark, for I am a sad coward. Had I not fled in the night like this from home, I don't think I should ever have been brave enough to break' it all off; but now it is done. I have written to papa. I shall go to Bella and stay with her a few months, and when we meet again, Mark, you will know that I am a free woman."

My lover took my hands—the hands I had laid upon his—and pressed them passionately to his lips.

"Hush!" he said, in a hoarse, choked voice, "do not torture me. Oh! my darling, how am I to tell you? Did you not guess it when we parted with such agony under the apple trees? Did you not see that I meant to say to you, 'We must say farewell for ever; marry your rich man who will be good to you; make yourself happy with him, and forget me?' Did you not see that it was an eternal parting between us? Do you suppose, love, that your engagement to a man you did not love was all that stood between us? Did you think that so frail a barrier would have kept me from you, so slender a chain not have been easily snapped? Oh, my love, what does your being free or bound matter, since that which stands irrevocably between us—stands there still like the angel with the flaming sword to keep us from our paradise? Oh, Freda, my love.

my darling, you may be free ; but I am bound, helplessly and hopelessly."

Whilst he spoke, a terrible presentiment of untold evil came upon me. My knees trembled, my heart turned sick and cold within me.

"Tell me, for Heaven's sake, what you mean?" I faltered.

"I am married."

The dingy room, the windows, the horse-hair chairs and sofa, the common-looking prints upon the walls, the dusty gas chandelier overhead, all swam and danced for one minute in a wild confusion before my eyes, and then I sank down huddled up upon the floor with my head prone upon the faded carpet and remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER XVII.

MARK'S STORY.

"Judge me, ye powers ; let Fortune tempt or frown,
I stand prepared, my honour is my own."

— LANSDOWN.

WHEN I awoke to life, after that short swoon, I awoke to find my head pillowed upon Mark Thistleby's breast, whilst he alternately sprinkled cold water upon my face, and showered down kisses upon my unconscious lips.

For a moment I remembered nothing—and could not think how I came to be in so strange and yet so pleasant a position. Then all at once the memory

of his words came back with a sharp, stabbing pain into my mind—"I am married," he had said! I shrank shudderingly away out of his arms, and rejecting his help, raised myself with difficulty on to a chair. I think my face must have been nearly as white as when I lay senseless and helpless upon the floor.

"I am better, thanks," I murmured. "Tell me, now, everything."

"You are not strong enough."

"Yes, yes," I interrupted, impatiently; "tell me at once everything there is to know."

So Mark Thistleby, sitting down opposite me on the further side of the bare, desolate little sitting-room, told me then and there the story of his life's mistake. I will let it stand in his own words.

"It was ten years ago, Freda, when I was quite a youngster, and had only joined the army a few months, that I was sent to the depôt of my regiment—to a little station on the west coast of Ireland. There is little to do ever at a depôt, and less than ever if it happens to be at such a desolate place as this was. There was not a decent-sized town within an hour by rail, and not an educated inhabitant within twenty miles. There was no sport beyond a little sea fishing, and no occupation of any sort or kind for us three fellows who were exiled there, besides smoking and idling away our time. Perhaps it was only natural that I should have got into some sort of mischief, especially as my two fellow officers in this lonely place were both older than myself, and were great friends, so that they were very much

together, whilst I was consequently left a good deal to myself, and spent most of my time alone.

"I used to take long solitary walks along the shore. One day when I was walking on the sands at low tide, in a wild, lovely bay, about four miles from home, I saw a young girl picking her way across the brown rocks left bare by the tide. The rocks were covered with seaweed and very slippery, and the girl stumbled and nearly fell. I hurried forward to her assistance, and helped her to gain the firmer footing of the flat, yellow sands.

"She was quite young and very pretty, after the true Irish type, dark-haired and blue-eyed, and with a pretty, shy, wild-fawn manner which completely captivated me. I found that she lived with her sister, who was many years older than herself, in a little cottage which she pointed out to me high up in a cleft of the wild hills which came down abruptly to the edge of the sea.

"They were the daughters of a gentleman—a navy captain, long retired from the service, and who had died a few years previously. But although a lady by birth and in appearance, my little Irish girl had had few or no advantages of education; she had spent all her life in that seaside cottage, and her sister, of whom, apparently, she stood in considerable awe, had been her sole instructress. She was like a wild flower of her native hills, utterly untaught and untrained, with no ideas beyond her narrow life, and with absolutely no knowledge whatever of the world and its ways. But an impressionable young fellow of one-and-twenty is blind to these

disadvantages in a young and lovely girl. When she looked at me with her deep blue eyes, I forgot that there was not much meaning in them beyond a certain puzzled wonder; when her pretty lips parted, I forgave them the sillinesses they generally uttered; and when her little head was pillowed on my shoulder, I did not remember that it was as ignorant and as empty as those of the yellow sea poppies which covered the cliffs over our heads. For it came to that at last; we used to meet daily upon the sands, and sit there for hours love-making, like the couple of young fools that we were, without a thought of what it was all to lead to.

"From first to last I was intensely foolish about the whole business. To begin with, I refused to make the acquaintance of the sister. I saw her once at a distance; she looked stern and hard-featured, and I had an uneasy consciousness that she would not regard these pleasant *tête-à-têtes* upon the sands with a friendly eye. She would want to know my intentions, and I had no intentions. How could a younger son, living with difficulty upon his pay and upon the small sum allowed him by his father, be supposed to have any intentions? I did not want to marry my little love. Fancy my father's face had I announced such a thing! Neither did I wish to be awakened out of my fool's paradise. So I persuaded her to go on meeting me on the sly, and I would not let her introduce me to her sister.

"Things went on drifting like this for some months, and then at last even I felt that something must be done. The girl was now absolutely devoted

to me; she was ready to follow me to the world's end. It became clear to me that I must either marry her or turn my back resolutely upon her for ever; for I must do myself the justice to say that, foolish and blameable as I was, no thought of any other less honourable course of action towards her ever entered into my brain. The man would have been a brute indeed, who could have harboured any thought of wrong towards one so young and so guilelessly confiding. No, it was either marriage or flight, which presented a conflicting alternative to my conscience. I had not the heart to leave her, and I had not the courage to marry her openly. I took a middle course, and married her secretly. One other folly I had committed, that of concealing my real name from her. I was so afraid of my father hearing of my love-making, that I took this perfectly silly and needless precaution. I obtained three days' leave without much difficulty, and I gave myself a fictitious name, and under that name I married her; meeting her at a little solitary church far up among the hills, where, by a strong bribe, I induced a very poor old priest to marry us according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church, and to ask no inconvenient questions. For the next two days I lived at the little village inn close to her cottage, and wandered with her all day upon the deserted sands. Then I had to go back to my work. We parted with tears upon the lonely shore, and, Freda—I have never seen her again!

"When I got back to the barracks, I found a telegram from my mother, telling me to come home at

once, as my father had had a paralytic seizure. I sent a note to my bride by a small village boy whom I have good reason to suspect never delivered it, and I started for England that night.

"My father was desperately ill for six weeks before he died, and a day or two after his funeral, as soon as ever I could be spared, I went back in hot haste to Ireland. All the time I had been away I had not dared to write to my little wife, but now I was determined to own her boldly, and to bring her home to my mother, and throw myself and her upon her mercy and compassion. I did not believe my mother would refuse us her forgiveness. But when I got back to the sheltered bay on the wild Irish coast where I had so often met her, I waited in vain at our trysting place, where I had told her to come every day at a certain hour until I returned to her.

"Lonely and sick at heart, I climbed the steep path to the cottage, and you may imagine my dismay when I found it empty and dismantled. The windows were bare and curtainless, and all the furniture had been taken away. The very garden looked uncared for and desolate. The sisters had ceased to live there. I never could gain any information about them. Why or wherefore they left, and where they had gone to, has for ever remained a mystery to me. At first I was in despair. I made every possible inquiry in the neighbourhood, and advertised in all the local papers.

"I came to the conclusion, at last, that she had become impatient and unhappy at my long absence, and had confided her story to her sister, and that

both together had gone to England, and were trying to trace me out there; but the fact of her being in ignorance of my real name placed an insuperable difficulty in the way of her finding me.

"Time went on, and I heard nothing of her; and by degrees my first grief abated, and insensibly I relaxed the energy of my efforts at finding her. Then suddenly I was ordered to join my regiment in India. Fresh scenes and interests served to drive the past more and more out of my memory, till at last those short six months upon the Irish coast became only like a dim dream to me; and it seemed to me as though my love-making and marriage had never existed.

"Until I met you, Freda, until I learnt to love you as I have loved no other woman, I give you my word that I had almost forgotten that I was a married man. I never meant you to know it. I meant you to think, if you could, that it was your engagement to Mr. Curtis which stood between us, and yet I could not bear you to think that I had behaved badly to you. But now that you have given up all for me—that you are ready to give yourself to me—I am bound to tell you why it is that I dare not take the dear gift which you hold out to me. For your own sake, my darling, I dare not take your love—not until I know for certain whether or no my poor little bride is still alive."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TELEGRAMS.

"When one is past, another care we have;
Thus woe succeeds a woe, as wave a wave."

—HERRICK.

I LISTENED in silence to the end, and then my face sank down into my hands, whilst a low moan of pain escaped me.

So it was all at an end!—all my dreams, my hopes of happiness, all that a woman looks for to make up the joy of life. I must give it all up! Even the dreaming was now forbidden to me; there was nothing in the future for me but colourless despair.

And Captain Thistleby must find his wife; for that she was dead, as he seemed—God forgive him!—to hope, never for one instant entered into my calculation. Why should she be dead? She had been young, and strong, and vigorous; there could be no reason why death should have claimed her. Somewhere, I felt very sure, she still lived; and where that "somewhere" was, it was undoubtedly Captain Thistleby's duty to discover.

"You are not angry with me?" he said, wistfully, after some minutes. "Will you not forgive me, Freda?"

"There is nothing to forgive," I answered, drearily. "You could not help it, I suppose?"

"I did not think of it when I first met you," he answered. "I have never spoken of my marriage, no one knows it. Bella would be as much sur-

prised as you are ; she has never had the slightest idea of it. It all happened so long ago, long before she married my brother. There has never seemed any occasion for telling my story to any one. I have flirted and made love to dozens of women, but I have never done so seriously until I met you. When first I saw you, I never imagined that our relations towards each other would have any other depth or significance on either side than an ordinary flirtation, such as I have passed through unscathed and unscathing many a time. But after a time, when I met you again at Eddington, I found out that this was a very different case. I leave you to judge of the misery I suffered, when I began to realise how far beyond my reach you were. And there was a time when the temptation to ignore that miserable mistake of my youth, and to let the secret of my wretched past, which no one knew but myself, remain for ever buried in my own heart—to woo you and to win you, for myself boldly—was almost too strong for me. Indeed, I came to Eddington, mad with jealousy and despair, with no other intention. And then I thought—I thought how terrible it would be if you ever came to know the truth after, when it would be too late. And I loved you too well, darling, to do you so cruel a wrong, and so I left you.”

My noble-hearted lover ! how dear he seemed to me, whilst he told me so simply the story of his love, and of his resistance of the overpowering temptation which had assailed him, and to which I believe nine men out of ten would have succumbed.

I had never loved him so well as now, and yet my love was no longer a glory, but a shame. I could never more own to it, nor confess it. Henceforth it must remain for ever hidden and concealed.

I rose and held out my hand to him.

"Thank you," I said. "I honour and respect you above all living men, and I can never cease to be grateful to you for your unselfish goodness. But you and I, Mark, must henceforth become strangers to each other. I will ask you to take me to Bella's house, and then I will say good-bye to you, and it must be for ever."

He did not attempt to contradict me. He rang the bell, paid the bill, and ordered a cab. As we came together out of the door of the little hotel, a victoria was driving slowly by with a lady inside it. Captain Thistleby suddenly put out his hand and pulled me back into the shadow of the doorway.

"It is Clara Featherstone!" he said. "I hope to goodness she did not see you."

"I don't see why it should matter if she did," I answered, somewhat proudly.

"She is the most spiteful and venomous-tongued woman in England," answered Mark, as he put me into the cab. "She would do you a mischief if she could; but I don't think she saw us, her head did not turn towards us in the least."

But Mrs. Featherstone had seen us both perfectly, as I was afterwards to discover to my cost.

We reached Chester Square after a drive of almost absolute silence between us. No sooner had the housemaid who had been left in charge of the house

caught sight of me, than she flew back into the hall, and brought out two of those fatal coloured telegraphic envelopes in her hand.

"Oh! miss, I'm so glad you've come," she exclaimed. "These two tallygrams has come this morning, and I didn't know whatever to do with them. And I do hope as they ain't bad news, miss," she added, with the encouraging delight in anything like a prospect of evil which is common to her class.

With trembling hands I tore open the envelope. The messages came from Aunt Selina; the first ran thus:

"Your father has had a stroke. Come back at once."

The second was even more alarming:

"Your father worse; return instantly; there is no time to be lost."

I turned straight back into the cab, from which I had just alighted.

"My father is dying," I said, in a dull voice. Mark called out to the cabman to drive to the Paddington Station as fast as he could, and followed me.

What happened when we got there I do not remember. Everything was in a whirl to me. I felt cold and numbed. I knew of nothing that was going on around me; I only knew that my father was dying, and that he had got his death-warrant in all probability from my hands.

It was my doing ! My flight, and the note which I had left in his room, telling him that I would not fulfil my engagement to George Curtis, had been the blow, I felt certain, which had shortened his frail old life. This one awful idea so absorbed my every thought and feeling, that I was absolutely unconscious of everything which was going on around me.

Captain Thistleby took my ticket, and thrust it into my hand, and placed me in a first-class carriage. I submitted myself to his guidance like a person in a dream ; he bought me something to eat by the way, and put it on the seat in front of me, whence I never moved it. We had about a quarter of an hour to wait before the train started. He got into the carriage with me, and I believe he talked to me ; but I heard nothing of what he said ; I answered yes and no mechanically. My lover, who was so lately everything in the world to me ; my love story, and my blighted hopes of happiness, which a short hour ago seemed to crush me to the earth with an intensity of pain, were now entirely forgotten in this new calamity which threatened me.

Even when Mark wished me good-bye, and raised my hand to his lips, I think, poor fellow, that I never answered him, and was hardly conscious that this parting, so mournful and yet so passionless, was in all probability a final one between us. I experienced no sorrow at leaving him, I only remember feeling a faint gleam of gladness when the train was off at last.

Oh ! that miserable homeward journey ! shall I ever forget it ? The remorse, the self-reproach, the

self-condemnation which filled me! And then the agony of suspense which every instant seemed to increase fourfold."

Should I find my father alive?—that was the question which I asked myself over and over again, in unavailing anguish. Should I be permitted to see him once more, and to kneel by his side, and pray for his pardon, and receive his parting words of forgiveness and blessing? Or was he to die before I could reach him, believing me to be heartless, and rebellious, and I be for ever unforgiven and unblest? Should I not then be guilty of his death?—I, his daughter, his only child. Oh! what a horrible thought was this!

Over and over again I cursed my folly and my wickedness in leaving home as I had done. If I had had the courage to stay and to tell him bravely myself that I was unhappy in my engagement, surely I might have broken it to him gent'y. But it was the shock of my disappearance, and the suddenness of the news in my hurried note, which had brought this evil upon him. Of that there could be no doubt.

At last, after what seemed to me to be the most interminably long railway journey, the train stopped at Narborough. I could not get on by rail to Sloperton, and had to take a fly from there. If the train had seemed to me to be slow, the fly assuredly was infinitely slower. I did not dare to ask the flyman if he knew how my father was. The man knew me, and I fancied that there was a respectful sympathy in his manner, as he touched his hat to me. But I

would not ask him if he knew; I was afraid of his answer, I was afraid to crush out the hopes which I could still indulge in. I felt that I would rather not know the worst.

So we drove on through the damp, foggy lanes, that looked unusually dreary, and cheerless, past many a well-known village and hamlet; past the woods and the high paling of Eddington Park, where I could catch glimpses of the deer through the glades of the leafless trees; past Slopperton Church, where the sight of the curate and the parish clerk, in close conference in the churchyard, made me shrink back tremblingly into the corner of the fly, lest they should see me. Oh! ghastly thought; they might be choosing a site for a grave! And then up the long straight road which led for half a mile from the village-green to our cottage.

The fly pulled up, the man descended slowly from the box, and pulled the bell. The bell rang out, clanging and harsh, into the stillness of the autumn afternoon, and I was at home.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ATTACK FROM THE ENEMY.

"For malice will with joy the lie receive,
Report, and what it wishes true, believe."

—JALDEN.

My father was dead.

He had died an hour before I came home, leaving me for ever unblest and unforgiven! It was as I had

feared; he had risen in the morning, and had found my note upon his dressing-table. Aunt Selina, whose room was next to his, had been frightened at hearing a sudden, heavy sound, as of some one falling. She had rushed in and found him lying senseless upon the floor, and my note open upon the table.

It was in vain for the doctor to assure me that there had been a strong tendency to a seizure of the kind for many months past; and that he had known for long that such an attack must, in all probability, carry him off. I took these assurances as well-meant efforts on his part to console and comfort me in my despair. They did not console me in the very least. In my own eyes I was guilty of my father's death, and I felt that to my dying day I should never be able to hold myself blameless of being the cause of his sudden and fatal attack.

And now it was a week ago, and the first agony of my grief and remorse had somewhat abated. It was the day after the funeral, and everybody knew that my father had sunk all his slender capital in an annuity, and that, probably, because he believed me to be fully and abundantly provided for by my marriage with Mr. Curtis; there was absolutely nothing, beyond the old books and the shabby furniture of the cottage, left for my support. I was penniless.

Aunt Selina and I, in our new crape, were sitting somewhat disconsolately together in the dining-room after breakfast.

"It is singular that Mr. Curtis has not yet been to see you, Freda," observed my aunt. "I should think he is sure to come to-day."

I thought it was singular too, for I knew he had attended my father's funeral, and I was sure that he could not have known of my letter, and of my intention of breaking off my engagement.

"Yes," I answered, "I wish he would come. I think I will send up Daniel to Eddington with a note."

"Yes, do, my dear."

I wrote the note merely requesting him to come and speak to me to-day, rang the bell, and sent it off.

"I want to tell him about breaking off my engagement, aunt," I said, when the servant had left the room.

Aunt Selina turned upon me in consternation.

"Freda, it is impossible that you can be such an utter fool!" she exclaimed, in dismay.

"How so, aunt?"

"You are never going to do such a mad thing as to break off your engagement *now*—now that you are left utterly unprovided for?"

"Is it likely, aunt, that I should have gone away to London, and written as I did to poor papa, if I had not meant to do it? And you cannot suppose that I should be so base as to ignore all that has happened, and go back to him just because I am very poor?" I added, indignantly.

"But he knows nothing about it—absolutely nothing," cried my aunt, throwing up her hands in despair. "I took possession of your foolish note instantly and burnt it. No one had seen it but your poor dear father and myself—no one knows what

made you rush off in that insane way. One can easily make up some plausible reason to tell the servants. Let us say that it was business, that some friend was taken ill; anything will do to put off questions and surmises. Mr. Curtis need never know anything about it. For Heaven's sake, Freda, don't be such an idiot as to tell him! Even if you are not romantically in love with him, he will give you a wealthy home, and you have nothing but starvation or hard work to look to elsewhere. Do not fly in the face of Providence, my dear. I am sure it is bad enough that the wedding will have to be put off six months at least; it wouldn't be decent before, but you can stay with me till then, though I am sure this sad death is a sore trial for me," and the good lady began whimperingly to wipe her eyes; "and all the breakfast from Gunter's that was to have come down had to be counter-ordered and all. Oh, dear—oh, dear!" and Aunt Selina dissolved into downright sobs, less over her brother-in-law's death, I fear, than over the collapse of the wedding festivities, and the breakfast from Gunter's in which she had taken so lively an interest.

"I must do what I think right," was my only answer, with, I fear, a hardening of the heart towards my relative's outburst of grief.

"You are an ungrateful, undutiful, headstrong girl!" gasped Aunt Selina, between her sobs; and then she fled from the room, slamming the door behind her with some show of temper.

I was left alone, gazing disconsolately out of the window. I was too filled with my own many very

serious sorrows and anxieties to have much sympathy with my aunt's fictitious and imaginary grievances.

By-and-by the messenger returned from Eddington. He brought no note in answer to mine, only a verbal message.

Mr. Curtis had left Eddington last night; but Mrs. Featherstone would do herself the honour of calling upon me during the course of the afternoon.

Mrs. Featherstone! what had she to do with it I wondered? Suddenly I recollected how Captain Thistleby had seen her pass by in her victoria as we were coming out of the hotel in the Strand! Of course she had seen us; and equally, of course, she had seized upon the incident eagerly, to do me an evil turn with her brother.

She might have saved herself the trouble of slandering me, had she known how determined I was to break off my engagement with him. But she did not know it, and she was probably now gloating over the chance that had placed me thus at her mercy. I augured no good from her proposed visit to me, and I confess that I looked forward to it with a good deal of trepidation.

About three o'clock the Eddington carriage drove up to the door, and my unwelcome guest alighted from it.

Mrs. Featherstone sailed in, attired, as usual, in brilliant raiment. There was a prevalence of blue and scarlet in her dress, which reminded me forcibly of the colouring of a cockatoo. She made me a cold bow, and sat down at some distance from me. I saw

at once by her bent brows and pinched lips that it was to be war to the death between us. I accepted the position at once, and took the initiative.

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this most unexpected visit, Mrs. Featherstone? I had wished to see your brother."

"Mr. Curtis has gone to town."

"And in his absence I do not see that any one else can fill his place," I answered.

"In his absence, Miss Clifford, I bring you a message from him. I have no doubt that my visit is unwelcome, and I assure you it is a most painful one to myself; but I have never yet been known to shrink from a duty, however unpleasant——"

"Pray deliver your message, Mrs. Featherstone," I interrupted, impatiently, "and spare me a description of your own sensations."

Mrs. Featherstone bowed.

"My message," she said, with a scarcely-concealed triumph of manner, "is that under the circumstances of your extraordinary visit to London, it will be quite impossible for my brother to fulfil the matrimonial engagement which existed previously between yourself and him."

"Under *what* circumstances, pray!" I cried, flushing up hotly and angrily—a display of weakness of which my adversary was not slow to take advantage.

"Pray calm yourself, Miss Clifford. Temper and angry denials, are alike misplaced and useless in this case. The facts, unfortunately, are but too plain and tell too strongly against you."

"I am at a loss to understand you," I said, falteringly, and feeling suddenly sick at heart; for I remembered how Mark had said that Clara Featherstone had a venomous tongue, and would do me an injury if she could.

"I will explain myself, then," she said, glibly, and with a growing satisfaction in voice and manner—"I will explain my meaning beyond a possibility of your mistaking it. I saw you, Miss Clifford, coming out of a low-looking inn near the Strand, at an early hour in the morning, in the company of Captain Thistleby, a man of profligate and dissipated reputation."

"Indeed? I imagined him to be a great friend of your own, Mrs. Featherstone," I interrupted, quickly; for, like a watchful adversary, I was not slow to take advantage of the weak points of my enemy's method of attack.

Mrs. Featherstone waved off my remark with disdain.

"There are many men, Miss Clifford, with whom a lady may claim acquaintance in society, but with whom, nevertheless, she would be very sorry to be seen walking about the streets of London alone! But that has nothing to do with the point. Suffice it to say that you were alone with Captain Thistleby; that I saw you get into a cab, and drive off—I should be sorry to say *where*—and that I then turned back and made inquiries at the wretched-looking inn out of which you had come. I found that, as I had but too much reason to suspect, you had been closeted with a gentleman for some hours in a private sitting-

room. I need not tell you how shocked and horrified my whole moral nature was at such a fearful revelation of wickedness! My duty, however painful it might be to perform, was now plain to me. I took the evening train to Narborough, and laid the whole case before my unhappy brother. I am thankful to say that, under Heaven, I have been the instrument of saving him from cherishing a viper in his bosom. When, at my entreaties, he consented to make inquiries, and found that you had been missing from home the night before the morning I had seen you in town, he was forced to acknowledge, with me, that nothing was wanting in the complete chain of evidence which proved your utter condemnation. He has only stayed to follow your poor father to the grave, as a mark of respect for his long friendship and esteem for him, and he left Eddington last night, and does not mean to return to it for a long time. I think I have said quite enough upon this subject, Miss Clifford."

"Quite enough—too much, indeed, Mrs. Featherstone," I answered. "I have heard you to the end without interruption, and I may say that, although my conduct can be perfectly well accounted for, I disdain to make any explanations of it to you. I should, however, wish you to know that I have had no intention of marrying your brother for some time back; that on going up to London somewhat suddenly, I left a letter for my poor father telling him of my intention—that I went to join Mrs. Thistleby, in Paris, and should have been under her protection now, had not my father's sad death re-

called me ; and, finally, that I sent for Mr. Curtis to-day in order to tell him that I wish to break off my engagement with him."

"That is easily said," said my enemy, scoffingly. "As if any one would believe all that when you are left without a penny!"

"You need not add insult to injury, Mrs. Featherstone."

"I shall wish you good-morning, Miss Clifford," she answered, rising, to my no small relief. "And I may also add another wish for your benefit: that you may be given the grace of repentance!"

And then my temper forsook me utterly. I turned upon her white and trembling, and absolutely furious.

"Who are you," I exclaimed, "who dare to talk to me of repentance? Go home, woman, and ask God, upon your knees, to forgive you. For if malice, and hatred, and evil-speaking, and slandering, and traducing your neighbour be sins, then do you most assuredly stand in need of repentance and forgiveness! You that are rejoicing to yourself, because you think that you have encompassed the ruin of an unfortunate girl, whose only crime is that hitherto she has been successful and happy; go home and pray that you may never, in your turn, find yourself at the mercy of a hard-hearted and pitiless fellow-creature!"

And then Mrs. Featherstone passed out of the room, and answered me never a word as she went.

CHAPTER XX.

CHARLEY FLOWER TO THE RESCUE.

"Nothing of farewell I uttered,
Save in broken words to pray
That God would ever guard and bless her—
Then in silence passed away."

—A. A. PROCTER.

It was the day before my final departure from Slopperton. My aunt had already gone home, and the following morning I was to go up to her house in London, where she and Mr. Carr had offered me a shelter until I could find something to do.

"Something to do" meant in my case going out as a governess, or as a companion, or as a pupil teacher in a school—earning my living, in short, by any of the dismal and uninviting methods in which alone it has been decreed that a lady may do so and retain her claim to the name. I had secretly determined to go out as a housemaid, or as a charwoman, sooner than live for long upon the bread of charity.

Mr. and Mrs. Carr were rich and childless, but it had not occurred to the worthy couple to offer me a permanent home. Aunt Selina was a fair-weather friend: as long as fortune smiled upon her relatives, she was filled with gushing and affectionate interest in them; but no sooner did the world turn its back upon them, and adversity and poverty come to them, than she drew in the strings of her heart and of her purse simultaneously, and wasted no more either of her substance or her feelings upon them.

She had made a great favour of offering me a temporary home, even ; and had I had anywhere else to go, I would not have accepted her offer. But to go to Bella was now forbidden to me. If I were to be with Bella, then Mark would know where I was, and, so knowing, might find me out ; and my one hope in life now was that I might never see nor hear of him again. I was determined to become lost for ever to him. Our only safety was in absolute separation from each other. So, with many a pang, I tore up my dear Bella's loving and kind letters, and left them all unanswered. Once I left Slopperton, I knew that she would never be able to find me, for she knew neither my aunt's name nor address.

Well, the last day at Slopperton had come ; there had been a sale of the furniture, and the proceeds had paid off all our little bills, and defrayed the expenses of my mourning, and left me a few pounds to begin my new life with. The house was bare and dismantled ; there were bills up in the windows ; and my solitary box stood ready packed and strapped in the hall.

Old Sarah went about weeping, for she too was to depart on the morrow, and begin life afresh. I had dragged a kitchen-chair into the dining room, and was sitting there miserably enough by the dying embers of the fire, pondering over the gloomy prospects of my future life, when a sharp knock at the door aroused me, and, to my amazement, young Charley Flower walked suddenly into the room.

"Mr. Flower !" I exclaimed, standing up in utter

bewilderment at the sight of so unexpected a visitor :
“ what on earth brings you here ? ”

“ Oh ! pray forgive me, Miss Clifford, I couldn't help coming. I have only just heard of your loss, and that you are turned out of your home, and all ; and oh ! ” looking suddenly away from me round the bare, carpetless, furnitureless room—“ oh ! I *am* so sorry for you ! ”

“ And you came to tell me this ? ” I cried, placing both my hands heartily into his ; “ just to tell me you are sorry for me ? How good of you, Mr. Flower ! Do you know yours is the first disinterested sympathy in my troubles anybody has given me yet ? ” and the tears so long driven back into my heart welled up suddenly into my eyes.

“ Well, I mustn't let you think I am quite disinterested, either, Miss Clifford,” said my visitor, somewhat hesitatingly. “ The fact is, that—that, Miss Clifford—oh, Freda ! ”—suddenly lifting his eyes in honest earnestness to my face—“ surely you must know that I love you ! ”

“ Oh, I am so sorry ! ” I murmured.

“ Why should you be sorry ? ” he cried, eagerly—having once broken the ice, Charley apparently found no difficulty in proceeding—“ Why are you sorry, if I can make you happy ? I have heard that your engagement with Mr. Curtis is at an end—and no wonder, for you never loved him, I know—and now you are free, and you are also in trouble, and have no one belonging to you, and I am pretty well off, Freda, and can afford to give you a comfortable

home. I would leave the army ; and I know I could make you happy, if you will let me try——”

“Stop, stop ! not so fast !” I cried, interrupting the category of his hopes and intentions ; “wait one minute, Mr. Flower. If you know that my engagement with Mr. Curtis is broken off, you do not perhaps know that there is a dreadful slander about me that——”

“Oh ! yes, I do,” he interrupted, quickly ; “don’t say anything more about that. I have had a letter from Mrs. Featherstone, telling me the whole story at great length.”

“She wrote to you ?” I exclaimed, in horror-struck tones.

“Yes—the she-fiend !” and Charley Flower ground his teeth and his fists together, as though he would like to murder her.

“And in the face of her letter you are here asking me to marry you, Mr. Flower ?”

“Do you suppose I believe one word of what that woman says ? It’s all a tissue of lies from beginning to end. You don’t suppose a woman like *that* could make me believe any harm of *you*, do you ? And it is just because of her spiteful letter that I have come to you now, so soon, without waiting any longer after your poor father’s death ; just because I see how lonely and friendless you must be, darling, to be at the mercy of that woman’s evil tongue, and how much you need some one to silence all such calumny against you, and to fight your battles for you.”

“Oh ! Charley, how good you are ! How I wish

I could love you as you deserve!" And then I burst into a flood of tears.

In a minute the young fellow was kneeling by my side, stroking my hands and my hair, and soothing me by every fond and loving word.

But I pushed him back firmly but gently.

"No, no, Charley," I said through my tears, "I must not let you waste any more love upon me, my poor boy. I don't know how I can ever thank you and bless you enough for all your goodness and your love to me. If I had not loved any one else I *must* have loved you—out of sheer gratitude. But alas! I can give you back nothing but tears and blessings—for I have no love to give you—it has all been given away long ago."

He rose from his kneeling position at my side, and walked two or three times the length of the room and back before he answered me, and then he stopped suddenly in front of me with a very white face.

"Will you tell me the truth about this, Freda?" he asked, gently.

I nodded.

"It is Mark Thistleby—the man who was at Eddington the night of the ball—whom you love, is it not?"

"Yes," I answered softly under my breath; whilst a hot blush covered my downcast face, at the thought of how much shame and how little pride there could be for me now in the avowal of my love.

There was a little pause, and then Charley spoke again; this time coldly and sternly:

"Tell me the truth, then—has he behaved badly to you? Has he treated you like a blackguard? for by heaven if he has——"

"Oh, no, no!—a thousand times, no!" I cried, looking up at him suddenly, as he stood before me, an angry picture of avenging young love. "What can make you think such a thing? He has been everything that is good to me always. He is the noblest of men; but—but, alas! we can never be happy. He is in no way to blame; but——"

And my voice faltered.

"Hush, my darling; say no more. Do you suppose I want to cross-question you, or to wring your secrets from you? It is enough that I know that no one has behaved badly to my darling."

And then he suddenly bent over me, and took me in his arms.

"I will not bother you any longer," he said, somewhat brokenly, "though I love you very dearly, I will never trouble you again; only give me one kiss, before I go, from your sweet lips!"

Dear, noble-hearted Charley Flower! I think that even Mark would have forgiven me that I granted him his last request; that I put up my arms suddenly round his neck, and gazed into the honest blue eyes that were dimmed with tears, and put up my face for his parting-kiss.

"Good-bye," he said, huskily, turning away suddenly to the door. "If ever you want a friend, Freda, do not forget that you have one in me—and God bless you."

Before I could answer he was gone, and with him

ned to go at once all the sunshine and the light
 seelich his unexpected entrance had brought into my
 whely and desolate life.

lo And yet I was happier for that visit—happier to
 link that one more honest heart in this desolate
 th world loved me, and was true to me, than I had
 w known of.

Poor Charley Flower! It was not so very long
 afterwards that he was drowned in a dreadful col-
 lision between two ships in the Channel—bravely
 devoting his own life to saving those of the perishing
 women and children about him. When I read of
 his noble death in the papers—a hero in his last
 hours—I wept tears of heartfelt sorrow over his sad
 yet glorious end, and felt proud to think that such
 a man had once loved Freda Clifford.

CHAPTER XXI.

CARING FOR THE STRANGER.

"Thou shalt by trial know what bitter fare
 Is other's bread; how hard the path to go upward and
 downward by another's stair."

—DANTE.

RUSSELL SQUARE, on a foggy winter's morning, is not
 a particularly cheering spot, yet there it was that I
 stood, looking out of the drawing-room window of
 one of the houses on the north side of the square,
 one day about two months after my father's death.

The square was filled with opaque yellow fog,

through which the bare trees in the garden looked gaunt and weird; a fine drizzle was falling, and a few passers-by hurried along under umbrellas. I stood leaning against the window-frame, with some open letters in my hand, and looked miserably and hopelessly out.

My Aunt Selina came bustling into the room, with her new black silk dress all crisp and fresh, and her cap-ribbons flying out behind her. She looked rosy and comfortably well-to-do. She stooped down and stirred the fire into a cheerful blaze.

"Any news, Freda?" she said to me; but before I could answer her, Uncle Carr, who was stone deaf, and never heard ordinary conversation, interrupted her, and claimed her attention. He was seated in a low arm-chair, drawn well up to the fire, and had been awaiting her reappearance from the lower regions impatiently.

"What have you ordered for dinner, Selina?" Next to eating his dinner, hearing about what he was going to eat, was Uncle Carr's chief solace during the twenty-four hours.

"Sole *au gratin*, mutton cutlets, oyster patties, and roast pheasants," shouted Aunt Selina.

"Eh?" and up went the ear trumpet. Aunt Selina repeated the *menu* down it.

"No soup?" inquired her husband, in an ag-grieved voice.

"Oh, yes; hare soup."

"Have you got the port for it, my dear? and what sauce for the cutlets?"

Being satisfied -----

points, Uncle Carr subsided into himself, nodding his head, and giving vent to low chucklings of pleasure at intervals—indicative, probably, of the delights of anticipation which he was experiencing.

Her husband's curiosity being appeased, Mrs. Carr turned again to me.

"Any news this morning, Freda?" she asked again. "I see you have some letters."

"No," I answered, glancing down at the papers in my hand; "there is nothing new. The lady in Hampshire is suited with a governess, and the one in South Kensington has gone back to the music-teacher who taught her little girls last year. Everything falls through!" I added, with a sigh.

Aunt Selina gave a grunt, expressive of disapprobation.

"And to think that you might have been living on ten thousand a-year now, if you had chosen!" she said, angrily, as she drew forth an enormous bundle of knitting—a counterpane for a bazaar—and settled herself down to it.

"And probably twice as miserable as I am now!" I answered, with a very sad smile.

"I've no patience with such sentimental rubbish!" exclaimed my aunt. "And pray what do you think of doing now?"

"Well," I said, doubtfully, "there's an advertisement in the *Times* for a bookkeeper in an hotel wanted."

"Impossible!" cried Aunt Selina; "pray remember that you have got relations, Freda. I am not going to allow you to disgrace your family. Why

on earth don't you sit down and write to Mr. Curtis!"

"And ask him to take me back, aunt? No, thank you! I think that would be disgracing myself and my family far more than if I were to sweep a crossing."

"What nonsense you talk! You needn't put it in that way. If you were just to say to him that you could not get any occupation and were in want of money, he would write off by return of post and propose to you again—see if he wouldn't. I am sure you had much better humble your pride a little than starve."

"I am not starving, aunt—thanks to you," I answered, smiling pleasantly; for when one is eating a person's bread, one feels bound to be as grateful as one can for the gift, however grudgingly it may be bestowed.

"You would be if it wasn't for me," is Aunt Selina's ungracious rejoinder.

I sighed, and walked wearily across the room towards the door.

"Where are you off to now?" asked my aunt, looking up sharply from her work.

"I thought I would go out; I might go to that office again and hear of something new," I answered listlessly, as I left the room; Aunt Selina launching forth more invectives against my "ingratitude" and my "obstinacy" after me as I went.

In truth, I had no object in going out at all, unless it was to get out of reach of my aunt's revilings, and out of the sight of her well-furnished

carpeted house, where I felt choked and stifled, as though I had no business there.

I was sick of governess offices and agencies; I would go to them no more. I would go into a shop or into a hospital and offer myself as a housemaid, I thought—anything to escape from Aunt Selina's charity, and to eat the bread of dependence no more.

I wandered along aimlessly and miserably in the damp foggy air, until chance brought my wandering footsteps into Pall Mall. Here suddenly my passage was arrested by a small crowd collected on the pavement which blocked the way. There were the usual ingredients—a tall policeman in the middle, a red-faced, noisy-voiced cabman haranguing and swearing, and a small, weeping woman, whom the engine of the law was grasping firmly by the arm, whilst a group of idlers, dirty men and lounging errand-boys, had crowded close round, eager to hear what it was all about.

"I tell ye I wants my money, and I will have it, or I'll know the reason why!" shouted the cabman, brandishing his fist within six inches of the woman's face.

"But how can I pay you if I've lost my purse?" sobbed the woman.

"You had better come along with me, my dear," was the only solution suggested by the maker of peace.

I don't know what irresistible impulse made me suddenly stop short and listen to what was going on.

"She's drunk, that's what she is!" suggested a
— and indeed it did not look unlike it, for

the woman, whose face was hidden in her handkerchief, was swaying herself backwards and forwards as if in a paroxysm of grief.

This being a reasonable, if not an original, solution of the situation, appeared to find favour in the minds of the by-standers; there was murmur of assent among the crowd. The cabman, a rough and brutal-looking specimen of his class, instantly took up the popular cry.

"Yes, that's what it is, she's drunk! She's led me a pretty dance up to Regent's Park Barracks"—there was a grin at this—"then into the City, then back again here, and then tells me at the end she can't pay me 'cos she's lost her purse, and won't tell me her address neither, for me to take her there and get paid."

I don't know why, but at this description of the circuitous route along which the unhappy cabman had been dragged by his fare I pressed in closer, and looked and listened more attentively. I observed that we stood right in front of the Army and Navy Club.

Something in the slight weeping figure struck me as familiar. Surely I had seen her before.

Suddenly she lifted her face, pale and tear-stained.

"Man," she said, solemnly addressing the cabman, "have you no heart at all? I would pay you if I could, but if I haven't the money, why can't you be charitable for once, and let me off? It won't hurt you in the next world to have done a kind action. And I tell you I am very unhappy and very

unfortunate. I have lost my purse, and everything—everything!" she added, gloomily.

Imagine what effect such a tragical appeal was likely to have on the typical London "cabby," defrauded of his fare!

But help was at hand for her, for I had recognised her. The pale, sorrowful-faced, dark-eyed little woman who had taken refuge at Slopperton in a thunder-shower, and had given me such a piteous insight into her broken-hearted life. It was she.

"Here," I cried out, addressing the policeman, "I know this lady; it is all right; I will pay the cabman."

In an instant way was made for me; the policeman touched his hat civilly, and "cabby," seeing that his hour for triumph was come, instantly demanded ten-and-six.

It was probably nearly twice as much as he was lawfully entitled to, but I was not inclined for further wrangling—a fact doubtless upon which he had counted. I paid him without a word, and tucking the little trembling woman's arm under my own, I led her away rapidly out of the crowd down a side street.

We had walked a hundred yards or more before either of us spoke; then suddenly she glanced shyly up into my face.

"I remember you; you are Miss Clifford, and I took shelter in your house in a shower of rain about four months ago."

"Yes," I answered, "I remember it perfectly; that is why I came forward to-day to help you. I

am glad I happened to be passing. How came you to lose your purse ? ”

“Dropped it, I suppose,” she answered, carelessly, as though the fact were not worth consideration ; and then she suddenly stopped short and caught my hands. “Are you a happy woman ? ” she asked me, with a sudden eagerness.

“Not very, I fear,” I answered, smiling a little at so strange and unexpected a question.

“Well, then, never mind ; you will be some day. Doesn’t it say in the Bible that ‘those who care for the friendless and the stranger are blessed’ ? Well, *you* have cared for the stranger, and I tell you God will make you happy some day. But as for that cabman, he will be cursed—*cursed* ! ” she repeated, furiously, clenching her fists ; then, seeing that I looked slightly shocked at the strength and bitterness of her malediction, she added, lightly : “Ah, I believe in my Bible, I do ! You good people don’t read it so much as I do, or you would know better ; it always comes true, the Bible does.”

We walked on again. I began to be much puzzled by my strange companion.

“Why where you crying ? ” I asked her. “Was it because you lost your purse ? ”

“Purse ? What does a purse matter ? Oh, no ; it was only because I am foiled again, and the man frightened me so, and the crowd.”

“Why did you not let him drive you home, and pay him then ? ” I asked.

“What ! for Barbara to find out I had gone out in a cab by myself ? No, thank you ! As it is, I

expect she will guess I have been out, and sha'n't I be scolded! But I sha'n't say where I have been, and you will never tell of me, I know."

"Who is Barbara?" I asked.

"Oh, don't you know? She is my sister."

"No; you forget I don't even know your name. Won't you tell it me?"

She looked up at me slyly, almost cunningly, and was silent a minute before she answered in these strange words:

"I shall not tell you more than Barbara would. After all, you are only a stranger, though I like you. My name? Oh, yes, my name is Ellinor Fairbank—Ellinor, that is what I am called."

We had reached by this time a quiet street north of Oxford street. Here she turned round to bid me good-bye.

"Don't come any further; this is our street, where we have lodgings, at least, for a week. Barbara, you know, has gone to Shoolbred's shopping, or I could not have got out. I promised her I wouldn't move; if she is in she will scold me finely."

She gave me her hand, and I wished her good-bye; then suddenly she turned back, and running up to me, whispered in my ear:

"You shall hear more of me soon—very soon."

CHAPTER XXII.

I GET A SITUATION.

"It is the mind that maketh good or ill,
That maketh wretch or happy, rich or poo

—SPENSER.

"If this should meet the eye of the lady who, on Tuesday morning last, paid a cab fare for a young lady who had lost her purse, and walked home with her afterwards, she is earnestly requested to meet a relative of the young lady whom she assisted, between twelve to half-past twelve o'clock any morning this week, in front of St. Marylebone Church."

This was the advertisement which I had stumbled across in the "agony column" of the *Times* about two days after my adventure with Ellinor Fairbank.

Behold me, therefore, at twelve o'clock one cold, winter morning, pacing up and down the short space in the Marylebone Road which is opposite the church. I was telling myself that I was rather a fool for my pains for coming there. The "relative" meant, of course, Sister Barbara; and if she was to turn out as queer and eccentric a being as her sister, I might possibly be amused, but I could scarcely be benefited by the interview. Besides, what could she possibly want with me? It was probably only a laudable desire on her part to repay me the ten shillings and sixpence which I had expended in her sister's service, but poor as I was, I did not wish to be repaid; it was a pleasure to me to have done my

little deed of charity towards one even more miserable, apparently, than myself, and I had no wish to be paid by the sensitive pride of her relatives.

Ten minutes past twelve, and no signs of anybody who looked likely to be my unknown friend. I glanced up at the clock, and was mentally determining to give up my wild-goose chase and go home, when a voice close behind me suddenly addressed me :

“I think you must be Miss Clifford ?” I turned sharply round, and found myself face to face with a short, dark-eyed woman, of about five-and-forty. She was simply but handsomely dressed in black, and had small pointed features, and a shrewd, and clever, but somewhat stern face.

“Yes, my name is Clifford, and you are Miss Fairbank ?”

“Yes, Barbara Fairbank. Will you mind coming in here, and talking to me ?” She turned in at the gate of the church, and we began walking up and down the space which is inclosed by the iron railings in front of it.

“I have to thank you for your very great kindness to my poor young sister.”

“Now for the ten-and-six !” I said to myself ; but no ! to my intense relief, she turned the subject instantly.

“Ellinor tells me that she met you once before ; she has taken the most extraordinary fancy to you, Miss Clifford.” She looked up at me and smiled, and all at once I felt that I liked Barbara Fairbank, and that she was a person one could trust.

"She told you, then," I asked, in some surprise—"she told you, that she had been out by herself?"

"Oh! yes, poor child. I am afraid I don't know how to manage her very well, she is afraid of me, I fear. But still she never can hide anything from me; besides, I was in when she came back, and of course terribly anxious as to where she was. And now, Miss Clifford, I must tell you why I have advertised for you, and dragged you out here to meet me. Of course you must have noticed that my poor sister is strange—slightly deranged in her mind?"

"Oh! no, not that!" I cried. "No one could think that—she is only eccentric."

"Thanks; it is kind of you to say that. And indeed upon most subjects—on all save one in fact—she is as sane as you or I. There is no insanity in my family; but, poor girl, she has had a sad trouble in her early life. A terrible story it is, to which I will not do more than allude. There was a man, who deceived her cruelly, and it is her mania to be always seeking for this man. I trust and pray," she added, fervently, "that he is dead; but if not, I pray that she may never meet him again; it would be a terrible calamity for her were she to do so. But whenever she can slip off by herself, on some wild-goose chase of her own fancy, to hunt for some trace of this wretched man, she always does, and it is wonderful how she manages to elude me! She was away the whole day once, the time you saw her in the country. You may imagine my state of mind,

for of course, poor child, with these delusions it is not right or safe for her to go about alone. I was nearly distracted on that occasion. And this brings me to what I want to say to you, Miss Clifford. You will understand that it is quite impossible for me to be always with her. We live in the country, in a little house which an uncle has lately left to me. I have a hundred duties to attend to, my household cares, my poor people, and at times I have even to be away, for I have a brother with a large family, who often claims my time, and services. A maiden aunt, you know"—with a pleasant smile—"has so many calls upon her. Well, during these absences it is not safe to leave Ellinor alone. Her health, too, is most precarious; and I have never met with a servant yet who understood how to manage her. The real object of my being in town just now is to find some young lady to live with us—a regular companion for her, in fact. I have utterly failed in finding any one suitable for so difficult a position; and what I want to ask of you, Miss Clifford, is, whether you will come and pay us a visit whilst I am looking out for this companion?"

A sudden rush of hope and delight filled my heart. Here at once was employment, and work, and independence, fallen as it were from the heavens into my path!

When Miss Fairbank stopped short, and took hold of my hand in the earnestness of her appeal to me, and in evident anxiety for my answer, I replied joyfully:

"No, Miss Fairbank, I cannot come as your visi-

tor, but should I do for the companion you are looking out for ? ”

“ *You*, Miss Clifford ? But I thought, I understood——”

“ You evidently do not know of my present circumstances, Miss Fairbank. I have lost my father ; I am poor, and dependent only upon charity, until I can find a situation in which to earn my living. I am not suited to be a governess ; I hate the idea of it ; and I can get nothing to do. If your sister likes me, and you think I should do, I should be very glad to come to you.”

Miss Barbara wrung my hands in gratitude and delight, and in a very few minutes my engagement was a settled thing. The terms she offered me were liberal, far more so than any I had yet been offered. I was to have eighty pounds a year, and apparently my duties were to be of the very lightest description. I was never to let Ellinor out of my sight, if her sister was not there, that was all.

“ She is so romantically smitten with you already, Miss Clifford, that there is nothing for you to do in gaining her affection. All I ask of you is to try and treat her as if she was any other young lady of your acquaintance, and not to encourage her to talk about the past. The less she remembers it, and dwells upon it, the better she invariably is in mind and in body. I hope you do not mind a very quiet life ; we can offer you no gaieties at Kaneton Scars.”

“ Gaiety is the last thing I wish for, even if I were not in mourning for my father. I suppose by the name, that your house is in the north ? ”

"Yes, it is on the borders of Yorkshire and Lancashire ; it is a very quiet place indeed," with some hesitation. "I think I ought not to conceal from you that many people might call it a desolate place : it is out of the world, on a little branch line, and is six miles from the station. I think," she said, smiling, "if you wished to hide yourself from any of your friends or enemies, that nobody would ever succeed in finding you at Kaneton Scars."

To hide myself ! was not that exactly what I wished to do ? How nearly this woman had unwittingly touched upon what must be the very main-spring of my existence henceforth. To hide myself for ever from my lover, who was mine no longer—to hide myself, lest he should ever see me again, and be tempted in some moment of weakness to forget that impassable barrier which stood between us. For, God forgive me ! I might be weak too ! No, that was what was best for both of us, that I should hide myself.

"That will suit me very well," I answered, gravely, as I gave Miss Barbara my hand in farewell.

The next day, according to her own wish, she called upon Aunt Selina, in Russell Square, and explained to her that she had engaged my services as companion to her younger sister, who was in delicate health and had weak nerves.

Aunt Selina was no doubt glad to get me off her hands ; nevertheless she was somewhat offended at the idea of my taking a salaried situation. She considered it derogatory to her own dignity that her niece should earn her living.

"It is an absurd folly altogether," she said, to Miss Fairbank. "My niece has no occasion to go out as a companion at all, she might if she chose marry one of the richest men in England."

"Aunt Selina, pray do not say such things," I exclaimed, with an indignant flush; whilst Miss Fairbank looked distressed.

"It's quite true, Freda, and you know it is. She threw him over at the last, poor fellow, in the most heartless way, just a week before the wedding, Miss Fairbank, I assure you. And all the breakfast was ordered, and my dress was made, and all, such a lovely peach colour! Of course her poor father died, but then it might have been put off for a few months, and she might be settling her wedding-day now instead of talking of going out as a companion!"

"I have no doubt that Miss Clifford had very good reasons for acting as she did," said Miss Barbara, politely.

"Oh; I don't know about the reasons. I don't much think there was any reason at all in the matter, or sense either; a man with ten thousand a year, I assure you!"

"There are other things in life more important than money," said Miss Barbara, looking at me kindly.

"Are there? Well, I don't know. I never found anything better, and I have lived a good many years. However, perhaps you and Freda agree upon that subject. I don't deny that she is a good girl in her way, though she has made a most

unfortunate mistake; and I am sure I hope you may find her a comfort to your poor sister. Consumptive, I think you said, she was? Oh, yes, I will give my consent to her going, and I will send her next week. Good-morning, Miss Fairbank, I am pleased to have seen you."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ELLINOR'S REVELATIONS.

"If she be mad, as I believe no other,
Her madness hath the oddest form of sense,
(Such a dependency of thing on things)
As e'er I heard in madness."

—SHAKESPEARE.

MISS BARBARA FAIRBANK was quite right when she called Kaneton Scars a "desolate place." As I drove up to it on the afternoon of my arrival, I thought it was, without exception, the most desolate and out-of-the-world place I had ever seen. There was not a house, nor even a tree, within two miles of it; not a hedge, nor a cultivated field, nothing but miles and miles of wild round-topped moors, dotted over sparsely with flocks of little black-faced north-country sheep, and cut up at intervals by swift rocky-bedded "becks," that came tumbling down noisily from the hills on every side. There was nothing else to be seen in any direction—it was like the end of the world.

The house stood in about five or six acres of

ground, and was entirely surrounded by a high grey stone wall, covered with lichens, and now withered ferns. It had been a convent in olden times, and was a weather-beaten and picturesque building, with a ruined chapel at one end of it. It stood low in a hollow of the hills, and had a melancholy and to a certain extent a prison-like appearance.

Within the surrounding walls were a pretty well-kept lawn and shrubbery, and a conservatory, evidently but newly built, substantial modern out-houses, a good kitchen garden, and a fair-sized field, or orchard, where in the summer time a couple of cows were to be seen. So that it was evident that everything that was possible had been done to make the house pleasant and homelike. Still, with it all, it was a gloomy place. Inside, the house was prettily and comfortably furnished; and in a very few days I felt myself perfectly at home in it.

The two Miss Fairbanks welcomed me joyfully. Ellinor could not make enough of me; she was evidently delighted to have me, and seemed never tired of sitting talking to me in her own queer peculiar way.

She spent a curious life; she never occupied herself in needlework, nor wrote letters, nor played the piano. She read no books except the Bible, but that was almost invariably open upon her knees, even if she were not reading it; and she would bring its words and precepts into her daily life in an extraordinary way. She took long walks every day, in which I was her only companion; and when I had been up to the tops of all the surrounding moors,

and had seen the wonderful lights and shadows among them, and had watched the crimson winter sunsets from their summits, I no longer thought the country ugly and uninteresting, but learnt to see a loveliness of its own in its wild and desolate features. Miss Barbara, meanwhile, relieved by my presence from her constant attendance upon her sister, drove off almost daily by herself in a little basket pony-carriage to visit her "poor people" in the nearest village, about four miles off. She generally went laden with good things for the old and sick, which I helped her to pack into the little carriage. We received no visitors, and we never went to church; indeed there was no church to go to within six miles, and, moreover, Miss Barbara told me privately that the excitement of seeing strange faces would be very bad for Ellinor. Every Sunday Miss Barbara assembled her household, and, spectacles on nose, read the Morning Service to us, followed by a short sermon, which I have reason to suspect was her own composition. And very good sermons they were, too. And once now and then the clergyman drove over in his high-wheeled gig, and paid us a pastoral visit, staying to our mid-day dinner, and bringing a little whiff of the outer world and its doings into our quiet lives.

It would be impossible to imagine a quieter life, and yet I was not in the least dull. For, to begin with, I became deeply interested in my charge, and intensely curious to fathom the mystery of her early life. Miss Barbara had never told me any more about the sad story which had wrecked her younger

sister's life than she had told me the first day I had met her in front of St. Marylebone Church ; and as she had impressed upon me to discourage any conversation concerning her past life in Ellinor herself, I was naturally anxious to fulfil her wishes in this respect. Nevertheless, in spite of my utmost endeavours to the contrary, Ellinor would at times perpetually refer to her past history, and would not consent to be silenced, and I could not help learning something of it from what she let fall.

One day she said to me, whilst we were out walking :

"Do you remember that I had a wedding-ring on the first time you saw me ?"

"Yes," I answered, shortly, "I remember it."

She was silent for a few minutes.

"Why don't you ask questions ?" she said at last. "You don't seem very inquisitive, but I know why, Barbara has told you not to let me talk, but I want to talk of myself to you because I like you."

"You had much better not, dear," I answered soothingly, for her face had suddenly flushed, and there was a gleam of excitement in her eyes.

"Don't be afraid," she said, laughing. "I shall not hurt you." Then with a sudden change of manner, she caught hold of my wrist, and said hurriedly : "When we go in, I will show you that ring. I keep it locked up, because Barbara won't let me wear it ; when I can get away by myself I wear it, for it is mine. I have a right to it ; you mayn't believe me, Freda Clifford, but it is as true as you and I stand here, that I am a married woman !"

She was evidently dreadfully excited; her hands trembled as she grasped me, and her voice was husky with emotion. We were a long way from home; I grew frightened lest she should have a sudden attack of illness out here on the moor, where I could not have got any help. I did not dare to let her go on talking upon these dangerous topics. I called her attention to a flock of starlings that came whirling by over our heads; like a child, she was instantly distracted from her previous train of thought; she looked up at the birds, but made no remark, only when I suggested that it was getting late and cold, and that we had better hurry home, she placed her arm within mine in silence, and let me lead her home passively.

That evening she had an attack of illness, the first since my arrival. She passed out of one fainting fit into another for nearly two hours, and afterwards was so prostrated and exhausted that she had to be got to bed as quickly as possible.

Miss Barbara always came into my room for a little talk after her sister had gone to bed.

That evening, when she came in for her usual visit, she said at once:

"Can you account for this attack, Freda? She never is so ill as this, unless there has been some previous excitement of mind."

"Yes, Miss Barbara, I think I ought to tell you that Ellinor told me this afternoon that she was married."

"Ah!" Then she was silent for a few minutes. "That was quite enough to account for it," she said.

"It is a dreadful delusion, is it not? The fact is the poor child really believes it. I think I had better tell you that she was tricked into a sham marriage by a scoundrel who deserted her. Was I not right to take her away, lest she should fall into his power again?"

Some memory of another story I had heard not so long ago flashed for a moment into my mind. But it was instantly dispelled by Miss Barbara's next words.

"The man's name was Thorne, John Thorne, an unprincipled wretch. He thought to make a victim of my poor child, but I have saved her. It is bad enough that her life and her health have been wrecked by him; he has not at all events been able to pollute her soul. That, thank God! is as pure as when my dying mother gave her as a sacred legacy into my care. It is a dreadful story, my dear Freda—a story of shame and misery; but it is best perhaps that you should know something of it."

"And do you not think that what she says may possibly be true, and that he did really marry her?" I ventured to ask.

Miss Barbara shook her head.

"Alas, no!" she said. "It is but the delusion of her poor warped brain. Some people might think that I have done wrong in flying from him, in not, on the contrary, seeking him out, and forcing him to marry her. But I could never reconcile it to my conscience to surrender her to the care of a wicked man, and as I have told you, I hope—God forgive me if it is a wicked hope—I hope that he is dead. If

not, if she were ever to see him again, I am quite sure, in the state of health in which she is, that the shock would either kill her, or drive her to raving madness. She was mad once, many years ago—at the time. After it had all happened she was completely insane for three months. It is best perhaps to tell you this. Shall you be afraid to stay with us, Freda ? ”

Poor Miss Barbara, her trial was indeed a sore one ! I kissed and comforted her, and told her I would never leave her as long as she and Ellinor required my services.

The stern-featured but soft-hearted woman wiped away a few tears, and bade God bless me, ere she wished me good-night.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW.

“ See, winter comes to rule the varied year,
Sullen and sad with all his rising train,
Vapours, and clouds, and storms.”

—THOMSON.

WE had a very severe winter at Kaneton Scars that year ; a long hard dry frost, and then a heavy fall of snow, that lay for weeks upon the face of the earth like a great soft white winding-sheet.

Ellinor had completely recovered from her attack of illness, and there had been no repetition of it, neither had she spoken again about her supposed

marriage. She had also either forgotten to show me her wedding-ring, or else had changed her mind about doing so—at any rate she had never alluded to it again. The only reference she had made to her past was one day when I had come suddenly into the drawing-room, and called her by her name.

“Oh! here you are, Ellinor!” I had said, for I had been looking for her in her own bed-room.

“Ah!” she said, dreamily, “it is always Ellinor now. Once, a long time ago, somebody called me Nell, his little Nell! Don’t you think Nell is a much prettier name than Ellinor, Freda?”

“No, dear, I think Ellinor is a beautiful old English name,” I answered, lightly.

She sighed, and did not answer me. That was her nearest approach to the dangerous subject which it was my duty to her sister to prevent her as much as possible from dwelling upon.

One morning, when the snow had been upon the ground for nearly ten days, one of the maids came in and told Miss Barbara that Thompson, the gardener, the only male being about the premises, desired to speak to her at once.

Miss Barbara went out of the room. Ellinor and I rose from the breakfast-table, and went into the drawing-room. There standing idly at a window that looked to the side of the house, watching the robins pecking up the crumbs we had thrown out to them, I was surprised to see Miss Barbara, in thick clogs, and with a shawl thrown hastily over her head, plodding her way by the side of Thompson through the thick snow.

To my astonishment they pushed through some laurel bushes in the shrubbery, heavy with snow, and which scattered a white shower over Miss Barbara's back as she stooped under them and disappeared. Presently they both reappeared through the same narrow opening, and passed down the swept path, on the drive, out through the front gate, where they must have remained outside the walls for nearly ten minutes.

Just then Ellinor called me to come and give my opinion upon the conduct of Samuel, in putting the unfortunate Agag to death, after he had thought that "the bitterness of death was past."

"I don't think it was very kind of him, do you, Freda?" she said, referring to the open Bible before her.

"No; but we are told that God ordered him to do it."

"Yes, I suppose that was it. And perhaps he had deserved punishment in some other way: he had been cruel to some woman perhaps, as that cabman was to me. And then, of course, he deserved to be killed."

I laughed at her queer way of bringing things home to her own life, and asked her if she thought the cabman deserved to be killed, too.

"There is nothing to laugh at, Freda," she answered, gravely. "I don't trouble my head about that cabman. But I know very well that God will punish him, and reward you."

This quaint discussion, arising from the story of Agag, had so diverted my thoughts from Miss

Barbara, and her unprecedented expedition across the snow, that I had forgotten all about it, until a few minutes later, happening to cross the hall, I met her coming in at the front door, with a face as white as the snow behind her.

"Come in here, Freda," she said, in a queer, choked voice. "I want to speak to you." She drew me into her little sanctum, half boudoir and half study, where she transacted all her daily business, and locked the door.

"What is the matter?" I asked in surprise, as I helped to divest her of her wet shawl and overshoes.

She looked not white, but ashen grey, frightened as if she had seen a ghost, and she trembled in every limb.

There was a medicine chest in the corner of the room. I ran to it, and poured her out some sal volatile, which I made her swallow.

"For heaven's sake what is it—what has happened?" I asked, alarmed in my turn at the sight of her evident agitation.

"You saw that Thompson came to speak to me?" she said, as soon as she was sufficiently recovered to be able to speak. "Well, it appears that he discovered quite early this morning that there were footprints in the snow, fresh footprints coming from under the shrubbery bushes, against the wall straight up to the house. I have just been out to see for myself, and they go from the conservatory, right up to the wall; then I went outside the wall, and there are the footprints again, coming from a long way off, across the snow; and stopping short at our wall,

exactly corresponding to the place within the walls where they reappear. The bushes grow rather close to the wall. I have ordered Thompson to cut them down this morning. Freda, a man got over the wall last night, and came up to the house!"

I was rather surprised that Miss Barbara, who was, as I had always imagined her to be, a strong-minded little woman, should be so terribly upset and frightened by the alarm—common enough, I have no doubt, in lonely neighbourhoods—of a thief wandering round the house in the night.

"Oh! don't be frightened, Miss Barbara," I said, reassuringly. "The thief, whoever he is, did not get in. You know how strong this old house is, how thick the walls are, and how well barred-up and shuttered are all the windows. No one could get in, I believe, and nothing has been stolen. If you feel nervous let us send in to the police-station at Kaneton, and ask them to send us out a couple of men for a few days to protect us. But no doubt since the burglar was unable to effect an entrance, he will not trouble us with another visit."

Miss Barbara continued to rock herself backwards and forwards in her chair, in an uncontrollable distress of mind.

"Oh! my dear," she said, with a sort of a groan, "you don't understand. It is no burglar—oh! how I wish it were!—that I could believe it for a moment. Do you suppose a whole gang of thieves would frighten me in this way? But it is not a thief."

"Not a thief?" I echoed in surprise. "Why

what else could it be, Miss Barbara? No honest person would come climbing over people's walls, and wandering round their houses at dead of night. Who else could it be but a thief?"

"Oh! my dear girl—my story is only half told. Look here at what I have found."

She held out her hand, which she had kept closed upon her knees, and showed me what she had hitherto concealed from me.

It was a small bright object. I took it from her and examined it, and found that it was the broken half of a solid and rather handsome gold sleeve-link.

"Tell me your opinion," she said, watching me anxiously as I turned it over and over in my fingers. "Tell me what you think. That sleeve-link never belonged to a thief, it belongs to a gentleman!"

"Not at all," I said, reassuringly, as I handed it back to her. "No doubt it originally belonged to a gentleman, but a thief may have stolen it, and probably has done so in this case. Where did you find it?"

"Just at the foot of the wall at this side; it must have broken off as he scrambled down. Oh! Freda, you must see now what frightens me. It is that man come to look for Ellinor!"

It was in vain that I tried to soothe and to comfort her, to assure her that nothing was more unlikely, no supposition could be more wild and improbable. The notion had taken firm root in her mind that our midnight visitor was her sister's false lover and none other, and no words of mine had the least effect in shaking her conviction.

"I am certain of it—quite certain," she kept on repeating.

"But, dear Miss Barbara, what motive could he have in tracing her out?"

"What motive? Why to regain possession of her, of course."

"But is it likely," I argued, "that after all these years he should suddenly endeavour to find her, now that her first youth is past—that illness——"

"What can you mean, Miss Clifford?" she interrupted, angrily. "My sister's beauty is as great as it ever was. I have never met any woman so lovely as she is!"

To her sister, poor Ellinor, in all her faded, woe-begone pallor, was as faultlessly lovely at eight-and-twenty as at eighteen. I could not help being touched by the devotion which could see no flaw in its idol.

"Yes, that is true," I said, humbly, feeling sorry that I had unwittingly offended her on so tender a subject; "but still you have described him as such a heartless villain."

"Ah! he may have heard that she has come into a little money lately. I told you, I think, that my uncle had left me this house, and his little fortune was divided equally between Ellinor and myself. If that miserable man has heard of this, it would perfectly account for his being anxious to claim the poor child; he will pretend that he married her, so that he may get hold of the money she has come into now."

Further arguments were wasted upon her. Miss Barbara stuck to her own opinion persistently, and

refused to listen to any of my far more reasonable theories.

One immediate result of the night occurrence was that she instantly stopped our daily walks, and that the place was put into a condition of siege. Workmen appeared the next day, and in spite of the hard weather the whole length of the grey wall was speedily garnished with a most alarming looking "*cheveaux de frise*" of iron spikes, that, like the flaming swords of the Garden of Eden, turned every way, and brandished their formidable points in every direction. The entrance-gate was kept locked and barred day as well as night, and Ellinor was told that there were some gipsies, evil-looking characters, about the country, and that it was safer to confine our walks for the present to the garden.

The snow disappeared, and with it the footprints which had so much alarmed Miss Barbara, and that lady seemed by degrees to recover her usual equanimity of mind. I could see that she was still watchful, for every night she went round the premises and inspected the fastening of every door and window in the house herself; but as days went by and nothing further happened, and no fresh alarm by night or day occurred, she gradually relaxed in her vigilance, and her extraordinary fears appeared to be quieted.

As for myself I had always regarded her terrors as the wildest and most unlikely fancies of her own imagination, so that I very soon dismissed the whole incident of the thief and his mysterious footprints entirely from my mind.

Things were in this condition at Kaneton Scars when an incident suddenly happened to myself so extraordinary and so unaccountable that, although I carefully kept it to myself, judging it worse than useless to alarm Miss Barbara by imparting to her my discovery, it had the effect of making me take a far more serious view of the appearance of those strange footprints than I had hitherto done.

It happened that one day as I was thinking of going up to my room in the usual way, up the wide oaken staircase which led from the entrance hall, I found my progress barred by a carpenter, who had been sent for to repair one of the steps which had got broken. I found the man, tool-basket and all, kneeling across the stairs, hammering away with all his might, with his back turned towards me. Sooner than disturb him I ran down again, along a passage at the bottom of the house to a small spiral back staircase seldom used, and which led from the conservatory door up to the landing, where my bedroom was situated. Running lightly up these stairs, which were but dimly lighted, I caught sight of a small glittering object in a corner of one of the steps. I picked it up, and carried it to the light.

It was a broken gold sleeve-link!

With a strange terror at my heart, I rushed into Miss Barbara's room, tore open the drawer of her writing-table, and sought for the half of the gold link she had showed me the morning of the discovery of the footprints. I fitted them to each other. They corresponded exactly.

The man, then, who had dropped the first half of

his sleeve-link near the wall outside, *had dropped the second half inside the house!*

CHAPTER XXV.

THE GHOST.

"'Tis listening fear, and dumb amazement all."

—THOMSON.

EARLY in the winter before the heavy fall of snow, there had been a slight change in the household. A new under-housemaid had come, and at the time of her arrival, Miss Fairbank had remarked to me that she was a south-country woman, and that she had taken her from the inn at Kaneton, where, however, she had only been two months, as she did not care to stay there, but wished to get into a lady's service. I remember that Miss Barbara remarked to me that she hoped the girl would do, that she seemed willing and respectable, but that it was rather an experiment taking her out of a country inn.

To all appearance, Elizabeth—that was her name—did her duties quietly, and was likely to retain her place. I did not, of course, take any particular notice of her.

It was about this time, however, that something unusual in the girl's manner suddenly arrested my attention. She flushed up quickly if any one spoke to her, and started if one came across her unexpectedly about the house. And once I met her in the dusk going along the passage outside my bed-

room, carrying something in her hands over which she hastily flung her apron as I approached. The house, as I have said before, was old and rambling, and many of the rooms were uninhabited and unfurnished. The two sisters slept in adjoining rooms, with Ellinor's maid beyond them at one side of the house, and my bed-room was quite at the opposite extremity. There was a door at the end of the passage where I slept, which led into a room used as a lumber-room, which had been in old days a passage into the chapel now ruined, and there was still a door at the further end, outside which were the broken stone steps, down which one might scramble, if so disposed, on to the floor of the now grass-grown chapel. In this room were kept old furniture and boxes, and no doubt a miscellaneous collection of rubbish of all kinds. When I had arrived at Kaneton Scars, my box, after it had been unpacked, was taken in there. One day I had occasion to want a leathern strap which had fastened my travelling-rugs, and I thought it must have been left inside my box. I went to the door of the lumber-room intending to fetch it myself, but, to my surprise, I found it locked.

I called out to Elizabeth, who happened to be in my bed-room, and asked her for the key.

"I want to find a strap I have mislaid," I said.

The girl seemed rather confused. She said she thought Miss Fairbank had taken the key away, and she would ask her for it.

Miss Fairbank had gone out driving, and about a quarter of an hour afterwards, long before she came

in, I went up to my room again and found the strap lying upon my dressing-table. Curiosity induced me to go again to the lumber-room door. It was locked.

It was evident that Elizabeth had the key in her own possession, and had gone in and found my strap, and had relocked the door after taking it out.

I said nothing to anybody about this any more than I had done about that broken sleeve-link which I had found a few days ago; but it was evident to me that something unusual had occurred, or was going on still in the house, and that Elizabeth was cognisant of it.

It came into my mind that she might be one of a regular organised gang of thieves, of whom the thief who had got over the wall during the snow-fall was one, and that possibly she was daily stealing our property little by little, and storing it up in the empty lumber-room. Everything seemed to point to this theory being a correct one, excepting in one all-important particular. I could not discover that anything of any kind had been lost by any one inmate of the house.

I determined not to frighten Miss Barbara by revealing any of my discoveries or my alarms, but carefully to watch things for myself.

For a few days all went on quietly. I could notice nothing unusual in any respect. The door of the lumber-room remained locked, and Elizabeth went about the house as usual.

One night, however, I remained up very late in Miss Barbara's bed-room, talking over many things

—over Ellinor's story and her general health ; and I had been telling her something too—not much, for I am not given to making confidences—of my own history.

The servants had all gone to bed, and no one was stirring as I went up to my room. Suddenly I noticed that the door of the lumber-room was ajar !

I am not physically very brave as a rule, but I own that my curiosity on this occasion quite got the better of my fears. I felt convinced that I should find Elizabeth inside disposing of her stolen goods. I should catch her in her own trap !

Shading my candle with my hand I crept cautiously to the door, pushed it softly open—not without a beating heart—and looked in.

The room was absolutely empty. There was a pile of boxes and lumber at one end, and one large trunk was pulled out from the rest, and covered over with an old horse-cloth ; an empty tumbler and a plate containing some fragments of food, and some cutlet bones—I swiftly recollected that we had had cutlets for dinner in the dining-room—stood on the floor. I had ventured into the room whilst making these observations, and now noticed suddenly that the door at the further end, which led out only on to the broken steps in the ruined chapel, was also unfastened, and was swinging gently backwards and forwards with the wind—of course it was the draught from this outer door which had blown open the inner door into the house.

It struck me suddenly that Elizabeth was no burglar in disguise, but that she simply pilfered the

good things that came out of the dining-room and brought them up here to eat them at her leisure. With this new theory of the subject I retreated to my own room, carefully closing all the open doors, and by some instinct of self-preservation, born of nervousness, locking my own bed-room door upon myself for further security.

The next morning when Miss Barbara came out of the kitchen, after ordering dinner, she called me into her sanctum, with a face full of annoyance.

"All the servants are in a commotion," she said. "I am so angry with them all, I have no patience with them! The cook declares she saw a ghost last night, and is sitting in hysterics in the kitchen."

"A ghost! What sort of a ghost?"

"I am sure I don't know; they were all talking at once, and all declaring they would none of them go to bed to-night. I told cook I would throw a pail of cold water over her if she did not leave off screaming, and that threat did stop her hysterics!" added Miss Barbara, grimly.

"She must have dreamt it," I said, musingly; "of course it is all nonsense."

"Of course; but as soon as she could speak she declared solemnly 'upon her Bible oath,' she said, that she was wide awake, and heard footsteps going along the passage—that she thought Miss Ellinor might be ill and something be wanted, so she got out of bed and lit her candle, and opened the door, and there she saw a tall figure, wrapped in a long dark cloak disappearing at the further end of the passage, that would be towards your room, Freda!"

Miss Barbara laughed as she said this, but she looked very much annoyed.

"There they all stood, the idiots! round her, with their teeth chattering as if they would tumble out of their silly heads, shuddering like a parcel of geese!"

"And what did Elizabeth say?" I asked.

"Elizabeth?—Oh! by-the-way, she was the only one who showed any sense at all. She laughed at the whole thing, and told the cook she had been dreaming of her sweetheart. I think she seems a sensible girl, that Elizabeth."

I was silent for a minute pondering over many things. I was trying to put two and two together in my mind, but found the task a harder one than that mathematical puzzle is generally supposed to be.

"Of course it is all rubbish!" continued Miss Barbara, impatiently and irritably. "And if they don't like to sleep in my house, I am sure they are quite welcome to go out of it. But what worries me is, that I am so dreadfully afraid that Ellinor will hear of it, and, with her state of nerves, I am in constant dread of her being upset, or frightened in any way. You must watch her carefully to-day, Freda, and see that she does not overhear any of this silly chatter."

"I will do so, Miss Barbara," I answered. "But would you mind, before I go to her, sending for Elizabeth here?"

"For Elizabeth! what for?" she asked, in surprise.

"Well, as you say she was less foolish than the others, she might be able to tell us quietly what she thinks of it all."

"I don't see how she is likely to know anything more about it than what she said in the kitchen. She did not see the so-called ghost. Ghosts, indeed! I wonder how any sensible grown-up woman can believe in such rubbish! As if God would allow dead people to come out of their coffins to go walking about living people's houses in the night. If they were good they are praising their Maker in heaven; and if they were wicked, why you may depend upon it they have enough on their hands to keep them quiet *somewhere*," added Miss Barbara, grimly.

I laughed at her quaint theology, but persisted in my request.

"Please send for Elizabeth, Miss Barbara. I should really like to see her."

"Very well, my dear, I am sure I will if it pleases you," and she rang the bell.

In due time Elizabeth appeared. She came in jauntily enough, but when she saw me I fancied that she looked suddenly confused.

"Elizabeth," said Miss Barbara, "you seem to have a head on your shoulders, which is more than I can say for most of you; just tell us what you think of this business, and whether there is any foundation for these silly fears."

"About the ghost, ma'am?" answered the girl, rather nervously I fancied. "Oh! I have no patience with such nonsense, any more than you,

ma'am. I know very well that it's downright wicked, and flying in the face of Scripture to believe in such things."

"Still there might be somebody who walks in their sleep in the house."

"Or thieves," I suggested.

"If there *be*, ma'am, I know nothing about it," she answered, stolidly, and with an expression of dogged obstinancy coming into her face.

"Well, it's an odd thing," I remarked carelessly, turning to Miss Barbara—"a very odd thing, that that door of the lumber-room next to mine, which is generally locked, should have been open last night."

At these words Elizabeth became suddenly as white as her apron, and turned round hurriedly towards the door.

"You may go now," I said to her, looking significantly at her; "but if you know anything about this *ghost*, you had much better tell Miss Fairbank."

The girl muttered something unintelligible and left the room hurriedly.

Miss Barbara turned round to me in amazement.

"What do you mean about the lumber-room door, Freda? Why did you not tell me about it before? and what made her turn so pale?"

I laughed.

"I suspect that Miss Elizabeth was acting *ghost* herself," I said, lightly. "I fancy she is a greedy girl, and pilfers things out of the larder;" and then I told Miss Barbara about my finding the plate and the tumbler in the lumber-room.

To Miss Barbara this discovery seemed no light

thing. She was more disturbed about it than I could at all see any reason for.

"I wish you had told me before," she said. "What business has the girl with that key? I will get it away from her at once." She rang the bell again and recalled Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth, in case there are any more ghosts about, I wish to keep the key of the lumber-room myself. Put it on my dressing-table, if you please."

"Yes, ma'am," she answered, meekly, and went out again.

When she had left, to my surprise, Miss Barbara turned suddenly round to me, and stretching out her hands piteously, burst into tears.

"Oh! Freda, Freda, it is that man I feel sure," she exclaimed, despairingly.

"My dear Miss Barbara, this is foolishness," I remonstrated. "How *could* he be in the house?"

And then I suddenly remembered the sleeve-link, and was silent. Could it be possible that this man had been actually in the house all this time without our knowledge? The idea was too horrible!

"There is only one thing that has comforted me about it, Freda," continued Miss Barbara, after she had recovered from her agitation. "I reassured myself before with the thought of it, and it seems to restore my confidence now, and my belief in the utter impossibility of his having found us out. I will tell you what it is, but it is a great secret. You will, of course, keep this strictly between ourselves. I have changed my name since that sad time; our

real name is Fairfax. I wish now that I had changed it more thoroughly."

"And Ellinor, does she know of this?" I asked.

"No; wonderful to say, she is actually unconscious of it. I told you that she was out of her mind for three months. During that period I took her away to an entirely new scene. I changed every servant we had had. I went through our wardrobes, and our books, and our house-linen; I altered every mark on every object I could find from Fairfax to Fairbank, and I gave the latter out as my name. When, by slow degrees, Ellinor recovered her reason, she forgot many little details of her former life; she remembered only her great sorrow. She herself is always addressed as Miss Ellinor. I am generally called Miss Barbara. She never receives any letters. Suffice it to say that she never noticed the change; and it is now so many years ago that I don't think she will ever do so."

"This, indeed, ought to reassure you," I said; "if this man Thorne does not know the name by which she is now called, he can hardly have traced her."

"True," she answered, doubtfully; "but still he might have seen her by chance out walking."

We spoke no further upon the subject.

In the course of the day the key of the lumber-room was placed upon Miss Barbara's table, and, curious to state, from that hour the mystery in the house seemed to have vanished. The door was as often as not wide open. Elizabeth went about the house cheerfully, and no longer seemed to have any

thing to conceal, and nothing more was seen or heard of the ghost.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE OLD BALL-DRESS.

"Of all affliction taught a lover yet,
'Tis sure the hardest science to forget."

—POPE.

"LETTERS—letters!" cried Miss Barbara, cheerily, as I came into the breakfast-room one fine spring morning about a month after the events recorded in the past chapter. "Here is one for you, Freda!"

"That is a rare event!" I said, taking a thick envelope from her hand; "nobody writes to me now. I suppose it is from my aunt."

"I wonder if I ever shall have a letter in my life again?" sighed Ellinor, looking enviously at me as I broke the seal.

It was, as I supposed, a short note from my aunt, and enclosed a thick letter addressed and re-addressed to six or seven different places in a handwriting which made my heart leap and bound with delight as my eyes fell upon it—a handwriting which I had sadly missed during the last few months—Bella Thistleby.

My aunt's note was short, but not correspondingly sweet:

"MY DEAR FREDA,

"I hope you will give your friends your address, and not give me the trouble of forwarding

your letters again; this one seems to have gone half over England after you. I hope you are getting on well, and giving satisfaction to your employers. It is a dreadful thing to think you are a paid companion now, when you might be Mrs. Curtis of Eddington, and with every prospect of becoming shortly a widow, too, and being left independent, for I had a letter the other day from a lady who is staying in the neighbourhood, and she mentions having met Mr. Curtis, and that he looks very shaky indeed, and is evidently, she says, not long for this world. Everything, you know, goes right away to a distant cousin, and my friend adds, 'What a fool your niece was!' which you may suppose is not a pleasant thing for me to hear. However, you have made your bed, and must now lie in it. Your uncle is not very well; he over-ate himself over some *pâté de foie gras* that was sent him, and has been suffering severely from indigestion.

"Your affectionate aunt,

"SELINA CARR."

I turned eagerly from this cold and unfeeling letter to Bella's. It was dated two months back, and had evidently been for nearly three weeks at my aunt's house before she had thought of sending it to me. It was written from Italy, and any one who has been for many weeks cut off entirely from every creature in the world they have ever loved and cared for, may guess with what avidity I pounced upon it, and how delightedly I devoured every word in the dear familiar handwriting. But

it made me very sad, too. It was but one long reproach to me for my unkindness, my "cruelty" she called it, in not answering her letters, and in not telling her where I was.

"I have heard nothing about you," she wrote; "no particulars; nothing but the bare fact that you have broken off your engagement and have left your home. I do not even know whether this letter will ever reach you. Of course I was delighted to hear of that hateful marriage being broken off, but oh! Freda, why, oh! why have you not written to me? I cannot understand your conduct. It is so unnatural—so unlike you. You are my dearest friend. I should have thought your first instinct would have been to have flown to me. You cannot be well off; you may even now be in actual want. The idea is horrible to me. You would never in the old days have allowed a little trumpery pride to stand in the way of coming to me. Sometimes I fancy you may be ill or dead. I cannot bear the uncertainty any longer. I am coming home next month to seek you out wherever you may be hiding. I have written to my solicitor to try and discover you; indeed I am sending this letter through him. He may be able to find out who are your father's executors, and *they* may know your address. Mark writes to me that he has hunted for you everywhere, and can hear nothing of you. And we neither of us can remember the surname of that old aunt of yours whom I have heard you speak of as 'Aunt Selina.' Never mind, I am coming home, and if you are alive, I will find you."

Thus far I had got in the perusal of my dear

little friend's letter, when an exclamation from Miss Barbara interrupted me.

"Dear, dear!" she said, looking up from her letters across the table at me with a face full of concern. "Here is bad news from my poor brother Charlie. His wife, poor thing! is very ill: her baby is dead. It died directly it was born, poor little angel! for of course it has gone straight up to heaven," added Miss Barbara, piously.

"And your sister-in-law is very ill you say, Miss Barbara?" I inquired.

"Yes, poor woman; and there is my brother half-distracted, sitting wringing his hands, I have no doubt, and being generally useless and in the way, as men always are when there is sickness in the house; and the schoolboys coming home for their Easter holidays, and the household all at sixes and sevens. Oh! my dear girls, I am very much afraid I shall have to leave you for a week or so and go to them!"

"Oh! we can get on very well alone," said Ellinor, with a palpably brightening face.

"We will try and take care of each other," I said.

Miss Barbara looked from one to the other a little anxiously. It was evident that the old longing to escape, in her absence, in order to search for her lost lover, had flashed across Ellinor's brain as soon as her sister had spoken of leaving us.

Afterwards Miss Barbara and I held a long consultation over it.

"She never has seemed so well and so free from all her old delusions as she has done of late. There

is no doubt, Freda, that your companionship has been of infinite benefit to her. Do you feel equal to taking the sole charge of her ? ”

“ Yes, Miss Barbara, I think I do. I have learned how to manage Ellinor perfectly now ; and should she prove in the least intractable I think I have sufficient influence over her to be able to persuade her to be reasonable.”

“ Well, it will only be for ten days at the longest, and if anything goes wrong you have nothing to do but to telegraph to me. But I do not fear any necessity for your doing so ; you will, I know, be more than usually watchful over her, and at no time have I ever felt so secure and comfortable in leaving her as I do now.”

So Miss Barbara departed on the morrow, and Ellinor and I were left in sole possession of Kaneton Scars.

Our quiet lives went on much as usual after the elder lady's departure. We walked together on the moors, hunting for daffodils and violets in the hollows of the hills, and for the first soft little curled-up fronds of haresfoot and ladyfern along the rocky sides of the becks. It was delicious spring weather. Never since I had come to live with the two sisters, over whose lives there hung so dark a shadow, had I felt so happy and so light of heart. Time was slowly healing up that old pain, which at first had seemed so unendurable. Mark Thistleby, a free agent and an ardent lover, had been to me the very essence of my life's desires ; but Mark Thistleby, divided from me irrevocably, had become by degrees

to me but a sad, closed-up page of my past existence, which I neither wished nor expected ever to re-open. The pain at one time had been vivid and acute, it was still there; but it had become dulled, and it was bearable. I could look upon my life as it was, calmly and dispassionately, and be thankful for the new interests and the new affections which had sprung up lately around me. Bella's letter, it is true, whilst affording me a keen delight, had somewhat unsettled my calmness of mind—it brought back to me so vividly the events of my former life; and although at the bottom of my heart I would not have had it otherwise, still the thought that she was coming home to try and find me out, and that her brother-in-law was even now seeking me, filled me with terror and apprehension.

I had written instantly to my aunt, and adjured her to keep my address a secret—through her only I believed it could transpire—and at all hazards I must hide myself from Mark. I was sorry to think that he was looking for me. To Bella, who was in ignorance of his fatal secret, it was natural enough to be surprised and perplexed at my disappearance. But surely *he* must know why I had fled from him. It would have been more generous of him, I thought, to have respected my efforts to become lost to him. Still I felt tolerably secure from discovery, for in this remote and desolate corner of the world, how was it possible that any one who had ever known me in my former life should come across me by chance? So I suffered the bright spring sunshine to make me forget my troubles, and, rejoicing in Ellinor's won-

derful improvement of mind and health, I became quite gay and light-hearted, like the Freda of old days, as we wandered, side by side, over the breezy moors.

One evening, after one of these rambles, we both came in rosy with exercise and desperately hungry. Ellinor was laughing and joking like a child—she was in the best of spirits—I thought I had never seen her look so well, or realised so clearly what a lovely creature she must have been once in her best days.

“We will have our dinner here, Freda,” she cried, throwing her hat down upon the sofa in our little morning-room. “It will be much cosier than in the dining-room. Have we not had a happy day?—let us end it by a really happy evening. I know what I will do, I will go and put on my ball-dress!”

“Your ball-dress, Ellinor, what do you mean?”

“Oh! I have got it upstairs—it is lovely. I have never worn it—it is quite new. I was to have gone to a ball once—given by some officers—it never came off. I was ill, I think—I never went to it. But there is the dress, just as it was. Barbara made it out of some old brocade of our mother’s. Oh! it is lovely!” she cried, clasping her hands excitedly. “If I put it on, perhaps it will bring me luck. You never saw such a lovely dress!”

She vanished up to her room to adorn herself. She was always full of quaint fancies. It was as well to let her have her own way in things that could not hurt her. After about twenty minutes the door

flew wide open and Ellinor, smiling and triumphant, stood before me.

She was arrayed in a low dress of white brocaded satin, it was cut in an old-fashioned manner, such as was worn many years ago. It hung loosely about her now attenuated neck and shoulders, which doubtless once had filled out its folds with their soft round plumpness. She had adorned her head with a high wreath of artificial flowers, once white, but which had now become yellow with age, and she had clasped some rows of pearls about her thin neck.

"There!" she cried, triumphantly. "Am I not lovely? I shall dine in this to do you honour, Freda!"

I smiled at her; but it was a pitiful sight. Even though her eyes and cheeks were bright with unwonted excitement, she looked so worn and aged, such a wreck of what she must have been when, as a fresh young girl, she had looked forward to wearing that very dress—her first ball-dress. It saddened me to see her so gay.

"Poor Freda!" she said, coming behind my chair, and passing her arm round my neck. "You look so dull and sad in your black dress, I must find something to smarten you up. Oh! I know—there is a camellia just out in the conservatory, I will fetch it for your hair."

She ran out of the room, leaving the door open. Two seconds later a shrill scream echoed weirdly through the silent house. I rushed to the door. Along the corridor, with outstretched arms, with face as white as death, and eyes wild with unspeakable

terror, came Ellinor flying towards me, her white satin draperies gleaming strangely against the sombre darkness of the passage.

"My husband! my husband!" she cried, in a choked smothered voice. "I have seen him—he is here!"

And she fell prone at my feet, a senseless, huddled-up mass of satin and faded finery.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHAT ELLINOR HAD SEEN.

"'Tis strange, but true; for truth is always strange;
Stranger than fiction."

—BYRON.

It was midnight. The house was perfectly silent. The room was darkened; the bed-curtains were partly drawn; and Ellinor lay in her bed, not asleep, but quite still, in a sort of death-like trance, more terrible to me to witness even than the fearful convulsions which had so lately racked her slender frame.

I sat at the foot of the bed. The maid moved softly about the room, replenishing the low fire, and making what preparations she thought necessary for my long solitary night-watch. We had done all we could between us; we had given her a hot bath, and had put on a blister, and had made her swallow some medicine, which Miss Barbara always kept ready in case of similar attacks.

I had done two other things upon my own responsibility—I had sent Thompson into Kaneton to telegraph to Miss Barbara to come back instantly, and I had had the garden and conservatory thoroughly searched to see if a man had indeed been lurking about the house. As I had expected, nothing whatever had been seen resembling a human being. The cook, who from her former experiences with reference to the ghost, might be supposed to be a nervous and easily deluded person, happened to have been in the yard which abutted on the back of the conservatory at the very time when Ellinor's screams had rung through the house.

"She had run out to see," she said, "if there was any sign of the house being on fire." It was getting dusk, but was quite light enough to have seen a man standing by the conservatory, had there been such a person there. And she solemnly averred that no one was to be seen in any direction. Thompson, too, was not far off in the shrubbery, and must have noticed had any one been anywhere within sight of the window.

No, it was clearly a delusion of poor Ellinor's bewildered brain. I blamed myself bitterly for having permitted her to deck herself out in that old dress. No doubt it was some association with it which had revived in her mind old memories and old thoughts of the past, until her diseased brain had conjured up before her eyes some vision of the face which was doubtless indelibly impressed upon her recollection. Oh! how heartily I wished I had not allowed her to array herself in that fatal garment! Even if

the telegram were despatched to-night, some time, probably the whole of to-morrow, must elapse before Miss Barbara could be here. And meanwhile, if Ellinor were to have a relapse, what was I to do? There was no doctor that I knew of to summon from town, and Miss Barbara had specially warned me never to send for the country practitioner at Kaneton, as she had little faith in him, and believed that his interference in Ellinor's case would be worse than useless. I did not know what I was to do if she should have a fresh attack. The responsibility of my position was appalling.

A slight stirring of the bed-clothes aroused me from these harassing reflections. Ellinor lifted her hand and beckoned to me. I bent down over her.

"Send her away," she whispered, looking towards Vickers, the maid. I sent the woman out of the room.

"I am going to get up," said Ellinor, in her usual voice, as soon as the door had closed upon her.

"My dearest Ellinor, it is impossible!" I cried, horrified. "You are very ill, you cannot possibly get out of bed. Besides it is late, you must go to sleep now. To-morrow, perhaps, if you are better——"

"I tell you, Freda, I *must* get up," she reiterated determinedly, making an effort to raise herself in the bed. She was as weak as water, and instantly fell back upon the pillows.

"You are very unkind to me," she said, piteously. "Why won't you let me get up? He is downstairs waiting for me; he has come to take me away now

Barbara has gone. I tell you I *must* go to him. He is my husband; he is in the hall waiting; what will he think of me for keeping him so long?"

"Hush, hush, dear!" I said, soothingly. "You must not think about him. It was all a mistake; there is nobody there at all, it was only your fancy."

"I tell you he *is* there, it is *not* my fancy!" she interrupted angrily. "I saw him there, just inside the conservatory door in the passage, as plainly as I see you. I tell you I *will* go to him, Freda. Who are you who would keep a wife from her husband? Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder!"

I held her down gently but firmly in the bed, and a sudden faintness of terror came into my own heart.

"Tell me, Ellinor," I asked: "You say you saw this—this person you suppose to have been your husband *inside* the house?"

"Yes, at the end of the passage, just at the foot of the spiral staircase."

I recollected the broken sleeve-link I had myself found upon those stairs; all the incidents connected with the locked door of the lumber room; and Miss Barbara's unshakable conviction that Ellinor's false lover or husband, whichever he might be, had found her out!

"Tell me everything about it," I said, breathlessly, to Ellinor. "What did you see?"

"I saw a man standing there, he had his back turned towards me, and he held a key in his hand."

"You did not see his face?"

"No, only the back of his head, and his cheek."

"Then how do you know it was your husband?"

"How? What a silly question! If you had loved somebody better than your own life, if you had held his dear head within your hands, if you had kissed scores of times every soft curled lock of hair upon it, would you not know that head again, Freda, among a hundred thousand others, even if the actual features had been hidden from you?"

She was right. Should I not know Mark Thistleby thus anywhere?

"And did he see you—did he turn round?"

"No; he made a movement as if to go into the conservatory, and then I screamed, and flew back to you. I can't think why I did it, I was frightened I suppose; it was very silly of me—so silly of a wife to be frightened of her husband, isn't it, Freda? I suppose it was seeing him again so suddenly. He must have seen my back as I ran away, and he must of course have recognised me, too. Oh! how foolish of me to turn away! I ought to have followed him. Oh! do let me get up!"

"Dearest, you cannot really; I must not let you get up, you are too ill."

"Oh! how tiresome to be ill just now, of all times, when he has come for me at last," she said, wearily.

"If I am good now, and lie still, may I get up, and see him in the morning, Freda?"

I was thankful to quiet her for the present, at any risk. I gladly promised her that she should get up the next day.

"You must get him something to eat, Freda," she said. "I daresay he is hungry, and will want some

dinner, perhaps he had just come off a long journey."

"Yes, yes, dear, I will see to all that," I answered, soothingly, thinking it wisest to humour her.

She relapsed into a long silence. I hoped she was going to sleep. But at last she started suddenly up in bed.

"Freda, Freda!"

I ran hastily to her side.

"Get me my keys, quick. They are there on the table."

I thought it best to obey her. She selected a small gilt key, and pointed to her dressing-case.

"Unlock it quickly. Take up that little tray, there, that one in the right-hand corner. Do you see a little packet in silver paper? there it is. Give it me directly. It is my wedding-ring. Of course I must have it on! Fancy how angry he would be if he found me again without it! How glad I am that I thought of it."

She put the ring eagerly, and with trembling hand, on to her finger. Then kissed it fervently several times, and laid down again quietly in the bed.

I did not know whether I might not have done wrong in giving it to her. I felt pretty sure that Miss Barbara would not have done so. But still I believed that on the whole, if I could only succeed in keeping her quiet in her bed, I could not be acting very unwisely.

The result proved that I was right. After getting her ring, Ellinor never spoke again all night. I do

not believe that she slept, but at all events she was perfectly calm and free from excitement.

Meanwhile I sat by her bedside with an ever-increasing anxiety of mind. It began to dawn upon me that Ellinor was not so mad as her sister supposed. Weak in mind she undoubtedly was: the life of utter seclusion and absence of occupation which she had led for so many years was sufficient in itself to have made her so, but that she was actually mad, or had ever been so, I began to doubt entirely.

There was nothing in this last attack, severe as it had been, to denote a deranged intellect. It spoke rather of a diseased heart. And then her whole account of what had happened, and what she had seen, had been so clear, and so succinctly and impressively related by her, that it bore the marks of its perfect veracity upon the very face of it.

I did not believe now that Ellinor had been under the influence of any delusion. She *had* seen a man, not as we had all supposed, *outside* the windows, but *inside* the house!

And that brought upon me by degrees a dreadful but overpowering conviction.

Some man or other had assuredly occasionally concealed himself within the house. He had not been there for some time I believed—not for a month; but he was here now, undoubtedly. It was Elizabeth who had admitted him, and who concealed him; and it was in the lumber-room that he was hidden; and the man was Ellinor's husband!

What was I to do with this awful conviction which now broke in upon me with unanswerable certainty?

What would this man do? Why had he hidden himself from us? If he wanted Ellinor, why did he not come boldly forward and claim her? Had he been waiting all this while for the opportunity of Miss Barbara's absence, of which no doubt Elizabeth had apprised him, to do so? and good heavens! what was I to do if he were to come forward and insist upon carrying her off with him to-morrow?

These questions filled me with horror and dismay.

I was not surprised when Vickers came in in the morning that she uttered an exclamation of dismay at my appearance.

"Oh! miss, you do look ill!" she cried. "Can I get you anything?"

"Get me a cup of tea, Vickers, please, and then you may take my place for half-an-hour whilst I lie down on the sofa," I whispered back.

"Do go into your own room, miss, and go to bed for a few hours. I can easily call you if Miss Ellinor should be worse."

"No," I answered firmly; "I shall not let Miss Ellinor out of my sight until her sister comes back. I shall not leave her room for one instant."

I lay down on the couch at the foot of the bed and rested, though I could not sleep, for about half-an-hour. I was distracted by my own thoughts and fears. What was I to do if Ellinor reminded me of my promise, and insisted upon getting up and going downstairs? How was I to keep her in bed without causing her an amount of agitation which would be most injurious to her?

This question soon answered itself in an unexpected way.

Poor Ellinor was seized with a fresh attack of illness more terrible and more severe even than the first. She became first insensible and then delirious.

Vickers and I had enough to do for many hours in attending upon her. I had no time to think of anything else.

The mystery of the man who might be even now in the house was a subject which I had no leisure to inquire into; for the present it must remain unsolved.

When Ellinor recovered slightly from this second attack, she was too utterly prostrated to be able even to move, far less to speak. I believed myself that she must be dying, she lay so perfectly still and motionless.

At six o'clock in the evening, to my unspeakable relief and thankfulness, Miss Barbara came home.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A SONG OF THE PAST.

"We are not ourselves

When nature, being oppressed, commands the mind

To suffer with the body."

—SHAKESPEARE.

NOR that day, nor for many days afterwards, not indeed until all our uncertainties and anxieties were set at rest for ever, did I impart to Miss Barbara the full extent of my fears and fancies.

It would have been but cruelty to add to her misery by doing so. In answer to her hurried questions, when she first returned, I merely told her briefly that Ellinor had been frightened, and had fancied she had seen some one in the passage, and I was careful to make light of the cause of her sister's illness, as the actual anxiety over her condition was already almost as much as she was able to endure.

For Ellinor was frightfully ill after that, so ill that a doctor from York was sent for, who gave but little hopes of her recovery. He came and shook his head, and looked solemn, wrote a few prescriptions, took his guineas, and then went his way, leaving us to a blanker despair than we had felt before his arrival.

For many days Ellinor lay thus, upon the borderland of the Kingdom of Death, and none could tell whether she would not soon overstep the narrow line, and be lost to us for ever. Every morning we said to each other: "She cannot live till night," and every night we marvelled that she was still with us. At last, although there was no sensible improvement, the bare fact of her being alive began to give us hopes.

Perhaps it was the reviving influences of the warm spring air, stealing in through the white curtains that shaded her open windows, perhaps it was the ceaseless assiduity of her sister's nursing, which flagged neither day nor night, or perhaps it was simply the elasticity of a naturally strong constitution. Be that as it may, Ellinor lived.

She came back to us as it were from the edge of

the grave—paler, weaker, thinner than of old, but still she did come back. And Miss Barbara and I, with tears in our eyes, kissed each other and thanked God with trembling joy that it was so.

The great man from York came again, said that she had had a miraculous escape, and that he had hardly expected that she would pull through. "But mind, Miss Fairbank," he added warningly, "you must consider her quite an invalid. The constitution is terribly undermined, the nervous system is shattered, the brain and heart are both sensibly weakened. I feel it my duty to warn you that extreme care will probably be necessary for many years. In your sister's condition another attack could hardly fail to prove fatal."

And then he wrote more prescriptions, and took more guineas, and departed.

During these weary days of nursing and watching I had forgotten all about Ellinor's mysterious husband, and the nervous terror I had once felt concerning the man, imaginary or otherwise, whom I had fancied to be concealed in the house, completely died away into insignificance, in the face of the more serious trouble which seemed to threaten the little household.

I had, however, noticed that the lumber-room door was unlocked as usual, and that Elizabeth appeared to be quite unembarrassed in her manner; and from these signs I concluded that there had been no further attempt to conceal any one within the house.

The intruder, whoever he might be, had apparently

decided to let us alone in peace for the present. Perhaps, indeed, after all, the whole thing was but the phantasmagoria of my own overstrung nerves. It might easily be that Ellinor had seen no one, that the ghost had been a mere delusion, that Elizabeth had no further object in locking the lumber-room door than possibly to effect stolen meetings with some village lover. Yes, and this latter theory might even account for the broken sleeve-link dropped upon the stairs.

I persuaded myself that such must be the case. A man might have been within the house, and Ellinor might have seen him, and in her bewildered brain he might have seemed to her to resemble her lost lover; and all the time the man might in all probability be merely some rustic swain who had set his affections upon Elizabeth, the housemaid.

In any case that damsel was hardly a fit inmate for a respectable household—her previous experiences at the “Railway Inn” had not had, evidently, a good effect upon her moral character. I determined, as soon as Miss Barbara’s mind should be somewhat relieved of the load of anxiety concerning Ellinor, that I would speak to her, and ask her to send Elizabeth away, but I did not like to worry her whilst her sister was so ill.

Slowly but surely Ellinor recovered, and it was a singular feature of her recovery that she never, with returning health and strength, made the slightest allusion to her encounter with the man she had called her husband. Either that meeting had never taken place; or she had utterly forgotten it. During

her illness, Miss Barbara had withdrawn the wedding-ring from her finger ; she had made no resistance at the time, and had not inquired for it afterwards. Her memory, indeed, with respect to many little things seemed to be considerably impaired ; she had, for instance, forgotten the names of the servants, the time of the year, and many other equally unimportant trifles. I could easily understand how it was that, after the longer previous illness, Miss Barbara had been able to change their own surname from Fairfax to Fairbank without her being in any way aware of the alteration.

At last, but not till the end of May, when the summer roses were all coming out in the garden, and the honeysuckle was blossoming all over the house-walls, Ellinor began to come downstairs again, and was laid upon the sofa for hours daily by the open window of her own little morning-room.

Miss Barbara resumed, to a certain extent, her usual avocations, and we all began to shake off the heavy gloom which hangs like a pall over the household which is visited by sore sickness.

Now, I thought, I will speak about Elizabeth's dismissal to Miss Barbara. But before I had found an opportunity of doing so, bad news again found its way to Kaneton Scars.

The brother's wife, who had never entirely recovered from the severe illness for which Miss Barbara had been summoned away before, now sickened rapidly from some unguessed-at after effect of that illness, and died very suddenly at the last, leaving her husband and his six motherless children

in a state of absolute despair. Miss Barbara was again sent for, to go to the help and comfort of that stricken family. And once more I was left alone with Ellinor.

To say that I was not nervous at being so left again would be to give myself credit for more courage than I have ever possessed. I was very nervous, but as the days went by peacefully and happily, and nothing unusual happened, only Ellinor became stronger and more like her old self day by day, I began to take heart, and wrote to Miss Barbara that all was going on well, and that she had no occasion to hurry home, but would do well to stay with her brother long enough to be a comfort and a help to him.

Of course there was now no question of taking walks upon the moors. Ellinor was not strong enough for walking. There was a light Bath-chair in which I used to wheel her about the garden on sunny mornings, stopping every other minute by her favourite flower-borders, that we might load her lap with heaps of white pinks, and cabbage-roses, and long trails of yellow laburnum. And even this seemed almost too much for her strength some days. When we came in she would go back to her sofa, and lie there quite exhausted, so still, and white, and motionless, that as I looked at her, a vague apprehension of evil would tighten at my heart. She had lived till the summer, it is true; but when the nipping autumn winds, and the chill winter frosts come again, will she live through them? Will she not rather fade and die before them even

as the summer blossoms in her own garden borders " Alas ! it seemed but all too probable.

I used to read aloud to her—the Bible chiefly—she did not care much for any other book—and I used to sit at the piano and sing to her for a little while, it tired her to listen to music for long. But above all she liked me to bring my work close to her sofa, and to watch me as I braided in the different coloured wools and silks, talking a little in her quaint, odd way to me as I worked.

One evening we sat thus after our little non-descript meal had been cleared away—that meal which women, left to their own devices, and untrammelled by the presence of the male sex, are fond of indulging in—a meal half dinner and half tea, with the teapot at one end of the table and the sherry decanter at the other, and an inharmonious arrangement of buttered cakes, of veal cutlets, and strawberry jam, midway between the two. This frugal but entirely cosy repast having been cleared away, I drew my chair and little round table, with its shaded reading-lamp, close in to Ellinor's sofa, and began my work. To this hour I can remember the pattern and design of that piece of work. It was for a cushion ; yellow silk flowers and tawny brown leaves on a dark blue ground. Ellinor watched every stitch that I put in with intense interest, and whilst I worked we talked.

The windows were wide open ; it had been very hot all day, for we were in July ; but now it was cooler, and all sorts of sweet night scents came floating in through the thin muslin curtains

which fluttered gently in the tender evening breeze.

From within the brightness of our little room the world without looked dark and shadowy. It was nearly nine o'clock; the birds were hushed and silent, all but one sweet-voiced nightingale singing high up in the elm trees behind the house. By-and-by even that too was hushed, and we heard no other sounds but our own low voices.

"We shall have you out again on the moors, Ellinor, by the time Miss Barbara comes back," I remarked, cheerily, trying for my companion's sake to shake off I know not what of strange oppression and presentiment of coming evil, which kept creeping over me in spite of all my efforts.

She sighed and shook her head. Then presently she murmured, more to herself than to me :

" 'The end is come—the end is come. Behold it is come.

" 'The time is come, the day of trouble is near, and not the sounding again of the mountains.' "

"What *do* you mean, Ellinor ?" I said, irritably, for that dreadful Scripture-quoting trick of hers gave me "the creeps." "What have those dismal texts to do with our walking on the hills ?"

"I shall never walk on the hills again," she answered, gloomily. "Do you not hear what it says ? 'Not the sound of the mountains again ;' does it not mean that I shall never be out upon them again ? It was in the chapter you read me this morning. Do not scoff at Scripture, Freda ; it is a sign to me."

What was one to do with a person who had moods like this? I shrugged my shoulders impatiently, and tried to laugh it off; but in spite of myself I could not help feeling oppressed too. Was she right? I asked myself; was the end of her poor troubled life indeed very near, and did she know it perhaps better than we her watchers could do? Her next remark was so grotesque a contrast to her last, that I burst out laughing.

"You have got that brown silk on the stalk of your leaf a shade too dark," she observed quite gravely, without apparently the slightest perception of the incongruity of her ideas.

"What an odd girl you are, Ellinor! A moment ago you were applying the gloomiest of Ezekiel's prophecies to yourself, and now you are talking about the silks in my needle-work."

"I do not think I was irreverent," was her answer.

"Oh, no; but you seemed so sad just now."

"I did not mean to be sad—the Bible never makes me sad. Sometimes I think of the past—of him—and that saddens me; but the Bible, oh, never!"

"Do you know," she said, presently, after we had both been silent for a few minutes, each absorbed in her own thoughts—"do you know I feel quite *sure* that I shall see my husband again before I die. I have dreamt of him three nights running. The first two nights it seemed all vague and indistinct, I could hardly see him—only I knew that he was there; but last night I saw him, oh! so plainly. It was in this room—he stood *there*—just beyond your chair, Freda."

I could not help half turning round with a little shiver.

"I saw him quite well; he looked as handsome as ever. I cried out to him—but he would not look at me; he mistook you for me, and held out his arms to you—and he never looked at me—and then it all grew dark and black, and when I looked again he was gone. Oh, it was dreadful!" and she hid her face in her hands and shuddered.

Her strange mood frightened me. Was this the beginning of another attack of illness I wondered, in terror? I did my best to soothe and calm her.

"Don't think of it, dear; nobody believes in dreams, you know—they are all nonsense. Shall I sing you something?" I jumped up, scattering my bright wools and silks on to the ground, and moved to the piano. It would alter the current of her thoughts, I said to myself, as I opened the piano. "I will sing you something cheerful and merry," I said; "we have been in the blues quite long enough for one evening."

My fingers wandered idly over the keys for a minute—then, half-unconsciously, I broke into that dear, queer old English ditty that I had sung so often in my happier days:

"Once I loved a maiden fair,
But she did deceive me,
She to Venus might compare,
In my mind, believe me."

As I sang, Kaneton Scars, poor Ellinor on her couch, the living realities of my present surround-

ings, vanished all at once from before my eyes. I saw once more Bella's little drawing-room at Seaciff; I heard the splash of the waves up against the garden-wall without; I saw, as in a vision, the tall, handsome form of my lover—whom even then I believed I was beginning to love—bending over me as I sang; and I felt my own foolish, girlish heart swell again with pique and silly mortified vanity as it had done then—oh, how long ago!—how long ago it was!

As I sang the last note of that arch, pert little song my voice was choked and husky, and as I rose hastily from the music stool, foolish, blinding tears came welling up into my eyes. Surely no one ever wept over that song before!

“Not much use singing a merry song if one cries over it, is it, Ellinor?” I said, half ashamed of my folly.

But there was no answer. A death-like stillness was in the little room. I crept softly to the back of her couch. She was fast asleep in a deep sound slumber. It would do her good, poor child, I thought thankfully, and drive away those ghosts of the past that seemed all too ready to persecute her this evening.

Very gently walking on tip-toe, I stole round to the other side of her sofa, making for my scattered fancy-work. I picked it up and sat down again in my place by the little table with the reading-lamp:

I had not set three stitches into my work, before all at once, by some intuition of soul, I became aware that there was a change in the conditions of

life around me. I *felt* that I was no longer alone. Some one was looking at me. I raised my head sharply towards Ellinor. Her eyes were shut, she was still fast asleep.

I looked quickly back towards the window; yes, surely since I had sat down the curtains had been moved! One was slightly drawn back as though by a hand from without.

Sick with terror I stood up, placing myself, by a sort of instinct, so as to shelter the slumbering form of my helpless charge. Rapidly it rushed through my mind that I must not wake her, that if I called out I should frighten her. I pressed both my hands firmly upon my throat.

The curtain moved quickly aside, and a man stepped into the room.

It was Mark Thistleby!

CHAPTER XXIX.

ELLINOR'S DREAM.

"The sudden images of vanished things
That o'er the spirit flash we know not why;
Tones from some broken harp's deserted string,
Warm sunset hues of summers long gone by,
Are not these mysteries when to life they start,
And press vain tears in gushes from the heart."

—MRS. HEMANS.

"MARK!"

"My Freda!" He stretched out his arms to me joyfully, gladly.

To say that I was surprised is hardly the word to use. I was literally paralyzed with amazement. My heart beat wildly, my brain seemed on fire. I could not have spoken above a whisper to save my life. But even in this first moment it did strike me that there was no astonishment in his beaming face, only a great gladness.

"How have you found me *here*?" I asked, trembling.

"My child, I found you long ago! It is weeks, nay months, since I traced you to this place. I have been here often."

"*You!* Then why——"

"Why have I waited so long, you would ask? I have waited for such an opportunity as this, darling, to find you alone, to speak to you unheard. It seemed sometimes as if it never would come; but now at last I have found you! Freda, have you nothing to say to me after all this while?"

But still I could not be glad yet; I could only be half terrified, and altogether puzzled.

"But what do you mean?" I asked, wondering vaguely if it was really true that Mark Thistleby and I stood thus face to face, speaking to each other. "You have been here before, you say?"

"Yes; for nights together, close to you, my love. You little thought who was so near you whilst you slept."

"You were in the lumber-room."

He nodded, laughing.

"The same. A friendly housemaid, amenable to the mighty influence of £ s. d., admitted me. I had

known her before she came here in the inn at the railway. Without her I should have had hard work in scaling your prison walls, sweet captive."

"And the sleeve-link?"

"Was mine. I smashed them all to bits clambering over the wall. How horror-struck you look, Freda!"

"But what object had you?" I gasped.

"As to object—well, lovers in all generations have always been idiotic!—I wanted to be near you, I suppose; and then I had a design for carrying you off by force at one time. But I abandoned the idea; and you were so well watched by those dragons of women you live with, that I have never been able to get near you before this ever-blessed night;" and then he laughed again out of sheer gladness of heart.

And I stood before him trembling, wondering, piecing out the riddle bit by bit, as he unsolved it for me. And yet—the truth being now so very near—yet I never guessed it!

"Freda, have you nothing to say to me?" he asked for the second time. "Will you not come to me?"

And then—I forgot all that had parted us in the past—all that was to part us in the future! I remembered only that I loved him above all living men; and I had been so long starved of his love, of the sight of his face, of the sound of his dear voice—was it very wonderful that when he called me I should go to him!

I went, I laid my head upon his breast, and his arms closed around me, and his lips, hungry and

eager, met mine once again in that delirium of joy than which earth can give us no serener happiness.

Ah! is there anything like it in the world? It may be old and hackneyed, it may be worn out and degraded, it may be dragged through the mire of irreverent jestings and scoffings, every poet may have rhymed it, every novelist may have conventionalised it, but still love comes to us all, old and young, man and woman alike, with the same everlasting freshness, the one God-given thing in this sordid earth, the one thing worth living for, the one thing worth dying for, the one thing we can never look back to with regret, even though it should cost us in the after-days a whole cycle of pain and a whole ocean of tears.

Thus forgetting the past and the future, and remembering only the entrancing present that rendered us unconscious of all save the divine enchantment of the passing moments, Mark and I remained clasped close in each other's arms.

And all the while Ellinor, on her sofa, lay soundly sleeping behind us.

"Oh, Mark!" I said, at last, withdrawing myself a little from his embrace, for such moments of bliss do not last long, recollection and sober reality soon break in upon the glamour of love's dreams. "Oh! why have you come? What good can it do you to have found me? Alas! are we not as far off as ever from happiness?"

"My darling," he answered, passionately, "it is no use, I cannot live without you. I have tried so hard to forget you, to remember the chasm that

us, but I *cannot*, Freda—I cannot live away from you. Will you not risk the infinitesimal danger that threatens us? Will you not come with me abroad, and marry me there? Do you not love me well enough to chance it?”

“But your wife?” I faltered, trembling with a sudden nameless terror which seemed to oppress me again for the second time to-night.

“My wife,” he answered, impatiently, “cannot be alive now, she must have died long ago.”

“But you cannot be certain of it,” I interposed, gently.

“Why did she leave me? I grieved for her sincerely. I sought her diligently. I wearied out my soul for years in endeavouring to trace her. What more do I owe her? Why am I to waste my manhood in vain endeavours to find a woman who is nothing to me now—who, in all probability, has long been dead, and who, even if alive, has never cared to come to me, and for whom, loving you, my darling, with all the strength of my life, I could never experience any other feeling than dislike and aversion. Good God!”—suddenly pushing me aside almost with violence, and looking beyond me—“Good God! who is *that*?”

I turned. Ellinor, wide awake, sat bolt upright upon her sofa. Her face pale as death, her eyes wild and horror-stricken, her dark hair all loosened about her wan cheeks and thin white neck, and her hands despairingly locked together like one who prays for mercy.

“Great Heaven! it is Nelly Fairfax!” gasped

Mark Thistleby, in a choked voice, literally recoiling from before her.

And then Ellinor rose suddenly from her place and made two paces into the room towards us. There burst from her lips one wild shrill cry that rang like the yell of a maniac through the silent house.

"My dream—my dream!" she shouted, and fell like a stone on her face between us.

* * * * *

In all the years that I may have to live, I do not think that I shall ever forget the horror of that moment, nor of those that followed.

"She is dead!" I said, wildly, looking across her prostrate form towards Mark. "For heaven's sake help me to lift her!"

Between us we raised her on to the sofa, and as we did so, a thin, dark stream came trickling out from her pale parted lips. At that awful moment I believed her to be actually dead.

"May God forgive me!" whispered Mark Thistleby, with a sob in his voice. "I have killed her!"

He bent down and kissed the thin, pale hand that hung by her side, and in that moment the truth at last was revealed to me. Ellinor was his long-lost wife!

"You shall not touch her!" I said, fiercely, pushing him back; "you are not fit to touch her! You have basely deceived her and deserted her, and she has spent her life in loving you. I will not let you come near her!"

And then Vickers and some of the servants, alarmed by that cry with which she had fallen, came rushing into the room.

Insensible still, even dead, as far as I knew, we bore her up to her own room, up the wide oaken staircase and along the low-roofed passages into her own little chamber which Miss Barbara's loving fingers had made into so fresh and pretty a maiden's bower, and there we laid her on her own bed with its white muslin curtains and pink satin ribbons, on that bed from which she was never to rise again.

And there, yielding to the restoratives which Vickers and I promptly applied, her poor little soul, with a long quivering sigh, fluttered back once more for a brief space to its place.

Thank heaven she was still alive! She had not died thus suddenly in her horror and her fright in her sister's absence.

"You must telegraph for the missus," whispered Vickers to me, when it was certain to us both that life was not extinct.

I crept noiselessly from the room. Outside, leaning against the passage wall, I found Mark Thistleby. In all the confusion and the dismay no one appeared to have noticed him.

He started eagerly forward to meet me as I came out of the room.

"You did not mean what was said just now?" he said, entreatingly. "You could not believe it, that I had willingly deceived and deserted that poor soul?" His anxiety even now was less for her than for me.

"I don't know ; it is all so bewildering !" I said, wearily, passing my hand over my aching forehead. "Miss Barbara has always said you deluded her into a sham marriage."

"Is that likely, Freda, when *you* know only too well how glad I should have been of late had I only been able to believe such a thing myself? You who know that this fatal marriage alone has stood between me and my heart's greatest good?"

"Yes, that is true," I assented ; "but, then, why could you not find her as you have found me ; if she was your wife it was your duty to have traced her ; and surely since you have been to this house you must have known *who* it was who lived here."

"How was I to know?" he burst forth, impetuously ; "how was I to recognise in the two Miss Fairbanks, whom I heard you were living with, the Nelly Fairfax and her sister whom I had known years ago? Remember, I never saw her till to-night—and they have changed their name!"

"Yes ; I forgot. But surely that night you were standing at the conservatory door, for of course it was you—and poor Ellinor saw you then and screamed out—did you not see her then?"

"No ; my back was turned. I heard the rustle of a dress and her screams ; but, of course, I was afraid of being found out myself, and got away as quickly as I could. I give you my word of honour, Freda, that until I saw her suddenly sitting there on the sofa to-night, I had not the faintest idea *who* it was whom you were living with ; and to think that of all the women in the world it should be *her*!"

"I am sorry," I said, "if I have been unjust to you; but, oh! I am very, very miserable."

And then suddenly all my fortitude gave way, and I burst into tears.

"To think!" I cried, wringing my hands in despair—"to think that I have been with her all these days and weeks, listening to her poor, pitiful story, in which her sister never would believe, whilst I, at the bottom of my heart, have always known it to be true—to think that I should have been here as her friend—learning to love her, and gaining her love daily more and more; whilst all the time it was *I* who stood between her and you—*I* who have robbed her of your love—*I* who have made her life the bitter thing it must be to her if she lives! Oh! is it not enough to break my heart with never-dying remorse?"

Mark did not speak; he stood with folded arms, looking gloomily down.

"Remember!" I said, whilst all the horrors of my situation burst upon me afresh—"remember how awful was the moment of her recognition of you. I was in your arms—and on your lips were words of hatred and repulsion to her—to *her*, and she your wife! Oh! am I not fated to bring misery to all those whom I have ever loved!" and my tears burst forth again.

And then my lover—mine, indeed, no longer—took both my hands within his and comforted me in this wise:

"Do not blame yourself or me, my poor child. We have all of us been the victims of a cruel trick

of our fate. Do not let us waste either tears or regrets over the past, which cannot be altered; let us rather think of the present and the future, which is still our own. Freda, I, for my part, swear before heaven, that having found my wife I will do my duty by her, as thoroughly, as entirely, as if my marriage vows had been spoken but yesterday; although *you* know but too well at what cost they will be kept; till death us two do part, I will not fail in one of the lightest of my duties towards her."

"Alas!" I said, and my love for my helpless charge was strong enough to make me thoroughly in earnest in the regret—"alas! I fear it will not be for long; love and duty come too late to save her."

"Can I do nothing for her now?" he asked, and his brave, noble face seemed to comfort and strengthen me.

"Yes," I said, "you can take the telegram for her sister into Kaneton; and, when you have done that, come back at once. She will be asking for you; and no one shall keep you from her now, my poor darling Ellinor!"

He took the telegram from my hand, and went.

CHAPTER XXX.

"THE END IS COME."

"He whom thou fearest, will, to ease its pain,
Lay his cold hand upon thy aching heart :
Will soothe the terrors of thy troubled brain,
And bid the shadow of earth's grief depart."

—A. A. PROCTER.

THUS, for the second time, Miss Barbara was summoned away in hot haste from her brother's house to her own by the illness of her sister.

This time I met her at the door when she arrived late on the following afternoon, and drew her hurriedly into her little study before I would allow her to go upstairs.

"Do not tell me I am too late!" cried the poor woman, wringing her hands; "do not tell me my darling is dead!"

"Dear Miss Barbara! No, she is not dead; but, alas! I fear that she is very ill," I said, while tremblingly I helped to divest her of her bonnet and travelling-cloak.

"Oh! what have you been doing to my child?" she cried, catching hold of my hands. "Why did you not take better care of her?"

Her reproach stung me bitterly. It had not, indeed, been by any fault or negligence of mine that she was so ill; and yet, indirectly, was it not, to a certain extent, my doing? Without me, would Mark Thistleby ever have come to Kaneton Scars?

"I have something to tell you," I said to her,

gravely ; for I felt that his presence in the house must at once be told to her. "She saw him—her husband—suddenly ; it was the shock I fear which brought on the attack."

"Her *husband*? Good heavens! you mean——"

"I mean her *husband*," I repeated ; "he is here now in the house."

"The man Thorne!" she cried, in horror, making as though she would rush past me to the door. "Are you mad, Freda Clifford?"

"The man whom you *called* Thorne," I said, stopping her. "His name is not Thorne ; it is Thistleby. Oh! Miss Barbara, why have you and I not been more open with each other long ago? I think, had we talked it over more fully, much of this misery might have been spared ; for I know this man very well. His brother married my dearest friend, and I could have told you that he is indeed Ellinor's husband—that he has sought for her for years—that he is good, and true, and loyal, and he was absolutely incapable of all the baseness and deception which you have long ascribed to him."

"Oh, Freda! can this be true?"

"Indeed it is," I answered fervently. And then I told her all—concealing only from her Mark's love for myself ; I would not wound her by speaking of that. I told her that he and Bella Thistleby had been such good friends to me, that they had been bent on discovering me, and that it was Bella who had sent him here to find me. He had come for me, not for Ellinor, I told her, but now that he had

found his wife, he was glad and thankful for the strange chance that had brought them together once more.

Miss Barbara listened to my story in wondering silence and with eager attention ; when I had done speaking she passed her hand wearily and miserably over her eyes.

"So it was all a mistake!" she said, with something like a groan. "After all it was her old sister in her selfish love who had spoilt her life for her!"

"You meant it for the best, dear Miss Barbara," I said, soothingly.

"Ah! if I had only believed in my child a little more, and in my own judgment a little less!" she sighed. "I was so certain that he must be a villain—so sure that no honest man would woo her without my knowledge, and wed her in secret under an assumed name; for I have always guessed it *was* a false name. Why did he do *that*?" she asked, looking up quickly to me, as though she could even now detect a flaw in my story.

"It was foolish, no doubt—nay, it was even wrong," I answered; "but he was very young at the time, and stood in great dread of his father. Had his father known of his marriage, Mark Thistleby believed he would have cut off his supplies, and left him and her to the semi-starvation of his lieutenant's pay. It was done from a good motive; and then, you know, his father died, as I was telling you, immediately after his wedding, and all would have come right for Ellinor. His father's will left him, not rich, indeed, but sufficiently pro-

vided for to keep a wife in comfort. As soon as he could leave his widowed mother, Mark Thistleby hurried back to Ireland, impatient to confess his fault to you, and to claim from you his bride, and found you—flown!"

"Yes, yes; I see it all! Oh! Freda, how terribly blind and self-willed I have been all through, and what a dreadful mistake I have made of life! I thought he was a bad man, such as one reads of so often—one of those men whose only object it is to deceive and to seduce poor innocent girls who have no fathers and brothers to protect them; and all the time he, poor fellow! must have suffered as much as she did! And all those years, when they might have been so happy together!—it is *I* who have been keeping them apart; and, but for you, Freda, they would, in all probability, never have met again, and I should have gone to my grave with this load of injustice against a fellow-creature upon my soul! Oh! Freda, how shall I ever be able to forgive myself?"

"Do not let us waste vain regrets over the past, which no one can alter," I said, quoting Mark's own brave words. "There is still something left for us all to do in the present. Dear Miss Barbara, will you not come upstairs and see her—and him? They are both together now."

She gave me her hand with a penitent humility which touched me strangely; and, as though she had been a child, I led her upstairs to Ellinor's chamber.

I pushed open the door very softly, and we stood for a moment together on the threshold.

Mark Thistleby sat by the bedside, his hand clasped in Ellinor's. He was bending down his handsome head towards her, and speaking to her in a low, gentle voice. I knew, without hearing them, that they were kind and loving words which he was saying to her; and I felt no jealousy in my heart towards that poor little dying wife. Had he been anything but what he was to her, I think I should have hated him. Poor Ellinor's face was slightly flushed; she was too weak to speak to him, but every now and then a gleam of joy would light up for a moment the depths of her fading eyes, as she met his kind, loving glances.

Miss Barbara dropped my hand, and walked forward to the bed. Mark looked up at her approach, and then glanced apprehensively at me, as though to ask me what was going to happen, and how she was going to take it.

Miss Barbara stood by the bedside opposite to him, and poor Ellinor lay between them; and then the elder woman spoke in a clear, brave voice :

"It has been all my doing that you and she have not been together long ago. I meant it for the best, but I have erred grievously. Sir, I have to ask your forgiveness and Ellinor's," she added, with grave, old-fashioned courtesy.

And there, over Ellinor's prostrate form, those two who had never met face to face before, but who had been as enemies for so many years, clasped hands together for the first time.

"I am happy!" whispered Ellinor, with a faint

smile, turning from one to the other ; and I think that Miss Barbara in that moment felt herself rewarded.

Ellinor Fairfax—or, rather, Ellinor Thistleby as she was rightly named—did not die immediately. She lingered for many days after that, fading away gently and painlessly from this troublesome world. I have often thought that it pleased heaven so to prolong her fragile life in order to give her those few days of happiness with him whom she had loved so dearly and so constantly before she was to leave him for ever. It was like a golden sunset after a stormy day. Whatever it might be to us and to him, to her all was peace. No disturbing element troubled the calm happiness which overshadowed her—no dark blot marred the serene purity of her perfect joy. With her return to consciousness, after her first attack, all painful recollections concerning the manner of her husband's return seemed to have vanished from her memory. She remembered only that he had come to her.

I thanked heaven that it was so. The trial, hard as it was for me, would have been harder still had she displayed any aversion or jealousy towards me in her last hours. But, by her uniform gentleness and sweetness to me, I could see plainly enough that no lasting impression had been made upon her mind by the situation in which she must have discovered us on awakening from her sleep upon the sofa ; the one all-important fact of her husband's return to her absorbed all the thinking, feeling powers of her poor weakened heart and brain. There was no room for

any other thought. He had come to her, and she was happy ; that was enough for Ellinor.

As to Mark Thistleby, he watched her with a tenderness and an assiduity which, knowing as I did, of all his love to myself, drew forth towards him my profoundest respect, and my deepest admiration. He hardly left her bedside ; he was untiring in his efforts to amuse her or to soothe her. I never heard him make to her any professions of love which he could not possibly have felt for her, but nothing in his manner was wanting of what was her due of affectionate interest, of tender regard, and of gentle pitying compassion. No husband by a dying wife's bedside could have been a more perfect example of devotion than was Mark Thistleby to the woman who was his wife, and yet was not his love.

And to me also his conduct throughout was beyond all praise. He neither ignored me completely, nor noticed me over much. Like Miss Barbara, I was a fellow-watcher by his wife's sick bed, and as such he treated me ; he made no difference between us.

Once, indeed, I met him in the passage on the way to Ellinor's room. He stopped me, and I trembled lest he should be betrayed into any expression of his love towards myself. Nothing would have shocked or revolted me more at such a time. But he was guilty of no such breach of good taste and right feeling.

He took my hand gently within his.

" You are not over-tiring yourself with all this sad business, Freda ? " he asked, looking at me anxiously,

and dropping my hand instantly, even before I answered him.

"Oh! no," I answered, "I am so glad to do anything for her."

"I have been writing to Bella," he continued, "and I have told her *all*," he added, significantly.

"Oh! I am so glad."

"She will want you to go to her by-and-by. I think she will come and fetch you herself. Will you go to her, Freda?"

He looked at me earnestly. I knew what the question meant. If I went to Bella it would be tacitly consenting to put my future life in his hands. He meant me to see that all this was not to part us in the end. I was grateful to him for saying it; for I should have been more than human had I been able to repress many anxious thoughts concerning my ultimate chances of happiness.

"Yes, I will go to Bella," I answered, looking up at him with a smile.

"God bless you," he said, shortly, and left me, passing on again into Ellinor's bed-room.

From the first, no one had entertained the slightest hopes of poor Ellinor's recovery. Miss Barbara did, indeed, send again for the doctor from York; but that magnate could not give her the faintest encouragement.

"She had broken a blood-vessel near the heart," he said; "sooner or later a further rupture must take place—probably in the shape of an internal diffusion of blood. The slightest movement might bring it on, and when that took place instant death

must follow. She *might* last, with care, one week, perhaps even two; but longer than that it would be idle to hope for."

At last the end came. It was evening; the windows were wide open, and great bunches of cream and crimson roses peered in from the casement into the chamber of death. We were all in her room; Mark and Miss Barbara sitting one on either side of her bed, and I at a little distance, by the window. Suddenly, she called me by my name.

"Freda!"

I rose up hastily and went to her.

"Freda, do you remember that cabman?" she asked, in a clear voice: "the cabman who behaved so badly to me when you met me that day in London—do you think you would recognise him?"

"I am not sure, dear, perhaps——"

"If you were to meet him, would you know him?"

"Yes; I think if I were to meet him I should know him," I answered, slowly, wondering what she meant.

"Then tell him," she said, feverishly, "that I had wished him evil things when I was well, but that when I lay dying I forgave him."

Then after a pause she spoke again.

"Did I not say that we should never walk on the moors again, Freda. *The end is come.* Barbara, give me your hand. My husband—kiss me."

She lifted her face to his, and in that parting kiss, Ellinor's gentle soul, forgiving and forgiven, passed away from among us,

CHAPTER XXXI.

REWARDING EVIL WITH GOOD.

'Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler, sister woman ;
Tho' they may gang a Rennin' wrang
To step aside is human !'

—BURNS.

I WAS back again in Russell Square, at Aunt Selina's. Uncle Carr sat behind me, as usual, grumbling over some defect in his last night's dinner and ejaculating at intervals the names of some of his favourite dishes. Aunt Selina bustled about the room in her rustling silk dress, with her gauze cap-ribbons fluttering behind her. I stood at my old place by the window, and looked out across the Square garden. Save for the fact that its stunted trees and shrubs were no longer bare, but were now thickly covered with dusty foliage, it might well be that the past eight months had never been, and that I was still the sad, friendless girl who had wearily paced the dirty London streets day after day, only last November, seeking hopelessly for that hard and difficult thing to discover—employment for a poor gentle-woman. Indeed, it was sometimes difficult to imagine that the past was not all a dream ; that the whole of my life at Kaneton Scars, with all its numberless terrors—poor Ellinor's sad life and sadder death, the return of Mark Thistleby into my existence, and the final clearing away of all that had divided us from each other—all this had really taken place, and was

not a delusive dream of my own imagination. I looked down instinctively at my left hand, and there was the glittering hoop of diamonds which my lover had placed upon my finger as we parted, and I saw in it the glad confirmation of all my happiness ; for Mark had gone abroad to bring Bella home. It was better, for all reasons, that we should be parted for a little while. Bella would come home with him, and I should go to her either in London or at Sea-cliff ; and meanwhile I am at Aunt Selina's.

"Am I to understand, Freda," says that lady to me, stopping short in her task of moving all the chairs in the room into their stereotyped corners—"am I really to understand that you are actually engaged to be married ?"

"Yes, aunt ; I think there is no doubt about the fact," I answered, smiling.

"Well, my dear, of course I am delighted to hear it, although you might have consulted me a little sooner, I think—I, who have been like a second mother to you, my love. Of course I feel a little hurt that you should not have told me anything about this—this Captain Thistleton, I think you said ?"

"Thistleby is his name, aunt," I answered, passing over the "second motherhood" of the good lady with a smile. I knew my dear aunt so well ! As better days and good fortune began to beam upon me once more, so also did Mrs. Carr. She was already kind and sympathising ; she waited only to hear the details of my future husband's means and expectations to wax affectionate, and perhaps even raptur-

ously loving, to me, according to what the figure of those means might chance to be.

"I could not tell you about it before, aunt, it is only just settled; and even now we do not wish it talked about."

"Very well, my love; but tell me all about it now. Come and sit down." She drew me down on to a sofa by her side, and took hold of my hand, patting it affectionately as she did so. "Tell me when the wedding is to be, my dear. How glad I am that I have kept that peach-coloured silk till now! it will come in again so nicely—not a bit old-fashioned yet, you know. I was to have worn it at your wedding last October. Ah! well, I won't say anything about that now."

"I am afraid, aunt, that if that dress is to be worn at my wedding, you will have to keep it for another year, for I shall not be married sooner than that."

"Another *year!*" exclaimed my aunt, in horror. "What on earth is that for, I should like to know! What in the world are you going to wait a year for? I hate your long engagements," she added, viciously dropping my hand; "they always mean beggarly incomes and inadequate settlements."

"Captain Thistleby is certainly not a rich man, aunt," I said, smiling with irritating good temper at her.

"And you met him at Miss Fairbank's?"

"Yes, I met him at Kaneton Scars," I answered.

Here Uncle Carr behind us was overheard muttering affectionate things to himself concerning "oyster fritters."

"Oysters? Rubbish!" cried my aunt, looking round angrily at him. "How can you have oysters in July? You must know they are out of season; and pray, Freda," turning round to me again with ill-concealed bad temper—"pray what do you propose doing with yourself until this wretched match comes off? Do you mean to honour *me* with your company for the next year?"

"Oh! dear, no, aunt. Captain Thistleby's sister-in-law, who is a great friend of mine, will be coming home from abroad in about a fortnight or three weeks. I am going to live with her, but I thought perhaps you would not mind my staying with you till she returns, as you know you are, as you said just now, a second mother to me," I said, laughing somewhat maliciously.

"Hum! ha! yes—delighted, I am sure, my dear," said my aunt, looking slightly disconcerted; "but as to that peach-coloured silk, it will be of no earthly use to keep it for another year, it will look as if it had come out of the Ark by that time. There is Mary Carr's baby going to be baptized next month; she has written to invite me to the christening, so I shall wear it then. What is the good of keeping it any longer?"

"Well, I think you are quite right, aunt, and it would be too grand a dress for my wedding, for I mean to walk into church in my bonnet and travelling-dress."

My aunt held up her hands in horror.

"It is downright wickedness, Freda, that is what it is! to treat holy matrimony in the way you do,

and to throw discredit on the marriage service. I always hoped you were a good churchwoman, and knew the importance of that holy ceremony; but you talk of walking into church in that airy way in a bonnet, just as if it was of no more consequence than a pastrycook's shop! But what can be expected of a girl who threw over the best match in the kingdom to marry a miserable army captain so poor you've got to wait a year before he can scrape up money enough to take furnished lodgings with! I wash my hands of you, Freda. I do indeed!"

I laughed.

"Mark is not quite so poor as all that, aunt; don't be too unhappy over my fate. It is not because we are poor that we are going to wait. There are other family reasons which I need not enter upon. We shall not starve, at all events. Mrs. Thistleby will take care of that, for she is very rich."

"Oh, indeed!" with an appearance of renewed interest; "rich, is she? Well, my dear girl, I was just going to say that I should do myself the honour of calling upon Mrs. Thistleby when she comes back from abroad, and, of course, love, I hope you will stay here until you can go on to her house."

So it was settled; and Aunt Selina ended by kissing me affectionately. Making friends with Mammon was a Scripture precept which Mrs. Carr never failed to act up to.

All this time I had been longing to hear tidings of Mr. Curtis, but had been too proud to ask my aunt what she had heard about him. She would have interpreted such inquiries into a wish on my

part to renew my engagement with him, and would have been quite capable of writing straight off to make overtures to him upon the strength of it.

I had not forgotten that she had told me that he looked ill and aged. I wondered whether it was my conduct to him which had altered him. I should have been very sorry to think so, and I could hardly believe it, for I did not think he had ever cared for me in any but a fatherly manner. But for my father's sake, and because he had been so uniformly kind to me, I felt that I should like to hear something of him.

One day during my visit to Mrs. Carr, I had gone out shopping by myself. I was in Bond Street, coming out of Redmayne's shop, when a hansom cab, which was passing by, suddenly drew up with a jerk in front of it, and a lady wearing a very thick veil, beckoned violently and imperiously to me. I drew near wondering, and then saw to my surprise that it was Mrs. Featherstone.

"Freda! Miss Clifford! Is it possible that it is you?"

I drew back instinctively; my aversion to the woman who had traduced and reviled me in the day of adversity was as great as ever.

"Oh, please don't turn away!" she said, in an entreating voice, strangely unlike the proud and haughty Clara Featherstone of old. "I have been longing so to meet you, and I did not know how to find you, or where you were. Please get into my cab; I am just going back to my lodgings, and I do

so want you to come with me, for I have so much to say to you."

"To *me*!" I said, in surprise. "What can you have to say to *me*? I am no friend of yours—you have plenty without me—there is Mrs. Leith."

"Mrs. Leith! Do you suppose she would speak to me now—now all the world has turned against me! Don't keep me talking here, somebody might recognise me—*do* come with me!"

Something in the woman's face and voice told me that she was in trouble, and that for once she was genuinely in earnest. I hesitated no longer, but got into the cab with her, and we drove on.

When I came to be close to her, I perceived that she was terribly altered. Her dress, no longer radiant with bright colours, was shabby and worn, and her face looked old and haggard; there were deep lines scored upon it—lines of care, and almost, as it seemed to be, of want and poverty. I looked at her with amazement.

"Why has all the world turned against you, Mrs. Featherstone? and why do you speak of being in a lodging? Why are you not in your own house in Eaton Square? What has happened to you? Tell me, for I cannot understand."

"Do you not know?" she exclaimed, seeming to be much surprised in her turn. "Is it possible you have not heard?"

"No; I have heard nothing," I answered, bewildered. "I have been living for months in a most remote, out-of-the-world place in Yorkshire.

All my friends, and my old associations, have been dead and buried to me—I have heard nothing.”

“Then you do not know what happened to me last December? I thought everybody knew it.”

Just then the cab drew up at a door in a miserable, dingy little back street—we had arrived at her lodgings. She let herself in by a latch-key, and we went upstairs into what is called “the drawing-rooms.” Two wretched rooms, low, dark, and dirty, opening out of each other by the usual folding-doors. There was the round table in the middle of the room; the tarnished console, with its marble top, opposite the fire-place; the horse-hair sofa between the windows. On the mantel-piece a case of dusty stuffed birds, flanked by cheap china figures of shepherdesses, under glass shades, and a dingy gas chandelier hung from the smoky ceiling. I glanced into the back room, through the half-open door; it looked if possible even more desolate and comfortless.

“It is rather a change from Eddington, isn’t it?” said my companion, with a piteous smile, as she flung off her bonnet and sat down wearily in front of the table.

All my heart went suddenly out in pity towards my old enemy.

“Dear Mrs. Featherstone!” I exclaimed, “what dreadful thing has happened to you? I am sorry, indeed, to see you in such a place. Tell me what calamity has brought you to this?”

“I don’t know why you should be sorry for me, Freda Clifford,” she said, looking at me with a strange mixture of defiance and deprecation. “I

dare say you will be glad when you hear—I know I should have been glad and triumphed if I had been you—if you had been the one that had been humbled; and, God knows, you have reason to hate me! So you never heard that I left my husband last December?”

“Left him?”

“Yes? with another man. Do you understand? I ran away from him. Don’t look shocked, child; it’s no uncommon case, after all!” and she laughed a harsh, bitter laugh.

“Oh! Mrs. Featherstone, how sorry I am! And—and—the man?”

“The man has now left me. You will say it serves me right, I suppose.”

“He will not marry you?”

“Oh! dear no, he would not dream of it; he is years younger than I am. I was a fool, I suppose, to expect it. And now I am waiting my divorce, or rather Mr. Featherstone is. It won’t make much difference to me; I have nothing but starvation to look forward to now.”

“But your husband—will he not be merciful? If you are sorry, will he not take you back?”

“Mr. Featherstone? Gracious, no! He is only too glad to be rid of me!” And again she laughed hardly and unmirthfully.

I was silent for a few moments, not knowing what to say to her. I suppose if I had had a bad heart, or even a justly stern one, I should have felt that this woman, who had once so foully slandered me, was only now reaping the due reward of her evil deeds and ill-natured words. I suppose no one could

have blamed me much had I said to her : " You have made your bed, and now you must lie in it. Can you expect pity or help from me, to whom you showed neither in my day of need ? " But I must be a soft-hearted person, and be destitute of a feeling of proper pride, for no such speech came to my lips—I made her no speech at all, in fact ; I only did what was essentially feminine and foolish, I sank down on my knees before her, and threw both arms round her neck.

" Oh ! poor—poor Clara ! " I cried, and tears of compassion rushed up into my eyes.

Clara Featherstone gave a sort of sob, and, turning away from me, hid her face in her hands.

" Oh ! Freda," she said, " I knew you would be good to me, though heaven knows I don't deserve goodness at your hands, for I did all I could to injure you ; and now it is strange, is it not, that you should be the only person in the world who can help me ? You will not refuse to help me, will you, Freda ? "

" Of course I will help you if I can," I answered ; " but how ? What good can I do ? Why not go to your brother ? "

" That is just it, Freda. My brother can help me, certainly, but he will not because of *you*."

" Of me ? "

" Yes. I wrote to him and told him I was nearly starving, and so I am. I have had to sell everything I possess—one thing after another, literally to keep myself in food. So I wrote to George, and asked him out of his abundance to make me a small fixed allowance—only £200 a-year ; with that I could

take a small cottage in the country, and do some embroidery for a ladies' needlework society that I used to subscribe to, and which would now, I think, give me employment. I could live, at all events. I thought George could not refuse me such a small request; but look at this."

She drew a note out of her pocket, and put it in my hands. I opened it and read:

"DEAR CLARA,—

"I do not know how you can expect mercy yourself when you know not how to show mercy to others. You have sinned grievously, but that I could have forgiven you. What I can never forgive you is your conduct to my poor lost child—the daughter of my dearest friend. You blackened her character to me, and prevented me from marrying her. I have since found out that your stories against her were but a tissue of lies, with a faint colouring of truth. But meanwhile, my poor Freda has been driven out into the world alone, and is friendless and penniless. If she had come to me I would not have married her against her will, but I would have been as a father to her. It is to *you*, my sister, that I owe the utter loss and perhaps the ruin of my old friend's child. I will never forgive you for it, nor will I help you in any way.

"G. CURTIS."

Through blinding tears I finished reading this letter, and then I put it in my pocket.

"Let me keep this letter, Clara, and I will answer

it for you ; and when I hear from Mr. Curtis, I will come and see you again."

I rose, and kissing her again, I left her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AT SEACLIFF AGAIN.

" But happy they, the happiest of their kind,
Whom gentle stars unite, and in one fate
Their hearts, their fortunes, and their beings blend."
—THOMSON.

I WROTE to George Curtis. I do not remember quite what I said to him, but I know that I told him that he was the best and dearest of men, and that gratitude and affection would always fill my heart towards him. That letter so harsh to his sister and so tenderly loving in its tone to me, had strangely touched my heart. It was not as a lover, but as a friend, that he had mourned for me, as my father's child, and the girl to whom he would sooner be "as a father" than lose altogether.

How little I had appreciated that noble heart ! Whilst I had thought myself scorned, and spurned, and dropped out of his life for ever, he had been grieving over my disappearance, and longing to help me and to befriend me. For a short space Mrs. Featherstone had poisoned his mind against me, but he had tested her accusations and had found out their falseness, and had justly hated her for her perfidy to me. If I had gone to him bravely at the first, I felt

now certain that he would not have turned away from me. But I had wronged him, and I had lacked the courage to face him. So now I wrote to my old lover a long letter, telling him of all my past and of all my future prospects, and praying him to reward my injustice and my want of faith in him, by the good gift of his friendship for the rest of my life. And then I interceded for Clara. I told him how I had found her—poor, miserable, humbled, and repentant, and for my sake and the sake of the past, I begged him to save her from destitution by giving her the pecuniary help she had asked him for.

In due time came his answer. It was everything that I could wish for. And I took it in my hand, and went with it joyfully to see Clara.

As I opened the door of her room she ran to meet me with outstretched arms.

“Oh! Freda, I have had a letter from George; and so have you, I can see. Such a kind letter! and he will give me £300 a year; he is going to settle it on me for my life; and he says it is all your doing, and because you have asked him. I don’t know how I can ever thank and bless you enough!”

She looked happier and brighter already, more like the Clara Featherstone of old, with whom I had so often quarrelled and fought, only softer, more womanly, and with all the old spitefulness and malice gone out of her face.

I sat down and entered gladly into all her future plans. She had decided to remain where she was till the divorce was settled, and then she meant to change her name, and take a small cottage in a

neighbourhood where she was not known, and begin life afresh.

"And will you sometimes come and see me, Freda?" she asked, doubtingly. "I know, perhaps, I ought not to ask it; but you have been so good to me I do not think you will drop me altogether, will you?"

"No, indeed I will not, Clara!" I answered, kissing her; and then I told her that I was soon going to marry Mark Thistleby.

"Really?—are you really going to marry Pet? I never thought it was more than a flirtation. Well, I am very glad of it. And I am sure you deserve to be very happy, and I hope you may be, Freda dear."

So it was that my old enemy became my friend.

A day or two later a telegram from Bella announced her arrival at Seaclyff, and summoned me to join her there without delay.

It may be imagined with what joy I was once more folded to my dear little friend's warm heart. How delightful it was, after all the sorrow, and misery, and anxiety of the past year, to be with her once more—to talk over all the past, and to make happy day-dreams for the bright future! I was never tired of dancing up and down the house—of running out into the little square garden, and down the steps where I had sat sketching the day that Mark and I had spent together, and where he had found me, and made his compact of peace and friendship with me.

It seemed wonderful to think that it was only a year ago since that never-to-be-forgotten day, and that now he was my very own, and nothing could

ever divide us again. How Bella and I chattered and talked over it all, anybody acquainted with the manners and customs of two women who are "bosom friends" may imagine for themselves.

"And to think," exclaimed Bella, for the twentieth time, as we sat together, fancy-work in hand, when our excitement had somewhat subsided,—“and to think that that *wretch* Mark was married all the time, and I never knew it, and was laying plans for marrying you to him! Why it's horrible to think of the danger I was in! I might have been taken up for bigamy, as an accessory before the fact!”

"Well, I hope it will be a lesson to you, and teach you never to do any match-making again!" I said, laughing.

"On the contrary, my dear, my match-making, as you call it, has turned out so remarkably successfully, that it will be an encouragement to me to persevere in the accomplishment for the rest of my life!"

"Think of the mischief you *might* have done!" I said, reprovingly.

"Think of the good I *have* done!" cried Bella, getting up and kissing me rapturously. "Can anything, I ask you, have turned out better? Here are you and Mark, devotedly in love with each other, and engaged to be married. The other woman, poor thing, whom he fortunately lost early in life, has died off conveniently in the very nick of time, and you two have nothing to do but to marry each other and be happy!"

"How flippant you are, Bella! If you had known my poor Ellinor——"

"And how falsely sentimental you are, Freda!" interrupted my friend. "It is quite absurd your pretending to be sorry for the poor thing, when her death is to make your happiness! By-the-way, I see you had a letter from old Miss Fairfax this morning. What does *she* say about your marriage to Mark?"

"She is very good about it," I answered, taking Miss Barbara's letter from my pocket and referring to it. "I am glad I told her; it was much better to be open with her. She congratulates me very kindly, and says that, of course, under the circumstances, she hopes we will not put off our wedding too long, merely on account of her feelings. It is kind of her to say so; but I think Mark and I are both agreed that we had better wait another year. She tells me, too, that she has let Kaneton Scars very advantageously on a long lease, and she is going to live with her widower brother, to take care of his babies for him. It will be an active and useful life for her, and I am very glad to hear it. She writes so affectionately to me, I am sure she is very fond of me."

"So she ought to be," answered Bella, nodding her head with decision. "You have behaved very well to her; and she was a silly old woman to hide her sister away from Mark for years, as if he was a common blackguard! She did a great deal of mischief to everybody; and if you had run away with her Ellinor's husband, married or unmarried, she would have only had herself to thank for it!"

"Don't be immoral, Bella!" I said, sternly and reprovingly.

"And don't you be a prude, Freda!" laughed back Bella, who, as of old, always loved to have the last word.

It may be easily imagined that Captain Thistleby did not keep very long away from our little feminine household. He very soon made an opportunity of running down for a few days to see us, and we found that that "running down" process was constantly repeating itself. I need not say that we were very happy together; and though our number was that fatal one of *three*, which is supposed to be so inimical to love or to friendship, I cannot say that we ever found Bella much in the way of our enjoyment.

One day we all three made an expedition to that little bay where Mark and I had gone on that eventful occasion when he had left me, like Andromeda, clinging to the cliff alone. No such fatal incident happened on this occasion; all went well; and Mark, stimulated by past recollections, became very sentimental and somewhat indecorously affectionate on the way back. But although he openly accused Bella of being *de trop*, I cannot say that either her presence or that of the boatman who rowed us back appeared to cause him any undue amount of shyness or reticence.

And so the happy weeks and months sped by, and, in the pleasant daily society of my friend, brightened by my lover's frequent visits, the year of waiting, which we had set before us as the proper thing to submit to, passed quickly away.

Summer faded into winter, and winter at length brightened once more into summer ; and when the anniversary of poor Ellinor's death had come and gone, Mark and I settled our wedding day, and were married quietly, and without any festivities, at the little church at Seacliff.

By his own special desire, George Curtis came down on purpose to give me away ; and Miss Barbara Fairfax, in slight mourning, would not consent to be absent on the occasion.

I had no bridesmaids, and no white satin or Brussels lace. There was neither wedding-breakfast nor wedding-cake ; nor were there any other guests save those two elderly people and Bella ; neither was Aunt Selina and her peach-coloured silk gown invited to assist at the ceremony.

But there was that at our wedding which is lacking to many where all the above adjuncts are present in profusion : for there were two people who loved each other with all their hearts, and who, whatever the sorrows of this troublesome world may bring to them, will still know how to be happy so long as it pleases God to spare them to each other.

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