E09438

THE SECOND SON

MRS. OLIPHANT

T. B. ALDRICH



THE SECOND SON

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'THE WIZARD'S SON,' 'HESTER,' ETC.



London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

AND NEW YORK

1888

First Edition (3 Vols. Crown 8vo) January 1888.
New Edition (1 Vol. Globe 8vo) April 1888.

CONTENTS

		PAGE
I.	THE FAMILY AT MELCOMBE	1
II.	THEIR NEIGHBOURS	8
III.	BROTHERS	17
IV.	THE WEST LODGE	24
V.	AFTER DINNER	33
VI.	NINA	41
VII.	MOTHER AND DAUGHTER	50
VIII.	PRIMOGENITURE	58
IX.	MOUNT TRAVERS	66
X.	THE LAWYER	73
XI.	THE SQUIRE	80
XII.	MR. MITFORD'S INVESTIGATIONS	87
XIII.	NINA'S VIEWS	94
XIV.	A NEW ACTOR	101
XV.	LOVE	109
XVI.	THOUGHTS AND TALKS	117
XVII.	SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY	124
XVIII.	THE RETURN	132
XIX.	ANOTHER TWILIGHT	139
XX.	BROUGHT TO BOOK	146
XXI.	SUBSTITUTION	154

PAGE

XXII. A Midnight Talk 161

XXIII. Going Away 166

XXIV. Mr. Mitford's Will 174

XXV. Lily's Resolution 182

XXVI. At the Railway Station 189

XXVII. In the Toils 194

XXVIII. A Night in the Streets 202

XXIX. The Knight-Errant and the Detective . . 210

XXX. Carrying Evil Tidings 217

XXXI. Three Brothers 224

XXXII. Stephen's Answer 231

XXXIII. The Shadow of Death 238

XXXIV. A Death in the Family 245

XXXV. Paternal Advice 253

XXXVI. At the Rectory 261

XXXVII. Edmund out of Heart 268

XXXVIII. The West Lodge 274

XXXIX. The Squire in the Wrong 282

XL. An Altercation 289

XLI. At Mount Travers 295

XLII. A Revelation 302

XLIII. The Culprit's Revenge 310

XLIV. The Squire goes Home 317

XLV. After the Storm 325

XLVI. The Last of the Squire 333

XLVII. The Break-Up 340

XLVIII. The Mingled Thread 346

THE SECOND SON

I

THE FAMILY AT MELCOMBE

MR. MITFORD of Melcombe had three sons. His estates lay in one of the richest of the midland counties, and they were not entailed. His house was not very imposing nor beautiful in itself, being of comparatively recent erection, and built at a period when comfort within was more considered than beauty without. It was low, no more than two stories in height, but spreading over a wide area, with a long garden front which permitted a very handsome suite of rooms; delightful to live in, though without architectural pretensions of any kind. Though the house was so recent, the Mitfords had been at Melcombe for as many centuries as were necessary to establish their claims as county gentry of the best class, and had met with those misfortunes which are almost as indispensable as success and prosperity to the thorough establishment of an old race. They had suffered more or less in the Jacobite rebellions, their house had been burnt down more than once, they had given their family valuables to the king when he was at Oxford. These circumstances made the fact that their house was new and ugly, their plate a little scanty, their jewels defective, rather a point of pride than of humiliation for the family. It was also rather a feather in their cap that the entail embraced only a very small portion of their possessions; for had it not been broken in haste during the eighteenth century, in order to leave the heir free to follow Prince Charlie without ruining the family in case the Hanoverians should hold, as happened, the winning side? This point, however, is a very important one, when the family, and not the individual possessor, is taken into view. It is generally supposed that the law of natural justice requires the abrogation of all

such restrictions as those involved in laws of primogeniture and entail. But there are, as usual with most human questions, two ways of looking at this matter. If you have made a great deal of money, it is only right that you should have the power of dividing it among your descendants, or (which is still another view) giving it to whom you choose. But when an inheritance has been handed down to you by your fathers and grandfathers in succession, the natural justice runs all the other way. Then it becomes a breach of right to contradict the purpose with which it was constituted, the limitations under which you received it: since it is not your property at all save in trust. But this is neither the moment nor the place for a treatise upon the English laws of succession. Mr. Mitford was a man who had a great idea of his rights as an individual, and he was the third in succession who had held the estates of Melcombe entirely in his own hands.

His three sons were Roger, Edmund, and Stephen. The eldest son, notwithstanding the power of disinheritance which was in his father's hands, had been brought up as eldest sons usually are, without any alarm as to his future, or idea that under any possibility he could be displaced from his natural position. He had been in the Guards in his youth, and had passed that blossoming portion of his existence without any discredit, if also without any special use. He had withdrawn, however, from a life somewhat too expensive for his allowance and circumstances some years before the beginning of this history, and, with occasional absences for pleasure or adventure, lived at home, managing as much of the business of the estate as his father permitted to pass out of his own hands, looking after the stables, hunting a little, and finding enough to occupy him in that busy idleness of country life which is so seductive and looks so much like important work when the doer of it has nothing else to do. Roger was not, however, ignorant of what men have to do in regions where existence is less easy. He had been, as people say, a great deal about the world. He had taken that round which, to young men of the present day, stands in the place of the grand tour which their forefathers took with more or less advantage in the way of culture and art. He had been all over America, he was still part owner of a Californian ranche, he had touched at Japan, and he knew familiarly many a place which, a generation ago, only sailors by profession or merchants' clerks knew anything about. How much good all these varied experiences had done him it would be hard to say, but they had at least contributed with many other influences to form the man.

Edmund, the second son, was of a very different mould. He

was one of those who are untravelled, and have not knocked about or roughed it, as it is the fashion to do; that is to say, he knew Europe and the great countries which have marched with his own through the comparatively modern levels of history, and he knew books and rather more art than was good for him. He had a mild little fortune of his own, derived from his mother; the just enough which is supposed to be very bad for a young man by inducing him to believe that it is unnecessary to do anything for himself, but which the present writer takes the liberty of believing is sometimes very good for a young man, keeping him out of the ranks of the struggling without that sense of guilt and helplessness which must always characterise the ineffectiveness of the poor. Edmund cared little for game, great or small; he was not interested in savage life, whether that of the hunter, or the cattle-owner, or the aboriginal, though more in the last than in the first. He was a man somewhat without motive in the world, reading a great deal, wandering more or less, writing a little, musing much. His musings did not come to anything to speak of; indeed, there was supposed to be little use in him of any kind. He could not even lay claim to that high reputation in the way of *bric-à-brac* which, for a dilettante such as he allowed himself to be, is a kind of salvation. Whether it was indolence, or whether it was that he had no conviction of the importance of Japanese fans and china plates in decoration, he had not made much even of the rooms which had been given up to him at home. They were hung only with pictures and water-colour sketches, some of which were done by his own hand, without a fan among them, or any other barbaric 'bit of colour.' He did not come up to his possibilities even in that respect. His presence or absence did not tell very much upon the house. It is true that most of the inhabitants at Melcombe were glad to have him there; but those very qualities which made everybody pleased to see him diminished the importance of his going away. He gave so little trouble that no one missed him, though when he was at home the fact that he gave little trouble was his highest praise.

Stephen was the one who turned the house upside down when he appeared. He was a soldier, with his regiment, spending his intervals of leave (and not always those) at Melcombe. no one could be under any doubt on the subject when Stephen at home. He had everything altered to suit his pleasure, even Mr. Mitford, who never departed from his rules, was unconsciously thrust out of them on Stephen's return, and thought nothing of it. This not because he was the favourite. He could not have said to

be the favourite. He was too noisy, too imperious, for that part. He had not the sweetness, the persuasiveness, which procures one of a family his own way. He got the upper hand because he insisted upon it. None of the others felt themselves able to oppose Stephen. As for Edmund, he shrunk at once from any controversy, feeling that he must go to the wall; and Roger would give in with a growl, saying in his moustache that the fellow was not here for long, or else—— Mr. Mitford yielded with a still worse grace, but he did yield also,—chiefly because he felt it undignified to engage in any strife unless he was certain to be victorious, and that could never be certain when it was Stephen who was the antagonist. Stephen did not mind in the least what weapons he used. He would speak of his father's age in a way which made Mr. Mitford furious. 'I don't want to disturb you, sir, at your time of life. One knows, of course, that habit is more than second nature with old people.'—'Who the deuce do you mean by your old people?' Mr. Mitford would shout in a passion, conscious of being only sixty-seven, and well out of sight yet of the threescore and ten years. The servants invariably flew to execute Mr. Stephen's orders. Anything for a quiet life, they said. And thus it was that without going out of his course to conciliate anybody, or troubling himself about the least recompense, Stephen got most things his own way. He was, perhaps, the handsomest of his family, as features and merely physical attributes go. He was taller than his brothers, he was better at all out-door pursuits; or perhaps it was because he always said he was the best that everybody thought so. Then he had the reputation of being open-handed and liberal, because people who are so noisy and impulsive generally are as careless of money as they are of other people's comfort, or at least it is usual to think so. Stephen is so thoughtless, everybody said; you don't expect Stephen to remember little precautions, or to curry favour, but at bottom he's the most good-natured fellow! He doesn't pretend to be clever, but he sticks to his friends like a good one, the gentlemen said. He's a little rough, but then he's so very good-natured, said the ladies. So Stephen went on steadily thinking of nothing but how to please himself. There is no branch of human industry in which perseverance is more sure of its reward.

There were daughters in the Mitford family, but they had never been taken much into account. The mother had died young, and feminine head of the house had ever succeeded her. There was an excellent housekeeper, Mrs. Simmons, who devoted herself to the girls, but thought young ladies were best in the schoolroom, and kept the governesses at a haughty distance. The young ladies

were timid girls, who were frightened of their brothers, and thought Mrs. Simmons quite right. Somehow or other, nobody quite knew how, two of them married out of that schoolroom, and escaped into what we must hope was a better life. One little girl was still left at home. Her name was Katherine, but she had not the vigour which that name implies. To have called her Kate would have been impossible, or even Katie. The universal sentiment of those who knew her averted this false nomenclature by calling her Nina, supposed to be a contraction of the last syllable of her name, as it is of so many names. She was nearly eighteen at the period to which I am referring; a pretty enough little girl, looking much younger than her age, and with a constantly apologetic tone about her, as if she had no business to be in the way, or show herself in superior male society,—which, to tell the truth, she did very little. The last governess had departed some time before: governesses had not been welcome in the Mitford family, nor had they been happy; and in what way Nina had been educated, or her sisters before her, nobody knew. It was supposed that they could read and write, and it was known (by the nuisance it was) that they could play badly upon a well-thumped schoolroom piano, out of which more noise than music was ever got. Now that the governess was gone, Nina was more often visible than she had been before. The humblest of little apologetic girls cannot live in a schoolroom all alone. If there had been no other reason against it, there was this reason, that it was now nobody's business to carry up tea to that secluded place. The schoolroom maid had departed along with the governess, and when this dilemma was reported to Mrs. Simmons her deliverance was very decisive. 'It is high time Miss Nina came down to dinner,' she said, although on a former occasion she had protested that the schoolroom was the proper place for young ladies. This proves that even the housekeeper was not always consistent; but then, in the present case, tea in the schoolroom instead of dinner downstairs had the air of being a privilege for Nina, a thing that evidently could not be. When it was thus settled that she should make her appearance at dinner, Nina learned to show herself much more downstairs during the day. She was all alone, poor little thing; there was nobody to talk with upstairs, or with whom to exchange those innocent little secrets which belong to girlhood. She was very heart-sick with longing for her sisters, and for Miss Beaumont, who had been kind, and even for Mattie, the little schoolroom maid. Had she been left alone, the deserted girl would in all likelihood have formed a very unsuitable but devoted friendship with Mattie;

or she might have fallen in love with the gardener, or done something of a desperate kind. Mrs. Simmons saved her by issuing that recommendation, which was as good as an order. Nina did not like it at first, but afterwards she got to like it. She was a pretty little creature. She was very anxious to please. And when any one walked into the drawing-room, which had hitherto been empty, save on great occasions, and became aware of a little startled movement, and the raising of a pair of half-frightened eyes, and the flutter of a frock which seemed ready to flutter out of sight on the faintest indication that it was in the way, the spectacle soon came to be quite an agreeable thing.

The sitting-rooms of the house were *en suite*. There was first a library, with windows all round, in one corner, then a large drawing-room, then a small one, and at the other corner the dining-room. The whole line of rooms was lighted at night. The drawing-rooms served only the purpose of a passage from the library at one end to the banquet at the other. But the flutter of Nina's frock changed this arrangement, and made the silent passage room into a little centre of domestic life, more pleasant than the heavy library, which was lined with books and hung with heavy curtains, as became the abode of knowledge and masculine mental occupation. It may be doubted, perhaps, whether Mr. Mitford ever discussed a question more profound than how to gain a little upon his new leases, or keep back a little from the new buildings and repairs which his farmers demanded. But these are questions serious enough in their way, and the library was grave enough in appearance to be tenanted by a bishop. The young men and their father, not always on the best of terms with each other, formed a sufficiently gloomy procession when they came from under the shade of the dark velvet portière, marching along to dinner, four tall men, and not a smiling face. When first Nina's white frock had been seen to rise timidly from one of the sofas it made a sensation in the group. 'What are you doing here at this hour?' Mr. Mitford said to his daughter somewhat gruffly. 'Please, papa, Miss Beaumont has gone,' said Nina, trembling a little. 'To be sure,' he said, mollified by her wistful look, and offered his daughter his arm. How Nina had trembled as she took that formidable arm! She was ready to sink into the earth one minute, but the next could not help saying to herself, 'Oh, that Mrs. Simmons could see me!' For though it was the housekeeper who had been the cause of this bold step, she had not intended it to be to Nina's advantage; nor had it ever occurred to her that her master, who was so little careful of the girls, should, on seeing this little one,

with her downcast eyes, trembling before him, have remembered that little Nina was a lady, and offered her his majestic arm.

By and by, dating from this time, a change came about in the domestic arrangements at Melcombe. Edmund was the first who forsook the gloomy assembly in the library, and went to Nina in the drawing-room when the gong sounded for dinner; and at last it came to this, that Mr. Mitford issued alone out of the library door, and found his three sons, in their black coats, all gathered round Nina, as if she somehow, who was nobody, only the youngest and a girl, had become a sort of head in the house. She did not, however, rise to the occasion. Nor did Roger, to whom his father left it to give the little lady his arm, give over to her the head of the table, which had been his place since she was a baby. She sat at her brother's right hand, as if she had been a little guest. It would have appeared absurd to all of them to put this little thing, though they all liked her well enough, in the place of the mistress of the house.

Such were the Mitfords and their house and family at the time when this episode of their story begins.

II

THEIR NEIGHBOURS

NEIGHBOURS, as everybody knows, are vastly more important in the country than they can be in town. The Mitfords were not people who kept much company; indeed, the female element being so entirely suppressed as it was, they can scarcely be said to have kept any company at all. They had parties of men in the house in September, and sometimes at other periods, when an election or some great public event occurred in the country; or in the race week at Beaulieu, when everybody is expected, more or less, to entertain. It might perhaps have been on these occasions that the elder girls met their respective husbands; but the matches were all made in neighbouring houses, never at home. And speaking of society, there was none at Melcombe; for who would call a shooting-party, or a collection of men gathered together for any one distinct male object, society? But the neighbourhood was, as everybody said, distinctly sociable and friendly. The nearest house, of course, was the Rectory, and the nearest neighbours were clerical. How it is that the English gentry should for so many centuries have suffered the existence at their very door of households fraught with peril to their younger members is a question which has not passed without previous discussion, that we should introduce it head and shoulders here without warning. It is one of the highest proofs of the sincerity of religious principle and faith in the national church which a body of excellent but perhaps not remarkably spiritual-minded persons could give. The Rectory is almost always at the Squire's park gates; it is nearer than any other house. In, say, six cases out of ten, it is full of sons and daughters about the same ages as the Squire's sons and daughters; young people evidently quite as good in every way, but probably not at all rich, or likely to increase by connection or otherwise the greatness of his house. The sons, young fellows getting afloat in the professions, or scuffling through the long vacation as best they

can between the Hall, which is the chief house in the parish, and the clerical house, which is the second,—what a danger for the Squire's daughters, probably just at the impressionable age, and not yet competent to judge of the advantages of a good match! And the girls, still more dangerous, innocent man-traps laid in the very sight of an indignant father! Sometimes the familiarity in which the two sets of young people have grown up, calling each other by their Christian names, and assuming almost brotherly and sisterly relationships, is a safeguard; but not always, for these sorts of fraternal relations often expand into something nearer and dearer.

The Mitfords were exceptionally fortunate, however, in their clerical family. The Rector of Melcombe had but two children: the daughter (providentially) older than any of the Mitford boys; the son younger even than Nina, which was more than could have been hoped for. The Rector was of a Jersey family, and his name was spelt Le Mesurier, as no doubt it ought to have been pronounced; but as a matter of fact he was called Lemeasurer, as if it were one word, and he never objected to the mispronunciation. Miss Lemesurier was the housekeeper, nay, the head of the house, at the Rectory. Her mother was dead long ago. Miss Lemesurier was approaching forty, and she was by far the best curate her father had ever had. Not only did all the external affairs of the parish pass through her hands, but most of the spiritual too. She was a large woman, larger than her father, and overshadowing him both mentally and bodily. She had a great deal of fair hair, somewhat sandy, but which in its day had been celebrated as gold, and this was her chief external distinction. She wore it in an old-fashioned way, in large massive braids, so that it could never be ignored, and was a conspicuous part of her somewhat imposing personality. Her name, it was believed, was Patience, but she had never been known as anything but Pax, though the origin of that cognomen was lost in the mists of antiquity. The Rectory, withdrawn among its trees, had a dignified and impressive appearance, with the spire of Melcombe old church rising beyond it into peaceful blue skies flecked with English cloud, and scarcely stained by the village smoke. But through an opening in these trees, Pax Lemesurier, from where she sat at her favourite window, commanded the gate of the great house, and saw everybody who went and came. Nature had at first afforded this facility, but it was kept up by art. She had the opening carefully preserved and trimmed, so that no intrusive bough should ever shut that prospect out.

This was the nearest female neighbour our Squire's family had. Naturally, as she was several years older than the Mitfords, two of them in succession had fallen in love with Pax. It had been a short affair with Roger, who had learned better after his first period of service with his regiment. But Edmund had held by it a long time, and would have brought it to the crisis of marriage if Pax would have listened to him; but she was not that kind of woman. Marrying, she declared at once, was not in her way. She had a house of her own, as much as any married woman had, and a great deal more independence, and to change this free and full life for that of a younger son's wife, watching her husband's countenance to keep him in good-humour, and conciliating his father that he might increase their allowance, was a sort of thing to which nothing would make her submit,—'nothing, at least,' with which I am at present acquainted,' Pax said. 'Of course such a thing might happen as that I should fall in love.' She said this with such gravity that everybody laughed, putting aside, as it were, a margin for future possibilities. At the moment Edmund was very angry and much offended by this speech, which showed how entirely that specific was out of the question in his own case: but in the end he learned to laugh, too.

Another notable member of the neighbouring society may best be introduced to the reader as she appeared in Pax's drawing-room, one spring morning, having ridden over to see her friend from her own house, which was quite near as country calculations go, being about five miles off. This young lady was a person of great importance in the circle round Melcombe. She was an heiress, not only of money, but of a delightful and highly prosperous estate; and though her name was not of much account, and her connection with the district recent, no one could have a finer position than Elizabeth Travers, to whom all the greatest families in the neighbourhood, possessing sons, showed the utmost attention. She was not in her teens, like the usual heroines of romance, but in her twenties, which is very different, and had seen a good deal of the world. It would be impossible to pretend that she was unaware of the position she held, and the great advantages, as people say, which she possessed. As these advantages were evidently not hers, but those of her wealth, she was not proud of them, but occasionally, indeed, a little bitter, like a woman who felt herself wronged, although she got nothing but compliments and worship. Her position was so far peculiar that she had inherited all this from an uncle, recently dead, who out of some abstract impression of justice, believing that Elizabeth's father had laid the founda-

tions of the fortune which he did not live to enjoy, had left everything to his niece, with but a slender provision for the insipid, delicate invalid wife whom he left behind. Mrs. Travers had been kept in ignorance of this arrangement, which had taken even her own house from her. It was the one thing upon which Elizabeth insisted. The poor lady was told that Elizabeth was the final heir, and that it was not in her power to leave anything away from her husband's niece, who had always lived with her, and of whom in reality she was both fond and proud. Mrs. Travers, all unsuspicious of the truth, had shed a few tears over even this disability. 'If there had been only ten thousand, my dear,' she said, 'which I could have called my own! Of course I should have left the most of it to you. He need not, I'm sure, have ever supposed that I would leave it away from you; but to think I could do what I liked with it, and leave a few legacies when I passed away, would have been a pleasure. I don't know why your uncle should have had so little faith in me, my dear.'

'It was not that he had little faith in you, dear auntie. Besides, you have more than ten thousand pounds, I am sure. And whatever legacies you wish to leave, you may be certain that they will be paid,' said Elizabeth.

But Mrs. Travers shook her head, declaring that what she wished was not any such assurance, but only that, to show his trust in her, he had left her something which she could have considered as her very own. This was quite as great a grievance to the poor lady as if she had known the real state of the case, which Elizabeth, with so much trouble, and even at the cost of a fib or two (but it was the lawyers who told them, and that did not matter), so carefully concealed from her. Thus they lived together; Mrs. Travers ordering everything as if it were her own, and believing it so to be, with Elizabeth, her dependant, in the house. She treated her niece as if she had been her daughter, it must be allowed, but now and then would exhibit little caprices of proprietorship, and debar her from the use of a horse or a carriage. 'It may be yours to do what you like with after I die, but it's mine as long as I live,' she would say pettishly: notwithstanding that the house and everything in it, the carriages and horses, were Elizabeth's and not hers at all. This assertion of rights had been of little importance while the two ladies led a secluded life of mourning, after the death of the head of the house; but that period was about ending, and Elizabeth's embarrassments and difficulties were likely to increase. It was upon this subject,

with perhaps some others underneath, that she had now come to unburden her heart.

Miss Lemesurier sat in her usual chair near the window, which commanded the Melcombe park gates. She was in a light gown, as was also her wont, though it was not becoming. Her flood of light hair, in two great heavy braids, framed her face, and was twisted in a great knot behind. Her complexion, which had grown a little dull, was not capable of overcoming the mingled effects of the light hair and dress, and her eyes, though they were large and animated, were gray, too, of a yellowish tone, concentrating rather than giving forth light. She lent her full attention to Elizabeth, and yet she kept her eyes on the park gates of Melcombe, and not a beggar or tramp could pass out or in without being seen by Pax.

'It is vexing, that's all,' said Elizabeth, drying her brown eyes, which in their wet condition sent sparks of light all round her, and illuminated the scene. 'It isn't as if I wished poor auntie to lose the least of the pleasure she takes in her things.'

'Only they are not her things; they're your things.'

'Oh, what does that matter? What do I care whose things they are? But she cares, poor dear?'

'I'm not fond of self-deception,' said Pax, folding her large hands in her lap. 'If you didn't care, my dear, you would never come and tell me.'

'Oh, Pax!'

'I'm not fond of deception of any kind,' continued Miss Lemesurier. 'The subject of it is always angry when it is found out, and has a right to be angry. You know I was always for letting Mrs. Travers, poor thing, know; there would have been a few more tears, and then all would have been right.'

'I don't think so. As a matter of fact, my uncle's will was very unjust. Fancy his wife, who had been his faithful companion all these years! Everything had been hers, just as much hers as his, and in a moment they all pass away from her without any reason, and come to me. Nothing could be more unjust.'

'That's a large statement,' said Pax. 'I don't know if it's unjust or not, but there can't be a doubt that it's hard. Widows have almost always to bear it. Perhaps they don't mind. When it's their own son who turns them out of house and home everybody seems to think it's all right. But of course you would never have turned her out. You would have made yourself her slave,—as, indeed, you are doing now.'

'Not a slave at all. It's all quite right,' said Elizabeth.

'Sometimes she is a little aggravating, and then I come and grumble to you,—but only to you, Pax: and then it all comes right again.'

'What's wrong can never be right,' said Pax, with a certain placid dogmatism. She paused a little, and then she said, 'There is a wonderful sight!—the three Mitford boys all walking together out of the gates.'

Elizabeth got up quickly to peep over her friend's shoulder. A little additional colour had come to her face. 'The three Mitford boys!' she said, with a little strained laugh. 'One would think you were talking of three curled darlings in velvet frocks, or knickerbockers at the most.'

'I've seen them in both,' said Pax calmly. 'But it's very seldom of late that I've seen them together. Lizzy, when you make up your mind, and poor Mrs. Travers is no longer in the way——'

'How could she ever be in the way?'

'Oh, my dear! How much simpler this world would be,' said Pax, 'if people would be sincere and speak the truth! I think the whole business wrong, you know. Still, having done it, you may at least be frank about the consequences, and not pretend to me that it makes no difference. Of course she is in the way. You know very well you can never marry while she is there, thinking herself the mistress of all. I should not wonder if you were to keep it up to the end, and humbly accept an allowance from her out of your own money.'

'It would do—us no harm if I did,' said Elizabeth, colouring high, and speaking in a very low voice.

'Very likely it would do you no harm. To be poor in reality would not do you much harm. You're a good, honest, healthy young woman, and quite capable of looking after your family, and bringing up your children——'

'Pax!' Elizabeth stopped her, laughing and blushing. 'You go a great deal too fast!' she cried.

'That's true. Of course it would take a few years. But that's not the question, my dear. You couldn't be married like an ordinary girl. There would be all the fuss in the world about settlements, and everything must be turned over among the lawyers and talked about, and your position made known. You couldn't deceive her any longer; it wouldn't be possible. Everybody would know.'

'Everybody knows now, except my poor auntie. I don't see what difference it need make.'

'And you think you could get a man to aid and abet you in all that! You think your husband would carry on the farce, and make believe to be Mrs. Travers's pensioner, and have your money doled out through her hands!'

'Pax,' cried Miss Travers, 'I tell you, you go a great deal too fast. There's no such person; time enough to consider what he would do when he exists.'

'My poor child,' said Pax, with a mixture of pity and contempt, 'he exists, or at least I hope so, for your sake. I hope you are not going to marry thirty years hence some boy who is not born yet,—that would be a dismal look-out indeed. He exists and not far off, or I'm mistaken. Indeed, I should not wonder if he were to pass at any moment under those trees.'

'All this is quite beyond the question,' said Elizabeth, with a look of pain. It was not the fluttering, pretty blush of happy anticipation, but a hot colour of embarrassment, of perplexity, almost of irritation, that made a line under her eyes. Something like a flame of trouble not unmixed with shame passed over her face. 'We have talked of this a great deal too much,' she said, 'or at least I have let you talk. To speculate may be no harm. I suppose I thought it amusing at one time, but it is not amusing now. Pax, please, if you care for me at all, don't say any more.'

'I care for you a great deal, my dear, and for him also,—I have a right to,' Pax said. Then there was a silence between them. For as a matter of fact the three young men were passing under the trees; and it remained uncertain whether they were coming to the Rectory, or whether any one of them was coming to the Rectory, or where this unlikely group were bound. To see them all three together was so unusual that the women who took so great an interest in them watched and waited for the two or three decisive minutes, almost holding their breath. The footsteps became audible after a minute, and even a distant sound of voices; and then these indications became distant, and it was evident that the Rectory was not the end to which they were bound. Both the ladies drew a long breath when this was ascertained beyond doubt, but it is uncertain whether it was in relief or disappointment. The colour still flamed, red and hot, under Elizabeth's eyes. The passing sounds seemed to have disturbed and excited her. She had forgotten the original subject of her complaints and trouble, and her mind went far away out of the Rectory drawing-room to other speculations of her own.

Meanwhile, the three Mitfords passed the Rectory gate, and recognised Elizabeth's horse, which the groom was walking up and

down outside the gate. 'Oh ho!' cried Stephen. 'There's Lizzy Travers's mare. She's having a consultation with old Pax, Roger, about the best way of hooking you.'

'I wish you'd try to be less vulgar, Steve.'

'Oh, vulgar! As soon as a fellow speaks the truth about a woman, you call him vulgar. Old Pax ought to know how to set about it, if all tales are true.'

'There are some things which are worse than vulgar,' said Edmund, 'and that is one of them. Keep your mess-room talk for that fine locality. You will soon be there.'

'I hope so,' cried Stephen,—'free from the lackadaisical, which is worse than vulgar any day. Look here, you fellows, I wish you would make up your minds who is going in for Liz,—a fine girl and a fine fortune, and capital preserves, though they're overstocked. If it's not good enough for you, it's quite good enough for me, and I shouldn't mind settling down. Not at home, though. The Governor is too much for any fellow. I can't think how you stand it, you two.'

To this speech there was no reply, and presently all three paused to greet a couple of men, quite unlike themselves, who were crossing the common, coming from the little railway station to which the Mitfords were bound. One of these was a very trim and fresh country gentleman of fifty or so, with a gray moustache and that indescribably clean, well-brushed air, the perfection of physical purity and soundness which we in England are apt to consider characteristic of an Englishman,—a man who was not above a cigar, but never smelt of smoke; who was no ascetic, yet showed no symptom of any indulgence; who looked his years, yet bore them like a flower, and was as active as any of the younger men beside him. There was no mistaking the handsome, slim young fellow by his side for anything but his son. But though he was tall and straight and delightful in the first bloom of his youth, Raymond Tredgold was not such a perfect type as his father. The man was as self-possessed and easy in speech and mind as in appearance; the youth was a little shy, a little eager, half a step in advance, but not half so sure where he was going or what he meant to do.

'Hallo, what's up?' Raymond cried, which indeed was but a version less refined of the sentiments of the ladies at the Rectory window as to the errand of the brothers, all walking together, as if they had something (for once) in common to do.

'You're going to see Stephen off?' said Mr. Tredgold, solving this problem summarily. 'I'm sorry you are going, Steve. My

girls think it will soon be weather for tennis, and I don't know what else, and every man that goes is a loss, they say.'

'If it's only in the light of any man that goes—I hope Amy and Nancy think more of me than that. Tell them I'll see them in town, where perhaps they won't take any notice of me.'

'Or you of them. We know what you think of country folks in town,' said Mr. Tredgold, with a laugh that was not without meaning. Then he added, 'We are going to see if the Rector can do anything for Ray in the matter of this exam.'

Ray gave a little shrug to his shoulders when he thus became the subject of the conversation. He was two and twenty, and it was recognised as fully necessary that he should lose no time.

'I am afraid the Rector has rather forgotten his classics,' said Edmund.

'What can I do? To send him to a crammer is too expensive; besides, I don't approve of the system. I wish I knew of any one else. But the Rector, even if he has forgotten something, must still know a great deal more than Ray.'

'In an old-fashioned way.'

'Goodness, what can that matter? Isn't it all old-fashioned?' cried Mr. Tredgold, who had been in the army in his youth, and had not had the advantage of a classical education. 'I always was told the classics themselves were the oldest things in creation. It stands to reason they can't be treated in any of your new-fangled ways.'

'Ray,' said Stephen, 'I'll tell you what to do, a deal better than going in for exams. A hundred yards off, round the corner, you'll see a certain mare walked about, waiting for her mistress, and the mistress is in the Rectory drawing-room with old Pax. Go in strong for that, and you never need trouble your head any more about exams.'

He laughed an insolent laugh, sweeping over his brothers, both of whom were very grave, a malicious glance of defiance. Young Raymond flashed an angry look at his adviser; but the colour rose in his young cheek, and he made a half step forward, like a dog pulling at the leash in spite of himself.

III

BROTHERS

'I WONDER,' said Edmund, as they returned towards the house, 'whether I may speak to you quite frankly, Roger?'

'That means make yourself disagreeable about something. Well, fire away. I don't mind anything, now that fellow 's gone.'

'I wish you wouldn't speak of him so.'

'Come, that's a little too much, Ned. I mean Steve no harm, but you don't think it adds to the comfort of the household, do you, when he's here?'

To this the younger brother made no reply, especially as at the moment he had obeyed involuntarily an impulse given by Roger, in which more was meant than met the eye. They had been walking along the road which, with a sweep round the village common, led to Melcombe from the railway. Roger had not said that he intended to take a less direct way, but he silently turned along a cross-road traversing the common in the opposite direction, and his brother had followed without a word. Indeed, there could not be said to be either leading or following in the matter, for they moved as by one impulse, keeping side by side. Imperceptible as the influence was, however, it was so marked that when the turn was taken Edmund looked up quickly with a questioning glance. After a moment he spoke—

'Need we enter into that? I have wanted for some time to speak to you, Roger. Don't you think you should come to some decision now, and think of doing what my father wishes so much, what all your friends desire?'

'Speak plainly. I am bad at riddles.'

'It is no riddle; you know what I mean,' said Edmund, with a faint rising colour. 'You should marry; you know that's the question.'

Roger was silent for a moment, and they went on quickly, their footsteps ringing clear upon the road, as if that had been

the prevailing sound to which speech was but a broken accompaniment. He said at last, 'It's a question for myself, surely, rather than for any one else. Marry—whom, I wonder? If I'm directed in such a matter, the direction should be complete.'

Edmund half paused, and threw out his arm with a quick gesture towards the point which they were leaving behind. 'To speak of direction is folly, Roger. But don't you know? If you don't, you are the only ignorant person.'

Again the steps went on and the voices stayed,—on, quickly, in measured cadence, sure and steady towards an aim, whatever that aim might be. It was very different, at least, from the object of the other interrupted strain,—the conversation which was begun and broken off so often, and by which only a portion of the intended meaning could be conveyed.

When Roger broke silence again, it was in the veiled voice with which a man speaks who turns his head away, not to encounter the scrutiny of his companion's eye. 'I thought it was the first tenet of the romantic school,' he said, 'that marriage cannot be without love. Should I marry one woman while—should I insult one woman by asking her while—that's out of the question, at least.' With angry force he kicked away a stone which was in his path as if that had been the thing which was out of the question, and, hurting his foot upon it, gave vent to a short, sharp exclamation of pain, all of which seemed to come into the discussion and form part of it, as they went on.

'Marriage is a very complex matter,' said the younger brother; 'it's not so simple as one thought. Love is not the only necessity, as one used to suppose.'

'You speak like an oracle, Ned,' said Roger, seizing the opportunity to laugh off an argument which was becoming serious. 'And that's much from you, the faithful Edmund. No, I'm not going to laugh about Pax, dear old Pax,—there never was a better or a dearer,—but you see the justice of it now.'

'I see,' said Edmund, adopting his brother's plan, that natural expedient of embarrassed feeling, and turning his head aside, 'that there are many things which make it impossible, and best that it is impossible. She saw that well enough from the first, and always told me so. It's rather a dreary thing to be convinced, but I am convinced, if that will do you any good.'

'How should it do me any good?' said Roger, in a quick, startled tone.

'Only because you know how much in earnest I was—and yet I see it all well enough. There are other things wanted. There's

suitability,—that commonplace qualification; there's all one's life to be taken into account.'

'You speak like Pax herself, Ned.'

'I daresay,—it's all her at second-hand; but the thing is, I now see it myself, which I didn't and wouldn't in the old days. I don't undervalue love. God forbid. It's the foundation of all things—but——'

'It must consider suitability first of all,' said Roger, with a forced laugh, 'and reckon up all the qualifications, so much money, so much family, so much beauty even,—oh, I know that comes in; and then, everything fully considered, it may let itself go! Yes, I understand all that. But,' the young man continued, drawing a long breath, 'that's not how it sets to work, alas. There's no consideration at all to begin with,—no dwelling on this, or dwelling on that, none of your reasons for doing a thing. Love,' he went on, warming to his subject, 'is not doing anything. It rises in you when you are thinking nothing of it; it catches you unawares; all at once there comes into you something that was not there a moment before. It's not your doing, nor *her* doing. It is not because she's lovely, even; it's because of—nothing that I know. It comes, and there it is: and the question is—the question is, what are you to do with it, what is to follow it, how is it to end?' He clenched the hand that hung by his side and dashed it into the vacant air with a kind of fury. 'Talk about questions!' he cried, with a strange laugh. 'There's a question which I don't know how to solve, for one.'

'Is it as bad as that?' asked his brother in a subdued and troubled tone.

'As bad as—what?' cried Roger, turning upon him. 'There is no bad in it. I don't believe you know what I am talking about. I am talking of love, love in the abstract, love with a capital letter,—what you despise, and think should give place to suitability, Ned. Suitability! I think I see myself poking about looking for what is suitable! Yes, when I want a pair of shoes—No, when what I want is——'

'The companion of your life, Roger, the mistress of the house, the lady of Melcombe, the representative of the family in our generations—besides other things more important still.'

'I'm glad you spare me the children!' cried Roger, with a hard laugh.

Then the conversation stopped, and the quick, steady strain of the footsteps, hurrying in their excitement like a march in music, resumed; always going on,—going on like the composed strain of

life through all that can happen, quickened now and then by the hurry or commotion of some event, but never brought to a standstill. The young men's minds were not open to such a comparison, nor, indeed, to any comparison at all. For a long time they moved on in silence, keeping step, with complete harmony in their movement; but in their thoughts they were an immeasurable distance apart. The month was March; the roads were dry and dusty, the woods all covered with an indescribable softened tint, and here and there shrubs with a higher tone of budding green, which denotes the new life swelling to the tip of every bough, half bursting in the brown buds. The footsteps of the brothers rang upon the road in perfect measure, and for several minutes neither spoke. At length, as the road rounded off towards the west, Roger turned suddenly upon his companion.

'Are you going anywhere in particular,' he said, 'that you come this long round? I thought you had something to do at home.'

'Only to keep you company,' said Edmund. 'I had not thought of any other motive.'

'Are you sure it was merely for company? It is your turn to be questioned now. Didn't you think that perhaps, if you stuck to my side, you might—influence me, for my good, as you fellows are always bent on doing; keep me from going where I have a mind to go; make me ashamed possibly of where I was going?' Roger spoke hastily and angrily, but at the same time with embarrassment and a hot flush upon his face. And now for the first time the rhythm of their footsteps ceased, and they stood and looked at each other with much meaning between them, more than was put into words.

Edmund replied in a somewhat startled tone: 'No, I don't think I intended all that. I came with you without any particular intention, out of mere habit, idleness. If you think I meant to spy upon you——'

'No, no,' cried the other, 'nothing of the sort. If you meant anything, Ned, I know it was for my good; but don't you know, you fellows who are so fond of influence, that the man who is to be influenced never likes it when he finds it out?'

'I had no such thought,' said Edmund, seriously. 'I didn't even know—but since you think so, Roger—— It's true I have no particular object in coming this way; on the contrary, the opposite direction—might suit me best.'

'I think so, Ned, if you will not be offended.'

'Why should I be offended?' said Edmund, but he had the

dubious, startled look of a man suddenly pulled up and arrested in his course, whatever that might be. 'It is true I have something to do,' he said, waving his hand to his brother as he abruptly turned back. He was not offended, but he was abashed and startled by this sudden dismissal. No, there was no cause of offence. A brother may say to a brother what it would not be civil to say to a stranger; he may give that natural ally to understand that he wants to be alone, that he has things to occupy which do not brook companionship. The frankness of the nursery may still linger about their intercourse and no harm done. But Edmund felt, as was equally natural, as if he had been meddling, and his efforts had been rejected as intrusive. He walked very quickly in the opposite direction, driven by annoyance and something like shame, while Roger went on with equal speed upon his way, a little disturbed and uneasy, but full of a fervour of feeling which drove all those lesser sentiments before it like a strong wind. It hurt him to hurt Ned, and at the same time the heat of his momentary anger against Ned, and feeling that his presence was extremely uncalled for, impelled him to do so; but in a few minutes he had forgotten all about his brother and everything else save the errand upon which he was bound.

Edmund had no such burning motive in his heart. When the little flash of irritation was over, evaporating in the speed of movement and the prick of the fresh breeze which blew in his face,—which, indeed, was an east wind, and nothing less, though, far inland as Melcombe was and sheltered by many woods, it was robbed of much of its severity,—his hasty steps gradually modified into that slower and reflective pace which comes natural to a thoughtful person in the depths of the country, where no pressure or hurry is. He went along quietly, thinking of many things. There had been little activity in Edmund's life; he had been somewhat apt to follow the impulse given him, as he had done in the present case, accompanying Roger, with no intention of interfering with Roger, but instinctively, because the turn had been taken which led that way. But it was upon this peculiarity of his own that he reflected, as he turned away. He thought of his brother, for whom he not only felt much tenderness, but in whom he took a pride, which was not, perhaps, justified by any superiority in Roger, but was the younger boy's traditional admiration for his elder brother, a sentiment which often lingers after the elder brother has been far surpassed by the younger one and left behind. In some respects this had been done in Edmund's case. He had a better head than Roger, and of this he could not but be aware.

He had done better in education than Roger; indeed, he had accomplished much which Roger had not even tried to do. He was in reality more independent, more individual, than his brother, who was of the order of the country squire, without any higher aspirations. But yet Edmund had always been proud of him, and so continued. He had been proud, at Oxford, of the gay young guardsman who brought a whiff of London (not always too wholesome) among the 'men,' and dispersed the mist of thin talk about schools and degrees. He was proud of him now in his robustness, his knowledge of several things, his profound learning in horses, his great rides and feats of all kinds. Roger could far out-ride him, out-walk him, even out-talk him in his own way. Edmund admired his energy, his quick impulses, his certainty of being right, whether about the course taken by the fox or the course taken by the government. As a true man of his time, knowing how very much is to be said on both sides, Edmund secretly laughed at this certainty, but he admired it, all the same.

Something, however, had come over Roger, in these late days, which had a strange effect upon this open-air and robust young man,—something which had cast him down from the supreme height of those certainties, and at the same time opened out new possibilities in him. To think of Roger, of all people in the world, discussing love,—love, as he said, with a capital letter, giving a nervous laugh; a thing surrounded by all the tremors and hesitations and uncertainties of feeling, complicated by horrible doubts as to what must be done about the issue which he could not control; a power sweet but terrible, which had carried him out of himself, as he described it, and out of all his habitual ways. This new phase of Roger made him more and more interesting to his brother, justified the instinctive pride in him which Edmund had always felt, and awoke a hundred questions in the quiescent breast of the young man, who, his own romance having died out to the very ashes, felt himself put aside from life, and for the moment in the position of a spectator. Where was a greater instance of the perversity of circumstances, or, rather, of human hearts and wishes? It had seemed to many people, not only to the family most concerned, that Roger Mitford and Elizabeth Travers were specially indicated by Providence as a pair 'fitly formed to meet by nature.' Their estates lay side by side; their characters were similar, or so the country thought. What Elizabeth wanted in point of family was fully made up by Roger; and though there was no want at Melcombe of a wife's money, still it is well known that more money never comes amiss even to the wealthiest. Thus everything

indicated a match, which had the 'suitability' which Edmund had appealed to in its favour in an overwhelming way.

Alas, suitability is a delusion and snare. It severs more heaven-destined partners than it unites; it lights fires of resistance in the youthful soul. Roger had never been supposed to be romantic, but even upon his seemingly unfantastic mind this rebellion against the suitable had told. At least, so he asserted now with vehement emphasis, as has been seen. There had, however, been a moment when it was not supposed that he had felt this any drawback; when he and the heiress had ridden together, danced together, walked and talked together, and all had been supposed to be in good train. Edmund's mind went back to this period as he walked along. From Roger's it had disappeared altogether; had it also disappeared from that of Elizabeth? The neighbourhood had unhesitatingly concluded that she had not been slow to make up her mind, and that when Roger's proposal was made it would be accepted without delay or doubt. Edmund had himself been of that opinion. When he had seen her horse and groom outside the Rectory gates, a keen sympathetic pang had gone through his mind. He was fond of entering into other people's feelings, and he had thought instinctively of the proud, yet tender, woman watching from the window the man whom she perhaps loved, whom, at least, she had begun to think of as a man who meant to seek her love,—watching him pass by on the other side, without a look or thought. The woman could make no sign; the woman was bound to stand like an Indian at the stake, whatever happened, and never show what she felt. Edmund's mind hung between these two with a poignant sense of pain, of which, possibly, he did not render a full and frank account to himself. Was it for Roger gone astray, or for Elizabeth slighted and disappointed, or was there still some subtler sentiment underneath?

IV

THE WEST LODGE

ROGER MITFORD quickened his steps as his brother left him. He had been like a dog in a leash, compelled to curb his impatient impulse; now he darted forward, the fervour in his heart carrying all before it. It was no walk upon which he was bound. There is no mistaking the expression on the face of a man who is going somewhere, who knows exactly where he is going and is eager to get there. He walked on as if for a wager along the winding country road.

Presently this impulse came to an end, or at all events he paused, relapsed into a saunter, but a saunter in which the same nervous impatience was disguised. In many things, but most especially in that kind of pursuit which absorbed Roger, the hurry of the eager pursuer fails as he reaches the point at which he has aimed. As he draws near he grows cautious, he grows timid. A terror of what he may find when he gets to the end seizes him. 'If Lucy should be dead!' cries the poet. But that is an extreme case.. It may be that Lucy will be cruel, that she will be indifferent; it may be—oh misery worse than either alternative—that she is not there. Finally Roger swung open the gate known as the west gate of Melcombe, and stole in with almost noiseless steps, holding his breath. No sign of hurry then in his mild aspect. He had only come round to ask Ford the keeper something about the dogs,—a most innocent question which was really of no consequence. 'I'll wait a bit, and perhaps he'll turn up,' Roger said, slightly breathless. 'If he doesn't, it's really of no consequence—only something about the puppies. I'll wait a bit, and see if he comes in. How is your garden looking this fine day?'

'Oh, sir,' said Mrs. Ford, 'when the sun come out this morning it was just ablaze: all the crocuses a-shining like gold. Them crocuses is the nicest things as ever was. You couldn't have done a kinder action to Lily and me.'

'I'm very glad you like them. They're simple things enough,—the very simplest you could get anywhere; why, gardeners, you know, make no account at all of them.'

'Gardeners is very queer,' said Mrs. Ford. 'I don't think they care for nothing as hasn't a name that's three miles long, as Lily says. She does take her fun out of the Scotch gardener about that, Mr. Roger. You should just hear her at him. My Lily has a deal of fun in her, when she don't stand in awe of a person.'

'Of whom does she stand in awe?' asked Roger, with a smile which lit up his face into tenderness; then it suddenly clouded over. 'The Scotch gardener is not society for your daughter, Mrs. Ford.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger! bless you, he thinks himself much too grand for the like of us.'

'Then he's a puppy and a fool, and doesn't know what he's talking of!' cried Roger hotly. He paused, and, restraining himself, continued with a smile, 'I hope I'm not the person of whom Lily stands in awe.'

'Oh, sir! you're a deal too good and kind,' cried the keeper's wife, taking up her apron to remove an invisible particle of dust, and avoiding the young master's eye. Then there was a momentary pause.

'Ford doesn't seem to be coming,' remarked Roger at last.

'No, sir, I don't expect him till tea-time at soonest. He said as he was going to make a long round out by Bilbury Hollow, and then down by——'

'Well,' said Roger cheerfully, interrupting her, 'I'll take a look at the puppies before I go, and I should like to see your crocuses, Mrs. Ford, now I'm here.'

'They're not half as fine as in the morning, sir,' said the keeper's wife. 'The sun's gone in, and they're just like children at school; they've gone in, too. If you were a-passing this way, sir, some time in the morning——'

'There's no time like the present,' answered Roger; 'but you needn't disturb yourself, if you're busy. I think I ought to know the way.'

'Oh yes, sir, no doubt you knows the way,' said the woman, hesitating. But whatever her feelings might be on the subject, it was clear that she could not oppose the entrance of the master's son, the young Squire, through whose favour her husband had got the place, and on whose favour they all depended. But the keeper's wife, with an uneasy soul, saw him pass through her house to the greenness of the garden which was visible behind. No one knew

or shared her anxieties. She stood looking after him helplessly for a moment, and then shaking her head, returned to her work, with the sort of unsatisfactory consolation there is in utter helplessness—for what could she do?

Roger stepped along through the passage which traversed the little house with a step which in itself was full of revelations. It rung upon the floor with a sort of triumph, yet timidity. He was on the eve of attaining a pleasure which had still more or less to be schemed for, which he could not seek openly. He had before him the prospect of such an occupation for the afternoon's idleness as it made his heart beat to think of; and yet whether he should have this pleasure at all, whether these hours should be enchantment or a blank of disillusion and misery, was not in his own power, but in that of another,—of one whose very charm was the caprice which wounded yet delighted, which sometimes made him miserable and sometimes intoxicated him with pleasure. It is not all men who are liable to this kind of subjugation, but Roger had all the qualities which give it supreme power. He was little used to women, still less to the kind of woman to whom the pursuit and subjugation of man are natural, and who puts a master's passion, his wiles and cunning, his patience and his vehemence alike, and disregard of all other things, into her sport. He was simple-minded, seeking no recondite motives, believing in what appeared before his eyes. And he was in need of an object, his mind vacant and unoccupied except by those matters of physical activity which cannot be always pursued, and which leave a perilous blank when they are withdrawn. Perhaps if he could have hunted all the year through, if the shooting could have lasted, if the village football and cricket had been continuous and exciting enough, he might never have thought of the more seductive play which occupies the imagination and the heart.

But there are perforce periods in country life in which there is, as *ces messieurs* lament, nothing to do. M. Ohnet's latest hero, at such a pause in existence, elegantly devotes himself to the seduction of the nearest lady as the right and natural alternative. A vicious young Englishman, in such circumstances, might perhaps have found in the keeper's pretty daughter a natural victim. But Roger was neither a *beau garçon* of the French type, nor a Squire Thornhill of the last century. And when he fell under this unaccustomed spell, it was himself who became, or was likely to become, the victim. There was no idea, however, of any victim in the sensations with which he went through the keeper's cottage into the garden behind. It was Armida's garden, the Bower of Bliss, the

fool's paradise, to Roger. Away from it he was not without serious thought of what it might come to, and a just perception of all the difficulties and impossibilities in his way. But at this moment he thought of nothing of the kind. All the restraints of judgment, of good sense and practical possibility, were withdrawn. He was hurrying to an intoxication more delightful than any which vulgarer methods could afford. The delicate fumes had mounted to his head already, though he had not yet tasted the dangerous draught.

The keeper's cottage, known as the West Lodge, was very much like many other lodges at the park gates of country houses. It was built of red brick, with gables intended to be picturesque, but without any pretence at antiquity, being indeed a quite recent erection and in conformity with the taste of the moment. It was, however, already half covered with creepers, and on the warm south wall the roses and honeysuckles which made it sweet in summer were bursting into leaf. The garden behind was separated from the park only by a railing, and in the season of flowers it was a sight to see. The keeper's wife was one of those women with an instinct for flowers, under whose hand everything thrives, and her simple gardening by the light of nature and homely experience succeeded better than art. Mrs. Ford had married somewhat late in life, and had been a florist in her untutored way before she was a mother. She took her baby, when it came, unexpectedly past the time for such vanities, very much as she would have taken some new and rare plant. It was no rough boy, to fall into the father's way, and grow up in velveteens, a miniature keeper, but a girl, a delicate little creature, a sort of animated flower, transporting the elderly mother into a heaven of tender worship such as she had never dreamed of. The great white lilies were standing in angelic groups about the garden, with their stately heads bent in the reverence of that Ave which the flower of the Annunciation has brought out of the old pictures, out of tender tradition, to make it doubly sweet. The keeper's wife could see them from where she lay, with the little woman-child who was her flower and late blossom in her arms; and what could she name it but Lily, in the still transport of her soul? The flowers and the child were as one in her eyes, the most exquisite things in the earth, good enough for a queen, yet hers, which was a wonder she never could get over. Lily the child grew up in such delicacy and daintiness as the endless care and worship of a mother often brings. Mrs. Ford's own perceptions grew finer through the medium of the child. Perhaps her flowers, too, gave her a delicacy not to be expected among her kind.

Lily had been dressed like a little lady when she caught Mrs. Mitford's eye, and was carried to the Hall to be admired and caressed and to amuse the invalid lady on her death-bed. The Squire's wife was not a judicious adviser for a woman lost in such an adoration. She took a violent fancy to the child, and left her a little legacy to be spent in her education. 'She must not grow up to be a mere housemaid. She must have a good education; and then who knows what may happen?' Mrs. Mitford said, with a smile that made Lily's mother dissolve in weeping. Lily was far more pretty, far more dainty, at that period than poor little Nina, who was in the nursery, a weakly baby, left to the nurse's care. From that moment the girl's fate was settled. Mrs. Ford had a battle to fight with her husband, who comprehended none of these delicacies, and did not understand why his little girl should not stir about the house, and open the lodge gates, and help her mother. But even Ford was penetrated by and by with the pride of having a child who was like nobody else's, and whom strangers took for a little lady from the Hall. He was mollified by the fact that the radiant little creature was very fond of him, and would sit in his lap, and coax him to tell her stories, and applaud her daddy's crooning of rustic songs, notwithstanding her white frocks and her lessons from the Melcombe governess. There is nothing more contagious than child-worship in any circumstances; and Lily was, to belong to a keeper and his homely wife, a miraculous child. Her beauty was not of the dairymaid kind. She was even a little deficient in colour, pale as suited her name. And as she grew older, the father came to look upon her with a little awe. 'Are you sure as she wasn't changed at nurse?' he would say as the dainty creature stood between them, he in his gaiters at one side of the hearth, and his elderly wife in her black cap on the other, with her hard hands all rough with work, and wrinkles abounding in the homely face which bore the brunt of all weather.

'I know as she's never left my lap till she could run by herself,' said the mother, well pleased. But she might have been a little princess,—they were both agreed on that.

Naturally, the bringing up of Lily was a point upon which the whole neighbourhood had its opinion, which did not agree with that of Mrs. Ford. 'What is to come of it?' the village people said; and indeed the West Lodge could give no answer to that question. 'Is she going for a governess, or do they mean her for the new girls' school?' her more favourable critics asked, when Lily came home with her education completed. Miss Lemesurier even

sent for the mother, to ask this question. 'I don't approve of that style of education even for such a purpose,' said Pax, 'but I will speak to my father, Mrs. Ford, if you want her to try for the girls' school.'

'No, thank you kindly, miss. Her father and me, we don't want nothing of that sort,' Mrs. Ford replied.

'What do you want, then? You haven't given your girl an expensive education, and brought her up so different from her class, without some meaning, I suppose?'

'Well, miss,' said the keeper's wife, drawing patterns on the carpet with the point of her umbrella, 'we've brought up Lily as we thought was best for her. She's different in her nature, without any doing of ours.'

'I wonder how you can talk such nonsense,' cried Pax,—'a sensible woman like you!'

'If it's nonsense, the dear lady at the Hall, she spoke the same. She saw as the child wasn't like one in a hundred. Give her a good eddication, she said, and then——'

'Yes, and then—what then? That's just the question.'

'Well, miss, then there's no telling what may happen,' Mrs. Ford said.

'Oh, you foolish woman!' cried Pax, holding up her hands; 'oh, you——' But words failed to express the force of her feelings. 'Mrs. Mitford, poor thing, is dead, and we'll say no harm of her,' she went on, 'but don't you see what that means? There is only one thing it can mean. It was like her sentimental, silly ways to put it in your head. It means that you expect some fine gentleman to come and fall in love with her and carry the girl away.'

'I'm not thinking anything of the sort,' cried the mother, springing up and growing red; for English mothers, both high and low, whatever may be their prudential outlook, unlike all parents of other races, vehemently deny that such a thing as marrying a daughter ever enters into their heads. But Mrs. Ford was too simple and too self-conscious to add anything to this first denial. Aware of the guilty hopes in her heart, she broke forth with, 'Oh, Miss Pax, I never thought as you'd say such things to me!' and burst into a flood of tears.

'I don't know that there would be anything wrong in it,' said Pax impatiently. 'If I saw any way to a good marriage for Lily or any one, I'd certainly help it on. But suppose she caught some one far above her, which is what you're thinking of, you know,—what would happen? If the very best came that you could hope

for, which is very, very unlikely, he'd take her away from you, and separate her from you, and perhaps never let her come near you more.'

The mother dried her eyes indignantly. 'It's clear to me you don't know my Lily; and how should you?' Mrs. Ford cried, with mingled resentment and pity. 'They might tear her with wild horses, but they would never get her to consent to that.'

'Perhaps so; but you wouldn't like her to be torn with wild horses, would you?' Pax said.

These words gave Mrs. Ford a tremor for the moment; they gave her 'a turn,' she said to herself. But as there was no immediate possibility of verifying them, and it is much pleasanter to think of events taking a favourable course than a bad one, she was able to dismiss them out of her mind for the time. Still it was not a pleasant thing to have said. Lily would never abandon her mother, never turn her back upon her, not if she were drawn with wild horses. But how about the wild horses? The mother's heart stood still for a moment. Better she should be abandoned, cast off, dropped for ever, than that Lily should be exposed to that rending. It gave Mrs. Ford a 'dreadful turn.' But then she hastily thrust it out of her mind.

It was enough to make any mother's heart dance to see the radiant creature Lily came home. Her hair was light brown and silky, and shone in the sun like gold. Her mother thought she had seen nothing like it save the knot of spun glass which she had brought home from the exhibition once held at Beaulieu, and kept under a little glass shade on the mantelpiece. Her face was like a flower, though more like a rose now than a lily; her complexion more tender, delicate, and perfect in its first bloom than anything but a girl's complexion can be. Her eyes were as blue as the sky. To be sure, the features were not perfect, if Mrs. Ford had been disposed to take them to pieces. The girl's slim figure was also like a flower, tall and light, and swaying a little, as a lily does with its graceful, drooping head. To think of such a creature doing housework, or looking after the dog's meat, was a thing that made the parents shiver: whatever happened to them, that was impossible; they had not brought her home from the genteel seminary and all her nice companions for that. It was, indeed, after the first rapture of her return, an embarrassing question what Lily was to do. The parents did not know what to make of it; they did not know what to say to her on the subject, or whether to suggest that it was necessary to do something. Lily did not at first appear to see any necessity. She went out with her pencils

and colours and made little sketches, and she played 'pieces' upon the jingling piano, which had come out of the schoolroom at Melcombe, and sounded like an old tin kettle, and for some time seemed to suppose that this was all that was required of her; but this blissful state of ignorance was dispelled by communications made to the girl in the village at a little tea-party, where she was eagerly questioned as to whether she were going into service, or what she was going to do. Lily awakened rudely under the fire of these demands, but she was not without spirit, and she had accepted the position. The housekeeper at Melcombe had some sewing to be done which was finer than the village was equal to; and Lily installed herself in the vacant little room that was called the parlour, which had never been used till her return.

And here the parents, growing less and less wise as they came more and more under the influence of this dazzling child of theirs, made Lily a bower. It looked into the garden, and Ford, with the aid of some of the workmen on the estate, made the window into a glass door opening into that flowery enclosure. There Lily took up her abode, with her pretty accomplishments and her pretty dresses, to see what would happen. These words which her early patroness had said had not indeed been reported to her. But she felt as Mrs. Mitford had done, as her mother did, as Pax had instantly divined, that there was no telling what might come. The preparation was over; the results might be anticipated any day.

What was it the girl expected when she sat down to her little pretence of work in her little room, all fenced and guarded from intrusion, looking out upon her flowers? She did not know; neither did the mother know who had prepared it all for her, as if with a settled plan and purpose. There was no telling what might happen; there was no telling what fine fortune or beautiful hero might suddenly come out of the unknown. Lily sat down in her bower all hidden among the leaves, and put out her webs unconsciously, as perhaps the spiders do when they begin. It is not a lovely comparison, and she meant to devour no one; but the girl, in all her prettiness, was like nothing in the realms of nature so much as the swift and skilful creature which spreads out these fairy webs, the *toile à la bonne vierge*, to shiver upon every bush in the autumn sun.

It was not long before an event occurred which made the heart of this little enchantress leap into her mouth in fright and triumph. One can imagine that to a little spider, new to her work, the sudden bounce of a great fat fly into those gossamers which she has extended by instinct in the sun, without any clear idea what

is to come of them, must be an alarming as well as an exciting sight. Will those airy meshes be strong enough to bear that weight? Will they tear asunder under it? And what is to be done with this altogether unlooked-for victim, so much bigger than his captor? Something like this thrill of strange sensation darted through Lily Ford, when all at once it became apparent to her that the vague event which there was no divining, the wonder for which she had been looking, had come. She had not selected that particular prey any more than the spider does. And it would be impossible to imagine anything further from the thoughts of Roger Mitford, when he strolled into Ford's cottage as he passed, with some question about the young birds and the prospects of the shooting, than that he should then and there be brought face to face with his fate. It was with no purpose, even, that he was led into Lily's parlour for greater honour, the fire in the kitchen being overpowering on the hot August evening. He went in unsuspecting, and asked his questions all unaware of Armida in her corner, who, for her part, intended the young Squire no harm. But when he made some remark which Ford did not understand at once, and the girl's quick, clear voice rose in the dusk, explaining it, and Roger, amused and interested, stepped to the open window opening into the garden, and in the mystic twilight, just touched by the glimmer of the small new moon, saw the unthought-of, unlooked-for apparition, and asked, surprised, if this were Lily, the deed was done. He was not himself aware of it, but she was aware of it, feeling the tug, let us suppose, in all the delicate, invisible threads of her nets, as this big captive caught in them. Roger lingered talking to her for ten minutes, pleased to find his mother's baby favourite developed into so charming a creature, and went away thinking no more of it. But after that he returned again and again. And this was why he had discoursed to his brother, he a man who knew nothing about poetry or the fictions of the romancers, upon the mystery of love; and why the keeper's wife endeavoured with affright to keep him out of the garden, where the cobwebs entangled everything, though it was now no longer autumn, but spring. But Lily sat within and peeped out, hearing his voice, and expected him, drawing the young man with her mysterious thread. For the enchantress had forgotten her alarm in the pleasure of conquest, and for her victim she was without ruth or pity.

V

AFTER DINNER

'I HEARD,' said Mr. Mitford, when the servants had left the room, 'that Elizabeth Travers was over here to-day. Who saw her when she came?—or was it true——'

A look was exchanged very quickly, almost imperceptibly, by the others round the table, and Nina, who had not yet had time to go away, answered in her little voice, which had still something in it of the shrillness of childhood, 'She was not here, papa.'

'But I heard that she was here,' said Mr. Mitford, in his peremptory tones. He was one of the men who are always ready to suppose that they are being deceived, and that every contradiction must be a lie—possibly intentional, perhaps only uttered on the spur of the moment, but at all events untrue.

Roger, who knew what was coming, stirred in his chair with a consciousness that could not quite be concealed; but it was Edmund who replied—

'She was at the Rectory, sir. We saw her mare in front of the gates, as we were going to the railway with Steve.'

'Which of you went in to make her welcome?' the Squire asked.

'I don't think any of us thought of it. Steve had only just time to catch his train.'

'I was not thinking of Steve. What has Steve to do with it? But you two, I suppose, had no train to catch. It was most fraternal, truly beautiful, to walk down with your brother, but it did not, I imagine, occupy all your souls.'

'I don't pretend it occupied much of my soul,' said Roger. He had turned half round on his chair, perhaps out of mere caprice, perhaps that the light might not fall so distinctly on his face.

'And when you saw her there—a fine creature, handsome enough to turn any young fellow's head, and as nice as she's handsome—you forgot all about Stephen, and did your best to make

yourself agreeable? Much as I value family affection,' said the Squire, in the voice of satire which his children dreaded, 'I could forgive that.'

Nina was not clever enough to see what it was about, but she perceived that the situation was strained, and she made a little diversion for the brothers by leaving the table. Mr. Mitford never entered the drawing-room after dinner, so that Nina's departure was accompanied by a little ceremonial which sometimes had the effect of changing a disagreeable subject. She went up to her father, and put her soft little lips to the weather-beaten cheek which he turned carelessly towards her. 'Good-night, papa,' she said.

'Good-night, good-night,' he replied, almost with impatience. This time the diversion was without effect. That Roger should get up to open the door for her seemed to Mr. Mitford a quite unnecessary ceremony; and it must be owned that Roger himself but seldom remembered this homage to womanhood in the person of so familiar and unimportant an object as his little sister. He had to come back from the door, by which he was so much tempted to escape, and take his chair again, which he did most unwillingly, foreseeing trouble to come.

'Well!' said the Squire. 'How far did you go with her? Or rather, how long did she stay?'

'I told you, sir,' said Edmund, 'that we went with Steve to the railway.'

'Again! what has Steve to do with it?' the father cried.

'So that we saw nothing but the groom with the mare. Her visit was at the Rectory, not here.'

'At the Rectory, and not here!' repeated the Squire with a contemptuous (and very unsuccessful) mimicry of his son's tone. 'Did I ever say it was here? How could she come here, to a house where there's no woman, to throw herself at your heads? That's what you expect a girl to do, you young fellows nowadays. She went as far as she could in coming to the Rectory. By Jove, when I was your age I should soon have let her see I knew what she meant.'

'You forget, sir,' said Roger, evidently restraining himself with an effort, 'that there is not the slightest reason to suppose—indeed, that we have not the least right to imagine—Miss Travers's visit to her friend at the Rectory to have anything to do with us.'

'I don't forget, sir,' cried the angry father, 'that you're a puppy and a coxcomb, and that Lizzy Travers is twenty thousand times too good for you.'

This perfectly irrelevant sentiment was delivered with so much heat that Edmund gave his brother an anxious, deprecatory look to which Roger replied with an indignant frown before he spoke. 'I am convinced of that,' he said.

'Convinced that you mean to let her be carried off before your very eyes! There's that long-shanked simpleton Ray Tredgold: though he's a boy and a fool, he has more sense than you. I saw him at her bridle, assiduous enough, I can tell you, and Tredgold himself settling her stirrup for her. Why weren't you there? What the deuce do you mean by always being out of the way when there's a really good chance for you? And she must have seen you pass under her very nose, taking no notice. A pretty way to treat a lady, and the handsomest woman in the country, and all the Biglow estate at her apron-strings!'

'I'm very sorry, sir, if you thought us negligent,' said Edmund. 'For my part, I think it would have been very bad taste to interrupt her at that moment. She had just arrived, she was with her particular friend——'

'What,' said Mr. Mitford, with a laugh, 'are you still so soft in that quarter, Ned? To think any woman in the world would prefer Pax Lemesurier to an admirer of the other sex! We all know your sentiments in that quarter, my boy; but women are not such fools as to care for each other's company except when there's nothing better to be got.'

To this neither of the young men made any reply. It is possible that they were themselves of the same opinion, regarding it with blind faith as a sort of mathematical axiom, recognised by everybody and beyond the necessity of proof. But to a man who is angry, and who is relieving his mind on a legitimate subject, there is nothing so exasperating as silence. It is worse than contradiction, for it implies disrespect. It implies that he is not worth arguing with, that there is nothing for it but to bear with him, and let the tempest die away.

'You seem to have nothing to say for yourself,' he said, turning to Roger, 'and I don't wonder. But at least you know my opinion. You are acting like a fool, in the first place, and how far it is strictly honourable——'

'Honourable!' exclaimed Roger, turning round suddenly from where he had placed himself with his face in the shadow.

'I'm not afraid of you,' said his father, with a laugh. 'Honourable,—that's what I said. According to my old-fashioned code, it's distinctly not honourable to persecute a girl with your attentions at one time, and at another to fling her carelessly off.'

'I have done neither one thing nor the other,' cried Roger, roused to an outburst of indignation, 'nor has any one a right to say so. I have the greatest respect for Miss Travers, and always have had. And if any one but you, sir, ventured to speak so of a lady whom—of a—of a girl who——'

'Do you want me to finish your sentence for you?—of a lady whom you once admired very much, and who is the best match in the country; of a girl who would make a capital mistress to Melcombe, and complete the estate in the most satisfactory way, so that the family would be the better of it for generations. I tell you what, Roger,' said Mr. Mitford, relaxing—'for a quarrel between you and me can lead to nothing agreeable—the thing for you to do is to get the Black Knight out to-morrow, and ride over to see her. She will be quite willing to believe that you prefer getting her all by herself, for the aunt, of course, doesn't count; you can easily elude the aunt. Do this, like a good fellow, and I'll be content.'

Edmund's eyes conveyed a dozen messages while this was being said, but how could his brother receive them, having turned again his shoulder to the light? No answer came for some time out of the shadow. Perhaps the young man was struggling with himself; perhaps it was only reluctance to reply, to meet the softened tone with another contradiction. At last he said abruptly. 'I am sorry—I can't go to-morrow. I am—otherwise engaged.'

'Engaged! I should like to know what that means,' said the father sharply.

'I've got something else to do,' said Roger. 'I've—various things to do. I've—a number of letters to write. I can't possibly spare to-morrow. It would throw everything into arrears.'

'Well,' said the father, persistently amiable, 'if not to-morrow, let us say next day, or Thursday,—at all events, a day this week.'

'I shall be busy all this week,' Roger said, in a sullen tone recognisable by both father and brother. They knew his underlip had set firm, and the somewhat too long upper one had closed down upon it like a vice. Edmund, looking at him fixedly, in the hope that he might glance up and take counsel from his warning eyes, afforded a means to the Squire of giving vent to his renewed wrath.

'What is all that telegraphing about?' he said. 'Ned, you had better mind your own business. You want to advise your brother to be prudent, not to try my patience too far. Let him alone; he had better be honest and let me know exactly what he

means, since we're on the question. If he means to defeat me in my first wish, let him say so, and then we can fight fair.'

'Roger means nothing of the kind, sir,' said Edmund, 'though he may be driven to say so, if you press him so hard. Good heavens, what is the use of talking of what a man means! You know very well that in most cases we mean nothing but just what happens to hit our fancy for the moment. To defeat you, no! I'll be bound for him that is not what he means.'

'Hold your tongue, Ned,' said Mr. Mitford. 'That's all very well for boys and women. I expect I'm talking to a man when I talk to my eldest son. How old is he? Three and thirty, if he's a day. Do you mean to tell me that's an age at which a fellow can go on philandering as if he were still a boy?'

'I'd rather, if it is the same to you,' said Roger, again suddenly shifting his position, and revealing a face very white and obstinate, with a fiery glow under the lowered eyelids, 'that we discussed this matter, father, you and I, instead of having it talked over like this. Ned means very well, and would be kind if he could, but he doesn't always understand.' After receiving this redding stroke, which is inevitably the recompense of the third party, Edmund drew back a little, involuntarily, from the table, pushing his chair out of the circle of the lamplight. The two faces which were within that round of light stood out like those of actors upon the intimate stage of private life, which is so much more exciting than any play.

'Very well,' said the Squire, 'that's what I say. Let us have it all honest and above-board. You know well enough what I want. I want the Biglow estate added on to Melcombe, which is all for your own advantage, not mine. It would not do me any good if it were done to-morrow. And I want a woman that will be a credit to us, that can take the head of the table, as your mother did, and make a fit mistress of a family like ours. The first pretty girl that turns up is not what I want, Roger. You're old enough to know what's what, and not to be run away with by any childish fancy. All these things I find in Lizzy Travers. She's a fine, handsome creature, she's a woman of sense, and she has got plenty of money, and just the land that is wanted to round off our own. You looked as if you thought so, too, a little while ago. Why, in the name of all that's idiotic, do you call off now, and disappoint her (as I've no doubt you're doing), and defy me?'

Mr. Mitford warmed as he went on; the enumeration of all Elizabeth's advantages fired his blood, and the thought that for some whim, some caprice unworthy of a man, some change of

liking, all these advantages might be thrown away, was intolerable to him. He could not but feel that his son must be actuated by something more than mere perversity,—by an undutiful impulse to go against himself and thwart his designs, which were so clearly for the benefit of the family. That sons did so out of mere rebellion, and injured themselves to spite their father, without any other motive, Mr. Mitford thought he knew well. It was one of their leading impulses, he was convinced.

The contrast between this superficial wrath and flow of opposition on one side and the passion in Roger's face was wonderful. He was quite pale; his eyelids half drawn over his eyes, his nostrils drawn in, his lips set tight. No petulance of contradiction such as his father believed in, but a force of emotion which was full of tragic elements, was in his face. He cleared his throat two or three times before he could get possession of his voice. 'In the first place,' he said, 'Miss Travers's name must be put out of the discussion once for all. We were never more than good friends, she and I. Stop a little' (for Mr. Mitford had given vent to a snort of contempt and the scornful exclamation 'Friends!'). 'You have no right, and I have no right, to speculate upon what she thinks. A woman's mind is her own, I hope, as well as a man's. That's only a small part of the question, sir, I allow; the question is between you and me. If I proposed to a lady and she rejected me, I suppose you would not say *that* was my fault.'

'But I should, sir,' retorted his father; 'certainly I should, in this case. I should say it was your shameful shilly-shally, your would and your wouldn't, your reluctance to come to the point, that had disgusted the girl, and with good reason; only somehow I've faith in her, and I don't think it has.'

Roger glared at his father with what he thought was indignation on Elizabeth's account. 'I refuse to bring in her name. She has nothing to do with the question,' he cried. 'The question is between you and me, sir, and nobody else has anything to do with it. I never had any such intention as you give me credit for; but even if I once had, as you think, I haven't now. I don't want to bind myself. I've—no desire to marry,' Roger said. He made a slight pause before he said these words, and plunged a sudden glance into the shade where Edmund sat, as if challenging him to interfere; and a sudden flush of colour rose on his own face. He added hastily, 'I hope you don't think I'm capable of changing my mind to annoy you. I cannot deny such an accusation, because it's incredible. You can't think so badly of me, even

if in the heat of the moment you say it. But if my mind ever inclined towards *that*, which it didn't, at least it does not now.'

'And you think that's a reason,' cried Mr. Mitford. 'By Jove! You ought to think a little, Roger, what's your *raison d'être*. You've no profession, you never do anything, you're the eldest son. Just because it is unnecessary for you to work for your living, being the eldest son, it's your business to attend to this. You may call me brutal, if you like; perhaps it's brutal, but it's true. This is your share of the duty. If you don't do it——' Mr. Mitford got up from his chair almost violently, pushing it away from the table. Then he paused, and looked at his son from the vantage ground of his height and attitude. 'Whether it's from mere caprice, whether it's for other reasons,'—and here, to Roger's troubled ear, his voice sounded full of meaning,—'whatever is the cause, you had better look to it, my boy. Though you're the eldest son,' said the Squire, turning away, 'please to remember that in our family there's no eldest son, so to speak, further than a parent may please.'

He went away as he spoke, bursting through the door which opened into the drawing-room. Though he had avoided that way of reaching his own special retirement since little Nina had taken up her abode in it, his excitement was so great that he forgot his usual habit to-night, and a scream from Nina, faintly heard in the noisy shutting of the door, testified to her wonder rather than pleasure at the sight of this unexpected figure pushing through her usually silent rooms. His two sons sat immovable in their astonishment, watching this stormy exit. It was seldom that Mr. Mitford permitted himself to lose his temper, and they stared at each other with looks which were far from comfortable. The Squire was generally very decorous; if he had never sought the confidence and friendship of his boys, at least he had seldom repulsed them, and never threatened. But on this occasion excitement (or was it policy?) had carried him quite out of himself. They heard Nina's frightened little outcry, then a quick and rather angry dialogue, and then the shutting of the distant library door, which indicated that he had entered his own room for the evening. Roger had become very calm, very silent, in the midst of this sensation. 'What do you suppose *that* means?' he said at last, when the echoes of the alarmed house had died away. 'I did not think my father would have adopted such vulgar methods,' he said.

'He meant nothing,' said Edmund, in his usual *rôle* of peacemaker. 'And you might have temporised a little. You could

not have been forced into matrimony at a moment's notice. Why not yield a little, and keep the peace?'

'There has been too much sacrificed to keeping the peace.' Roger got up and began to walk about the room, his figure moving up and down like a shadow outside the circle of the light. 'I can't keep it up,' he cried. 'I cannot go on like this. The best thing for me, if I could but do it, would be to go away.'

'And why not? Why not go to town for a month or two? There's nothing tragical about that, no grand decision involved. Go up for the season, and cut this knot, whatever it is.'

'You speak at your ease,' said the elder brother, looking out of the shadow at Edmund's thoughtful face, in which there was no struggle, only a shade of sympathy and anxiety. Roger was torn by sensations very different,—by passion contending with all the restraints of life, and thought, and better judgment. 'It is an easy matter for you,' he repeated, with a certain bitterness; 'to settle other people's affairs is always the simplest thing in the world.'

'I don't even know what your affairs are,' said the other. 'I suggest no settling; take a moment's pause, as you may so well do. No one can have a word to say, if you start off for town now. It is the moment when everybody is going. And whatever there may be to decide, get it at arm's length, get it in perspective,' Edmund said.

Roger stared at him almost fiercely for an instant, then came back and flung himself down again in his chair. 'Don't insult a man with your artist's jargon,' he said; then changing his tone in a moment, 'That's just what I do, Ned,—that's just what I do too much. I can't get any natural action out of myself for that. My father thinks I mean to cross him. I don't. I see the sense of all he or you can say, though you drove me mad with your talk about what was suitable. I know it well enough. He's right, and you are right, and nobody knows so well as I do all the trouble that's in it, or how good it would be to take the other way. But,' said Roger, staring into the white heat of the lamp, with eyes that were full of glowing fire—'but——'

Edmund stretched across the table, and laid his hand on his brother's arm. There are moments when the most sympathetic can do nothing, can say nothing, that may not turn to exasperation instead of solace. The touch was all he could venture on. Already both had forgotten the father's threat, if threat it were.

VI

NINA

THE drawing-room at Melcombe had a succession of window recesses, or rather projections built out from the level of the room, like little porticoes enclosed with walls, where all the brightness of the sunshine concentrated, and where a silent little reader or thinker might rest unseen, whoever went or came. It was in one of these that Edmund found his sister the next morning. She had appropriated the little nook, which was oblong, with an opening opposite the great window like a doorway into the drawing-room. On the cushioned seat which ran all round Nina had accumulated her treasures. She had a work-basket full of bright-coloured wools and silks, always in disorder, and pieces of work at which she sometimes laboured for half an hour at a time. She had a few books scattered upon the seat: a novel always in course of reading; a book of poetry, about which she was not very particular so long as it was verse; and a volume of that vague morality and philosophy beaten down into a sugared pulp, which has at all times been thought the right thing for young ladies. It need scarcely be said that the little girl never opened it, but it represented the higher literature to her unsophisticated soul. She had what she called her 'drawing things' upon the table beside her, so that in case an inspiration moved she might fly to her pencil, like a heroine in an old-fashioned novel, without loss of time. She never did so, but what did that matter? An old guitar, which Nina had found in a lumber-room, hung by a faded ribbon from the wall, so that she might equally soothe her mind with that, if any sudden pressure of affairs suggested music as the natural relief to an overburdened soul. To be sure, Nina did not know how to play, but that made no difference. Had the necessity existed, no doubt the knowledge would have come.

On the whole, the little thing pleased herself much with these simple preparations for every emergency, and as no emergency

occurred read her novel in peace, or when there was any bazaar in prospect, for which her married sisters claimed her aid, would seize her crewels and work for a whole twenty minutes. She led a very useless life, much unlike the present habits of high-minded girls. She had nothing to do, and did nothing. She learned nothing. She did not improve her mind. She had no part in the operations of the household. In short, she existed only like one of the flowers in the garden. She loved the guitar, which she called a lute, and the drawing things, and the poetry book, and the crewels, which she called embroidery. These were all accessories to the little part she had to play, but her novels were old-fashioned, and so was her ideal, and she did not know that any more was intended in the constitution of a little girl belonging to a county family. Geraldine and Amy had married, that was true, and entered upon another kind of existence, which Nina supposed, some time or other, she too would have to do. But she did not speculate on that change: it was not within the range of any near possibilities, and the little mind did not require the stimulus of any such subject for dreams. Lily Ford, in her room which opened on the garden, dreamed all day long,—dreamed with passion, inventing for her future endless pleasures, splendours, and delights; but Nina, in her window-seat, was quite quiescent, pleased with the days as they came. To be sure, Lily was a little older, and her position was not the assured and simple one held by the little lady at the Hall.

'Oh, you are here, Nina,' said Edmund, coming in. He placed himself in the basket-chair, which, though it was well cushioned, always creaked, and disturbed Nina's quiet. 'I thought you might be out, as it is such a fine morning. You don't go out half enough.'

'I have no one to go with, Edmund. It is rather dull always going out alone.'

'So it is. If you would only be a little bolder, Nina, and get upon a horse, you could ride with Roger or me. One of us would always be glad to go.'

This was one of the little habitual things which Nina knew were said without much meaning. Oh yes, no doubt Edmund meant them when he said them. But his sister was too shy to keep him to his word. She was not so timid as was supposed, and had got, if not upon a horse, yet upon a pony, many times with impunity, and ridden soberly about the park. But the idea that Nina was not bold enough to ride had always been kept up. Though she was so simple, she quite understood this little fiction,

and that it was not at all in her *rôle* to call upon her brothers to go out with her; for little persons like Nina, with all their innocence, often know things which they are not supposed to know.

'Thank you very much, Edmund,' she said. 'I am quite happy here. I am at a very interesting bit in my book. I am not quite sure, but I almost think that Ethelbert is going to turn out Lord Wilfrid's son, which would quite explain the sympathy that Emily felt for him the first time she saw him. It is the most interesting book——'

'Perhaps you would rather I went away, and let you unravel the mystery,' Edmund said.

'Oh no; oh, dear, no!' exclaimed Nina, putting down the volume upon its face. 'I would a thousand times rather talk to you. And there's something I want to ask you, Edmund. What was papa so angry about last night?'

'Last night? Oh, it was nothing, my dear. One of us displeased him. Either Roger or I said something that brought on a discussion; nothing you need trouble your little head about.'

'But I do trouble my head. How can I help it? I know it was Roger, and not you. I heard loud voices, sounding quite angry, and then I went and sat close to the door.'

'Do you think that was quite right, Nina? It is not the thing for a lady to do.'

'Oh, I was not *listening!*' cried Nina. 'I did not look through the keyhole, or anything like that. I only sat near the door. And then I heard papa scolding,—oh, scolding! worse than he ever did, even at Geraldine. I couldn't help hearing. Then he bounced in when I was sitting there, never expecting it. What made him come through the drawing-room last night? I started up as if I had been shot, and then he—said something disagreeable to me.'

'I am afraid you deserved it this time,' said Edmund, shaking his head. 'You should not sit near the door; you might hear something that you were not intended to hear.'

'Oh, that is exactly why——' Then she stopped short in confusion. 'I mean,' she said, looking as if about to cry, while Edmund continued to shake his head, 'that I never know anything —about anything! And why shouldn't I find out if I can? It is so dull at night, sitting all by one's self here.'

'I ought to have thought of that,' said Edmund; 'of course it is dull. I'll make a point of coming in and sitting with you in future, Nina, if you will promise not to sit near the door.'

'Oh, thank you very much, Edmund,' said Nina. She was

aware that this promise was about as much to be depended upon as that of riding with her, if she could not ride; but repression had taught this little creature wisdom, and she accepted the offer as a benevolent form. 'It was about Roger getting married,' she said, nodding her head in her turn.

'What do you know about that? You must not say a word of anything of the kind. Roger is not going to be married.'

'I know,' said Nina. 'I think I know more than you do, or papa either, but I am sure I would never tell.'

'You—know about Roger? Nonsense, my dear little girl, you must not even think on such a subject. There is nothing for you to know.'

'Oh, but there is,' said Nina, once more nodding her head. 'I knew first from what Simmons said. And then I rode round by the West Lodge, and there I saw.'

'I thought that you said a minute ago you would never tell.'

'Not to any one else,' replied the girl, 'but you and I are just the same as himself, Edmund. I would not tell papa for the world. Did you ever see Lily Ford? I think she is beautiful. There are not very many beautiful people like women in books. Perhaps she is not quite up to that, but she is the beautifulest I ever saw.'

'Oh, nonsense,' said Edmund, endeavouring to laugh the revelations off. 'Prettier than Geraldine? You couldn't mean that: and "beautifulest" is not a word.'

'It is what I mean,' said Nina. 'Geraldine? Oh, Geraldine! —she was just Geraldine, nicer than anybody. It did not matter in the least whether she was beautiful or not. But Lily Ford is like somebody in a book. I once read a poem about a beautiful maiden in a garden, don't you know? She is like that. She walks out among the flowers, and she never goes anywhere else except to church, and Mrs. Simmons says she doesn't know what her parents are thinking of; and then they always say something about Roger, but they don't let me hear what they say.'

'You hear a great deal too much, I think,' cried Edmund. 'Nina, you ought to know it is not fit for a young lady to listen to what the servants say.'

'Who am I to speak to, then?' asked Nina, the tears rising to her eyes. 'Am I never to hear anything about anybody?'

'My dear child,' said Edmund. 'I see how wrong we have all been. It is a shame that you should be driven to that, you poor little girl among all us men. But there is always the Rectory, Nina, when you're dull,' he hastily said.

'Oh, I'm not at all dull. I like home the best: but I can't

help thinking about what is going on. I like to ride past the West Lodge, the garden is always so pretty. And when it is warm you can look in at the window and see Lily sitting at work. I believe she's making some things for me,' the girl added, with a certain sense of pride and proprietorship in Lily. 'Roger is there almost every day.'

'Nina! for Heaven's sake, don't go on with these revelations. All this information is quite out of your way. If Roger knew, he would be very angry; he would think you were watching him.'

'So I was,' admitted Nina quietly, 'more or less; for I wanted to know. When you hear all sorts of things said of your brother, and especially when you see that they don't want you to hear what they say——'

'You must be removed out of the hands of those servants,' said Edmund. 'Don't you know the difference between educated and uneducated people, Nina? You have no right to listen to them. You don't hear people of our own class——'

'Oh, Edmund! why, everybody does it; not about Roger before us, but about others. The Tredgolds, and even Pax. Pax was saying the other day that Amy Tredgold went out a great deal too much when she was in London, and that our Stephen——'

'Don't say any more, please. I daresay we all talk about our neighbours more than is necessary. But the servants.—you must not listen to the servants. As for Roger, he would be very angry. You must know, if you heard anything at the door,—oh, Nina! —that this was not what my father was speaking to Roger about.'

'No,' said Nina, after a pause, fixing her eyes upon her brother as if there might be a great deal more to say; but though her eyes were eloquent she spoke no further word. For the next half hour or more Edmund kept his place, and made conversation for his little sister. He did his duty manfully, using every endeavour to make her forget the subject on which she had herself been the speaker. He told her about the books he had been reading, giving her at considerable length the plot of a new novel, with a description of the leading characters and their actions. He told her about some discoveries in which the fairy tales of science, the beautiful part of research, came in as they do not always come in, even in its most beneficent spheres. He told her about the last great traveller who had made a track across the black continent. To all of which Nina responded with a little swift interrogative Yes? with a No! of wonder, with the milder Indeeds, and Oh, Edmunds, of attention. She gave him her ear devoutly for one thing as much as the other, and laughed, and clasped her hands, and looked astonished and

dismayed, just when it was right for her to show these sentiments. But when at last he got up and left her, Edmund was by no means sure that Nina had not seen through him all the time, that she had not been quite aware of his purpose, and laughing in her little sleeve at his attempts to beguile her. He thought to himself, as he went away, considerably exhausted with his exertions and with the uncertainty of having at all succeeded in them, that he would never undervalue little Nina's intelligence again. What she had told him was not new to him. He had known very well where Roger was going when he turned along the west road from the station. He had understood what his brother meant when he betrayed the uneasiness of his troublous passion in talk which pretended to be abstract. But Nina's little matter-of-fact story, her glimpses into the conclusions of the servants, added a pang of reality to the visionary picture which Edmund had made to himself. As it was in Edmund's fancy, it might have gone on for months or years before coming to any crisis; but in a moment, by the illumination of all these sharp little commonplace lights, he saw how immediate and how urgent the danger was.

There had been in Edmund's mind a lingering incredulity, the conviction of a man in his sound senses, that love, in the gravest sense of the word, for the keeper's daughter was after all an impossibility; that it was a freak of fancy rather than a serious passion which had occupied his brother. How in Ford's cottage, within the ken of the father and mother, amid all the homely circumstances of their life, Roger should have been so fatally enthralled it seemed impossible to conceive; and by Lily Ford, the little half-educated, conventional enchantress, with all the sentimentalities of her boarding-school about her, her artificial superiority, her little romantic graces! If she had been an unconscious, dutiful, rustic maiden, helpful and sweet, Edmund thought he could have understood it better. But for a man who had known and liked, if not loved, Elizabeth Travers, who had owed something of his development to Pax—that he should throw his life away for Lily Ford! The wonder of it took away Edmund's breath; yet he had no resource but to believe it now. And what was worst of all was that he could think of no way of helping Roger. His father's threats, his inquiry in respect to that other matter so plainly impossible, the mere suggestion of which was an insult and injury to the lady—so much too good, Edmund said to himself indignantly, for any one of them at their best—would of course throw Roger more and more into his fatal entanglement, and make all deliverance hopeless. And there seemed nothing that

any one could do. Remonstrance was futile; the time for it was past; and what advantage could there be in pointing out the frightful drawbacks, the miseries, involved in such a connection to the unfortunate who saw them all, and yet could not resist the infatuation which was stronger than reason? It was not thus, perhaps, that Edmund would have regarded a love which was superior to all obstacles, had it not approached himself so nearly. He realised in the present case with a heavy force of fact, more telling than imagination, what it would be to have Lily Ford the mistress of his father's house.

In the perplexity of his mind he found himself following instinctively a path which he had perhaps trod oftener than any other during the whole course of his life, the path that led to the Rectory. He knew that Pax at her window would see him coming, and would divine that he was in trouble, and that his errand to her was the selfish one of unburdening his soul. How often had he unburdened his soul to Pax, in every kind of embarrassment and distress!—even when the disturbing element was herself, when he had so loved her in her full maturity, so hotly wanted to marry her, so insisted that the obstacles were of no importance in comparison. He still loved Pax devotedly in a way, but the thought of his boyish projects in respect to her sometimes brought the hot colour to his face, sometimes overwhelmed him with a desire to laugh. It had become ludicrous, impossible, as no doubt it had been always, had he had eyes to see. The recollection of it came strongly back to him as he ran up the familiar stairs and went in unannounced, with a little tap at the door. Perhaps she thought of it too, as she turned half round to greet him, holding out her hand, with a 'Well, Edmund!' looking at him in the tall, narrow mirror which stood between the two side windows, and which was always the medium through which she contemplated her intimate visitors. Pax was of opinion that she understood people better when she first saw their faces and unconscious expression in this old-fashioned greenish glass.

'Well!' he said, throwing himself down upon a chair opposite to her. 'I'm out of heart and out of humour, and as usual I've come to you to be consoled.'

'That's quite natural,' said Pax. 'What is it about?'

'I can't tell you—everything,' cried the young man. And then he took up a piece of work which lay on the table and began to examine it gravely, as if he knew all about it. And so, indeed, he did; for Pax kept a piece of work by her for state occasions, for the afternoon when people called, which made slow progress,

and had no connection with the big work-basket, always overflowing, which stood on the other side of her chair. 'You were at this leaf, or thereabouts, last time I was on the verge of suicide,' he said, with a laugh.

'And I shall be at another leaf next time,' Pax answered calmly. 'There is just enough of the pattern to keep me going till I deliver you over into the hands of your wife.'

'My wife! I shall never have one, Pax.'

'Not till you are married,' said Miss Lemesurier. 'But I don't suppose that is what troubles you now.'

He made no answer for some time, and then he burst forth suddenly, 'I don't think it's good for Nina to be all alone as she is. That little thing is far sharper than any of us think.'

'I am glad,' said Pax, 'that you have found that out.'

'She ought not to be left to the servants, to pick up the gossip of the house.'

'I am very glad,' said Pax, 'that you have found that out. I hope your father sees it, too.'

'Oh, my father!' Edmund said impatiently, conscious all at once that not Roger, but the Squire, was the cause of all his anxieties, for surely he ought to have known better, if anybody should.

'And I don't see how it is to be remedied, unless one of you were to marry.'

'To marry!' Edmund exclaimed again, and there suddenly gleamed upon him another vision of Lily Ford in the chief place at home, training, restraining his little sister. A flush of angry colour came over his face. 'You are very keen upon marriages,' he cried, with an instinctive endeavour to give a prick in return. 'You used not to be so, if I remember right.'

Pax looked into the mirror, and saw herself seated there, mature and motherly, while the young man, flung into his chair in languor and discontent, sat gloomy before her. She uttered an involuntary thanksgiving within herself. If I had been such a fool! she thought, and thanked Heaven: then spoke sedately. 'For right marriages always—for wrong never,' she said, with emphasis. 'Come, I know that's what you are upset about.'

'I have no right to be upset,' he said, 'I suppose I've nothing to do with it. Am I my brother's keeper? Probably he is better able to judge than I am, and I'm a meddling fool to think I could interfere.'

Pax raised her eyes and looked at him seriously, but she did not help him out, and he sat pulling her work about, snipping at stray threads as if that had been the most important occupation

in the world; then he suddenly tossed it from him, nearly overturning the light table.

'I should have thought,' he cried angrily, 'that you would have known all about it. Here is one of the storms that are periodical in our house—my father raging, and Roger going to the devil.'

'No, no,' said Pax, 'not so bad as that.'

'What do you call not so bad? He might be bad and do less harm. Imagine Lily Ford at Melcombe, the lady of the house!'

'Has it gone so far?' said Pax, in a tone of alarm. 'You ought not to speak so to me, Edmund, about less harm—but still I know what you mean. I can't think it's so bad as that.'

'Can you think of my brother, then, as a scoundrel?' cried the young man, changing his view in a moment, as the caprice of his troubled mind suggested. Then he came to his senses in the relief of having thus disburdened himself. 'I fear,' he said, 'it has gone as far as that. I don't see what else can come. Roger is not a fellow to—he is not a man that could—— You know what I mean, Pax. He is too good, and too tender-hearted, and too honourable. He could neither deceive a woman nor desert her, even if he wanted to.'

'Does he want to?' Pax paused a moment, not expecting any answer to her question; then she said slowly, 'There is still one way out of it: there is the girl herself.'

'The girl herself!' Edmund cried, with unmeasured astonishment and almost contempt.

'She is in a very artificial position; but she is a natural, silly little thing, with a will of her own; when that is the case there is never any telling,' Pax in her wisdom said.

VII

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

On the same morning a consultation of a very different kind was going on at the West Lodge. The scene was the little parlour which to poor Roger had been a place of fatal enchantment. It bore, perhaps, a different aspect in the morning, but it is doubtful if any circumstances, even the chill daylight with all its revelations, even Mrs. Ford in the midst of her morning's work, with all the common accessories of household labour about her, could now have affected the mind of the lover. Perhaps if at the first he had seen the mother on her knees 'doing' the grate, while Lily in her pretty dress, not fit even to be touched by those grimy fingers, stood by and looked on, the contrast might have affected his imagination; but who could tell? He might have found it only an accentuation of the wonder how out of so homely a soil such a flower could have grown. To the chief actors themselves there was nothing in the least remarkable in the situation. Mrs. Ford on her knees before the hearth, with a brush in her hands and the glow of exertion on her face, had paused, looking up from her work to speak, while Lily stood by in the brown velveteen which had been her winter dress, and which, to do her justice, she had made herself, with pretty white frills round the hands which were free from any trace of labour, a few early primroses pinned upon her breast, and her silky hair shining in the sun. The glass door was open, the sunshine streaming in, the garden ablaze with those crocuses of which the keeper's wife had boasted, the little room all glorified by the light, which, however, at the same time remorselessly showed all those poverties of over-decoration and vulgarity of ornament of which its inmates were unconscious. Mrs. Ford was making an appeal which was almost impassionate, and which suited very well with her attitude, if not with her occupation, while Lily listened somewhat impatient, very decided in her adverse opinion, pulling the threads unconsciously out of a scrap of linen which she held in her hands.

'My pet,' said Mrs. Ford, 'it's time to think serious, if ever you thought serious in your life. I'm dead frightened, and that's the truth. I've always looked, I don't deny it, for a 'usband for you as could give you a different 'ome from this. We've done our best, your father and me, to make it a nice 'ome. We've done a deal for you, Lily, though maybe you don't see it. It's not a place now for the likes of you, brought up a lady, and naturally looking for things as was never wanted by him or me. But still we've done a deal more than most folks approved of our doing; we've done the most we could.'

'Yes, yes,' said Lily impatiently, 'what is the use of going over all this again, mother? I never said you hadn't been awfully good.'

'Well, I don't mean to say *that*,' resumed Mrs. Ford, drying her eyes with her apron. She was apt to be tearful when she insisted on Lily's excellences, or humbly put forth her own attempts to do justice to them. 'But we've done what we could, and I've always hoped for a 'usband as could do more, and that I won't deny.'

'Well, mother!' said Lily again.

'But, dear,' cried the keeper's wife, 'you mustn't look too high! Oh, Lily, you mustn't look too high! When Mr. Roger first came here I was a bit flattered; that I don't deny. I felt as if it was a great compliment. Him to come in quite friendly like, and take a chair, and talk to you and me. It was not as if it had been talking to your father about them things as men can go on about for hours. Senseless things, *I* think, but then that's their way. And that he should be taken up with you was natural, and asking questions, for you were his mother's pet, there's not a doubt of that. I was flattered like, I won't deny it. But since Christmas I've took fright, Lily. I've got more and more frightened every day. I've tried my best to say as you were busy, as you were out, —any excuse I could think of.'

'Thank you, mother.'

'You would thank me if you thought a bit. Lily, you don't know the world; if you were as old as me you would know that nothing good ever comes of a gentleman visiting in a poor 'ouse. He may mean no harm, and she may mean no harm, but it comes to harm in spite of 'em both.'

'Mother!' exclaimed Lily, with great indignation, 'how dare you speak like that to me! Harm! Do you think I'm one of the poor creatures that forget themselves, that get into danger and trouble—me! If you think that of me, I wonder you don't turn me out of your house.'

'Oh, Lily!' cried the anxious mother. She gazed at the girl for a moment with hands uplifted, then turned round hastily and addressed herself to the grate with great fervour of exertion, making her brush ring into all the corners. After a minute or two of this active work Mrs. Ford turned round again. 'You put me to silence and you put me to shame,' she said, rising from her knees. 'You've got learning enough and sense enough to get the better of a dozen like me; but you didn't ought to, Lily, however things are, for I'm your mother, and that's more than learning, or foreign languages, or playing the pianny,—ay, or even taking views.'

'Mother, of course it is,' said the girl. 'I never would have been nasty to you if you hadn't been nasty to me—supposing for a moment that I was like one of the victims in a story book, and that harm of that description could ever happen to me!'

Mrs. Ford accepted Lily's kiss with a tearful smile. 'Hold off the brush,' she said, 'or it'll make a mark on you. Oh, Lily, my pet, you're never nasty to me,—only I'm silly about you, and I take everything to heart. And as for Mr. Roger—no, I ain't easy in my mind about Mr. Roger. I can't say I am, for it wouldn't be true.'

'Why, what could Roger do?' said the girl, with a triumphant smile. 'Nothing but what I like, you may be sure.'

'That may be, or that mayn't be,' replied Mrs. Ford, shaking her head; 'but what I'm thinking of is his father, Lily. His father, he can do just what he pleases. He can turn us out of this house, which is the nicest I ever was in for its size, and where I'd like to end my days. He could turn your father out of his place. He can hunt us all out of the parish, away from everybody we know. Oh, you think nobody could do that? But you're mistaken, Lily. The Squire can do whatever he wants to do. It's awful power for one man, but he can. I have heard say he can leave all his money away from his sons, if they don't please him, and that's what frightens me. Oh, Lily, Mr. Roger, he's too grand; he's not the 'usband I'd choose for you.'

'Too grand,—nobody's too grand,' said the girl; and then she laughed. 'For that matter, your favourite Mr. Witherspoon thinks a deal more of the difference between himself and the keeper than Mr. Roger does. A fine scientific gardener,—oh, that's a great deal more grand than the young Squire.'

'Lily, Lily! there you are, always laughing at the steady young man that could give you a nice home, and furnish it nicely, and keep a servant, and everything. That's what would please me. Better than us, but not so much better that he would throw your

father and mother in your face, with a good trade that he could carry anywhere. Oh, that is the kind of man for me. All the masters in the world couldn't frighten that one, they couldn't do him no harm. He's sure of a place somewhere else, if he has to leave here. Squire may fret as he likes, he can't do no harm to him. Oh, Lily, if it was me——'

'And how are ye the day, Miss Lily? and did ye like the sparrygrass?' cried the girl, with an imitation of the gardener's Scotch. 'Oh, mother, how you can like that man! He may be nice enough, and respectable enough, and all that, but he's not a gentleman,' Lily said, with great dignity, drawing herself up.

'And that's what I like him for,' replied her mother.

Lily gave Mrs. Ford a look of mingled indignation and superiority. 'I shall never have anything to say to a man who is not a gentleman,' she said.

'Oh, goodness gracious me!' the mother cried.

Neither to Mrs. Ford's exclamation nor to her attitude of despair did Lily pay any attention. She seated herself at the table, opened a little fancy box in which were her thimble and scissors, and drew towards her the needlework she was doing for Nina at Melcombe. It was a work which went on slowly, subject to many interruptions, but still it was the occupation to which she sat down morning after morning, when the grate was done and the fire lit. The fire was now blazing up brightly, and everything was cheerful within and out: the crocuses all expanding under the sunshine, the same brightness flooding in at the open door, the brisk little fire modifying what sharpness there still might linger in the March air. The only shadow in this brilliant little spot was Mrs. Ford, standing on the other side of the table, with her black brush in one hand and her broom in the other, disconsolately leaning upon that latter implement, and looking at her daughter with troubled eyes. Lily had taken her seat opposite the window. She had laid out a pretty mass of white muslin and lace upon the table; her graceful person, her shining head, the flowers on her bosom, all harmonious and delightful, made the picture perfect. If her features wanted regularity, who could pause upon that point, in the general radiance of beauty and health and satisfaction that shone about her? In short, who could take that beauty to pieces, or question which part of it was more or less near perfection, who had ever fallen under the spell of her presence? Six months ago Lily had been conscious of that spell. She had been very willing to exercise it if it existed, and fully and fervently believed that the something which would certainly come would be something to

her advancement and glory. But still it had all been vague. She had not known what kind of fly would stumble into her shining web. When Mr. Witherspoon, the gardener, appeared her heart had fluttered; she had for a little while supposed that he might be, if not the hero, at least the master, of her fate. But Lily's ideas had much enlarged since those days. She had learned what triumph was. Visions very different from that of the gardener's two-storied, blue-slated house had passed before her eyes. That man of science who condescended to love her, and wished to improve her mind, was very different from the young Squire, who found all her little ignorances half divine. Roger with his straight, well-dressed figure, standing up as she had seen him first, asking, was this Lily? stroking his moustache as he looked at her, had been, in comparison with the solid gardener, romance and beauty embodied to the ambitious girl, who, suddenly enlightened by this revelation, held to the certainty that no man who was not a gentleman could ever satisfy her. And since then—well, since then—— As she mused a conscious smile lighted up her face; since then perhaps other and still more splendid revelations had come.

'What are you laughing to yourself at?' said Mrs. Ford, who sometimes felt a prick of exasperation even with her darling. 'You're thinking of Mr. Roger, and that he'll make a lady of you; but suppose his father leaves everything away from him? Oh, Lily, you don't know what it is, trying to be a lady, and nothing to do it with. It's worse, a deal worse, than living poor and thinking nothing different, like we do.'

'Mr. Roger!' cried Lily, with a toss of her head. 'One would think there wasn't a gentleman in the world but Mr. Roger, to hear you speak.'

'There's none as comes here, at least,' Mrs. Ford said.

The conscious smile grew upon Lily's face. It seemed on the eve of bursting into a laugh of happy derision. But she made no reply in words; indeed, she bent down her face to hide the smile which she could not repress, and did not intend to explain.

'Leastways, not as I know,' her mother continued, with a vague suspicion passing like a cloud over her mind. She gave a moment to a hurried, frightened reflection on this subject, and then said to herself that it was impossible. Why, Lily was never out of her sight, never away from her, never wished to be away, or take her freedom, like other girls. Lily was quite satisfied to be always within her mother's shadow. Mrs. Ford felt a glow of happy pride as she remembered this, and it drove all her doubts and painful anticipations out of her mind 'My pet,' she said, 'there's a many

things to be thought of afore you marry, and in particular if you marry out of your own kind. I don't call Mr. Witherspoon that, or even young Mr. Barnes, or Harry Gill, though he's as well off as can be.'

'A gardener, a farmer, and a horse-dealer!' exclaimed Lily, letting out her suppressed laugh, but with an *éclat* of derision in it. 'What fine gentlemen, to be sure!'

'Oh, Lily!' cried the troubled mother. 'There's not one of them but would be a grand match for Ford the keeper's daughter. Now listen a bit to me. As far as that you can go, and none of them would say you nay when you had your father and your mother up of an evening, or to sit with you when you were lonely, or have a bit of dinner at Christmas or that. They mightn't be fond to see us too often, but they'd never say a word so far as that goes.'

'I should hope not,' said Lily, growing red. '*My* father and mother! If they were not proud to see you, I should know the reason why.'

'Oh, my sweet! I always knew as you'd be like that. But, Lily,' continued Mrs. Ford, with bated breath, 'what if it was the Hall? I've been through the rooms once with Mrs. Simmons, when she was in a good humour because of the game. Oh, Lily! I felt as if I should take off my shoes. I'd no more have sat down on one of those golden chairs, or touched the sofas, except, may be, with a soft clean duster, than I'd have flown. I couldn't have done it. Velvet beneath your feet, and velvet on the very footstools, and you couldn't turn round but you'd see yourself on every side. I declare, I was nigh saying to Mrs. Simmons, "Who's that vulgar, common person as you're showing round, and what's the likes of her got to do there?" and it was just me.'

'Well, mother,' said Lily coldly. She held her head very high, and there was a crimson flush on her face. The view was, no doubt, new to her, and wounded her pride, perhaps also her heart, deeply. She spoke with a little difficulty, her throat dry with sudden passion.

'Oh, my darling child, supposing as you was to lead Mr. Roger on, and let him come and come, till he hadn't no control of himself no more; and that's what it's coming to. And supposing as it come to that as you was married. And supposing the Squire didn't make no objection, but gave into him because you was so pretty,—as has happened before now. Lily, what would you do with your father and your mother then?' asked the good woman solemnly. 'Would you have us up to one o' your grand dinners, and set us down at your grand table, with Mr. Larkins, as has

always been such a friend to your father, to wait? It makes me hot and cold all over just to think of it. Your father always says Mr. Larkins, he's such a good friend; and suppose he was standing up behind my chair to help me to the potatoes, or pour Ford out a glass of beer. Lord, I'd sink through the floor with shame, and so would your father.'

Poor Lily had been foolish in many of her little ways, but she was miserable enough while she listened to this speech to make up for much. She saw the scene in her quick imagination, and she too shivered: the terrible Squire at the end of the table, and delicate little Miss Nina, and all the ladies and gentlemen; and in the midst of them her father and mother, and Larkins grinning over their shoulders! Lily's own heart sank at the thought of how she would herself come through if exposed to that ordeal; but father and mother! She sat bolt upright in the keen pang of her wounded pride, for it was all true; it was true, and more. She felt as her mother said, as if she too, in shame and mortification, would sink through the floor.

'If it should ever come to that,' she said, with a gasp, 'I should like to see—any one that would dare to look down upon father and you.'

'Oh, my pet, I knew you would feel like that; but how could you stop it, Lily? You couldn't stop it, my dear. You would have to get all new servants, for one thing, and they would turn out just as bad as the old ones. There's no way as you could work it, my pretty,—no way!'

'If it was like that, I should give up all company altogether, and you should come and see me in my own room, where nobody could interfere,' declared Lily. But then the strain of her tone relaxed, the hot colour faded, and she laughed with a tremulous mirth in which there was an evident sense of escape. 'It might have come to that once, mother,' she said, 'but not now. No, not now,—I know better now. If it was Windsor Castle he had to offer, instead of Melcombe Hall, I wouldn't have him. Don't you worry yourself about that.'

Mrs. Ford gave a gasp of amazement. She had meant to make the drawback very clear, but she had not intended to be thus taken at her word. That Lily would weep and protest that no such indignities should ever be possible in *her* house, be it ever so splendid, was what she meant, but no more.

'Lily,' she said, 'Lord bless you, I didn't mean you were to give up what was for your happiness on account of me.'

'Do you think I'd let people look down upon and slight my

mother?' asked Lily. 'Besides,' she added quickly, 'he's dull; he is not the least entertaining; he is no fun, mother. There are some that are far better fun, and just as good gentlemen, and never would behave like that.'

Mrs. Ford was deeply disappointed, in spite of her evil prognostications. 'Well, Lily,' she said, 'I'm glad you're so reasonable. I can't help feeling for Mr. Roger, poor dear; but if it's to be Witherspoon, after all——'

'Witherspoon!' ejaculated Lily, with an accent of scorn; but who it was, or where she had seen any gentleman who was not Roger, not all her mother's importunities could make her say.

VIII

PRIMOGENITURE

THE atmosphere of a house in which there is a family quarrel is always affected, however limited may be the extent of the quarrel. In the present case there were but two of the family involved; but they were the principal persons in the house. Not a word was said about it at the breakfast-table, from which, indeed, the Squire had disappeared before Roger was visible, to the relief of everybody concerned, nor at lunch, where they met with more civility than usual, saying 'Good-morning' to each other with averted eyes. But at both these meals the situation was very obvious, the air stifling the other members of the party, embarrassed to a degree which was absurd. Why could not they talk in their usual tone, or keep at least an appearance of ease? Why was it that a subject could not be kept up, but was dropped instantaneously as soon as, with two feeble remarks, it had been brought into spasmodic being? How was it that all the ordinary events which furnish table-talk seemed for this moment to have ceased to be?

Edmund did his best, labouring against the passive resistance of the two silent figures who sat at the head and foot of the table, and made no contribution to the conversation. Every subject, however, that he could think of appeared to have some connection with forbidden matters. As Nina's support was of a very ineffectual kind, and she was too much in awe of her father to hazard many observations of her own, the result was very unsuccessful. It was so feeble, indeed, that the servants gave each other looks of intelligence, and Larkins stationed himself in a pose of defence behind his master's chair. If there were to be any split in the house, which was a thing the servants' hall had foreboded for some time past, Mr. Larkins felt very sure on which side policy and safety lay. The air was thus affected throughout the house. It diffused a kind of general irritation for which nobody could account. Even little Nina spoke very sharply to her maid, and Edmund kicked

away the unoffending dog who got between his feet as he left the dining-room. They were angry, they did not know why. And Mrs. Simmons had all the maids in the kitchen in tears before she had done with them that day. The belligerents themselves were the only persons unaffected by this general tendency. They were cool to an exasperating degree, polite, making remarks full of solemnity and high composure. These remarks were addressed to Edmund, who figured as the general public. 'What do you think of the weather, Edmund? It was sharp frost last night, Larkins tells me, but I hope you'll be able to get a good run to-morrow.' 'Did you notice if the wind was veering to the west, Ned? I rather think we are going to have a deluge.' These were the sorts of observations they made. Had the mind of Edmund been free to remark what was going on, he would no doubt have been struck by the comic aspect of the situation; but unfortunately in such circumstances, though there is always a great deal that is very funny, the persons about are too deeply concerned to get the good of the ludicrous side.

Edmund was much startled to find himself called into the library after that uncomfortable meal. His father made a sign to him to close the door, and pointed to a chair near his writing-table. 'I don't often make such demands on your time,' he said. 'I suppose you can give me ten minutes, Ned?'

'As long as you like, sir,' he said promptly, but with some surprise.

'Oh, as long as I like! It's not exactly for pleasure. Edmund, perhaps I was a little peremptory with your brother, last night.'

'I think so, sir,' said Edmund, 'if you will let me say so. You've always been so good to us. That makes us feel it the more when you are a little——'

'Ill-tempered, unjust. I know that's what you meant to say.'

'I meant only what you yourself said, father,—peremptory. Roger is not in a happy state of mind, to begin with.'

'He has no great reason to be in a happy state of mind. I know he's after some villainy. I've heard it from several people.'

'No villainy,' said Edmund quickly. 'Whoever says so doesn't know Roger.'

'That's the most lenient interpretation,' his father remarked; 'otherwise folly, madness, something too wild to name.' The Squire paused, and looked his second son almost imploringly in the face. 'Can't you do anything, Ned? You two are very good friends, and you've a great deal of sense. There are times when

I've thought you rather a milksop, not much like the rest of us, but I never denied you had a great deal of sense.'

'Thank you, sir. I'm afraid I am rather—a milksop, as you say. My kind of sense doesn't seem to make much impression.'

'It would, upon your brother, if you would speak plainly to him. A young fellow can do that better than an old one. They think we're preaching, they think we don't understand. That's a good joke,' said Mr. Mitford, with a short laugh, turning his eyes as it were inwardly upon his own experience. 'But the fact is you all of you think so. Persuade him that he's a fool, and get him to understand,' continued the father, looking into Edmund's eyes with a steady stare, 'that what I said was no vain threat. I mean it, every word.'

'You mean it, sir?' said Edmund, with a look of surprised inquiry. So little impression had the threats of last night made upon him that he did not even remember what they were.

Mr. Mitford's face flushed into an angry redness. 'I mean it, and I hope *you* don't intend to be insolent too. I mean, sir, that there's no eldest son in our family. I can make whomever I please the eldest son; and by Jove, if Roger makes an infernal fool of himself, as he seems to intend to do——'

'I suppose it's quite legitimate as an argument,' Edmund said reflectively.

'Legitimate! What do you mean by legitimate? It is no argument; it's a plain statement of what I mean to do.'

'If there was any hope that it would be effectual,' Edmund went on, 'but my opinion is it would have exactly the contrary effect; and to threaten what one doesn't mean to carry out——'

'Do you want to drive me out of my senses?' cried the Squire. 'I never threaten what I don't mean to perform. Take care you don't spoil your own prospects too. As certainly as I sit here, if Roger takes his own way in this, I shall take mine, and wipe him out of the succession as I wipe off this fly, without hesitation or—compunction,' he continued, drawing a long breath.

'No,' said Edmund, with a deprecatory smile. His heart quaked, but he would not even appear to believe. 'No, no,—you are angry, you take perhaps too grave a view; but wipe him out—Roger? No, father, no, no.'

'None of your no, no's to me, sir,' cried the Squire. He had a way of imitating his antagonist's tone mockingly when he was angry, but he had not the talent of a mimic. 'I say what I mean, and not a word more than I mean. If you cannot do any more

for your brother, make him understand that I am in earnest, and you may do some good.'

'I should only do a great deal of harm. I should put him beside himself.'

'Then there will be two of us,' said the Squire, with a grim smile. 'If that's all you're good for, I'm sorry I asked you, and you may as well go. But take care, my boy,' he added, rising as Edmund rose. 'Take care that you don't spoil your own prospects too.'

Edmund left his father's room with something of the feeling of a man who has been listening to some statement of important possibilities delivered in an imperfectly understood language. He made a great many efforts to elucidate these unfamiliar words, and make out what they meant. They were as strange to him as if they had been in Hungarian or Russian. 'Wipe Roger out of the succession;' 'No eldest sons in our family;' 'Take care you don't spoil your own prospects too,'—the most recondite of Slav dialects could not have been more difficult to understand. The constitution of the family was a matter entirely beyond argument to this young Englishman. In the abstract, he was ready enough to argue out any question. The law, as interpreted in different countries under different theories, bore no especial sacredness for him, that it might not be fully criticised, questioned, or condemned. He was quite willing to discuss the hereditary principle in general, both its drawbacks and its advantages. But to think of Roger disinherited, of himself, perhaps, preferred, gave him an intolerable sensation which it was impossible to endure. Roger wiped out of the succession! —his brother, whom nothing could keep from being the head of the house, no change in respect to the estates, no arbitrary settlement; his elder brother, *Roger!* There was an incredibility about it which brought an angry laugh to Edmund's lips, yet struck him like a sharp blow, like a sudden warning stroke, awakening him to dangers unthought of, to the unreality of everything about him. It was as if, walking along a solid, well-known road, he had suddenly come to an unexpected yawning precipice, as if he had all at once seen some volcanic crater open at his feet. Nothing less than such metaphors could explain the sudden shock, the tremendous danger. Roger wiped out of the succession, his own prospects—his *prospects*, good heavens!—of disinheriting his brother, of being preferred in Roger's place! This made the blood rush to his brain, singing and ringing in his ears. He to disinherit Roger! Just in that way the warmest champion of equal inheritances would probably pause. Abstract justice is one thing; it may be that

children have a right to an equal division of their father's possessions; it may be that they have no right at all to another man's property, even though he may be their father; but for one to displace the other, to take advantage of the father's weakness and grasp his inheritance,—this, to a generous spirit, looks like the worst kind of robbery. Edmund felt himself degraded, injured, by the very thought. He recalled his father's words. They could not mean this or that; there must be a different signification to them. If there were only a dictionary of human perversities by which he could find it out! He took a long walk upon it, which is so good a way of clearing the head, but light did not come to him. His father was an honourable man. He was a good father; he had never done anything unkind or cruel. What did he mean now by this insane suggestion, by speaking in a new language which the unassisted intelligence could not understand?

The sun had set by the time Edmund returned home. The little paraphernalia of the tea-table, which it had pleased Nina to set up in the hall, was there in its corner, deserted, and nobody was visible but Roger, who stood with his back to the entrance as Edmund came in, apparently examining the whips upon the rack, displacing and rearranging them. He turned half round when his brother entered, but for a minute or two took no notice, carrying on his half-occupation, one of the expedients of idleness to get through a little time. Edmund, for his part, took no notice either, for his heart was still sick with bewilderment, and he was reluctant to say anything, afraid to begin a conversation, though he had so much to say. He went up to the wood fire, which blazed in the great open chimney, and stood leaning upon the carved stone mantelpiece, which bore the Mitford arms, and was one of the curiosities of the place. The hall was the only part of the house which had any pretensions to antiquity. It was full of dark corners, with two deep-recessed windows throwing two broad lines of light from one side to the other. One of these was partially filled with painted glass, coats-of-arms, blazoned in the brilliancy of that radiance; the other was white and pale, full of a silvery spring-coming sky.

'How is the wind?' said Roger at last. 'I hope that old croaker is not going to be justified in his forebodings. The sky looks uncomfortably clear.'

'There is frost in the air,' said Edmund. Then he turned round, with his back to the fire, in the favourite attitude of an Englishman. 'But I thought,' he said, 'it couldn't matter much to you. Are you not going away?'

'Going away! Not that I know of,' Roger replied curtly.

'I thought you said—it's just the time for town; a number of people there, but none of the whirl of the season. Why don't you go? The hunting is not worth staying for at the fag end of the year.'

'Why don't you go yourself, if you like it so much?' Roger asked.

'I will, if you'll come with me, like a shot. To-night, if you please, by the last train.'

'Why should I go with you? I am not a man for town,' said Roger, with a gloomy face, as he approached the fire. 'And just at this time of the year, when the country gets sweeter day by day! Hang the hunting! Is that all I care for, do you suppose?'

'A man should not shut himself up from the company of his kind,' remarked Edmund sententiously.

'His kind! And who are they, I wonder? Fellows at the club, who don't care a brass farthing if they ever see you again—or—or——'

'That's the question,' said the younger brother. 'Our friends like us well enough here, but they would not break their hearts if we absented ourselves for three months, or even for six. Come, Roger, let's go.'

'You are perfectly welcome to go, whenever you please. You don't want your elder brother to take care of you, I hope?'

'My elder,' Edmund murmured under his breath. The word gave him new energy. 'Roger, I wish you'd listen to me,' he said. 'Look here! Here is this sort of a quarrel got up in the house. It's nothing,—a fit of temper, a fit of obstinacy; for you are a bit obstinate, you know. It's nothing, but it puts everybody out of sorts; even Nina, poor little thing, who has nothing to do with it. The best way by far to cut it short would be to run off for a little. Don't you see, that clears you from all embarrassment. After all, perhaps you ought to have gone in and said a word to Elizabeth, now that she is just beginning to show again. No harm done, old fellow, but she might have taken it kind.'

'What's Elizabeth to me,' cried Roger, 'or I to her? She is just as indifferent—— If you had gone, it might have been more to the purpose; or Steve,' he said, with a harsh little laugh,—'the all-conquering Steve. Ned, if we are not to quarrel, leave that alone, for on that subject I will not hear a word.'

'On what subject, then, will you hear?' said Edmund, 'for one way or another there is a good deal to say.'

Roger began to pace up and down the hall from one end to

another. He had his hands thrust into his pockets, his shoulders up to his ears. The least sympathetic spectator might have observed the conflict which was going on within him. At last he burst forth, 'Don't say anything at all, Ned. For goodness' sake, hold your tongue, and let me think for myself.' He had another long march up and down, then resumed: 'If I could think for myself! I can't think at all, I believe. I just bob up and down as the current catches me. I think I shall go to town, after all. You're right, Ned; you are a cool, clear-headed fellow, with plenty of sense. I daresay I couldn't do better than take your advice.'

Edmund could not but smile within himself at this double ascription of sense to him at his special quality. He did not feel as though sense had much to do with it. 'Do,' he urged. 'I don't think you'll ever regret it, Roger. I'll tell Wright to put your things together, for a month, say. Shall I say for a month?'

'I wonder, now,' said Roger, fixing his gaze upon his brother, 'why you should be so anxious about it. It might be pleasant or it might be convenient, but why the deuce *you* should make such a point of it I don't see.'

'I—don't make any point,' replied Edmund. 'It seems to me that it would be a nice thing to do. I should be glad of your company. We might do a few things together. We have not been out together like this since we were boys, Roger.'

'On the spree,' said the elder brother, with a laugh; 'that's the word. I wonder how Mr. Gravity will look when he's on the —what do you call it?' He paused a moment, and then he said, 'That's not your reason, Ned.'

'Not altogether, Roger. A family quarrel is a hideous thing; it upsets me more than I can tell you. The Squire and you are too like each other; you will not give in, one or the other; and a little absence would set it all right.'

'Oh, a little absence would set it all right! But still, that's not what you mean, Ned,' Roger said. He walked across the hall, across the gleams of prismatic heraldic tints from the nearest window, to where the other revealed far away, to the distant horizon, a whole pale hemisphere of sky. There he stood, his dark figure outlined against that almost shrill clearness, while Edmund stood anxious behind. What the conflict was which was going on within Edmund painfully guessed, but could not know as he watched him, in that wonderful isolation of humanity that prevents the closest sympathiser, the most zealous helper, from understanding all. Dared he interfere more distinctly? Must he keep silence? Was he losing a precious opportunity? Edmund could

not tell. He stood helpless, clearing his throat to speak, but in the terrible doubt saying not a word.

'A little absence would set it all right,' Roger repeated, muttering between his teeth. 'Would it so? Is one's will of no more consequence than that? A little absence—a little—— Ned,' he said, turning round, 'you needn't speak to Wright. Perhaps I'll go, perhaps I sha'n't; no man can tell at six o'clock what he'll do at ten. We'll see how the chance goes,' he added, with a laugh, 'if there's time after dinner—or if there's not.' He paused as he passed, and laid his hand on his brother's shoulder. 'This I will say, whatever happens,—you mean well, Ned.'

'That's poor praise,' said Edmund, 'my sense and my good intentions. If you'd do it, Roger, for my sake—we've always been good friends, old fellow. Never mind the good meaning; do it for love.'

'For love!' the other said. He went away, with a hasty wave of his hand. Was it possible that his brother, 'that dearest heart and next his own,' in the very melting of his fraternal anxiety, had touched the wrong chord at the last?

IX

MOUNT TRAVERS

MOUNT TRAVERS, which was the name of the place which Elizabeth's uncle had built when he became a rich man, was of a very different description from the older houses of the district. It stood out barely on the top of a hill, surmounting everything within range of half a dozen miles, with a few half-grown plantations round it. It was constructed in the style of what was supposed to be in those dark days an English manor-house—that is, in red brick—to which dignity, it had been fondly hoped, was given by the introduction of large bays and great windows in hewn stone. No redder or whiter house ever existed outside of a nursery book. At the foot of the height on which it stood the natural foliage of the leafy country rose in waves of varying green, but near the house itself, to give it shelter or shade, were nothing but shrubs and neatly-planted trees, which were not tall enough to hide a single corner of the brilliant walls. Mr. Travers had thought all this very fine, and a proof of the superiority of the nineteenth century; for there was no other plate-glass in all the parish, and the conveniences in every way were innumerable. His horses and even his cows were better lodged by far than the servants at Melcombe, who were all huddled together in old attics at the top of the house, whereas Mr. Travers's butler had a large and airy room, lighted with plate-glass, like his master's. It had been the great pleasure of the last year of old Travers's life to make a striking thing of that new and resplendent dwelling. You stepped into the hall upon tiles of the most elaborate and costly description, and found yourself surrounded with inlaid panels and carvings in oak, which did not pretend to look old, as most things of the kind do, but boldly showed in every leaf and twig an art manufactuer fresh from the workshop. The staircases were all ornamented in the same way; the rooms were gorgeous from the hands of the

upholsterer; everything was the newest, brightest, and most highly improved of its kind.

Mrs. Travers sat in the great window of the drawing-room, a huge, broad, and lofty bay, where the plate-glass extended from the roof to the floor, and all was as light and naked as the noonday, indeed much more so; for Nature at her most unadorned never takes that air of nakedness which a great, open, unabashed window, making everything more distinct with its vast film of clear glass, throws upon the landscape. Mrs. Travers in her black gown, a speck in that broad stream of light, appeared like a small black image in the intense but doleful whiteness of the prospect beyond. It was a rainy day, the clouds all careering about the skies, throwing occasionally a spiteful dash of rain straight at the window, and the country looking dull yet shrewish, like one who would fain scold, but dared not under the circumstances. The successive waves of the trees, in their various outlines and depths, the faint tinge of green upon some, the half-opened leaves of others; the undulating country, here a common, there a park, here a piece of rich upland, there a ridge of trees, with villages scattered, and the roof or turrets of a rural mansion appearing out of a thick cluster of wood,—everything was visible from that big window. It seemed like an inquisitive watcher: and in the midst of its staring whiteness sat Mrs. Travers, all black save for the widow's cap and cuffs and collar, which were everything that is suggested by the dictates of unmitigated woe.

She was a little, spare woman, with a small, worn face, very gentle to outward semblance, yet with certain lines in it that denoted a querulous soul. She had her work in her hand, a large piece of white knitting, upon which she generally kept her eyes fixed, talking softly on with her face thus rendered opaque, save when she would suddenly and quietly drop her hands in her lap and lift the said eyes, which were of a somewhat muddy blue. This happened at periodical intervals, and was apt to rouse in the interlocutor, if at all sensitive, a certain nervous expectation which was not comfortable. Elizabeth had been used to her aunt's 'ways' all her life, and she did not so much mind.

'I hear you were at Melcombe yesterday, Elizabeth.'

'Yes, aunt. I went to see Pax.'

'You have grown very fond of Pax, as you call her. It was not much of an object for such a long ride.'

'Perhaps the ride itself was the chief object,' said Elizabeth, with a smile. 'I have always been fond of Pax, but I did want a ride, a good long ride, after being shut up so long.'

'You call it long? Your poor uncle would have been surprised if he had known that, after making you his heiress and everything, you should think six months' mourning too long.'

'Dear aunt!' said Elizabeth, with a little sigh of impatience; then she added, 'My uncle would understand; he would know that one might long for a little fresh air, and yet mourn him as truly—as truly as——'

She paused. She was a very honest young woman, above all treachery. She began to feel with self-reproach that there was little mourning in her thoughts. Some natural tears she had dropped; nay, she had dropped many. But it cannot be denied that she had begun to wipe them soon. It is the course of nature; because an old man dies, it is impossible that a young woman should shut herself for ever out of the world.

Mrs. Travers put down her knitting, and looked at her niece with those little pale blue eyes. Elizabeth thought they looked through her, but this was not the case. Mrs. Travers had not yielded to any violence of grief, and Elizabeth's mourning was quite respectfully 'deep,' which was almost all that she felt to be required.

'Many people would have thought it necessary, for an uncle who had done so much for them, not to be seen at all for the first year,' remarked Mrs. Travers.

'If that were all. I am not in the least anxious to be seen.'

'Then, what were you doing at Melcombe? You know as well as I do that now you are known to be your uncle's heiress all the young men from far and near will be after you, like flies round a pot of honey.'

'Indeed, aunt——'

'Oh, don't tell me you don't know. That is one of the reasons that ought to have made your poor dear uncle leave things more in my hands; for if it had been understood that you were to have the money only at my pleasure, it would have been a refuge for you from fortune-hunters. What he has done, though he meant it well, is really a very bad thing for you,' Mrs. Travers said, ending off a row abruptly, with a little tug to bring it straight. '*I* know what fortune-hunters are.'

To this Elizabeth made no reply, and after a while her aunt continued. 'You saw some of the Mitfords, of course; and of course the old man, whom I never liked, has marked you down for one of his sons. Oh, don't tell me; I know it well enough. The eldest, perhaps, because Mount Travers would be such a nice addition to the property; or the second, because he has not very much of his own, and it would be nice to have him so near home; or the

youngest. Now, if it had to be one of them,' said Mrs. Travers, suddenly lifting her dull but very observant eyes, 'the youngest would be my choice.'

'I wish you would understand,' replied Elizabeth, with some vexation, 'that there is no question of anything of the kind. I saw the Mitfords pass, all three together, on their way to the station. That was the nearest communication I had with them. I saw young Raymond Tredgold and his father also, if you feel interested about them.'

'Oh yes, fortune-hunting too. Of course I am interested about them all; but I will tell you this, Lizzy, if you make any ridiculous marriage like that, taking up with a boy ever so many years younger than yourself, I can't take anything from you in the end, but you sha'n't bring a baby-husband to live in my house.'

Elizabeth had gone to the window, and stood close to that great expanse of light, leaning her head against one of the divisions. Had she been, as Mrs. Travers supposed, dependent, no doubt all this would have wounded her deeply. But as there was not the slightest vestige of right in the matter, and the poor lady was as powerless, though she did not know it, as the chair on which she was seated, the poor little ineffectual injury was easier to bear. Elizabeth stood looking out, a little vexed but more sorry, with nothing but compassion slightly tinctured with shame in her face. She was a little mortified that her aunt, her nearest relative, who had known her for so long, should speak to her so.

'I don't think you will be tried,' she said, with a faint sigh of impatience. And then she added, 'Mr. Gavelkind is coming to luncheon to-day. I hope you won't mind. I heard from him this morning that there was something he wanted to speak to—about.'

She stopped short at the pronoun in spite of herself. She could not say 'to you,' and would not say 'to me.' Her path was very thorny. The lawyer had to be received somehow, and must have the way prepared for him. Poor Elizabeth, in her impulse of generosity, had found a thousand reasons to answer all arguments, when she was told that her uncle's widow ought to be informed exactly what was the state of affairs. But she had not foreseen such a very ordinary little practical dilemma as this.

'Mr. Gavelkind!' cried Mrs. Travers. 'I must say I think it is very strange that he should write to you about coming, and not to me, Elizabeth. I don't like to say so, but I can't hide it from myself. You take a great deal too much upon you, my dear. Though my husband did leave you his heiress, I don't suppose he ever intended to make you mistress of my house.'

'Dear aunt!' cried Elizabeth in despair. 'You know you never did take any interest in business. He wrote to me thinking —that he ought not to trouble you about such matters; thinking it would worry you, and that you would not like it, and that I—— In short,' added Elizabeth, with a sudden inspiration, 'it is something about my own little bit of money, after all, and nothing of yours.'

'Why did not you say so at once?' asked her aunt. 'I should not wish ever to interfere with your own money. I have always regretted that I was not allowed to manage mine from the beginning. I am sure there would have been more of it now; and as that is all I have to dispose of, to give any little keepsakes to my own relatives—— Well, we needn't talk of that any more. If you want any advice I shall be pleased to give you my opinion, Lizzy, but you young people think you know everything better than we do.'

'No, indeed, aunt; but I shall not exercise any judgment of my own; I shall do just what Mr. Gavelkind advises. What do I know about stocks and investments?'

'You ought to know about them, if you don't. You ought to look at the city article every morning, and improve your mind. My father was a stockbroker, and that is what *he* said. "Read the city article, and then you'll know as much as any of us do,"—that is what he always said. Of course it does not matter just now with your own thousand or two. But when you have all the Travers money to manage——'

'I hope,' said Elizabeth, faltering, turning her head still more away, oppressed by the weight of the untruth which she had meant to be only a tacit one, 'that it may be very long before——'

'Well, my dear,' said Mrs. Travers, in a subdued and softened tone, 'I believe you do. I am sure that you don't want to get rid of me for the sake of the money. I may be a little nasty about the will sometimes. It isn't that I ever would have alienated his money,—you should have had it all the same, Lizzy, every penny,—only it would have seemed more trustful-like. But any way, my dear, I am certain you never would grudge me a day's enjoyment of it,—of that I am quite sure.'

Elizabeth stole like a culprit behind her aunt's chair and gave her a kiss, at the risk of receiving a stab in return from the knitting-pins. She felt guilty but glad this time, her own heart melting too. 'We don't need to say these things between you and me, do we?' she whispered, feeling very tenderly towards the guardian of her youth.

'But, my dear,' remarked Mrs. Travers, going on with her knitting after a little emphatic nod of assent, 'by that time you will have a husband, who will rule the money and you too.'

'I am not so sure of that. At all events, there is no appearance of him as yet upon the horizon,' replied Elizabeth, returning to her seat, this little episode being over. The worst of it was that such little episodes occurred almost every day.

'And you nearly five and twenty!' said Mrs. Travers. 'To a woman who was married at nineteen, as I was, that seems quite old for a girl.'

'I don't consider myself a girl,' returned Elizabeth, with a smile. 'I am like Pax. I have outgrown those vanities.'

'Nonsense, my dear. Pax is five and forty if she is a day, and a clergyman's daughter without a penny. Oh yes, I know all the Melcombe young men were in love with her—once: except the youngest. The youngest is the one I would choose. He is a fine-looking sort of fellow; he is not one of the calculating sort. Roger is as proud as Lucifer, and would snuff and sniff at good honest money, and think a great deal more of his mouldy old lands, and Edmund is a sentimental dawdle; but the third one, Lizzy, he would be the man for me. He has always something to say to a woman. He'd run off with you whether you would or not; he'd give you no peace; he wouldn't take no for an answer. That is the sort of young fellow I like to see.'

'Why, you are like Lydia Languish, aunt! I did not know you were so romantic.'

'I never was for myself,' said the little woman, who had sparkled up out of her widow's weeds for a moment with a flash of spirit and fire which tempted the listener to laugh; 'married at nineteen to a stockbroker in the city! I never had any time to be romantic; but I confess I have always been so for you, Lizzy. You are a handsome woman, and you were a very pretty girl. I used always to expect some one to come riding up out of the distance for you. When we first came here I always thought some carriage would break down at the gates, or a gentleman be thrown off his horse, or something. But it never happened. I was dreadfully disappointed when you got to twenty-one and nobody had ever come for you. Some girls have these things happen by the dozen. I never could understand why they didn't happen to you.'

'Poor auntie, how I must have disappointed you!' cried Elizabeth, laughing. 'I feel quite sorry that Prince Charming has never appeared, for your sake.'

'But you have him under your hand now, or I am much mis-

taken. Next time he comes home on leave, you will just see if he isn't over here on some pretext or other before he has been two days at home, Lizzy——'

'Because he has heard that—I am my uncle's heiress, aunt?'

'Well,' observed Mrs. Travers, 'you can never leave money out of account in affairs of this sort. A man like that wouldn't dare to propose to you unless you had money, for he has none: and how could the pair of you live? I don't call that fortune-hunting. He has a very good position, he belongs to an old family, he's a soldier, which always counts for something, and I am quite sure that he admires you very much. The money 's not his object; it only makes his object possible.'

'What a clever woman you are, auntie! You are a casuist as well as a romancer. I never should have seen it in that light.'

'Wouldn't you, now?' said Mrs. Travers, with gratification. 'Oh, I am not such a fool as I look. My father always said so. And, my dear, in such a case as that, I need scarcely say—a man whom I liked, and who would cheer us all up, and throw a little *éclat* upon the place—there would be no need of thinking of another establishment, Elizabeth. You would be welcome, and more than welcome, like my son and daughter in my house.'

The tears trembled in Elizabeth's eyes, a hot colour came over her face. She felt guilty and ashamed, and yet she could hardly restrain the laugh in which alone sometimes a perplexed soul can express itself. 'You are always the kindest of the kind, dear aunt,' she said.

'You should have your own set of rooms,' the old lady went on, quite pleased with her plan—'sitting-rooms and everything. You should choose them yourselves, and have them furnished to your own taste. I should do everything I could to make you feel—I mean to make *him* feel quite at his ease: and of course you would succeed to everything at my death. Now, Lizzy, if this does happen, as I hope it will, and I am almost sure it will, don't you take any notion into your head that he should have spoken before; for how could he speak before, having no money of his own, and not knowing whether there might be anything more than that thousand or two of your mother's, on your side?'

'My dear aunt, Stephen Mitford has never spoken a dozen words to me in my life,' cried Elizabeth, a little vexed. 'He has not the remotest idea of anything of the kind, nor of me, at all, I am sure.'

'Well,' returned Mrs. Travers, 'we shall see, we shall see; and certainly he is the one that would be my choice.'

X

THE LAWYER

ELIZABETH received the lawyer, when he arrived, in the room which had been her uncle's business-room, a plain, dark-complexioned little place, with a large writing-table and a few comfortable chairs, but no paraphernalia in the way of books to distract the attention. The charms of business by itself were sufficiently great to make other pleasantnesses unnecessary, Mr. Travers had thought, and accordingly, though the window was quite large and of plate-glass, it looked out upon no panorama of varied landscape, but upon a close little corner of shrubbery which rose to a climax in a large larch, very feathery and fine in its way, but which certainly did not add to the light or even cheerfulness of the small, square, brown, uncompromising room. The spring sunshine did not get near this place, nor even the blue of the sky. It was all larch and laurel, and a very modified dull light. And it cannot be said that Elizabeth's companion was an entertaining one. He was a spare man, with a lock of hair growing upon his forehead as if it had somehow strayed there, leaving the crown of his head ungarnished, of a sallow gray colour, not unlike parchment, and features that seemed too small for his face; his nose appeared to have remained the size it was in childhood, and the mouth to have grown into a little round aperture by some spell or freak of nature; but the extraordinarily bright little twinkling eyes which completed the countenance seemed to promise that Mr. Gavelkind's intellect had not been arrested in its growth. They dwelt upon Elizabeth with a very kind, paternal look as he shovelled away into a bag the papers he had been placing before her. She had not much more knowledge than she had professed to have, and did in reality prove her confidence very completely in the adviser who had managed all her uncle's affairs; but Elizabeth's ignorance was very intelligent, and he had been explaining a great many things to her, which gave her a certain

interest in the large transactions which were now carried on in her name.

'And now,' he said, shutting his bag with a snap, 'tell me, Miss Elizabeth, what face am I to put on before the poor lady whom you are deceiving for her good?'

'Oh, don't say deceiving, Mr. Gavelkind.'

'What shall I call it, then? Give me your name for the business, and I shall use it. I know no other, according to my own lights.'

'Then you must not use your own lights. Fancy not allowing her to believe that she is mistress in her own house. I would rather lose it altogether, and be dependent upon her bounty, as she thinks would have been more just.'

'You would not have liked that.'

'No, perhaps I shouldn't; but that is not the question. I have told her—I hope it is not too dreadful a fib, but what can I do?—that it is my own little bit of money you have come to me about.'

'Well, it is your own money, so far as that is concerned; but you will have to tell a great fib before you are done, which is what I warned you; and if she should once get a clue, and begin to suspect, you will be very easily found out.'

'Oh, please don't say so, Mr. Gavelkind. I admit it isn't so easy as I thought. Little things occur which I had not foreseen, and I am quite frightened when I see how clever I get in explaining. Do you think it will give me the habit of telling fibs?'

'Very likely indeed. But I hope you can trust your memory, for that is the worst of it—when we step beyond the truth we are so apt to forget what the last l—— fib, I mean, was.'

'You are dreadfully severe,' said Elizabeth, half laughing, not without a little inclination to cry. 'That *is* exactly what I feel; and sometimes I contradict myself, and can't remember what I said last.'

'Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive,' said the lawyer. 'The thing I fear is that you will not be able to keep it up.'

'Oh yes, I shall be able to keep it up,' she cried hurriedly, and led the way out of the room. At times this deception, at which everybody who knew of it shook their heads, got too much for poor Elizabeth. She took Mr. Gavelkind to the cold lightness of the drawing-room, and ran up to her own room, to bathe her forehead and refresh herself. The situation occasionally got upon her nerves, as people say. She felt disposed to laugh and cry, with

a sobbing mixture of sounds, and could not stop herself for a minute; but Elizabeth was not at all a hysterical subject, and good sense and cold water soon got the better of this.

'Well, Mr. Gavelkind,' observed Mrs. Travers, 'I hear you have come to see my niece about her investments. Have you got some new chance for that little money of hers? I expect to hear it has quite doubled its value, since you take so much interest in it.'

'I take an interest in the money of all my clients,' said the lawyer, 'and I am glad to see that Miss Travers begins to understand business, which is what a great many ladies can never be taught to do.'

'Yes, indeed,' said the old lady. 'I was of that kind myself, so long as I had my husband to think for me. But now if you were to give me the benefit of your instructions, as you do Elizabeth,—you know I am a stockbroker's daughter, I ought to have a little aptitude,—I think I might begin to understand too.'

'There is no occasion, my dear lady, no occasion,' said the lawyer hastily; 'everything is as comfortable as possible. If there is any need, then it will be time enough. Your niece is getting back her colour, Mrs. Travers, I am glad to see. For some time after your great loss, whether it was altogether distress or something to do with the deep mourning, I quite feared that Miss Elizabeth——'

'She is always very well, thank you,' interrupted the widow rather sharply, 'Elizabeth's health need give nobody any trouble. What should be the matter with her, at her age? At mine these great shocks are a very different matter.' It was indeed a little hard upon Mrs. Travers to have her attention called to the depth of her niece's sorrow, when no notice was taken of any paleness or changed looks of her own.

Elizabeth came in at this moment with something of a flush upon her face, owing to the large application of fresh cold water with which she had been driving away the momentary hysterical sensation produced by all the contrarieties of feeling in which she was involved.

'She is red enough just now, certainly,' her aunt remarked, choosing, as elderly relatives not unfrequently do, the least complimentary expression possible. 'Is luncheon ready, Elizabeth? Mr. Gavelkind has begun to think already about catching his train.'

This anxiety, though, perhaps, it really existed in the lawyer's mind, had not been expressed, but he only smiled, and owned that he was anxious to get back to town as soon as possible; and Mrs. Travers, taking his arm, led him into the dining-room, which was

on the opposite side of the hall, and commanded the same extended prospect through the clear sheets of plate-glass.

'What a view, to be sure!' Mr. Gavelkind exclaimed. 'I suppose you are higher up than anybody in the county. Why, some of the trees are quite green already; and I like that sort of purply down over them that shows spring 's coming. Why, you have the air quite fresh from the sea.'

'Five hundred feet above the sea level,' observed Mrs. Travers with a touch of pride; 'and nothing so high between us and the Channel. You can smell the air quite salt sometimes, and even see it, they say, on fine days; but I can't say that I put very much faith in that.'

'And that's Whitelocks common just underneath. Such a sweep of land as that is quite good enough without any sea. And that's Whitelocks itself among the trees. I used to know it very well in the late lord's time. I knew all the country about pretty well. What's that brown house to the west, with the little square tower? Oh, it's Melcombe, I remember. Are the Mitfords still there? I suppose you know everybody as far as you can see.'

'We know the Mitfords, at all events,' replied Mrs. Travers significantly, with a glance at Elizabeth. 'There are three young men in the house; and that is a fact which can't be without interest where there is a girl and an heiress.'

'It amuses you, at any rate, to think so, auntie.'

'Amuses me! Oh no; on the contrary, it makes me very anxious. Three young men, all marriageable, planted at my very door! And I think a young woman in Elizabeth's position, or rather, in what her position will be, ought to have a husband. It is all very well for her to understand her investments under your instructions, Mr. Gavelkind; but a woman never is very bright on such matters, you may say what you like, and her husband would understand them much better.'

'That is sometimes the case, I must allow,' said Mr. Gavelkind, 'but Miss Elizabeth——'

'I hope you don't want to turn Elizabeth's head with your compliments. She is just a girl like other girls. She will take up that sort of thing if she has nothing else in her head, and she will make you think she understands it. You will imagine that she takes quite an interest, and cares more for it than anything else. But the moment other things come in which are more congenial, you will find it is like the seed sown on thin soil, where there is, as the Bible says, no deepness of earth, and that it has all withered away.'

'That's very natural, I believe,' said the lawyer.

'You talk me over very much at your ease,' said Elizabeth, with a laugh; but she was a little nervous, and slightly excited still. 'I am quite capable of taking care of myself and of everything I may have, without asking other assistance than Mr. Gavelkind's, I assure you, aunt.'

'You need not assure me anything of the kind, for I will not believe it,' Mrs. Travers answered; and then turning to the lawyer she said, 'What I am afraid of is that Elizabeth will choose the least suitable, if she is left to herself, which is what girls generally do. But, fortunately, she has not very much to think of in the way of money as yet.'

'Fortunately!' assented the lawyer. He had shot one glance out of his keen eyes at Elizabeth, who had not replied with any sign or look from hers. Then he directed the conversation into another channel by commending the dish from which Mrs. Travers had helped him. She was very ambitious on the point of cookery, and delighted to hear that Mr. Gavelkind's cook had never been able to reach the perfection of these chicken cutlets. 'And she came to me from Lord Youngham's,' the lawyer said, 'where a great deal of attention was paid to the kitchen. There was a French man-cook, and this woman of mine was the first kitchen-maid, but we never have anything on our table that can come up to this.'

'Perhaps Mrs. Gavelkind does not take great interest in it herself,' said Mrs. Travers, well pleased. 'They all know I do, not for the sake of eating,—though I think that even in the way of eating we should all know what we are about,—but I love to see a nice dish, looking well and tasting well. I take a great deal of trouble about it altogether. I'm fond of seeing a nice luncheon and a nice dinner on the table. And my cook knows that. Has Mrs. Gavelkind ever tried——' And here the old lady entered into domestic particulars such as her listener did not disdain. Elizabeth sat and listened vaguely, hearing the voices run on, though without any very clear perception of what they said. She was not interested in all the ingredients of the sauce, and the elaboration of the process by which that perfection was reached, but she knew it interested her aunt, and that there was no such good way of withdrawing her attention from much more important matters. Elizabeth sat at the foot of the square table, drawn near the window now that the weather was milder, and commanding the whole wide landscape, miles upon miles, in all the softness of the spring tints, stretching away into the horizon. In the midst

of this wide scene her eyes instinctively caught the low square tower of Melcombe amid its trees. When the foliage was out the house was almost hid, but at the present moment the range of those windows along the south front, which made every one a little chamber of its own, projecting from the long line of the sitting-rooms, showed all the way, and reminded Elizabeth, in spite of herself, of various little scenes. She had sat there on summer evenings, last year, with Nina and her chatter, with 'the boys,' as Pax called them, one after another. Her aunt's remarks brought those recollections back. Last summer had been the only one in which the Travers household had been fully received into the life of the county. There had been a certain amount of curiosity about them and their reported wealth, and their great new blazing house, and then there had been a certain hesitation before the neighbours 'took them up'; but that period of doubt had ended in a general advance, and during the last summer before her uncle died they had 'gone everywhere,' as people say. It was a good thing he had tasted such sweetness as there was in that, Elizabeth thought to herself, as her aunt discoursed and enlightened her appreciative listener. Poor old uncle! he had got as much good as the circumstances allowed out of the situation. It had been a great pleasure to him to build that wonderful house, with all the latest improvements in it, and to overtop everybody, looking down upon the lower-lying houses of the gentry, and upon the villages that peeped at various corners. And at the last he had been very well received in the county; he had been asked to all the best houses, he had felt himself to be acknowledged by all the constituted authorities: no doubt that had given him pleasure. But now that he was dead, and had left so many complications and perplexities behind him, Elizabeth could not but ask herself whether it was an unmingled good to be thus uplifted, like a city on a hill, to be stared at, perhaps laughed at. The situation of the house and her own situation seemed to run into each other, so that she could scarcely keep them apart. She was the heiress, known far and wide, held out to public competition, as it were, just as her house was held out in a blaze of colour and reflection, so that all the country could see it. If they had stayed in town, Elizabeth would have been but one of many, and she would have lived in the unobtrusive level of a street, in the midst of other houses like her own. What a pity that it had ever occurred to him to plunge into this new way of living, to begin afresh for so short a time, in this new world.

Presently, however, the conversation in which she took no part came to an end, and Mr. Gavelkind began to fidget and to talk of

his train. He had time to walk, but no more than time, and the walk would be more pleasant, he declared, than the dogcart which was at his service. 'Perhaps Miss Elizabeth will walk down the hill with me,' he said. And Elizabeth took him through the new plantations, still so straggling and unfinished in their youthfulness, by the short cut to the railway, which was another thing Mr. Travers had prided himself upon. 'Poor uncle liked to think he had so short a way to the station. He used to say that though we were so much higher up than anybody, we had still the nearest access to the world.'

'Poor old gentleman,' remarked Mr. Gavelkind. 'What a pity, what a pity! Just when he had got everything ready for his own enjoyment, to go and leave it all! He must have regretted it so; and who can tell whether there will be all the modern improvements where he has gone?'

'You must not laugh,' said Elizabeth. 'He was very good to me. I can't bear laughing on such a subject.'

'My dear young lady! Laugh! No, you need not fear, there was no laughing in my mind. It is a curious question, though, and one I often think of: What will happen to us, with all our artificial wants, in what I may call Another Place? Don't you know what I mean? It should be primitive there, if it's anything; like Eden, don't you know?—quite pastoral or agricultural at the most; and an old gentleman accustomed to a town life and all sorts of conveniences—— If you think I am laughing you are very much mistaken. I often think of it, and how much at a loss we shall probably be,' Mr. Gavelkind said, with a sigh.

Elizabeth felt, with a humorous suggestion at which she was shocked, the ruefulness in her companion's tone,—an old city man, full of his little habits, in the Garden of Eden! It was not possible to exclude a sense of the ludicrous from that image.

'I should think,' she said, with a little trembling of her lip, which, to tell the truth, was caused more by a struggle to preserve her gravity than to repress her feelings, 'that all good people would be at home there.'

'Yes, yes, oh yes!' cried Mr. Gavelkind; and then he changed the subject abruptly, pausing upon a knoll to take breath, and pointing with a wave of his hand toward Melcombe. 'My dear Miss Elizabeth, I've known you all your life, and I am one of your trustees; tell me, is there any truth in what Mrs. Travers said?'

XI

THE SQUIRE

ELIZABETH came quickly up the slope, having parted with the lawyer at the gate. Perhaps the colour on her face was partly from the climb, but it was no doubt a little from the cross-examination to which she had been subjected. Something in it! She had answered quickly, 'Nothing whatever!' with a little start almost of offence. Then she had laughed, and said it was silly of her to feel annoyed. 'My aunt is not a matchmaker,' she said, 'but she likes to speculate on possibilities, which are possibilities only in her own mind.'

'Many ladies do,' said Mr. Gavelkind. 'It is like making up a novel. It seems to give them a great deal of amusement.'

'To be sure,' said Elizabeth. 'It is too silly to object to what amuses her, only she ought not to speak of it as if it were, or might be, true.'

The lawyer gave a sidelong glance at the young lady by his side, whose colour had risen though she laughed. 'No, that's imprudent,' he said. 'It sometimes spoils sport.'

They had reached the gate as he said this, and Elizabeth had not time to object or protest. But she was red with indignation as well as other sentiments, as she hastened up the ascending path. The air was very fresh in her face, coming from the west, the rainy quarter, and charged with moisture. The gravel glistened, and so did the polished leaves of the evergreens, with the occasional showers. It was not a cheerful day, on the whole, for the ordinary pedestrian, but Elizabeth, in the revulsion of feeling after six months of partial seclusion, and with the consciousness of the spring in her veins, found a certain excitement, if not exhilaration, even in the hostile weather, the dash of rain in her face, and the capricious puffs of the changeable wind. After that quiet period her mind had sprung up afresh. She felt a tumult of life in it, pushing forward to new efforts. She walked briskly up and down the broad

walk in front of the house. Mrs. Travers had left her usual place in the great window of the drawing-room, and retired to her bedroom for her equally usual doze, so that there was no one to disturb or to be disturbed by Elizabeth as she paced up and down, keeping the confusion of her thoughts in restraint rather than actively producing them. There was too much rain in the sky to justify a long walk, even in the close-fitting dark-gray ulster and cloth hat, which were things which could take no harm; and nowhere could she have got more air or a more extended prospect. There is little doubt that Mr. Gavelkind, with his questions, had given a fresh start and impetus to her thoughts. They hurried on far more quickly than her steps, which scattered the gravel; they went as quick as the clouds careering over the sky. Now and then when she came to the end of her promenade, as she turned quickly, the immense landscape below suddenly attracted her, and made her stand still for a moment. What a breadth of undulating country, what ridges of trees, what soft down of the new corn upon the fields! Everything was full of promise and new life; the very sap showing as it coursed in the veins of every tree.

But there was one spot which above all others attracted Elizabeth's look. Her eyes turned there instinctively, she did not know why. Seriously she did not know why, unless because the recent talk had directed her that way in spite of herself. For, she said to herself, she had no connection with Melcombe to turn her face that way, —none whatever! There was nothing in it; neither in her aunt's foolish talk, nor in the questions which Mr. Gavelkind had put, and to which Elizabeth believed she had been very decisive and even peremptory in her reply.

Nothing in it? After all, was that quite seriously and sincerely true? Or if so, why, in all that landscape, did her eyes light continually upon the little square tower of Melcombe among the trees?

Elizabeth was disturbed by the interposition of the question put against her will by herself to herself. One can answer a lawyer, though he may put his question very cleverly, much better than one can answer one's self. When one's self chooses to be inquisitive, there is nothing for it but sophistry and a wrapping up of the question in evasions, which, however, do not conceal the truth from that all-scrutinising judge. Was there nothing in it? There was this in it: that there were two young men at Melcombe (Elizabeth characteristically replied to her aunt's imaginations on the subject by forgetting that there was a third), about her own age, in her own position, likely enough either of them. She turned abruptly round and gave her head a shake, to throw off any irrelevant

thoughts. Well, what about those two young men? They were nothing to Elizabeth. They were well looking enough, well mannered, well educated, on the whole nice enough. You could not better them in a summer's day. A woman could not complain if either of them fell to her lot. At Whitelocks the eldest son was a shambling boy, but the Mitfords were excellent representatives of manhood. That was all that there was to say, and the reader will perceive that it was nothing. There was nothing in it; and Elizabeth Travers, so far as these young men were concerned, was fancy-free.

She laughed softly to herself, after she had got over the little shock with which she had been conscious that herself to herself was putting that question. There is safety in numbers, she thought; one does not fall in love with two. But both were interesting to her, she could not venture to deny. Nay, she would admit it, proclaim it, holding her head high. In all the county she had not become acquainted with any other two human creatures so interesting. They had both been in love with Pax, in their day,—dear Pax, who called them 'the boys,' and was so fond of them, and their most faithful friend. There was something in all this which pleased Elizabeth's imagination. It was quite a beautiful point in the moral landscape, as in the scene before her it was pretty to see the tower of Melcombe rising homely and brown among the trees. If there were anything in it, that was all, and what was that? Nothing whatever, as she had said.

At this point Elizabeth became aware of a figure on the road below, walking briskly in the direction of the lodge, which lay almost at her feet. There was something in his air which made it apparent to her that he was coming to call. How it is that this is always so unmistakable it would be hard to say, and yet it is so. You can tell even by the pace of the horses when a carriage is aiming for your own door; how much more by the attitude of a man! He was coming to call. Who was he? A large, imposing presence of a man; holding his head high, walking as if the place belonged to him. That was how the lodge-keeper's wife described him afterwards. 'Mr. Mitford's a fine man,' she said; 'he's like a nobleman. He walks as if the ground wasn't good enough to set his whole foot upon, kind of starting off from it, like he scorned it.'

Elizabeth looked at him for some time, with his springy step, not making out who he was. When it suddenly dawned upon her that it was Mr. Mitford of Melcombe, not the son but the father, the blood flushed again to her face, and she hurried indoors, feeling as though she were escaping; and yet she had no wish to

avoid the visitor. She ran upstairs to her aunt's room, and tapped at the door. 'Dear aunt, I don't want to disturb you, but here is Mr. Mitford coming to call,' she said. Then she went to her own room, and threw off her ulster and her cloth hat, in which she looked very pretty, though she was horrified at the idea of being found in them, and smoothed her ruffled locks. Her hair, thus blown about by the wind, and sprinkled with diamond drops by the rain, was extremely becoming in its untidy condition. Perhaps Elizabeth, as she glanced into the glass, was not unconscious of this, but she brushed it all flat and smooth with a remorseless hand.

Then slowly, decorously, she went downstairs, and took up her place in the drawing-room, in front of the great window, to prepare for the visit,—which, after all, was no more than any other visit, if there were nothing whatever in what her aunt had said to the lawyer. Elizabeth's heart beat a little, all the same, she could not have told why, and she had more colour than usual and a brighter reflection in her eyes.

'I understood that Mrs. Travers was seeing her friends at last,' Mr. Mitford said. 'I am glad of it, heartily glad of it. It is not good to shut one's self up with one's grief, if you will let me say so.'

'It was scarcely that. My aunt has not been well. She is always delicate, and it was a great shock.'

Elizabeth did not like to take the sacred name of grief in vain. She felt with a movement of shame that even in the case of Mrs. Travers the sorrow which had followed her uncle's death had not been of that sublime and majestic kind, devoid of consolation, in which youth hopes and believes.

'No doubt, no doubt,' assented the Squire, 'but we must not let our emotions swallow us up. Something is due, my dear Miss Travers, to our friends and to society. Because one is absent, however dear, we must not shut out all the world.'

Elizabeth was silent, not knowing how to reply to such a broad statement, and Mr. Mitford went on to make various inquiries about her own tastes and habits. He had heard that she had been at the Rectory, with that noble mare of hers. It would have been very pleasant to him if she had come as far as Melcombe; but he was aware that his little Nina was too much of a child to be any attraction, and that he and a parcel of sons could scarcely expect such a visitor, 'though we should all have felt it a great honour,' he added. He had always been civil to Elizabeth, being the kind of man who is never unaffected by the

presence of a woman with any pretensions to good looks; but he had never before paid his court in this deferential way. The effort was somewhat bewildering, slightly amusing, half oppressive; and Elizabeth was glad when Mrs. Travers appeared, to whom he made some of these pretty speeches over again.

'I have no one to pay visits for me,' he said; 'my little daughter 's too young. You must accept me as the representative of my family, Mrs. Travers—and let me express my pleasure in the thought that we shall have you in the midst of us again.'

'You are very obliging, Mr. Mitford,' returned Mrs. Travers. The little lady was much surprised and slightly excited by this unexpected *empressement*. It looked as if he must mean something; but what to a six months' widow of her respectable standing could the man mean?

'My sons have just left me,' said the Squire. 'One can't easily keep young men out of London at this time of the year. Roger, indeed, is not at all a man about town; but it takes some time to get out of the engagements which a young fellow plunges into without thought. He'll make a good family man one of these days.'

'He ought to marry,' declared Mrs. Travers. 'That is the best thing to steady a young man.'

'The very best, my dear lady,—the foundation of all real happiness, as you and I, alas, have good reason to know.'

Mrs. Travers eyed her visitor with some curiosity. 'I don't see why you should say "alas." It has been the very best thing for me that ever happened in my life, and I am sure my poor dear would have said so too. He has left me only a life interest in the property,' she added abruptly, fixing her eyes coldly upon the visitor, in whom, with all directness and a good deal of the pleasure of being acute enough to see through and through him, she saw a possible candidate for the reversion of Mr. Travers's possessions. The widow felt that there should be no deception practised upon him in that respect.

'A life interest,' Mr. Mitford said. He knew all about the will, much better than she herself did. 'I thought that Miss Travers—I thought that——'

Elizabeth looked quickly up at him with a keen glance of meaning, which he did not understand, though it startled him. 'I am sure, aunt, that Mr. Mitford does not care to inquire into our private affairs,' she said.

'I have no secrets, Elizabeth; everything has always been quite clear and above-board with me. So near a neighbour might

easily be interested. Yes, the property is all locked up hard and fast. It was his own, to do what he liked with it, and I never should have gone against him. The only thing that I feel a little is that he might have known me better, and had more confidence; but no doubt everything is for the best.'

'That is always a satisfaction,' remarked the Squire piously, 'whatever our circumstances may be.'

'So it is,' said Mrs. Travers, 'but no doubt you have noticed that people seldom say so when they are pleased with their circumstances. I care nothing about the property, for in any case, of course, Elizabeth should have had it after me, all the same. It is only the want of confidence that is a little vexing. But you great proprietors, I have always heard say, have just as little freedom with your entails.'

'Not I,' replied Mr. Mitford briskly. 'There is no entail to speak of on my property. I can leave it to whom I like, the youngest as easily as the eldest,—or away from them altogether, if I please.'

'Dear me,' exclaimed Mrs. Travers; then, after a pause, 'It must give you a great deal of hold on them to have that in your power.'

'It does,' he said, with a satisfied expression, shutting his mouth after the words were said, as if he had closed and locked the door of his treasures. Elizabeth sat and looked on with a curious terror and repugnance growing upon her. These two old people comparing notes with a certain eagerness of fellow-feeling, over their power to influence the generations after them, sent a chill into her blood. One of them, at least, might be impotent to do anything, but there was a gleam in Mrs. Travers's eyes which told how much she also would like to have the power of posthumous revenge or injury in her hands.

'Well, it is a great thing to be able to do what one pleases,' Mrs. Travers observed, with a long-drawn breath. 'It must make you feel that what you have is really your own. But that can never be a woman's case unless she is an heiress in her own right, as Elizabeth will be when I am gone. She will be like you, quite free to leave it to whom she likes.'

'We must tie her down in her marriage settlements,' said the Squire, with a laugh.

'If I were she, I should not let myself be tied down. I should keep it in my own hands. Money is power, don't you know? I never was in that position. My husband's money was almost all of his own making, and I never questioned his right to dispose of

it. Lizzy is his natural heir, as we never had any children of our own—his natural-born heir, being his brother's daughter; while I,' she continued, with an irony which gave her a certain enjoyment, 'was only his wife.'

Mr. Mitford was completely puzzled. He could not but ask himself whether there was not some codicil, some rider to the will which he had seen, which made her a more important person than he had thought. If it were only after her death that Elizabeth inherited!—and she was not an old woman from his point of view. He continued the conversation with unabated cordiality, and took his leave with many pretty speeches, but he carried with him subject for thought. If, after all, there should be nothing to be got by it till after her death!

'Dear aunt,' Elizabeth said, when he was gone, 'since you care so much for it, I wish the money had been yours, and yours only; but may we not keep that grievance to ourselves?'

'I don't see why I shouldn't speak of it, Lizzy. It is no grievance. I should have done the same whatever had happened; but there are circumstances in which everybody, and a gentleman particularly, ought to know the exact truth——'

'A gentleman particularly!' Elizabeth repeated in consternation; but the meaning of the phrase entirely escaped her, though it seemed to mean more than reached the ear.

XII

MR. MITFORD'S INVESTIGATIONS

MR. MITFORD, it is needless to say, had no such ideas in his mind as those which had been suggested by his remarks to his widowed neighbour. As a general rule he disliked women, having found them in his way all his life. His daughters had happily gone off, and had not troubled him,—all but Nina, who was not a disagreeable plaything in her way, and for whom one of her married sisters would probably provide before long. He did not contemplate with any pleasure the introduction into his house of even a Mrs. Roger, though he was aware that a certain additional respectability, a greater claim upon the regard of your neighbours, follows the presence of a mistress in the house. He scorned, indeed, the notion that a house could be better ordered, or its expenses regulated better, under feminine supervision than under his own. Nay, he knew that he was a better housekeeper than any woman, as a man when he gives his mind to it is sure to be, the Squire believed. But he was a little disturbed in his mind by Mrs. Travers's statements. He had looked up the will in Doctors' Commons without making any fuss about it, and he was aware exactly how things stood. The idea of a codicil was impossible, since that must have been registered and in evidence also. But nobody could say what a romantic young woman might do. Elizabeth might personally have executed some deed to put herself in subjection. She might have signed some instrument which she could not annul, to please her aunt, or in accordance with some whim of her own. Women are full of whims. There is nothing they are so fond of doing as rushing into all sorts of muddles with lawyers; it gives them importance, it gives them occupation, and an adroit man, probably an old ally of Mrs. Travers, could persuade the girl into anything. These were the troublesome thoughts with which Mr. Mitford went down the hill, not any idea of proposing himself to the widow to fill the old stockbroker's place.

He had a great many things to disturb him, it must be allowed. Roger had gone away, refusing or postponing the execution of his father's wishes, and Mr. Mitford, who was not without sense, began to see that it was a mistaken policy to urge upon a young man a marriage which there was any hope of bringing about in a more natural way. He felt that he had taken a wrong step, and that the probable effect would be to drive his son farther off from Elizabeth, not to make her seem more desirable. This consciousness of wrong on his own side neither made his reflections more pleasant, nor softened his anger. When, indeed, should a man be angry, if it is not when he has made a mistake? Roger's abrupt departure, though he was aware that in itself it was no bad thing, had left him in that impotence of displeasure which is one of the greatest burdens of the choleric man. For there was nobody to find fault with, nobody to express his wrath to or pour out its vials upon. The servants had all felt it,—but there is comparatively little satisfaction in wasting your rage upon servants,—and Nina had fled in tears from the breakfast-table, which, instead of affording relief, had only made the Squire ashamed of himself. The two fellows had gone away together, mutually siding with and abetting each other, forming a sort of conspiracy against their father's lawful power. Words could not express the indignation of the father thus driven to silence. He had taken a walk to Mount Travers, partly to get the better of his wrath, partly to make up for the shortcomings of those 'cubs,' as he called them to himself, and keep the way open in case of after-ameliorations of the situation. But he came away much sobered, wondering if, after all, it was so much worth the while. Perhaps he had been a little hasty; perhaps it might be just as well to wait and see how things would turn out. After slowly revolving this in his mind, Mr. Mitford returned to his original way of thinking. If any silly thing had been done by Elizabeth, she must be made to alter it; or if she had been so much more silly as to commit herself by a deed-poll, or any of those confounded legal instruments which are popularly considered irrevocable, why then—at the worst the old woman could not live for ever. Mr. Mitford thought remarks upon his own age were in the very worst taste, and Mrs. Travers was not by several years so old as he was; but he did not hesitate to characterise her as the 'old woman,' and to conclude that she could not live very long, even had her niece been silly enough to make any effort to put back the 'life interest,' as she called it, into her hands. No, there could not surely be any great harm done there; if that confounded boy had not run away just

at the least desirable moment. Mr. Mitford had a consciousness that it was he who had driven Roger away, which made him more angry still at the 'confounded boy.'

The nearest way from Mount Travers was by the West Lodge, which, as it was out of the way for most ordinary purposes, seldom attracted the Squire's attention. When he perceived it in the distance, however, there came back to his mind something that he had heard of Roger's visits there. Mr. Mitford was not strait-laced; he thought the presence of a pretty daughter in the keeper's lodge was a likely enough explanation of a young man's visits; and though he considered it right to put a stop to such things, which always eventually do a man harm, yet he was at the same time of the opinion that among such people, as in other classes, it was their own business to take care of their girls. He might have launched a thunderbolt at his son for mixing himself up in any discreditable story, but at the same time he would have felt that if Blowsabella thrust herself into the way she must take the consequences. It occurred to him at the moment that he would look in, as he passed, and see what Blowsabella was like, and perhaps give her mother a word; for the last thing that was to be desired was any scandal, so long as there was even a chance of Elizabeth Travers and her wealth.

He marched into the little house with the ease of a man to whom it belonged, and took Mrs. Ford's frightened welcome without paying much attention to it. 'Ford out?' he inquired. 'I daresay you'll do as well. All right about the house, eh? No leakages? drains in order? I like these things to be seen to in the spring, if anything's wrong. It used to be thought rather marshy about here.'

'Oh no, sir,' replied Mrs. Ford, with another curtsy, 'it's as dry as a bone, sir. We've never had no floods here.'

'Well, that's a good thing,' said the Squire, glancing round. He was looking for the girl, but he could not say so. 'You have made the little place look very comfortable,' he added approvingly, 'and I hear you've got a nice little garden. What, another sitting-room, too! I never knew these lodges were so large.'

Mrs. Ford's mind was sadly divided between pride and alarm. When a poor woman has a daughter like Lily, it is hard not to want to show her, especially when there is a parlour like Lily's parlour in addition to be shown off. But she had an instinctive feeling that the Squire meant no good by his visit, and that it might be wise to keep these glories of her life to herself. She had no time, however, to think; for while Mr. Mitford directed

his keen eyes to the little dark passage evidently leading to that best room which is the ideal of such homely housekeepers, there suddenly appeared in the doorway before him, floating in with all the ease of one at home, such a radiant apparition as took away the Squire's breath. Her mother said afterward, in awe-stricken tones, that never before had Lily looked so beautiful. The western sun came in at the cottage window, and just reached her, touching her hair till it glittered as if it were all mixed with threads of gold. In colour, in bloom, in everything that goes toward that first dazzle of physical perfection which the French call the *beauté du diable*, Lily was at her best. She did not know there was any one there, therefore she was free of any of the little affectations of self-consciousness; and when she did perceive that there was some one, and who it was, Lily's first thoughts were not of her own appearance, nor of the impression she would like to make. She had a sense of fright, a sort of suspended animation till she should know what the object of this visit was. The Squire stood before her, astounded, not knowing what to think. He plucked off his hat, which he had (naturally, according to his ideas) kept on his head when he went into the keeper's cottage, a remarkable evidence not only of the effect produced upon him, but of the bewilderment of his mind under this sudden impression. He thought for the first moment that it was some young lady of the district, who had come to give Mrs. Ford orders about needlework, or to visit her in a benign and angelic way, as ladies are in the habit of visiting poor women; but when he had taken a rapid note of the circumstances, of the young lady's uncovered head and indoor dress, and her evident air of being at home, Mr. Mitford could not but gasp with astonishment and consternation. 'I—don't think I have met this—young lady before,' he said.

'Oh, sir, it's no young lady,' cried Mrs. Ford, tremulously enveloping her arms in her apron, and making an unnecessary curtsy, which brought shame to Lily's face; 'it's my little girl, as madam was so kind to. You've not seen her, sir, for years and years, and she's grown up, and had a fine eddication; but bless you, sir, it's only Lily, it's my little girl.'

'Lily!' exclaimed the Squire, with a sort of roar. He did not put his hat on again, as might have been expected, but held it behind him, ashamed of the politeness to which he had been driven.

'Make your curtsy to the Squire, child,' said her mother, in a loud whisper; and then she added, once more trembling, and

smiling with deprecating civility, 'Will you step into the parlour, sir? This ain't a place for the likes of you.'

'Oh, there's a parlour too!' muttered the Squire, stupefied. He felt that he must at least follow the adventure to the end, though some confused association with the words 'walk into my parlour' came across him, bewildering and confusing his mind still more. The bright vision melted away, leaving the entrance free, and the Squire stamped through it, making a great noise with his heavy boots and blundering tread; for the little angle of a passage was dark, and he not adroit enough to find his way, as young eyes can do. Mrs. Ford followed humbly, scarcely knowing, between fright and pride, what she was doing. She felt that the sight of Lily's bower would complete the evident effect made upon the master by the sudden appearance of that unexpected figure; but whether he might look with favour upon these strange adjuncts to a keeper's cottage, or whether he might roar out an order to somebody to cast all such unsuitable accessories away, she could not tell. He might condemn the furniture, but he could not pronounce any decree of separation from Lily, the mother in her panic thought.

'Hallo!' Mr. Mitford cried. He was not much impressed by the room. He considered it rather a poor thing in the way of a flytrap. 'Will you walk into my parlour?' By the time he got there the Squire had recovered himself, and felt like pulling all the delicate cobwebs to pieces, and tearing to the ground the machinery of conquest. Lily had gone before him; she had made no curtsy. She turned round with a little gesture of welcome, putting a chair for the visitor as a young lady might have done, not like the keeper's little girl. Mr. Mitford drew the offered chair out into the middle of the room and sat down upon it facing the two women, without the least suggestion that they also should seat themselves. Had Mrs. Ford the keeper's wife sat down in his presence without a special invitation, he would have thought the world was coming to an end.

'So this is your little girl,' he said. He cast a careless glance at Lily, scanning her over from her beautiful head to the neat little shoes which she was so careful about, noting all her little ladylike pretensions, and the faint astonishment at himself which began to show in her eyes. 'She is a well-grown girl,' he said calmly, 'and I see you keep her very nicely. What do you mean to do with her, Mrs. Ford?'

'To do with her, sir?' The keeper's wife was choking with mortification and humbled pride. A well-grown girl!—was that all the praise that was to be awarded to her Lily? In her outraged

devotion she could have struck the man before whom she trembled, the master upon whom everything depended, whom she dared not offend. Her voice died away in her throat.

'What kind of a place do you want for her,—a lady's maid, or in the nursery? I suppose, of course, at that age she's been out. You can't afford to keep great girls like that idle at home, Mrs. Ford.'

'Oh, sir!' the mother began. It was difficult to form any words. And Lily, who had stood there first in consternation, then in wrath, hearing herself so discussed, here felt that she could bear no more.

'Mother,' said the girl, 'if you want me, you will find me in my room. I am going upstairs.'

'Oh, Lily!' exclaimed Mrs. Ford. It was a double trouble. She did not know which was the more difficult to deal with, the terrible master sitting there in the middle of her beautiful room discussing her beautiful daughter as if she had been a mere village girl, or Lily, who could not bear to be so looked at, who dared the Squire and all that he could do. The mother's heart was torn in two; she did not know to which she should make her appeal.

'Doesn't like to be interfered with, I suppose; prefers to set up for a lady at home. Mrs. Ford, I fear that you are preparing trouble for yourself, and that you have given her a great deal too much of her own way.'

'Oh no, sir,' protested the keeper's wife, almost sobbing. 'You are in a mistake, sir,—indeed, you are in a mistake.'

'Ah, that's possible enough,' said the merciless Squire. 'I am sure I hope it is a mistake. I have been taking some dressed-up milliner's girl for your daughter? I am quite glad to hear it. I could not think how anything like that should belong to my honest Ford and you.'

'Sir,' cried Mrs. Ford, in a tone which indignation and horror made steady, but which came out with a rush like the sound of a trumpet, 'Ford and me we have served you honest for many a year, but our Lily, sir, as madam was so good to, she's more to us nor master and service and all. It's not her fault if she's more like the quality than she is like her father and me.'

'Do you call that being like the quality, you silly woman?' asked the Squire, with a laugh. 'Take my advice, Mrs. Ford, send her to service. I daresay Mrs. Simmons will help you to hear of something; but don't spoil your girl, if that is your girl, by keeping her at home. She will only get into mischief. There's a number of young fellows about, and this parlour of yours is deucedly like the spider's parlour where she invited the fly, don't

you remember? "Will you walk into my parlour? said the spider to the fly." By Jove! I'd send her off before the week was out, if I were you.'

With this he rose abruptly, shook himself, put on his hat, and with a slight wave of his hand by way of good-bye, strode again through the narrow passage and emerged into the open air with a 'Pouff!' of restrained breath. He had made himself as disagreeable and offensive as it was in his power to be, and he had a certain satisfaction in the certainty of having done so. But even this did not neutralise the shock which he had himself received. This was the house which Roger had been in the habit of visiting, and this the keeper's daughter who was said to be the attraction. Mr. Mitford was not brutal by nature, though he had done his best to appear so. He knew his son well enough to know that Roger was no libertine, but yet he had felt that if Blowsabella put herself in the young man's way the consequences must be on her own silly head. He had no exaggerated sympathy for the rustic flirt, however tragical might be the circumstances into which her folly might betray her. But all his ideas about Blowsabella had died out when that radiant young figure suddenly walked into the doorway of Mrs. Ford's kitchen. He had plucked off his hat in his surprise, and all the courage had gone out of him. This was no Blowsabella, this was no buxom, forward, romping girl to meet with a reward for her folly. The consequences, if any followed, so far as Roger was concerned, would be disastrous for the young man and the family, not for the young woman. This was what had given a sting to his tongue and brutality to his look. If it had only been Blowsabella, he would have been kind and sorry for her. But this affair was something that must be crushed in the bud.

Curious to think that from Elizabeth he should have walked direct into this adverse camp, into the heart of the other influence which made Roger insensible to Elizabeth! These two images withdrew themselves from the rest and came and walked with him as he hurried across his own park, striking with his cane at any taller growth, angry and anxious, turning over in his mind the strange combinations of which he had been unconscious before. The Squire knew, the conviction flashing across his mind like an arrow, that in Roger's place it would not have been the high-toned and serious Elizabeth, in the maturity of twenty-five, that he would have chosen, but the other, in that dazzling early bloom of hers, that apparition of light in the dimness of the cottage. Good heavens! Ford the keeper's daughter! To see her seated at the head of the table at Melcombe would be a revolution indeed.

XIII

NINA'S VIEWS

It was very surprising to the Squire to find himself at table with no other companion save Nina, the only member of the family left at home. When he had been alone in the house before, this little person had been still in the schoolroom, and her father had not been incommoded by her company; and to see her rise from her seat, as he passed through, forgetting all about her, and timidly precede him to the dining-room, took him entirely aback. He felt, somehow, that she must disappear with her brothers, and that his dinner would be the easy and solitary 'square meal' which it had been many times before, without the least idea on his part that it was dreary to be alone. She was not even at the other end of the table, where he could have ignored her, but, by the considerateness of the butler, who thought Miss Nina would feel lonely, her place had been laid quite near her father's, so that they might entertain each other mutually. The situation was one for which Mr. Mitford was not prepared. He had nothing to say to his own little girl. Politeness might have suggested a few nothings to answer the uses of conversation with other juvenile members of Nina's class, but a man has no need to be polite to his own child, and he had not a notion what Nina was capable of talking about, or if there was anything, indeed, that was likely to interest her among the subjects with which he was acquainted. Asking her rather gruffly if she would take soup, if she would like some fish, served the purpose for a little; but when it came to the beef and mutton stage, which was with the Squire, an old-fashioned Englishman, priding himself on an excellent appetite, a prolonged period, the sight of her, saying nothing, eating nothing, sitting with little hands clasped before her, ready with a timid smile whenever he looked at her, became more and more an embarrassment to him. He broke forth at last with a question in which his own *ennui* found vent, though it appeared to be intended to

gauge hers: 'Isn't it a great bore to you, Nina, to sit at table with me alone?'

'Oh no, papa,' cried Nina, in a tone of surprise.

'Not a bore? Well, you are a better creature than I am, which is very likely at your age. Aren't you sorry, then, that your brothers are away?'

'Very sorry, papa,' Nina answered; and then there was a pause again.

'It's your turn now to fire away,' he said, after a moment. 'I've asked you two questions, now you can ask me two.'

'Oh, may I?' said Nina, faster than seemed possible, clapping her hands softly with apparent pleasure. 'That is exactly what I should like: for I want above all things to ask you why it was that Roger and Edmund went away so very suddenly. They said nothing of it at dinner, and next day they were off by the early train.'

'I suppose,' said the Squire, with his mouth full, 'they had got tired of the country.'

'No, I'm sure it wasn't that; they are both fond of the country. Either they heard some news, or something happened, or perhaps you scolded them. You talked very loud after dinner, and you were angry with me when you dashed in and found me sitting near the door.'

'That was because I don't want you to get into that mean sort of womanish way. You looked as if you had been listening at the door.'

'Oh no, papa, never; but I always sit at that end of the room for company. To hear voices is something; it makes you feel as if you were not quite alone, though you may not hear a word they say.'

'Oh!' said Mr. Mitford. He resolved from that moment to put a guard upon his tongue; for if it is only saying 'deuce,' and other words that begin with a *d*, a man would rather not say these things in a girl's ear.

'And when I heard this morning that they had gone away, I thought that perhaps you had been scolding them, papa.'

'Scolding does not make so much difference at your brothers' age as at yours,' he said, softening in spite of himself.

'Doesn't it? Roger had an angry look last night, as if he were going against his will, and Edmund was anxious to get him to go. The servants say——' But here Nina pursed up her mouth suddenly, perceiving Mr. Larkins, the butler, in the background. It was difficult to see the attendants, except the footman in his

white stockings, which were visible low down, going round the table; for the lamp which hung over it was shaded, and left everything beyond in an uncertain aspect. But she saw Larkins like a shadow standing by the great sideboard, and her mouth was closed.

'What do the servants say?'

'I will tell you afterwards, papa,' the little girl said.

'Prudent, by Jove, that little thing,' the Squire said to himself, as if this had been a crowning wonder. He did not speak again till the beef had gone, and something of a savoury character, replacing the exhausted game, smoked upon his plate, while Nina ate her rice pudding. Then he resumed, quite unconscious that such keen observers as his child and his servant could easily trace the line of connection between his present utterance and what had been last said.

'Do you ever pass by the West Lodge in your little walks?'

'Oh, the Fords, papa? Yes, to be sure,' cried Nina. 'Lily is just a little older than I am. I have always known her. Oh, isn't she pretty? We all think so in this house.'

'Who thinks so? I don't understand what you mean by "all,"' exclaimed the Squire, with lowering looks.

'They are a little jealous of her,' said Nina, 'which is not wonderful, for she does not look like them at all. She is quite a lady, Mrs. Simmons says. You may think how lovely she must be when Simmons allows it. They say she has a great many admirers, and that——' Here Nina gave a little cough of intelligence, and made a slight gesture with her hand towards the flowers on the table. '*Him*, you know,' she said, nodding her head.

'What do you mean?' cried the Squire, confounded—Nina's confidential communication being more than any man's patience could bear.

Nina drew closer, and put her hand to her mouth. 'The gardener, you know,' she said, 'but I don't like to mention his name aloud, because of the men.'

'Oh!' murmured Mr. Mitford. He had been very careless of his little girl, he had paid no more attention to her, as she grew up, than if she had been one of the hounds, but in that moment he got his reward. 'Do you know,' he said angrily, 'that you talk like a little village gossip, Nina? What have you to do with such stories? If I hear you discoursing again upon the servants and their love affairs, or any other affairs, I shall send you back to the schoolroom, and you shall not appear here again.'

Poor Nina gave a little frightened cry. She did not know what she had done. The colour went out of her cheeks. She sat quaking, thrown back upon herself, her eyes filling with tears that she dared not let fall. 'Oh, papa!' she said faintly. This threat penetrated to her very heart, for no one could know so well what the schoolroom was as the last of the little victims who had languished there, to be delivered only by marriage. Nina saw with very clear prevision that it was very unlikely she ever should be emancipated by marriage, seeing that she never met any one, and that nobody ever came to Melcombe who was not, she said to herself, half a hundred. The poor child's heart sank within her. She had been bolder than usual, encouraged by her father's attention to her little chatter, and she did not know into what pitfall it was that she had dropped. She sat quite still, sometimes lifting a pair of wistful eyes towards him, while the wearisome dinner concluded. The servants, stealing about in the shade, with their subdued steps silently offering all the fruits of the dessert, which she would have liked very much, but had not the courage to touch, were like ghosts to Nina; and her father's severe face, in the light of the lamp, shone upon her like that of an awful judge who should presently pronounce sentence upon her. Larkins and his satellites were a kind of protection; they saved her temporarily, at least, from receiving her sentence, and when she saw them preparing to go away, her heart sank. The Squire did not say a word during the conclusion of the dinner. He did not hurry over it; he took everything as leisurely as usual, showing no burning desire to proceed to the execution of Nina. But in this she could not take any comfort, not seeing in reality how it was.

When the servants had left the room, Mr. Mitford, after a brief interval, spoke, and his voice seemed to fill all the room with echoes. Nina was so paralysed with fear that she did not perceive its softened tone.

'You have no business with the affairs of the servants. Keeper and gardener, or whatever they are, you have nothing to do with them. It is not becoming in the young lady of the house to discuss their concerns or intentions; remember that, Nina.'

'Yes, papa,' assented the girl, scarcely venturing to breathe.

'However,' said the Squire, 'now those fellows are gone who have ears for everything, you may tell me what you know about this business. That daughter of Ford's is going to marry the gardener, is she? And a very good thing too; it will keep her out of the way of mischief; and when is *that* to be?'

'I don't know, papa,' said Nina, without raising her eyes.

'You seemed to know all about it a few minutes ago. I didn't mean to frighten you, child. Speak up, and tell me what you do know.'

Nina began to pluck up a little courage. 'It is only what they say. They all think a great deal of Mr. Witherspoon, the gardener. They say he is quite the gentleman, and so clever. They think he is too good for Lily. Mr. Witherspoon was once after Miss Brown, the steward's sister. You know, papa, she is Scotch too.'

'I know,' said Mr. Mitford, with a nod of his head; 'go on. So little Ford has cut out the red-haired one? I shouldn't have thought by Miss Lily's looks she would be content with such small game.'

'Oh, she is not in love with him at all,' cried Nina, forgetting her caution. 'It is all her father and mother, just like a story-book. But some take Miss Brown's side. Old Simmons is all for Lily; she is always having private talks with Mr. Witherspoon. They say she wants to get her married and out of the way; for, papa,' said the girl, dropping her voice, and putting out her hand with the instinct of a true gossip for the dramatic climax, 'papa, they say that all the gentlemen are always going to the West Lodge. They all think so much of her—for to be pretty is all the gentlemen think of; and they say that Roger——'

'All the gentlemen!' cried the Squire, with a sudden quiver of rage which appalled Nina. 'What do you mean by all the gentlemen, you little gossip, you confounded little—— How dare you say anything about Roger! How dare you discuss your brother with the servants! Do you mean to tell me that Roger—that Roger——'

'Oh papa,' cried Nina, beginning to weep, 'I don't talk about Roger. I only hear what they say.'

'What *they* say! The people in the servants' hall? By Jove,' said the Squire, 'you ought to go out to service yourself; you seem just of their kind.' He got up in his impatience, and began to pace about the room, as he had done on the previous night. 'I have a nice family,' he went on. 'A son who is after Lily Ford, the keeper's daughter; and you, you little soubrette, you waiting-maid, you Cinderella! I believe, by Jove, you have been changed at nurse, and it is Lily Ford who is the lady, and you that should be sent to the servants' hall.'

Nina sank altogether under this storm. She began to cry and sob. Instead of getting better, as things had promised to do, here was everything worse and worse! The schoolroom, with which

she had been threatened first, was bad enough; but the servants' hall! As the Squire went on enumerating his own misfortunes, piling darker and darker shades of reprobation upon the children who were bringing him to shame, fear and dismay overwhelmed the poor little girl. She was at last unable to keep down her misery, and ran and flung herself, half on the ground before him, half clinging to his elbow. 'Oh papa! send me to Geraldine or Amy,—they will take me in; send me to Aunt Dacres; send me to school, even, if you are so very, very angry; but don't send me to service; don't put me in a place like one of the maids. Oh, papa, papa! I am your own daughter, whatever you may think. I am Nina,—indeed, I am, I am!' cried the girl in a paroxysm that shook her little frame, and even shook his great bulk, as she hung upon him. He was moved in spite of himself by the passion of the girl's panic and the matter-of-fact acceptance of his unmeaning threats, which to Nina, with her childlike apprehension, seemed so horribly real and imminent. He took hold of her shoulder, which was thrown against him, the slight, round, soft form, in its white muslin, all quivering with measureless fear.

'Get up, child,' he said; 'sit down, dry your eyes, don't be a little fool. Of course I know you are Nina. Do you think I can stop to weigh every word, when you drive me out of my senses? Of course I don't mean that. But you oughtn't to listen to the servants and their gossip, or put yourself on a level with the maids; you ought to have been taught better, you ought——'

'Oh papa, I know it's wrong,' cried Nina, rubbing her head against his arm and clasping it with both her hands, 'but I have never had any one to care for me, and I have no one to talk to, and it's so lonely.'

He took a little trouble to soothe her, partly moved by her words, and partly by the childlike clinging; and presently dismissed her upstairs, bidding her go to bed and take care of herself —an injunction which Nina obeyed by holding a long chatter with her maid, in which she disclosed the fact that papa had given her a dreadful scolding for something she had said about Lily Ford. Mr. Mitford returned to his wine with thoughts that were not at all agreeable. His son publicly reported to be 'after' that roadside beauty, his daughter talking like a little waiting-woman, full of the gossip of the servants' hall,—these were not pleasant reflections. He had taken a certain pride in the young men who were his representatives in the world, which stood more or less in the place of paternal love; and even Nina, of whom he knew little more than the outside, had gratified occasionally, when he

thought of her at all, that rudimentary sentiment. They had all done him credit, more or less. But there was not much credit to be got out of a little thing who talked like a village gossip, nor out of probably a degrading marriage on the part of the young man who considered himself his heir. 'My heir, by Jove!' the Squire said to himself. The veins stood out on his forehead and on his hand as he clenched it and struck it against the table. He was not a man to bear with the follies of his children, and this was not the first occasion upon which he had reminded Roger that he was entirely at his mercy. Let the boy take but one step towards the accomplishment of that act of madness, and he should see, he should see! No gamekeeper's daughter should ever be received at Melcombe, much less placed at the head of that table where he himself had so long sat. A hot flush of fury came over him at the thought. If that was what the fool was thinking of, if that was what had made him turn away from Elizabeth Travers, a fine woman with a fine fortune in her hands, then by Jove—— It is not necessary in such circumstance to put a conclusion into words. The threat was well enough expressed in that angry exclamation. A man must submit to many things when he is bound down and cannot help himself. It is a very different matter when he has all the power in his own hands.

XIV

A NEW ACTOR

It was some time after these events, after a period of great quiet, during which Mr. Mitford had been living alone with his daughter, seeing her at every meal, and with a curious compound of compunction and fatigue endeavouring to talk to her, and to encourage her to talk to him, an exercise which bored him infinitely, when he received one day a letter from Stephen, in itself a somewhat unusual event. Stephen had heard, he said, that his brothers were away, though he did not inform his father how he had found it out, and he thought, if the Squire did not disapprove, of taking his leave and coming home in their absence. 'You know, sir,' he wrote, 'though it is no doubt my fault as much as theirs, that we don't pull together as well as might be desired; and as it happens that a lot of our fellows are in barracks,—for town is very handy from this place, and they can run up almost every day,—it would be a good moment for getting leave, as I'm not going in for town much this year. Perhaps you wouldn't mind my company when there's nobody else about.' Impossible to be more surprised than was the Squire by this letter. Stephen himself to propose to come home in April, exactly the time when there was nothing doing! Stephen to give up town and its delights and the possibility of running up every day, in order to come home and make himself agreeable to his father, when everybody of his kind turned, like the sunflower to the sun, towards the opening joys of the season! Mr. Mitford was so much astonished that he instinctively cast about in his mind to make out what motives the young man might have, presumably not so good as those which he put forward; but he could not discover anything that Stephen could do, nor any reason why he should wish to bury himself in the country in spring, that least attractive of all seasons to the child of fashion, the young man of the period. It was not with much pleasure that the Squire contemplated the offered visit. Stephen interfered with his own

habits and ways more than any other of the family; he turned the household in the direction he himself wished more than either of his brothers ever attempted to do; he was less amiable, more self-assertive, than either, and showed much more of that contempt for the judgment of the elder generation which exists so generally, whether displayed or not, among the younger, than either Roger or Edmund had ever done. On the whole, Mr. Mitford would rather have been left to his own devices, he did not yearn for sympathy or companionship. If there was one thing that consoled him, it was, perhaps, the thought of being delivered from that *tête-à-tête* with Nina, which began to be a very heavy necessity. But whether he liked it or not, he could not refuse to receive his youngest son.

It was almost the end of April when Stephen arrived. He came home in the spring twilight some time after his baggage, having chosen to walk, as the evening was fine. It was not a long distance from the station, but he explained that he had made a little round to see how everything was looking. The explanation was quite unnecessary, for Mr. Mitford was not like an anxious mother who counts the moments in such circumstances. He was quite willing to wait till his son made his appearance in the natural course of events. Stephen was the biggest of the family, a large, strongly-built, well-developed young man, with a soldier's straight back and square shoulders, and he had altogether more colour about him than was usual to the Mitfords. His hair was reddish-brown, crisp and curling, every ring and twist of it looking like a demonstration of vigour and life. Edmund was pale, and Roger had no more than the average Englishman's health and vitality (which is, however, saying a great deal), but Stephen had something exuberant, almost riotous, in his strength and life. He began at once to interfere, to suggest and meddle. He paused even before he took his place at table. 'Nina, you should come up here; come along, young 'un,' he said. 'It's your place, now you've grown up, to take the t'other end.'

'Let Nina alone,' interposed Mr. Mitford. 'If you don't like taking your brother's place, take your own and let's begin dinner. "For what we are about to receive——"' The Squire's murmur of thanksgiving seemed to lose itself in the fumes of the soup from which Larkins lifted the cover as he sat down.

'Oh, I don't mind taking my brother's place,' cried Stephen, with a laugh, 'not a bit! I'll cut him out whenever I can, I promise you. There's no reason why a fellow like that should have all the good things. But now Nina's out, as I suppose she calls it——'

'Let Nina alone,' said the Squire again briskly. 'She doesn't understand your chaff,—and neither do I, for that matter. Did you see either of them as you came through town?'

'Roger or Ned? No, we don't belong to the same sets. I never see them in town, and I was there only for an hour or two. I was impatient, as you see, sir, to get home.'

He said this with a slight laugh, and the Squire replied with a Humph! through his nostrils. Stephen did not even pretend to be serious in this profession of regard for his home. What did the fellow want? What was his object? His father could give no answer to this question, which was asked mutely by Nina's wondering blue eyes. She had not sufficiently advanced in knowledge of life, indeed, to question her brother's motives, but her look was full of an incredulous surprise.

'Are you so fond of home, Steve?' Nina inquired timidly, in the pause that ensued.

Stephen burst out laughing over his soup. 'Are you, little 'un?' he said. 'Tell the truth and shame the—— I don't believe you are, a bit. Yes, I'm devoted to home: but I wish the Squire had a better cook. Do you call this *bisque*, Larkins? I call it mud.'

'I will see the name in the *menu*, sir,' said the butler, with grave severity.

'Sure enough. That's what comes of having a woman. You should give yourself the luxury of a *chef*, sir. The women are less expensive, but they always make a mess. You appreciate good living, and you can afford it. Hallo, what's this? Sole *au gratin*; why, it's black! I say, Larkins, you must really tell Mrs. Simmons, with my compliments——

'That's enough, Stephen,' exclaimed Mr. Mitford. 'What's good enough for me must be good enough for my company, even if that company happens to be my youngest son, fresh from a mess-table.'

'Ah, that's bitter,' said Stephen, with a laugh. 'Your youngest son happens to care for what he's eating. Now my elders don't know the delicate *bisque* from the common gravy, or what your cook no doubt calls clear. Clear soup, that's the word. As for the mess-table just you come and dine with us one day, sir, and if you don't forgive me all my impudence—— Larkins, some chablis. Why, man alive! you don't serve sherry, I hope, with the fish?'

'I suppose there's no news, except what's in the papers,' said Mr. Mitford, to stop these remarks.

'Well, sir, I don't imagine that you expect to see any real news

in the papers,' said Stephen. 'I hear there's all sorts of things going on,—a pretty to-do in the war office, and the devil to pay among the ordnance. They tell the public there's no evidence against those big-wigs, don't you know, which means that the witnesses have been squared, of course. Government don't dare to stir up that dirty pond.'

'Will you tell me, sir,' cried Mr. Mitford, 'that British officers, gentlemen, men of honour——'

'Oh—oh!' cried Stephen. 'Softly, sir, softly. The British public ain't here, unless it's for Larkins you do it. Officers and gentlemen are just about like other people; a little percentage is neither here nor there. The country doesn't really mind, and a little more money to spend is good for everybody. Why, that's political economy, isn't it?—or so I've heard.'

'I don't see how money spent in bribes can be good for anybody,' said the Squire. 'I hope we're not going to take a lesson from Russia at this time of day.'

'The Yankees do it', said Stephen calmly, 'and they're the most go-ahead people on the face of the earth. As for the Russians, we shall probably have to fight them, but I don't mind them in a general way. They're up to a lot of things. In the way of life there's not much to teach those fellows. I'd like you to meet Salgoroufsky, sir. He's the last new thing in accomplished foreigners: lives better, and plays higher, and—in short, goes the whole——'

'I don't put any faith in Russians,' said the Squire. 'Oh, I suppose they're fast enough, if that's what you like. You know the old proverb,' "Scratch a Russian and you'll come to the Tartar."'

'Ah!' said Stephen. 'Don't you think we've got a little beyond the range of proverbs nowadays? A real Russ wasn't known to our seniors, sir, in the proverb-making age. By the way, I hear Salgoroufsky is coming before the public in a more piquant way. They say he's one of a half dozen Co——'

'Stephen!' said Mr. Mitford, 'none of that here; you're not at the mess-table now.'

'What's the matter, sir?' asked Stephen, arching his eyebrows with surprise. 'Oh, Nina. Good gracious, what does it matter? I daresay she wouldn't understand; and if she did, why, a girl can't go anywhere nowadays without hearing such things talked about. If you think the women don't discuss them as much as we do——'

'Then I can tell you they sha'n't be discussed here,' cried Mr. Mitford, who had the traditions of his generation. 'What do you

fellows think about the chances of war? That's more to the purpose, and a subject upon which a soldier may have an opinion.'

'Oh, if you like shop!' said Stephen, with an indulgent smile. 'I make a point of avoiding it myself. We're always game, you know, and that sort of thing, "by jingo, if we do"—and so long as it happens at the dull time of the year, when there's nothing much going on—modern warfare's capital for that; a man can arrange his engagements so as to lose next to nothing.'

'Unless he chances to lose his life by the way!'

'Exactly so, sir,' said Stephen coolly. 'Of course that's on the cards, but fellows don't calculate upon it. Our only general's a good 'un for that. He knows pretty well how long it will take to do a business,—or to come to smash,' he added philosophically. 'The one or the other is sure to happen, don't you know, within a certain time.'

'And I suppose nowadays,' said the indignant father, 'with all your new enlightened viêws on the subject, you don't mind much which it is, so long as you get back in time for your engagements?'

'Well, sir, it fits in somehow,' returned the young warrior calmly. 'I don't know whether, in a social point of view, the smash, on the whole, isn't the best, for you are always the victim of circumstances, and all the women are quite sure that if it had depended on you——'

'And as for the country, or the cause, or anything of that old-fashioned sort——'

'Oh, well, sir!' said Stephen, shrugging his shoulders, elevating his eyebrows, and putting out his hands.

Nina sat listening to all this with very wide-open eyes, turning from one to the other with a rapt attention which was not wholly accompanied by understanding. Her mind did not travel quick enough to follow all these changes of subject, and she was quite unaware how much of the unknown element of chaff lay within the utterances of her brother. Chaff is not a thing which is easily understood (without careful training) by the very young. She took it all seriously, wondering at Stephen's wisdom, who by this time felt that he had done enough in the way of enlightening his father, and that a little time might be given to dazzling the sister, whose eyes regarded him with so much admiration. Stephen liked to be admired by ladies; even, when no one else was about, was capable of appreciating the worship of Nina, and open to the gratification of getting a little fun out of her, as he would himself have said.

'I say, little 'un! you should see Gerry in all her grandeur,' he

said. 'Statham's joined the Four-in-Hand, don't you know? and there she is on the top of the coach with all her fast friends; little Algy Banks in close attendance, of course, and Petersham and Beckerbaum, and all that lot. Why doesn't she ask you to stay with her, little Nines? You should tell her you're coming—don't stop to be asked. You'd have such fun you can't think.'

'Oh, Steve!' cried Nina, her blue eyes growing rounder and bigger.

'Once they have their heads loose, how these girls do go it, to be sure!' remarked Stephen, with benign admiration. 'Amy's to be met with all over the place, wherever there's anything going on. And to think they were just such little mice as you, a year or two since; never a word above their breath! They're ungrateful little cats, too,' said this philosopher, indifferent to the change of metaphor; 'they never throw anything in a fellow's way. Let's hope they'll give you a hand, Nina, though they take no notice of a brother: and then you'll remember me, my dear, and say to yourself it was Steve who put it first into your head.'

'Let Nina alone,' said the Squire once more. 'I tell you she doesn't understand your chaff. And I hope this is chaff as well as the rest, Stephen. I hope you don't mean that Geraldine, a child of mine——'

'Oh, for that matter, sir!' returned Stephen with cool contempt; then he added quickly, perhaps thinking better of it, for his father's eyes shone across the pyramid of flowers in the middle of the table, 'Statham's quite able to look after his wife. He is one of the coolest hands going. If they go too fast, he knows exactly when to pull up. As for that, they are in a very good set, and have lots of fun. I'd let them introduce the little 'un, sir, if I were in your place. Gerry ought to do something for her family. Great exertions were used, as we all recollect, to get her off,' and Stephen laughed, aware that under the protection of Larkins he was safe for the moment, at least, Mr. Mitford being much too great a personage to compromise himself, so long as the servants were in the room, by any outbreak of temper. And looks do not hurt. He was rather pleased than otherwise, amused and tickled by the barbed darts that flew across the table at him from Mr. Mitford's eyes.

'Oh, papa,' cried Nina, 'I wish you would! I am eighteen, and I have never been at a dance, certainly not at a ball, a real ball, all my life. Geraldine and Amy were asked out on visits, but I think people have forgotten there is a third one of us. And I am the last. Oh, papa, let me go.'

'You had better wait till you are asked,' said the Squire morosely; and the rest of the dinner went over in comparative silence, broken chiefly by Stephen's remarks and comments. He thought the *soufflé* was like lead; he suggested that his father was using up *that* cheap claret 'that you thought you had got such a bargain, sir,' he added cheerfully, and with a laugh.

When Larkins left the room the Squire broke out, almost before he had shut the door; and indeed he need not have waited, for Larkins was perfectly aware of what was about to take place, and as he passed immediately into the drawing-room, to see that the lamps were burning properly, got the advantage of it in a great degree, as Nina had done, when she sat near the door 'for company,' on a previous occasion. But Stephen was not discomposed by his father's temper. Having spent all his time in 'poking up the bear,' according to his own refined description, he would have been disappointed had the excited animal refused to dance. Mr. Mitford delivered his mind in very forcible language, driving Nina off to her retirement in the drawing-room, and following her in a gust of wrath a few minutes afterwards. Stephen's arrival at Melcombe was generally signalised in this way. Papa, as Stephen now chose to call him, shut himself up in his library, slamming the doors like an enraged waiting-maid, while Nina sat and trembled, and listened not without a certain demure satisfaction in the mischief. She admired her brother for the brilliancy of his appearance in general, and for the effect he had produced now, and hoped that he would come in and tell her more of Geraldine's fast and furious proceedings and the splendour of Amy. Ah, if she could but go, if she had but an invitation! She saw herself on the top of the coach, with all the ecstasy of happiness foreseen; and, as Stephen said, why should she wait to be asked? Why not say she was coming? A sister could surely take that liberty. Nina drew forth her little cabinet of ornamental stationery, hesitated, took out a sheet of notepaper and put it back again. Could she venture upon it, in spite of what papa had said! Oh, if Stephen would but come in and advise her!

But Stephen apparently found something more attractive to do. He sat a while at the table his father had left, and smoked a cigarette, which was a thing no one else dared to do, considering the close vicinity of the door which led into the drawing-room, and smiled to himself at something, perhaps at his success in routing the Squire; and he held up his glass of claret to the light with an admiration of its colour, which was in strong contrast to his scoff at his father about the cheap wine. He had the air of

enjoying himself very much, as he balanced himself on the hind legs of his chair, and finished his claret and his cigarette. Nina, who had gone to her favourite corner in one of those deep window-recesses, heard him laugh to himself, and smelt his cigar with all the pleasure which attaches to the forbidden. She admired him for smoking and doing what no one else was allowed to do, but she did not venture to steal in and join him, which was what she would have liked. Presently, however, this heavenly odour died away. Stephen got up, still smiling, and went out into the hall, where he put on a light overcoat and lit another cigarette; then, with that smile of triumph still upon his face, he stepped forth into the soft darkness of the April night.

XV

LOVE

INTO the April night! It was very light, for there was a new moon, which, without giving the effect of white light and profound shadow which moonlight generally gives, produced a sort of mystic twilight, the sky still showing all its soft colour, the park lying half seen, with dim trees in groups, and soft undulations, all harmonious in the faint and dreamy landscape. The weather was warm, for the season, and all the scents and sensations of the evening were indescribable, so full of balm and movement, everything still tingling with life. The impression of peace and soft conclusion which belongs to the hour was contradicted, yet enhanced, by the deeper sentiment of the sweet spring, with all its renewals. The dew fell like a benediction, and it was answered by the noiseless but almost audible (for is not paradox the very law of this soft, self-contradictory nature?) rising of the sap in all these trees, and of life refreshed throughout all the old framework of the earth. It scarcely needed Fine-Ear, with his fairy sense, to hear the grass growing. The air was full of it, and of the breath of the primroses, which were almost over, and of the bluebells, which had but newly come. There was a rustle, and a tingle, and a sigh, a something which was at once silence and sound, inarticulate, uncertain as that faint darkness which yet was light. It was an hour of dreams and lingering, delicate vision,—an hour in which the young man's fancy, as the poet says, turns lightly to thoughts of love.

Alas! there are so many ways of that. The young man whose thoughts we are about to trace stepped forth in the splendour of his evening clothes, the broad white bosom of his shirt showing under his open overcoat at a quarter of a mile's distance; his quick step ringing over the gravel where he crossed it, coming down rapid but resistless on every daisy bud and new blade of grass; his red-brown hair curling all the more crisply for the humidity of the

evening air; his whole vigorous, relentless being moving on through those soft influences unaffected, bent upon one aim, moved by one purpose, in which there was nothing akin to the charities of the blowing season, although what was in his mind was love,—after his kind, love,—with no anxieties, humilities, doubts of itself or its own charm, with a smile of conquest half disdainful, and superiority assured; love triumphant, elated with a sense of power, patronising, and yet humorous too, amused by the delusions which it meant to encourage and develop. The smiling lips sometimes widened into a laugh, the elated imagination blew off a little strain in a snatch of song. He was going to conquest, going to success, and he knew his own power.

About the same time there stole out of a low garden gate, opening directly into the park, a figure, very different, more ideal, yet perhaps not quite ideal either; a slim, lightly-moving form in a neutral-tinted dress, which made her like another shadow in the ethereal twilight, scarcely more marked, except by her gliding, noiseless movement, than the bushes among which she threaded her way into the silent glades. Lily Ford had stolen out, as it had long been her romantic habit to do—sometimes on pretence of meeting her father, oftener still, and especially on moonlight nights, for her own pleasure. It was a habit which had seemed in keeping with the poetic creature whom her parents worshipped. She was as safe as in their own garden, and it was like a poem, Mrs. Ford thought, to think of Lily's moonlight walks, not like the strolls of the village girls with their sweethearts. The mother, with a little pang made up of mingled pride and exultation, saw her go out. It was scarcely warm enough yet for these rambles. But it was so sweet a night! She wound a shawl about the child's throat, and begged her not to be long, to come back at once if she felt cold. 'It's a little bit chilly,' she said. But Lily would hear no objection. A new moon, and the wind in the south, not a bit of east in it. 'And I'll be back in half an hour, mother,' she said. Her heart beat as she glided away over the grassy slopes and hollows; her steps made no sound upon the old mossy turf. She was all athrill with excitement, and expectation, and awakened fancy, lightly turned to thoughts of love. She thought so, at least, as she skimmed along, a noiseless shadow, lifting her face now and then to the tender moon, which was new, and young like herself, and full of soft suggestion. She was going to meet—him. How she knew that he had come and that she was to meet him she never revealed. It was not the first by many times, and there was no reason why she should not have told that by accident, as

first happened, she had met the Captain in the park. She had meant to say so at the time. She held it in reserve to say now, if there should ever come a moment in which it would be expedient to make known the accidental nature of that meeting. Lily's entire being thrilled with the expectation, with the delightful excitement, with something which, if it were not love, answered all the purposes of love, making her heart beat and the blood dance in her veins. Roger's visits had never caused her such palpitations, by which she knew that it was not ambition, nor the delight of having a lover so much above her and out of her sphere. It was not that. She stood half in awe of Roger, though there was a pleasure in seeing him come night after night (in the cold weather, and while the other was away); but Stephen filled her with a dazzled admiration and delight.

She had been bewildered at first by the careless splendour of him in his evening dress. That was one glory of the gentleman lover which was doubly seductive to Lily's aspiring heart. The gardener, in his respectable Sunday clothes, was 'quite a gentleman' to the servants' hall; but even Mr. Witherspoon did not attempt an evening suit; and nothing had ever so flattered the girl's longing to belong to the patrician class, to get a footing in that paradise above her, as the splendour of Stephen's fine linen, the whiteness of his tie and his cuffs, the perfection of the costume, which nobody wore who did not dine late and live in that world for which Lily's soul sighed, which was, she felt, the only world in which she could be content to live. All this was in her mind to-night, as she stole out to keep her tryst: the lover, with all his ardour and warmth, not respectful like Roger, and the love which drew her to him, which was like wine in her own veins, and the sense of being drawn upward into the heaven she wished for, and the intoxicating consciousness of all that he could give her—of the life in which she should be like him, in which those evening clothes of his should be balanced by her own gleaming white shoulders and the flowers in her hair. Let it not appear that this was mere vulgar vanity of dress with Lily. That was not at all how it moved her. It was the last refinement of the change for which her heart was longing, her transfer from the gamekeeper's lodge and all its incongruities into what she felt was the only life for her, the real world.

Was it, then, not love on either side?

Stephen was aware that it was something more than ordinary, a sentiment much deeper than the usual easy entanglements, which had brought him down from all the attractions of town to the

country at the end of April; and though he laughed a little at Lily's conviction that it was a *grande passion* for both herself and him, yet there was no small excitement in the pursuit which he was carrying on at so much trouble to himself. In her inexperienced soul there was the sweep of a great current of emotion, swiftly, irresistibly, drawing her toward him with an impulse which sometimes seemed altogether beyond her own control. There had been times, indeed, when she had tried to stem it, to stop herself, to ask whether what she was doing was right; and Lily had learned, with an intoxication of mingled pleasure and terror, that her power to do so was small, and that this high tide was carrying her away. With terror, but yet with pleasure too; for the girl was eager for all the high sensations of life, and wanted to be heroically in love almost as much as she wanted to be a lady; so that the thought of being unable to stop herself, of being swept away by that great flood of feeling, was delightful and ecstatic, elevating her in her own opinion. As for any moral danger, or the possibility of ever finding herself in the position of the village heroines who abound in fiction, the victims of passion, it never at any time entered into Lily's imagination that anything of the kind was possible to herself. There are evils which can be, and there are some which cannot. We do not, on the top of a hill, consider how to save ourselves from being carried off by a flood, for instance. That she should ever be a poor creature, betrayed and abandoned, was as impossible a contingency. Indeed it did not even touch the sphere of Lily's thoughts.

They met in a little dell, where the trees opened on each side, leaving a long soft line of light descending from the pale, clear blue of the sky, with the young moon in it, to the scarcely visible undulations of the turf. It was scarcely light so much as lightness, a relief of the evening atmosphere from the shadows of the trees, and the vista slanting upwards towards that pure, far radiance of the heavens. It was a spot in which the tenderest lovers in the world, the gentlest hearts, most full of visionary passion, might have met, and where all things, both visible and concealed, the soft light and softer dark, the silent watch and hush of nature, the guardian groups of the trees, protectors, yet sentinels, enhanced the ideal of that meeting. But perhaps even Lily, discovering before anything else her lover, by that spotless expanse of shirt front which Stephen exposed without hesitation to the night, was scarcely quite on a level with the scene, notwithstanding the thrill in her nerves and the sound of her heart in her ears, which was, according to the last requirements of *banal*

romance, the only sound she heard. She glided along towards him, admiring him, with a sense that he was, if not a god, nor even a king, in the phraseology so largely adopted by love-lorn ladies nowadays, yet in all the entrancing reality of that fact a gentleman, able to confer upon the girl he loved the corresponding position of a lady and all that was most desirable in this world. But perhaps we do injustice to Lily. In the enthusiasm of the moment she did not think of what he could bestow, but of himself in that climax of perfection, exquisite in those circumstances and surroundings which nowhere else had she ever touched so closely,—not only a gentleman, but one in full dress, in the attire only vaguely dreamed of by admiring visionaries in villages, in his evening clothes.

It is very probable that Stephen would have been, though not of very delicate sensibilities, extremely mortified and shocked had he been aware of the part which his shirt front, his white tie, and that one very tiny diamond stud, bore in the fascination which he was conscious of exercising over Lily. Fortunately, no such idea ever entered his mind, any more than the possibility of harm occurred to Lily. The thoughts of the one were so far entirely incomprehensible to the other. But at the moment of their meeting, perhaps, on both sides the reserve fell away, and they were what they seemed for one big heart-beat—lovers; forgetting everything in a sudden flash of emotion, such as banishes every other feeling.

'Well, little 'un,' Stephen said; 'so you've come at last.'

'Oh, Stephen!' Lily cried.

After a minute, this transport being over, they entered upon details.

'Have you been waiting long? I couldn't get away.'

'Never mind, now you're here. You are a darling to come on such short notice. I was awfully afraid you wouldn't.'

'Do you think there are so many things to occupy me that I haven't always time to think——'

'Of what, my little Lily? Say of me. I know it's of me.'

'Oh, Stephen!'

'You are the most enchanting little—— Would you like to know exactly how it was? As soon as I heard Roger was out of the way—— You are sure you didn't cry your little eyes out for Roger?'

'Stephen!' with indignation.

'Well, little 'un, he ain't half bad—for——' 'you,' he was about to say, but paused, with a sense that Lily's meekness was

not sufficiently proved. 'As for looks—but looks are not everything; he has his backers, as I have mine. What side would you be on, Lily——'

'Oh, *Stephen!*' She rung the changes upon his name in every tone from enthusiasm to indignation.

'Well,' he cried triumphantly, 'as soon as I heard they were out of the way I got my leave like a shot. The Squire can't make it out, Lily. A fellow like me, fond of being in the middle of everything, to turn his back on the fun just as the fiddles are tuning up,—he can't make it out.'

'Oh, Stephen! and you are giving that up, and the balls, and all the grand ladies, and everything, for me!'

'Well, ain't you pleased? I should have thought that was just what you would like best, Lil. To know you're more attractive than the whole lot, eh? that I'd rather come here for this—for a look of you—even when I can't see you,' he cried laughing.

'Oh, Stephen! it is too much.'

Her cheek touched the polished surface of that shirt front, but for the moment she was not sensible of it, being swept away by the feeling that there was no one like him, no one so noble, so disinterested, so true.

'Well, it's a good deal, my pet; it's about all a fellow can do, to show—— I shall get the good of it all the more another time, when we're no longer parted like this, having to meet in the dark; when we're——'

'Together!' she said softly, under her breath, with a sense of ecstatic expectation, as if it had been heaven.

He laughed and held her close; he did not echo the word, but what did that pressure mean save a more eloquent repetition? Together! Before Lily's eyes the darkness of the dell lighted up with a light that never was on ballroom or theatre, a vision of entertainments indescribable, happiness ineffable, splendours, raptures, visions of delight. She saw herself walking into marble halls, leaning upon his arm, dancing with him, riding with him, always together, and in the first circles, among the best people in England. Her heart melted in the softening of enthusiasm and gratitude and joy.

'Oh, tell me one thing,' she said.

'A hundred, my pet, whatever you please.'

'Are you sure—oh, tell me the truth! don't flatter me, for I want to know—are you sure that when you take me among all those grand people you will never be ashamed of your poor Lily? Think where you are taking me from, a poor little cottage.

Won't you ever feel ashamed? Oh, Stephen! I think it would kill me—but I want to know.'

'You little goose!' he said with various caresses; 'if I were ashamed of you, do you think I'd ever take you among the grand people, as you say?' He laughed, and the echoes seemed to catch his laugh and send it back in a fashion which frightened Lily. 'We'll settle it in that way,' he cried; 'you may trust me for that.'

'If you are sure, if you are quite sure!'

'I'm sure,' he returned, 'and I'll tell you why; for whether it would put you out or not, it would put me out horribly, and I never expose myself to an unpleasantness,—don't you understand that, Lily? So you needn't be afraid.'

The form of this protest did not quite satisfy Lily. It was not exactly the reply she expected; but after all, was it not the best pledge she could have? Did it not show how certain he was that never through her could he be shamed? But she went on with him a little in silence, daunted, she could scarcely tell why.

'We've something to talk of, of much more importance, Lily. There are to be no silly fancies, mind! We'll not often have such a good time as this, with nobody spying. When are you coming to me for good and all?'

'Oh, Stephen!'

'Yes, my pet, I know all that. I've thought it over and settled everything. Lily, you *are* a little goose, though you're a very sweet one. I believe you're hankering all the time after the white satin and the veil, and church-bells ringing, and village brats scattering flowers.'

What a leap her heart gave at the suggestion! Ah, that she did,—hankered, as he said, longed, would have given her finger for the possibility, not, to do her justice, of the white satin, but of the orderly, lawful, peaceful rite which everybody should know.

'No,' she replied, with a falter in her voice, 'not if that—would be against—your interest.'

'Against my interest! I should think it would be,' he said, 'and a nice quiet registrar's office is as good in every way.'

'Ah, not that; a little old church in the city. Don't you remember what we agreed?'

He looked at her a moment, then broke into a laugh again. 'To be sure,' he cried, 'a little old church in the city; St. Botolph's or St. Aldgate's, or something of that sort, with an old sexton and pew-opener, and everything mouldy and quiet. I know where you have taken that from, you little novel-reader; they're

all alike in the romances. Well, it shall have its little old church, if it won't be content without.'

'Oh, Stephen, you are not to think me fanciful: but unless it was in a church I should never believe it any good.'

'What, not with a special license, and a ring, and everything orthodox? Do you think,' he said with a laugh, 'that I should want to deceive you, Lily?'

'Oh no!' she cried, with a vehemence which seemed to push him from her, so earnest was she. 'Oh no, no!' She was wounded even by the suggestion, which never could have come from her own mind. 'I would as soon think of the sky falling,—sooner, sooner!'

He laughed again, but in a less assured and triumphant tone. He added nothing to the strength of her denial; why should he? She was sure enough to make all other asseveration unnecessary. And then they went on, slowly wandering in the soft darkness of the night, getting under the shadow of the trees as they turned in the direction of the West Lodge, for it was time for Lily to go home. Their figures disappeared amid the groups of trees, where the clear skylight and the faint radiance of the moon reached them but by moments. Not the keenest-eyed spectator could have followed them through the wood, which they both knew so well, every step of the way, round the boles of the great beeches and the gnarled roots of the oaks. They spoke of all the details of that event, which had been already arranged and agreed upon; to which Lily had long ago worn out all her objections, and now regarded almost as a matter settled; which had come, by much reasoning over it, to look like an ordinary event. She had ceased to think of the misery of her father and mother, which at first had weighed very heavily upon her; for what would that be?—the distress of a morning, the anxiety of a single night, ending in delight and triumph. All these points were disposed of long ago; the sole thing that remained was to carry out this project,—to carry it out so effectively, so speedily, so quietly, that until it was done and over nobody should suspect its possibility. For no one was aware of these silent and darkling meetings. No spy had ever encountered them, no prying eye seen them together. Roger, indeed, was well enough known to be a constant visitor at the cottage, but of Stephen, who was so seldom at Melcombe, and who knew nothing of the country,—Stephen the officer, the one who had always been away,—of him nobody knew anything; nor had he ever seen Lily Ford, so far as the country neighbours were aware, in his life.

XVI

THOUGHTS AND TALKS

ROGER and Edmund Mitford had gone away together, much against the will of the elder brother. He had not consented to it even at the moment when, obeying a hundred half-resisted impulses, he had finally, without any intention of doing so, refusing at the very moment when he yielded, gone away, to Edmund's surprise and his own. So unlikely up to the last had it been, that they went off finally by the night train, without any provision for going, making—a step which commends itself, somehow, in all cases to the imagination of the miserable—a sudden rush into the night, an escape from all the known and usual conditions of ordinary existence. Edmund so understood and humoured the capricious, fantastic misery of Roger's mind as to go on without pause or inquiry, not to London only, as everybody thought, but as fast as the railway could carry them across France, till they reached those soft shores of the Mediterranean, where so many people go when life ceases to be practicable, as if there were something healing in the mere contact with those mild breezes and in the sight of that tideless sea. Even the journey, occupying so many long hours, in which he was at once tired out and shut up in a moving prison from which he could not escape, did Roger good, and restored, or seemed to restore, his mental balance. He broke out into wild ridicule of himself when he got to the Riviera. What did he want there, a fellow in such health, who did not know whereabouts his lungs were, or had anything that wanted setting right in his constitution? He stalked through the rooms at Monte Carlo, observing the play with the scornful calm of a man whom this kind of superficial excitement did not touch, and who could scarcely suppress his contempt for the human beings whose souls were absorbed in the attractions of a colour or the number of a card. The greater part of them, no doubt, however conscious of their own folly, would have considered the plight of a young man

in his position, disturbed in all the duties and responsibilities of life by the pretty face of a gamekeeper's daughter, as an idiocy far more unaccountable. Thus we criticise but do not better each other.

After a few days, in which he composed himself thus by the observation of other people's imbecilities, Roger turned back, always humoured by his anxious companion, by whose motion it was that they paused in Paris, then brilliant in all the beauty and gaiety of spring; and it was only after Stephen had been for some days at Melcombe that the brothers came back to London. It was by this time the beginning of May. Easter was over, and with it all country claims upon the attention of society. The season had begun its hot career, and there were a thousand things to do for all those who were affected by the influx of the invading class, and by many who were not. Roger had got back, as his brother thought, much of his self-command and healthy balance of faculty. He allowed himself to float into the usual current, and do what other men did. If he said something bitter now and then about the men, or particularly the women, whom he encountered, or betrayed a scornful consciousness of those little attempts to attract so excellent a *parti*, to which the intended victims of such attempts are nowadays so very wide awake—these, though very unlike Roger, were not at all unlike the utterances of his kind, and roused no astonishment among those who heard them. A fine and generous mind, bent out of nature by some personal experience, is rarely bitter enough to equal the common sentiments of the vulgar and coarse-minded in society or out of it. The cynical outbursts which grieved Edmund, and jarred upon Roger's own ear like false notes, were not so false as the common jargon which men were accustomed to listen to and give vent to, without thought of any particular meaning at all. In this way the state of mind of which the brothers were so painfully conscious scarcely betrayed itself outside. And they ceased to be each other's constant companions in the familiar circles of town. Edmund had his own 'set,' which was not that of his brother. It was at once a humbler and more exclusive world than that into which Roger allowed himself to be drawn, without any special inclination one way or the other, drifting upon the customary tide. Edmund avoided the ordinary and inevitable, to which Roger resigned himself. He had friends here and there of quite different claims and pretensions. Sometimes he would be at an artist's gorgeous house in St. John's Wood, sometimes at the big plain dwelling of a lawyer or *savant* in Russell Square. He did not at all mind where it was, so long

as he found people who were congenial, and whose notions of existence were more or less in keeping with his own. These notions of existence, it is scarcely necessary to say, were not confined to the habits of Belgravia or even Mayfair.

It cannot be denied that Edmund, when thus freed of all responsibility for his brother, and the position which had been little less than that of Roger's keeper, or his nurse, felt much more at his ease, and began to enjoy himself. He liked the beginning of the season. The stir of renewal in the veins of the great city, a stir which runs through everything, and in which all her various developments have a share, was pleasant to him. He went to all the exhibitions, and to the scientific gatherings, and—what we fear will greatly impair any favourable impression he may have made for himself upon the mind of the reader—even to some which are far from being scientific, those which flourish in the neighbourhood of Exeter Hall. He did this without a blush, and realised with a smile how wonderfully alike they all were, both in their good qualities and in their bad. In all there was a certain ground of honest enthusiasm, and in all a superstructure of humbug and make-believe, and not one of the actors in these scenes was aware where the reality ended and the sham began. In some of these places he encountered Mr. Gavelkind, the lawyer who had charge of the affairs of the Travers family, whom Edmund had met at Mount Travers in the late proprietor's lifetime. Mr. Gavelkind was something of an amateur in life, like Edmund himself, notwithstanding that he was a sober married man, with a family. He was so sober, so respectable, so out of place in some of the haunts where the young man found him, that the lawyer felt it necessary to explain. 'You will wonder to see me so much about,' he said. 'You will think I ought to be at my own fireside, a man of my age.'

'I was not thinking specially of firesides,' said Edmund; and indeed there was but little occasion, for a lecture was then going on at the Royal Institution which was of a nature altogether to discountenance such old-fashioned ideas. There was a large audience, and the occasion was supposed to be highly interesting. But Edmund and Mr. Gavelkind were both among that restless and disturbing element, the men who hang like a sort of moving, rustling fringe round the outskirts of every such assemblage,—men who could evidently have found comfortable seats, and listened at their ease to all the lecturer's demonstrations, had they chosen, but who preferred to stand, or swing on one foot, looking on, with their heads close together, and making remarks, which were not

always in the subdued tone which recognises the sanctity of teaching, whatever the character of that teaching may be.

'Yes,' said the lawyer, 'I ought to be at home; but my family are all grown up and settled, Mr. Mitford. My youngest girl was married a year ago, and the consequence is that their mother is after one or the other of them for ever, and nobody takes any trouble about me. There is always a baby come, or coming, or something. It's all very well for half a dozen other houses, but it doesn't add to the charm of mine. We don't think it worth while to change our house, my wife and I, but it's a great deal too large for us, that's the truth, and a little bit dreary,—just a little bit. Mrs. Gavelkind has always one of her brood to look after, and I come here, or there,' he added, with a gesture of his thumb over his shoulder; where that was, whether Exeter Hall, or the theatres in the Strand, or the House of Commons, or Mr. Spurgeon's Tabernacle, it would have been difficult to tell, for Mr. Gavelkind frequented them all.

'It's not particularly lively here,' Edmund remarked.

'You mean the lecturer? Well, I imagine I know all his arguments by heart. But then, why should he take trouble about me? I don't want to be convinced. I don't care much for what he believes, one way or another. It's *that* lot he's thinking of, and quite right too. It is not you or I, Mr. Mitford, who will ever do him any credit.'

'Softly,' said Edmund. 'I may be an enthusiastic student seeking enlightenment on this particular point, for anything you know.'

'Oh!' said the other, with some curiosity and surprise. He paused a little, and then resumed: 'Are you really interested in this evolution business, now? Well, we're a strange lot; that's what I always say. I see strange things in my way of business every day. Bless us all, what's a thumb, or half a dozen of 'em to what you can see, going about with eyes in your head, every day?'

'Indeed, that is my opinion too,' assented Edmund, thinking rather sadly of his brother and his arrested life.

'I knew it. I've a little experience among my fellow-creatures, and I generally know from a man's looks. We are a droll lot, Mr. Mitford. Last time I met you, it was at that Fiji business. Odd, wasn't it? What you call unconventional those fellows ought to have been, if anybody. Dear me! they were just as cut and dry as the best of us,' said Mr. Gavelkind, with a sort of admiring pity, shaking his head.

'That is true too,' returned Edmund with a laugh. 'You are a desperate critic, Mr. Gavelkind. From Exeter Hall to this sort of thing, do you never get any satisfaction?—for we have met now at a number of places.'

'Not the sort of places people generally mean, when they say that,' said the lawyer with a chuckle. 'I tell you now, Mr. Mitford, that actor man,—that's the fellow, of all I've seen, that has got the most confidence in himself. It isn't a cause, or anything of that sort—but for going at it helter-skelter, whether he can do it or not, and carrying the whole hurly-burly along with him—— This man here's got no convictions,' the lawyer added. 'It puts him out to look at you and me.'

'Perhaps it is not very respectful to stand and talk while he is doing his best.'

'That's well said too. Perhaps I don't think enough of that. If you're going my way, Mr. Mitford, I don't mind breaking off in the middle of his argument. A stroll in the streets is just as instructive as anything else, when you've got a rational being along with you. I know how to get out without disturbing anybody.' When they had emerged into the streets, however, instead of pursuing the course of his reflections, Mr. Gavelkind said—

'I've been down in your part of the country since I saw you last.'

'Indeed?' said Edmund. He was taken entirely unawares, and it brought a colour to his cheek, which was not lost on his companion. 'I suppose with Miss Travers,' he continued. 'I hope that all is well there.'

'Well enough, and very ill too,' said the lawyer, shaking his head. 'You know the deception she's got in hand?'

'Deception!' said Edmund with surprise.

'Perhaps you don't know. By her uncle's will she has everything, but to save the feelings of that little, useless, uninteresting person——'

'I remember,' said Edmund; 'but surely it's a sacred sort of deception.'

'A sacred falsehood,' said the other, shaking his head; 'all that doesn't make it easier to manage now. She has wound herself up in coil on coil, and unless the poor old lady dies, which would be the only safe ending, I don't know how she's to come out of it. It's better to let things take their course. You can't play providence with any success that I have ever seen.'

'But surely it was most natural, and, indeed, the only thing which Miss Travers, being the woman she is, could have done.'

'Being the woman she is,' the lawyer repeated, shaking his head. 'She's a very fine woman, Elizabeth Travers. I don't mean in the usual sense of the words, though she's a handsome girl too. There are not many like her, Mr. Mitford—though I don't know whether she's properly appreciated among all the old fogyisms of a country neighbourhood.'

'I think Miss Travers is valued as she ought to be,' said Edmund, again with a slight embarrassment. 'At least, as near that as common understanding goes,' he added after a moment.

'Ah, there you're right,' cried Mr. Gavelkind; 'that's never within a long way of the reality. A country neighbourhood—begging your pardon, if you're fond of it—is the devil for that. They're all so precious set up on their own merits. And the new people, as you call 'em, the new people get no chance.'

'All that has been got over in this case,' Edmund said. 'The old people—had very little in common with——'

He was going to say 'Elizabeth,' the lawyer felt sure. The puppy! And yet what a natural and, on the whole, pleasant thing to do!

'Mrs. Travers is not a badly bred woman. She has some sense, in her way. But now they've both got wound round and round in the coils of this huge mistake, and the worst is that everybody knows. You might as well have tried,' declared Mr. Gavelkind, 'to smother the scent of that ointment, you know, in the Bible, as to keep a will from being known. Who tells it you never can find out, but before the seals are broken it's everybody's property. That's one of the things that can't be hid. And some time or other it will all come out, unless the old lady dies, which would be the best.'

'It seems a pity to doom the old lady on that account.'

'Then Miss Travers should marry, sir, as great a fool as herself, who would accept the position and keep it up. And I don't suppose a saint like that is easily to be met with in this commonplace sort of a world.'

'Should he be a saint?' Edmund asked with a faint laugh. They were crossing a stream of bright light from an open door, and Mr. Gavelkind, looking sharply up, saw the wave of colour which went once more over his face.

'If you know anybody so disinterested, put the circumstances before him, and tell him that the man that marries Elizabeth Travers will get——'

'Excuse me,' said Edmund, putting up his hand quickly, 'but

don't you think we're going rather far? I have no right, on my side, to discuss such a question, whatever you may have.'

'Oh, I've right enough,' cried Mr. Gavelkind. 'Good-night, Mr. Edmund Mitford. We are a queer lot in this world. Lord, to think of a man troubling his head about evolution that can see the contradictions of human nature every day?'

With this curious bombshell or Parthian arrow, the lawyer gave Edmund's hand a hasty shake, and before he could draw his breath had turned round and darted away.

The man that marries Elizabeth Travers will get—— Edmund went along Piccadilly, when he was thus left, with these words ringing through his mind. They formed into a kind of chorus, and sung themselves to the accompaniment of all the rhythm of life around, as he passed along quickly, silently, absorbed in the thought. It was not a new thought, though it was one which he had never allowed himself to entertain. Nobody could understand like himself the chill resistance of the county neighbourhood first, the flutter of discussion after, and all those levities about the heiress which had flown about like thistle-down. The man who marries Elizabeth Travers will get—— What should he get, that happy man? Was it so many hundreds of thousands that old Gavelkind had been about to say? Half the people in the county could have told that with a glib certainty, and had repeated it till an honest heart grew sick. Was that all that the husband of Elizabeth Travers would get? Edmund unconsciously flung his head high, with a half sob of generous feeling in his throat. That was not what the old lawyer had been about to say. Even that old fellow knew better. The man that marries Elizabeth Travers—— The man that—— Fortunate man, favoured of Heaven! The tumult of the streets changed around Edmund to a ring of mingled echoes, all chiming round these words. They pressed upon him so, and rang in his ears, that presently, when he reached that corner where all the lights were flashing, and the streams of the great thoroughfares meeting, and the carriage lamps darting past each other like fireflies, he took refuge in the quiet and comparative seclusion of the Park, like a man pursued. But when he got there, and caught sight of the soft May sky over the wide spaces of the Park, and felt upon him the shining of that same moon, only a little older, which shone upon Stephen and his wooing at Melcombe, instead of escaping, he found himself caught again by softer echoes, like the sound of marriage-bells. The man who marries Elizabeth Travers—— Who, in the name of all happy inspirations, who—was that to be?

XVII

SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

THE two brothers lived in the same chambers, though they did not see very much of each other; for Roger generally was not out of bed when Edmund went out, and Edmund had retired to his room before Roger came in at night. They were in different 'sets,' as has been said. Roger, whom society held as the more desirable of the two elder Mitfords, though inferior in many ways to the third, had been sucked into a very usual, very commonplace round of engagements which, without any pleasure to speak of, to himself or any one else, kept him perpetually occupied, and in the condition of which it is said of a man that he cannot call his soul his own. But it so happened that on this night, of all nights, Roger had an engagement which he disliked particularly, or else he had a headache, or something else had happened which made him break off abruptly for once in a way from that absorbing round; and to the astonishment and temporary embarrassment of both brothers, the elder came in while the younger was still lingering, smoking a cigarette, over the dying fire, which was not out of place even in the beginning of May.

'Hallo! is that you, Roger?' said Edmund; and 'Hallo! are you still there, Ned?' said Roger. These were their only salutations, though they had not met all day.

'Yes, I'm still here,' said Edmund, poking the fire to give himself a countenance; 'naturally—it's not quite twelve o'clock.'

'I didn't know that it was so early,' Roger replied with some embarrassment, bringing forward his favourite easy-chair.

'Some of your engagements fallen through? By the way, I thought you were to be at the Stathams' to-night?'

'Ned,' returned the elder brother, with a seriousness which perhaps was partly put on to veil other feelings, 'when girls do run amuck in society, it's appalling the pace they go. I've laughed

at it, perhaps, in other families, but, by Jove, when it's a little thing you've seen in long clothes, or short petticoats——'

'Gerry?' said Edmund, looking up, with the poker still in his hand.

Roger only nodded as he threw himself down in his chair. 'It's enough to make a fellow forswear society altogether,' he remarked.

'She means no harm. It's because she was kept in so much in her youth. We are partly to blame, for we never attempted to do anything for the girls. There's poor little Nina. I don't wonder if they are wild for pleasure when they get free: but Gerry means no harm.'

'Harm!' cried Roger, 'that little thing that never spoke above her breath! She is as bold as a fishwife, and as noisy as—as noisy as—I can't find any comparison—as her kind. They are noisier than anything else out.'

'It is all ignorance—and partly innocence,' said the apologetic brother. 'They tell her it's fun to startle the old fogies—and she knows no better. I believe most of them are like that. They fear nothing, because they don't know what there is to fear——'

Roger kept on shaking his head during this speech. 'That's all very well,' he said, 'that's all very well; but when it happens to be your own sister, it takes away your breath.' To show, however, how little his breath was taken away, Roger here breathed a mighty sigh, which disturbed the calm flame of the candles on the table, and made a slight movement in the room. The fastness of Geraldine had given him occasion to let forth some of the prevailing dissatisfaction in his mind; but the trouble in him did not arise from that alone. 'And what's the good of it all,' he went on, 'even where there's no harm, as you say? Good Lord! was life given one to be spent in a round of stupid parties night after night, and stupid nothings all the day? What do I care for their Hurlingham, and Lords', and all the rest of it? I'm not a boy; I'm a man. I tell you that I'm sick of all those fellows that say the same things, and wear the same clothes, and make the same silly jokes for ever and ever. Jove! if a war would break out or something, a good, savage, man-to-man business, like the French Revolution; but the beggars would fight, I can tell you. We'd neither stand to have our heads cut off, nor run away.'

'No, I don't suppose we should—but why such a grim suggestion? We'll have no French Revolution here.'

'More's the pity,' declared Roger with a sigh. 'It might clear the air all over the world, and dispose of a lot that could do that, but are not much good for anything else.'

Edmund feared above all this fierce mood, which was half made up of longing for those scenes and objects of living from which he had been instrumental in drawing his brother away.

'You should try my haunts for a bit,' he said with a laugh. 'My friends are bent—the most of them—on mending the world. And now and then one meets an original who is fun. To-night there was old Gavelkind——'

He regretted it the moment he had mentioned the name.

'Gavelkind! who's that? It's an odd name, I remember the name. Something to do with law: now I recollect. It is the old fellow one used to see about with Mr. Travers. An original, is he? And so was the other old man.'

'Old men seem to have the better of us in that way,' remarked Edmund. 'They have had a longer time in which to form their opinions, I suppose.'

'Not the old fellows about town,' said Roger fiercely. 'Old beasts! holding on like grim death to what they call life.'

'You are severe to-night. If you knew them better, no doubt you would find there was some good in them too.'

'Let us have no more of your moralities, Ned. I can't stand them to-night. Look here, did he tell you anything about—about *them*, you know—about—Elizabeth—and the rest? He's always coming and going. What did he say about them?'

'Roger,' said Edmund, turning from his brother, and playing with the poker upon the dying fire, 'I am not much of a fellow to ask questions—but I should like to know—— If you will let me —I should—like to understand——'

'What, in the name of Heaven? Am I to be brought to book by you too?'

'Bringing to book is folly, and you know it. There is one thing I should like to be sure of. It may be among the things that a man has no right to ask.'

'Not from a brother?' asked Roger, with something like a sneer.

'A brother, I suppose, least of all—and yet—I may as well say out what I mean. There is one name which you have singled out to inquire after. I don't want to bring that name under discussion: we have had enough of that. Roger, as one fellow to another, without any right to ask or pry into your business—— After all that has come and gone, have you any—feeling about her, or intentions, or—— Right?—no, I have no right to ask. I said so to begin with: only the right,' Edmund added with a little harsh laugh, 'of wanting to know.'

He had put down the poker and risen from his chair, but not to aid his interrogatory by his eyes. He stood with his back to his brother, staring into the glass, all garlanded with cards of invitation, which was over the mantelpiece, and in which the only thing he saw was his own overcast and clouded face. There was a momentary silence in the room, into which the creaking of the chair upon which Roger was leaning heavily, the fall of ashes from the grate, and even the sound of footsteps outside came in as with a curious diversion of interest, which, however, was no diversion at all. Roger replied at length, with his chin set down, and the words coming with difficulty from between his teeth, in the tone which all the Mitfords knew,—

'I can't see why you should want to know, or why I should submit to be questioned—or what my affairs are to you.' These phrases were uttered with a little interval between each, and then there was a longer pause; after which Roger exclaimed, suddenly striking his hand upon the table, 'I feel like the very devil to-night. Why do you provoke me with questions? There is no woman in the world that is worth a quarrel between you and me.'

Edmund made no reply. He sat down again in his chair without turning round. On his side, he thought, no doubt, that the question he had asked was one that ought to have been answered should the whole earth fall to pieces; and as for no woman in the world being worth— He could not but say to himself with some bitterness that the women Roger knew were indeed worth but little, which, at the same time, he was aware was not true. An uncomfortable moment passed thus. Edmund could keep himself under, and restrain all words of impatience, but words of kindness were beyond him. Presently, in ten long minutes or so, in the course of nature, he would say something on some profoundly indifferent subject, and the incident would be over, without sequence or meaning of any kind.

This, however, was not to be. The silence was broken by Roger, though only by the sound of his chair drawing a little nearer to the half-extinguished fire; then he lightly touched his brother on the shoulder. 'Ned, I say, no woman's worth a quarrel between you and me.'

'I have no intention of making any quarrel——'

'No, but I know what you think. I asked about Miss Travers because—because that old fellow was connected with her; because hers was the first name that came uppermost; because—— Ned, her name is nothing to me more than any other; and it's a pity.

My father was quite right, notwithstanding. No, more's the pity, —her name means nothing to me.'

'But it may, if you regret it already.'

Edmund turned round for the first time, and looked his brother in the face. Roger's eyes seemed full of a moisture which was not tears; a strange, softening liquid medium which made them glow and shine. The look of them went to Edmund's heart. He put out his hand and grasped his brother's, which was hot and not very steady. 'Old fellow,' he said, and said no more. Emotion in England does not know how to express itself between two men. Pity, tenderness, an awful sense of the impotence of humanity, came into Edmund's heart and overwhelmed it. No man can save his brother. The tragic folly, the passion which would not loose its hold, the infatuation which appeared to have laid its hand upon one, and which the other understood with an intolerable conviction of the madness of it, the unworthiness, were beyond the reach of help. Anger, indignation, wonder, all mingled together, and all obliterated in pity could do nothing. Edmund understood, yet could not understand. He would have given up all thought of happiness for himself, if that would have sufficed to pluck Roger from the edge of the precipice. But what could he do? Words were of no avail, remonstrances, arguments; nor even the pointing out of a better way. No man can save his brother. He sank back in his chair with a groan.

'There's nothing to make yourself unhappy about, Ned,' said Roger with sudden cheerfulness. 'I am safe enough, and out of the way of mischief here. Out of the way of mischief!' he repeated mockingly. 'I should think so. There is nothing in poor little Gerry's set, is there, to tempt a man to folly?'

'I wish there were!'

'You wish there were? You would like to see Melcombe turned into Vanity Fair, or into a sort of anteroom to the stables, —which? You would like to see dogs and horses, and horsey men crowding up the place; or a rabble rout, acting, dancing, rushing about; something going on for ever and ever. Which is better, I wonder,' said Roger, 'a stable-boy disguised as a fine lady, with the best of blood and all the rest of it, education and so forth, or a woman descended from nobody in particular,—just a woman, no more?'

'Is that a question we need to ask?' said Edmund. But Roger had left his chair, and gone to the other end of the room to supply himself with some of those drinks which seem indispensable when men sit and talk together, and he did not hear, or if he did

hear, did not think it necessary to pay any attention. He came back to his chair with his glass in his hand, and began to talk upon ordinary subjects, to the great relief, yet disappointment, of his brother; and they sat thus through the small hours, discussing matters not of the least importance; or, indeed, not discussing anything; sitting together, while the fire went out at their feet, making a remark once in five minutes or so; now and then fortunately hitting upon some subject which called forth a little rapid interchange of words for a few seconds; then dropping off again into that silence occasionally broken with an indifferent phrase. They had both many things to think of, but carefully abstained from approaching again the edge of any subject that was of the slightest interest. They would both have been a great deal better in bed, and they had nothing in the world to keep them out of it; no particular pleasure in this companionship, nothing but habit, which kept them with their feet on the fender, though the fire was out; and, especially with a window open, it is not always balmy in London in the middle of the night in May.

At last Edmund got up, stretching his limbs like a man fatigued. 'I think I'll go to bed,' he said. Then after an interval, 'I've half an idea of running down home to-morrow. There is nothing much for me to do here.'

'Home!' cried Roger, rising too. 'To-morrow! That's sudden, isn't it?'

'No; I don't think it's sudden. I'm not one of your fashionable men. I never meant to stay——'

'Oh!' Roger said, and that was all. The remark, however, had a great deal in it. It meant a little surprise, a slight shock, indeed, as of a thing not at all expected or foreseen; and then a half doubt, an uncertainty, a dawn of purpose. All this Edmund divined and feared; but he made as though he saw nothing in it except that universal English exclamation which means anything or nothing, as the case may be. He lighted his candle with sudden expedition, so as to leave the room before the dull air should tingle with any more words; before Roger should say, 'I don't see—why I should not go too.' Edmund escaped to the shelter of his own room before these words could be said, if ever there had been any intention that they should be said. The elder brother left behind did not say them to himself. All that he did was what Edmund had done before, to lean upon the mantelpiece and gaze into the glass, about which were stuck so many cards, large and small. Gazing into a mirror is not an unusual trick with people

with troubled minds. Sometimes one does but look blankly into that unreal world, with its mystery and suggestions. There is a kind of fantastic charm in it. Roger did this blankly, not caring for his own face, in which he could read nothing he did not know, but gazing into the void, which was something different from the well-known room reflected in it,—something with depths of the unseen, and darkling shadows as profound as fate. What did he see there? No prevision of what was coming; only a blank such as there was in his heart, without power to anticipate, much less to decide, what was to be.

Going home to-morrow! Presently he began to take down and turn over in his hands the invitation cards. At first mechanically, without any thought; afterwards with flashes of imagination, of realisation. So many crushes through which he would make his way, hat in hand, shake hands with a few people, say half a dozen indifferent words here and there to individuals whom he had probably met half a dozen times before the same day, and whom he did not care if he never saw again; dinners where he would eat the same delicacies out of season, and maintain the same talk evening after evening. 'The Row was very full to-day. I did not see you at Lady Grandmaison's. It was rather a pretty party, considering that so many people stayed away. We shall meet, I suppose, to-night at old Bullion's,—oh, everybody is going.' These were the jewels of conversation which he would gather, unless horses were in question, or the prospects at Ascot, or the opinions of the grooms and trainers; or perhaps, which was worst of all, there would be a young lady in the house, gently urged upon him, carefully thrown in his way, sometimes to the girl's own indignation, sometimes with her consent. As he went over them all, Roger, being somewhat jaundiced in his view of society, and glad to think the worst of it, felt a sickness and faintness steal over him. Why should he stay for that? Was this enjoyment? Town was supposed to be exciting and delightful, and the country dull and flat. Well, perhaps the country was dull and flat. There was nothing in it, save one forbidden thing, which tempted him very much. But town!—the vulgar routine of it, the commonplace, the vacancy, the same thing over and over again. Why, a labourer on the road, a gamekeeper in the woods, had something to say that varied at least with the weather or the season. He did not ask, Are you going here? Have you been there? Yet it was for that that a man was supposed to stay in London. To give up, to sacrifice——

What? Roger did what Edmund had done. He lighted his

candle hastily and went off to his room, to escape—from himself, which is a thing not so easily done as to escape from a brother. 'I don't see why—I shouldn't go too.' Edmund had got away before these words were said, though he had seen them coming. But Roger was not so quick, and could not get away.

XVIII

THE RETURN

It is not very excellent policy, perhaps, when you see the words upon a man's lips, and know they must be uttered one time or another, to run away before they can be said. As likely as not they will be worse instead of better when you do hear them, taking harm by the delay. When the two Mitfords met, next day, which was not till Edmund was ready for his journey, it was to him as if some explosive which he had thought dead and harmless had suddenly developed and exploded under his feet, when Roger said abruptly, 'I think I shall go home too.'

'What!' his brother cried, with mingled astonishment and dismay.

'What? Is there any harm in it? I'm sick of town.'

Edmund said nothing, but waved his hand towards all the cards on the chimney-piece, remarking, however, as he did so, with a chill of alarm, that they had been taken down from the glass, and lay together like a pack of cards among the ornaments of the mantelshelf.

'Oh, these! What do they matter? Half the people will never remember that they asked me; the other half will never find out that I have not been there. I might not have thought of it but for our talk last night; but why should I make a martyr of myself for a pack of people who care nothing for me?'

'Not that, Roger; but a man like you has—duties. No one leaves London at this time of the year.'

'You are leaving London. Ned, don't talk any nonsense. Duties! I'm not a young duke, if that's the sort of thing you mean.'

'You are the eldest son, which comes to much the same thing,' said Edmund.

'With a father who is always threatening to disinherit me, and can if he pleases; and after all, no such mighty position, were

it as safe as the Tower. Come, Ned, no folly; London will never put on mourning for me. Should it shake society to its foundations, I am still going home.'

'If that is so, you will do what you please, no doubt,' said Edmund, with much gravity; and the consequence was that they travelled down to Melcombe together, as they had left it, but with no such eagerness on Edmund's part to amuse and keep his brother from thinking, which had transformed him into an exuberant, not to say loquacious, conversationalist on the way from home. The brothers now sat each in his own corner, moody and silent: Roger, not unconscious that he was taking a step which might be fatal to him; Edmund, vexed and disappointed, saying to himself that he might have spared all this trouble, that after all he was but an officious busybody, and that after one tantalising moment of hope everything was as before.

They reached home while Stephen's traces were still warm. He had returned to his regiment only the day before. 'I wonder you did not knock against each other somewhere on the road,' said the Squire. 'He's always a queer fellow; he told me you were coming home.'

'I did not know it myself till this morning,' said Roger; 'he must have the second sight.'

'He has very keen eyes of his own, at all events; he gave me a number of tips,' said Mr. Mitford, who was apt to exalt the absent at the expense of the present. This was the welcome the young men received. It left an uncomfortable impression on their minds that their shortcomings had been talked over between Stephen and their father, which was not at all the case. To Edmund this gave scarcely any uneasiness, but it lit up a dark glow of anger under Roger's eyes. They had been talking him over, no doubt, in that which was his most intimate and sacred secret, putting vulgar interpretations to it, hideous developments. Roger thought he could hear the mocking of Stephen's laugh, and it raised in him a responsive fury. What did Stephen know about anything that was sacred? He had his own vulgar amours, and judged others by that standard. Roger quivered with indignation as the image of these possible conversations, which had never taken place, came before him.

The weather seemed to change all in a moment as they left town, as it sometimes does in the capricious English spring. It had been ungenial and cold there; here it was May, as that month should be, but so seldom is, in all the softness of the early year, the air sweet with growth and blossom, the skies shedding balm.

Something in this delicious sudden transformation went to the young men's hearts, softening and charming them. The first dinner, the domestic gathering for which Edmund had trembled, passed over quite harmoniously. Mr. Mitford appeared for the moment to perceive that to irritate his son was bad policy, and Nina's soft storm of questions as to Geraldine and Amy filled up the silence at table. Here unexpectedly Roger and his father were in accord.

'Don't you think Gerry might ask me to come and see her? Don't you think I might write and say I should like to come?' Nina no doubt was bolder since Stephen's judicious drawing out had put so many new ideas in her head.

'No,' said Roger, 'certainly not, if you take my advice.'

'Oh! that's not what Steve said; he said they had such fun!'

'I don't think, sir,' said Roger to his father, 'it's the kind of fun you would approve of for a girl.'

'I have told her so,' returned the Squire. 'There, Nina, you hear what your brother says; your brother's a good authority; not like Steve, who is a rover himself. Run away now, and let me hear of Geraldine no more.'

'Oh, papa!' Nina exclaimed.

'I tell you I'll have no more of it,' said Mr. Mitford. 'I never liked that sort of thing. Your mother was a quiet woman, and I've always been used to quiet women. These girls ought to be spoken to,—they ought to be spoken to. But Stephen tells me Statham is a fellow that can take care of his wife.'

'There is no need for alarm, sir,' remarked Edmund; 'the girls mean no harm.'

'I hate fast women,' said the Squire. 'I never could bear them. Your mother was a pattern; out of her own house nobody ever heard a word of Mrs. Mitford. That's the greatest praise a woman can have.'

'That is no longer the opinion of society,' said Roger. 'They think the more a woman is talked of, the more noise she makes, the more absurdities she does, the better. If she has a moment's quiet, she thinks she's out of the swim. If she stays a night at home, she's half dead with the bore of it. Women are not what they used to be.'

'The more's the pity. It's all the fault of this ridiculous education, which, thank Heaven, I never went in for,' said the Squire. 'They think themselves emancipated, the little fools, and they don't care how far they go.'

Edmund had an observation trembling on his lips, to the effect

that education, which the Squire thanked Heaven he had never given in to, could scarcely be the cause of his sister's failings, but he was stopped by a certain nervous air of seriousness in Roger's face.

'My own opinion is,' said Roger, whose eyes had an abstracted look, as if he were ruminating a general principle, 'that to find a woman of the old type, like my mother, sir,—sweet and womanly, you know, and fond of home, and satisfied to be happy there,—whoever she was, would be better than anything you could get, family, money, rank, whatever you please, and a fast girl along with it. That's my opinion; and as I've just come from the midst of them, I think I ought to know.'

'All right, my boy,' assented the Squire, 'I'm with you as far as you go. Carry out your views, my fine fellow, and you may be sure you'll please me.'

This pregnant conversation was interrupted by a question on Nina's part, in which that little person took a very practical view of the matter. 'Should one always stay at home?' she asked. 'If Geraldine and Amy had always stayed at home, they would never have been married, and then you would not have got rid of them, papa. I have heard you say you were glad to have got rid of them. If I am never to go on any visit, nor see any one, you will never, never get rid of me.'

'Run away, Nina. We've had enough of this. The first thing a woman ought to learn,' said Mr. Mitford, 'is when to go, after dinner. Five minutes after the servants,—that's long enough. Run away.'

But the conversation languished after Nina's little white figure stole reluctantly out of the room. The twilight was sweet, the windows were open, the air was balmy with the breath of early summer. The Squire talked on, but his sons paid slight heed. He continued the discussion of women which Roger had begun. But it is rare that such a discussion can be carried on without a jar, especially when the company is a mingled one, and youth, still accessible to romance, not to say actually touched by the glamour of love, has to listen to the prelections of an elder man upon this delicate subject. The Squire did not trangress decorum, he was not disposed that way; but he was full of that contempt for women which men of his age, especially when freed from all domestic intercourse with the inferior sex, often entertain. And it may be supposed that his talk about what constituted a good mother and continuer of the race, and all the domestic qualifications which he thought necessary, was of a kind little congenial with the perturbed yet absorbing passion which Roger had held at

arm's-length so long, only to fall back into with redoubled force and *entrainement* now; or with the more visionary, yet at the same time more highly pitched sentiment of Edmund, whose feet were being drawn away by the sweet, rising tide, but who had not yet ventured to launch fairly upon it. Roger was the more impatient of the two, for his mind had gone much farther than that of his brother. He was indeed moment by moment passing out of his own control, feeling his feet and his heart and his thoughts swept along by that resistless flood, and all the will he ever had against it gone like a useless barrier across a river. He bore his father's matter-of-fact discourse as long as human nature, in so very different a vein of sentiment, could do; and it was at last quite suddenly, with a start, as if he had been touched by something intolerable, that he rose from his chair. 'Excuse me,' he murmured, 'I've got a headache, I must try the open air;' and he slid out into the gathering grayness of twilight like a shadow, leaving Mr. Mitford open-mouthed, with the half of his sentence unsaid.

'I'm afraid Roger is not very well,' cried Edmund, getting up; 'if you'll excuse me too, sir——'

'Nothing of the sort,' said the Squire. 'Excuse you? No, I won't excuse you; sit down, I tell you, Ned. What! your first night at home, and neither one nor the other of you can spend half an hour with your father after dinner? Let Roger alone; you're not a couple of girls to make yourselves interesting, fussing over each other's headaches. I suppose the truth of the matter is, he wants his cigar. I'm glad he's gone, for one thing. You can tell me what he's been about, and in what mind he's come home.'

'I can tell you neither the one nor the other,' said Edmund, not sufficiently under his own command to overcome his annoyance at being detained, and his fear as to what his brother might do. Then he added, 'I must follow him, father; for Heaven's sake, don't detain me! He may be going——'

'Sit down, sir,' exclaimed the Squire, with a powerful hand on his son's arm, forcing him back into his chair. 'Let him go to—the devil, if he likes; if he means to, do you think you can keep him back?'

'That is true,' said Edmund, yielding, with once more that sense of impotence which makes the heart sick. What could he do, indeed? Certainly not keep back Roger's fated feet from the path which any opposition would make him only the more determined to tread. No man can save his brother. To have to submit to his father's interrogations was hard too.

'Where may he be going? What does he want?' asked Mr. Mitford. 'Do you mean to tell me he's come home as great a fool as ever? Do you mean to tell me—— Why, what was that about women? What did you understand by that? The fellow's a liar as well as a fool, if it wasn't Elizabeth Travers he meant. Right sort of woman, whoever she was; better than rank, and so forth,—well! *she's* nobody; but she's worth a score of the fast ones. Isn't that true? What do you mean, confusing my mind again, when what he has said is as clear as daylight? I tell you, Ned, if he's deceiving me again——'

'I never said he was deceiving you. I am not my brother's keeper. I can't give you any account of Roger.'

'You mean you won't. I know, honour among thieves. You'd rather see your father's heart broken, and all his plans put out, than split upon your brother. That's your code, never mind what becomes of me. Your father 's nobody, and his interests are nothing; but stand together like a band of conspirators, and keep him in the dark. Keep him in the dark!—that's what you think honour. It's not the first time I've found it out.'

'Father, I don't think you have any right to question me so. I should not betray my brother if I could; but as it happens, I can't, even if I wished, for I know nothing. We have not been very much together even in an outside way; and if you think he opens his heart to me——'

'To whom does he open his heart then?' cried the Squire. 'Has he got a heart to open? It doesn't seem so, so far as his family is concerned. Now look here, Ned, this sort of thing can't go on. He must make up his mind one way or the other. If he will not take my way, he shall not take my property; that's as clear as daylight. If he's meditating any disgrace to his family, it shall never be done in this house, I can answer for that. You'd better warn him; you shall have it, not he.'

'I, sir!' cried Edmund, springing from his chair.

'No heroics, for I sha'n't believe them. Melcombe is mine, to dispose of it as I please. Unless Roger does as I wish, he sha'n't have it, not a square foot of it. You shall have it; I've said so before. You think I'm joking, perhaps? I never joke on such subjects; you shall have it. There! my mind is made up, and there's not another word to say.'

'Stop a moment, father,' exclaimed Edmund. 'Nothing in this world, neither your will, nor the law, nor any motive in existence, would make me take my brother's place. I don't joke any more than you do, once for all.'

'Bah!' said the Squire; 'wait till you're tried. Your brother's place! It is nobody's place; it's my place to the last moment I can hold it, and then it goes to whoever I choose. Hold your tongue, Ned. And now you can go and look after your brother. Take care of him, pretty innocent; don't let him fall into bad hands. You'll take greater care of him than ever, now you know what'll happen if you don't succeed.'

He went off, with a laugh that rang through the room, tramping along the corridor with his quick footstep, which was not heavy for so large a man, yet vibrated through the house, finding out somehow every plank that sounded and every joint that creaked, as no other step did. When that hasty progress had concluded with the swing of the library door, another door opened softly, and Nina stole in.

'Oh, is papa angry? Oh, Edmund, is it about me?'

'Nina, you have been listening again?'

'No, indeed; oh no; besides, I could not hear a single word; everything was quiet, as if you had been the best of friends. It is only his step like that, and then he slammed the library door.'

'The library door always makes a noise; no one was angry; there was not a word said about you. Be satisfied, Nina; I'll come and talk to you afterwards. I'm going out a little now.'

'Are you going after Roger, Edmund? for I'm sure he's gone to the West Lodge.'

'What do you know about the West Lodge? What nonsense you talk, Nina! What should Roger do there? He has gone to smoke his cigar.'

'I know very well,' said the girl, 'he had no cigar. He came round to the hall to get a hat, and then he went off. Oh! I know quite well what it means when people walk in that way.'

'In what way?'

'I am not very good at explaining: going straight on, with their heads bent, as if they did not want to look where they were going, because they knew so well. Do you mean to say you don't know?'

Edmund, alas, knew very well what she meant. He flung himself back into a chair with that sense of despairing which had seized him so strongly on various occasions already. What could he do to stop those steps of fate?

XIX

ANOTHER TWILIGHT

ROGER went out into the twilight without seeing anything, with his head bent, taking long steps straight forward, as his sister had said. While he had been musing the fire had burned. All the way down in the silence of the noisy train, all through the dinner hour with its needful ceremonials, the thoughts so long repressed had been flowing on and on in full stream, until his heart was full and could no longer contain itself. He had relieved himself a little by these enigmatical speeches about women. 'A woman of the old type, like my mother, sweet and womanly and fond of home, and satisfied to be happy there—whoever she might be—would be better——' It was a relief to say this; it was the last development of the thought which had given him so much comfort, perhaps the first thought which had given him any comfort at all in the whole matter. Instead of a fast woman, or a horsey woman, or a woman given up to 'fun' and sport, to find one who was all a woman, the flower of life, the sweet, the gentle, and the true. No one could deny that; it was clear as daylight. It might be a good thing, if you so chanced it, to find such a woman in your own class,—one that knew all the little punctilios, how to receive your guests, and sit at the head of your table, and all that. Yes, it might be a good thing; one who had connections something like your own, though everybody says your wife's relations are a bore. That might be an advantage, if it so happened. But otherwise, instead of one of the society women, those creatures who cared for nothing but amusement, how much better to have a fresh and uncontaminated being, vigorous and pure as nature could make her, knowing no harm nor thinking any! A wife like that brought new blood and new possibilities to a house. It was a thing that ought to be done, for mere policy, from time to time. True, there might be drawbacks, —drawbacks that were very evident on the face of them; the father and mother, for example, who would turn everything upside

down. That could never be a pleasant thought; but it was better than a band of fast girls and doubtful men who would convert one's house into a bear-garden. People put up with these last because the offenders had good names, because they were in 'society,' though Heaven knows their manners were often bad enough,—worse than the Fords. The Fords—well, no doubt that would be a bitter pill! But at least it was a thing which nobody would have any business with,—a skeleton which could be comfortably disposed of in the cupboard at home. Better that a thousand times than the other. He repeated this to himself again and again, or rather it turned over and over in his mind, giving him the most curious justification in everything he was doing. He had struggled before as against a thing that had no excuse, but now he had found one; now it seemed to him of two possibilities the better one,—far better for himself, for the race, and the name.

The spring night was very sweet. There were great bushes of hawthorn here and there, gleaming whitely through the faint half light, filling the air with their fragrance. He wandered from point to point, half guided by those trees, taking much the same course that Stephen had done. It was a fortnight later, and the moon, which had been then young, was now on the wane and rose late. That was one element of enchantment withdrawn; and Roger, though much more apt to regard things poetically than his brother, was not doing so to-night. He did not think of the sweetness of the evening, scarcely even of her sweetness who was drawing him towards the place where she was. It was, he would have said, the serious, the practical part of the question that occupied him now. He had not any love meeting to look forward to, as Stephen had; no feeling of triumph, no excitement of the senses, was in him. He was going over the matter, as he thought, coolly, balancing the advantages and disadvantages, and for the first time seeing all that was to be said on the favourable side. He was hardly aware, even, that all this time he was coming nearer and nearer to Lily. He had not had any thought, when he set out, of seeing her that night.

When he saw something moving among the trees, not far from the West Lodge, Roger was startled, almost alarmed. He went towards the thing by instinct, saying to himself, however, that it must be one of the servants, or perhaps some passing villager, not aware that this was not the permitted way. He was in the clothes he had worn at dinner, and, like Stephen, the whiteness of his linen was like a moving speck in the dark. He went on, quickening his pace, he hardly knew why; going up to the spot where somebody must be, partly with the instinct of proprietorship to

warn off an intruder, partly with a less defined feeling. Something indistinct separated itself from the trees, as he went on, and turned towards him. There was a little cry, a tremulous Oh! and a sound like the flutter of a bird—and was it Lily, with a quick movement, who came to meet him, as if she had expected him, as if she would have run to him? He asked, with a sudden leap of his heart, 'Who is it? who is it?—Lily?'—making a rapid step forward, so rapid that she was almost in his arms. Then there was a quick recoil, a cry almost wild, with a sharp note of wonder in it,—'Mr. Roger!'—and he saw that it *was* Lily, but Lily drawing back, startled and frightened; not ready, as he had thought, for one moment of surprise, to fling herself into his arms.

'Yes, it is Roger,' he said. 'You thought it was—some one else?'

'I was looking for—my father—he is late, and I came out to look for him. Mother was—a little anxious.' Lily was breathless with alarm or some other feeling, and panted between the words—'and we did not know, sir, that you had come home.'

'You could not. I came on the impulse of the moment, I scarcely know why.'

'They say,' said Lily, still panting a little, 'that it is very gay in London at this time of the year.'

'Yes, it's very gay. I am not fond of gaiety. The park here, and a young gentle creature, like you, walking in it in the sweet evening, that is more delightful to me.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger.'

'You think I don't mean it, perhaps, but I do,' said Roger, feeling his own breath come a little quickly. 'You suit the soft darkness of the evening, Lily. It is like poetry, and so are you.'

'I am only a poor girl, Mr. Roger,' said Lily. It was not a speech such as she was usually disposed to make. She could not tell, indeed, by what impulse it came from her. There was a little vexation in it, for she could not help thinking, with a faint pang, that Stephen had never said anything to her so pretty as this. But then Stephen laughed at poetry; he was superior to it.

'Poor or rich makes little difference that I know of,' said Roger, who also had struck a quite unusual vein. 'A true woman is always in her fit place.'

'It is very good of you to say so, Mr. Roger,' exclaimed Lily, rousing up to the occasion, 'for there are some people who don't think so well of us as that; they scold poor mother for me, as if I were not fit for my own home.'

'I hope you will not be offended, Lily; but no one can help

seeing that the keeper's lodge is not the sort of place from which one would expect you to come.'

'It is my home, though,' said the girl; and she added tremulously, 'Do you think, if I were in the position of a lady, I wouldn't, I shouldn't—shame those that put me there——'

'Shame!' Roger cried with indignation. It all seemed to him very strange, as if he had walked into some fairy place where there were no disguises, and carried his breast uncovered, so that the throbbings might be seen. 'I cannot imagine any place,' he added gravely, 'so beautiful or so refined that you would not be in your place there.'

Even in the uncertainty of twilight Roger saw the blush of delight that covered the girl's face; but he did not know that it was not for him.

'Thank you,' she said, 'perhaps I'll never be anything but what I am; but if I should ever be different, I am glad to know that you don't think I'd bring my—friends to shame.'

'Hush! hush!' he said, 'that can never have anything to do with you.'

Lily had gone on towards the lodge, and Roger walked by her in a curious fascination, like that of a dream. He had never expected nor planned to have this interview. He was not even prepared for anything it might lead to. He had never talked to her before in the freedom of complete solitude, with no one near them to interrupt. If he had ever seen her alone, it had been but for a few minutes, with Mrs. Ford always ready to come in. But the effect of finding himself thus with her bewildered rather than encouraged him. He had let the first overflowings of his heart have vent, which might be mere vague compliment, and no more. But her presence in the midst of this stillness, the sensation as if they two were all alone in the world, no one near them, was for the present as much as his mind could take in. He was prepared for nothing more. The silence was so long that at last Lily herself spoke.

'It's very sweet,' she said, 'to have the park to walk in. It's beautiful in the evenings. There has been a moon, but now it is on the wane, and does not rise till late.'

'Is this where you walk always,—not down to the village?'

'The village!—oh no! What should I do in the village? I have no friends there. It is hard upon a girl when she has got a better education, and cannot move in the class she belongs to, Mr. Roger. They don't like me for that; and they're so different, I don't care for them.'

'You can have nothing in common with them,' he said.

'No,' assented Lily. 'I should like to be with the ladies and gentlemen; but they would have nothing to say to me.'

'You are mistaken, Lily. That is not the case, at least so far as—some are concerned. Women, people say, are jealous. But on the other hand——'

'Oh yes, Mr. Roger,' said Lily, 'I know there are gentlemen who are pleased to come and talk. They think it amusing to see me in my father's cottage. But I hope you don't suppose that's what I care for. I think more of myself than that.'

'I beg your pardon,' he cried, 'with all my heart. I hope you don't imagine I could ever mean—Lily, you don't know with what reverence I think of you. I have been among women who are not fit to tie your shoes; and to think of you has kept me from despising my fellow-creatures and growing bitter and hard. You don't know what it does for a man to remember a girl so spotless and sweet as you.'

Lily was frightened by the meaning of his voice, the earnestness with which he spoke, and the fine words, finer than anything that had ever been said to her before. And she reflected that to have two brothers making love to her would be very strange, that it would scarcely be right. She hastened her steps a little over the soft undulations of the turf.

'You are too kind, Mr. Roger,' she said. 'If you knew me better, you would not perhaps think so well of me. I am well enough, but I am not so good as that.'

'It is not a question of thinking well or ill,' exclaimed Roger, with the strange sensation going through all his being that fate had got hold of him; that the current against which he had been struggling, sometimes so feebly, had at last got the better of him, had swept him off his feet, and was carrying him away. 'I have long ceased to think so far as you are concerned. I can only feel that you have been a new life to me since ever I first saw you. I have fought against it—I will not conceal that from you—and tried hard. Lily, I wonder if you ever thought of me?'

'Oh yes, Mr. Roger,' she said tremulously, walking on faster; though in her agitation she kept stumbling as she went. 'We all thought you very kind. It has been very good of you, coming to the lodge. It is getting late, and I must hurry home. Perhaps father has got in the other way.'

'Lily, stop a moment; kind was not what I meant. Kind!—it is you who must be kind to me, Lily. Don't you really know

what I mean?' he asked, touching her arm with his hand. 'I want you to be my wife.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger!' cried Lily, moving suddenly away from him with a voice and gesture of horror. She said to herself in her fright, her heart almost standing still for a moment, then leaping up again in a very frenzy of excitement, that it was like being courted by a brother. Should she tell him? How could she answer him? And she engaged to Stephen! She had never felt so terrified—so overwhelmed, in her life.

'You are frightened,' Roger said. 'Why are you frightened? Don't think of anything but ourselves, Lily. Be selfish for a moment, if you can be selfish. Everything will come right afterwards for the others, if it is right between you and me.'

'For the others?' she repeated, faltering, gazing at him with large and tearful eyes through the dimness of the night.

'Yes, yes,' he cried impatiently. 'You are thinking of your father and of my father. All that will come right. Lily, you must have known; I have not taken you by surprise. Will you? will you? My Lily! Words cannot say what is in my heart for you.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger,' she exclaimed, again putting up her hands between them, 'don't, please don't talk so! I mustn't listen to you. It makes me feel as if I were—not a proper girl. Mr. Roger, oh, for everybody's sake, go away, go away.'

'For everybody's sake?' he said, the moisture coming to his eyes. 'Is that what they have put into your dear mind, that you must not listen to me, for everybody's sake? But, my dearest, if I answer for it that nobody shall come to harm, if I tell you that all shall be well? Surely you may trust me that nobody shall come to harm.'

She made no reply, but hurried along, stumbling over the inequalities in her path, with her head averted a little and horror in her heart. 'Stephen! Stephen!' she said to herself; but she dared not utter his name. What would Stephen think if he heard his brother thus offering her himself and all he had? In the shock of fancied guilt, Lily could not realise what was the offer that was being made. The heir of Melcombe and all that he had! Her brain was not even touched by the magnificence of the conquest. Perhaps she had not yet time to realise it. She was eager for the shelter of the cottage, eager to get away from him, terrified to betray herself, still more terrified lest she should do or say something that would make Stephen angry; his brother, which was the same as her own brother,—something too horrible

to think of! He went on speaking, she scarcely heard what, as he hurried on beside her; begging her to pause, to think; telling her he would wait for his answer, that he saw she was beside herself with fear. 'But why? why?' Roger cried. 'My sweet Lily, do you think I would risk your father's living? Do you think I would do him harm? If my father even should stand in our way, do you think I wouldn't keep *him* from suffering? Hear reason, dearest, hear reason!' He was out of breath, and so was Lily. She only cried, 'Oh, Mr. Roger!' as she hastened on.

Mrs. Ford stood at her garden gate looking out for Lily, and saw with wonder and a shock at her heart the figure which accompanied her child, clearly a gentleman, with his white shirt front, otherwise indistinguishable in the night. Her first thought was that some one was insulting Lily.

'I'm here, dear, I'm here; you're all right, you're close at home!' she cried.

'Oh, mother, it's Mr. Roger!' cried Lily in reply; but she did not pause as if her mother's presence reassured her. 'Good-night, sir,' she said, and ran in. And in the stillness of the place the lover and the mother, facing each other in the dark, could hear her footsteps climbing hurriedly up the narrow, steep staircase till she reached her room, in which sanctuary both sight and sound of her disappeared.

Mrs. Ford and Roger were left standing, confronting one another, and the position was not without its disagreeable side. Mrs. Ford looked at Roger, and her fingers began to fumble with her apron. Fear for her daughter, uneasiness in the presence of her master's son, whom she was so unwilling to offend, took all assurance from her tone. And yet, if any wrong had been done to her child—'Mr. Roger,' she said, trembling, 'you have given my Lily a fright.'

'It appears so. Mrs. Ford, I hope you will stand my friend and bring her to hear reason. It must be Ford and my father she is thinking of. No harm shall come to Ford. I have asked her to be my wife.'

Mrs. Ford gave a shriek which echoed out into the stillness among the trees. 'Oh! good Lord!—Mr. Roger!' she cried.

XX

BROUGHT TO BOOK

THERE is at once something very exciting and strangely calming in having at last carried out an intention long brooding in the mind. The thrill of the real and actual through all the veins is suddenly met and hushed in the awe of the accomplished. And all the hundred questions which had been distracting the spirit,—shall I? shall I not? shall it be now? soon? a lifetime hence? will it be for good? will it be for evil?—all these doubts, uncertainties, peradventures, cease and disappear, leaving a curious vacancy and awe of silence in the soul. No need for them any longer; no room for further debate. Whether it ought to have been now or never, whether it was for good or evil, it is done, done, and never can be undone. Perhaps to the most happy such a crisis is something of a shock, and in the midst of rapture even a regret may breathe, for the time when everything was still wrapped in the mists of uncertainty, everything possible, nothing accomplished. Probably, even in such a matter as a declaration of love, the fact is always less delightful than the anticipation. Fancy alone is high fantastical; the imagination which gives us so many of our highest pleasures is exigent. A look, a touch, the inflection of a tone, may offend its overwrought expectations, and reality can never be so wholly sweet as the pictures it has drawn.

Far more than in ordinary cases was this the case with Roger. The melting of modest half-reluctance of which he had dreamed; the shy, sweet wonder of the girl to whom he was opening (how could he help knowing that?) gates as of heaven; the pause of delicate hesitation, doubt, alarm, all of which his love would have so amply cleared away,—these were not what he had encountered. His suit had been received with an appearance of terror very different from that veiled and tremulous happiness which he had imagined to himself. She had been not shy, not trembling only, but afraid, in a panic of real terror, anxious to escape from him;

too much terrified to hear what he had to say. To be sure, he felt himself able to account for this, in a way which exalted and ennobled Lily, since it was her utter unselfishness, her preference of her father's interests and of his, Roger's interests, to her own, her determination to allow no quarrel on her account, no family break-up, no endangerment of others, which had made her receive him so strangely. But yet it had been a disappointment. He had not, indeed, allowed his imagination to dwell on that scene; other questions, far more dark and tragic, had kept him from such lover's dreams; but yet by turns, in the pauses of his anxious thoughts, there had gleamed upon him a sudden picture of how that gentle heart would understand his, of the struggle in Lily's transparent countenance, the spring of delight, the pause of soft alarm. He had seen these things by a side glance. But the picture had not been realised.

This was the first sensation. Then followed others more personal. He had done this thing over which he had hesitated for months, which he had recognised as a revolution in his life, full of terrible, perhaps tragical, consequences. He had foreseen all these, both great and little, from his own banishment from his father's house (which did not seem a very real danger) to the more horrible certainty of the close ties which would be established between him and the Fords, the place they would have a right to in his household, the gamekeeper father, the homely drudge of a woman, who would be brought so near him. All this he put behind his back now with disdain. What he had done he had done, and nothing could undo it. He raised his hand unconsciously as he hurried across the park, waving all these spectres away. He had accepted them, and their power was gone. He thought of them no more.

A kind of exaltation came into his mind as he went home. To have done it after all was much, to have got out of the region of conflict and doubt. Strange to think that he had been wasting his strength in futile conflicts only this morning; that yesterday he had been struggling in those nets of society which he loathed, and had almost believed of himself that he never would have done this thing, which now it was as certain he must have done as if it had been planned amid all the counsels of the spheres. And who should say it had not been so planned? When the great crises of our life arrive, we are seldom unwilling to recognise that there is something providential in the way they come about; or at least, if we are very advanced and superior, to smile upon the weaker sweet imagination which seems to have some fanciful justification

for thinking that Heaven itself might have taken that trouble. For how can there be a greater thing than the bringing together of two human creatures, from whom a greater and a greater life may spring, until the race touches again the spheres? Marriages, the simple say, are made in heaven. They are fit things to be made in heaven; not the marriages 'arranged' in society, with so much blood and beauty on the one side, and so much money on the other, or between two great estates which would naturally come together, or for any other horrible devil's reason, not Heaven's; but between two genuine human creatures, man and maid, between the primeval Two, the pair on whom all life is founded and all society. Roger was not, perhaps, a man of poetical thought in general, but the mind which usually thinks in prose will sometimes strike a higher note of poetry in exceptional elevation and excitement than the more poetically disposed. Then he thought of the fast women, the girls like Geraldine and Amy, and of the contrast between the noisy racket of that unlovely life and the beautiful tranquil existence of the true woman, working all day under a humble, quiet roof, walking in her sweetness among all other sweet and tender influences in the soft May evening, amid the dews and balmy odours of the park. How different, he thought with a certain glorying in his own apparent unsuccess (which he did not believe, would not believe, was real), how still more different would have been the reception of his suit in that other world, the great world, where he was known as an excellent *parti*, the heir to a good estate! There would have been no hesitation about the girl he had chosen; the parents would have accepted him with open arms. Lily's panic was sweet in comparison,—how sweet! To her it was the obstacle that he should be the heir of Melcombe. How different! This thought carried his soul away, floating upon waves of immeasurable content.

He had reached the house before he was aware, going quickly in the abstraction of his mind. It stood solid in the summer dark, a big shadow softly rounded off by the surrounding trees; the great cedar on the lawn like a tower, more substantial even in its blackness of shadow than the human house with its flickers of light at the windows. He came to it upon the garden side, where were the long row of projecting windows. In Nina's, which formed one of the drawing-room bays, there was a light, and he saw her little face appear, suddenly pressed against the glass, peering out at the sound of his footstep on the gravel. A more subdued light, that of his father's shaded lamp, shone from the

corresponding window of the library. Did his father rise too at the sound of his step, or was it only his imagination that suggested a stir within? He had passed these lights, and was making his way round to the door which he could see was open, showing the coloured lamp in the hall and a glow of variegated light upon the black oak carvings, when he heard himself sharply called from a little distance beyond. It was the Squire's voice. Roger felt in a moment that all that had gone before was as child's play, and that now the great crisis of his life had come. He went forward slowly, and I will not say that his heart did not beat louder. He was a man fully matured, not one to tremble before a father; and yet there went through him a thrill of something like alarm,—a thrill which did not mean fear, nor any disposition to yield to his father the arbitration of his fate, yet which was a summoning of all his energies to meet a danger which he had foreseen without ever expecting it, and which far sooner than he had supposed was to settle and decide the future tenor of his life.

'Roger, is it you? I might have known. What do you mean, bursting in at the windows and scaring poor little Nina? Nobody shall do that in my house.'

'Has Nina said so?' asked Roger sharply. 'I came in at no window, sir. When you called me I was making my way to the door.'

The Squire paused, and looked at his son as a bull might look, with his head down before charging. 'It doesn't matter,' he said, 'door or window. Where have you been, sir?—that's the question. Only a few hours at home, and here's somebody who must receive a visit, who can't be put off,—the first night! Where have you been?'

'Where have I been? Surely I am not a child, sir, to be questioned in that way——'

'No, you're not a child, more's the pity. A child can do no harm but to himself. You—can disgrace your family and everybody belonging to you. Where have you been, sir, to-night?'

'I have been,' said Roger, with a strong effort at self-control, 'in the park. When you think of it, you will see that a man of my age cannot be asked such questions. Let the night pass, father. If you have anything to ask that I can answer, let it be to-morrow.'

'It shall be to-night!' cried the Squire, with foam flying from his lips. 'And you shall answer what questions I choose to ask, or else I will know the reason why. In the park? I know where you have been, you poor fool. You have been at the West Lodge!'

'Well, sir; and what then?' said Roger, the blood coursing back upon his heart, all his forces rallying to meet the attack. It subdued his excitement and made him calm. He stood firmly looking in his father's face, which he could scarcely see, except that it was infuriated and red. And there was a moment of silence,—dead silence,—into which the stirrings of the night outside and the movements of the house came strangely.

For a moment Mr. Mitford was speechless with rage and consternation. Then he turned and walked quickly into the house, waving to his son to follow him. 'We can't talk here. Come into my room.'

The library was a large room lined with books, a miscellaneous collection, abundant but not valuable, in dingy old bindings, which made the walls dark. One lamp, and that a shaded one, stood in a corner on the table where Mr. Mitford read his newspapers. This was the only light visible. The Squire went up to it, and threw himself into his arm-chair. Roger did not sit down. He stood with his hand upon the table, which was in the light, but his face was in shadow. This gave him a slight advantage over his father, who was full in the light.

'You say "What then?"' said Mr. Mitford, 'and you say it mighty coolly, as if it didn't matter. Let's understand each other once for all. It's some time now since you have set yourself to thwart my plans. I was ready to settle everything for you, to make it easy,—and you had the best of everything waiting for you to pick up. By Jove, you were too well off,—that's all about it. Well, what's come between you and all this? Your mind's changed, and your ways. Once you were all straight, doing very well, though you were always a stubborn one. Now——'

'I am still a stubborn one, I fear,' Roger assented, with an attempt at a smile.

'None of your smiling!' cried the Squire. 'It's no smiling matter, I can tell you. What's the reason? Confound you, sir,' exclaimed the angry father, the foam flying from his lips again, 'do you think I don't know what it is? A dressed-up, mincing milliner's girl—a doll with a pretty face—a—a creature! I've seen her, sir,—I've seen her. Ford's daughter,—the keeper! That's what takes you every night from home. And you come back from low company like that to your sister's—and look me in the face——'

'I hope,' said Roger, pale and trembling with passion, 'I can look any man in the face. And as for my sisters, any one of them, if they were half as good as she of whom you speak——'

The Squire was purple; it was not much wonder perhaps. And he knew that was a bad thing for a man of a full habit, like himself, and with one big word to relieve his mind he forced himself into a sort of calmness, resuming his seat from which he had started. Losing one's temper does nobody any good. He puffed forth a hot blast of angry breath, which relieved him, and then he assumed what was intended for a polished air of composure.

'Good! I see you have made up your mind. May I ask what course you intend to adopt in respect to this paragon? I suppose you've settled that too?'

'Sir,' said Roger, 'when a man loves a woman, and she is free to marry him, there can be but one course to adopt, so far as I am aware.'

'Oh! so that is it; "there can be but one course!"' repeated the Squire, with that highly offensive attempt to mimic his son's tone which was habitual to him. Then thundering, 'You mean to *marry* the baggage, sir, and bring her to this house, to your mother's place!'

'She was my mother's favourite; she has been trained upon my mother's plan,' said Roger with white lips.

'Your mother's favourite—for a waiting-maid! Trained upon your mother's plan—to cut out aprons and sew them! Is that what you want her for? But let me tell you, sir, that girl shall never sit in your mother's place,—never, if there was not a woman but herself in the world; never, if—— What is the use of wasting words? If you mean to make such a disgraceful match, you had better count the cost first, which is—Melcombe in the first place, and your supposed position here. The land shall go to your brother; I withdraw your allowance. Love is a fine thing, isn't it? Go and live upon it, and see how you like it then.'

'Father,' gasped Roger; he felt it necessary to control his own passion, and caught at the word to remind himself of a bond that could not be ignored.

'It is of no use appealing to me. You think I have been uttering vain threats and have meant nothing; but, by Jove, you shall find out the difference. I've not been a pedant,' cried the Squire, 'nor a prude,'—they were the first words that occurred to him. 'I've paid your debts, and put up with—many things no father approves of.'

'You must think, sir, that you are speaking to Stephen, and not to me.'

'Hold your tongue, sir!' thundered the Squire. 'I know what I am saying and who I am speaking to. Stephen may be a

fool, but not so great a fool as you are. He would not throw away his living and his place in the world for any woman. Look here! either you give up this business at once, this very night (I'll pack the whole brood away to-morrow, out of your road), and settle down and marry as you ought, and do your duty by your family, or—good-bye!' cried the Squire, angrily, kissing the tips of his fingers, —'good-bye! Take your own way; it's to be hoped you'll find it a wise one. As for me, I've nothing more to say.'

'Father,' exclaimed Roger again. The shock, for it was a shock, calmed him once more. There had been no very cordial relations in the family, perhaps, but never a breach. And his home exercised that charm over him which an ancestral home does over most Englishmen. The disinheritance did not strike him as anything real, but the severance had a horrible sound; it daunted him in spite of himself.

'I will listen to no appeal,' said the Squire. 'You think you can touch my heart by that "father" of yours. Pshaw! you're not a baby; you know what you're about as well as I do. We're both men, no such wonderful difference. I'll have no false sentiment. Do what I require, or if you take your own way, understand that Melcombe will never be yours. I may settle some trifle on you for charity, but Melcombe——'

'In that case, sir,' said Roger, slowly and stiffly, 'words are useless, as you say. I can't take your way in what's life or death to me. Melcombe—can—have nothing to do with it so far as I am concerned. It is yours, not mine, to dispose of. And as for charity——' His hand clenched upon the table, showing all the veins; but his face, which was white to the lips, was in the shadow, out of which his voice came tuneless and hard, with pauses to moisten his throat. It stopped at last from that cause, his mouth being parched with agitation and passion, on the word 'charity' which, had he retained the power of expression, would have been full of scorn; but he had lost the power.

The door opened behind them at this crisis, and Edmund came into the room. Edmund had been uneasy all the evening, but his mind went no farther than uneasiness. He feared vaguely a quarrel between his father and brother. He feared that Roger, in his excited and uncertain state, would bear no interference, but this was all. He came into the room anxious, but scarcely alarmed, and took no fright from the words he heard. 'Charity,'—it had ended thus, he thought, amicably, on some mild matter of benevolence on which father and son were agreeing. But this delusion lasted a moment, and no longer.

'Here, Ned,' cried the Squire, 'you're just in time. Your brother thinks more of your interest than his own. Your name goes down in the will to-morrow in the place of his. Shake hands, old fellow; it's you that are to have Melcombe. You are a bit of a milksop, Ned, but never mind. Shake hands on it, my boy.'

'What does this mean?' cried Edmund, hurrying forward into the light. But Roger did not wait for the explanation. He caught his brother's hand as he passed him, and wrung it in his own; then hurried out of the room, leaving the two others, the one at the height of excitement, the other disturbed and wondering, looking strangely into each other's eyes.

XXI

SUBSTITUTION

EDMUND and his father stood looking at each other, as Roger's steps died away. They listened with a curious unanimity, though the one was at the height of unreasoning anger, and the other anxious and alarmed,—as people listen to steps that are going away for ever. There seemed some spell in the sound. Mr. Mitford was the first to break free from it. He threw himself down in his chair, making it creak and swing. 'Well!' he cried, 'there's heroics! And now to business. You were surprised, I don't doubt, at what I said just now, Ned. You thought I didn't mean it. You thought, perhaps, I had said it before. There you're wrong. If I said it before, it was but a threat, a crack of the whip, don't you know, over his head. I am in serious earnest now.'

'About what, sir?' asked Edmund. 'Pardon me if I don't understand.'

'You mean you won't understand,' retorted the Squire, who spoke with a puff of angry breath between each phrase, panting with anger. 'It is too late for that sort of thing now. You had better give me your attention seriously, without any quixotical nonsense. I don't say it is wrong to consider your brother. You've done so as much—more than he or any one had a right to expect; but you're doing no good, and that is a sort of thing that can't go on for ever. You had better accept the position, and think a little of yourself now.'

'What is it, father? You would not, I am sure, do anything hasty. Roger's not a prudent fellow, and he has a hot temper. If he has done or said anything that offends you, it was inadvertence, or carelessness, or——'

'I know very well what it was, without any of your glosses. If you mean to say that it was not with any intention of being cut out of my will in consequence, I grant you that. Most likely he does

not believe I shall ever be aggravated to the point of cutting him out of my will. What he wants is his own way and my property too. Yes,' said Mr. Mitford, with a snort of hot breath, 'that is what he intends,—it's simple. But there's a limit to that as to everything else, and I've reached that limit. I've been coming to it for some time, and he's clenched it to-night. I want to speak of yourself, not Roger. So far as he's concerned, there's not another word to say.'

'He can't have *done* anything since he came home—if it's only something foolish he has said——'

'Hold your tongue, Ned! There's not to be another word on that subject, please!' with fierce politeness. Then the Squire added with a snarl, 'He's asked Lily Ford to marry him,—or means to do so,—and tells me she was his mother's favourite, and therefore is fit to be put in his mother's place. By Jove!' cried Mr. Mitford, puffing out once more from his nostrils a hot blast, 'and the fellow thinks I'm to stand that! It's all quite settled; we may take it quietly; there's nothing more to say. Now comes your turn, Ned. You won't disgrace me in that sort of way, I know. You may sink into a corner and do nothing at all,—that's likely enough,—but you won't disgrace your family. Try and be something more than negative, now you're at the head of it. You're not the man your brother is, though, thank Heaven, you're not the fool he is, either. Why, if you put your best foot foremost —there is no telling—Lizzy Travers might like you as well as Roger. You could but try.'

The Squire exhaled a part of his excitement in a harsh laugh. It sounded coarse and unfeeling, but in reality it was neither. It was anger, pain, emotion, the lower elements heightened by something of that irritation of natural affection which makes wrath itself more wrathful. Edmund did not do justice to his father. He was horrified and revolted by the supposed jest, and had he given vent to his feelings he would have made an indignant and angry reply; but the thought that he was Roger's sole helper restrained him. He must neither quarrel with his father, nor even refuse these propositions, however horrible they were to him, for Roger's sake.

'It would be very painful to me,' he said gravely, 'to be put in my brother's place.'

'What, with Lizzy Travers?' cried the Squire, with another laugh. 'Take heart, man. Women, as often as not, prefer domestic fellows like you.'

Edmund had a hard struggle with himself. He had the sensi-

tiveness of a man whose mind was touched with the preliminaries of love, and in a semi-reverential state to all women; and to hear one name thus tossed about was almost more than he could bear. But there was a great deal at stake, and he mastered himself.

'You might leave me your heir, sir,' he said, 'but you could not make me the head of the family. After you, Roger is that, though he had not a penny. I am very strong on primogeniture so far as that goes.'

'Primogeniture is all humbug,' said the Squire. 'If it were not that those Radical fellows are so hot against it,—as if it could do anything to them!—I should say myself it was a mistake. Let the father choose the son that suits him to come after him. That's what I say, and that's my case. As for the head of the family, don't you trouble your mind, Ned. The head of the family is the one who has the money. You may take my word for that.'

'And yet, sir,' said Edmund quietly, 'if I were owner of Melcombe to-morrow, and had everything you could give me, I should still be obliged to bear the Mitford arms with a difference, to show I was not the first in descent.'

This statement made the Squire turn pale. It will probably not impress the reader very profoundly, unless, indeed, he belongs to an old county family, and knows what such a misfortune is. For a moment it took away Mr. Mitford's breath. He had not thought of that. Roger landless, with full right to the ancient coat; and Edmund rich and the proprietor of everything, yet bearing a mark of cadency, his younger son's difference! That was a bitter pill. He had not thought of it, and therefore received the blow full on his breast. The first effect it had was to make him more and more angry with his eldest son.

'Confound the fellow!' he cried, with an earnestness of objurgation which was more than wrath. Roger was not only making his father angry, but giving him occasion for serious thought. A mark of cadency! It was an idea for which the Squire was not prepared.

'And if what you foresee should happen,' said Edmund, with grave persistency, following out his line of argument without raising his eyes, 'if we should marry and leave children behind us, there would be the Mitfords who are the elder branch poor, and the Mitfords who are——'

'Stop that!' cried the Squire; 'if it is so, it can't be helped. Do you think I'm going to let myself be balked and all my plans frustrated by a trifle like that? Let them be the elder branch, and much good may it do them!—the children of Lily Ford, my

gamekeeper's grandsons! By Jove!' Mr. Mitford felt himself grow purple again, and saw sparks flying before his eyes; and he stopped, for he knew it was not good for him to let excitement go so far. To decide which of his sons should succeed him was one thing; to open the way for him to receive his inheritance at once was very different. He had not the least intention of doing that. 'It's quite enough,' he said, 'for this time that you understand and accept my settlement. I have had enough of it for one night. To-morrow we'll have Pouncefort over and settle everything. You can leave me now. Why the deuce did you let the fellow come here?' he exclaimed, with a sudden outburst, as Edmund turned to leave the room.

'You may ask that, sir. It is my fault. I told him I was coming, which I had no need to do.'

'Need! I would as soon have told him to hang himself. And what did *you* want here? Couldn't you have stayed in town and kept him straight? What is the good of you, if you can't do a thing like that?' The foam began to fly from the Squire's mouth as the gust of irritation rose. 'A younger brother, sir, should have some feeling for the family. He ought to be able to sacrifice a little to keep his brother straight. Good Lord, what is the use of him if it isn't that? And here you come vapouring to the country for no reason, and tell him you are coming! Tell him! For goodness' sake, why?'

'It was the act of a fool,' said Edmund, with bowed head.

'It was worse,' cried the Squire. 'It was the act of Jacob, he that was the supplanter, don't you know, that took his brother by the heel—it's all in the Bible. It's your fault, and it will be to your advantage; that's the way of the world. Oh, I don't suppose you thought of that,—you're not clever enough; but I should, in your position. I should have seen what people would say. You'll get the land and the lady, while Roger, my poor Roger——' And here the Squire broke down. Who could doubt that to cast off his eldest son was a misery even to this high-tempered and imperious man? Roger was lost to him,—there was no going back upon the decision; but still a man might rage at the things and chances which had turned his son aside from the right way.

'Father, for God's sake, let things be as they are!' cried Edmund. 'Do you suppose I would take Roger's inheritance from him? When you think of it you will relent; and I, for my part, could only accept as his trustee, as his representative, to frighten him, since you think proper to do so, but to restore——'

The Squire looked up, suddenly brought to himself by this

unguarded speech. His momentary emotion had blown off, and the watchfulness of the man determined to have his own way, and to permit no one to interfere, started up in full force. 'Oh!' he said, 'so that's it. Your compliance seemed a little too gracious. You're not so ready to humour me in a usual way. So that's it! I might have known there was something underhand.'

Anger flamed up on Edmund's cheek; but he restrained himself once more. If he let himself go and joined Roger in his banishment, who would there be to make any stand for the disinherited? Stephen? He did not trust Stephen. He said gravely, 'I do not suppose you mean, in this respect at least, what you say. I have never, that I know of, done anything underhand.'

'Well, perhaps that was strong,' said the Squire. 'I don't know that you have, Ned; but I'll have nothing of the kind here. I hope Pouncefort knows his business. If you're to be my heir, you shall be so, not merely a screen for Roger. Go away now. I'm excited, which, if I had any sense, I shouldn't be. One lets one's self get excited over one's children, who don't care two straws what happens to one. That is the truth. You are interested about your brother; but as for me, who have brought you up and cared for you all your life——'

The Squire's voice took a pathetic tone. He really felt a little emotion, and he was not in the way of using histrionic methods; but yet everybody does this at one time or another, and he was not unwilling to make his son believe that he felt it a great deal.

And Edmund was aware of both phases. He knew that his father was not without heart. He was even sorry for him in the present complication of affairs; but it went against him to fall into the pathos which was suggested, and make any pretty speech about Mr. Mitford's devotion to his children and the manner in which they repaid it. He stood still for a moment, silent, making no response, feeling to himself like an impersonation of the undutiful and ungrateful. What could he say? Nothing that would not be at least partially fictitious, as had been the appeal.

'I think I will take myself off, sir,' he said, 'as you tell me. To-morrow we shall all know better, perhaps, what we are about. I am very much taken by surprise. I never for a moment supposed that, in earnest, you meant to disinherit your eldest son.'

'You thought I meant it in jest, then?' said the Squire. 'It's a nice thing to joke about, isn't it, a man's eldest son? Well, go; I have had about enough of this confounded business for one night.'

He felt that his effort had failed, and he was vexed to think that his voice had trembled, and that he had really been touched by his

own fatherly devotion, and in vain; but that soon went out of his head when his son had left him, and he sat alone surveying all the circumstances at his leisure in the quiet which solitude gives. He leaned his head upon his hands, and stared at the light, which came with so much additional force from under the shade of the lamp. He was not a happy father, it was true. His children had gone against him,—Roger violently, Edmund with a silent disapproval which was very trying to bear, Stephen with the careless insolence of a young man who knows the world much better than his father does. Even the girls paid no attention to his wishes. The elder ones were fast young women about town, which was a thing he detested; and Nina was a little gossip, no better than a waiting-maid at home. These things all came to the Squire's mind in this moment which he passed alone. He had done a great deal for them all, especially for the boys, and this was how they repaid him. He protested in his own mind against it all,—against their indifference, their carelessness, their superiority to his opinion. That was what a man got for taking a little trouble, for trying to make a home for his family, for giving up all pleasure outside of his own house. It was rather a fine, disinterested, noble-minded picture he made of himself. It looked very well, he thought unconsciously. He might have married again; he might have spent his time at race meetings, or gone into society, or amused himself in a great many ways; but instead he had lived at home, and brought up his children, and devoted himself to them. It was a fine thing to have done. He had been comparatively young when their mother died, and she, poor thing, had gone early. But he had never given her a successor, as he might have done; he had never abandoned her children; and this was how they rewarded him,—to propose to put Lily Ford in their mother's place; to pretend to accept his favour in order to give it back to Roger, whom it was his intention to disinherit; to go against him, cross him, show how little they cared for him in every way!

Mr. Mitford was not softened by his reflections; after that touch of pathos and admiring self-pity, he worked himself up into anger again. They might think to get the better of him, but they should not. They were all in his power, whatever they might think. He was not bound to give them a farthing, any one of them. He might marry again, for that matter, and have heirs who would be perfectly docile, who would never set up their will against his. By Jove! and that was what he would do, if they did not mind. Who could say that even Lizzy Travers herself might not think a man of sixty-five, hale and hearty, a man who knew the world, as good

as any one of the young fellows that did not know a fine woman when they saw her? She was not in her first youth, after all,—not what you could call a girl. She was twenty-five. The Squire said to himself that he might do a great deal worse, and that she might do a great deal worse. This gleamed across his mind for a moment with a triumphant sense of the universal discomfiture which he might thus create all around. But, to do him justice, it was not such a suggestion as found natural root in his mind; and presently he returned to the practical question. To disinherit Roger, yet leave the next heir free to reinstate him, was, of course, out of the question. The Squire drew his blotting-book towards him, and began to write out his instructions to Pouncefort. He was not at any time a bad man of business, and the excitement in his mind seemed to clear every faculty. He who had prided himself so on his freedom from all bonds of entail or other restrictions upon his testamentary rights began, with a grim smile upon his face, to invent restrictions for his successor. He tore up several copies of the document before he satisfied himself at last; and as he went on, getting more and more determined that his son should have no will in the matter, the Squire finally decided upon conditions by which Edmund was to be tied up harder than any tenant for life had ever been before him, with the most minute stipulations as to who was to succeed him,—his own children first, then Stephen and his children, then the girls,—not a loophole left for Roger, nor for any arrangement with Roger. The Squire perhaps saw the humour of this, when he read the paper over and shut it into his drawer before going to bed; for there was a smile upon his face. Nevertheless, he breathed out a long breath as he lighted his candle, and said to himself, 'He'll never be such a confounded fool,' as he went upstairs to his own room through the silence of the sleeping house.

XXII

A MIDNIGHT TALK

THE house, however, was not so still as Mr. Mitford supposed. It contained at least one room in which an exciting act of the same family drama was being carried on. The brothers had not met immediately after Edmund had left his father; for a few hours they had been alone, following each the thread of his own excited and troublous thoughts. Roger had gone out to calm the fever of his mind in the coolness and darkness of the night. Edmund, hastening out of his father's presence after his dismissal, had sunk into a chair in the hall, where all was vacant, the night air breathing in through the open door, the shadows of the trees waving faintly, the leaves rustling. He had thrown himself down there in the dark, where no one could see him, to escape from the necessity of doing or saying anything. As he sat there Nina's little white figure came out from the drawing-room, peered about with anxious curiosity, then vanished upstairs; and Larkins appeared, with a footman after him, to shut up for the night. Edmund did not move while they passed from one room to another, closing the windows, letting down the bolts and bars. The jar of these noises gave a kind of unwilling accompaniment to his troubled mind. Then a quick step, unsteady with passion and excitement, approached rapidly and rang upon the pavement. 'Is it you, Roger?' his brother said, rising out of the shadows. Roger was in no mood to talk; he waved his hand as if to put all interruption away, and hastened to his room with an evident disinclination for any further intercourse. But an hour or two later, when all was still, Edmund, who had taken refuge in the meantime in the billiard-room, which was the one room of the house left alone by Larkins, always a refuge for the young men,—their sulking-room when they were indisposed for family society,—heard the door suddenly open and his brother come in. The only light in the room was from the lamp suspended over the billiard-

table, and throwing a vivid glow upon the green cloth. The large bow-window at the end let in a prospect of pale sky and waving branches. The room was in an angle separated from the rest of the house. Roger came in like a ghost, scarcely seen, and threw himself upon a chair near the one which Edmund had himself taken; and there they sat for some time, stretching out their long limbs, extending, as it were, their minds, racked with distracting thoughts, with nothing to say to each other, and yet so much; communicating a mutual *malaise*, misery, difficulty, without a word said. They had a degree of family likeness which made this mute meeting all the more pathetic. They were antagonists in interests, according to any vulgar estimate of the case. The younger brother disapproved profoundly, miserably, of what the elder had done. He felt the inappropriateness of it, the folly of it, to the bottom of his heart; and yet in this troubled chaos, where all landmarks were disappearing and every established law being abrogated, he was one with Roger, smarting with him under the wounds given by his father's rage, and even moved (though he was so much against it) by a sort of instinctive sympathy with that fatal infatuation of foolish love.

They began to talk at last in monosyllables, which dropped now and then into the silence with a question and answer half expressed. 'All settled, then?'—'Nothing to be done?'—'All'—'Nothing.' Then another long pause. By degrees a few more words came to Edmund's lips and a longer reply from Roger's; then, the ice once fully broken, the brothers settled into talk.

'Don't spoil your own life for me, Ned,' said Roger; 'the die is cast for me. And in every way it is better, when you come to think of it. I don't say there is not reason in it, from his point of view. I've never been blind to that side of the question. I know that it might not be easy to reconcile everything—the father and mother——'

'You see that,' exclaimed Edmund, 'and yet it makes no difference.'

'I have always seen it,' said Roger almost fiercely; 'you know I have. I see everything. No! it makes no difference,—rather the reverse.'

'It pushes you on?'

'It pushes me on. Ned,' he added, leaning forward, 'you don't know what it is to be caught in the tide like this. Every disadvantage pushes me on; because it is not what I may have dreamed—because, God help us! there may be, even afterwards, things to overcome——'

'Roger, for God's sake——'

'Don't speak to me,' he said, holding up his hand. 'I'll quarrel with you, if you do,—though, Ned, old fellow, Heaven knows I trust you and hold you closer than any other man in the world. Only don't touch that subject. Yes,' he went on dreamily, leaning back in his chair again, 'I don't disguise it from myself; there may be things to overcome. We have lived in very different spheres, we have different ways of thinking, and all the associations and habits—I scorn myself for thinking of them at all, but I overlook nothing, I am as cool and cold as any calculating machine——'

'And yet you sacrifice everything, you throw away everything.'

'Hush!' said Roger again, 'not a word. What do I sacrifice? —the chance of marrying a woman like my sisters? And suppose that there are differences between her and me,—what are they? Conventionalities on my side, things that mean nothing, mannerisms to which we choose to attribute an importance; to sit down in a certain way, to speak in a certain tone, to observe certain ceremonies. What is all that? Who would put these nothings in comparison with a pure nature,—a pure, sweet nature and a good heart?'

To this Edmund made no reply. A self-pleading so pitiful wanted none. The depths out of which Roger spoke, a happy lover, feeling the world well lost for the sake of the woman he loved, were too dark and tragic to be fathomed by any sympathiser, even a brother. And perhaps when Edmund did speak it was still more dangerous ground upon which he trod. 'Are you sure——' he said, then paused, feeling the insecurity of the soil.

'Am I sure—of what? That there is no further question as to what I have done and mean to do? Yes, quite sure.'

'That was not what I meant to ask—and you may be offended by my question; but it is serious enough to risk your anger for. Are you sure that she—loves you, Roger,—you who are giving up so much for her?'

Roger did not reply at once, but when he did so did it in haste, turning quickly upon his brother, as if he had not allowed a minute to elapse before giving him his answer. 'Would you like her to have thrown herself at my head, clutched at me as a good *parti* not to be let slip? That's what she would have done if she had been a girl in society; but, fortunately for me, she is not that.'

'Forget the girls in society,' said Edmund; 'they are not what you choose to think them, or at least I don't believe it. But,

Roger, there's no question so important to you as this. Think how many inducements there are for her besides love. I will say nothing else,—I will allow that everything has gone too far to be altered,—but only this; are you sure that she shares your feelings? I don't want to bother you; you know that.'

'Am I so disagreeable?' demanded Roger with a laugh; 'beside all the people she is likely to see, am I so little worth considering? You pay me a poor compliment, Ned. But of this I'm sure; if it is so, she'll have nothing to say to me. You can comfort yourself with that thought.'

'Perhaps not,' said Edmund, hesitating; 'but if so, she will have great strength of mind. Roger, for Heaven's sake, make sure. She has everything to gain, and you have everything to lose——'

'That's enough!' Roger rose impatiently, and held out his hand to his brother. 'You're a Job's comforter, Ned! I don't doubt you mean very well, but this is not the way to encourage a man when he's—when he's at a difficult point in life. Good-night, old fellow! I know you wish me well. Don't spoil your own chances for me, that's all.'

'Good-night!' Edmund said; and he sat still in the silent room after his brother had left him, thinking over this new danger,—that Roger might give up everything he had in the world for the sake of a girl to whom he was merely the means of rising, a fine match, a gentleman elevating her out of her own small sphere. Love! how could it be love? What did she know of him to make love possible? It might even be that it was a hard thing to expect from such a girl indifference to the advantages which Roger could offer her; she would be flattered, she would be dazzled, she would see herself in a moment placed high above all her equals. Neither she nor her parents would believe in Roger's disinheritance; and he, with this fatal passion in him, this fate which he had not been able to resist, would barter away his heart and his life—for what? —for the privilege of making Lily Ford a lady; not to win love and all its compensations, but to serve as a stepping-stone to the ambition of an artificially-trained girl. The tragedy deepened as he thought it all over, sitting alone, feeling the chill of the night steal upon him in the silent house. Oh, what a mystery is life, with all its mistakes and tragic blunderings! What fatal darkness all about us, until all illumination is too late! It is the spectator, people say, who sees the game, not those whose whole fortune is staked upon it. But in this case it was not even so; the gamester, who had put his all upon the touch to win or to lose, saw too,—was

aware of the ruin that might be before him, the wasted sacrifice, the spoiled life,—and yet would neither pause nor think. Perhaps it is the tender-hearted looker-on, in such circumstances, who has the worst of it. He has none of the compensations. Even the excitement which is sometimes so tragic is sometimes also rapturous for the chief actor; but the sympathiser can never get its realities out of his eyes; they overshadow everything, even the hope, which might be a just one, that, after all was said, the soul of goodness would vindicate itself even amid things evil. For Roger there was still the chance that joy might be the outcome; at all events, there was no happiness for him except in this way. But Edmund saw the evil and not the good, nor any good, however things might turn.

XXIII

GOING AWAY

WHEN Roger woke next morning, and opened his eyes in the familiar room, and saw the peaceful sunshine streaming in through that familiar window, as he had done for the greater part of his life, it was not for some minutes that he realised to himself all that had happened,—all the difference there was between this awakening and that of any other day. It flashed upon him suddenly after a moment of wonder and trouble,—a moment in which care confronted him, awake before him, but with the mists of morning over its face. What was it that had happened? Then recollection came like a flood. He had declared himself to Lily, his love-tale was told, he was hers whatever might happen. All doubt or question was over so far as that was concerned. A gleam of troubled sunshine passed over his memory, a vision of her, timid, shrinking, with that frightened cry, 'Oh, Mr. Roger!'—nothing more responsive; but what could that be but her modest way, her shy panic at the passion in him, her unselfish fears for her father? It could be nothing more.

Then out of this sunshine, out of this transporting certainty, his mind plunged into the darkness again. He saw the dim library, the shaded lamp, his father, furious, opposite to him, calling for the renunciation of all his hopes. He raised himself slowly from his bed, and looked round him. All was so familiar and so dear; it was home. There cannot be two homes in this world; he had grown up here, he knew every corner of it, and there was not a nook, out of doors or in, that had not some association for Roger. As in a vision he suddenly saw his mother standing just within the door, shading the candle with her hand so that the light should not fall on his eyes. He seemed to see her, though it was so long since she had stood there; fifteen years or more; and all this time he had lived here, with short absences; coming back always to the same place, always the chief person in the house next to his father,

knowing that all was his whatever should happen. And now it was his no longer. To-day was to be the last he should spend under the paternal roof; to-day was the last day on which he could call Melcombe his home; and up to this time there had never been any doubt that he would be master of all. It was not a thing that had ever been taken into discussion or questioned. He was his father's eldest son, the head of the family after him. What could happen but that Roger should succeed his father? He had no more wished for this as an advantage over his brothers than he had wished for his father's death in order that he might succeed. There was no reasoning in it, no personal thought. It was the course of nature, taken for granted as much as we take it for granted that to-morrow's sun will shine.

Now the course of nature was stopped, and everything that had been sure to be was turned aside and would be no more. Bewilderment was the chief feeling in Roger's mind; not pain so much as wonder, and the difficulty of accepting what was incredible,—a state not of excitement, still less of struggle, but of a certain dim consternation, incapacity to understand or realise what nevertheless he knew to be true. He knew it so well to be true and irresistible that, as he dressed, he arranged in his mind how his few private possessions were to be disposed of. Some of them he would no longer have any use for,—his hunters, his dog-cart, the many things which somehow had come to be his, without either purchase or gift, the natural property of the heir of the house. Were they his at all? What was his? Almost nothing; a legacy his godfather had left him, a little money he had at the bank, the remains of the allowance he had from his father; that, of course, would stop. He must find work of some kind,—something which he could do, enough to maintain himself—and his wife. His wife! Good heavens! was it to poverty he was to bring her? Instead of transporting her to the higher sphere in which he had (O fool!) foreseen so many difficulties, was he to give her only the dulness of genteel poverty,—a poverty harder and less simple than that to which she had been used? Was this what it had come to? He thought for the first time seriously of Edmund's question,—'Does she love you?' She was not mercenary; no, not like the society women. She would not count what he had or weigh the advantages of marrying him, but—— The question had become more serious even in the very moment of being put. It might have been enough for the future master of Melcombe to love his bride, whom he could surround with everything her heart could desire. But if Lily were to wed a man disinherited, she must love him. The chill of that

thought came over him like a sudden storm-cloud. He had not asked if she loved him. She was a timid, modest girl, who perhaps had never even thought of love. She would love him *after;* she would come to love him; he who could make her life like a fairy-tale, who could change everything for her, realise her every dream, —what could she do but love him? He had expected to be the fairy prince to Lily, the giver of everything that was delightful and sweet. He had never been exacting, he had not expected from her a return which he believed she was too innocent, too inexperienced, to have thought of. It would almost have wounded the delicacy of Roger's passion had she thrown herself into his arms, and acknowledged that her heart had already awakened and responded to the fervour of his. But now the question was altogether changed. Now that he had nothing to offer, nothing to give her, it was necessary before she accepted the only remainder, which was himself, that Lily's heart should have spoken, that she should love him. He had not thought of it in this light even when Edmund put the question to him, nor had Edmund thought of it in that light; but he saw it now.

The effect upon Roger of this thought was extraordinary. Certainly he had not intended to carry away from Ford's cottage an unwilling bride. He had looked for a sweet consent, a gentle yielding to his love, a growing wonder and enchantment and delight; but now—— In spite of himself, a chill got into Roger's veins. What had he to offer her? Poverty, obscurity; an existence differing from that in which she had been brought up in nothing except that it would be far harder in its necessities than those of the gamekeeper's cottage ever could have been. Acquiescence would not do any longer. Lily must choose, she must know what her own heart said. This change altered all possible relations between them at once. She must take a woman's part, which, he said to himself with a groan, she was not old enough nor experienced enough to take, and judge for herself. It was for her sake that he would be poor, but perhaps she would be in the right if she refused his poverty. It would have to be put to her, at least, and she must decide for herself. The shifting scenes which surrounded this resolution in Roger's imagination were many and various. He imagined what he would say to her, and half a dozen different ways in which she might reply. She might put her hand in his and say, 'You need me more if you are to be poor;' or she might whisper that it was he, and not his fortune, that had ever moved her; or she might tell by nothing but a smile, by nothing but tears, what her meaning was. There were a hundred ways.

Ah! if that were so, it would be easy to say it; but if it were not so?

He set out with a very grave face, after the pretence at breakfast which he had made alone, having waited until the family had dispersed from that meal,—all but Nina, who sat faithful by the urn, with large eyes expanded by curiosity, watching all her brother's movements, waiting till she had poured out his tea for him. Roger did not even notice her watchful looks. He had not an idea that she perused all the faces at that table, one after another, and made them out. But something more was going on than was within Nina's ken: it was not enough, she knew, to conclude that papa had been scolding the boys,—that was the only way of putting it which she was accustomed to; but by this time she was aware that it was more serious than that. Roger's face, however, was all shut and closed to her scrutiny; the upper lip firmly set against the lower, the chin square, the eyes overcast.

'Will you have another cup of tea, Roger?' she said.

'No, Nina, thanks.'

'Won't you have something to eat, Roger? You have had nothing. A gentleman can't breakfast on a cup of tea.'

'Thank you, my dear; I have had all I want.'

'Oh, Roger, I'm afraid you are not well. Oh, Roger, do eat something before you go out.'

Her voice was so much disturbed that he paused to pat her upon the shoulder, as he passed her.

'Don't trouble about me, Nina. I have more to think of than breakfast,' Roger said. His tone was more gentle than usual, his hand lingered tenderly upon her shoulder. Nina got very quickly to her window, when he had left the room; there was no more occasion for keeping her place by the urn. She watched till he came out from the other side of the house and took his way across the park. To the West Lodge again, and so early! It became clear to Nina that something more must be involved than a scolding from papa.

Roger had not the air of a happy lover; his face was grave and pale and full of care. He went straight across the park as the bird flies, not even perceiving the obstacles in his way. It was a mode of progress as different from the manner in which he used to approach that centre of his thoughts, circling and circling until, as if by accident, he found himself close to the little humble place in which was his shrine,—as different as the evening leisure, the soft nightfall, when beasts and men were alike drawing homeward, was to this morning hour of life and labour. Ford's cottage

was different too; it was astir with morning sounds of work and the rude employments of every day. One of the helpers about the Melcombe stables was busy outside with something for the pheasants, with half a dozen dogs following him wherever he moved; and the sound of his heavy footsteps coming and going, the rattle of the grain in the baskets, the scuffling and occasional barking of the young dogs, jarred upon Roger, whose first impulse was to order the man away. But he remembered, with a half smile which threw a strange light upon his face, that he had no longer any authority here, and passed on to the house.

Mrs. Ford was busy with her domestic work within,—very busy cleaning bright copper kettles and brass candlesticks, which stood in a row upon the table and made a great show; but though she seemed so hard at work, it was probable that Mrs. Ford was not working at all. Her honest face was disturbed with care. She was red with trouble and anxiety. When she curtsied to the young master, as he came in, the salutation concealed a start which was not of surprise, but rather acknowledged the coming of a crisis for which she was on the outlook and prepared.

'I have come,' said Roger quickly, 'to see Lily, as you will understand; but I have also come, Mrs. Ford, to see you. Where is Ford? I suppose you told him what I said to you last night.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger!' cried Mrs. Ford, wiping her hands in her apron, with another curtsy. 'Oh, sir, yes, I told him.'

'Is he here? You must have known I should want to come to an understanding at once.'

'Oh, sir! It's early, Mr. Roger—we never thought—Ford's away in the woods; he wouldn't bide from his work.'

'I suppose he told you his mind; of course you know it well enough. Mrs. Ford, I've got something more to tell you to-day.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger,' said Mrs. Ford, 'don't, sir, don't tell me no more! I've not got the strength for it. Oh, don't tell me no more! We are that upset, Ford and me, that we don't know what to think or what to say.'

'Am I not to be trusted, then?' asked Roger, with a smile of conscious power, grave as he was. 'Have you higher views? No, I oughtn't to say that. Why should you be so upset, Ford and you?'

'Oh, Mr. Roger,' she said again, 'oh, when we thinks how it would be—— What will the master say, as has been a good master, taking one year with another, ever since him and me was married,—what would he say? He has a rough tongue when he's put out of his way. He'd say as we'd inveigled you, and set snares for

you, and I don't know what. He'd think this is what we've been aiming at first and last, giving her her eddication for, and all that.'

'You need not trouble yourself to think what he'll say; he'll take no notice. We have had some words, he and I, and I don't think he will interfere any more. Where is Lily? I have much to say to her. And as for you, my father will not be unjust to you.'

He was turning along the narrow passage which led to Lily's parlour, when Mrs. Ford caught him by the arm. 'Mr. Roger! Lily's not there.'

'Not there? Where is she? I hope you don't mean to interfere between her and me?'

'Oh no, sir, not *I* wouldn't,' cried the keeper's wife. 'She's out somewhere; I don't know where. She is just distracted, Mr. Roger. Speak of being upset, she's more upset than any one. Oh, wait a bit, sir; don't go after her. She's distracted, Lily is. All this morning she's been wringing her poor hands, saying, "What shall I do—what shall I do?" She's very feeling, too feeling for her own good. She takes thought for us, and for you, and for every one afore herself. I shouldn't wonder if she were to go and hide herself somewhere. I don't know at this moment where she is.'

'Mrs. Ford,' said Roger, almost sternly, 'I must know the truth; is this because Lily does not—care for me?'

'Oh, sir!' exclaimed the woman, trembling, watching him with furtive eyes; and then a small hysterical sound, half cough, half sob, escaped her. 'Mr. Roger, is it possible she shouldn't be proud? A gentleman like you—and stooping to our little place to seek her out! Not but what my Lily is one as any gentleman might——'

'Yes, yes,' he cried,—'yes, yes! There is no question of that. The question is, Has she any answer to give me? It is not because I am a gentleman, but because I am a man, that I want my answer from Lily. Does she want to avoid me? Am I not her choice,—am I not——' Roger paused and turned to the door. 'I must find her, wherever she is,' he added.

Mrs. Ford caught his arm again. 'Oh, Mr. Roger, she do find such places among the trees as nobody 'ud ever think of. Oh, don't go after her, Mr. Roger! Is it natural, sir, as she shouldn't give her 'eart to you? Who has she ever seen but you? You're the only gentleman—— Oh, sir, don't stop me like that. My girl, she's a lady in her heart. Do you think she would ever look at the likes of them common men? And she has never seen nobody but you. It's not that. I understand what it is, Mr. Roger, if you, that are young, don't understand. It's turning everything

wrong, everything upside down, everybody out of their way, all for one young little bit of a girl. She can't abear it. Her father and me as will be turned out of house and home, and you as will be put all wrong with the Squire, and everything at sixes and sevens! Oh! I understand her—though it mayn't be so easy for a young man like you.'

'As for Ford and you, I'll see to——' Roger had said so much before he recollected how powerless he now was. He stopped short, then added hastily, 'I don't think you have any cause for fear, Mrs. Ford; my father has done all he can. He will not trouble himself with other matters. He has disinherited me. It does not matter to him now what I do. Of course, you have a right to know it; and I must see Lily; I must speak to Lily; there must be no doubt upon the subject now. She must look at it, and think of it, and make up her own mind.'

'Disinher—' It was too big a word for Mrs. Ford's mouth, but not for her understanding. She gazed at Roger with round, wide-open eyes. 'Oh, sir, has he put you out,—has he put you out? and all for our Lily!' She wrung her hands. 'Oh, but Mr. Roger, it's not too late. You mustn't let that be. A girl may be both pretty and good, and that's what my Lily is; but to be turned out of house and home for her! Oh no, no,—it's not too late,—it mustn't be.'

'There is nothing more to be said on that subject,' said Roger, with a certain peremptory tone. 'But tell me where she is. Where is she? Why am I kept from her? You understand that I am leaving to-day, and that I must see her. To keep her back is no kindness; it is rather cruelty. Let me see her at once, Mrs. Ford.'

'Oh, Mr. Roger!' she cried again, wringing her hands, 'you can go into the parlour and see for yourself. She has been distracted-like in her mind since last night. She's gone out, and I can't tell where she is. Oh, sir, for all our sakes, make it up with the Squire. Don't make a quarrel in the family; go back to your father, Mr. Roger, and don't mind us no more!'

A smile passed over his face at the strange futility of the idea. As well suggest that the pillars of the earth might be shaken, to make his seat more comfortable. He waved it aside with a movement of his hand.

'You will perceive that I must see her to-day. I will come back before the time for the afternoon train. Tell her—tell her to think it all over; and don't attempt to come between us, for that is what cannot be done now.'

Was he almost glad in his heart to put off this interview, although he was so anxious for it? There are times when, with our hearts beating for the turn of an event, Nature, sick with suspense, yet terrified for certainty, will with both her hands push it away.

XXIV

MR. MITFORD'S WILL

ROGER left Melcombe by the afternoon train, to which his brother accompanied him with feelings indescribable, but no faith in anything that was happening. It seemed to Edmund like a feverish dream, which by and by must pass, leaving the world as it was before. Roger was not very communicative as to what he was going to do. Indeed, it would have been difficult, for he had not any distinct plans. He meant to get something he could work at, with a great vagueness in his mind as to what that would be. Something would be found, he had no doubt, though what he was fit for, what he could do, it was still more difficult, nay, almost impossible, to say; but that was the least of his preoccupations. He was sombre and downcast about matters which he did not confide to his brother; saying, indeed, nothing about the Fords, or Lily, or anything that went below the surface of affairs. His father and he had met at luncheon, but nothing had been said between them. He left the house of his birth without a word of farewell, without any sign on his own part or that of others that he was doing more than going out for a walk. Nina, who had gained an interest in his eyes, he could not himself tell how, by dint of the anxious curiosity in hers, which Roger, forlorn, took for affectionate interest, received from him a kiss upon her cheek, a most unusual caress, which astonished her greatly. 'You are not going away, Roger?' she said, scanning him all over with those keen eyes, seeing no indication of a journey, no change in his dress, yet suspecting something, she did not know what. 'Good-bye little Nina; be good, and take care of yourself,' said he. And these were all the adieux he made.

When they reached the station, Edmund observed that his brother glanced round him anxiously as if looking for some one; but he did not say for whom he looked. His last glance out of the carriage window was still one of scrutiny; but it was evident

that he did not find what he was expecting, and it was with an air of dissatisfaction and disappointment that he threw himself back into his corner, not making any response to Edmund, nor, indeed, seeing him as he stood to watch the train go away. The station was as little frequented as usual; one or two passengers, who had been dropped by the train, dispersing; one or two vacant bystanders turning their backs as the momentary excitement died away; Edmund watching the line of carriages disappear with a sensation of sickness and confusion of faculties far more serious, he said to himself, than could be called for. There was nothing tragic in the matter, after all. Even if Roger were disinherited, as his father threatened, some provision must be made for him, and no doubt there would be time for many changes of sentiment before any disinheritance could be operative, the Squire being a man full of strength and health, more vigorous than any of his sons. What if Roger did make an unsatisfactory marriage? Hundreds of men had done that, and yet been little the worse. If a woman were pretty and pleasant, who cared to inquire who her father was? Lily would no doubt put on very readily the outside polish of society. After all, there was nothing tragic about it; and yet——

Edmund, as was natural, strayed into the Rectory on his way home, and, what was equally natural, unbosomed himself to Pax, who had seen the brothers pass, and who knew somehow, neither she herself nor any one else knew how, that something was wrong at Melcombe. 'My father speaks very big, but of course he will never do it,' Edmund said.

'I would not be too sure of that. He may sometimes say more than he means to carry out, but when he is set at defiance like this——'

'Pax, you go in too much for the authorities. A man over thirty may surely choose a wife for himself.'

'He should choose for his father too, when he is the eldest son,' said Pax. 'Don't talk to me. It's all an unnatural system, if you like. I don't mind what you say on that subject; but granting the system, it's clear to me what must follow. If you're to carry on a family, you must carry it on. It's quite a different thing when you live an independent life. The predestined heir can never be an independent man.'

'That is not the opinion of the world,' returned Edmund with a smile.

'It's my opinion, and I don't think I'm a fool. Now you are free to please yourself. You might marry Lily Ford and welcome. No one has any right to interfere with you.'

'Thank you,' said Edmund; 'my tastes don't lie that way.'

'No,' answered Pax; 'you might, and won't; and Roger ought not, but does. That is the way always. I blame him very much, though I'm sorry for him. She is not worth it. There are some women who are, though. If Lizzy Travers had not a shilling, she would be worth it. She's a fortune in herself.'

'Why bring in her name?' said Edmund; 'though I don't doubt you are right enough.'

'I bring in her name for this, Edmund; that your father is quite right about her, and that if you let her slip through your fingers it will be wicked as well as foolish. There, that's my opinion. Roger's out of the question. Now, Edmund, *à vous*——'

'You speak as if it didn't much matter which, so long as it was one of us; that is highly disrespectful, I think, to one of whom—to one who——'

'Yes,' said Pax, 'that's right; resent it on her account. That's exactly what I knew you would do. Why bring in her name, as you say? Poor Roger, poor boy! So he thinks the world well lost for Lily Ford. I could hope he would never live to change his mind; but I fear that is not likely to be. Lily Ford! Well, she is neither a bad girl nor a silly one, any more than she can help being. I don't think ill of her at all. She wants to be a lady, naturally, after her ridiculous bringing up, but she has not a bad heart. There's nothing bad about her. If she is fond of him, if she has any sort of love for him, all may come well.'

Though Edmund had himself expressed a doubt on this point, he could not hear it suggested by another. 'If she does not, she must be perverse indeed,' he said. 'Whom can she have seen equal to Roger? I suppose he is the only gentleman who has ever come in her way.'

'Who knows?' observed Pax oracularly. She had not the slightest intention in what she said, nor did she know anything about the people whom Lily might have met. But she had a rooted objection to assumptions generally. 'Who knows? A girl like that finds men to admire her in the depths of a wood, where other people would see nothing but twisted trees.'

Altogether she did not give much comfort to her visitor; and Edmund did not find any pleasure in that day. He had to meet his father at dinner, who did worse than inquire about Roger; he took no notice of his absence, not even of the empty chair at the other end of the table, which Edmund would not take, and which marked painfully the absence of the eldest son. Mr. Mitford talked a great deal at dinner; he told stories which made Nina

laugh, and even produced from the young footman a faint explosion, for which Larkins made him suffer afterwards. Edmund, however, would not laugh; he sat silent, and let his father's pleasantries pass, the presence of his pale, grave face making a painful contrast with the gaiety of the others. Larkins was as deeply conscious of the strained state of affairs as Edmund was, and went about the shaded background of the room with more solemnity than ever, while the Squire went on with his story-telling, and Nina laughed. Nina, indeed, did not want to laugh; she wanted to know why Roger had gone away, and what was the meaning of it all. But papa was 'so funny,' she could not but yield to the irresistible. The dinner is always a dreadful ordeal at such periods of family history, and most likely it was to hide his own perception of this, and do away with the effect upon himself of that significant vacancy at the other end of the table, that the Squire took refuge in being funny, which was not at all his usual way.

Next day Edmund was called to his father in the library. He found him in close consultation with Mr. Pouncefort, the solicitor who had been charged with the family business almost all his life, having inherited that, with other lifelong occupations of the same kind, from his father. Mr. Pouncefort sat at Mr. Mitford's own writing-table, with a bag full of papers at his feet, and turned a very rueful countenance upon Edmund as he entered. He accompanied this look with a slight shake of the head, when Edmund came up and shook hands with him. 'Pretty well, pretty well,' he said mournfully; 'as well as can be expected, considering'—in answer to the young man's question. He was a neat little old man, with silver-gray hair carefully brushed, and a way of puckering up his brows which made his face look like a flexible mask.

'Look here, Edmund,' said his father, 'I have been settling my affairs, as I told you.'

'He means destroying his will, a very reasonable will, and making one that oughtn't to stand for a moment,' broke in Mr. Pouncefort, shaking his head and pushing up into his hair the folds of his forehead.

'Nothing of the sort, you old croaker! Pouncefort knows every man's business better than he does himself.'

'It's my business to do so, and I do. I know your affairs all off by heart, which is a great deal more than you do. And I can see to-day from to-morrow, which you can't in your present state of mind. I don't know my own affairs a hundredth part so well as I know yours. Look here, a bargain: take my advice about *your* business, and you shall say what I'm to do with mine.'

The county gentleman looked at his solicitor with eyes in which familiar friendliness scarcely concealed the underlying contempt. They had known each other all their lives,—had been boys together, and called each other, in those days, by their Christian names. Mr. Pouncefort was as independent and nearly as rich as the Squire, but he was only a solicitor when all was said. 'What!' Mr. Mitford cried, 'if I advise you to let your son marry the housemaid? Come, Pouncefort, no folly. Read the stipulations to Edmund, and if he likes to abide by them it's all right. If not, I think I know another who will.'

'I declare to goodness,' asserted Mr. Pouncefort, 'I'd rather see my son marry anybody than put my hand to this!'

'I didn't send for the pope nor the bishop to tell me what was right,' said the other old man. 'I sent for my solicitor—I daresay Edmund has a hundred things to do, and you're wasting his valuable time.'

'I have nothing to do, and I wish you would listen, sir, to what——'

'By Jove!' exclaimed the Squire, jumping up from his chair, 'is this my business, or whose business is it? Let him hear it, and let us be done with it. I can't stay here all day.'

Upon which Mr. Pouncefort, occasionally pausing to launch a comment, read the new settlement of the Mitford property, which after all was not so cruel as appeared. Roger was not cut off with a shilling; he was to have ten thousand pounds: but his successor as Mr. Mitford's heir was strictly barred from conveying back to him or his heirs, under any pretence, any portion of the property. Roger was excluded formally and for ever from all share in Melcombe. Any attempt at the transgression of this stipulation was to entail at once a forfeiture of the estate, which should then pass to the persons to be hereafter named. The spaces for the names were all blank. Mr. Pouncefort, shaking his head, interjecting now and then an exclamation, read to the end: and then he opened out the crackling papers on the table, and turned round first to the Squire, who had resumed his seat and listened with a sort of triumphant complacency, then to Edmund, who had stood all the time leaning on the back of a high carved chair. 'There!' cried the lawyer, 'there's your confounded instructions carried out, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it; and now, Edmund, it's for you to speak.'

'My answer is very simple,' said Edmund. 'It can be no disappointment to you, sir, for you must have foreseen it. I refuse——'

'You refuse! You are a great fool for your pains. You had

better take time to think it over. A day or two can't make much difference, Pouncefort.'

'A day or two might make all the difference,' replied Mr. Pouncefort. 'Why, you might die—any of us might die—before dinner.'

Once more the Squire jumped out of his chair. 'I think you want to drive me to——'

'Suicide?' said little Mr. Pouncefort. 'Oh no; but I'll tell you one thing, Mitford. If you thought you were going to die before dinner,—ay, or after it, either,—you would not make this will.'

'You think yourself privileged,' cried the Squire, with a puff of hot breath. 'So far as I'm aware my death is nothing to you, or when it takes place. Edmund——'

'Oh yes,' returned the lawyer, 'it's a great deal to me, for we're the same age; and when you go, I'll have to be looking to my preparations for the voyage. I don't want it to happen a day sooner than can be helped.'

'Edmund,' said Mr. Mitford, 'all this is utterly beyond the question. Take a day or two to think. I don't want to hurry you. I like to deal justly with everybody. You're the next, and I don't want to pass you over; but don't think you can bully me by refusing; for I'll stick to my intention whether you go in with it or not.'

'I want no time to think, sir; there can't be a question about my decision. I am as grieved about Roger as you can be, but I will never step into his place.'

'"Never" is a long word. He might die, as Pouncefort's so fond of suggesting, and then, of course, you would take his place.'

'I never will while he lives; I never will to his detriment. Father, don't do anything about it now. You are as young as the best of us. What does it matter whether it's decided now or in six months' time? For the moment let it alone. We are all excited——'

'Not I,' declared the Squire, 'though Pouncefort thinks I may die before dinner.'

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. 'Edmund's a very sensible fellow,' he said; 'suppose we put it off for six months.'

'What! to leave me time to die, as you say, and balk myself? No, I tell you. I know where to find a man to do what I want, if you refuse. Let it be yes or no, then, on the spot, if that's what you choose.'

'It must be no, then, sir,—no, without a shadow of hesitation,'

Edmund replied. His face was very grave and pale,—as different as could be imagined from his father's red and angry physiognomy. Mr. Mitford knew it was bad for him to be thus excited. Dying before dinner is not such an impossible thing, when a man is stout, of a full habit, and allows himself to get into states of excitement. He had a roar of rage in his throat to deliver upon his son, but was stopped by this thought, which had more effect upon him than a high moral reason. He pulled himself up with another puff of heated breathing, which was half a snort; and then assumed the air of mockery which was, he was aware, his most effectual weapon.

'Very well, then, sir,' he said, with that very detestable mimicry of his son's tone. 'It shall be no, then, sir, and there's an end of it. And I know some one who will not have a shadow of hesitation, not a—— Stephen knows very well on what side his bread's buttered. I'll telegraph for Steve, Pouncefort.'

'Writing will do quite well; I'm in no hurry. One would think it was I that was pushing this matter on.'

'Why, I might die—before dinner,' the Squire retorted. To be mimicked is never pleasant, but to be mimicked badly is a thing beyond the power of mortal man to support. Mr. Mitford had no imitative powers. Mr. Pouncefort grew an angry red under his gray hair.

It was at this moment that Larkins opened the door, and came in in his dignified way,—a way that put an end to everything in the shape of a scene wherever he appeared. He was in the habit of making a wide circuit round the furniture, with a calm and decorum which made excited persons ashamed of themselves, and which transferred all their attention, in spite of themselves, to this perfectly *digne* and respectable messenger from a world outside which made no account of their excitements.

'Mr. Edmund, sir,' Larkins said, 'there is a person outside who wishes to see you.'

Larkins was far above making telegraphic communications to any man, especially to one of the family; but there was something in his look which startled Edmund.

'A person,' he repeated involuntarily, 'to see me?'

'A very respectable person, sir,' Larkins said. Then he walked round the furniture again, making the circuit of the room, and stood at the door, holding it open to let his young master pass.

Mr. Mitford had seated himself in his chair at the appearance of Larkins, with the aspect of a judge upon the bench, severe but amiable; and Mr. Pouncefort had smoothed down all the

billows of his forehead, as if nothing had ever disturbed him. Calm and self-respect came back with that apparition. Edmund was too glad to take advantage of the interruption. He hurried out, with little thought of the object of the call,—glad to be delivered anyhow.

'I have taken her up to your room, sir. I thought you'd be quieter there,' Larkins said.

'*Her!* Whom? Who is it? Has anything happened?' cried Edmund, scarcely knowing what he said.

'It is a female, Mr. Edmund; very respectable, and in a deal of trouble.'

Edmund rushed upstairs, three steps at a time. He did not know what he feared. His rooms were at the end of a long corridor, and the mere fact that his visitor should have been taken there was startling. What woman could want him in this way? But imagination could not have helped him to call up that homely figure in the garb of a perfect rustic respectability, such as Larkins knew how to value, which came rushing forward as he opened the door, turning upon him an honest face, red with crying and misery. 'Oh, sir, where's my Lily? Oh, what's been done with my Lily? Oh, for the love of God—if you care for that! Mr. Edmund, Mr. Edmund, where is my girl? Tell me, and I'll go on my knees and bless you. Oh, tell me, tell me, if you don't want to see me die before your eyes!'

'Mrs. Ford!' Edmund cried, with an astonishment beyond words.

'Oh, for God's sake, Mr. Edmund! Yes, I'm her mother, her poor mother, that has trained her, may be, for her ruin. Oh, where is my girl? Where's my Lily? Tell me, sir, tell me wherever it is, and I'll thank you on my knees.'

And the poor woman flung herself, in her big shawl and respectable bonnet, her eyes streaming, her face working with wild supplication, heavily at his feet upon the carpet; a figure half ridiculous, wholly tragic, in all the abandonment of despair.

XXV

LILY'S RESOLUTION

LILY FORD had been extraordinarily moved by Roger's declaration. It had an effect upon her imagination which was beyond all reason, and quite out of proportion with the event. She had not been without stirrings of heart as to Roger's visits in the days when her mind was still free, and Stephen was to her only a vague shadow of that hero of romance for whose arrival she was looking daily. Roger's appearance had been, indeed, the first that had roused the expectation in her, and made that general and shadowy sense of something about to happen, which is always dominant in a girl's mind, into a still shadowy but more possible reality. Her heart had beat its first, not for him, but for the excitement of his coming, the prince, the knight, the lover of all the romances. Afterwards Lily had grown a little afraid of Roger. His visits, his looks, his tones, all flattered her, but frightened her at the same time. Perhaps she never could have been at her ease with him as with Stephen. He reverenced her too much, and Lily knew very well that this was not the appropriate sentiment with which to regard her. Admiration she understood perfectly, and love more or less; but that ideal respect bewildered her, and impaired her self-possession in his presence. That she should look up to him as an elder brother and head of the family was a much more possible relation than anything more familiar, and in this light she had begun to regard Roger vaguely before his sudden disappearance. But now that all was changed, now that she was Stephen's betrothed, almost his bride, his brother's sudden return, his sudden appeal to her, the almost certainty there seemed in his mind that he must be the first who had so addressed her, and that only her anxiety for her father prevented her full response, was an overwhelming surprise, and indeed a horror, to Lily. It shocked and paralysed her. Her 'Oh, Mr. Roger!' was a cry of terror. No other words would come, nor did she know what to do except

to fly, to hurry away, to hide her face and stop her ears, that she might not hear nor see those avowals, which not only were almost criminal, but would raise, she felt vaguely, such a wall of separation between herself and the brother of her future husband as nothing hereafter could overcome.

Lily was altogether more painfully affected by this incident than could have been supposed possible. It made her wretched, it filled her with visionary terror. It was wrong, wicked, unnatural. His sister-in-law! and she dared not tell him,—dared not betray the position in which she stood towards Stephen, who by this time had no doubt got the license and prepared everything for their marriage. The situation overwhelmed the girl; no better expedient occurred to her than to shut herself up in her room, from which, scarcely venturing to breathe lest she should be discovered, with feelings of alarm and agitation indescribable, she had listened to the voice of Roger speaking to her mother downstairs. Mrs. Ford, for her part, did not understand Lily's panic, nor why she should hide herself. It was, no doubt, a very agitating and splendid event; but except for the natural tremor of so enormous a success, and some qualms of alarm as to its immediate effect upon Ford's position as gamekeeper,—qualms calmed by the thought that everything must come right in the end, for Mrs. Ford had no faith in disinheritance,—the mother would have easily made up her mind to boundless joy and triumph. But Lily's condition was not to be accounted for by mere nervousness or excitement. She was so determined that Roger's suit could not be listened to for a moment, so anxious to hide herself and keep out of his way, that Mrs. Ford was compelled to yield with a troubled heart to these tremors. She had long ago discovered that she did not always understand Lily. How should she? The girl was far above her mother in so many things. It was a pride the more to think that so humble a woman as she was could not always tell what her child meant,—her child, who was so much superior to any other woman's child.

But while Lily thus lurked terror-stricken in her room, her mind was full of many troubled thoughts. The time had come, she felt, when her fate could no longer hang in the balance; when that decision, which she could not but feel to be an awful one, must be made. For nothing in the world would she run the risk of meeting Roger again, or being once more addressed by him in those words which she trembled to think of. Rather anything than that; rather the final step, the plunge which she longed, yet feared to make. She had parted from Stephen with a promise that her

decision should not be long delayed, but whether without this new excitement Lily would ever have been able to wind herself up to so bold a step it is impossible to tell. She sat upon the floor in her little chamber, all crouched together, sick with alarm and nervous excitement, while the sound of Roger's masculine voice came up from below. She had consented that Stephen should remain in town awaiting her, and that he should take all the steps about the license; she had even promised to let him know, by a telegram, the time of her arrival, in order that he might meet and take her to the house he had selected,—the house, of course, of a good woman, an old servant, who would care for her until the hour of the marriage, for which, in the meantime, all should be prepared. Everything had been arranged between them, even to that old church in the city which Lily, aided by her experience of novels, had thought the safest, and which he had yielded to, though avowing his preference for a registrar's office. A registrar's office! Oh no, that would have been no marriage at all! And at last he had consented, and even had discovered that he knew the very place,—an old, old church, quite out of the way. All these things began to swim through Lily's head as she sat on the floor, in the panic and humiliation of her thoughts, listening to the far-off sound of Roger's voice; anticipating the horror of perhaps seeing him again, of having to make him some answer, of her mother's wondering questions, and of all the commotion which she did not know how to face.

And on the other side, how much there was! Her lover waiting, longing, hoping that every day would bring her to his arms; a new life, the life she had always known must one day be hers, and happiness, and splendour, and her right position, and the society of ladies and gentlemen. All this lay before her, separated from her only by the decision, by the one step out of her present world into the other, which would indeed be something like dying and coming to life again, and yet would be so quick, accompanied by so little pain; a thing, too, that must be done sooner or later. Lily scarcely thought of the pangs she would leave behind her, of the tortures her father and mother would have to suffer. It would be only for a moment, she reflected, for a single night, or perhaps a couple of days; and then what comfort and delight to follow! The pain was scarcely worth thinking of. Mrs. Ford herself would not complain: she would say it was nothing; it was a cheap price to pay for knowing her child to be so happy. Her mother's very humbleness reassured Lily. The parents would care nothing for the anxiety after it was over; they would be so

glad, so glad, when the next day a telegram told them that all was well.

But was she herself strong enough to do it,—that was the question,—strong enough to forget herself, to step out of all that was ordinary, to free herself from every prejudice? They were only prejudices, she said to herself,—how often had Stephen told her so! To meet him at the railway, to drive with him to that good woman's house, was that worse than meeting him in the park? Was it possible for her, was it honourable, was it modest even, to have any doubts of Stephen? No, no, she had none. She would be as safe with him as with her father, she knew. It was nothing but a prejudice, a breach of the ordinary, that was all. She wanted orange-blossoms, and the children to strew flowers, and the church-bells to ring. Oh yes, she allowed it all in her heart. That was what she would have liked best. Oh, how she would have liked it! If she had married Witherspoon even, that was what would have happened at home. Witherspoon! She trembled, and grew red for shame of herself, who, engaged to a gentleman, an officer, should allow herself to think it had ever been possible that she might have married Witherspoon. The gardener! while his master was there, pleading, persuading, with that tone of entreaty which she could distinguish, with a shiver, downstairs, begging that he might see her; and he was her brother-in-law, if he had only known it! Oh, good heavens, her bridegroom's brother! And how could she face him, or reply to him, or let him speak to her, in that dreadful mistake he was making? No, no, no! it was impossible! There was only one thing to be done, and that was to go away. It must be done one time or another; to-morrow or the day after to-morrow, if not to-day. It must be done. Was not Stephen waiting for her, waiting for her telegram, with everything ready at that good woman's house, and the license in his pocket? It must be done! it must be done! It was the only way of escaping, of seeing Roger no more,—poor Roger, who loved her, yet must not love her, poor fellow!

She did not venture to get up, to run the risk of betraying her presence in the upper room even by the creaking of a board, until she heard his voice die out underneath, and then his lingering step upon the gravel. She felt sure—and her heart beat louder at the thought—that he turned, after he had left the door, to look back wistfully, if perhaps he might still see her at a window. Poor Mr. Roger! But she dared not meet him; it was kinder, far kinder to him that she should go away.

Presently Lily heard her mother toiling up the narrow stairs. Mrs. Ford came in panting for breath, but not only with the fatigue of the climbing. She had her apron thrown over her arm, handy for wiping her eyes or forehead, which was moist with exhaustion and trouble. She threw herself into a chair with a half groan. 'I'd rather do the hardest day's work as I ever had in my life than do what I have been a-doing now,' she said. 'Oh, Lily, Lily!'

'What is it, mother?' asked Lily, though with a tremor which showed how well aware she was of her mother's meaning.

'What is it, child? It's this, that I never seen a man in more trouble than the young master. To think it should be *us*, as has always been so well treated, that has brought him to this! And he can't believe as you won't have nothing to say to him, Lily; and no more can I, no more can I!'

'Do you think a girl is obliged to—to accept anybody who asks her?' cried Lily, trying to give her excitement a colour of indignation. Her eyes shone feverishly through quick-springing tears, and her colour changed every minute. Her agitation and trouble were indeed very plain to see.

'Do you call Mr. Roger "anybody"?' retorted the mother angrily. 'Who have you ever seen like him? You told me you would never marry if it wasn't a gentleman, and where will you find a gentleman like Mr. Roger? And one that respects you, like you were a queen. And says the Squire will never meddle with us, seeing as he's put it all out on him. Oh, Lily, the Squire's cut him off with a shilling, all because of you. And now you won't have him! Oh, poor young gentleman! and to think this is all come to him through coming in so kind to say a pleasant word to your father and me!'

'Cut him off with a—— Mother, do you mean to say the Squire knows?' Lily's voice sank into a half-frightened whisper. Her eyes grew large with terror. If this were the consequence to Roger, what would happen to Stephen? But then she reflected, quick as a lightning flash, that Roger was the eldest son; that no such penalty would be likely to attach to the youngest; that Stephen was an officer, and, as she thought in her foolishness, independent. This quick train of thought reassured her almost before the words were said.

'Knows!' echoed Mrs. Ford, with a tone almost of contempt. 'What is there as the Squire don't know?' She did not set herself up as equal to her daughter in any other kind of information; but for this potentate, of whom her experience was so much greater than Lily's, she could take upon herself to answer. Of course he knew!

Had he not discovered for himself what Lily was, and must he not have divined from that moment all that was happening? 'I knew,' she added, 'as it wasn't for naught that he came here,—I saw it in his eyes. He was struck when you came in; he lost his senses like. Oh, Lily, Lily!' cried Mrs. Ford. 'You I've been that proud of! May be, after all, it would ha' been better for all of us if you'd been more like other poor folks' children. Oh, my pretty, that I should live to wish you different,—me that have always been that proud!'

'You don't wish me different, mother, whatever happens,' said the girl, with a sudden melting of the heart, throwing her arms for a moment round the homely woman, and kissing fervently her bowed head. But Lily had disengaged herself from this rapid embrace before her mother, surprised by the sudden warmth, could return it; and when Mrs. Ford turned round to give back the kiss, Lily had already begun to arrange some small articles, collars and cuffs, which were laid out on her drawers, and was saying over her shoulder, in a voice which had a strained tone of levity, 'It's far better for Mr. Roger that I should have nothing to say to him, in that case, mother,—better for both him and me. For the Squire will have him back when he hears it has all come to nothing. And what could we do with a shilling? We couldn't live upon that.'

'Oh, Lily, you have always the best of sense,' replied Mrs. Ford. 'I never took that view. But, dear, you'll have to see him when he comes again. I've done my best for you, but I can't take it upon me no more.'

'When he comes again! Is he coming again? Oh, mother!'

'How could I help it, Lily? He wouldn't take his answer, was it likely, from me.'

'Then, mother,' cried Lily,—she spoke with her head bent over her little collars, counting them, Mrs. Ford thought, to see that they were all right after the wash,—'then, mother——' Her breath came quick, but that was very natural, disturbed as she had been; and she made a pause before saying any more. 'I think I must go out and stay—about the park—till night. I cannot, oh, I cannot see Mr. Roger! It would make me ill to see him; and what would be the use? I will take a piece of cake for my dinner, and go up into the wood, and come home with father. And then you can tell him you don't know where I am,—and it will be quite true.'

'Oh, Lily, I have said that already,—that I didn't know where you were. It was true enough, for I didn't know if you were here,

or in my room, or in the loft, or where you were. But if I say it again—and him looking that anxious in my face——'

'It will be truer than ever, mother,' said Lily. She turned again to Mrs. Ford, and put her arms, which trembled, round her, and leaned her head upon her mother's breast. 'Oh, mother,' she cried, 'I know it's hard upon you, I know it is; but only have patience just a very little, and everything will come right. I know it will all come right. Only have patience a little, and don't be vexed with me, mother dear.'

'Vexed with you, my pretty!' cried Mrs. Ford, hugging her child. 'Since ever you were born, Lily, you've been the pride of my heart; and I wouldn't have you different, not a bit different, whatever was to happen to me. There, bless you, child, don't cry: and I'll go and cut you a nice bit of cake, and put some apples in the basket, and you'll come home with your father; and I'll never say another word about Mr. Roger poor young gentleman, though it do go to my heart.'

She went quickly away downstairs, not trusting herself to say another word, lest she should enter again upon the forbidden subject. Lily, with hands that trembled, lifted her hat from its box. She selected her best hat, and a pretty little cloth jacket which had been purchased for Sundays; but such extravagance was not unusual with Lily, who took very good care of her clothes, though she did not always keep them for best. Perhaps this was one reason why she ran out so quickly, taking the little basket hurriedly from Mrs. Ford's hand, that her mother might not remark upon her dress. And she left her collars lying about, not put neatly into the drawer, as was her wont. Mrs. Ford put them away very carefully afterwards, wondering a little at Lily's carelessness; but indeed it was no wonder, poor child, in the circumstances, that she should be put out of her usual tidy way.

XXVI

AT THE RAILWAY STATION

ROGER arrived in London in the evening, before it was dark. He had not had a cheerful journey. The fact that he had not been able to see Lily, and that her mother had a second time defended her doors against him, and with flushed cheeks and troubled eyes had repeated once more that Lily was out, that she could not tell where she was, had disturbed him in his convictions. It had seemed so certain, so self-evident, that his suit must be acceptable to the gamekeeper's daughter; was it possible that Lily was not of that opinion, that she loved some one else, that after all somebody in her own class had secured her affections? The idea made Roger's blood boil; but when he thought again he said to himself, No, no. She could never give herself to a man of her father's class; it was impossible, it could not be; and who could she have seen whom it was possible to reckon with as rivalling himself? Roger was not vain, especially now when his heart was so profoundly touched. At the best, he had scarcely expected her to love him as he loved her. But that she should shrink and fly from him was incredible. It could be only what her mother said: that to find herself the cause of so much disturbance had overwhelmed her delicate spirit. Sweet Lily, pure flower of nature, moved by all the most generous emotions! A girl who had been brought up in the world would have liked the commotion. She would have thought of nobody but herself in the matter. But Lily held her own happiness at arm's-length, trembling for it lest it should hurt some one else. This conception of her sweetened his thoughts, which were not bright, as he went away. He told her mother that he would write, explaining everything, and that Lily must reply to him sincerely, truly, without thought of any secondary matter. 'You shall not be disturbed; I will take care of you,' he repeated, though he did not know how he was to do so. And thus unsatisfied, unhappy, he had gone away.

It seemed to Roger that at the junction, where there was a change of carriages for some of the humbler travellers, he saw for a moment among the changing groups a figure which reminded him of Lily; and he started from his corner to follow it with his eyes. But he knew the idea was absurd even as it flashed through his mind. It was only that he had Lily on his heart, on his brain, in his every thought, and discovered resemblances to her, visions of her, wherever he turned; he knew that nothing could be more ridiculous than the thought that Lily was travelling to London or anywhere else, alone. It was only a delusion of his preoccupied heart.

The yellow flame of the lamps, newly lighted, was shining against the dim blue of the evening when he reached the big railway station, crowded and echoing with voices and commotion. He had just got his bags and coats out of the carriage he had occupied, and flung them into the arms of the waiting porter, when he was suddenly startled by the appearance of another very familiar image, almost as unlikely in such a place as that of Lily. The sight of his brother Stephen was not habitually a pleasure to Roger; but there was something in his own forlornness, in his sense of severance from all his former life, which disposed him towards his own flesh and blood; and a wild idea that Stephen might have heard what had happened, and might have come to meet him, to show him a little sympathy, though they were not usually great friends, suggested itself in the heat of the moment. He turned round abruptly, straight in his brother's way, and held out his hand. 'You've come to meet me, Steve? How kind of you!' he cried.

Stephen had been going slowly along looking into the carriages, as if searching for some one. He stopped and stared, not with the air of a man who had found the person he was seeking, but astonished at the sudden grasp of his hand and claim upon him. 'You here!' he cried, with a look of wonder and discomfiture; and then he laughed, getting free of Roger's hand. 'No, indeed,' he said, 'I didn't come to meet you. How should I? I didn't know you were coming. I thought you were at home.'

'I have left home. Steve, I have a great deal to tell you. There are things you ought to know. It may affect you, too,' added Roger, pausing, with a new thought. 'Jump into the cab with me; don't leave me now we've met. I have a great deal to say.'

'My dear fellow,' answered Stephen, 'I'm very sorry; but I've got half a dozen engagements. I've come here to meet—one of

our fellows, don't you know. I can't possibly spare you a moment to-night. You're at the old place, I suppose? Well, good-bye. I'll soon look you up.'

'Stay a moment; none of your fellows can be so important as this,' said Roger, with his hand upon his brother's arm.

A smile of conscious triumph came over Stephen's face; he shook off Roger's hand and turned away, kissing the tips of his fingers. 'Ta-ta. I'll look you up very soon,' he cried, disappearing in the crowd. Roger divined the meaning of that triumphant smile. He looked after his brother for a moment, with a sense that Stephen's rendezvous, whatever it was, was an offence to his own trouble and to the cause of that trouble,—a sin against love. The train was long and the platform crowded. Stephen and the person, whoever it was whom Stephen had come to meet, were lost in the groups of moving figures, indistinguishable, a continually shifting and re-forming crowd, under the mingled light of the yellow lamps and the waning day. Roger saw the pale sky at the end of a long vista, the lights, more perplexing than illuminating, in a row above, the dim, long, crowded line of moving figures below. And then, with a sigh, half of disappointment, half of a vague and troubled foreboding, he turned to get into the cab, which was already laden with his travelling-gear. A curious fancy to wait and see who it was whom Stephen had come to meet crossed his mind, one of those sudden, vague fancies which blow about through a man's consciousness without any will of his own. He pulled himself up with an indignant return upon himself. What! wait and spy upon his brother! Of all things, that was the last. The little self-argument passed in a second, scarcely so long as it took to transfer to the porter, who stood waiting to know what address he was to give the cabman, the sixpence in Roger's hand,—and it never really was a question at all. That he should watch Stephen and find out who it was he met was as impossible as to catch the first passer-by by the throat and rob him. And yet, if that impossible thought had been carried out,—if he had but done it, this impossible thing!

Roger went off to his chambers, the rooms which had scarcely yet begun to show the emptiness of rooms uninhabited. The invitation cards which he had taken down from the glass still lay together in a little bundle on the mantelshelf. How few hours it was since he had left them, still all uncertain, not knowing what turn his fate was to take! Now it was all settled, beyond the reach of further change. The state of mind in which he was when he left this place, not much more than twenty-four hours before,

was now almost incredible to him. He scarcely understood how it could have been. From the beginning of time it must have been clear that only in one way, only in this way, could he have acted. Doubt on the subject was an offence to him as he now saw it, and all the efforts that had been made to turn him from his purpose were as wrong as they were vain. He thought of Edmund's action, his persuasions, the journey they had made together, in which his brother had been his slave,—a slave to all his caprices, while believing that he was the guide, weaning Roger from those plans which never could have been doubtful for a moment, which now were fixed beyond all recall. Poor Edmund, always so well intentioned, so well meaning!

Roger sat gazing at the light of his solitary lamp, and wondered within himself what Edmund would do. Would he accept, after all, the reversion of the heirship, and become in time the proprietor of Melcombe? Why should he not accept it? Since it was no longer Roger's, how much better it should be Edmund's, so good a fellow as he was,—the best of them, much the best! He paused here for a moment to wonder over again, or rather to be conscious of an impulse of wonder floating across his mind, as to who it was Stephen was going to meet—but dismissed this absurd, insignificant question, and returned to Edmund. It would be by far the best thing that Edmund should accept, and marry Elizabeth Travers, and bring her home to Melcombe. A smile came over Roger's face as he sat thinking,—a smile altogether sweet and tender, with perhaps a touch of melancholy, as there always is in such tender thoughts. Where could there be a better pair? They would make the house delightful; not like anything Roger had ever known in it, but far better, purer, more elevated, a home of love and kindness. Yes, that was how it must be: Edmund and Elizabeth must marry, and live happily ever after, like the lovers in a fairy tale; 'While I and Lily,' he said to himself, 'Lily and I'—with his smile softening more and more into a melancholy, profounder, sweeter, than any sentiment he had ever been conscious of in his life. Lily and he would not make a home like that at Melcombe. He did not anticipate any centre of life, any new world beginning, in that fated union, which was like one of the old tragic expedients of destiny in the Greek plays, he thought,—a thing that had to be, that no human effort could disturb. He smiled over it with a pathetic consciousness that it might not be what people call happy,—not like that other marriage, like Edmund and Elizabeth; not happy in that way,—no, nor of that kind.

He returned with pleasure from the too penetrating thought of his own fate to think of these two, largely administering an ample household, a shelter from the storms outside, an ever noble, tranquil centre of life. His smile grew with his consciousness into a half laugh, in which amusement mingled. Ned would fight against it, he would not see his way, he would think it was robbing his brother,—old Ned! the best fellow that ever was; in love with Lizzy Travers all this time, but never owning it, never letting himself think of it, in case he might come in Roger's way. But in the end Edmund must hear reason,—he must see that this was the most desirable thing that could happen. Roger drew his writing things towards him, and began at once to write to his brother, setting all these arguments before him. There must be no mistake upon the subject; Ned must do it, if it were but for Roger's sake.

After writing this letter he sat motionless for some time, staring vacantly at the flame of his lamp. Then he took up the pen again, and began another letter, his great letter, his explanation to Lily. He wrote to her as to one whom he regarded with a kind of worship, reverent of all her ignorances and innocences, yet as one who belonged to him, between whom and himself there could be no obstacles that were not imaginary, to be surmounted at their pleasure. She had to understand this at the outset,—that she was his, that he would hear of no objections. He had encountered for her everything a man can encounter for the woman he loves. It was done, and there could be no further question. Family and fortune he had put away for her; it only remained that she should put away her hesitations, her anxieties for her father (who should not suffer, he promised her), her fears and diffidences for him,—a matter so easy, and yet all that was wanted to make everything clear.

It was very late when he concluded the letter, or rather early in the May morning, the solemn hour which is at once the dead of night and the approach of day. As he sealed the envelope there came over him again that insistent yet altogether irrelevant question,—Who was it whom Stephen was hurrying to meet, with that smile of triumph on his face? He shook it from him indignantly, not knowing by what mechanical freak of fancy it should come back thus, again and again. What did it matter who it was? Some of Stephen's banal loves, a vulgar adventure, perhaps some one of whom it was a shame to think, while the air was still softly echoing with Lily's name. If he had but known!

XXVII

IN THE TOILS

LILY'S heart was in her mouth, as people say,—it was fluttering like a bird. She stepped out, stumbled out, of the railway carriage among the crowd, looking wildly about her, feeling herself for the moment lost. She had never encountered such a crowd before. She felt herself disappear in it, among the people who were running about after their luggage, and those who were calling cabs, and the porters pushing through the throng with big boxes on their shoulders. Lily felt herself lost, as if, whoever might be looking for her, she should never be found any more. It had not occurred to her to prepare for the risk of not meeting her lover. She was quite unaware where to go, what to do. She had never been in London before, nor in a crowd, nor left to herself to push her way. She was as much disconcerted at finding herself alone as if she had been a duke's daughter instead of a gamekeeper's; and the noise and the bustle frightened her.. She looked round helplessly, wistfully, putting up the veil which she had kept over her face during the whole journey. No one was likely to recognise her here,—no one except him for whom she was looking, who had not come. Had he not come? Was it possible that some accident could have happened, and that he was not here?

Lily had some ten minutes of this panic and misery. It was the first thing that had gone wrong with her; all the previous part of the journey had seemed so easy. She had walked to the junction, from whence, as had been arranged between them, the telegram was to be sent, and thus avoided all curious eyes at the little Melcombe station; and she had been lucky enough to find a second-class carriage empty, where she was left undisturbed all the way. She had not the least idea that Roger was in the same train: nobody had come near her except the guard, and she had seen no familiar face; all had gone perfectly well till now. Her heart beat, indeed, with a wildly quickened movement whenever she allowed

herself to think. But Lily had enough perception of the necessity of self-command to avoid thinking as much as was possible, and to concentrate her mind upon the happy meeting at the end of this exciting journey. She figured to herself Stephen appearing at the carriage window almost before the train stopped, and how in a moment all anxiety of hers, all need to act or decide for herself, would be over. She had nothing in the shape of luggage except the little basket in which her mother had put the luncheon, the slice of cake and apples, which she had been glad enough to have before the long afternoon was over. Lily had slipped into this basket a very small bundle of necessaries, which were all she had brought with her. She held it tightly in her hand as she got out, bewildered by the arrival, by the jar of the stopping, by the dreadful sensation of finding herself there alone among the crowd. She did not know how long she stood, pushed about by the other travellers, who knew where they were going, who had nothing to wait for; but it was long enough to feel herself forsaken, lost, and to realise what it would be to have nowhere to go to, to be thrown upon her own resources in this horrible, great, strange, noisy place. Then in a moment Lily's heart gave a wild leap, and she knew it was not to be so.

But the first sensation of the meeting was not altogether sweet. Instead of Stephen's face at the window, ready, waiting to receive her according to her dream, what really did happen was that Lily felt herself suddenly surrounded by an arm which drew her close, and felt a hot breath upon her cheek, and a 'Here you are at last, little one!' which jarred upon her almost as much as it relieved her. In the railway station, among all these crowds! She started out of his embrace, freed herself, and threw a hurried glance upon the bystanders with instinctive terror almost before she looked at him. 'Oh, Stephen!' she exclaimed, with a little cry of reproach.

'Don't be frightened,' he replied; 'nobody knows us here, you little goose. I might take you up in my arms and carry you off, —nobody would mind. And so here you are, Lil, my pet; really here at last.'

She put her arm timidly through his. 'Oh, Stephen, I thought I should never find you! And what should I have done?'

'It was not my fault,' he declared. 'Where is your luggage? Oh, to be sure, you haven't got any luggage!' He stopped to laugh at this, as if it amused him very much, but pressed her arm close to his side all the time with a sort of hug, which consoled though it half frightened Lily. 'Why, how are you to get on for to-night?'

he went on, still with that laugh. 'Must we stop at a shop somewhere and buy you things for to-night?'

'Oh, Stephen, don't!' said Lily, with a pang of wounded pride.

'Don't? What? Talk of your things, or about what you'll want? Well, well, we'll leave all that till to-morrow.' His laugh, why should it have offended Lily? It had never done so before. 'Here's our cab,' he said, leading her out of the noise of the station. Lily's heart beat so that it made her faint, as he put her into the hansom, and took his place beside her, so close, with again that sweep of his arm round her, which seemed to offend her too, though she could not tell why,—she had no right to be offended by that clasp. He had held her in his arms in the park, when they met there, with not a creature near, and she had not been offended: why should she be so now, or find fault with the man who was to be her husband to-morrow, for his fondness? She drew herself away a little, as much as was possible; but she restrained the protest that rose to her lips, though her heart fluttered and beat, and all her pulses seemed to clang in her ears, with an excitement which had pain in it and trouble, not the sensation of safety and protection and shelter for which she had hoped.

'Fancy what made me late,' Stephen said; 'it was not my fault. As I came hurrying along, looking out for my little Lil, whom do you suppose I saw jumping out of a carriage?—and he saw me too, worse luck, and thought, the fool, I had come to meet him. You couldn't guess if you were to try till Christmas. Why, Lily, my pet, my brother Roger! Think what a fright I was in for a moment; for though you never would own to it, *I* know he was always hanging about the place; and if you could have had the eldest son, my little Lil, I daresay you'd never have thought twice of me.'

'Oh, Stephen!' she cried, with a choking sensation in her throat. 'Oh, don't, don't.' He held her close as in a vice, and laughed, and delivered these remarks with his lips close to her cheek. He was excited, too, but the banter which had appeared to her so sprightly and delightful at Melcombe seemed at this tremendous moment so out of place, so dreadful to listen to. And then Roger!—if he but knew!

'Yes,—you didn't know he was in the same train, did you? Had he turned up a little sooner, you'd have thrown me off at the last moment, wouldn't you, Lil? But Roger is one of the prudent ones, my dear. No chance for you there. Catch him offending the Pater and losing his chances for all the girls in the world! He is not that sort. He is not a fool in love, like me!'

'Please, Stephen! Oh, please, Stephen!' Oh, to hear all that

of Mr. Roger, who had said such beautiful things to her, who had suffered she knew not what for her, who had come boldly and told her mother that he wanted Lily for his wife! All at once there sprang up in Lily's frightened soul a consciousness that she dared not say this to Stephen, as things now were. She had been very bold with him, and said what she pleased, while she had her home within reach and had still full power over herself. But now everything seemed changed: now that she was at the height of all her dreams had pointed to, on the eve of her wedding-day, about to marry a gentleman,—and not a gentleman only, but a splendid officer, the flower of the world; now that she was about to step into another sphere, to leave her own humbleness and obscurity behind for ever—— Confusedly Lily was conscious of all this grandeur shining before her,—only one other step to be taken, only a few hours to pass; but still more certainly she became aware that her lover terrified her beyond description, and that in a moment there had rolled up between them a crowd of things which she dared not speak of, nor allude to, and those the very things which she most wished to say.

It was a relief to her when the cab stopped, in a quiet street, with not many lamps and scarcely any one about,—a street of houses with little gardens in front of them, narrow London enclosures, with a tiny tree or bush in the centre of a space no bigger than a table. But it was very quiet, and Lily felt a throb of satisfaction, hoping to see the good woman, the faithful creature who was to protect her and be a mother to her until to-morrow. She longed for the sight of this woman as she had never longed for anything in her life. But no woman appeared; the door was opened by a man, and Stephen led the way up to a room on the first floor, where there were lights and a table was laid. The room looked fine to Lily's inexperienced eyes: there were flowers about, plants in pots, and huge bouquets in vases; and the table was pretty, with its dazzling white cover, and the glass and silver that shone under the candles with their pink shades. All these details caught her eye even in this moment of troubled emotion, and gave her a thrill of pleasure, as signs and tokens of the new world into which she was taking her first step. The man, whether servant or master of the house, who had followed them upstairs, opened a door into a room beyond, which Lily saw was a bedroom. She took refuge hastily in this room, half because she seemed to be expected to do so, half that she might be alone for the moment and able to think.

There were candles lighted upon the toilet table and an air of

preparation, something of the ordinary and natural in the midst of all the horrible strangeness of her circumstances, which consoled her a little. She sank down upon a chair, to recover her breath and her composure, saying to herself that it was very foolish, even wicked, to be so full of nervousness and doubts and fears; that having come so far, and having done it deliberately of her own free will, she could not, must not, give way to any imaginary terrors. She might have known it would be terrible, this interval,—she might have known! and where was the good woman, the kind woman, whom Stephen had assured her she should find waiting? Then she recalled herself with a pang at her heart. How could she even ask for this woman, as if she had no confidence in the man who would be her husband to-morrow? To-morrow,—only to-morrow,—it was not very long to wait. This panic was due, no doubt, to the excitement of her nerves, a weakness such as women were so apt to have in novels. Lily had never known before what unreasonable nerves were. She took off her hat, which relieved her throbbing head for a moment. But when she caught sight of herself in the glass, her pale, scared face frightened her as if it had been a head of Medusa. She turned away from that revelation of her own instinctive alarms with a fresh access of terror; her hands trembled as she put them up to smooth her hair. The table was arranged with pretty brushes, ivory-backed, and every kind of pretty thing, such as Lily had heard of, but never seen before. They had all been put there for her, she tried to say to herself, all arranged for her gratification, and she so ungrateful! But she could not use them. She smoothed her hair tremulously with her hands. Oh, where was the woman, the kind woman, whose presence would give her a little courage? Where was she?

'I say, Lil, look here,' cried Stephen, rattling loudly at the door. 'Don't be long about your toilet; dinner's just coming.' Then he opened the door and half came in. 'You want a lady's-maid,—that's what you want. Not used, eh, to managing for yourself, my dear?' His laugh seemed to fill the house with horrible echoes. 'Can't I fasten something or undo something? Here, Lil, you'll find me very handy,' he said, advancing to her, his large masculine presence filling the room, exhausting the atmosphere, affecting the frightened girl with a passion of terror which was almost more than she could contain.

'Oh, please!' she said, her breath coming quick, 'I shall be ready—in a moment—in—in five minutes: oh, go away, please. If you would send the woman, the woman——'

'What woman?' he asked, with a stare; then laughing, 'Oh,

yes, I remember! The woman, eh? A faithful old servant, wasn't she? Yes; well, she's looking after the dinner, I suppose; but no doubt there's a drudge of some kind, if you must have her. You mustn't be silly, my pretty Lil. You must make the best of your bargain, you know. Come, can't I do?'

'Oh, if I may have the woman—only for a moment—only for five minutes!'

'Well, don't work yourself into a fever,' he said. 'And mind you don't keep the dinner waiting, for I'm as hungry as a hunter,' he added, looking back from the door.

Lily stood trembling in the middle of the room, with her hat in her hand, and that wild pain gradually rising, swelling, in her heart. It was all she could do to keep still, not to fly she knew not where. But yet she made an effort to control herself. He ought to have been more delicate, more respectful than ever, now that she was so entirely at his mercy. He ought to have treated her like something sacred. Ah! but then, she said to herself, he had never been respectful, reverent of her, like Mr. Roger. She had preferred it so,—it was Stephen's way; he was only a little rough, thinking there was no need for so many ceremonies, when to-morrow—to-morrow! She stood with one foot advanced, ready in her panic to fly, though she did not know where she could fly to. And then she heard his voice shouting downstairs for some one to come up,—for the maid, for Mary. 'Here, you Stimpson, send up the girl, send Mary—whatever her name is.' Lily hastily locked the door which was between the rooms, while his voice was audible; feeling that even the girl, even Mary, or whatever her name was, would be some protection. Wild thoughts traversed her mind as she stood there panting for breath, like clouds driven over the sky by a stormy wind,—thoughts over which she had no control. For the first time the other conclusion burst upon her, the end of the story which was in all the books: the unhappy girl betrayed, wandering home, a shameful thing, to die. O God! O God! would that ever happen to Lily? Not to return in pride, a gentleman's wife on her husband's arm, to make her parents glad, but perhaps in shame, flinging herself down before the door, dying there, never raising her head! Oh, what folly! what folly! Oh, how horrible—horrible! But it could not be,—how could it be? It was only Stephen's way,—a little rough, not respectful; he had never been respectful. She would have laughed at the idea before to-night,—Stephen respectful, delicate, thinking of her silly feelings! Oh, was it likely, when they were to be married to-morrow, and ceremony would be needed no more?

Presently there came a heavy, dragging step mounting the stairs, a hard breathing as of a fatigued creature; the other door of the room was pushed open, and some one came in with a steaming jug of hot water, a London maid-of-all-work, of a kind quite unknown to Lily, with a scrap of something white pinned upon her rough hair, and an apron hurriedly tied on. 'I'm sorry as I forgot the 'ot water, ma'am,' she said; and put it down with much noise and commotion, shaking the room with her tread, and making everything in it ring.

She was not pretty, nor neat, nor anything that was pleasant to see, but when she turned to go away, after putting down her jug, Lily caught her arm with both hands. 'Oh,' she cried, 'don't go away! don't go away!' holding her fast. The young woman, half frightened, looked up in the face of this lady who must certainly be mad to seize upon her so.

'Laws!' she cried; and then, 'If it's for lady's-maidin', ma'am, I ain't no good; and Missis wants me downstairs.'

'Oh, wait a moment! wait a moment!' cried Lily under her breath. A hundred questions rushed to her lips, but she did not know how to put them into words. 'Didn't your mistress—expect me?' she managed to say.

'Missis? Expect you? Oh yes, ma'am; the Captain said as you were coming.'

A little relief came to Lily's mind. 'She did expect me! But why does she not come then? Why doesn't she come?'

'Missis?' said the drudge, astonished. 'Why, she's a-cookin' of the dinner. She ain't a lady's-maid, ma'am, no more than me.'

'But you said she expected me!'

'Oh, bless you! It was the Captain as expected you. He said, "Mrs. Stimpson, I'm expecting of my good lady. She's been a-visiting of her friends, and I expects her back Tuesday or Wednesday," he says. We was all ready for you yesterday, ma'am, and the dinner ordered; but the Captain, he says, "It'll be to-morrow, Mrs. Stimpson." He said as how you was very fond of your own folks, and it was always uncertain to a day when you'd come back.'

'When I'd come back?'

'Yes, ma'am: I hear him sayin' of it. "Mrs. Stevens," he says, "is very fond of her own folks."'

'Is that—is that—what he said? And where does he—live, then?' said Lily, in a whisper which she could scarcely make audible.

'Captain Stevens—when he's at home? Laws! how can I

tell you? But for the last week he has been living here, a-waitin' for his good lady,—just as Missis is waiting for me to help dish up the dinner downstairs.'

Lily did not say another word. She fixed her wild eyes upon the maid's face, and signed to her to go impatiently. The drudge was surprised at this rapid dismissal, but she was too much occupied with her own dreary life to trouble herself what happened, and her mistress, she knew, would scold her for her delay. She went downstairs, not looking behind, not hearing the steps that followed her. Lily followed like a ghost; her foot was light, not like the heavy steps of the maid. She went behind her step by step, not thinking of anything but of how to get away, incapable of thought. She had her little basket still in one hand, her gloves in the other, which she held mechanically. When the woman turned the corner of the stairs to pursue her way to the kitchen, Lily found herself in the narrow hall, lit with one dull flame of gas, alone. She flew noiseless as a bird to the door which was before her, the only way of salvation. In another moment she was outside in the fresh cool air of the spring night.

Outside,—outside of everything; alone in London, without a soul to turn to,—alone in the unknown streets, on the verge of the awful night!

XXVIII

A NIGHT IN THE STREETS

It was a long time before Lily could think at all of what had happened, of what might have happened, of what might be going to become of her now, all forlorn and alone in the London streets. She had no time for thought; the first necessity was to go away, to go as far as her trembling yet nervously strong and energetic limbs could carry her,—away, away from that dreadful place. She flew rather than ran close by the garden walls and railings, scarcely feeling her feet touch the ground, to the end of the street, and out of that into a little square, which she crossed obliquely, following the street that led out of it at the other corner in a contrary direction. Until her breath was exhausted, and the first impulse of horror and panic had to some degree worn out, she never paused, going always straight before her, out of one street into another; sometimes crossing one which was full of bustle and lights, plunging into the darkness again on the other side. The district to which she had been taken was one of those which flank great London on every side, like a series of dull towns with interminable endless little streets, leading out of each other; all alike, monotonous, featureless, overpowering in their blank nonentity. Lily had no leisure of mind to understand this, or think how it was that she found nothing but solitude round her, though it helped to oppress her soul; but now and then a chilly anguish ran through her, a feeling that she had got into some terrible circle which might bring her back to the spot she had fled from, and throw her once more into the power of him from whom she had escaped; for the streets were all so like, so horribly like, with the same dull lamps at the corners, the same line of little gardens, the same rows of windows. The light had altogether faded out of the evening sky, but it was still faintly blue overhead, showing a glittering and twinkling of innumerable stars; not bright, but mildly present in the sky, making a sort of twilight in

the heavens. The sight of this pale ineffable clearness appearing where there was a larger opening gave Lily heart to go on; it was something known in the midst of this strange wilderness through which she was wandering, something familiar where all was so dark and strange.

When the first impulse of flight and panic began to wane, and she felt her breath fail her and her limbs trembling under her, Lily slackened her pace unconsciously; and then she began to think. This was more dreadful than the other state, the wild instinct which had obliterated everything except the necessity of getting away. She began to remember, to realise what it was that had happened to her. Heaven help her, a forlorn and solitary creature, not knowing where to go nor what to do in this awful desert of houses, where there was no door open to her, but only one which led to—hell. That was where it led to. She caught her breath with an effort to repress the long, broken, convulsive sob that shook her from head to foot, and came back and back, like the sob of a child which has wept all its tears away. Yet it was not of the immediate danger she had escaped that she thought most. She did not, in fact, realise that, having an imagination free from all visions of corruption. What Lily realised with vivid horror was the picture so common in books, so continually repeated, which forms the burden of so many a rustic tale,—the betrayed girl going home in shame and misery to die, creeping to her father's door, not daring to knock, not venturing even to look, hiding her ruined head upon the threshold. That it should have come within the most distant possibility that this could happen to her! This was the first conscious thought that took possession of her when she became able to think at all. It had flashed across her mind as she stood in the dimly-lighted room, hearing from the dingy little maid what fate was preparing for her. It returned now, and filled her whole being with such a pervading force as is possible only to the simple soul. It did not seem to be a thought only, but a vision. She, Lily, the first of all belonging to her, the one exceptional creature, unlike all others; knowing and feeling to the very tips of her fingers that she was not like any one else, that she belonged to another sphere,—she whose intention and dream it had been to go in at that humble door, leaning upon the arm of the finest gentleman she knew, and justify her mother's pride and fulfil all prognostications of splendour and happiness! That to her, to Lily, that other fate might have come, the common fate of the rustic fool, the village girl betrayed! Perhaps it was a proof that no stronger passion,

no self-abandonment, had ever been in Lily's thoughts. This terrible picture took possession of her; she could almost feel herself sinking before the door, covering her face, and in her heart the humiliation, the shame beyond words, the collapse of every hope. If it had not been that silence was the first necessity in her present terrible circumstances, nothing could have restrained the keen cry of imagined anguish that was on her lips,—that this might have happened to *her!*

Then she calmed, or tried to calm, herself with the thought that it never could have happened. Even if she had not ascertained her danger in time and escaped as she had done, Lily felt, grasping herself tight, as it were, holding herself together, that shame could never have come to her, never, never, never! It was a thing which she could not acknowledge possible, which never could have been. She clenched her hands, which were cold and trembling, until she hurt them with the pressure, and repeated, Never, never, never! In all the world there was no power which could have brought that humiliation upon her. Oh no, no, no! There are things which can be, and there are things which cannot be. She hurried on in her passion, flying from that thought which of itself was a degradation; for to be obliged to acknowledge even the possibility of shame approaching, shame almost within touch, was a shameful thing. She went on quicker and quicker to escape from it. It takes a long time to exhaust a thought, especially in such circumstances as those in which the girl now found herself. Was any girl ever in such a plight before? In the streets of London, without a place to go to, without a friend, not knowing where to turn, lost, altogether lost to everybody who knew her, to everything she knew! Her thoughts swept on like an accompaniment to that soft sound of her light footsteps, sometimes interrupted by a start of rising terror when she heard steps following her, or saw some figure coming into sight under the lamplight, but resuming again, going on and on. It was a long time before she came to the question what she was to do. The night had darkened, deepened, all around; the few little shops at the street corners which she passed from time to time had put up their shutters; the lights were few in the windows. It was no longer evening, but night. What was she to do?

Lily had never in her life gone anywhere or taken any important step by herself. She had gone to school, indeed, without the escort given to girls of a higher class, but even this under limitations: put into the railway carriage at one end, and met at the other as was thought necessary by her schoolmistress, at least.

She knew that what people did, when benighted in a strange place, was to go to a hotel; but this was an idea which made the blood course through her veins more wildly than before. To go to a hotel, a girl, alone, on foot, without any luggage except the basket, which she clung to as if there might possibly be help in it! The beating of her heart seemed to choke Lily, as she thought of that expedient. How could she explain that she was in London without any place to go to? No, no, that was impossible! She could not do it; she had not the courage. Oh, if she could but see some good woman, some one with a kind face, going into one of the little houses, standing at one of the doors! In books it was so certain that a poor girl would meet her at the end, when she was perhaps in despair. But no good woman stood at any door which Lily passed, or looked at her suddenly with compassion, going along the pavement. By this time, indeed, there were no women about, nobody was in those quiet streets. The doors were all closed; from time to time some one went by, not distinguishable in the lamplight, who took no notice of Lily,—sometimes a policeman, with his heavy tread sounding all down the street in the quiet of the night. As it grew later and later, these policemen began to look at her, she observed, as if she were a strange sight; and it occurred to her that perhaps, in her ignorance, not knowing where she was going, she might be passing and repassing through the same street, meeting the same man, who would naturally wonder to see a young woman going along so late. And she began to get so tired,—oh, so tired; feeling as if she could not go farther than the next corner, yet walking on mechanically without any volition of her own; her limbs moving, moving, her feet sometimes stumbling, always going on as if they had some separate impulse of their own. If she only dared to sit down on the steps of a door, rest a little, perhaps go to sleep for a time, leaning her head upon her hand! But Lily felt hazily, in the confusion of her weariness, that if she did this the policeman or some one might speak to her, might take her perhaps to prison, or to the workhouse, or somewhere which would be a disgrace. Everything unknown seemed as if it might be a disgrace, something that would be a shame to think of, to have encountered. To be out all night was shameful, too,—in the streets all night! What would any one think to whom that was said? In London streets all night! Anybody who heard of that would think of noise and tumult, and crowds of people and blazing lights, and dreadful gaiety and merry-making. But what a mistake that was! Lily said to herself. The streets of London,—what could be more

quiet? Quieter than the road through the village or the country highways, where the dogs would bark, at least, at a passing footstep, and the people in the houses get up to look out and wonder who it could be. But in these streets no dog barked, no window opened, no one looked out. She remembered to have heard that no woman need fear going anywhere in London, so long as she walked steadily along, minding her own business, giving no occasion to any one to interfere. How true that was, how safe it was, nobody paying any attention! It sounded a terrible thing to be out walking about the streets all night; but it was not so dreadful, after all. There was nobody to meddle; the policeman might perhaps look surprised to see a girl alone so late; but no one said a word. It was quite, quite safe; it was the best way, so that nobody should ever know. For who could believe it possible that Lily, *Lily!* had spent a night like that, roaming restlessly about the silent, dark streets? If she were not so tired, and so faint, and so ready to cry, and so like to drop down with utter fatigue and blinding, chilling weariness! But here was the policeman coming again, and he might think he had a right to speak to her if she faltered, or made any sound of crying, or showed that she was tired while he was passing. So she went on and on.

What she would have done had she not happened upon this quiet district, these innumerable little silent streets, who can tell? Had she drifted into a great thoroughfare, or the places where people live who go home late, poor Lily's adventures might have been very different. It was fortunate for her that Stephen Mitford had chosen a quarter far removed from those which he knew best, a place out of reach of any prying eyes, in the midst of the respectability of the Westbourne Park district, in the endless labyrinths of Roads and Gardens and Places, where midnight commotion never enters. More than once she passed the very corner of the street to which he had taken her, in the ignorance of her aimless wandering in the dark hours of the night; sometimes, indeed, was within the length of a street from him searching for her. But it would not have mattered had they met face to face. Lily was for ever emancipated from that dream. He could as soon have moved the church in the deep shadows of which the poor girl ventured to pause a little, leaning against the railings, as have persuaded or forced her back to the false shelter he had provided. However, he never came within sight of that shadowy little figure, which passed like a ghost, going close to the houses, brushing past the garden walls.

She was still going on in her circuit, her head more and more

confused, her thoughts more broken, all lucidity gone from her mind, nothing left but the mechanical power of movement and sense that she must go on, when suddenly a miracle was worked about and around the poor little wanderer. The day broke. She was so dazed with fatigue that she had not observed the preliminary phenomena of dawn. Things had got clearer round her, but she had taken no notice. She had been vaguely aware of the houses, with their windows all veiled with white blinds, like closed eyes, which somehow became more visible, as if looking coldly at her, wondering what she was doing there, when abruptly there came upon her through an opening, like a hand reaching out of heaven, the warmth and glory of a ray of sunshine. Lily, who all that awful night through had not uttered a sound, started as if some one had touched her, and gave a faint cry. The sun, the day! It was over, then, this horrible darkness and silence. She put her hand to her heart to which the ray, the dart, had gone. All at once the danger seemed over. It seemed to her that she now could sit down anywhere, which was the one sole, overpowering wish that remained in her—rest anywhere without being remarked. The policeman was no longer a thing to fear, nor any one, any one! Not that she had been afraid, but now that it was over she felt with reawakening faculties all the horror that had been in it,—now that it was day. She did not sit down, however, though the friendly steps at all those closed doors appeared to spread out like delightful places of refuge to receive her. One on which that ray of sunshine slanted was almost too tempting to be resisted. But courage came back to her with the light, and freedom and deliverance. It might be possible to ask for shelter somewhere, to look out wistfully again for that good woman, now the day had come. But though she felt this sudden relief in her soul, utter exhaustion made Lily like a creature in a dream, moving she could not tell how, drifting onward with little conscious impulse of her own. She remarked things round her, and felt the sensation of freedom, but always as in a dream. Presently she came to the edge of a large thoroughfare, and stood and gazed at it with a wonder that was half reverence and half fear. Lily knew enough to understand that this was not like the streets in which she had been wandering. The great shops all barricaded and barred, the wide pavements, the many lamps, some of them still burning ineffectually, with curious unnecessary light, in the full eye of day, showed her that this was one of the centres of life of which she had heard. She thought it was perhaps Regent Street or Piccadilly. To see it bereft of all life, silent, filled with light and the freshness of the

morning, produced in her mind some faint shadow of that emotion with which the poet saw the 'mighty heart' of the great city lying still, and the river flowing at its will. But that impression was faint, and the aspect of the deserted street chilled once more the innocent vagrant, half restored to life by the awakening touch of day. There was no one to help her, no one looking out to see what unhappy lost creature was in want of succour, no good woman. Oh, where was she, that good woman, who would take her by the hand, who would stand between her distracted youth and the terrible world?

She was too much worn out, however, to feel even this with any warmth. Standing still had rested her a little: she went on again, automatically, scarcely knowing why, because there was nothing else for her to do, along the whole vacant length of the empty street. An early workman or two, pipe in mouth, went past her, taking no notice. No one took any notice. The earliest houses began to wake, as she passed, a few blinds were drawn up, a housemaid appeared here and there at a door,—a girl who had slept all night, and risen to her work cheerful and rosy, whereas she! One or two of these looked curiously at her, she thought, as she went along. Was her walk unsteady? was her hair untidy? she wondered vaguely. What would they think? And what was she to do? What was she to do? Though she could neither feel nor think save by moments, something would rise in the morning air, and breathe across her with this question. What, what was she to do? As she went on, she suddenly became aware that the people whom she had begun mechanically to observe, appearing one by one from various sides, were all tending in one direction; and then a carriage or two came noisily along, disturbing the quiet, turning the same way. She looked up, and her heart gave a wild spring, then fell down again, down, down, into her bosom. It was the railway to which the people were all tending, and she with them,—the way home. How could she go home? Oh, home, home, to which she had meant to return triumphant on her husband's arm! Her husband—but who was he? She had no husband; and how could she go home? She must think, she must think; the time had come at last when she must think, and find out what she was to do. She went on with the little stream, following instinctively, as if the current had caught her. One lady went into the waiting-room, where Lily followed, still mechanically. She did not know why she should choose to follow that individual more than another; they were all blind leaders of the blind to the confused intelligence, now sinking into a sort of waking sleep.

But when she found herself sheltered by four walls and with a roof over her head, the long wretchedness of the night overwhelmed Lily. It seemed to have waited for her there to close around her, to stupefy all her faculties. She sank down upon a sofa, unconscious of the public place it was, knowing nothing except that here at last was shelter, and a place where she could lay her weary head.

XXIX

THE KNIGHT-ERRANT AND THE DETECTIVE

'YOUR Lily?' exclaimed Edmund, with an amazement so evident that the poor woman, who stood subduing herself, in a state of passionate excitement, yet keeping down her voice and her tears, half in eagerness to hear his reply, half in terror lest she should betray her distress to other ears than his, clasped her hands together in dismay, and burst into one momentary strangled cry. She had not doubted that he would know,—and he knew nothing. Her feverish hope, the hope which had seemed almost a certainty, fell in a moment and perished.

'Oh, sir,' she said, 'oh, Mr. Edmund, don't say that you don't know, for it's been all my hope!'

He took her by the hand gently, and led her to a chair. The interruption had made him angry at first; but the real and terrible suffering in her homely face, which was blanched out of all its usual ruddiness, the mouth trembling, the brows all puckered with trouble, touched Edmund's heart. 'Sit down,' he said, 'and compose yourself, and tell me what has happened. I know nothing about your daughter: what is it? If I can do anything to help you, I will.'

'Oh, Mr. Edmund!' cried the poor woman again; then she clasped her hands in her lap, and, leaning forward, her eyelids swollen and large with tears, said with impressive tragical simplicity, 'I have not seen my Lily since yesterday middle day,—not since yesterday middle day.'

'You have not seen her? I don't understand,' said Edmund. 'Do you mean that you have had a quarrel—that she has—— No, no, I know that can't be. She must have gone—to see some of your friends.'

'We have no friends, Mr. Edmund, as she'd wish to go and see. Oh, if I've been a foolish woman bringing her up as I have done, out of her own kind, oh, God forgive me, and that it may all

lie upon me! Mr. Edmund, she's got no friends for that reason, because she's a lady, is my Lily, and the rest are all just girls in the village. It never was no amusement to her, nor no pleasure, to go with them. No, no, she's not gone to no friends. There's only one thing I can think of to keep me from despair. Oh, Mr. Edmund, have pity upon me! Tell me as she has gone off with your brother, and I'll never say a word. I'll not suspect nor think no harm. Mr. Edmund, I have confidence in my Lily, and Mr. Roger, he's always acted proper and like a gentleman. Oh, Mr. Edmund, say as he's taken her away!'

'Why should he take her away? He has asked her to marry him, and he has told you of it, and my father knows; everybody is now prepared for the marriage. You may be sure it would never occur to my brother to do anything clandestine, anything secret. Why should he? He has suffered enough for her; there can be no need for any secret now.'

Edmund could scarcely restrain the indignation which rose in his mind as he spoke. Yes, Roger had suffered enough for her. To run away, after all, with this cottage girl was a supposition impossible, unworthy of him, ridiculous. Why had he borne all that he had done, if the matter was to come to such a solution at the end?

'I've said that to myself,' said poor Mrs. Ford. 'I've said it over and over: all as ever Mr. Roger has done or said, he's been the perfect gentleman all through. But,' she added, crushing her hands together, and raising to him her tearful face, 'if my Lily is not with him, where is she? for I have not seen her—I have not seen her'—her voice broke, choked with tears and unquenchable sobs—'me, that never let her out of my sight,—not since yesterday middle day. And there's her bed that no one's slept in, and her things all lying, and supper and breakfast never touched. And oh, where is she, *where* is she, Mr. Edmund, where's my Lily?' cried the poor mother, her painful self-control breaking down. She held up her hands to him in an agony of appeal. Her poor homely face was transfigured with love and anguish, with that aching and awful void in which every wretchedness is concentrated.

It was scarcely to be wondered at if in Edmund's mind there had sprung up at first a sort of impatient hope that here was a possibility of being rid of Lily, that troubler of everybody's peace. But he could not resist the misery in the poor woman's face. He sat down by her and soothed her as best he could, inquiring when and how the girl had disappeared and what the circumstances

were, if perhaps they might throw any light upon it. It was a curious and bewildering coincidence that she should have disappeared on the afternoon on which Roger had gone to town. Was it possible, his brother asked himself, that, weary of all that had taken place, scarcely happy even in the prospect of what was to come, Roger had snatched at the possibility of concluding the whole business without further fuss or fret, and persuaded her to trust herself to him? He thought it strange, very strange, that his brother should have dreamed of such an expedient; stranger still that Lily, no doubt elated by such a change in her fortunes, should have consented to it, and foregone her triumph. But still it was extraordinary that both these events should happen in one day, both in one afternoon, Roger's departure and Lily's disappearance. He could not refuse to see the probability of some connection between them. While he listened to Mrs. Ford's story, his mind went off into endeavours to reason it out, to convince himself that the possibility of such a rapid conclusion might have struck Roger as desirable. He interrupted her to ask if she had inquired at the station, if any one had seen Lily there. 'It must be known, some one must have seen her, if she went by that train. But of course you have inquired there.'

Mrs. Ford replied with a little scream of alarm.

'Ask, ask at the station!—as if I didn't know about my own child, as if she had gone away unbeknownst to me! I'd rather die! Oh, Mr. Edmund, don't go and do that; don't, for God's sake! Ask—about Lily!—as if she was lost, as if we didn't know where she was——' She seized him by the arm, in her terror, as if she feared he would begin his inquiries at once. 'Oh, Mr. Edmund, don't, don't, for the love of God!'

'If you do not inquire, how are you ever to know?' he asked, with impatience.

'I'd rather never know,' she replied. 'I'd rather spend my life in misery than expose my Lily. Whatever she's done, she's done it with a right heart: whatever happens, I know that. And rather than ask strangers about her, or let on as I don't know, I'd rather die. Don't you go and expose us, and make my girl the talk of the parish that doesn't know her—oh, that doesn't know what she is! Ford would have done it, never thinking; but he saw when I told him. Mr. Edmund,' she said, rising, with a kind of dignity in her despair, 'I came to you putting faith in you because of your brother. You haven't got no right to betray me, nor my Lily. If you go and expose my Lily——' She stopped with a gasp,—words would do no more,—but confronted the young

master, the gentleman to whom she had looked up as a superior being, with all the indignant grandeur of an angry queen.

'You need not fear for me,—I will betray no one,' said Edmund. 'And I think I understand you,' he added more quietly, 'but it is very unreasonable,—you must see it is unreasonable. How are we to find out if we make no inquiries? However, I understand you, and I will say no more. I don't know what to think about my brother. It was to avoid him that she left the house, and that she told you she was going to spend the day in the park; and she said you could tell him truly that she was far, far away? And yet you think—— I don't know what to think.'

'It's all true,—it's all true! Nor I don't know what to think.—But oh, my Lily, my Lily, where is she?' the mother cried, wringing her hands.

After a time Edmund succeeded in calming the poor woman, and persuaded her to go home, promising to follow her there, to meet her husband, and discuss with them both what was to be done. Appearances were so strongly against Roger that it was impossible for Edmund to stand aside and let the poor little rural tragedy go on to its appropriate, its conventional end. If Roger had anything to do with it, it would not have that conventional end. But it became harder and harder, as he thought all the circumstances over, to persuade himself that Roger could have taken such a strange step. He conducted Mrs. Ford downstairs through the billiard-room, which was the way in which she was least likely to be seen by the servants, and flattered himself that nobody save Larkins was any the wiser. Larkins was a person of discretion,—of too much discretion, indeed, for he had looked every inch the possessor of a family secret when he called Edmund out of his father's room to see Mrs. Ford, and there was a suspicious vacancy about the hall and corridors, as if the prudent butler had thought it necessary to clear every possible spectator away. The consciousness of something to conceal makes the apprehension unusually lively. In ordinary circumstances Edmund would have remarked neither Larkins's looks nor the vacancy of the house and passages. He was not, however, to be allowed long to congratulate himself upon this quiet. When he came out of the billiard-room, after Mrs. Ford's departure, he met Nina, her eyes dancing with curiosity and the keen delight of an inquirer who has got upon the scent of a new mystery.

'Oh, Edmund!' she said, breathless, too eager even to dissimulate the heat of her pursuit.

'What are you doing here?'

'Oh, nothing, Edmund, only looking. Was that Mrs. Ford, that woman going out this way?'

'What does it matter to you who it was, Nina? You had better go back to your own part of the house.'

'Oh, Edmund, I do so want to know. I want to ask you something. What is the matter? You and papa were shut up so long in the library, and then you and Mrs. Ford. Are you fond of Lily, *too?* Are you like all the rest?'

Edmund put his hand upon her arm, and led her to the drawing-room. It was only there, in the shelter of that wide and quiet space, that he trusted himself to turn round upon her. 'Nina,' he said severely, 'will you never be cured of this prying and listening?' And then, drawing his breath hard, 'Why do you put such a question to me? Do you know it is a great piece of impertinence? And what do you mean by "all the rest"?'

'Oh, Edmund, don't look so angry. I haven't done anything wrong; indeed, indeed, I wasn't listening! How could I,' said Nina, with indignation, 'when you know there are those horrid *portières* at the library door?'

Edmund, with a groan, threw himself into a chair; this little creature, with her odious insight and information, had him in her power.

'And, Edmund,' she went on, 'do you think it is possible not to want to know, when the whole house is turned upside down? Roger coming home on Monday, going away on Tuesday again, you in a great worry all the time, papa so angry and shut up in the library with Mr. Pouncefort,—there is always something wrong when Mr. Pouncefort is sent for, Simmons says,—and then Mrs. Ford taken to your sitting-room upstairs. If you think all that can happen, and only me not want to know!'

There was a certain reason in what she said which her brother could not dispute; and her words were full of mysterious suggestions. 'What do you mean,' he said again, 'by "all the rest"?'

'I would tell you if you would not be angry; but how can I tell you, Edmund, when you find fault with everything I say?'

He waved his hand in mingled impatience and apology. All the rest!—was it only the instinct of a gossip, or was there any light to come upon this dark problem from what Nina, with her servants'-hall information, really knew?

'Well, Roger is in love with her,' said Nina calmly; 'every one, both upstairs and downstairs, knows that. I did,' the little girl added, with a certain triumph, 'long ago.'

'Nina, you don't know how you vex me. You ought to be sent away, my poor little girl; you ought not to be left here——'

'To Geraldine's or Amy's! Oh yes, do ask papa to send me,' cried Nina, clapping her hands.

'But allowing that about Roger, which is no business of yours, Roger is only one, after all; what do you mean by "all the rest"?'

'Oh, I only said that when I thought that you, *too*—because of Mrs. Ford going up to your room, Edmund.'

'You have nothing to do with Mrs. Ford, nor with me either. What did you mean by "all the rest"?'

Nina hung her head a little. 'It isn't grammatical to say *all* when there are only two, is it?' she said; 'but supposing there *were* only two, Edmund, why, then they would be "all the rest"!'

'Who are the two? Who was the second, Nina?'

'Oh, Edmund, don't tell upon me! I don't mind for Roger. He might be angry, but he wouldn't scold me. And then they say he has told papa and everybody that he is going to marry Lily, so it would be no secret. But, Edmund, if you were to tell Steve——'

'Steve!'

'Well, of course,' said Nina, 'he is "all the rest"; who could it be else? I said you *too*, and there are only the three of you. I found out Steve all by myself. He used to go out every evening after dinner. I wondered very much,—how could I help it?—and then I found out what it meant.'

'Nina, this is too dreadful; you are no better than a little spy. You found it out, you went after him, you followed him—where? To the lodge?'

Nina had been nodding vigorously during the course of these interrogations; but when he came to the last she changed the movement, and shook her head with all its innocent curls, instead of nodding it. 'Oh no, no!' she said, 'he never went near the lodge; she met him in the park. They had a post-office, a place where they put their letters, in a hollow tree; I could show it to you, Edmund. And I will tell you another thing,' cried the girl, forgetting all possibility of reproof in the delight of having such a wonderful tale to tell. 'Some one saw Lily Ford at Molton Junction yesterday. She went to the office and sent off a telegraph,—oh, I know that's not the right word, but you know what I mean,—she sent off a telegraph from Molton Junction. It is a long walk to Molton Junction. If it had been right to do it, she would have sent it from our own station. I don't know what it was,' said Nina regretfully, 'but I am sure she must have intended that nobody should know.'

'At Molton Junction!' Edmund forgot to chide the little collector of news, whose eyes were dancing with satisfaction and triumph, as she brought out one detail after another. She enjoyed her own narrative thoroughly, without observing its effect upon him. He had grown very grave, his face was overcast, his brows were knitted over his eyes, which looked away into vacancy as if seeing something there that appalled him. 'And what then? What did she do then?' he asked sharply, turning round. Nina was taken by surprise at this sudden change of tone.

'I don't know; I did not hear any more. I suppose she must have walked home again. And fancy going all that way only to send a telegraph, when you have a station so near your own door?'

'Then she went only to send the telegram; and came back again?'

'I suppose so,' said Nina, with a sudden sense that her evidence, though so full of interest that at last it had silenced Edmund, was on this point defective. She had all the instincts of a detective, and perceived her failure, and saw in a moment that her brother had expected more. But Edmund asked no further questions. His mind was indeed so distracted by this new light as for the moment to be almost paralysed. And yet there was nothing impossible nor even unlikely in it. But if the solution of the problem was to be found in Nina's story, what was he to say to the miserable father and mother? The new character thus introduced was very different from him whom they suspected; and Stephen's actions could not be calculated on, like Roger's. If Lily had fallen into his hands, Heaven help her! for she was very little likely to escape. It was not, however, of Lily that he thought; if he considered her at all, it was with an impatient feeling that, whatever happened, she would have but herself to thank for it, which was not just. Even Ford and his wife, though Edmund's heart ached to think of them, held a secondary place in his thoughts. But Roger! This was what struck him dumb with dismay. How was he to tell Roger that the girl he had loved had fled from her father's house, and in all probability with his brother? And the Squire, who for this unhappy girl's sake had disinherited Roger, and was putting Stephen's name in the place of that of his eldest son! What could be more terrible than that irony of fate?

XXX

CARRYING EVIL TIDINGS

EDMUND found Ford the gamekeeper, with red eyes, strained by watching and misery, waiting for him as he approached the lodge; and Mrs. Ford came out from her door to meet them as they neared the house. The sight of these two unhappy people gazing at him with a wistful hope, as if he could do something, went to Edmund's heart. Their house loomed vacant and miserable, with all the doors open, an empty place behind them, while they stood on either side of their visitor, and with appealing faces mutely implored him to help them. For neither of them could say much. 'Oh, Mr. Edmund!' Mrs. Ford cried from time to time, while her husband stood crushing his hat in his hands, starting at every little sound, with his bloodshot eyes fixed upon the young master. Ford's misery was more pitiful to see than his wife's was. He had less command of words, and could not calm himself either by renewed statements of the case or tears, as she could; and perhaps the grosser dangers were more present to his mind, and he had less confidence in Lily's power of controlling circumstances. All that he could do to relieve the anguish of his soul was to turn and twist his hat out of all shape in those strong moist hands, with which he would have wrung the neck, if he could, of the man who had beguiled away his Lily: but Ford was not capable of uttering her name.

Edmund's attempt to question the anxious pair as to whether Lily had known any one who could have tempted her away, whether there was any lover, even any acquaintance whom she could have made without their knowledge, produced nothing but eager contradictions from Mrs. Ford, and a look of fury in her husband's face which warned Edmund that the man was nearly beyond his own control, and might almost be tempted to spring upon him, Edmund, in lieu of any other victim. 'Who could she ever see? Who entered our doors but Mr. Roger? And not him

with my will,' said Mrs. Ford,—'oh, not with my will! I would have shut the door upon him, if I could. But never another came near the place,—never another! And she wasn't one to talk or to bandy words: oh, never anything of that sort! She was as retired, as quiet, never putting herself forward, never letting any man think as she was to be spoken to different from a lady——'

Ford made a wild movement, as if he would have struck his wife. 'Will you stop that?' he said hoarsely, the blood mounting into his brown, weather-beaten countenance: and then she began to cry, poor soul, while he kneaded his hat with restless hands, and looked straight before him into the vacancy of the park, his eyes red and lowering with excess of wretchedness and sleeplessness and misery. He could not speak nor hear her speak; he was impatient of any touch upon his wounds; and yet, in the helplessness of his ignorance, incapable of doing anything in his own person, he turned his piteous gaze again, with dumb expectation, on Edmund, who assuredly could do something, he knew not what, to help to clear up this misery, to find Lily if found she could be.

'Mrs. Ford,' said Edmund, 'if you are right, she is as safe as if she were here in your own care. My brother Roger asked her from you as his wife.'

'Oh, Mr. Edmund!' cried Mrs. Ford, wringing her hands.

'She is as safe as in your own house,' said Edmund, stopping with a gesture the story on her lips. 'If she is with him, all is well. Ford, you know him; you know that what I say is true.'

The man looked at him wildly, crushing his hat into a pulp in his fierce grasp. 'I don't know nothing,' he suddenly burst forth, with a kind of roar of anguish,—'nothing but that I'll wring his damned neck with these hands!'

'Ford, oh, Ford!'

'I'll wring his damned neck, master or no master, if he's harmed my girl!' said the man, with his hoarse roar, pushing his wife away with his elbow. Then he turned to Edmund with the pathetic eyes of a dog, a helpless dumb creature asking for help. 'Do something for us, Mr. Edmund,' he said.

'I will, I will, if I can,' Edmund cried. They stood on each side of him, their eyes, appealing, going to his very heart. What was he to do? He knew, though they did not, how vain it was. If she were with Roger, then no harm could come to her. But Stephen!—how could he suggest to them that horrible danger, that misery in which there was no hope?

Edmund went to London by the night train. He arrived very early in the gray of the morning, before it was possible to see any

one, even his brother. He went to the hotel near the station, and loitered through those slow, still morning hours, when nothing can be done, which are perhaps more dreadful in their monotony than any others. He was too much excited to sleep, and the brightness of the morning was appalling and merciless; softening nothing, showing everything terribly distinct and clear. To go to Roger and seek Lily there appeared to him more futile than even he had felt it to be at first. Lily there! Could anything be more impossible? That Roger should expose his wife that was to be to the faintest remark, that he should subject her to any misconstruction, that he could even have supposed it within the bounds of possibility that Lily would consent to go with him, Edmund now knew was preposterous. He had known it all along, but from pure pity of the misery of the family he had allowed himself to think that perhaps for once the impossible might have happened. He now felt that it could not be so. But on the other side, if Nina was right! The Mitfords had no delusions in respect to each other; at least there was none so far as regarded Stephen. Stephen was the member of the household whose course of action had always been most certain to the others. He would do what was for his own pleasure and his own interest. He professed no other creed. What he liked, what suited him, was what he did: and if he chose to gather that humble flower, what was it to any one? He would do it without any after-thought. Was it not only too possible that he had corrupted Lily even before she left her father's house? Edmund set his teeth, with something of the feeling, though the culprit was his brother, which had made poor Ford in his passion crush the hat which was in his hands. 'I would wring his damned neck!' Edmund, with a passion of indignation and righteous wrath in his heart, felt that he too could do the same. And how could he hold back the miserable father, whatever he did in his anguish? If Stephen had not corrupted her, then he had betrayed her. Poor Lily! Poor flower of folly,-trained to her destruction! He thought with a kind of rage of all concerned, from his own mother, who had begun that fatal career, to the fond, deluded parents, who had put their pride in their daughter and brought her up a lady. A lady, and the gamekeeper's daughter,—too good for her own people, not good enough for the others, destined to trouble from her cradle, devoted to misery and shame! Poor Lily, it was no fault of hers. It was not by her will that she had been separated from the honest rustic lover who would have made her father's daughter a good husband, had it been left to nature. The gardener, with his

little learning, his superior pretensions, his pleasant house and work,—how happy Ford's daughter might have been in such a simple possible promotion! Whereas now, the ruin of one brother or the prey of another,—was this all her harmless vanity, her foolish training, her fatal beauty, had brought her? To bloom like a flower, and to be thrown away like one, and perish, trodden underfoot. Edmund's heart was sore with these thoughts. He had come to help, but how could he help? Could he take her back to these poor people, stained and shamed, her glory and her sweetness gone? Would she go with him, even, abandoning the delight of a life of gaiety and noise and so-called pleasure, to return to the wretchedness of the home she had left and the name she had covered with shame? Poor Lily, poor Lily! His heart bled for her, the victim of the folly of so many others more than of her own.

As soon as it was possible to do so, he went to Roger's chambers, which he had always shared, and in which, now that the day was fully astir and awake, he had his own room to retire to, to prepare himself for an interview which he dreaded more and more as it approached. Though half a day seemed to have passed since Edmund's arrival, it was still early, and Roger was not yet visible. His letters were on the breakfast-table ready for him, one in Mr. Mitford's well-known hand, which Edmund perceived with a sensation of impatience almost insupportable; thinking of Stephen promoted to Roger's place, of Stephen guilty and cruel in the place of his honourable and innocent brother, and of the unhappy girl who stood between them, for whom Roger was suffering without blame, and upon whose ruin Stephen would stand triumphant. Could such things be? It was all he could do to restrain himself, not to seize upon his father's letter and tear it into a thousand pieces; but what would it matter? His father, Edmund knew in his heart, would forgive Stephen's fault, but not Roger's. It made no difference. Lily destroyed would not stand in the younger brother's way, while Lily honoured and beloved would ruin Roger. It was horrible, but it was true.

When Roger appeared, he came up to Edmund almost with enthusiasm, with a sparkle of pleasure in his eyes. 'I thought, somehow, I should see you soon,' he said; 'it seemed natural you should come after the one who was down on his luck,' and he grasped his brother's hand with an unusual effusion. Though this was all that was said, they were both a little moved,—Edmund, as he felt, with better reason, for how he was to make known his trouble now he could not tell. The moment he saw Roger, all

doubt of him disappeared from his mind. To have asked him where Lily was, or if he knew anything of her, would have been an insult. He had felt this with waverings from the first, but he had no wavering on the subject now. Roger, too, had a great deal of excitement about him, which took the form of elation, and even gaiety: smiles danced in his eyes; he laughed, as he spoke, for nothing, for mere pleasure. 'I hope you got my letter,' he said; 'but you could not, I fear, since you must have started last night.'

'I got no letter. I was—anxious to see you—to know—— I suppose you have been arranging things?'

'So well that I don't understand how I can have been so successful the first try. I had made up my mind to everything that was discouraging. You know, people say that when you want anything very much, that is precisely the time when you don't get it. But I've had a different experience. I went to see Hampton yesterday. I thought he was the man, if there was anything to be had: but you'll never believe what he's going to do. They're coming into office, you know. The excellent fellow offered me the post of his private secretary. What do you think, Ned,—private secretary to a cabinet minister, the very first try one makes!'

'I am very glad, Roger; but it will be hard work, and you're not used to that.'

'Work! what does that matter? I shall delight in it, and there is no telling what it may lead to. I never thought I should fall into public life in this way; but I have always had a fancy for it, one time or other, don't you know?'

Edmund did not know; indeed he thought he knew the reverse, and that his brother had aimed at a life untrammelled by any such confinement. But he did not say so. 'It is a capital beginning,' he said.

'I should think it was! I never hoped for anything of the kind: but I have a feeling,' said Roger, with again a little joyous laugh, 'that my luck is going to turn, Ned. I've had a good long spell of bad; I have some good owing me, and I feel that it's coming. Why don't you say something, you sulky fellow? I believe you're not half pleased.'

'I am pleased, as long as it pleases you. It is not the life I should have planned for you, but if you think you will like it——'

'Think! I don't think, I know: it will give me occupation and something serious to think of. A man wants that when he settles down. I wrote to Lily, too,' he said, his voice softening, 'putting everything before her.'

And then there was a blank silence for a moment, one of those pauses full of meaning, upon which the most unsuspecting can scarcely deceive themselves. Edmund did not so much as look at his brother, whom he was about to strike with so cruel a blow.

'Well,' Roger said, after a moment, 'speak out; what have you got to say? I know there is something. Let me have it without more ado.'

'It is not so easy to speak out,' returned Edmund.

'Why, Ned! You forget that I know it already. My father has done what he threatened. He has put me out of the succession. Do you think I did not know he would keep his word? And you have got it, old fellow,' said Roger, putting out his hand, 'and I am quite satisfied. I wish you had got my letter. What England expects of you now is that you should marry Elizabeth, and live happy ever after. Did you think I should grudge it to you, Ned?'

Edmund listened to all this with a perfectly blank face. It sounded in his ears like something flat and fictitious, without interest, without meaning. He grasped the hand which his brother held out to him across the corner of the table, and held it fast. It seemed as if that little speech which Roger made him would never be done. Edmund held the hand after Roger's voice ceased, and again there was another pause. Then Edmund heard his own voice say, as if it were some one else speaking, 'When did you last see Lily Ford?'

'See Lily?' Roger looked at him with wondering eyes. Then he said with a little impatience, 'I have not seen her since the night before I left home. You know that. She would not see me, for some reason or other, a panic about her father; but I have written, I have set everything before her—— Ned, what is it? What do you mean?'

'She did not—come with you to London?'

'Ned! What do you mean? Have you taken leave of your senses? Come with me to London, the girl who is to be my wife?'

'I told them so,' said Edmund. He could not lift his eyes and look Roger in the face.

'You told them so? Edmund,' said Roger, laying his hand upon his brother's arm, 'you have something to tell me, something you are afraid to say. For Heaven's sake, out with it! What is it? Something that I do not expect?'

'Roger,' said his brother, faltering, 'Roger, Lily Ford disappeared from her home the day you left. They do not know where she is, nor what has become of her. They thought she might have come to London with you. I told them that was impossible. They are heart-broken; they don't know where she is.'

Roger received this blow full in his breast. He had not feared anything, he had no preparation for it. It came upon him like the fire of a shooting party, when a man is condemned to die. The solid earth swam round him. He heard the hesitating words come one by one, singing through the air like bullets; and yet he did not know even now what it meant.

XXXI

THREE BROTHERS

In the end, however, this dreadful news, which Edmund had thought would kill his brother, had little or no effect upon him. The idea that Lily had in any way compromised herself, that anything disgraceful could be involved, or that there was wrong in it, was one which Roger was incapable of receiving. He was stunned for the moment by the mere wonder, but recovered himself almost immediately. 'And she left no letter, gave them no clue?' he said gravely enough, yet with a smile breaking through beneath the seriousness of his lips.

'None, whatever,' replied Edmund, watching his brother keenly, with the strangest new suspicions and doubts springing up in his mind.

Roger said nothing for a minute or two; and then, shaking his head, 'What unreasoning creatures women are, the best of them! Do you think she could suppose it possible that I would be shaken off like that?'

'Shaken off—like what?'

'I don't know what is the matter with you, Ned: you look as if you were in great trouble about something. Not about this, I hope. Don't you see it is as clear as daylight? She is frightened of me, poor darling. She thinks her father will lose his place, and his home, and all his comforts. It is just like a girl's inconsequent way. If she removes herself out of the question, she thinks all will be well. No doubt she is hiding somewhere, with her poor little heart beating, wondering if we will really let her get lost and sacrifice herself. My poor, little, silly, sweet Lily! She has read too many novels, no doubt: she thinks that's the best way,—to make a sacrifice of herself.'

Edmund looked with a certain awe at his brother's face, lit up with the tenderest smile. Roger was not thinking of any danger to her, nor of how other people were affected, nor of anything but

the romantic, generous girl, following, perhaps, some example in a novel, as little reasonable as any heroine of romance. And was not she a heroine of romance, the true romance which never fails or is out of fashion,—and was not this unreason the most exquisite thing in the world? He did not observe that his brother made no answer; that Edmund gave him one wondering glance only, and then averted his eyes. Roger required no answer; his mind was altogether absorbed in this intelligence, which he received in so different a way from that which his brother feared.

'We mustn't leave her too long in that thought,' said Roger cheerfully. 'It's curious how sweet that want of reason is,—don't you think so? No, you're too matter of fact, Ned; and besides, you have not fallen under the spell. What do they think? Or rather, where do they think she can have taken refuge,—with some old aunt, or old friend, or something? They must have made some guess.'

'I don't think so. They thought, and they almost persuaded me to think, that you had brought her here with you.'

'I bring her here with me!'

'I knew, of course, it was absurd,' said Edmund, averting his eyes.

'There is a kind of unreason that is not sweet,' said Roger quickly. 'What did they suppose I could have done that for? And it was so likely she would have come with me, her only half-accepted—when it is evident it's to escape me, to sacrifice herself, that she's gone away.' He got up, and began to pace about the room. 'This becomes a little disagreeable,' he said. 'With me! What a strange idea! The most sensitive, delicate—why, you might almost say prudish—— And why, in the name of all that's ridiculous, could I have wished her to come with me?'

'That is what I felt,' Edmund said, but still with averted eyes.

'Ah, Ned,' said Roger, 'that's the worst of it. These good, honest people! things that would horrify us seem natural to them. They would see nothing out of the question in such an impossible proceeding,—to show her London, perhaps, or consult her about our future arrangements?' He laughed, with a faint awakening of uneasiness. 'And all the time she is in some nook in the country, some old woman's cottage, thinking how clever she has been to hide herself from everybody, but yet perhaps wondering—— I wonder if she is wondering whether I am no more good than that, whether I will let her go——' He paused a little, his voice melting into the softness of a mother with her child; then he said quickly, 'We must get at once the directions of all the old aunts.'

'They have no directions to give,' observed Edmund in a low tone; 'there seems to be no one they can think of. And the strange thing is that she appears to have come to London the day before yesterday, in the same train with you, Roger,—from Molton Junction, so far as I can make out, where it seems she sent off a telegram, having walked there.'

'This is more mysterious than ever,' said Roger, growing red under his eyes, 'but also more natural than ever. Of course she must have telegraphed to the house she was going to. Of course London is the way to everywhere; or she might even have a friend in town. Of course they must know of some one. You don't mean to say that they have no relations, no friends, out of Melcombe? Come, Edmund,' he said, giving his brother a sudden sharp pat on the shoulder, 'wake yourself up! We must find our way out of this; we are not going to be outgeneraled by a simple girl. How strange,' he continued, after a moment, 'that I didn't see her! Now I think of it, I did see some one in the crowd at Molton who reminded me—— To be sure—— I said to myself, if I did not know she was safe at home—— And, after all, I never thought of looking when we got to Paddington. By the way——'

'What, Roger?'

'It has just occurred to me. I saw Stephen at the station; he was going to meet one of the men of his regiment. He may have seen her. I suppose he knows her,—by sight, at least?'

'Most probably,' answered Edmund, scarcely knowing how to command his voice.

'And no one could see her without remarking her. Steve may have noticed, Ned; he may have seen whether any one met her, or what way she went. The moment I have swallowed my coffee (which had in the meantime grown cold on the table, and which was the only part of an ample breakfast which Roger seemed inclined to touch), 'I'll go and look him up.'

'Let me go,' Edmund suggested. 'I am ready now; and it will be easier for me, who have no special interest, to make inquiries than for you.'

'No special interest,' said Roger, with an unsteady laugh. 'If it didn't happen to be my brother Ned's way to think of everybody's interests before his own——'

'Because I have none in particular, you see,' returned Edmund, waving his hand as he hurried away. He was too glad to find himself outside Roger's door, and under no further necessity to veil the changes of his countenance. It had gone to his heart like a sudden arrow to hear that Stephen had been seen at the station

going to meet some one. Whom was he going to meet, and what would he say, and how reply to the questions that must be forced upon him? Edmund had no faith in Stephen's reply. He had no faith in him in any way, nor any hope of satisfaction from him. If only he could keep Roger from suspecting, and prevent any meeting from which enlightenment could come!

Stephen was not to be found at his club, though it was known there that he was in town. He was not to be found at the rooms where he generally lived when in London. The people there knew nothing of Captain Mitford's whereabouts; they did not believe he was in town; they had seen nothing of him; from which Edmund drew the conclusion, which was far from reassuring, that Stephen had established himself somewhere else. He went back to the club a second time, after seeking his brother in every other quarter he could think of, and was again disappointed. But as he turned away from the door, sadly cast down, and feeling himself baffled at every turn, he met Stephen coming along Piccadilly, in all the splendour of his town clothes, with that additional exquisite neatness of detail which the military element gives. Stephen was very triumphant to behold, in his strength and fulness of life: his hair exuberant in a hundred curls, his step spurning the pavement, his whole appearance the perfection of health and cleanness and superlative polish and care. Another man, equally splendid, brushed, and shaven, and smoothed into perfection, walked with him, and Edmund, in his country habiliments and with his anxious mind, felt himself a shabby shadow beside those dazzling specimens of their kind. His brother was passing him, with two fingers extended to be shaken, and a 'Hallo, Ned!' when Edmund came to a stand before him, and compelled him to pause. Stephen's companion paused, too, with momentary suspicion, then passed along, saying something under his moustache of seeing him again at the club. They were quite near the club, and Edmund read in Stephen's face the contrariety of being so near shelter and yet caught. For he saw in a moment that the splendour of his brother's appearance was but outside, and that his face was not as radiant as his clothes.

'Well,' cried Stephen, 'I thought you had gone home, Ned. It seems to me you are getting as bad as the worst of us, always about town.'

'I have come up on special business,' said Edmund, and he thought the splendid Stephen winced a little, as if he might have a suspicion what that business was.

'Really! So have I,—with that fellow that left us just now;

he's gone to wait for me at the club. I owe him a trifle. I'll see you another time.'

'My business is very much with you,' replied Edmund, 'but I'll walk with you. I need not detain you.'

'Oh, about the will,' said his brother with a laugh. 'I heard from the governor to-day. It's all right, old fellow. I'll take it like a shot; I've no delicacy. If Roger and you choose to be a couple of fools, what does that matter to me?'

'There is something else which matters, though,' answered Edmund sternly. 'You know why Roger is out of it. So far as I can hear, the same reason stands against you.'

'What!' said Stephen, 'that I am going to marry? Not a bit of it. Not such a fool, thank you. I've no more thought of marrying than you have, and little inclination that way.' His colour heightened, however, and his breath quickened, and he did not meet Edmund's eye.

'It is not marriage; it is—Lily Ford.'

'Well,' cried his brother, turning upon him sharply, 'what of her? The little damned jilt; the ——' He paused, with an evident sense of having committed himself, and added angrily, 'What the devil has she got to do with me?'

'Much; for she belongs to our immediate surroundings, and my father will never put up with an injury to a person who is really one of his household. She must be restored to her family at once.'

'Restored!' exclaimed Stephen with a harsh laugh. 'You speak at your ease, my friend Ned. You must have a thing before you can restore it. I've had nothing to say to the lady, and therefore I can't give her back.'

'We had better go somewhere where we can talk with more safety. These are not subjects for the club or Piccadilly.'

'Piccadilly has heard as much as most places, and so has the club; and I don't know what there is to talk about.'

'Stephen, where is Lily Ford?'

Stephen swore a big oath under his breath. 'What have I to do with Lily Ford? If you are trying to put blame upon me, mind what you are about, Ned; I'm not a safe man to meddle with. If you mean to spoil my luck with got-up stories ——'

'She came to London on Tuesday night,' interrupted Edmund, abstractly, as if he were summing up evidence, 'and you met her at the station. Where is she now? If you will tell me that, I will ask you no further questions.'

'Who told you I met her at the station? You are making up ables against me.'

'Stephen, where is Lily Ford?'

It was in Piccadilly, with all the people passing; impossible to make any scene there, had life and death been in it. Edmund's voice was low, but Stephen had no habit of subduing his tones or controlling himself, and he was already excited. The fury of a man baffled, disappointed, tricked,—for so he thought it,—whose victim had turned the tables on him, and placed him in the position of a fool instead of that of a scoundrel, raged within him, and it was a relief to vent it upon some one. He griped his brother's arm with a sudden force which took Edmund by surprise and made him stagger, and he swore again by the highest name. 'By——! I don't know. And if I did I shouldn't tell you. I'll break the head of any man who asks me such a question again. Stand out of the way!'

Edmund's arm was raised instinctively to resist the push aside which his brother gave him, as Stephen released him from his grasp. But already the altercation had caught the eyes of two or three passers-by, and Edmund had an Englishman's dread of exposure and horror of making an exhibition of himself. He stepped back, answering only with a look the insolent gaze which Stephen fixed upon him, and in which there was an uneasy inquiry, an alarm which neutralised the defiance. It was not a light matter to submit to such rough treatment, but a quarrel in the open street, and above all in Piccadilly, was the last thing in the world to be thought of, as Stephen, cowardly in his audacious selfishness, well knew. Edmund let his brother brush past, and after a moment turned back in the other direction, silent while his heart burned. Stephen was fully aware that Edmund would make no public quarrel, and took advantage of it, as bullies do.

Edmund had said more than he was sure of, without premeditation, in the haste and heat of his first address to his brother. 'You met her at the station.' He had not been aware that he meant to say this until he heard himself saying it. But he had no doubt now that Stephen was guilty; the very absence of all hesitation in his response, his instant comprehension of the question, made it apparent that Stephen had nothing to learn in respect to Lily's flight. And God help the unfortunate girl if she were in his ruthless hands! God help the miserable parents, to whom Edmund could not have a word of comfort to say!

His heart was very heavy as he went along amid the stream of people flowing towards the park. It was afternoon by this time, and the carriages had begun to follow each other in a long line Everything looked bright and gay, with that impression of endless

prosperity, wealth, ease, and luxury which few other scenes convey to a similar degree. No doubt, among that luxurious crowd there was no lack of sad histories, aching hearts, unhappy parents, and ruined children; but the glitter and splendour seemed to carry the misery of his thoughts deeper into his heart.

Until all at once he woke to a terror near to himself, a danger which touched him more than anything that had happened, or could happen, to Lily Ford.

XXXII

STEPHEN'S ANSWER

THIS terror which seized Edmund did not come upon him for the first time; he had already perceived the supreme danger of making known his suspicions of Stephen to Roger; but there had been enough in the inquisition which was forced into his hands, and the question whether or not Stephen were really guilty, to distract his thoughts. Now, however, that he must carry back to Roger Stephen's disavowal, a disavowal which could, he said to himself, convince nobody, and which was of something quite different from the simple question which Roger had intended to put, a real panic seized upon him. Lily's disappearance was not an event which could be forgotten. It was not a thing of the moment, which could pass out of recollection, with all its attendant circumstances, when its novelty was exhausted. Had it been the father and mother alone, poor, helpless, miserable people, they might have been silenced somehow, and the cause of this misfortune concealed. But Roger would leave no stone unturned; he would resolutely clear up the mystery, and seek the girl whom he had loved, so bitterly to his own cost, until at least he had found that the Lily of his dreams was lost for ever. Edmund shuddered to think what would befall his brother when he made this discovery; but more terrible still was the thought of what would happen when, in that search, Roger was brought face to face with the man who bore his own name, his father's son, his own flesh and blood.

In a state of distraction, the third of the sons of Melcombe, he who must stand between the two thus made deadly enemies, divided by a wrong which could never be forgotten or forgiven, dwelt upon this inevitable discovery, and hurrying through the streets, unconscious of the crowd, turned over and over in his confused mind every expedient by which it could be averted. A thousand schemes passed wildly before him, only to be rejected. He laughed within himself at the futile suggestion that Roger might be per-

suaded to go away, to withdraw from the scene of his loss, that first thought which occurs to every Englishman in trouble. It was not so long since he had himself hurried his brother over the *banal* road into the commonplace resorts of weariness and wretchedness. That was not to be done again; and on what pretence, till Lily was proved unworthy, could Roger be driven from the new life he had planned? And how was Lily to be accounted for without the unveiling of that most horrible complication of all, and the revelation of the destroyer of Roger's hopes and dreams in his brother?

Edmund felt himself paralysed by this terror, which he saw no way of escaping. He was as helpless as he was panic-stricken, and wandered about for the rest of the day, with no aim but to keep out of Roger's way, and no power to originate any expedient by which he might stave off the danger.

At last the moment came which could not have been long avoided. He met Roger at the end of the street in which their rooms were, about the hour of dinner, and for a moment hoped that he was going out to fill some engagement, and that there might still be a breathing time.

Roger had just come out, dressed for dinner, with a light overcoat over his evening clothes; and it seemed to Edmund, who was still in his country suit, not fit for London, and sadly worn out and wretched, that the mere fact of his careful dress showed that his brother had shaken off the impression of the bad news. But when he saw more distinctly, by the uncertain evening light, Roger's face, white and rigid, with the upper lip closed down upon the lower, as if made of iron, he was quickly undeceived. As soon as they met, Roger put his arm within Edmund's, and turned him round in the direction in which he was himself going, with that ignoring of his brother's inclinations, even of his weariness and bodily needs, which is in some cases the highest compliment one man can pay to another.

'Ned,' he began, without any preface, 'the more I think of it, the more wretched it makes me. Was she a girl to disappear like that, leaving her people in anxiety? Besides, what motive was there for any such mystery? She might have let them know somehow,—she must have done so. Ned, my Lily has been spirited away!'

Edmund was taken by surprise. 'No, no—who would do that?' he asked, bewildered by the suggestion.

'Who? Any one. Some madman who had seen her. We think we have outlived such things, but we haven't, Ned. Passion

is as mad as ever it was. Or even to get her out of my way, my father——'

'Impossible! Such a thing would never enter his mind!'

'There is nothing impossible!' returned Roger, with nervous heat, 'except that my Lily should go—should consent——' The deep murmur of his voice ceased in something inarticulate, a note of such immeasurable pain, of horrible doubt hidden under words of certainty, that Edmund felt all his fears realised. Then Roger gave himself a shake, as if to get rid of some nightmare, and asked, with an air of sudden awakening, 'Did Stephen see her? Did he notice anything—which way she went?'

'No, he noticed nothing.'

Something in Edmund's tone made Roger look at him keenly. 'He must have seen her. I could bring it to his recollection,—the night we met and the circumstances, which of course you did not know.'

'Don't, Roger, for Heaven's sake! Why should you ask him again? Don't you believe me? He knows nothing. Don't let us bring in any one more.'

'There is something in that,' said Roger, with momentary acquiescence; then, after a pause, he asked, 'Did he know her—at all?'

'I can't tell you,' replied Edmund hastily, feeling that the intolerableness of the situation began to affect his nerves and temper. 'I suppose he must have known her by sight; I don't know. What is the use of bringing him into it? He can tell us nothing.'

Roger looked at his brother with a dawning suspicion in his eyes. 'I don't think you are just to Stephen,' he remarked. 'I am going to see for myself.'

'Roger,' said Edmund, making use, like a woman, of the weariness and exhaustion which he felt,—though, like a woman, he could have disguised and suppressed them, had not the other way afforded a possibility of deliverance,—'I wish you could come with me first, and get me some dinner. I am fairly worn out. It has not been a good time for me, these last few days, and I have been wandering about from one place to another——'

'How selfish I am,' interrupted Roger, 'forgetting all you have been doing, and even to ask you—Come along, Ned; we'll get something at the club.'

The penalty of this expedient was, that Edmund had to eat a prolonged dinner, which he needed, indeed, but for which he had no appetite, and which he allowed to linger on, through course

after course, while Roger sat opposite to him, eating nervously a piece of bread, drinking the wine that was poured out for him without even observing what it was, sending away dish after dish with a half shudder of disgust, and with the wonder of a preoccupied mind that his brother should be capable of dining in so prolonged a way at such a moment. Edmund had to pay this penalty, and accepted it with what fortitude he could. He calculated, while he sat having everything handed to him, that by this time, probably, Stephen was disposed of for the evening; dining out, perhaps; or, which was more likely,—the horrible thought obtruded itself, even though it was so essential that he should give Roger no clue to the nature of his thoughts,—that Stephen might be at this moment by the side of the deceived and lost creature to whom Roger, with his white face of anxiety, was still holding loyally as his bride.

'Now,' said Roger with a faint smile, 'if you are satisfied, Ned, don't you think we might go?'

If he were satisfied! He tried to laugh too, and answered, 'I had eaten nothing all day. Don't you think it is a little too late now?'

'I think—— You shall go home and go to bed, Ned. You're worn out; and it cannot have the same overwhelming interest for you as for me,—though you're very good,' said Roger. It was Edmund's *rôle* to have good intentions attributed to him. He took care not even to smile, not to groan, as he got up from the table at which he had been working so hard to make the meeting he dreaded impossible.

'No,' he answered, 'I'm not going to bed. I'm going with you, Roger, wherever you go,—provided it is not among any of your fine friends, in this garb.'

'My fine friends!' exclaimed Roger with indignant astonishment. 'Can you suppose me capable of going anywhere—anywhere! I thought you knew better what this is to me. Do you know what it is? It is life or death! If anything has happened to *her*—— My God!'

The most tragic scenes, the most tragic words, are often mixed up in our strange life with the most petty and common, and desperate appeals to the last Arbiter of all things rise out of the depths of wretched hearts over the broken meats of a disordered table. There is something more heart-rending in them, under such circumstances, than when there is no jar of the ignoble matters of every day in the despair and passion. Roger standing over the table at which his brother had dined, in his correct

evening dress, with his miserable face; the brown bread which he had been crumbling to pieces before him; his overcoat, which he had not cared to take off, hanging open; the background of cheerful parties dining; the murmur of cheerful talk around, made such a combination as would have smitten the hardest heart. He had come to that, that he had begun to acknowledge the possibility of something having happened to Lily; something which could not but be disastrous, horrible; something which might make an end of that which no other power on earth could have ended, for which he had been prepared to sacrifice everything that could be called life. There was a tremor in him which was visible, even though he was nervously erect and steady, in the outline of his figure,—a faint, nervous trick of movement which he could not restrain, and of which, indeed, he was unconscious. He put his hand hastily upon Edmund's arm, as they went out together. It was dry and burning, and he did not see the step at the door, and stumbled as they went out into the noise and bustle of the street.

Provided only that Stephen might not be found when they sought him at his club!—for happily they could not seek him elsewhere. Edmund estimated the chances hurriedly, as they went along, and felt them to be all in his favour. If Lily were somewhere in London awaiting her lover, it was not possible that Stephen should spend the evening at his club. But Edmund was too anxious and too unhappy to take the comfort out of this which he felt to be justified; for every one knows how perverse circumstances are, and how a chance which would have no importance on another occasion will often detain a man, when his detention for that uncalculated moment means a catastrophe. So inscrutable, so little to be reckoned upon, is this strange life, which seems the sport of accidents, which is at least so little in our hands to arrange or settle! These thoughts went through Edmund's mind in a confused torrent, as he walked with Roger to Stephen's club, once more along that crowded pavement of Piccadilly, where so many men like themselves were hurrying on to all manner of engagements, and close to which so many carriages, coming and going, conveyed the fairest and the brightest and the most distinguished from one scene of pleasure to another,—of pleasure woven with so many threads of suffering, of festivity, and of tragedy. When the mind is full of distress and anxiety, such ideas come naturally. It is perhaps a little aid in bearing our own burdens to think how others are weighed down, and how little any one can know from the exterior.

It would have been, however, but a poor observer who could not have perceived that the two brothers walking along from one club to another were bound on no common errand. The faint yet almost palsied thrill of nervous movement about Roger, and Edmund's fever of anxiety, were not sufficiently veiled to be imperceptible to any keen eye. Neither of them seemed to breathe, as they approached the place. Edmund, who knew how well his own excitement was justified, could not quite understand how it should have so communicated itself to Roger, who so far as he knew was unaware of any foundation for it. He pressed his brother's arm, as they went up to the open door. 'Roger, you'll take care not to let him pick a quarrel! He was very impatient of my question; he may be still more so to have it repeated. A row in the family between brothers——'

'Why should we quarrel? What reason is there for any row?' Roger said sternly, and Edmund had no answer to give.

Stephen was there,—upstairs. They went in together, Roger first, Edmund scarcely able to breathe. A group of men were descending as they went up, and on the landing the two brothers perceived Stephen, the last of the band. His companions were talking and laughing, but he was coming down silently, with an angry cloud on his face. The two young men waited for him on the landing, which gave them full time to note his aspect and the unusual gravity of his looks; but he did not observe them, so occupied was he with his own thoughts, till he was close upon them. Then Roger put out his hand and touched him on the arm. Stephen started, and raised his eyes with a sudden gleam of impatience; evidently he was not in a temper to be disturbed. But when he saw who it was, a look of fury came into his eyes,—they were very light eyes, which looked sinister in excitement. 'Hallo!' he cried, 'you there again!' He passed over Roger with intention, and fixed his look upon Edmund, who stood behind.

'Stephen,' said Roger, 'I have a question to ask you.' He was drawing his breath quickly and with difficulty.

'I presume,' said Stephen slowly, scowling, drawing back a little, 'it's the same question as that fellow put to me to-day. What the —— is it your business whether I know or whether I don't know? I told him I'd break any man's head that asked me that again!'

'Nevertheless, you must give me an answer,' returned Roger, making a step forward. The question had not been put into words; there seemed no need between them for any such details.

Neither of his brothers was in the least aware what it was which brought such fury into Stephen's eyes and tone. Roger, who accused him of nothing, whose question was in reality of the most simple character, was irritated by an opposition which appeared so uncalled for. He advanced a little as Stephen drew back. 'If you have any light to throw upon the matter, for Heaven's sake answer me,' he said, putting up his hand, as Stephen thought, to seize him by the coat.

There was in the younger brother a fury which had no means of utterance, which caught at the first possibility of getting vent. He pushed Roger back with a violence of which he was himself totally unaware. 'I warned him—the first man that asked me that question again!' he cried savagely, thrusting his brother from him with all his force. They were all three on the edge of the heavy stone stairs, none of them conscious or thinking of any danger. Perhaps there would have been no danger if Roger had been in his ordinary condition of health. As it was, before a word could be said or a breath drawn, before Stephen was aware of the violence of the thrust backward which he had given, Roger went down like a stone. There was a breathless, horrible moment, while the two who were left looked involuntarily into each other's faces: then Edmund, with a spring, reached the bottom of the stairs, where, all huddled upon himself, like a fallen house, his brother lay. In a moment—it was no more; as if a flash of lightning had come out of the sky and struck him down there.

XXXIII

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

THERE is something in the atmosphere of a sickroom in which a man lies under the shadow of death, especially when that awful shadow has come upon the sky in a moment, which changes the entire aspect of the world to those who stand at the bedside. There had been a moment of horror and dismay, in which Stephen's bewilderment and terror-stricken compunction had obliterated all feeling of guilt on his part from his brother's mind. Indeed, the catastrophe was so unlooked for, and seemed so entirely beyond any cause that could have brought it about, that the two brothers bent over Roger with equal anxiety, equal alarm and astonishment, forgetting everything but the sudden shock as of a thunderbolt falling, striking him down at their feet. Edmund had no time or power to think, during the turmoil and horrible pause which ensued, which might have lasted, so far as he knew, a day or ten minutes, in which Roger was examined by a grave doctor, who said little, and was then painfully transported to his own rooms and laid on his own bed. He had not recovered consciousness for a moment, nor did he during the long, terrible night which followed, in the course of which Edmund sat like a man paralysed, within sight of the motionless figure, for which there was nothing to be done, none of those cares which keep the watchers from despair. The doctor had sent in a nurse, who, after vainly endeavouring to induce Edmund to withdraw ('For he doesn't know you, or any one, nor won't, perhaps, ever again, poor gentleman! And what's the good of wearing yourself out, when you can do nothing for him?' she had said, with that appalling reasonableness which kills), had herself retired to the next room, provident, as her class always are, of the rest which would be so needful to her, in face of whatever might occur to demand her watchfulness afterwards. Her words, her look, made Edmund's heart sick, and the realisation of the fact that there was nothing

to be done, and that, whether for always or only for a time, Roger was beyond all possibility of succour, came over him with a sudden blankness of desolation. He knew nothing of illness, especially of illness so extraordinary and terrible. He felt that he could not tell from moment to moment what might be accomplishing itself on the curtainless bed, where Roger's profile, stern in the silence, showed itself against the faintly coloured wall. He sat there himself in a sort of trance of despair and anguish and deadly fear. His brother might die at any instant, for anything Edmund knew; the life which was already hidden and veiled might depart altogether, without a hand being held out to save. The horror of doing nothing, of sitting still, and perhaps seeing the precious life ebb away without putting out a finger, without an effort, as Edmund felt, was almost beyond bearing. He himself could do nothing,—he knew nothing that could be done. If the doctor had but remained, who knew! but the doctor had said that to watch the patient was all that was possible. And Edmund was watching, Heaven knew how anxiously! yet in his ignorance feeling that some change might occur which he would not observe, would not understand, and on which might hang the issues of life and death. Half a dozen times he had risen to call the nurse, that there might be some one who would know; then had restrained himself and noiselessly sat down again, remembering what she had said, and half afraid of crossing or irritating the attendant on whose services, for aught he knew, Roger's life might depend. He felt like a fool, or a child, so ignorant, so helpless, so ready to be seized with unreasonable panic,—surely unreasonable, since both doctor and nurse had felt themselves at liberty to go away. It was about nine o'clock when the catastrophe had occurred, and by midnight it seemed to Edmund as if years had passed over him in that awful stillness, and as if everything in life had receded far away. By the bed where Roger lay unconscious there was no longer anything worth thinking of, except whether he would open his eyes, whether the hardness of his breathing would soften, whether any sign of life would break through that blank. Lily Ford?—who was she, what was she? If her name swept, in the current of his thoughts, over Edmund's mind at all, he was impatient of it, and flung it from him, like something intrusive and impertinent. All the associations that had occupied his thoughts for days past went from him like vanities. He remembered them no more, or, if they recurred, brushed them from his mind, with indignant astonishment that such nothings could ever have occupied it. What was there to think of in all the

world but that Roger lay there, an image of death in life, wrapped in darkness, and perhaps—perhaps—a horror that made his heart stand still—might never come out of it again?

At midnight Stephen came in, trying, no doubt, to walk softly and speak softly; opening the door with a creak, and stepping upon some loose plank in the flooring, which shivered and jarred under his foot. 'How is he now?' he asked in a rough whisper, which seemed to Edmund's strained faculties more penetrating, more disagreeable, than any ordinary noise. Stephen made a step forward elaborately, and looked at the face upon the pillow. 'Don't look much better, does he?' he said. In reality Stephen was very uncomfortable,—more than uncomfortable. He had not meant to do his brother any harm,—he had repeated that assurance to himself a hundred times within the last hour. He never meant to harm him,—why should he? He had no motive for injuring his brother; they had always been good friends. What had happened about their father's will was nothing. There was no possible reason in that for quarrelling with Roger, for he was quite out of it, and had nothing to say in the matter. Nobody would do Stephen the wrong to say that he had any bad meaning. How could he know that a man, a man as big as himself, would go down like that at a touch? It was no fault of his: there must have been something the matter with the poor old fellow, or he must have been standing unsteadily, or—but certainly it was not Stephen who was to blame. He had repeated this to himself all the way, as he went along the streets. How could he be to blame?

'For God's sake, be quiet,—don't disturb him!' said Edmund, with an impatience that was uncontrollable. Disturb him! He would have given everything he had in the world to be able to disturb Roger,—to draw him out of that fatal lethargy; but the sound of Stephen's jarring step, and the whisper which whistled through this sacred place, roused Edmund to a fever of suppressed passion.

'Oh, nothing disturbs a man in that state. I've seen 'em,' Stephen said, taking less precautions as he became familiar with the darkened room, the aspect of everything, 'when you might have fired a cannon-ball close to their ears, and they would have taken no notice. When is the doctor to come back? Are you going to sit up all night? I thought he had sent in a nurse. Then what's the use of you sitting up? You can't do him any good.'

'I can't talk,' Edmund answered; 'don't ask me any questions. We can only wait and see what the morning brings.'

Stephen nodded in assent. He stooped over the bed, looked at the motionless figure, and shook his head. 'Poor chap!' he said, 'he looks very bad.' Stephen was very uncomfortable, but he did not know how to express it. He stood swaying from one foot to the other, looking blankly about him. 'I don't suppose I can be of any use,' he said.

'None, none!' replied Edmund. 'Nobody can be of any use.'

'You'd rather I should go?' asked Stephen, glad to escape, yet reluctant to show it. 'I shouldn't if I could be of any use; but if I can't—— Look here, Ned, call the woman, and go to bed yourself; you can't do him any good, either.'

'Oh, go, go!' Edmund said.

'And, Ned—as for what he asked me, poor chap! You may think it isn't true, but it is true. I declare to you——'

'Oh, for Heaven's sake,' cried Edmund, under his breath, 'go away, go home, go to bed! What does it matter? What does anything matter? Do I care whether it is true or not? Go, go!'

'You speak as if I hadn't as good a right—as if you thought I meant to—to do him harm. I never meant to do him harm, so help me——'

'Go now, Stephen, go home and go to bed. He may be better in the morning.'

'Poor chap!' Stephen said once more, shaking his head; and then creaking more than ever, like his father, making the boards jar and the room shake, he went away.

And again that awful silence came over the place,—a silence which thrilled and vibrated with dreadful meaning, till even the interruption of Stephen's presence seemed to have been a gain. Edmund sat still and motionless, his heart within him in a fever of suspense, and fear and agitation indescribable rioting his bosom with an independent, mad life of unendurable pain. How he kept still, how he did not cry out, spring up from his watch, drag back by any violent means the dead, dumb, marble image which was his brother, to life, to life, to any kind of conscious being, even if it were agony, he could not tell. But something, whether it was reason, whether it was the mere solidity of flesh and blood, which bound the raging anxiety of the soul, kept him almost as still as Roger; watching, wondering what was to come, and how he was to live through this awful night.

The morning brought little hope; and then ensued days upon days, of which Edmund knew nothing except that they came and passed and brought no change. Stephen appeared from time to time, stealing in with elaborate precautions, making every board

creak,—as if it mattered! And presently the Squire arrived, like a larger Stephen, looking at the patient in the same helpless way, shaking his head. The father's sanction was necessary before the dangerous operation, which was the only thing in which there was a glimmer of hope, could be attempted. Mr. Mitford was far from being without feeling. To see his son, his first-born, of whom he had been proud, lying on that bed, which was too evidently a bed of death, affected him deeply. He had asked a great many questions at first, and had been inclined to blame everybody. 'Why did you let him question Steve? Steve never would stand questioning, from a child. Why didn't you warn Steve that he was ill? He must have been ill, or a mere push could not have harmed him. Was it only a push? It must have been more than a push. They had a scuffle, I suppose, on the stairs! By ——! how could you be such a fool as to let two men in the heat of a quarrel meet on the stairs?' Thus he talked, in his large voice, with an angry cloud upon his face, as he came upstairs. But when he entered Roger's room the Squire was silenced. He stood and looked at his son with angry, helpless wretchedness, making a little sound of half-remonstrant trouble with his tongue against his palate. What could he do? What could be done? To know that it was all over would have been nothing compared to the misery of seeing him there, and not knowing what might happen at any moment. Mr. Mitford was glad to go away, making his progress audible by that faint sound of inarticulate perplexity and remonstrance, and by the unsubduable tread which shook the house. He had no objection to try the desperate expedient of the operation, though he did not in the least believe in it. 'He's a dead man! he's a dead man! I don't believe they can do anything,' he said, in the hurried family council which was held in an adjoining room. And Stephen also shook his head. He was very like his father. He had the same expression of perplexed and irritated seriousness. He had taken up almost eagerly the same note of remonstrance. If Ned had only kept him quiet, kept him indoors that night, when anybody might have seen he was out of sorts, and not fit to give and take, like other men. His discomfort as to his own share in the matter was wearing off, and he began to feel that he was an injured person, and had a right to complain.

Ah! if Edmund had but been able to keep his brother indoors that night! He said it to himself with a far more tragic sense of the impossibility than the others were capable of. If only—if! —how lightly, it now seemed, all the miseries that existed before

could have been borne. It gave him a pang indescribable to think, as he immediately did, of how simple it might have been,—how life might have flowed on quite smoothly: Roger miserable, perhaps himself weighed down by the pressure of a secret never to be revealed; but what of that, what trifles, what nothings, in comparison with this!

He was the only one who had any hope in the operation, though he was the last to consent to it. The others, no doubt, would have been glad if Roger had recovered, but they were almost as anxious to be freed from the dreadful pressure of the situation as to save his life: his life, if possible; but if not, that these paralysing circumstances might come to an end. It was with the hope that one way or other this release might be accomplished that Mr. Mitford and Stephen awaited the result. They would not remain in the room,—it was too much for them: they remained close by, in Roger's sitting-room, with all its scattered traces of his presence. Geraldine and Amy were there, too, with a little feminine rustle, crying from time to time, yet not unconscious of a curiosity about the photographs on the tables, which were not all family photographs, and about such other revelations as might be gleaned of the young man's independent life; but ready to cry again, to give back all their attention to the one absorbing subject, whenever a door opened or a sound was heard. The Squire walked about the room with his heavy tread, taking up and throwing down again such articles as caught his eye, a whip, a cane, a cigar-case, little luxuries such as in some cases he despised. Stephen stood with his back to the others, looking out, with a curious mingling of compunction and resentment and self-defence in his mind. Nobody could say he was to blame,—how could he be to blame? Was he to know that a man might be as weak as a cat, not fit to stand against a push? Nobody could be expected to think of that.

Edmund alone stood by his unconscious brother, while the doctors were doing their work. He alone received the dazed, bewildered look which Roger cast round him in the first moment of relief, like a man awakening, yet with something awful in it, as if the awakening were from the dead. When that vague gaze fell upon Edmund, the sufferer recognised him for a moment, smiled, made a motion as if to put out his hand, and said something which was audible only as a murmur in his throat. He was not allowed to do any more. The doctors interfered to ordain perfect quiet, perfect rest, the closest watch, and no excitement or movement. The operation was successful, quite successful. Twenty-

four hours, perfect quiet, and then—— The great operator, whose every minute was worth gold, looked into the adjoining room himself, to relieve the anxiety of the family. 'As an operation, entirely satisfactory; everything now depends on the strength of the patient,' he said. The relief of the strain which had been upon their nerves was great. The girls got up from their corner with that pleasant rustle of their skirts, and uttered little cries of pleasure and thankfulness. Geraldine stood up before the glass over Roger's chimney-piece to put her bonnet straight, which had been a little disarranged, she thought, by her crying. Amy made a little dart to a table where there was a photograph of a woman which she had never seen before, and turned it over to see if there were any name or inscription. The Squire threw down a cane with a curious silver handle which he had been examining, and breathed forth a great sigh of relief. 'That's all right!' he said. It seemed to all of them that the incident was over, and that perhaps they had been unduly excited, and it had not been so important, after all.

But Edmund did not move from his brother's room. His heart was sick with that deferred hope which it is so hard to bear. He too, for the first minute, had thought the incident was over. He took his brother's hand and pressed it in his own, and thought he felt a faint response. But when he was dismissed again to his watch, and forbidden to speak or touch the patient still hanging between life and death, his heart sank. The room relapsed once more, after all the silent strain and excitement, into absolute quiet. Presently the nurse came to Edmund's side and whispered, 'He's going to sleep, sir,—the very best thing; and you should go and take a bit of rest. Nobody in this world can do without a bit of natural rest.'

Edmund scarcely understood what the woman said. He did not move; he could not have risen had his life depended upon it, nor withdrawn his eyes from the sleeper. Was it sleep? Was it death? How could he tell? No more than if he had been dying himself could he have moved from his brother's side.

And in that sleep Roger died.

XXXIV

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

It is needless to say that this event, so unlooked for, coming with such a shock upon them all (though the two brothers-in-law, the husbands of Geraldine and Amy, declared that they had never for a moment looked for any other termination), produced a great effect upon the family. A death in a family always does so. There was a jar and startling stop of all the machinery of life. The two gay young houses in London, and the great house at Melcombe, were shut up. Geraldine and Amy, retired from all their pleasures, and with a good deal of sorrow for themselves, thus withdrawn from existence, as it were, so early in the season, crossed by a real transitory pang, more perhaps for the horror of the catastrophe than for the brother lost, made an occupation and distraction for themselves in the ordering of their mourning, which gave them a great deal to do, and a little much-desired novelty. They had never been in mourning before; it was a new sensation; they did not know whether it would be becoming or the reverse. Roger had not been much to them at any time, and if they cried a little now and then, when they remembered, and felt a sharp little sting of that almost remorseful pain with which simple minds contemplate the sweeping away of another life, while they still continue to enjoy the sunshine, it was all that could have been expected from these two untrained and uncherished girls. It is to be doubted even whether Roger would have felt so much for them. Women are more capable of having the feelings they ought to have, and responding to the exigencies of their position, than men.

At Melcombe the household lived, for the days which elapsed between the death and burial, in a pause of suspended excitement, with a great deal to talk about and think about, and a solemnity which was not unpleasant. Some of the old servants were truly grieved for Mr. Roger, but the subdued bustle in the funereal house, the continual succession of events, the comparison of facts

and reports, the making out so far as they could of an extremely exciting story, and even the new mourning into which they were all put, men and women, with a fulness of provision which they felt showed the most real respect for the dead, occupied their minds and aroused their interest,—quickened, in short, their entire mental being. They all knew—though how, nobody could have told—that Stephen was somehow connected with his brother's death; they all speculated as to what Lily Ford had to do with it. Was it jealousy? What was it? It was known by this time that Lily Ford was no longer in her father's house. Indeed, Mrs. Ford proclaimed the fact to everybody, saying that her daughter was staying with some of her grand friends, and that she was glad of it, for Lily was very tender-hearted, and would have felt Mr. Roger's death dreadful. The Fords, indeed, entirely confounded the ingenuity of the servants' hall. Larkins, who was aware of that distracted visit to Edmund, had put on his most sympathetic face the next time he had met the gamekeeper's wife. 'I hope, ma'am, that you've better news,' he had said in a most mournful and confidential tone. 'Oh, thank you, sir, I've had the best of news, and am just as happy as can be,' she had responded cheerfully, taking him much by surprise. There was a mystery, but no one had even a guess what the mystery was.

The family, as was natural, assembled at Melcombe for the funeral, filling the house with guests and a kind of gloomy entertainment for three or four days. Poor Roger was laid, with 'every respect,' with all honour, in the family vault, a black-robed group of mourners, with respectfully bowed heads, standing round the coffin, which was concealed from sight, it need not be said, by wreaths of the most beautiful flowers, sent, according to the fashion of the time, from far and near. Father, brothers, brothers-in-law, cousins, old neighbours of all degrees, followed the melancholy train. More respect could not have been shown to a prince; and some went away saddened by thoughts of the promising life cut short, and some with relief to think that at last all was over, which was scarcely a less human sentiment. In Melcombe perhaps the feeling of relief predominated. To be able to have the blinds drawn up, to look at the papers, to enter without self-reproach into ordinary subjects, after such a long and distressing break in all usual habits, was a welcome change. Poor Roger! it could not do him any good, poor fellow, that anybody should be ill at ease. All the crying in the world would not bring him back. Everything had been done that could be done,—more, far more than people in general were able to do; and now that it was all over, it was

a relief to return to ordinary themes and ordinary habits once more.

The Squire was a man who did not feel very much except when he was put out and his habits were interfered with; but yet, as much as was possible he had felt this. A man does not lose his eldest son by a sudden and almost violent death without feeling it; especially when he has just made a family revolution in consequence of that son's proceedings, and altered the succession in a way that becomes ridiculous the moment the culprit disappears. He had put Roger out of his natural place, and he had put Stephen in it. And now that he had time to think, the arrangement struck him not only as very ridiculous, a thing that naturally everybody would think they had a right to demand explanations of, but also as unjust and unjustifiable. The wrong to Edmund had not troubled him, so long as Edmund's refusal to carry out his wishes had stood between them. But now that these wishes had dropped, now that fate had ended all Roger's chances, there was no doubt that to cut off Edmund for no reason at all was an injustice. He was now the eldest son,—there was no doubt on that point,—the natural heir, the head of the family after his father; whereas Stephen must bear the mark of cadency, however completely endowed he might be with the family honours. This troubled the Squire greatly, and prolonged the existence of the cloud which had arisen with Roger's death. That event put everything out. It stultified him; it made him do what he had never intended to do. There was nothing, indeed, nothing in the world against Edmund. He had given his father no offence. He would, all things considered, probably make a better Squire of Melcombe than a man who had got a great deal too much of the mess-room in him. The Squire was certainly uncomfortable, and yet he did not like to make again an exhibition of himself by another change. Pouncefort would say, 'I told you that you would regret it;' he would say with his eyebrows, if not in words, that the Mitfords were hot-headed fools. He would perhaps talk of the risk, of which he had warned the Squire, of dying before dinner. Mr. Mitford was afraid of Stephen, too, who would not willingly part with the inheritance which he had accepted so readily. It requires a strong inducement to make a man expose himself to all these disagreeables, and in face of this paraphernalia of death and burial the Squire felt with a recoil the force of his own life and strength. Why should he hurry himself, expose himself to the remonstrances of Stephen and the jeers of Pouncefort? But he was very uncomfortable, and troubled with an angry sense that his eldest son, whom he had so remorselessly cut out, had

repaid him very summarily, almost shabbily, for this ill turn, and that Roger might have helped it if he would.

Stephen too was very uncomfortable, so uncomfortable that in one respect it did him good. It put Lily, and the rage and the humiliation which her escape from his hands had caused him, out of his mind. He forgot that he had been made a fool of, cheated, deceived, *planté là*, which was how he represented it to himself. There are different standards of pride and honour. Stephen had felt himself wronged, insulted, put to shame, by Lily. He would have thrown up his commission, abandoned all his occupations and pleasures, left England, disappeared he did not care where, had the story ever reached the ears of his set. It would have covered him with ridicule and shame; it made him ridiculous to himself, even, while he brooded furiously over it during the first day. He had spent half the night in the streets, like Lily, but not in the same streets, as it happened, and had not given up the search for twenty-four hours after; not, indeed, until the morning on which Edmund found him, coming back, suspicious and on the watch for any look or hint that might show a consciousness of his secret. It was this rage of shame and terror of ridicule which had made him repulse his brothers, one after the other, in the latter case with such fatal effects. But the catastrophe delivered Stephen: he thought of Lily no more; he forgot that disgusting episode, as he called it in his thoughts; the shock of this new and dreadful event drove her and the fury with which he had been regarding her out of his mind altogether. He was not very sensitive nor tender-hearted, but the sight of Roger's fall would not go out of his eyes or his mind. When he was by himself it came back to him,—the sudden disappearance, the sound, so heavy, so horrible, so unlike any other sound. He could not forget it. Presently something of the same feeling with which he had regarded Lily when she escaped came into his thoughts of Roger, a sense of anger, as if he had been taken at a disadvantage, put into a position in which he could not but show badly, although he was not really to blame. Certainly he was not to blame. He had done nothing that the gentlest-tempered man might not have done. He did not strike nor knock down his assailant, as a hot-headed fellow would have done. He only pushed him back a bit; anybody would have done that. He meant no harm. How could he tell that Roger was weak, or unsteady, or excited? He had done nothing wrong, but somehow he was put in the wrong, and he knew people would look at him askance. Edmund did, for one. They had walked together after the coffin, but Edmund had not

said a word to him, had greeted him only with a hurried nod, had turned his eyes away, as if he could not bear the sight of him, which was unjust,—by Jove! abominably unjust. For he had done nothing—nothing that any man would not have done in the circumstances. He was not to blame. He had not meant to hurt Roger. Why should he? Roger was not in his way. Still, it is a disagreeable thing to have anything to do with the killing of your brother; no one likes to be mixed up in such a catastrophe,—and again Stephen would seem to see the face of Roger disappear from before him, and the mass all huddled up at the bottom of the stairs.

And this funeral party was very disagreeable to him. To act company with Statham and Markham, whose spirits were only temporarily subdued, and who seemed to think they should be taken over the stables (a duty which Edmund, retiring to his own rooms as soon as the funeral was over, would take no part in), and to show the civility of a son of the house, almost of a host, to the departing guests, who, he felt sure, must be commenting upon everything that had happened,—all that was wearisome. A man who has been so unfortunate as to shoot his father or his brother, as they push through the covert together, is pitied, though probably it is all due to his carelessness; but a man who pushes his brother downstairs, his brother whose rightful place he has just usurped? Stephen felt that circumstances were very hard upon him; for it was no fault of his,—he was not to blame.

He would have liked above all things to leave Melcombe with the Stathams and the Markhams, next day; they were unfeignedly glad to go, and so was Nina, who had persuaded Geraldine to take her 'for a change.' 'Everybody goes for a change, when there has been a death,' Nina said, and the sisters acknowledged the justice of the statement. They all went away with serious looks, giving little pinches and pats to each other's crape, which, being so stiff and new, would not 'sit,' but by the time they got to the station they had all cheered up wonderfully, and began to talk about what they had better do. The season was lost to them, but still the world was not without delights. 'It would be just the time to go for a little run abroad,' Geraldine had said, laying to heart that suggestion of Nina's about a change after a death. Lady Statham had so far recovered her spirits as to suggest this, as they reached Molton Junction, whither they had driven to catch the express train.

Stephen turned back, with a sigh of angry pain. He could not go away, nor go abroad, nor even return to his regiment. His

father had angrily insisted that he should remain. 'If you're going to be the head of this house, you'd better give up the regiment,' he said. *If*, again !—that *if* did Stephen a little good. It showed him that he might have to fight for his rights, which was exhilarating, and gave him something to think of. *If!* It was the governor's own doing to put him in that place, but he was not going to give it up,—it would be the greatest folly to give it up. He was not one of those who could chop and change with every wind, he said to himself; and if the governor meant to go back from his word he should not find it so easy as he had done with Roger. When a thing was settled, it was settled. The chance of a fight again did Stephen good. It kept him up after all the others had gone away. To be left alone in the house with his father and Edmund was not a cheerful prospect; but if there were going to be a fight!

He had need of this little spark of pugnacity to sustain him, for it would be difficult to imagine anything more miserable than the dinner-table at Melcombe, on the first evening after the Stathams and Markhams had gone. Roger's empty chair stood at the foot of the table, but no one took it; neither Edmund, who had the natural right as the eldest surviving son, nor Stephen, who had the acquired right as the heir. They took their places on either side of their father with a sense of desolation. Presently Edmund started up, and pushing against the astonished Larkins, put away the chair against the wall. No one said a word; the father and Stephen looked on, with a feeling that something of reproach to them was in this rapid movement, but they were too much cowed to protest or remonstrate. Larkins, following Edmund, cleared away very solemnly the knives and forks and glasses from the table, which had been laid as usual for that fourth who would never take his place there again. Larkins felt the reproach also, though in a different way; but he had the support of feeling that he had done it for the best, not knowing which Mr. Edmund would prefer: to assume the place which was now his; or, for convenience, as there was so small a party, to keep his former position at the side. The butler put all the silver and crystal upon the tray which John Thomas held behind him, very slowly, and with great solemnity and just but suppressed indignation; and they all looked on in silence, not saying a word. And so the last traces of Roger's presence were swept away.

They were all glad when the meal was over, and they were at liberty to separate. Even Nina's presence would have been a little relief. The three, each other's nearest relations in the world,

felt among them a *sourd* antagonism. To Stephen and his father Edmund's silence was as a disapproval of both; Mr. Mitford was angry with his youngest son for having gained a promotion to which he had no right, and Stephen was all in arms against any possible repentance of his father. How glad they were to rise, a few moments after Larkins, who was a sort of protection to them, left the room! Each was afraid of what the other might say. Another night of repose, of postponement, before any explanation could be made, was the greatest gain which was possible. Mr. Mitford and Edmund retired quickly, taking different directions, the moment they rose from the table, to their own apartments. Stephen strolled out into the park with his cigar. He had no den within doors, no occupation to which he could withdraw. He did not read; he could not play billiards or anything else without a companion; and the billiard-room, to which he would have gone on an ordinary occasion, was full of the memory of Roger, so that Stephen felt with a shudder that he might see his dead brother, or imagine he saw him (for he was well aware that ghosts were but optical illusions), in the present disturbed state of his nerves, if he went there. But he had forgotten, when he stepped outside into the soft air of the summer night, that here were other associations not much more salutary for his nerves than a fancied apparition. How often had he gone forth, complacent, expanding his broad chest, pulling down his cuffs, with all the pleasure of a conqueror, to meet the little beauty, the admiring girl, who was ready to burn incense to him as much as he would, ready to drop into his arms as soon as he should hold up a finger! (Stephen took no pains to keep his metaphors clear.) But now the very thought of Lily filled him with rage. He could not put her out of his mind, now that he had come back. He seemed to see her advancing towards him under the trees, hurrying to meet him. By George! she wished she could now, he did not doubt. She would give her ears that she had not been such a fool. She ran to be chased, to be sure; the last thing in her mind was to be lost, to be allowed to get away. He caught eagerly at this idea, which occurred to him for the first time. Women always run away that men may run after them, but she had succeeded better than she wanted, this time. By Jove! if she had ever supposed he would not have caught her up, she would not have been in such a hurry to run away: and then he began to compliment himself on his skill in missing Lily. What a life she would be leading him now, if he had found her, if he had seized her round some corner and brought her back, as no doubt she intended!

This was the way in which Stephen tried to subdue the furious recollections of that failure, when he brought the whole business back to his mind by strolling out into the park; but the attempt was not very successful. He did not finish his cigar, but whirled it away into the twilight, as if it were a missile thrown at Lily, and went in again, discontented, sulky, miserable, to fall into his father's hands.

XXXV

PATERNAL ADVICE

MR. MITFORD, also, was sulky, miserable, and discontented. Perhaps in him it was grief taking another aspect, different from that of common grief. He was out of heart with himself and everything round. Roger was in his grave,—all his own fault, his obstinacy and folly, setting himself against his father and everything that was sensible! But, however it came about,—and it was a faint satisfaction to think that it was Roger's own fault,—the boy was in his grave. There was nothing more to discuss about him or to find fault with,—he was in his grave. The Squire had a dull sort of consciousness in his mind that Roger might meet his mother thereabouts, and that it would be a little triumph to her to find out that he had not succeeded with the boy,—for he had never agreed with his wife about education, and never would let her have her own way. She would say, 'This would not have happened if he had taken my advice.' Mr. Mitford had not thought of his wife for a long time, and he wondered how it was that this recollection should seize him now. It was not cheerful in the library, where he suddenly remembered that all the boys had been in the habit of meeting, the drawing-room being so little used after their mother's death. All the boys!—and now one of them was in his grave; and another keeping apart, tacitly blaming his father (though how any man in his senses could think him to blame!); and the third, whom he had himself set above the others, made the master! Stephen had never been very kind, always a selfish fellow, taking his own way. Well, well! The Squire said to himself, with a sigh, that this was how children treated one, after all the trouble they were to bring up: went against you; contradicted you; died if they could not have their own way otherwise, and thought that was the thing that would annoy you most; or sulked, making you believe that you were to blame. He found the silence of his room

intolerable, that lingering, slow evening, the house was so quiet. He could remember when it had made him very angry to hear steps and voices about, and he had said that the servants were altogether forgetting themselves, and that Larkins and Mrs. Simmons must have lost their heads; but he would have been glad to hear something moving to-night.

By and by he saw a red speck in the distance, in the evening gray, coming towards the house, and made out that it was Stephen chiefly by that hasty motion of flinging his cigar from him, which Stephen, on his side, had been driven to do by the hurry and stinging of his thoughts. Mr. Mitford was glad to see some one to whom he could talk, some one who had no right to be sulky; who, if there were any blame, was worse than he was, far more deeply involved, and to whom he could furnish matter for thought such as perhaps Stephen would not like.

Short of getting rid of our own discomfort, there are few things so soothing as making other people uncomfortable, and the Squire felt that to plant Stephen's pillow with thorns would restore a certain zest to life. He opened his door accordingly, as his son came in, and said, 'If you've nothing better to do, you may as well come in here for half an hour. I want to talk to you.'

'I have nothing whatever to do,' returned Stephen resentfully, 'except to write some letters,' he added as an afterthought, perceiving the snare into which he had fallen.

'You can write your letters any time; but me you mayn't have —you mayn't have—so very long——' Mr. Mitford had not at all intended to say anything of this lugubrious description, but it came to his lips unawares.

'Why, you are as hale and hearty as any man could wish to be!' said Stephen, surprised.

'Perhaps so,—perhaps not,' remarked the Squire oracularly. 'Don't vapour about, but sit down, for Heaven's sake! Don't stand and swing about. It's a thing I cannot bear, as I always told——' He would have said 'Roger,' with one of those curious returns upon a dead name which so constantly occurs when the void is fresh; and though his feelings were not deep, he was touched by it in spite of himself. 'I'll never say that or anything else to him again, poor fellow! Sit down. I have a great many things to say.' But though Stephen sat down with more than usual docility, perhaps moved in a similar way, it was some time before his father spoke. When he did, it was in the tone of a man who has been awaiting a tardy response. 'Well! you know what I said about sending in your papers?'

'There can't be any such dreadful hurry about it, I suppose?'

'There is a hurry. You've stepped into the place, and you must fill it. I am not going to have a fellow here who is at home only when he pleases, or never at home at all. There's no objection to that on the part of a younger son, who is of no particular account. But when you come to be the eldest, or at least to stand in the place of the eldest——'

'There's many an eldest son who is as much away from home as I am. When the man of the house is as well and lively as you are——'

'Lively,—with my poor boy in his grave!' said the Squire; and then he abandoned this subject curtly. 'There's a great deal more for you to do,' he added. 'I'll take nothing off your hands. You'll have to give your attention to Pouncefort and the rest. I've come to a time of life when I don't choose to be troubled. I say when I don't *choose*,—I don't mean that I'm not able enough to do whatever's wanted; but I don't choose to bind myself. You'll have to stay at home and look after things.'

'You know very well that you wouldn't let me look after things, if I were to try.'

'I know nothing of the sort,' returned Mr. Mitford angrily. 'And more than that, you must marry and settle. It's not decent to go on as we've been doing, without a woman in the house.'

'Marry!' said Stephen, with a low whistle of ridicule and surprise.

'Yes, marry. You may laugh,—that's part of your libertine mess-room ways; but in my day, as soon as a young man knew how he was going to live he married,—it was the first thing that was thought of. If you are to have Melcombe, you must arrange your life accordingly.'

'If I laughed,—and I did not laugh,—it was to think of such a piece of advice from you, when we're all in the deepest of mourning.'

'Well! getting married isn't fun, is it?' said the Squire. 'It's not a frolic; and besides, it's not a thing that can be done in a moment. You can't be introduced to a girl now, and propose to her in a week, and marry her,—in your mourning, as you say. Mourning doesn't last long nowadays. If you wear a hat-band for six months, I suppose it's about as much as you'll do. Dead people are soon shovelled out of the way.' Mr. Mitford was not thinking now of Roger, but the summary way in which he himself would be disposed of, supposing such an unlikely thing to happen as that he should die. The thought recurred to him against his will.

'You talk,' remarked Stephen, taking his cigar-case from his pocket, choosing a cigar, looking at it all round, and then returning the case to his pocket, in order to show by this expressive pantomime how hard a thing it was to sit and talk or be talked to without the help of smoke,—'you speak,' he said, poising the cigar in his fingers, 'as if you had settled it all; not only the marrying, but whom I'm to marry. Oh, I'm not going to smoke. It's absurd in a man's room, but I know there's no smoking allowed here.'

'In my day a man could listen to what his father had to say to him with a little respect, without tobacco; or else he ran the risk of being turned out of the house.'

'Ah! there's been about enough of that, you must think,' Stephen said, with cool impatience. He began to examine his nails as he spoke, and took out a penknife to scrape off a sharp corner, with the air of finding this much more interesting than anything his father could have to say. And his words rendered Mr. Mitford speechless, partly with rage, which was an effect Stephen frequently produced upon him, and also because what he said was true. Turning out-of-doors was not an experiment to try again. The Squire had not found it a successful method. He could make no reply, though the taunt was hard to bear. There was a moment of silence, which Stephen was the first to break. 'Well, sir,' he said, after he had finished the little operation on his nail, holding it up to the lamp to see that it was even, 'and who may the damsel be?'

The Squire sat up in his chair, red, with the pulses throbbing in his temples. It was very bad for him. The doctors had told him so a dozen times,—that to let himself get angry and excited was the worst thing he could do, and put his life in danger. So easy it is for doctors to speak, who probably have no sons, or only little ones, not old enough to drive them frantic with constant contradictions. He sat still, getting the better of himself; and this not only on the consideration of health, but because he knew that his anger would have no effect upon Stephen.

A man who has an unrestrainable temper can find the means to restrain his temper when his motive is strong enough; and though it was always on the cards that the indulgence of it might bring on a fit of apoplexy, yet Mr. Mitford could hold himself in check when it was his only policy to do so. Besides, there was always that recollection of Roger coming in to stop him. Things might have succeeded better if he had fallen on some other way with Roger. When you have tried *les grands moyens* and failed,

needs must that you should return to influences of a more practicable kind. But it was not for a considerable time that Mr. Mitford could prevail upon himself to reply.

'The damsel!' he said. 'You'll have to mend your manners, if you're to do anything there. Ladies in the country are not hail-fellow-well-met, like some, I fear, of your fast young women in London.'

'No?' queried Stephen. 'I've always found them very much alike. If it's a duchess in her own right——'

'The lady I mean is a great deal too good for you, my fine fellow, whatever she is.'

'I was going to say that in that case there was no difficulty at all, for they like it when a fellow shows that he forgets what swells they are.'

'She's no duchess,' said the father. He was a little nervous about the announcement he was going to make. 'She's a very fine woman, as handsome a creature as ever I saw, and she has money enough to buy us all out twice over, though we're not so badly off at Melcombe; and, by George! I've set my heart on one of you having her, Steve! You're a man of the world; you know sentiment isn't everything,—though I give you my word she's a fine woman apart from her money, and would be a credit to the house.'

'You're very warm, governor,' observed Stephen with a laugh. 'Why don't you go in for her—whoever she is—yourself?'

'Pooh!' said the Squire; but the suggestion mollified him. He began to give his son a sketch of the circumstances; the great fortune all in her own hands; the old woman dependent upon her, who considered herself the mistress of the house; all the little imbroglio of facts which a husband would have to clear up. He told the story as if he were talking of a stranger, and it was not till he had gone on with rising enthusiasm to set forth the advantages of old Travers's London property, and all his profitable investments, that Stephen suddenly interrupted him with a little shout—

'Why, you're talking of Lizzy Travers, the only woman I ever loved!'

'None of your slang, sir. I'm talking, it's true, of Miss Travers. What do you know of Miss Travers? I didn't know you had ever met.'

'Governor,' said Stephen, 'all this has been too much for you; you want rest; you'll be forgetting your own name, next. Why, I've danced with her, ridden with her, flirted with her. Don't you recollect the last Christmas I spent at home? By the way,

though,' said Stephen, pausing, 'that's three years ago, and the fair Lizzy wasn't a baby then.'

'She is five-and-twenty,—I know her age, and an admirable age too: old enough to know a thing or two; to be aware what her money's worth, for instance, and to like to see something solid in exchange. Now, Melcombe is all she could look for in that way, and if you see your true interests and can show her what we might call a manly devotion——'

Stephen laughed. 'Oh, I'll show her a manly devotion,' he answered, 'or any other sort she likes. I'll be a troubadour or anything. I'm not such a fool as not to see the use of a match like that. I'll ride over and see her to-morrow, if you like, sir. I'll tell her I've come for sympathy, and that will make a very good opening. Women are fond of giving consolation. I'll tell her——'

'Don't go quite so fast!' interrupted the Squire. He was greatly relieved to find that Stephen made no objection,—that he received the idea 'in a right spirit,' which was what neither Roger nor Edmund had done; but at the same time he was disgusted with his son's readiness, and with the laugh which accompanied his idea of going to seek consolation. Mr. Mitford felt at once that it was a very good idea, and that to kick Stephen for having it was the duty of every man. He could not do this himself, having found out, as already said, that *les grands moyens* were not always successful, but he felt that it ought to be done. And yet he was much satisfied with the easy conversion of Stephen, and he saw that his idea was a good one,—women *are* fond of consoling. It might be that Elizabeth (for the Squire believed women to be wholly unaccountable creatures) would at once answer to this rule; but not to-morrow, not so fast. In his mingled satisfaction and indignation he could not say any more.

'If that's all,' said Stephen presently, rising and yawning broadly on the other side of the lamp, 'I think I'll go off to bed. It can't be said, sir, that Melcombe is particularly amusing at this time of the year.'

'Few houses are very amusing,' remarked the Squire with dignity, 'two days after the funeral of the eldest son.'

'To be sure there's something in that. Good-night, then,' said Stephen, again yawning, 'if that's all you've got to say.'

All he had got to say! It meant only two lives, with the background of another life sacrificed; the one scarcely cold in his grave, the others with long years before them in which very possibly to be miserable. Mr. Mitford sat and thought it all over

after Stephen was gone. He thought it highly desirable that Elizabeth should listen to this dashing soldier, this tall, well-set-up, well-looking Mitford, the handsomest of all the sons. Why shouldn't she? The fellow was a very good-looking fellow, well born, with a good estate behind him and a good position. There was nothing so likely as that she would be charmed with him. But whether it would be quite a good thing for her, whether she would live happy ever after, was a thing the Squire would not have taken upon him to prophesy. Quite probably the pair would not be what is commonly called happy, as Stephen did not even pretend to care anything for her, nor to contemplate happiness at all in the matter: and yet he said, if that were all! His father listened to his progress upstairs to bed with various sensations, —glad of his acceptation of the part which had been in vain pressed upon Roger, yet with an angry scorn of Stephen, in comparison with Roger, which words could not express. She would have him,—no doubt she would have him; and the Mitfords of Melcombe would increase and flourish. And yet how much better for poor Lizzy had it been Roger who had been persuaded to go a-wooing—Roger newly laid in his grave!

Stephen paused on his way upstairs to look out of the long staircase window. He was tickled by the turn which affairs had taken, and that he was to be the man to marry Lizzy Travers and get all that wealth. It would be a prodigious bore, but such a lot of money made almost anything supportable. He stopped to look out upon the long stretch of the park, all indistinct and blurred in the dim summer night. There lay the glade where he had gone to meet Lily,—damn her! the little jilt, the little fool who had escaped him, who had run away to make him follow, whom he had lost in the London streets. If he could but have found her and killed her, he felt as if he would have liked to do it. He would never have killed her; but to crush her, to humble her, to cover her with scorn and shame, would have been sweet. In the middle of his laugh about Lizzy Travers, thus offered to him, whom apparently he had only to put forth his hand and take, came in this image of the other, the country girl who had outwitted him, balked him, jilted him,—curse her! the little cheat, the little designing, mercenary flirt. He clenched his hand and set his teeth when he thought of it, still. He might have got over his fancy for her,—indeed, he had got over that; but the mortification, that was not so easy to forget. As he looked out over the dim trees in the direction of Lily's home, Stephen suddenly remembered that the pleasure of revenge was now easy to be had.

If he could not reach her, he could reach the father; he could crush the family, he could turn them adrift upon the world. When she found herself without a crust, without a rag, then she would repent bitterly enough, if she had not done it already. Revenge is sweet, everybody says,—at least the anticipation is sweet. It is to be hoped that Stephen would not in any case have carried out all that he intended, but it gave him a fierce satisfaction to think he could bundle Ford out of the lodge to-morrow, take his bread from him and his character, and ruin the bad lot of them! He went up to bed solaced by these thoughts, and presently laughed again when he thought of Lizzy Travers, the heiress, with all her money. She was not bad-looking, either; not mind taking a little trouble. But first he would have that Lily—lily, indeed! common weed that she was—cast out upon a dunghill, to perish there. Let us hope that he could not have been in any circumstances so bad as his thoughts.

XXXVI

AT THE RECTORY

EDMUND had little heart for the company of his father and brother; his own life seemed to have stopped with Roger's. It was not only natural affection and sorrow, but a sudden dropping of all the usual companionship. He seemed suddenly to have been left quite alone. As a matter of fact, Roger and he had been thrown more together in the last month or two than they had been since they were boys; and though they had both gone their own way, and were not what might be called of similar tastes, Edmund was himself surprised to find how much he had been in the habit of talking to Roger about the things that interested him. Already, in the short interval since his death, an incredible number of things had accumulated of which Edmund's first thought had been to tell them to Roger. And when he remembered that Roger was no longer there, and that there was nobody in the wide world whom he could tell them to, whom he would have cared to tell them to, a sense of great solitude came upon him. He felt himself as if in a desert. He seemed no longer to know anybody, to be able to exchange a word with any one. He was as lonely as if he had been upon a desolate island. Even little Nina, the poor little badly brought-up sister, who troubled his mind with her gossip,—even she was gone. With his father and Stephen he was on good enough terms, with no suspicion of hostility among them, but only a faint aversion in his own mind, a disinclination to have anything to do with them. He could be civil; he could be no more. He did not accuse them of anything,—even Stephen. He did not in his heart allow that Stephen had killed his brother; but he felt a little revulsion, a sort of mental sickening, at the sight of him. He had nothing to say to him; he did not like to be nearer him than he could help: that was the form his feeling took.

He felt a dreary vacancy around him; of the many things which had once interested him, nothing seemed to remain. He cared for

nothing, he had nobody to whom he could talk. When he thought of it, he felt that there was exaggeration in the feeling, and that Roger in life had not really been everything to him, as he now seemed to have been. It was perhaps only the form his sorrow took,—a sentiment which was its own reason, and for which no explanation could be made. He scarcely went out at all for some days, feeling a reluctance to look at the face of the world and resume intercourse with ordinary men. When he did go beyond the limits of the park, his feet carried him, almost without any will of his, to the Rectory. And yet it was the place to which he would have gone had he been in full possession of his will, for there was no one, he felt, who could understand him like Pax, who knew them both through and through. To her he could talk. He had scarcely even remembered her existence, in that first dull vacancy; it was a sign of the beginning of restoration when it occurred to him that with Pax he could talk over everything, without having to explain.

Thus it was almost a disappointment when he found the drawing-room at the Rectory tenanted, not by Pax, but by Elizabeth Travers. He stopped short, in the very act of coming in, when he perceived her. But after that first pause a shock of something like pleasure went through him. Unwittingly to himself, she did him more good by the mere sight of her than Pax could have done. The blood seemed to come back to his heart with a thrill, and personal feelings, wishes, consciousness, seemed to awaken suddenly, with a stinging pain, in his heart. But for the first moment he thought he was disappointed, and that, Pax not being there, his better plan was to go away.

Elizabeth rose up, colouring a little. She coloured still more when she saw his instinctive stop, and said hurriedly, 'Mr. Mitford! Oh, I'll go and find Pax,—she has only gone upstairs for something. I shall find her in a moment!'

He put out his hand to stop her movement. 'Don't go,' he pleaded, 'don't go.' There was a feeling in him as of the bursting out of wells in the desert. The heavy vacancy quivered into life. Ah, all this still remained, and he had thought that life was emptied out and deprived of all things! He became astonished at himself.

'I know—you must want Pax—and not a stranger,' Elizabeth said, with a quiver, too, of sympathetic feeling.

'You are not a stranger,' he replied, and then for a moment there was nothing more. He sat down near her, and wondered vaguely whether Roger could know that she was the first person he

had seen, the first to whom he would talk, after what they had said together that night.

It was she who broke the silence, after an interval which seemed long to her, but not to him.

'We were very sorry,' she said, faltering, 'very sorry,' and paused again, looking at him, telling him more clearly than in words how sorry she was, how changed she found him, and how she would fain have had something to say to comfort him. Then she repeated, as if nothing else would come, 'Very sorry, both my aunt and I——'

'I knew you would be. I think I've been dead, too, these last days.'

'Oh! I have heard—you have had everything to bear—and you look ill. You must care a little for yourself now.'

'That's poor comfort,' he returned, 'to care for one's self, when there's nobody else to care for.'

'But it has to be done, Mr. Mitford. Oh, Pax will know what to say to you much better than I do!'

'Don't go,' he begged again, 'don't go,' putting out his hand with an appeal to her, as she half rose. Elizabeth was more embarrassed than became her character. She wanted to escape, and neither knew how to do so nor what to say.

'In any case,' she said, 'though I am so little qualified to say so, we must not throw away our lives because we are unhappy. We have all our own place to fill—perhaps more—perhaps better than——'

Here she stopped, reddening with some emotion which she could not repress, the tears coming into her eyes.

Edmund apprehended faintly what she meant. 'You do not know,' he said hastily,—'no one knows—all that he was. He had not time to show what was in him.'

Miss Travers bowed her head, but there was a stiffness as of unconscious opposition in this assent. 'I saw—very little of him,' she said, faltering.

'We talked of you the last time we ever talked together.'

A sudden blush covered Elizabeth's face, a hot colour that looked like anger. She made another little constrained bow. 'I don't know what there could have been to say of me.'

He did not make any reply, for his mind had gone back to Roger's rooms in town,—to his brother, all unconscious of what was coming, conscious only of the dawn of a new life in himself; full of anticipations which were so different, so different from what had come. It was not till all this had passed before him that he

remembered what Roger had said of Elizabeth and these prognostications, which were as little likely to come to pass as those which he had imagined of his own career. And Edmund felt his tongue tied; he made her no answer, partly because he could not, seeing what it was that had been said, and partly that he would not lift the veil from his dead brother's plans and hopes.

At this moment Pax hurried in, with her arms held out to him and her eyes full of tears. 'Oh, Edmund!' she exclaimed, grasping him, giving him a motherly kiss. 'Oh, Edmund!' Not the worst comforters are those who have nothing to say in the way of consolation. When she loosed her arms, Pax sat down and cried, tears not only of sympathy, but of grief. 'Tell me,' she said, sobbing,—'tell me everything! I want to hear everything. Oh, who would have thought it, that my old father should get better at eighty, and Roger die! Oh, my dear Roger! my poor Roger! Tell me everything, Edmund!'

He did what she told him, and it was a relief to him. There had been no occasion to speak of what had passed with those who knew as much as himself, no family comparison of what each individual had seen and heard. It was a change from the dreadful monotony of the home atmosphere, in which Roger's name was no more mentioned, to live over all the incidents of his concluding days again. He sat beside Pax, and told her everything, as a brother might have done to a sister; she ever throwing in a new question, requiring every detail, her sobs now and then interrupting the narrative.

Elizabeth moved uneasily in her chair, then rose to go away, but was stopped again and again by a word from Pax. 'He doesn't mind you being there, and I want you,' she said in the midst of her tears. Miss Travers had no resource but to stay. She listened to the story of the deathbed, herself now and then greatly moved, yet contending with her feelings, something like indignation mingling with her involuntary sympathy, a look of reluctance and resistance on her face. She was angry with herself for being so much affected, yet unwilling to shed a tear for Roger. Edmund did not perceive this, in the preoccupation of his own sorrow,—not, at least, till he had nearly reached the end.

'And what part did Lily Ford take in all this?' inquired Pax at last.

At this utterance Elizabeth got up hurriedly and went to the window, where she stood, turning her back upon them, as if she could bear no more.

'Lily Ford!' exclaimed Edmund. 'What part should she have

taken? She did not even know that anything had happened, so far as I am aware.'

'And yet the poor boy was going to marry her! She might have gone and nursed him, at the least. Not that I hold with such nursing, but she might have offered—she might ——'

'I have no reason to suppose she knew anything about it,' replied Edmund. 'Don't blame her, poor girl!'

Elizabeth turned quickly from the window. 'Blame her?' she cried involuntarily.

Edmund turned half round to look at her, but he had no clue whatever to her meaning. He turned again to Pax. 'He had made out a draft of a kind of settlement,' he said,—'I found it among his papers,—to secure to her what money he had to leave. It was not very much.'

'That was like him,' said Pax, 'that was like him! My dear, I can't help being glad it never happened; but to take care of her future, as if she had been his own equal, as if she had had people to look after her interests,—that was like my Roger! Ah! you may say what you please, all of you, but I knew him best of all. He was in love with me once, bless him!—a woman who might have been his mother! It was nonsense, of course, but it gives me all the more right to him now. You none of you know him as I do! And what will you do about it, Edmund,—a thing that was never binding, of course, and never could be?'

'It shall be binding,' answered Edmund. 'I shall see that his intentions are carried out,—though she did not deserve that he should care for her so.'

'Not deserve!' cried Elizabeth, turning round again, the words bursting from her in spite of herself. Both of them, Pax drying her eyes, Edmund raising his head, looked up at her, wondering what she could mean. Elizabeth was very much moved; her colour came and went. 'Mr. Mitford,' she said, 'if you mean this to be a sort of compensation,—which I suppose was its intention at first,—I may say to you that Lily would never accept it, never! Oh, how could you think of such a thing! I know that nothing but good should be said of the dead, and I don't want to say a word—not a word. I am sorry, sorry to the bottom of my heart, for you. I know you will wish to think the best, naturally; and so should I. But Lily will never accept it! I—I happen to know ——'

It was with difficulty she could restrain her tears. To see Elizabeth, so composed and dignified as she was, in this strange state of excitement bewildered them both. What did she mean? The thought shot through Edmund's mind painfully, as if some one had

thrown an arrow or a missile at him, that she had cared for Roger more than she was aware, that she had resented his love for Lily, that Elizabeth was another victim. If it were so, Roger had never suspected it, and in that case all was waste, Elizabeth's love as well as the rest,—though had it but come to him! He looked at her with a pang that seemed to cut his heart in two. Elizabeth's love all wasted, when it might have made the world bloom again, and brought Eden out of the wilderness! The thought was very bitter, and the thought that she herself resented it, angry, excited, covering a pang which no doubt mortified as well as wounded her with this fierceness about Lily; taking Lily's part, as if Roger had meant her any wrong.

'She knows something we don't know,' observed Pax. 'You would not speak like that, Elizabeth, without thinking you had some reason.'

'I *have* reason; there is no thinking! Oh,' said Elizabeth, wringing her hands, 'it's not a moment to say anything! I am very wrong to have said anything. I am going home. I can't help it if I don't feel as you do. I am very, very sorry, all the same, Mr. Mitford, for you.'

'Let me go away, not you,' said Edmund, rising; 'it is time I did. It has done me a great deal of good to tell Pax. Thank you for your sympathy, Miss Travers. One day I wanted to tell you what Roger said, and perhaps that day may come still, but I see it cannot be now. Perhaps there were things he did not understand. He may have been absorbed in a foolish thought, and not have perceived what was a great deal more worth thinking of.' Edmund stopped when he had made this strange apology, remembering that if his discovery were a real one, this was not what Elizabeth would wish to have said; but it was too late to draw back.

Whatever she meant, however, it was clear enough that she did not understand what he meant. She looked him in the eyes in a strange way, with a fixed look, as if trying to convict him of something, he had not the least idea what. They looked earnestly at each other; he sorrowfully, grieving for her, for himself, for Roger, for everything thus lost and wasted; she severely, scarce able to contain herself, moved in a more intolerable way by the contradiction of some indignant resentment which contended with all the softer feelings in her heart. To both there came a vague sense that there was something more on either side than either comprehended, which neither could divine. Pax looked at them both with lips apart, with a gaze of wonder. It was seldom that

she had a difficulty before her which quite transcended her power of divination.

'Yes, Edmund, my dear,' she said, 'go; we have had our cry together, and it has done us both good. And Lizzy and you will never understand each other in this way. Leave her with me. Whatever her reason is it can't be a true one against our boy. We know better than that. Good-bye, Edmund, my dear!' Pax took him in her large embrace again, and put her wet cheek against his. 'It's miserable now,' she said, 'but it will not be so for ever. God bless you, my dear!'

He went away almost without looking round. Elizabeth held out her hand to him suddenly, as he passed her, and her hand trembled; but he did not know why, unless it was for the dear sake of Roger, against whom she was angry, he could not tell why. Because he had not loved her,—because he had loved Lily Ford? Would a woman be angry still, when the man was dead, at such a wrong? It seemed more fit that Edmund should be angry against Fate, who had thus let everything run to waste, and taken from him all hope of a new spring of life. But he had not the heart for any such feeling.

He went to the churchyard on his way home, and lingered long, looking at the outside of the vault in which Roger had been placed. There was not so much comfort in it as there would have been in the sod of a visible grave. It seemed to wrap the dead in a deeper darkness, to misrepresent all life and the meaning of life; as if everything were to fall into subterranean gloom, and all possibilities were to be piled together like so much rubbish in the bowels of the earth.

XXXVII

EDMUND OUT OF HEART

THERE were some subjects which were altogether ignored at Melcombe during the somewhat sombre period which the three gentlemen spent together there. They met scarcely at all, except at meals, and when they talked, which was never much, it was on public and impersonal subjects. Political questions had never been so thoroughly discussed in the house: they were more or less safe subjects. Mr. Mitford and Stephen were naturally Tories of the old school, who followed their party steadily, without any idea of independent judgment. It would have been against Mr. Mitford's principles to think on these matters; his ideas had been defined from before the beginning of time. He thought as his father did, and as he fully expected his son should do. Roger, had he lived, would have carried out the tradition faithfully enough, though with a more reasonable devotion to the tenets in which he had been trained. And Stephen, whose only virtuous point was a capacity for understanding discipline and the power of authority, followed his father closely, and was staunch as steel to the tradition of that old stubborn, all-resisting conservatism which is a most respectable sentiment, and has perhaps done England more good than all the new theories in the world. Edmund, also in strict conformity to nature, was of a totally different frame of mind. He was the second son. He was in her Majesty's opposition. But as he had no special political fervour or impassioned creed, his politics were much more theoretical than practical; he had none of the martyr impulse in him, and he was strong in that slightly contemptuous toleration which the only intellectual member of a family often feels for those who are not in the least given to independent thought. He knew he could not convince them, nor even make his point of view comprehensible to them, so he refrained from controversy. And in the present state of affairs it was a relief to let them talk upon subjects of public

moment on which they were entirely agreed, and on which he could occasionally say his say without too much offence. But on subjects more familiar there was little said. Roger was not named among them, nor did any one speak of the future or of what he intended to do. There were no confidences of any description in the strange little male group, which was a family party, yet had so little of the character of a family in it. Even little Nina, as Edmund felt more and more, would have been a relief. It would have been possible to say to her, 'What are you going to do this morning? Do you intend to walk, or to ride, or to drive?' Such questions were not put to each other by the three men, who only remarked that it was a fine day; that Lord So-and-So made a very good speech last night; that Tredgold, as chairman of quarter sessions, was ridiculously out of place; and that what with competitive examinations and all that the country was going to wreck and ruin. Edmund, for one, longed, amid all this talk, to be able to say to Nina, 'What are you going to do to-day?' but to Stephen he did not put that question, even when he had a distinct interest in knowing what Stephen meant to do.

His special interest in this question arose from the fact that Stephen and his father had spoken, in his hearing, of the household at Mount Travers in a manner which vaguely but powerfully excited Edmund. He had himself found his way there soon after his meeting with Miss Travers at the Rectory, and had been puzzled, yet not discouraged, by his reception. Elizabeth had received him with something which looked almost like agitation,—agitation suppressed and only to be divined, yet which betrayed itself to an observer so sympathetic in little changes of colour and momentary tremors, in sudden impulses and self-restraints, which were scarcely comprehensible and very perplexing. When any allusion was made to Roger, she stiffened at once into a marble-like impassiveness, more significant in the studied absence of all expression than the utmost show of feeling, keeping all his questions back. Was it an injured sense of love rejected? Was it the indignation and wounded delicacy of a woman who felt herself slighted for an object much less worthy? Edmund was unable to solve this mystery.

What made it still more difficult to understand was that Pax also put on to some degree the same manner, checking him in those talks which were almost the only relief his mind had by a hurried 'Poor Roger!' accompanied by a shake of the head and a change of subject, such as Edmund found it still more difficult to understand. 'God forgive him, poor boy, for all his imperfections! Lets' say no more,—let's say no more about it. By and by it

won't be so hard,' Pax said once. Why should it be hard to speak of him, now or at any time? To protest against the prayer that God might forgive him would have been vain indeed, for the best of men must have need to be forgiven; but when that is said between people who loved him, of one who is dead, it means something more than the imperfections which all men have before God. Edmund was greatly perplexed and unhappy, notwithstanding that there were in Elizabeth's manner to himself many signs which a vainer man might have built much upon: an air of almost tenderness in her look, a softness in her voice, as if sympathy for Edmund were somehow involved in her singular repugnance to any mention of his dead brother. Edmund frequented the roads between Melcombe and Mount Travers with a fascination for which he could scarcely account to himself. He wanted to see her, to speak to her of that last conversation with Roger, to tell her a tale which was all woven in with his brother's memory; and the more Elizabeth stiffened at all reference to him, the more indispensable it seemed to Edmund that she should know the complications of his story. He had been silent before for Roger's sake, and now she would give him no chance to show her what was in his heart.

He was so intent upon the explanation that he forgot how impossible it ought to be for him, the disinherited, to approach the heiress. Of that secondary subject he never thought at all. Perhaps it showed a dulness of perception in him. His mind was so full of what he had to say to her, of the story he would so fain have poured into her ear, of his long doubt and uncertainty, and final liberation from all hindrances, that he had no time to be tormented by the thought of her great fortune and his small one. That consideration no more entered into his mind than it would have entered into hers. A woman, in such a case, is better off than a man; but Edmund was as free from painful calculations of this sort as Elizabeth herself could have been. He forgot that what might have seemed to some supersensitive minds a new barrier between them had come into existence. He was so much occupied by other matters, by perplexity about her feelings and desire to disclose his own, that he had no leisure to think of anything else. And yet, though he was so eager to tell her his story, which was in reality the story of several past years, Edmund could not find opportunity nor courage to do so. Day after day he walked to the very gate, and then turned back, his heart having failed him. Once or twice he had gone farther, as far as the drawing-room, with its great plate-glass windows, when the sight of that sudden shutting up of her countenance silenced him in a

moment, and took all strength from him. In this way Elizabeth occupied his mind almost more than had she been his affianced bride. He could not make out the meaning of that look, almost stern in its sudden repression, or of the melting kindness with which she would turn to him after she had thus silenced him. Something stood between them,—he could not tell what; a shadow of Roger, a ghost which came chill between the two whom Roger had wished to see one. There could not be any doubt that it was Roger who was that shadow, but how or why Edmund could not divine. Had she loved him who had not loved her? Did she find herself unable to forgive him who had never divined that love, who had given his less worthily? But why then that softened look, that melting tone, to Edmund? He was bewildered by this question; it paralysed him; the words died from his lips, though he knew that until he said them he could have no rest.

But when he became aware that the same subject was being discussed between Stephen and his father, a singular excitement took possession of Edmund. He remembered the discussions between the Squire and Roger, the recommendations which were commands on one side, and insults on the other,—commands to his son to secure the heiress, insulting enumerations of the advantages to follow. Had this process begun over again? Had Stephen lent an ear more attentive than that of his elder brother to these inducements and recommendations, and was Edmund's brother again, and this time in earnest, to be his rival? The suggestion made his blood boil. Stephen to pretend to Elizabeth Travers! Stephen, who made no secret of his own estimate of women, and whose associates among them were sufficiently well known! He, with his garrison-town associations, his intrigues, his cynical incapacity for deeper emotion,—could it be in the possibilities of the future that Elizabeth had been reserved for him? Edmund's blood boiled at the thought. He said to himself that it was impossible,—that it could not be; but then he remembered how many things that are seemingly impossible come to pass, especially in such concerns. The shadow of Roger stood between himself and the woman he loved, but no such shadow was upon Stephen. Stephen would never perceive, even if it did exist for him, that indefinable something which closed Edmund's lips and made his heart fail him. Stephen would go forward boldly, whatever were the circumstances. No scare of the imagination would prevent him from pressing his suit. And who would say that amid all these complications Elizabeth herself might not find a certain relief in the addresses of a man who had nothing to do with the past, whose image was not

involved with Roger's, and who, though his brother, had so little in common with him, and was so entirely a new departure, a fresh competitor? In the hurrying excitement of his thoughts at sight of this new possibility, Edmund could not but see all that was in its favour. He was well aware of Stephen's advantages,—his good looks, his self-assurance, his boldness, even his position as virtually a stranger, an individuality little known. All this struck him with a horror which was not to be expressed. That which Roger in his folly had not sought, but might perhaps have obtained, that which Edmund himself would give his life for,—to think that it might come to Stephen at last! He said to himself that it was not possible; that Elizabeth's perceptions were too fine, her taste too delicate, for such a catastrophe,—but who could tell? How many tender women had fallen victims before to men as unworthy of them! How often had all prognostications been defied and all finer divination suspended!—for what could a woman really know of a man, in such circumstances, but the outward impression which he made, and how often was that outward impression a false one!

This was the thought which eventually roused Edmund out of the lethargy into which he had fallen. All the circumstances of his present position had combined to hold him in that suspense of being. Grief and that sense of injury with which such a grief is so often accompanied, the feeling of unworthiness triumphant, and the nobler and more true swept away before the tide of successful wrong,—Roger fallen, and Stephen raised in his place,—produced of themselves a partial arrest of all Edmund's faculties. The feeling was not a selfish one. He had never anticipated, never contemplated, the position of heir and future head of the family; but the extraordinary overturn of all justice or any moral balance in the world, when the good and true were thus thrown down to make way for the false and evil, produced in him that pause of hopelessness, that sense of incapacity to understand or contend with the apparently blind and inexorable fate that seems so often to shape human affairs, which makes action impossible, and sickens the heart. And then the curious attitude of Elizabeth, as incomprehensible as fate, repelling and attracting him at once, added so much more to the paralysing effect. But when he thought of Stephen's possible suit, the suit that he divined with an angry alarm which was more than jealousy, Edmund's dormant energy awoke. The man who had taken his inheritance, who had killed his brother, who had ruined Lily Ford, should not, must not, soil the pure name and break the heart of Elizabeth Travers. No!

She might not be for Edmund,—he believed she would never be for him,—but she must not be thrown away upon one unworthy.

Lily Ford! Edmund came to himself after the long suspension of his energies: he had not done his duty by his dead brother in this respect, at least, which Roger would have thought the most important of all. He had not sought out Lily, nor tried to save her, nor carried out Roger's wishes in regard to her. Edmund did not believe that it was possible to save Lily; but wherever the poor girl now was, she could not but be in trouble and misery, and to find her might be to save Elizabeth. The notion was, if not selfish, yet not single. It aimed at two objects, and the less direct was the more important in his eyes. But yet, apart from Elizabeth and all her concerns, he had a duty to Lily too. He was the executor of Roger's wishes, and it ought to have been his first business to find her. What matter that the thought of her was odious to him; that she embodied in her slightness and trifling unimportance all the misfortunes that had crushed Roger,—the loss of his tranquillity, his fortune, his career, finally his very life? A creature of so little account, with nothing but her prettiness, her foolish education; a girl whom Stephen's careless wooing could lead to her destruction,—and she had cost Roger everything, his happiness and his life! The thought roused in Edmund a silent rage against human fate and the helplessness of man, and towards her, the trifling instrument of so much harm, a sick contempt and indignation, a horror of the sight of her and of her ill-omened name. But yet he had a duty to fulfil, and perhaps—perhaps—her story might yet be of some service; it might save Elizabeth. It was this hope, more than any juster sentiment, which turned his steps toward the West Lodge. Mrs. Ford had appealed to him to find her daughter; and though he had not succeeded in doing that, the appeal justified his inquiries. Time had flown heavily but quickly during this interval of inaction; yet, after all, a month had not passed since Roger's death.

XXXVIII

THE WEST LODGE

It was about noon when Edmund approached the lodge, and everything recalled to him the last time he had been there, which was so short a while ago, and yet seemed to belong to another life. He remembered every incident, even all the appearances, of that day: the anxious mother hurrying out at the sound of his step; the father, all blanched in his rough out-of-door redness and brownness with the horror of a catastrophe which was worse than death; his passion and threats against the man who had betrayed his child, and the woman's pitiful attempts to restrain, to comfort him, while herself in the grip of despair. Poor people! tragic as their unintended influence had been, they themselves were not less to be pitied on that account; and he conjured up before him the miserable little house with all its happiness blighted, the shame that had taken the place of their foolish, innocent pride, the weight of suspense, or still more terrible knowledge, that must have crushed the unhappy father and mother, so that his heart had become very tender towards the unfortunate couple before he reached their door. After all, they were not to blame; and they had suffered even more bitterly than the family of the other victim.

It seemed to Edmund that he must see tokens of their wretchedness in the very air, as he drew near the little flowery place which had once been their pride; and to see the garden as bright as ever, the tall lilies, from which their child had got her name, standing with all their buds ready to open along the sunny borders, and everything in summer order, full of sweetness and bloom, filled him with involuntary surprise. The morning sun shone upon the red roof and waving trees; the door stood open; a tranquil cat lay sunning herself upon the window ledge; a brood of little yellow chickens flitted about under the charge of an anxious mother hen. Nothing more peaceful, more full of humble

ease and comfort, could be. The whole seemed to breathe a silent contradiction to Edmund's troubled thoughts. Yet the sun will shine, the flowers will bloom, the unconscious creatures thrive and enjoy their little life, whatever misery may reign within the house, he said to himself, with a curious sense of incongruity, almost of disappointment.

To his astonishment he heard voices in raised and angry tones within the house, and, unconsciously listening, distinguished with consternation indescribable the voice of Stephen addressing some one with loud authority. 'You must clear out of here!' he was saying, in a tone so little subdued that any passer-by must have heard. 'I know nothing about notice. I tell you you must clear out of here. I want the place. Get out at once: do you hear? You'll be paid in place of your notice, if you've any right to it, which I don't believe you have. You think I'm to be put off with tricks and excuses, to gain time, but you're mistaken. You must get out to-morrow at latest: do you hear? I want the place for a servant of my own.'

'Sir,' replied the voice of Mrs. Ford, 'my 'usband's not here, and I can't make you no answer; but turn a servant away there's no master can, without warning. I've been in service all my life, and if I didn't know that, who should? It's all the protection poor servants has. I'm not saying nothing again going——'

'You had better not,' said Stephen, 'or I'll have you turned out, which perhaps would be the quickest way.'

'I said as I'm not saying nothing again going,' said Mrs. Ford, raising her voice. 'We've allays meant to go. It's not as if we were badly off or had no friends; and Ford isn't one as can stand new masters and new laws. He's ready to go, but he won't go without his warning, as if he was turned off for something bad. I don't want to say nothing disrespectful, but we has our pride the same as other folks, and Ford, he won't stir without his legal warning. I mightn't stand out myself,' the woman continued, with a sound as of coming tears, 'for the sake of peace, but Ford, he's not that sort of a man; he'll not be turned out like a thief,—him as has served the Squire man and boy.'

'Don't give me any of your impudence,' said Stephen; 'that is just how he shall be turned out. I give you your choice,—clear out at once, or I'll have the police to-morrow to throw your things out of the window. Hallo! what do *you* want here?'

This was addressed to Edmund, who had come in unnoticed, behind him, to the little trim kitchen, where Mrs. Ford stood on her own hearth as in a citadel, flushed, with a look of resistance

on her homely face, but her apron in her hand, ready to wipe off the angry tears which were very near coming, and a huskiness growing in her throat.

'What is the matter?' said Edmund. 'There must be some mistake. I could not help hearing what you were saying. What has Ford done? My father would never bundle them out in this way unless there's a very serious reason; he will listen to what they've got to say.'

Stephen turned round upon his brother with a flushed and furious face. 'You had better mind your own business, Ned! I've got this to do, and I'll allow no one to interfere.'

'And as for what we've got to say,' cried Mrs. Ford shrilly, turning upon the newcomer,—'we've got nothing to say, sir. I wouldn't stay, not if I was paid to do it. We've got better friends than ever the Mitfords was, that won't see us put upon. And there's no man livin' as can have a better character than my man. But we'll have our warning. Police! Them that dares name such a name to me know well as my man's out o' the way, and I've nobody to stand up for me. Police!' Her voice ran off into a shriek. 'For shame of yourselves as call yourselves gentlefolks, and can come and insult a woman like that!'

'There must be some mistake,' repeated Edmund. 'No one shall insult you while I am here. Stephen,'—he turned and faced his brother, laying his hand on his arm,—'whatever you have against these people, let it be referred to my father. You know he will never turn them out; and it's not for you——'

Stephen threw up the arm which his brother had touched with a fierce gesture, which brought back to both their minds another scene. He was about to reply furiously, but the angry exclamation was stopped on his lips by that recollection. He gave Edmund a look of baffled rage. 'I'll refer it to no man,' he cried, 'and I'll be questioned by no man, and I'll not argue with *you*, either. You know what I've got to say. Clear out of this at once, or by Jove! I'll——' Stephen, however, was made of flesh and blood, like other people. He could not stand against the thoughts thus evoked. He turned round upon his heel and quitted the house, leaving his threat unsaid. The ghost of Roger came up again, and protected the humble place. He could not stand before that shadow, though he saw nothing, and though he was not in any way turned from his purpose; but for the moment his soul was disturbed, and he could say no more.

Mrs. Ford did not know why he had abandoned the field. She thought it was perhaps Edmund, always her friend, who had driven

forth the enemy; but when the angry visitor had withdrawn, those tears which were so near falling came at once. 'Oh, that any gentleman should have named the police to me!' she cried. 'Oh, that I should have lived to be threatened with that, and my things thrown out o' window! Mr. Edmund, don't say nothing, for I'll never forget it, I'll never forget it; not if the Squire was to come on his bended knees, and ask me himself to stay!'

'I am very sorry,' observed Edmund. 'I don't understand it. I came to——' He paused here, and looked round the comfortable room, where there was no sign of neglect or downfall. It was quite true that Mrs. Ford was the sort of woman to keep her house tidy, whatever happened, but he could not associate the trim room with any misfortune. 'I have not seen you,' he said, 'since before —the great trouble we have had.' He felt that it would be easier to inquire into her circumstances after he had made some allusion to his own.

For a moment Mrs. Ford stopped her angry sobs. 'Oh, sir,' she cried, 'we was very sorry! Nobody would ever have spoken to me like that if Mr. Roger had a' been to the fore! Oh, I don't hold with new masters that can speak like that to a woman, and her husband's back turned. And us that didn't mean to stay,— us as was going to give warning from one day to another! But without he has his just warning, Ford'll never go. He's a man as stands upon his rights!'

'When I was last here,' said Edmund, 'you were in great trouble.'

Mrs. Ford took scarcely a moment to recover herself. She put down her apron from her eyes, which were still wet, but immediately became watchful and full of strange defiance and light. 'Was we, sir?' she asked, with an appearance of surprise and a sudden smile, as if the affair had been so trifling as to escape her memory.

'You were in great trouble,' repeated Edmund, with some impatience. 'You were almost in despair. Lily had left home, and you didn't know where she was. You thought it might have been my brother Roger'—Edmund spoke the words with an effort —'who had taken her away.'

'Lord bless us!' said the woman, 'what things do get into folks' heads! I remember now. I was just like a mad woman. Ford, he never gave in to it——'

'I beg your pardon, Ford was as bad, or worse, than you. He said he would kill the man who——'

'So he did,—so he did! Them things go out of your mind when you find out as it was all silly fancies and not true. Dear, bless us all! so we did; ravin' like mad folks, as if our Lily——

Mr. Edmund, I don't blame you; you think as poor folks has no feelings; but I wouldn't have put you in mind of the like of that, if I had been you!'

She gave him a look of injured feeling, yet of magnanimous forgiveness, and laughed a little, with her apron still held in her hand.

'It was thoughtless of the child,' she continued, looking down upon the apron, which she twisted in her fingers. 'I don't say nothing else. But one as never thought a wrong thought, nor knew what wickedness was, how was she to suppose as we'd take such fancies into our heads? I was that ashamed I couldn't look her in the face,—to think as I had ever mistrusted my Lily! But, thank God! she don't know, not to this day; and them as would tell her would be cruel,—oh, it would be cruel! I would sooner die nor do it, though I'm nothing but a poor woman, and no scholard nor a gentleman, like you!'

'You may be sure,' replied Edmund, 'that Lily shall never hear anything of the sort from me. I am very glad your fears have turned out to be vain. Is she here now?'

'She's far better off,' answered Mrs. Ford. 'She's with friends that think a deal of her,—oh, a great deal of her! She's kept like a lady, and never puts her hand to a thing but what she pleases, and books to read and a pianny to play upon, and everything she can set her face to. Oh, she's better off than she could be with Ford and me.'

'Is this the account she gives you? Are you quite sure it is true? Don't you know where she is?' Edmund asked, with again a sickening thrill of horror. 'Do you take all this merely upon her word?'

'I'd take the Bank of England upon her word!' cried the mother, with a confusion of ideas not difficult to understand. 'Me and the lady—the lady that makes Lily so happy—more happy,—and I do grudge a bit to know it, I'll not deny my mean ways—more happy than she was with me.'

'Mrs. Ford,' said Edmund, 'are you sure you are not being once more deceived?' He was very much in earnest and very serious; confused more than it is possible to say by the mother's evident ignorance, by Stephen's strange appearance here, which was scarcely credible if Lily was still in his power, and by all the bewildering circumstances which seemed to contradict each other. Mrs. Ford, on her side, flung her apron from her, and confronted him with a glowing countenance and eyes aflame.

'I was never deceived!' she cried. 'Me, deceived! Oh if I

was weak for a moment, and came and cried out to you in my trouble, it was because I was a silly woman and didn't know no better. Deceived! I could tell you a name as would bring you down on your knees, Mr. Edmund, to ask her pardon,—yes, on your knees, that's the word! Lily's where she has a right to be and that's among ladies, like what she is herself; ladies as is her friends and our friends too,' cried Mrs. Ford, 'mine and my 'usband's, all for the sake of Lily, and has offered us a home, and a better home nor here. And Ford, he was to have given the master warning this very day, if it hadn't been as my heart just clung a bit to the flowers. But without his warning he'll not budge a step,—no, not for all the police in the world, neither him nor me; and you may tell the master that, Mr. Edmund! We've served him honest and true for more than twenty year; is that a reason to turn us out like thieves at a day's notice? But we'll not go without our just warning,—no, not a step, neither Ford nor me.'

Mrs. Ford made this long speech with a fervour and passion which had its natural result, and plunged her at the end into a fit of indignant tears.

'I don't understand it,' returned Edmund. 'I am sure my father never meant this. There must be some mistake. And Stephen—what Stephen could mean—— I am bewildered altogether. I don't understand your story, and I don't understand his action; but I promise you you shall not be turned out if I can help it; certainly you shall not be turned out.'

'Oh, sir, I can tell you what he means; he's got somebody of his own as he wants to put in, and it's well known that there's little mercy for them as comes in Mr. Stephen's way. I wouldn't be in Mr. Stephen's power, not for anything that could be given me; and that's why I could bite my tongue out that I wouldn't let Ford give warning. Oh, it's easy to understand Mr. Stephen; he don't let no one stand in his way.'

'You are doing my brother injustice,' Edmund said; but he had little spirit in Stephen's cause, and he was too much bewildered to be able to see light one way or another. That Stephen should thus venture to insult the people he had so deeply injured seemed beyond belief, and so was the whole confused mystery of Lily,—the ladies with whom she was supposed to be, the friends, though the unhappy mother had declared at the first stroke of the calamity that she had no friends. Edmund did not know what to think or say. He went back across the park completely perplexed, feeling that he had lost every landmark, and all was chaos and confusion

around him. Was it, after all, the common tale of betrayal and ruin? Was it something entirely different? Was Stephen the cold-blooded destroyer, who, after he had ruined the daughter, could attempt to conceal his crime by driving away the helpless poor people from their home? He could not tell what to think. Was there perhaps some unsuspected third party, who was the criminal or who was the saviour? Edmund felt that he could make nothing of it, one way or another. As for the hope which he had entertained of injuring Stephen in the eyes of Elizabeth by means of Lily's wretched story,—for that was how his project now appeared to him,—he felt ashamed to the bottom of his heart of this unworthy purpose. Stephen was without mercy, without kindness, bent on his own ends, and tolerating no interference; but in this matter, perhaps, after all, he was innocent. He could not have tried to crush Lily's parents if Lily had owed her destruction to him: a man may be bad, but not so bad as that! Compunction came into Edmund's soul; to do injustice to any man was terrible to him.

A brief conversation which he had with Stephen before dinner did not, however, mend matters. Stephen took the first word. He asked what the devil Edmund meant by interfering with what was no business of his.

'As much of mine as yours,' retorted Edmund; 'more, perhaps, since I know the people better. You could not really think of taking it upon yourself to turn one of my father's old servants away?'

'Old servants be——!' exclaimed Stephen. 'A pair of detestable old hypocrites! What use is an old fellow like that in the covers? I'll have all those vermin of old servants cleared away.'

'Fortunately you are not the master, Steve. No, neither am I; I pretend to no authority.'

'I should hope not,' rejoined Stephen, with an insolent laugh; 'you're out of it, at least. And I can tell you I'll stand no nonsense, Ned,—no protecting of a set of rogues and toadies. They think they can defy me, and that Mr. Edmund will see them righted, as they call it. I'll have none of that. The estate is to be mine, and I mean to manage it my own way.'

'The estate is not yours while it is my father's, Stephen; and I shall certainly appeal to him not to suffer the Fords to be turned out in this summary way. They are old retainers,—they were favourites of my mother.'

'Oh yes, to be sure; and the pretty daughter! There was perhaps more than one of us hit in that quarter,' cried Stephen,

with a rude laugh. 'That explains everything. It is a crime to meddle with *her* father, eh?'

He stood with insolent eyes fixed upon Edmund's, a flush on his face, defiance in his look. Edmund did not know the keen pang of mortification in Stephen's mind which made him seize this opportunity of mischief, and there was something exasperating in the look which tried his patience almost beyond endurance. It was the second time in which all his self-control had been necessary not to strike his brother to the ground. They stood straight up in front of each other for a moment, looking into each other's faces like deadly foes, not like brothers. Then Edmund turned slowly away.

'We cannot fight,' he said, 'because we are both Mitfords, and I will not dishonour my father's house by a scuffle; but you know what I think better than if I said it, either by words or blows.'

'That for your blows!' cried Stephen, snapping his fingers; but he turned away more quickly than his brother. Even he could not but feel that there had already been enough of that.

XXXIX

THE SQUIRE IN THE WRONG

THEY both watched their father during the hour of dinner, which passed as usual, in a suppressed antagonism and careful avoidance of dangerous subjects. But neither Edmund nor Stephen had the advantage for that night. Mr. Mitford fretfully declined to listen to what either had to say. He had no mind for a discussion with the son who was now his eldest son, and to whom he was doing wrong. His conscience was not very tender, but it was vulnerable in this respect. There could be no doubt that he was wronging Edmund. Edmund, perhaps, had not been too complaisant. He had stood by Roger, and deserted his father; but Roger was dead, poor fellow, and except in that point the Squire was aware that Edmund had given him no just cause of offence; and yet he was cast out of his natural place and disinherited for no reason. Mr. Mitford could not bear to think of it; and to allow himself to be let in, as he said, for a discussion with that fellow at night, when there could be no chance of deliverance, when he probably would bring up everything and go over the whole ground—— No, no; the Squire took refuge in the first excuse which occurred to him, and that was a headache. 'I don't feel at all the thing,' he remarked. 'I've got a very queer feeling here,' tapping his forehead as he spoke. 'It's worry and the hot weather, and things in general. Robson is very decided on the subject. I am never to bother about business, he tells me, when I feel like this. I suppose it will do to-morrow?'

'It will do to-morrow, certainly,' assented Edmund, looking at Stephen, 'so long as I am assured that no further steps will be taken.'

'Steps taken! I should like to see any man taking steps on my property without my knowledge,' the Squire said, still more fretfully. The secret trouble in his conscience was telling upon him more than the hot weather. The power to do as he liked

with his own was very dear to him, but he could not obliterate the sense of justice which was in his imperious and selfish, yet not altogether undisciplined nature. There were things which he could not do with any ease of mind, and Edmund's disinheritance hurt him, even though he was not brave enough to undo it. The safest thing for him, with that queer feeling in his head against which the doctor had warned him, was to cast that thought behind him, though it was not very easy to do, and above all to avoid agitating conferences with his son whom he had wronged, at the dead of night, so to speak.

'I think I'll go to bed early,' said the Squire. 'I'm not up to any more worry to-night. To-morrow you can say what you like, Ned: it's fresher and cooler in the morning. I'll hear then all you've got to say.'

'It is not very much I have got to say; a few minutes would do it.'

'I tell you,' cried the Squire angrily, 'I can't bear any worry to-night!'

'Don't disturb yourself, sir. I'll see to everything—you may leave it to me,' said Stephen. 'You ought to be saved all worry, at your time of life.'

Mr. Mitford turned furiously upon his younger son, though his head, with that leap of the angry blood to his temples, felt more queer than ever. 'What do you know about my time of life?' he asked. 'I'll trouble you to let me and my affairs alone. I'll have no man meddle in my affairs. You think I am in my dotage, I suppose; but you shall find out the difference.' He could not refrain from a threat, though it was vague; not like the threats which had failed to subdue Roger, for the shame of changing his mind a second time was strong upon the Squire. He could not, he felt, do that sort of thing a second time.

But when he had retired to his library, and closed the door, though he could shut out both the son he had wronged and the son he had promoted, he could not shut out the troublesome thoughts that tormented him, nor return to the easy mind which used to be his. That shadow of Roger, dead, stood by him as it stood by Stephen, as it stood between Edmund and Elizabeth. The birthright with which, in his passion and self-will, he had interfered would not allow itself to be forgotten. His head continued to throb, the pulse kept on beating in his temples. Finally that commotion in his head, which he could not get the better of, drove him to bed, which was the best place for him, and where he slept heavily but soundly, far beyond the reach of the

interrupting and disturbing elements round him. Nothing as yet had occurred in his life which had proved capable of keeping the Squire from his sleep.

Edmund was admitted to an audience next day, when Mr. Mitford was quite himself again. To see him seated there, clean-shaved, faultlessly arrayed in his light shooting suit, with a rose-bud in his buttonhole, and his complexion almost as clear as the flower, no one could have believed in the head that felt queer, the temples that beat, the blood which ran in so strong a tide. He looked perfectly cool and calm, as he sat behind his writing-table, in all that fresh array of good health and good manners,—but not, perhaps, perfectly good manners; for he was angry with Edmund still, because he felt that he had wronged him.

'Well,' he observed, half roughly, 'what is it you have got to say?'

'I feel as if we were boys again, and I was the sneak who was coming to tell. Have you heard anything about it, sir, from Stephen?'

'Stephen takes too much upon him,' answered the Squire. 'Whatever may happen in the end, by George! I'm master of my own concerns in the meantime, and neither Stephen nor any one else shall interfere.'

'I will make no complaint of Stephen. What I want is that you should protect some poor people, who perhaps don't deserve very much at our hands, but it is not any fault of theirs. It seems strange I should come to you about them. I want to speak about the Fords.'

'The Fords!' The Squire muttered something under his breath, which might be forgiven him, though it was not a blessing. 'What, that girl again!' he said, with something hoarse and husky in his voice. 'Don't tell me that it's you this time, Ned. Is she a witch or what is she, that her name should come up between us again?'

'It is nothing about her,' Edmund cried, with a sense of profounder sympathy with his father than he had yet felt.

But before he could enter into further explanations he was interrupted by Larkins, who came in solemnly with a card. 'The gentleman would like to see you, sir, on business,' he said.

'Gavelkind! Who's Gavelkind? I've heard the name before. What's his business,—did he tell you what was his business? I can't let every stranger in that comes to me on business. It might be an old-clothes man, for anything one can tell, though I think I know the name; it's a queer name.'

'I know both the name and the man, sir; you have met him at Mount Travers. He is the man who manages all their business affairs.'

'Oh, at Mount Travers! Show him in, Larkins.' The Squire looked up with a half-humorous, puzzled look. He was not humorous by nature, but the occasion moved him. 'It can't be her—herself—sending to propose—for Stephen?' Mr. Mitford said.

'For Stephen!' Edmund did not see any humour in the suggestion. He did not laugh, as his father did; a deep red mounted to his face. 'Why for Stephen?' He forgot the absurdity of the idea altogether in the keen pang of thus being left out of all calculation. His mind had not dwelt upon the loss of what was now his birthright, but to be thus put out of the question was a cutting and insulting injury. He awaited the entrance of Mr. Gavelkind with mingled anxiety and offence; of course what the Squire said was altogether ridiculous in every way, but yet—— He recovered his common sense, happily, and his usual colour before Mr. Gavelkind came in, with his absent look, yet keen, penetrating eyes, his head projecting in a forward stoop from his thin shoulders, a very large hat in his hands.

'I have come from Miss Travers,' he said, when he had seated himself. He had given one of his quick looks, as he came in, at Mitford and his son, but he did not look at the Squire as he spoke. He raised one leg across the knee of the other and caressed it, slowly smoothing the cloth of his trousers as if it had been a child. 'I've come to make some inquiries.'

Whether he paused to tantalise their curiosity, or to make a little mystery, or to get his breath, or for nothing at all, it would be hard to say; probably the last was the true explanation. He attached no importance to what he had to say, and did not imagine that it would excite any special interest; but half because of the Squire's jest, half from the general excitement which was in the air, both father and son listened as if some special intimation were about to be made.

'Yes?' remarked Mr. Mitford. 'I'll be happy to answer any of Miss Travers's inquiries. I only wish she had come to put them herself.'

'I suppose that's impossible, in the circumstances,' returned the lawyer. 'I'm sure I don't know why. Ladies go to many places a great deal less suitable than the house of a man that might be their father; but that's neither here nor there.'

'And of one who would have no objection to be her father,'

said the Squire with a laugh. 'You can tell her I said so; she has always been a great favourite of mine.'

'There are many people with whom she is a favourite, especially now when she has all her uncle's money. Perhaps you, like me, Mr. Mitford, liked her before; but, as I was saying, that's not the question. It appears there's a man in your service whom she wishes to take into hers.'

'Several, I shouldn't wonder,' said the Squire, 'and there is one I can recommend. To tell the truth, we were planning to go over to Mount Travers for the purpose.' And at this intended witticism he laughed loudly, which was not, to do him justice, Mr. Mitford's way. But perhaps to have been seized with a humorous idea had demoralised him. He was proud of the unusual good thing, and wanted to keep up the joke.

'Ah,' said Mr. Gavelkind, looking vaguely round with eyes that made a slight pause upon Edmund. The Squire felt that he had made a mistake, and naturally hastened to make it worse.

'No, not that fellow,' he cried; 'he hasn't spirit enough to teach a pretty girl to know her own mind.'

It was all so entirely out of character, so unbecoming, almost indecent, such a wild and causeless betrayal of his plans to a man who as likely as not might be his adversary, that the Squire lost his head altogether; and the fact that he was more than half conscious of his folly only made it the greater. 'I've got a soldier boy,' he added.

Edmund got up, and walked hastily away. It is difficult to sit still and hear one's own people commit themselves, even when one is not much in sympathy with them. But after the momentary impulse of vexation, he came as hastily back, conscious, as it followed him, though he could not see it, of the sober lawyer's wondering, inquiring glance. 'Mr. Gavelkind can scarcely have come to make inquiries concerning your sons, sir,' he remarked.

'No,' said the lawyer, still smoothing assiduously the cloth of his trousers, 'it was not that. Ladies don't make the inquiries they ought in that sort of way. It's about a man of quite a different sort,—far less important, no doubt. He's been game-keeper at Melcombe, I hear, for a number of years, and now I'm told he's going to be turned off summarily. Miss Travers would take him into her service, knowing something of his family; but she would like to know first if there is anything really against him. Dismissal at a moment's notice, after a service of years, looks bad. It seemed to me that, before allowing her to decide, I had better inquire.'

Mr. Mitford looked from Edmund to the speaker, and back again. He had been checked, and almost snubbed, and was aware that he deserved it. The consciousness made him somewhat angry and more than ever severe. 'Who is it?' he asked sharply.

'It's a man of the name of Ford. I suppose I must allow that there's been some kind of negotiation going on before this. For some reason or other,—I suppose because she thought him a trustworthy man,—Miss Travers had offered him——'

'Ford!' said the Squire, interrupting almost rudely. 'Why, that's the second time I've heard of Ford this morning, and it was you, Ned——'

'I came to tell you, sir, just what Mr. Gavelkind has told you; that by some mistake, which I don't understand, Ford had been told that he must leave at once. There could be no reason for it,—it could be nothing but a mistake.'

'Ford!' the Squire repeated. 'Why, he's the—hum—ha—I don't understand what you mean. Ford! I've not said anything about Ford. I had forgotten the fellow's very existence, with all I've had to think of.'

'I knew that must be the case,' said Edmund eagerly. 'You see my father had no such intention. It was a mistake.'

'The mistake must have gone pretty far,' said Mr. Gavelkind, 'for it appears the man came over this morning to say that he was threatened with the police if he did not turn out to-day.'

'I should like to know by whom!' cried the Squire. 'Ford! Well, yes, I wasn't over-pleased with him once. I meant to get rid of them, Ned, you know. I don't take it kindly of Miss Travers that she should parley with my servants, Mr. Gavelkind, and the fellow had better go; but I never said a word about him, and I should like to know who's taken upon himself to interfere. It's a confounded piece of impertinence, whoever has done it.'

'I may conclude, then, that there's nothing against the man,' said Mr. Gavelkind, with his mild voice. 'There's some private reason which makes Miss Travers take an interest in him. Ladies are governed greatly by private reasons, which they don't always confide to their man of business. Nothing against him, Mr. Mitford? Trustworthy, and all the rest of it; so that if he does leave your service after all——'

'He's free to leave my service as soon as he likes!' cried the Squire. 'I had very nearly sent him off,—how long is it since, Ned? I'd rather never hear the fellow's name again. But I don't think Miss Travers should meddle with another man's servants,' he said, calming himself down, with his usual prudential after-

thought. 'I've the highest opinion of the lady,—the very highest opinion; but between gentlemen, Mr. Gavelkind—— Ah, I forgot; it's not between gentlemen; it's——'

'Between a lady and a man it's not such plain sailing,' remarked the lawyer. 'Some stand out, all the same, and for my part I think none the worse of them; but a great many give in; and when you're not married to them, nor bound to them,' Mr. Gavelkind added reflectively, 'perhaps it is the best way.'

'She's got no preserves that I know of, and not much forest land nor wood of any kind to speak of; what does she want with Ford? On second thoughts,' said the Squire, with a vague notion that Ford had something to tell which might be supposed to be to the discredit of the family, 'I think I'd rather keep the man. He knows every inch of my covers, and he's useful in his way.'

'But since he's ordered off, on the risk of being turned out by the police if he doesn't go to-day——'

This brought the purple flush again to Mr. Mitford's brow. 'I've got to find out who's done that!' he cried. 'Who's done it, Ned? It's confounded impertinence, whoever it is. By George! if I find the man who has taken it upon himself to interfere——'

'I think I've accomplished my business,' said Mr. Gavelkind. 'I mustn't stop you from proceeding with yours. The man's honest, I may say, if it should come to anything with Miss Travers? Present employer wishing to retain him always the best testimonial. No, she doesn't do anything in the way of game, and what she wants with a keeper is more than I can say. But ladies go upon private reasons, and nothing more was confided to me. I wish you good-morning, Mr. Mitford.' The old lawyer gave Edmund a look which indicated his desire for further talk. 'I wish you'd come and see them,' he said, in a low tone, as Edmund accompanied him to the door. 'There's something going on I don't understand. There's some mystery among the ladies, I don't know what it is. I wish you'd come and see.'

'I fear I have no eye for mysteries; and I am not sure that they care to see me; why should they? I am not a very cheerful guest.'

'Of course they care to see you,' said the old lawyer. 'Don't lose your chance for nonsense, if you'll allow me to say so. And you know a little about human nature, so you must have an eye for mysteries. Come and see them; and come while I'm still there.'

XL

AN ALTERCATION

'EDMUND!'

Before Edmund could get his hand free from the lingering clasp of Mr. Gavelkind, his father's voice was loudly audible, calling him, which was a very unusual thing to hear in Melcombe. The call was repeated with some vehemence before he could obey. He was absent scarcely five minutes, but the Squire regarded even that little interval with suspicion; and in the meantime the scene had changed. Stephen had come in when the visitor withdrew, and had, it was evident, been hotly received; for though he had thrown himself into a chair with an appearance of indifference, his attempt at ease was belied by the heated colour on his cheeks. Mr. Mitford was fulminating across his writing-table. He turned his wrath upon the newcomer without a pause.

'What did you want of that old rogue, Ned? They're all rogues, the lot of them, and up to something or other now,—that's clear,—trying to embroil me with Lizzy Travers. And you go over to the other side, of course, and desert mine! Come in, and shut the door. Now you're both here, perhaps I may get to understand. Who is it that takes upon himself to interfere in the management of my affairs? No one has ever done it till now, and by George! I'll not have it! I'll not have it! Not if you were twice the men you are, both Stephen and you!'

'I don't know what you are in such a rage about,' remarked Stephen. 'It is not much more than a week since you ordered me to send in my papers, that I might be free to take the trouble off your hands.'

'I said nothing of the sort, sir. I never said anything of the sort. I could not have said it, for I certainly never meant it!' cried the Squire.

'If you please to say so,' returned Stephen, with cool impertinence; 'there was no witness present, to be sure. It must go

either by your word or mine. It's a conflict of testimony, that's all.'

'Do you mean to say I am telling a lie, sir?' the Squire demanded furiously.

'Oh, not at all; it is not I who make such accusations. I only say that it is clear one of us has made a great mistake.'

'And that's I, of course, you mean to imply?'

'I never said so, sir,' replied Stephen, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Mr. Mitford was very angry. He got up and walked about the room, with his hands deeply dug into his pockets, saying to himself from time to time, 'By George!' with other exclamations perhaps less innocent. It was as good a way as another of blowing off his wrath. Meanwhile, the culprit sat with an air of coolness and contemptuous indifference which exasperated his father more and more, stretching out his long legs in such a way as to bar the passage and confine the Squire to his own side.

'If I ever said a word that could be twisted into such a meaning, it must have been when I thought you a little serious, impressed by what had happened,—as you might have been, if you had any feeling: but there's no feeling of that sort left in the world, so far as I can see. Here's one of you trying to get the reins out of my hands, and the other holding secret confabs with a pettifogging lawyer, a fellow that wants to bring me to book,—me!' the Squire cried, with an indignant, almost incredulous sense of undeserved insult and injury. 'Heaven knows I have had trouble enough, one way or another, on account of my sons,' he went on, changing into a tone which was almost tearful; for to think of all he had suffered overcame him with self-pity. 'All the trouble I have known has been connected with one or other of you. The man who has no children has the best of it. But there is one thing you may be quite sure of, and you had better both of you mark what I have to say. I will not have you meddling in my affairs. Thank Heaven, I'm very well capable of minding my own business. Whatever I may be supposed to have said, this is my last word. I'll have none of your meddling,—neither yours, Stephen, nor yours, Ned; neither the one nor the other! The first man who interferes shall go. I'll have none of it—I'll have ——'

Stephen got up from his chair with a laugh, shaking himself out of all creases in his well-fitting clothes. 'That's just what I should like, for one,' he remarked. 'Don't restrain your feelings, sir. I am delighted to go.'

Mr. Mitford turned like a bull who is confronted by a new assailant; but a man and a father cannot take a ribald upon his horns, like that well-provided animal. He stared for a moment, with fiery eyes that seemed to be leaping from their sockets, and then he recognised, as the angriest man must, that barrier of the immovable which an altogether unimpressionable human being, however insignificant, can place before the most mighty. Stephen was not to be influenced by any of those causes which make it possible for a domestic despot to have his way. He was not afraid of the penalty involved. He had no reluctance to see his father compromise his own dignity by unbecoming threats or violence. Edmund, moved by that sentiment, had turned away, willing rather to submit or to retire than to be thus compelled to witness a scene which made him ashamed for his father. But Stephen knew none of these delicacies; he was entirely free from all such restraints. The Squire was like any other old fellow, who threatened a great deal more than he could ever perform. And Mr. Mitford recognised this, as he stared at the heir of his choice, this young man to whom he had given the chief place in the family,—that being, quite invulnerable, untouched by sympathy, natural respect, or human feeling, who is the fit and only opponent of the family tyrant. He stared and gasped with exasperation unspeakable, and the feeling that Jove's thunderbolt would be the only effectual instrument to level the rebel to the ground instantaneously. Perhaps, vulgarly considered, Prometheus was something of this intolerable sort to the father of gods and men. The cool cynicism of Stephen's eyes struck his father like a blow. They said, 'You have done that once too often already. Do it,—I'd like it. Make an old fool of yourself!' But after that astonished, incredulous stare of the Jupiter *manqué*, Mr. Mitford came to himself. Passion itself could not stand before those cynic eyes. Virtue and heroic suffering are alone supposed to possess this restraining power; but perhaps it will be found that the less elevated defiance has the greater influence, the sneering devil being more potent with the common mind than the serious hero. Mr. Mitford made the discovery that in whatsoever way he might be able to establish his authority, this way would not do. He solaced his personal discomfiture by an attack upon the one remaining, who would not flout nor defy him, and turned upon Edmund with a snort of wrath.

'Perhaps you think you'll curry favour with Lizzy Travers,' he cried, 'by playing into her hands, and defying me. You'll find that's not so; she's not the girl to encourage a man to desert his own side.'

Edmund was much surprised by this unexpected attack. 'Mr. Gavelkind is a friend of mine,' he said, 'which was the reason I went out with him. I had no thought of deserting my own side; but since you blame me, I will venture to return to the original subject, sir. Is Ford dismissed with your consent? And if not, may not I go and reassure them, and let them know that they are not to be hurried away?'

The Squire looked at Edmund severely. It gave him great satisfaction to come upon some one who would not rebel. He took a high tone. 'One would think,' he remarked, 'that the welfare of these people was of more importance to you than the credit of your family. They have not deserved much at my hands.'

It struck Edmund with a sort of dreary amusement that he should be the one to be accused of partiality for the Fords,—he, who was the only one entirely uninfluenced by them. He said with a faint smile, 'I am no partisan of the Fords,—it would be strange if I were; but they have done nothing to deserve this, and it would be cruel to punish them for a fault—for a fault—which was not theirs.'

'Do you mean to tell me that the girl was brought up for any other end? Why, she was trained to inveigle one of my sons, or somebody else,—Ray Tredgold, perhaps, who is not quite such a fool,—into making a lady of her. A child could see that,' said the Squire with indignation. 'I cannot understand how any man, considering all the circumstances, can speak of the Fords to me.'

'That was my idea,' returned Stephen boldly. 'I felt that they ought to go, but I didn't think that you ought to be bothered with the name of them. If I went a little farther than I ought to have done, that was my idea. Their name can't be very agreeable to any of us,' he added, with a deep-drawn breath. 'If I went too far, that's my only excuse.'

'Well, Steve,' said the father, 'I am glad you see it as I do, and that, if you were wrong, it was an error of judgment only. After what you've said, I'll allow that. But Ned is one of the fellows that like to turn the sword round in a wound. He thinks that's the way to make a man forget.'

'I thought solely of the injustice to them,' urged Edmund, 'not of ourselves at all. It cannot be worth your while, sir, on whatever provocation, to wage civil war upon your gamekeeper. Send him away, by all means,—I should be glad, I confess, to get rid of the sound of their name; but let it be fairly, with such warning as is natural, or at least with time enough to provide themselves with another home. Suppose they have been scheming,

artful, whatever you may call it; you can't punish them for that as for a crime.'

'It's a deal worse than many a crime,' asserted Stephen, with a black look which transformed his face. 'It's the sort of thing you smother vermin for. Even poaching I'd look over sooner. I don't pretend to be one of your forgiving people. There are some things I'll never forgive, nor forget.'

Mr. Mitford gave him a grateful look. He was much relieved by the disappearance of Stephen's sneer, and felt as if he had recovered his proper position when his son condescended to explain. 'I am glad to see that you feel as I do, Steve,' he repeated. 'Ned has his own ways of thinking, though I should have supposed he had more feeling for his brother than to stand up for the Fords. I don't want them to make out a case for Lizzy Travers's charity, though. I'll speak to Brown, and he shall buy them off and get them out of the country; and you and I will go over to Mount Travers and explain. You may do some business for yourself at the same time,' he said with a laugh, to which Stephen responded. The two were once more in full intelligence, understanding each other's thoughts and wishes.

To Edmund's sensitive ears the laugh was intolerable. It was full of that rude and primitive meaning which lurks so often in the private sympathetic chuckle with which two men discuss a woman. He went out of the room quickly, with a nervous impatience, over which he had no control. In the experience of all sensitive persons, there arises now and then a moment when contrariety seems in the very air, and everything turns against them. Edmund felt that on every side his wishes, his feelings, his ideas of all that was just and fit, were contradicted, and that the entire world was out of harmony with him. Not only his father and brother, and the atmosphere of the house which was full of them, opposed him and jarred his nerves and temper at every turn, but the most trifling things appeared to rise in antagonism, and cut every possibility of relief. The *sourd*, mysterious something which stood between him and Elizabeth, which made even old Pax, his most familiar confidante, repellent and unharmonious, scarcely affected him more than those lesser jars of contradiction which met him at every turn. That Mrs. Ford should have refused information about Lily, that he should be supposed the champion of the family, that it should be possible, however falsely, to gibe at his forgetfulness of their disastrous influence over Roger,—he whose heart was the only one faithful to Roger,—exasperated him almost beyond bearing. He went out with that sensation of being unable to bear anything more,

or endure another moment of this contrariety and horrible antagonism of everything, which is at once so natural, so inevitable, so foolish. Women find relief in tears at such moments, but Edmund could get no such relief; everything was against him; he was despondent yet exasperated, angry as well as sad. Why should he go to Mount Travers, where everything was already decided against him? Why stay here, where he was put out of all influence, misrepresented, misunderstood; where his attempt to do justice was taken for partiality towards the offender, and his anxious endeavour to carry out his dead brother's wishes repulsed as a curiosity of his own? It was time, surely, for him to shake the dust off his feet, and leave the place where he was disinherited, contemned, and set aside. He felt the jar of the vexation, of the contradiction, go to his very soul. How much better to go away from the house where he was displaced, from the love that would have none of him, from the country where his charities, his faithfulness, his desire to help and succour, were all misconceived! Roger had done it in the most conclusive fashion, shaking off so many embarrassments and troubles along with the mortal coil. Edmund thought wistfully, with a certain envy, of his brother's complete escape. He had no temptation to put an end to his life, yet a great weariness took possession of him. If he could but turn his back on everything, flee far from them! Oh, for the wings of a dove! But where? Not to some foreign land, which was the ordinary commonplace expedient,—to change the sky, but not the mind. What Edmund really wanted was to escape from himself; and that, alas, is what none can do.

At the same time, amid all this contrariety, there was something, a spirit in his feet, driving him to that high house on the hill, to which he had been invited that morning. To see Mr. Gavelkind! He laughed, with a bitter sense of humour, at that idea. The old lawyer was his friend,—there was no scorn of him in Edmund's mind; but with a heart full of Elizabeth, to go to her man of business! It would have been too ludicrous, if it had not been the greatest contradiction, the most irritating contrariety of all.

XLI

AT MOUNT TRAVERS

'YES, I am just going. I wish you could have come a little earlier. I've been here three days,—to be sure, one of them was a Sunday. There are a great many things I should have liked to talk to you about.'

'I am sorry,' Edmund said; but he had not the same sense that to talk things over with Mr. Gavelkind was a matter of importance which the lawyer seemed to feel on his side.

'I see; you don't feel that it's of very much consequence what I think. Well, perhaps not. Few things are of much importance taken separately; it's when they come together that they tell. No, don't apologise; I am in no danger of misunderstanding. I'll tell you what, though; you shouldn't leave things too long hanging in the wind.'

'Hanging in the wind?'

'Come,' said Mr. Gavelkind, 'I don't intend to summer it and winter it, as the country people say. You and I have been able to understand each other before now without putting a dot on every *i*. There's something going on up there which I don't understand.'

He pointed, with a wave of his hand, to the house on the hill. The sun was blazing in all the plate-glass, and made it flare over the whole country, as if it were some great heliographic apparatus. Edmund had met the lawyer going down to the station by the steep and short path which old Travers had made through the grounds. He had a little bag in his hand, and his coat over his arm.

'To have to do with ladies in business is a trial,' he resumed. 'In your own family it's a different matter, and I'm fond of women for friends, notwithstanding all that's said to the contrary; but to have their business to do, and to hold them to it, and to keep reason always uppermost, is almost too much for me.'

'I have heard you commend Miss Travers's capacity for business, all the same.'

'That I have, and meant it too! She has a good head, and a clear head; but there's always some point in which reason is not the sole guide with women. It may take a long time to find it out, but it always appears at the end. There's this business about these Fords—— Ah, Mrs. Travers!' exclaimed Mr. Gavelkind, hastily transferring his coat to his left arm that he might take off his hat. 'I knew you were out of doors, but I didn't think you would venture down a steep road like this.'

'I didn't. I came the other way, to say good-bye to you; I couldn't let you go without saying good-bye. And my compliments to Mrs. Gavelkind. I hope she will really arrange some time to come with you and stay a little while. Saturday to Monday I don't consider a visit at all.'

'You are very kind, I'm sure,' said the lawyer. 'It's been Friday to Monday, this time, and a great deal of business got through. I'll give my wife your kind message. Miss Travers had already asked——'

'I daresay,' said the old lady quickly, 'that your wife, being an older person, would not think much of an invitation from Lizzy, while the mistress of the house said nothing; but you can tell her from me that it's all the same. We'll be highly pleased to see her any time before the end of the summer. Good-bye, Mr. Gavelkind.'

The lawyer shot a glance at Edmund underneath his brows, but he took his leave very ceremoniously of the old lady, who had been accompanied by a female figure, a few steps behind her. She turned round to take this companion's arm, to mount the slope.

'Why, the girl is gone!' she cried. 'Mr. Mitford, I beg your pardon! I was so occupied in saying good-bye to Mr. Gavelkind that I've never said "How d'ye do" to you. I wonder if you'll give me your arm to help me up the bank. Thank you. I've always noticed you were nice to old people. And so was your poor brother. Is it true what I hear, that it's the youngest that is to succeed to the property? Somebody told me so this very day.'

'There is no question of succeeding to the property at present, Mrs. Travers. My father is well and strong, and I hope may keep it himself for many years.'

'That's a very proper feeling; I approve of it greatly. When Lizzy marries, I hope it will not be any one who will grudge me

every day I live; for of course I will leave her everything,—everything that is in my power.'

Edmund made a little bow of assent, but he did not feel it necessary to enter into the possible sentiments of the man whom Lizzy might marry. The old lady looked at him closely, her keen eyes undimmed by the little gasps and pantings with which she had dragged herself up the steep ascent.

'I have not so much in my power as you would think,' said Mrs. Travers, 'for all the property belongs to Lizzy after my death. Her uncle thought that was only just, seeing that her father began the business, though it was my husband who made the money. Everybody has his own way of thinking, Mr. Mitford, but I must say I felt it a little not to have anything in my own power. Of course I should have left it to Lizzy,—who else should I leave it to?—but everybody likes to be trusted, and to have something in their own power.'

'No doubt,' returned Edmund gravely. The little old lady clung to his arm, and kept looking up from time to time suddenly, as if to take him at a disadvantage, and read whatever unintentional meaning might pass over his face.

'If she married a man whom I approved of, they might go on living with me, perhaps. I would not make it a promise; but if he were a person I liked, and one who would behave properly to an elderly lady. They don't generally, Mr. Mitford; when a woman has ceased to be young, they have a way of looking at her as if she had no right to live at all. Oh, I know what I am saying. I am not Lizzy's mother, it is true, but I should be more or less in the position of a mother-in-law, and that is what I never could put up with. Give a dog an ill-name and hang him, they say; call a woman a mother-in-law, and it's the same thing; though why a respectable woman should be turned into a fiend by the marriage of her daughter I have never been able to find out. Happily, Lizzy is not my daughter, but it comes to very much the same thing.'

As she paused for a reply, Edmund felt himself obliged to say that the general hatred of mothers-in-law was 'only a joke.'

'A joke! It's a joke in very bad taste, Mr. Mitford. But you may rely upon it, I know what I am talking about. You were very civil, giving me your arm when that girl ran away. (It was very silly of her to run away, but she can't bear to be seen about, poor thing!) And your father was very polite the last time he was here. He looked to me as if he were bent on finding out something; but he was very polite, all the same, and made himself

quite agreeable. Tell me about your brother—the brother that is to be the successor, according to what people say. Oh! I forgot; you don't wish to talk of that.'

'I have no objection to talk of it. I believe you are quite right, and that Stephen is to be my father's heir.'

'I have always heard it was a very nice property,' she remarked. 'My dear Mr. Mitford, I am sure you must have played your cards very badly, when your kind father cuts you off like that.'

'Perhaps so,' replied Edmund, with a half smile; 'or perhaps he thinks my brother better fitted to keep up the character of a country gentleman, and he may be quite right.'

'You take it very coolly, anyhow,' said Mrs. Travers; 'and you really think that Mr. Stephen—isn't that his name? oh, Captain, to be sure; I had forgot—will keep it up best? Well, I never was brought up with any superstition about an eldest son, myself. I know your younger brother least of any of you. I hope he'll come and see us. I am devoted to the army, and I like people of decided character. Tell him I shall be glad to see him at Mount Travers. Mr. Mitford, I am very much obliged to you. I don't require to trouble you any more, now we have got up to the level of the house.' And she drew her arm briskly out of his, and stood still for a moment, turning round upon him as if to give him his dismissal.

Edmund felt with a sense of pleasure that, notwithstanding all that had happened, his mind was as capable of being amused as ever. He had been vague enough up to this moment, not decided whether he should go or not. But Mrs. Travers made up his mind for him. 'I hope,' he said, 'I may call, though I am no longer of any use; for I have a message for Miss Travers from the Rectory.'

'Oh, from Pax, as Lizzy calls her; an absurd name, and I think she's rather an absurd person. I can't see what Lizzy finds in her—very limited and prejudiced, like all the clergy people, and very fond of her own way. Oh, surely, Mr. Mitford, come in, come in; you'll find Lizzy in the drawing-room. Good-bye, in case I should not see you again.'

Elizabeth was seated at the farther end of the room, at a writing-table, with her back turned towards the door. She got up with a little stumble of excitement, when she became aware of Edmund's presence. 'You must pardon me,' he said, 'for coming in unannounced. I met Mrs. Travers at the foot of the bank, and came back with her. She told me I should find you here.'

'Yes,' said Elizabeth, holding out her hand. She added, in a

voice which was slightly tremulous, 'I am always at home at this hour.'

Did she wish him to be aware of that? Or was it a mere impulse of shyness, and because she did not know what to say?

They sat down near each other, in the great room with the vast plate-glass window, which took away all sense of being within doors, and made that wide landscape part of the scene, and for perhaps a whole long minute neither spoke. There was a screen arranged round Mrs. Travers's little table and easy-chair, to preserve her from some imaginary draught, or perhaps to give a sense of shelter where all was so blank and wide. Elizabeth looked at her visitor with something like a sentiment of alarm in her wide-open eyes. The two seemed at last to have met alone, in a vast centre of naked space, where there could no longer be any veil of mystery between them. Edmund was not so ready as she was expectant. He had not come with any definite idea in his mind as to what he was to do or say, but only to see her, to speak to her, to follow any leading that good or evil fortune might put in his way.

'I met Mr. Gavelkind, on his way to town.'

'He has been here since Friday. He is a very warm friend——'

'You could, I am sure, have nobody more devoted to your interests.'

'I meant of yours, Mr. Mitford. He has always a great deal to say of you.'

'Of me?' responded Edmund with a smile. 'That's strange! I have got so wiped out of everything that it is odd to hear of any one who thinks of me.'

'You are too kind,' said Miss Travers; 'you let the thought of duty carry you too far. Duty must have a limit. There is something that perhaps I ought to tell you; but when I see that you are deceived, or that you think yourself bound to regard as sacred, to uphold and to justify——'

'What?' he asked, bending forward towards her, too much astonished to say more.

'Mr. Mitford, I don't know how to speak. It is not a thing to be discussed between you and me. But when I see how you are making an idol of one who—when I perceive how you are devoting yourself to carry out plans which—and letting your life and everything in it go by——'

Elizabeth's voice had begun to tremble, her eyes were filling with tears, her colour changed from red to white. She kept clasping and unclasping her hands, in the strain of some excitement,

the cause of which he could not discover. What was its cause, and how was he involved in it? And what was this purpose which she attributed to him, which made him let his own life go by?

'My own life?' he said. 'I seem to have none. I am pushed aside from everything, but I wish I could think you cared what became of my life. I should like to tell you how it has been arrested for months in the only great wish I have ever formed for myself. Miss Travers, my brother Roger——'

'Oh!' she cried, clasping her hands with something which looked like a wild and feverish impatience. 'Don't speak to me of Roger,—I don't want to know any more of him! I would rather never hear his name again!'

She got up as she spoke, starting from the chair as though she could no longer tolerate the situation, and stood for a moment in front of the great window, her tall figure showing against the background of the vast landscape outside. She turned her back upon it, and stood facing him, twisting her fingers together in her agitation.

'Mr. Mitford,' she said, clearing her throat, 'I know I ought to have told you—I ought to tell you——' The door opened while the words were on her lips. Elizabeth made a movement of almost angry impatience. 'I had made up my mind to it, and now I can't do it!' she cried, turning away hastily. Edmund had risen too, he could scarcely tell why. She had turned round, and stood gazing out of the window, in a tremor of suspense and agitation, disappointed and excited. Mrs. Travers appeared at the door, relieved of her outdoor garments, with her little pale face surrounded by the dead white of her widow's cap, and everything about her breathing the tranquillity of the common day. The extraordinary difference and contrast startled Edmund. He did not know why Elizabeth should be so excited; but he perceived the seriousness of her agitation, and how much it must mean, when he saw her spring up and go to the window, as Mrs. Travers came softly in and took her usual place. A third person, whom he did not remark, except that there was a movement of some one following, came in with the old lady; half visible for a moment then disappearing behind the screen. He had an impression, of which he took no heed amid the other images, more urgent, that filled up all the foreground, that this third person, the attendant, whoever she was, remained in the room, though unseen.

'So you found Lizzy, Mr. Mitford?' said Mrs. Travers. 'I thought you would find her here. I did intend to let you have

her all to yourself, while I rested a little. But to tell you the truth, we saw your father and your brother coming this way, and I put on my cap and came down. I couldn't leave Lizzy to entertain three gentlemen, all of the same family; that would have been too much.'

Elizabeth turned quickly from the window. 'I see them; they are just here,' she said.

'And I wanted particularly to see the captain,—I have always told you I like military men,' returned her aunt; 'but don't let Mr. Edmund Mitford go away for that. He is not ashamed, I suppose, of being found here.'

Elizabeth came and sat down near him, not concealing the tremulous condition in which she was; she gave him a look of disappointment, mingled with an almost feverish irritation and annoyance, and faintly shook her head. She had something to tell him, and she had been made to stop with the very words in her mouth. Her eyes had a certain pleading in them that he should not go away, and Edmund had no wish to go away. He was glad to be here, to watch what his father and brother intended, to find out their purpose. Whatever aim they might have, it was well that there should be some one to keep a watch on that.

XLII

A REVELATION

'Oh, you've got here before us, Ned,' Stephen remarked in an aside, in his amiable way. He drew a chair near to that from which Elizabeth had risen on the entry of the newcomers, and which she had resumed nervously, still with that thrill of agitation. She was thus seated between the brothers, Stephen bending towards her, half turning his back upon the window. 'It is dazzling to come in here,' he observed. 'The country doesn't look half so sunny and brilliant outside. It must be something in this room.'

He looked at her, as he spoke, with a laugh and an admiring gaze which indicated his meaning almost too distinctly. The time of broad compliment has passed away, and Elizabeth was unacquainted with that form of address. She gave him an astonished look.

'Of course it is something in this room,' said the Squire. 'Young fellows are not so ready as they were in our day, Mrs. Travers. I think I could have put it more neatly, in my time——'

'It is the plate-glass,' suggested the old lady. 'As for the other sort of thing, my time's over, and Lizzy's too serious. I don't know why the plate-glass should have that effect. I always told Mr. Travers that we wanted shade; but trees won't grow in a day, and the plate-glass is like a mirror,—that's what it is.'

'It's the light within,' said Mr. Mitford, with an old-fashioned bow that took in both the ladies. 'My son Stephen has scarcely been at home, to stay, since he was a boy. But he turns up when I want him. We need to hold together now.'

'Yes, indeed,' Mrs. Travers replied, with the gravity that befitted the situation, 'the fewer you get, the more you ought to cling close; but it isn't all families that do that.'

'It wants a pretty strong inducement,' said Stephen, 'to make a man bury himself in the country in June. Don't you think so? Oh, I know it's the height of summer, and all that; but on the

other hand, there's nothing for a man to do. Tennis, yes; but tennis soon palls, don't you think so, Miss Travers?—with the Miss Tredgolds and a curate or two.'

His own laugh was the only one that Stephen drew out, which was uncomfortable. Elizabeth was too completely preoccupied to be able to give him more than the faintest smile. 'I am no authority,' she said. 'I never play.'

'We must find something for him to do till September, Miss Travers,' remarked the Squire. 'I shall trust to you ladies to help me in that. In September we all come to life, you know. And that reminds me of our particular errand, Stephen. It appears there is one of our keepers, Ford, whom you ladies have taken a fancy to.'

'Ford?' Elizabeth said, with a sudden interest. 'Yes, I know something of him.' She gave a quick look round, and seemed to hesitate for a moment whether she should not get up and call some one, but reconsidered the matter, and sat still.

'My dear young lady,' said the Squire, playfully holding up and shaking a finger at her, 'don't you know—— But I am sure you don't, or you would never have done it. Among us men, it's not quite the thing—it's not considered quite the thing to interfere with another man's servants. We are but savages, more or less. I know our ways are not ladies' ways.'

'I beg your pardon,' returned Elizabeth. 'I have never intended to interfere. I take an interest in the man,—that is true. He came to tell me he was turned out at a moment's notice,—threatened with the police.'

'That was all a bit of nonsense,' observed the Squire, bland and smiling. 'There's the culprit, looking ashamed of himself, as he ought, come to beg your pardon, my dear young lady. Speak up, Steve. You're on your trial, my boy, and before such a judge it's worth while clearing yourself.'

'I hope I'll meet with mercy,' said Stephen. 'It's my ill-fate that though I know Miss Travers so well, she knows me little, I fear, and possibly doesn't—trust me.' He was used to good fortune with women, and he knew that among the class to which he was accustomed a bold front was half the battle. He looked at Elizabeth with an air which was half ingratiating, half insolent. 'I'm not, perhaps, good for very much; but if I had known you took an interest in the people, why, that would have made all the difference. But I hadn't a notion—— You'd better speak for me, sir. I haven't the ear of the court.'

'Well, to tell the truth, we take a very strong interest in the

Fords,' said Mrs. Travers, looking up from her work. 'We think they've had a great deal to bear from your family. I don't know all the details myself, but Elizabeth does. Probably Mr. Mitford himself doesn't know, Lizzy; and Captain Mitford, who has been away for so long, and is really almost a stranger in Melcombe——'

'It is true,' interrupted Elizabeth. 'I ought to have thought. I know only one side, and perhaps you know only another. I have no right to be the judge.'

'My dear Miss Travers, we are delighted, delighted to have you for the judge. Where could we find one so gentle, one so fair, in both senses of the word? Speak up, can't you, Steve, and tell all your bad meaning. Of course he had a bad meaning; not abstract justice,—oh no, that's seldom what we think of. Speak up! A fellow like you should get the ladies to take his part.'

'I'm quite ready, for one,' responded little Mrs. Travers, laying her work down upon her lap. 'I'm always a friend to military men. Where should we be without them? There would be no security for anything, I always say.'

'There's encouragement for you, Steve,' remarked his father with a laugh.

'If there's to be a trial, the court had better be cleared,' said Edmund, getting up,—a movement which made Stephen's face lighten with evident satisfaction.

'That's true,' he assented. 'I had better have as few listeners as possible, to take notes of my enormities.'

Elizabeth put up an eager hand. 'Don't go away,—don't go away,' she pleaded, almost in a whisper, with an anxious look and a return of that agitation which was so inexplicable to Edmund, and with which he alone seemed connected. The only answer he could make was a bow of submission, but he withdrew from the group, and going to the window, that universal resource for persons who find themselves *de trop*, stood looking out, seeing nothing, as such persons generally do.

'I say, sir,' exclaimed Stephen, 'this isn't fair. Here is Ned, a sort of counsel for the defendant. No, not exactly that, for I am the defendant; but at all events for the other side. Don't you know, Miss Travers, that brothers are usually on different sides?'

'Come, come,' cried Mrs. Travers, 'begin! This is getting more and more interesting.' She was delighted with Stephen's air of assurance, with his banter, though it was not very refined, and that look of a conquering hero, which he rarely laid aside.

'Well, then, here goes. Miss Travers, you must know our

view of these Fords. They are people, though I don't know details any more than Mrs. Travers, who have been mixed up in—in most painful events. I know that much, though I mayn't know all. The governor, there, has heard a great deal too much about them; that's the truth. I knew he'd be glad to be rid of them. I knew also that he'd rather never hear their name again. Don't you see? I therefore thought I'd make bold to take it into my own hands.'

'I think you were very right. Mr. Mitford might indeed have painful associations, and *he* could not be to blame.'

Edmund turned round in amazement to hear these words from Elizabeth. To hear the question discussed here at all was in itself strange enough, but to hear it with Stephen's gloss of pretended solicitude for his father, approved by Elizabeth! The story was dim, and full of mystery to himself. The chance of hearing it cleared up or explained away, from Stephen's side, was one which startled him out of all pretence of calm spectatorship. He turned, with involuntary excitement, to watch the speakers. As he did so, Edmund's eye was attracted by a flicker of movement behind the screen. There was a very narrow interval between its edge and the wall,—so narrow that a person standing behind might see without being himself seen. There seemed to be preparations for some one sitting there; a table with something white on it, a chair pushed against the wall. These details caught Edmund's eye instantaneously, as he turned his head. But a second glance showed him more. Some one stood, a slight dark figure, at this coigne of vantage, leaning against the screen. Her head was bowed, her face invisible. She had the air of clinging so close as to obliterate herself in the shadow and dark line of the piece of furniture. Perhaps he would not have been sure at all but for the lighter colour of her hair; her very face was pressed against the dark velvet of the screen. He was so much startled that for the moment he scarcely heard what Stephen was saying, though that had an interest to him beyond anything which could be roused by a visitor or servant at Mount Travers, thus clandestinely listening to something which she had no business to hear.

'Yes,' Stephen said, 'I own that I thought that a kind of duty; but there it is that my bad meaning, as my father calls it, comes in. To get rid of Ford was all right, a relief to the Squire without bothering him; but the fact was, I had a man of my own.'

'A man of your own! Go on, Mr. Stephen, go on. It is always more and more exciting,' cried Mrs. Travers, sitting up erect in her chair, and clapping her hands.

'Yes, *mea culpa*,—that is the height of my offence; I wanted to put in my own man. It is a nice little cottage, with a charming garden; and instead of that troublesome fellow, Ford, with his bad antecedents, I had planned to put in a nice young couple, my own—— Hallo! What's this? Who's this? What—what do you mean by it?' Stephen cried.

Something had flitted across his line of vision,—a figure which Edmund alone had previously seen. But even Edmund did not observe, so quick was her motion, how it was that she detached herself from the shadow, and suddenly became visible to the whole group, standing in the full light of the great window. Stephen acknowledged the wonder, the strangeness, and the power of this apparition by springing suddenly to his feet; his face, slightly flushed by his story-telling, grew crimson in a moment; his eyes seemed to project from his head.

'Eh?' exclaimed the Squire, turning towards the new actor on the scene. 'Who is it? What's happened? Why, it's Lily Ford!'

'She has heard her father reflected upon,' said Mrs. Travers. 'Dear, dear, I forgot she was about! Go away, my poor girl, go away; it was not meant for you to hear.'

'Miss Travers,' said Lily, in a tremulous, hurried voice, 'I told you all my story, every word, the very first day. I told it all, except who it was. I meant to hide that from you, for his very name was a shame to say. Perhaps I've done harm by it; I'm afraid I have. I'm mended of my folly now. To hear him speak of Ford, that was troublesome, that had bad antecedents, that Mr. Mitford could not bear the name of—— Look at him, Miss Travers; do you want me to say more? That's the man that beguiled me up to London; that was to take me to a woman's house, where I should be taken care of, and marry me in the morning. I told you every word. He was to have the license in his pocket, and it was to be at a church in the city. There he is, there he stands! That's Stephen Mitford, that was to be my husband, but never meant it; that's the man that is turning out my father and mother, and threatening the police to them, because I escaped away from him out into the streets! Rather the streets than him! Rather anything in all the world than him!'

'It's a lie!' retorted Stephen, forgetting all his precautions. 'Hold your tongue! How dare you speak? It's a lie!'

'Lily!' cried Elizabeth. 'Oh, Lily! What are you saying?' She had uttered a cry and started up at the first words of this strange revelation; and without looking at Edmund she put out

her hand to him, saying, 'Edmund, forgive—forgive me!' as Lily went on.

'He knows it's all true!' the girl cried, pointing to Stephen. 'He used to meet me in the park, and he offered to marry me. He said Not church, church was of no consequence,—a registrar's office; but I said No, the church or nothing; and he was to get the license for a church in the city, and all straightforward, and to take me to a good woman's. But there was no woman, and he had said I was his wife. Then I opened the door and ran out into the streets; and I walked, and walked, and walked, till I was like to drop, till the morning; and then I got to the railway, where there was a woman, and slept all day; and there you found me. I told you all the story, every word, except his name. And there he stands,—Stephen Mitford. Oh, I have good cause to know his name!'

'The girl is mad!' Stephen cried. 'It's a lie! She means my brother. My brother would have married her. He was a fool. It was Roger; it was not I.'

'What's all this about?' blustered the Squire. He had sprung up too, from his seat. 'He's right, Miss Travers. This girl, confound her!—my poor boy wanted to marry her. She had —she had—got over him, somehow. It's true, Roger wanted to marry her. Stephen was never in it. Stephen is not that sort!' Mr. Mitford laughed in a wild way, with an indignant braggadocio, ready to boast of his son's want of virtue. 'He's not a—he's not one of the innocent ones. He is up to most things!'

'Lily, my child,—Lily, come here,' cried Mrs. Travers. 'Oh dear, dear! To hear that about her father has quite upset her. Lily, come here,—come here.'

Lily obeyed the call. She was very docile, though trembling with passion; and in that stirring up of all her being, she was glad of some one to cling to, some one to lean upon. She obeyed the movement of the old lady's hand, and went and stood behind her chair. The others were all standing up, gazing at each other. Elizabeth, in her compunction and astonishment, had put her hand suddenly into Edmund's, not knowing what she did, calling him by his name; and notwithstanding the wonderful commotion which this involuntary act roused in him, he had said or done nothing save hold that hand firmly in his, not attempting to interrupt the strain of a stronger interest, the question now raised between his father and brother, between whom a whole tragedy lay. As if a magnet had drawn them, they both followed Lily's movements

with their eyes; as if her change of position could impart something new to the startling tale.

'Speak up, man!' cried the Squire, growing gradually excited. 'Don't leave me to answer for you,—you've a big enough voice when you please. Take your oath to it! Are you going to let them believe that—that lie?'

'That's what it is,' answered Stephen. His voice was big enough, but there was something hollow in it. 'It *is* a lie. I've said so. You see she can't face me and say it again!'

'Sir,' said Lily, leaning over her friend's chair, over the head of the little old lady, who looked like some curious white-and-black bird with eager little sparkling eyes, 'I have but one word. I can't vary it. Mr. Roger,—oh! he was too good; he spoke to me as if I had been the highest lady in the land. But Stephen made me leave my home; he said we were to be married, and he would get a license; it was to be in a church in the city.' Lily went over those details again with a monotony of repetition, as she had gone over and over them in her mind in circles of confused and miserable thinkings. 'I trusted him, and I went to him, but he never meant it. When I saw how it was—— Oh, ask him; he will tell you!' she cried, suddenly turning upon her former lover. 'Ask him, look at him! Can't you see it in his face?'

'You liar!' he cried, hoarse with passion; 'you jilt, you little devil! The streets,—that was where she came from, where she belonged! Yes, I'll take my oath! I tell you it's an infernal lie!'

'I walked about the streets all night. God protected me,' said Lily. 'It was like the dead walking, but I was safe there from him. I told Miss Travers every word, but not who he was. I would have spared him, if he had spared my father and mother. For he did me no harm, only a night in the streets; an awful night, on my feet, walking all the time, but that's all. He did me no harm!'

Stephen looked as a bully looks when he is beaten down and can brag no more. 'I took her from the streets,—that's what she means. I wouldn't go after her there,—that's what has made her mad. She's a liar,—she's a d——d——'

Mr. Mitford raised his stick, and made as if he would have struck his son on the mouth. His own forehead and cheeks were purple. He tried to speak, and the foam flew from his mouth like spray. 'You hound!' he cried. 'Do you know there are ladies here? D—— you, you make me forget it!' He struck his stick upon the ground in his passion, and snapped it as if it had been glass. 'Enticed the girl like a villain and lost her like a fool! I'm

glad my stick's broken, or I'd have struck him. Don't speak to me,—don't speak to me. Get out of my way, sir. I'm going home.'

They all stood staring, accused and accuser together, while the father, stammering, maddened, pushing everything, furniture and persons, wildly from him, turned round, clearing the way with the broken end of his stick, and rushed out of the room.

XLIII

THE CULPRIT'S REVENGE

THEY were left, as the exit of an important actor in a stirring scene leaves the rest of the parties to it, in an enforced pause before the movement can be resumed, at watch upon each other, distracted for the moment, each antagonist a little astray, not knowing how the debate is to be resumed, and against which of the adversaries he is to find himself engaged. To Stephen it was a moment of relief. Among the others, there seemed no one whom he could not cow by his louder voice and stronger denial. It appeared to him that he could crush that slight creature standing opposite by the mere lifting of his hand. But for the moment he did not know whether it were she or some other against whom he would have to stand.

'Dear, dear!' said Mrs. Travers, leaning back a little upon Lily, who stood behind her. The old lady was frightened, flurried, horror-stricken. 'Oh dear, dear!' she cried, wringing her little transparent hands. 'I knew there was something, but I never knew how bad it was. Oh dear, dear!—oh dear, dear!'

'Stephen,' said Edmund, 'I think we had better follow my father. After what has passed, it can do you no good to stay here.'

'After what has passed! What has passed? The story of a —of a—the sort of creature no man is safe from. It might have been you instead of me. Would you slink off, and let her have it all her own way? I'll appeal to Mrs. Travers. *You* know what the world is; will you trust that woman against me? a girl that has nothing to lose against——'

'Oh, hush!' interposed Elizabeth. 'For Heaven's sake, don't go any farther,—there has been enough. Oh, get your brother to go away! We do trust her,—we know her better than we know him. Oh, get him to go away!'

'Dear, dear!' exclaimed Mrs. Travers, 'oh dear, dear! I can't bear this sort of thing, Elizabeth. He's a gentleman, a military

man. And don't you hear him? He appeals to me. Lily may have been mistaken; he may be able to explain. Oh dear, dear! Mr. Mitford will have a fit, and it will kill me. To have such a disturbance and such things talked of in a lady's house,—oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!'

'Let me alone, Ned,' cried Stephen; 'it's my character, not yours, that is at stake.' He straightened himself, and looked round him with rising courage. 'You say true,' he continued. 'Mrs. Travers, *you* understand. How am I to explain before ladies? Things look dreadful to ladies that are no harm among men. If you will get Miss Travers to go away, and that girl, I will tell you all I can. I'll explain as well as I can—to you——'

'To me!' interrupted the old lady, with a subdued shriek,—'explain improprieties to me! Lizzy, he oughtn't to be allowed to talk to me like this. Unless she has made a mistake—— Oh, don't be too hasty, my dear! Are you sure, are you quite sure, it's the same gentleman? Oh, Lily, look again; you might be mistaking him for some one else. Are you sure it is the same gentleman, Lily? If it was the right one, do you think he'd appeal to me?'

'It is the man whom I was going to marry,' returned Lily, drooping her head. 'How could I make a mistake as to him?'

'That was my brother Roger,' said Stephen, 'as is well known. Why she should wish to ruin me in your opinion, I can't tell. She came up to London to Roger. What happened to her there, who knows?' he added with an insulting laugh. 'Perhaps it's natural she should seek out some one to answer for that adventure,—I shouldn't blame her. It's fair enough to do what you can in self-defence.'

'Let my brother Roger's name be left out of this,' said Edmund sternly. 'Say what you will for yourself. She never went to London to Roger. He was as delicate and tender of her and her good name as if she had been the Queen's daughter. Keep his name out of it. I cannot allow any reference to him.'

Mrs. Travers sat up erect in her chair, and looked at Stephen with her small, keen eyes. 'They are not like each other,' she said; 'and how could she mistake the man she was going to marry, as she says? Captain Mitford I think you had better go away. I am very sorry, for I have a partiality for military men, but I don't really see how there could be any mistake. And you mustn't speak about the girl and that sort of thing. We know her, as Elizabeth has told you, a great deal better than we know you.'

Stephen looked round upon the audience, which he began to

perceive was hostile to him, with lessening self-command and growing wrath. His father's departure had sobered him out of the first burst of passion, but he was not a man to fight a losing battle. He went on, however, repeating his plea. 'I can't go into it now, before ladies. Name a man, and I'll explain everything. I can't speak before ladies. A man would soon see it was all a made-up story. Send for old Gavelkind, or somebody. I'll explain to a man.'

'You are not upon your trial here, Captain Mitford,' remarked Elizabeth. 'We have nothing to do with it. It has been all very unexpected and very painful.' She turned to Edmund with an appealing gesture. 'It would be much better if it could end here. There is nothing more for us to do; it is no business of ours.'

'That is to say,' cried Stephen quickly, 'I am to consent to a slur upon my character because there isn't a man in the house to whom I can speak, nor any one who can see through a made-up story. I sha'n't do that! Send that little devil away, and not me. You can't know her half so well as I know her. How should you? She puts on one face to her backers-up, but quite a different one to me. She's——'

'Captain Mitford,' Mrs. Travers said, 'you seem to think, after all, that you know Lily very well.'

He stopped short, confounded, and looked at the old lady with a dangerous glitter in his eyes—like a bull putting down its head before it charges.

'You think you know Lily very well,' she repeated; 'and how should you know her, unless what she says is true? I'm very sorry, for you are a near neighbour, and I always thought I should like you best of the family. If you please, Captain Mitford, will you go away? I don't want to hurt your feelings, but there's no man in the house, as you say. We are only ladies; we have ourselves to take care of. Please go. And I don't think,' added the old lady, upon whose face there had come a little colour, a flush of roused temper and feeling, 'that so long as this is my house I shall want to see you here again.'

He burst out suddenly into a loud laugh. He was exasperated by her little air of authority, her precise words, the majestic aspect she put on, and he was half mad with the efforts he had made to restrain himself, and the sense that he had failed, and the fury and shame of the exposure. No one had listened to what he said in his own defence; but he had it in his power to startle them into listening to him at last. 'Your house?' he cried, hurling the

words at her as if they had been a stone picked up in haste; 'you've no house, any more than you have the right to judge me!'

'No house! The man must be going mad!' Mrs. Travers exclaimed.

'Captain Mitford,' cried Elizabeth, 'if you have any sense of honour, go,—go away!'

'I'll not allow myself to be insulted,' he returned, 'not even by an old woman. Her house! It's no more hers than it's mine. She's got no house,—she has not a penny but what you give her. Do you think I don't know? Do you think that everybody doesn't know? Let go, Ned. I'll not be put out, either by her or you. By Jove! to order me out of her house, when she's a pauper, a pensioner, a—— Good-evening, Mrs. Travers. I hope I've given you a piece of information which is as good as yours to me!'

The little old lady had risen to her feet. It was not possible for the small, worn face in the white circle of her widow's cap to be paler than it habitually was; but her eyes were opened more widely than usual, and her lips were apart. 'Lizzy!' she said, with a gasp, putting out her hands. She paused until Stephen had gone out of the room before she said any more. Then she resumed: 'Lizzy! Is that true?'

'Mrs. Travers,' replied Edmund, 'my brother is entirely in the wrong. He has received a dreadful blow. I am dazed and confused by it, though I have nothing to do with it. He did not know what he was saying. He wanted to revenge himself on some one. It was a dastardly thing to do; but that is all. Don't think of it more.'

'I am asking Lizzy. Lizzy,' said the old lady, 'is that true?'

'Aunt, listen to him, he knows everything, and we've done him injustice!' cried Elizabeth, with an effort, scarcely conscious, to turn the discussion into another channel. 'Ask him to forgive me. I thought he was involved in all this dreadful story. I thought it was all different.'

'Lizzy,' said Mrs. Travers, 'is that true?'

'Aunt, how can you ask me? It is nothing; it is revenge, as he tells you.'

'What does it matter what he tells me, or the other? The other meant what he said. Lizzy, is it true?'

'Aunt, dear aunt!'

'You call me by my name, but that's no answer; nor is it an answer,' cried the old lady, holding Elizabeth at arm's length, thrusting her away, 'to come and coax me and kiss me. Is it true—*true?*' She grasped Elizabeth's shoulder after a moment,

and shook her, as a child might grip a woman in vain passion. I want an answer,—I want an answer. My husband thought it right to leave you everything—after me; that's what I've been told, and I thought it was hard. Was there more than that? I'll not be deceived any longer!' she cried, stamping her foot. 'If I'm a pauper, a pensioner, as he said, tell me. I'll not be deceived any more!'

'Oh, aunt! Never, never that! Oh, never that!'

'Never what? There may be degrees of lies, but there can be but one truth. What? I will know!'

'Aunt,' said Elizabeth, who had grown very pale, 'there is but one truth, but I might tell that truth so that it would be almost a lie. If you will sit down, and have patience, and let me explain——'

'Explain, when it's a simple matter of yes or no? Mr. Edmund Mitford, this is between my niece and me; but she seems to wish you to remain,' Mrs. Travers added querulously. 'And I suppose you know, as he said everybody knows. Oh, that Mr. Gavelkind should have gone, just when he was wanted!' Mrs. Travers began to moan. She clasped her little attenuated hands together; tears began to gather in her eyes. 'Lily Ford,' she said, 'I've been kind to you, I've asked you no questions, you've been living in my house—— In my house? I don't know if I have a house. Oh, what am I to do,—what am I to do?' She sank back into her chair, and began to whimper and cry. 'I was his faithful wife for forty years. I brought him a bit of money that was of great use to him at the time. I was never extravagant,—never wanted anything that he wasn't the first to get! The plate-glass and all that,—was it my doing? I never had any interest but his. And now he's left me without a home, without a home, after being his wife for forty years!'

'Oh, dear aunt,' cried Elizabeth, flinging herself on her knees beside Mrs. Travers's chair, 'he never thought of that. You were like himself to him. It was a mistake, it was some delirium, he never thought.'

'Ah!' she said, 'there's mistakes; yes, there's mistakes. You asked me, Lily Ford, if you could mistake the man you were going to marry; and it seemed both to me and you as if you couldn't. But I was married to mine for forty years, and I was mistaken in him all the time, it appears. I never thought he would leave his wife a—a pauper, a pensioner, as that villain said. Oh, that villain! Get up, Elizabeth, get up; don't hang on me. I'll be your pensioner no more.'

Elizabeth, repulsed, still knelt at her aunt's feet, her hands clasped, the tears streaming from her eyes. Lily Ford, behind the old lady's chair, put her arms timidly round her, caressing her, crying too. Beside all these weeping women, what could Edmund do? He stood irresolute in sheer masculine disability to bear the sight of their tears; and yet he could not go away, nor desert Elizabeth at this crisis. Not a word had been said between them, and yet she had called him, bound him to her side. He turned from them, and walked about the room in the confusion of despair.

'That's what marriage is,' Mrs. Travers resumed after an interval of sobs. 'I'll go out of my husband's house with the little bit of money I brought into it, and glad to have that. It was all mine for forty years; but what was I all the time? What's a wife but a pensioner, as that man said. She has no right to anything; it's all in the man's hands, though she's helped him to make it, though she's taken care of it and saved it, and done her work as honest as he. But when he dies, he does what he likes; he takes her home from her, and gives it to some one else. She's got no right to anything. Oh, talk of mistakes, Lily Ford! You might well mistake the man you were going to marry, when I've mistaken mine, after I've been his wife for forty years.'

'Aunt,' Elizabeth cried, 'have some pity upon me! You cannot have the heart to leave me! I would have died rather than let you find out—anything to wound you. Every word you say goes to my heart. It's all true; but he never meant it so. He never, never meant it. It's true, and yet it's not true. And why should you punish me? What have I done? Will you leave me alone in the world, in a house that's no longer a home, because I have been put in a wrong position, and because his mind got confused at the end?'

'Hold your tongue,' said Mrs. Travers angrily, turning sharply upon her. 'Don't say a word against my husband to me. I know what I think; but it's not for you to say it,—you that he was always so good to. Respect your uncle, if you please. You shall not say a word against him to me. And as for leaving you, why, what's this young man here for, Lizzy? He wants to go away, he has feeling enough to see he has no business here; but you won't let him; you keep him with your eye. I suppose you'll marry him, and then you'll want nobody,—there will be no further need for an old woman; though perhaps she *is* wanted, enough to earn her living, enough not to be a pauper,' Mrs. Travers said, drying her eyes indignantly.

'I must speak, if I am to be here at all,' said Edmund, coming

forward; 'let me be of some use now, at least. You are all excited,—too much excited to decide anything. If Elizabeth will have me, I have been long at her disposal, Mrs. Travers; and in that case I can speak for her as well as for myself. This house will never, by my consent, be anybody's but yours. She will never live in it, with my approval, except as your daughter should live. It is better this should be cleared up, perhaps, and that we should all understand each other. You shall never leave here with my consent. I can't but be of some importance, if what you think is true. All the rest is little, and means nothing. These are the facts of the case; you are here at home, and Elizabeth lives with you. What is to happen after shall be arranged between us,—you, as the head of the house, having the first voice. I know nothing about wills and law; in nature you are the head of the house and the mistress of the house, and so you shall always be for me.'

When a man speaks words of wisdom, it is very seldom that they are not received by the women about him as oracles from heaven. Elizabeth rose from her knees, and came and stood by his side, putting her arm into his with a timidity unusual to her. Mrs. Travers sat up in her chair, with her face raised to him, in attention, half bewildered but wholly respectful. Even Lily Ford, behind the old lady's chair, looked up as if her salvation depended upon this supreme and serious statement. When he stopped, there was a breathless pause.

'Well, if it's any satisfaction to you, Lizzy, I think he speaks up like a man,' Mrs. Travers said.

XLIV

THE SQUIRE GOES HOME

THE Squire went out of the house like a man distracted, his brain on fire, a surging as of a flood in his head. He passed out into the hot sun, with his hat in his hand, feeling the rush in his ears too hot and terrible to permit of any covering upon the temples, which throbbed as if they would burst. Very few times in his life had it happened to him that the fiery commotion within dazed and confused him as to what was going on without, but so it was to-day.

He had been without any premonition of trouble, when he climbed that slope with Stephen. He was going to smooth over all offence on Elizabeth's part. Stephen was to tell his tale, to explain, as he seemed convinced he could. 'Let me alone. I hope I know how to talk over a woman,' he had said. Mr. Mitford had been such a fool as to trust to him. Such a fool! he said to himself now. As if Elizabeth had been an ordinary woman, as if the circumstances had been so simple! The Squire could not imagine how he had been such a fool, forgetting that he had known none of the circumstances. Now it seemed as if his own folly were the thing most apparent. How could he think that it would be so easily disposed of! How could he imagine that all would be well!

Mr. Mitford was not a severe judge. He had, perhaps, in his heart more sympathy with Stephen's errors than with the virtue of his other sons. He was not a man to make any fuss about a little irregularity, about what had been called youthful folly in the days when he was himself subject to such temptations; so long as there was nothing disgraceful in it, he had said. But a girl upon his property, the daughter of an old servant, his wife's favourite,—nay, good heavens! the girl whom Roger had meant to marry! Was there ever such a hideous combination! To entice that girl away on the old pretence of marriage, what a scoundrel! and to let her slip through his fingers, what a fool! Everything that was

most unbearable was involved in it. It would be over the whole county to-morrow, flying on the wings of the wind,—a scandal such as had not happened for a generation, and ridicule worse still than the scandal. It was like a Surrey melodrama, the Squire said to himself, crossed with a screaming farce. To have meant to outwit the girl, and to have found her too sharp for him! A Lovelace *planté-là!* a brilliant and conquering hero, made a fool of, like the old nincompoop in the plays. Jove! and this was his son! And the scandal and the derision, the county talk, the shaking of the wise heads, the roar of ridicule would peal round the house, like a storm. The laughter, that was the worst. Had Lily been altogether lost, Mr. Mitford would have been perhaps not much less disturbed; he would have felt keenly the shame of such a scandal, the noisy echoes awakened, the shock of that overthrow of all the decorums and betrayal of all those trusts which an old servant puts in his master, and which public feeling protects and authorises. But that the laugh should be added to the shame; that when people heard what villainy Stephen had been about, they should also hear how the tables had been turned upon him, how the biter had been bit and the deceiver deceived,—that was more unbearable still! The echoes seemed all to catch it up, to breathe it about him, to come back laden with derision and scorn. Stephen, who had been admired in the county, who had a reputation as a dashing fellow, of whom his father had been proud! Proud! Jove! there was not much to be proud of: a base, abominable seduction, and not even a successful one, the laugh turned against him, the victim holding him up to shame. If everything had been put together that could most humiliate and expose the family,—just on the edge of a family affliction, too, when decorum ought to have the strongest hold,—it could not have been more thoroughly done!

It was a very hot day, the very height and crown of summer, and the road between Mount Travers and Melcombe was for a great part of the way quite unshaded, exposed to the full beating of the afternoon sun. It was afternoon, but the sun was still high in the heavens, and the air was penetrated by the fierceness of its shining. Three o'clock is almost more than the climax of day; it has the meridian heat, with an accumulation of all the fiery elements stored up in every corner and in the motionless air, which has not yet been freed from the spell of noon. After a while, Mr. Mitford put on his hat mechanically, to interpose something between him and that glow of heat and brightness. The waves of the flood of passion, of coursing blood and heat, rose one after another, ringing and surging in his ears. He knew what his doctors

had told him about that overwhelming sensation,—that he ought at once to get into a darkened room, and lie down and keep quiet, when he felt it. None of these things could he do now. This rushing along in the full sun, with his head uncovered for part of the way, no shade, no possibility of rest, and some miles of blazing road before him, was enough to have given Dr. Robson a fit, not to speak of the patient, whom he had warned so seriously. The Squire felt this dully in his confused brain, but also felt that he could not help it; that everything was intolerable; that he must get home, and do something at once. He must do it at once; there was no time to lose. A fellow who had exposed himself to the county, to the whole world, like that, could not be permitted to be the representative of the Mitfords. He had always felt uncomfortable about it, always since poor Roger was taken away. Poor Roger! It seemed to the Squire that only death had taken his eldest son away, and that it was somehow a grievance to himself that Stephen had been put in that eldest son's place; he could not make out, in his confusion, how it had come about. It was a wrong to Edmund,—he had always said so,—a great injustice, an injury, a—— And now the fellow had proved how impossible it was to keep up such an arrangement. It was all his own doing, as somehow the other, the injury to Edmund appeared to be Stephen's doing. But the Squire felt that if he could only get home in time, only reach his writing-table and his quiet library and the cool and the shade, and get his pulses to stop beating, and that rushing surge out of his ears, things might still be put right.

But the road stretched out white before him, like something elastic, drawing out and out in endless lengths, such as he had never been conscious of before; and the sun blazed, without a tree to subdue that pitiless glare. He had a vague notion that there was some way with a handkerchief to stop the beating of the light upon his head, but his thoughts were not free enough to arrange it, or think how it could be done. And still, the farther the Squire walked, the farther and farther before him seemed to stretch on these lengths of expanding road. If he could but get home! Presently the name of Pouncefort surged up into his head on those rising waves. Pouncefort!—he must send for Pouncefort: by an express, a man on horseback, in the old way, or by the telegraph,—there was the telegraph. Vaguely it came into his mind that he might stop at the station which he had to pass, and send a message; but that would keep him longer, would prevent his getting home. To get home was the first necessity,—into the cool, into the dark, with the shutters shut. The idea of shutting

the shutters came with a sense of relief to his brain. Somebody could go to the office and send the message; or a man could go, on horseback, the old way.

The laughing-stock of the county! It seemed to him now, somehow, as if it were he who would be laughed at, he who had been outwitted, though without any fault of his. The laugh would be turned against him all over the place, who had meant to play the gay Lothario, and had been made a fool of by a little chit of a girl! Something of the mortification and rage with which Stephen himself thought of that failure entered strangely into his father's brain, but with a confused sense that he had been got into that position without any fault of his; that it was the trick of an enemy; that he had been made to appear ridiculous in the eyes of all men, by something with which his own action had nothing to do. He seemed to hear the ring of that derision all about him. Ha, ha, ha! did you hear that story about Mitford? about the Mitfords? about old Mitford? That was what it came to at the last. Old Mitford! though he was a man that had never made a laughing-stock of himself, always kept clear of that; had been respected, feared, if you like; an ugly sort of fellow to be affronted or put upon, but laughed at, never! And now this was his fate, for the first time in his life, and by no fault of his.

How good it would be to have the shutters closed, all along the side of the house! What a change it would make all at once!—out of that beating and blazing, the pitiless heat, the sound of the laughter; for somehow the laughter appeared to come in too. Meanwhile, the road did nothing but grow longer and longer, stretching out like a long white line, endless as far as one could see, not diminishing, extending as one rushed on; until at last, when the heat was at its highest, the sunshine almost blinding, the surging in his ears worse than ever, Mr. Mitford suddenly found a coolness and shelter about him, and saw that he was stumbling in at his own door.

'Shut all the shutters,' he said to the first servant he saw.

'The shutters, sir?'

'Every shutter in the house. Don't you see how the sun is blazing? And I want something to drink, and a horse saddled at once.'

'A horse, sir?'

'Don't I speak plain enough? Send Larkins,—he'll understand; but shut the shutters, every shutter; keep out the sun, or we'll go on fire,' Mr. Mitford said.

Larkins was sought out in the housekeeper's room, with a message that master had come in, off his head, as mad as mad,

calling for the shutters to be shut, and for a horse. The butler had been dozing pleasantly, and was just waking up to enjoy his afternoon tea.

'Rubbish,' he said. 'I daresay as he's hot with his walk, and wants a drink; they allays does, when a man's comfortable.'

But Mr. Larkins was not an ill-natured man, and he had a sympathy for people who wanted a drink. He sent for ice and various bottles, and there was a popping of corks which occupied some time; and finally he took in himself to the library a tray, which the footman carried to the door. He found, what alarmed even his composure, his master tugging at the shutters to close them, though the sun had passed away from that side of the house.

'Bless me, sir, let me do that! But the sun's gone,' he said, hurrying to set down his tray.

The Squire was purple. He fumbled about the shutters as if he did not see, his eyes seemed starting out of his head, and he was panting, with loud, noisy breath. 'Every shutter,' he said, 'or we'll go on fire; and, Larkins, have a horse saddled, and send a groom——'

'Yes, sir, but please leave all that to me, and take a seat, sir; you're rather knocked up with the heat, and I've brought some of that Cup.'

Larkins, alarmed, had to guide his master to his big chair, and while he brought him a large glass of that skilful decoction, with the ice jumbling delightfully and making a pleasant noise, he resolved within himself that the groom should go for Dr. Robson, and that without a moment's delay.

'For Pouncefort, for Pouncefort,' said the Squire; 'a man on horse, the quickest way.'

'If I were to send a telegram?' said Larkins, more and more decided that the doctor should be the groom's errand.

'That's it,' said Mr. Mitford, and he took a deep and long draught; then repeated, 'The shutters, the shutters,—shut the shutters!' Larkins moved away to humour his master. But his back was scarcely turned when there was a great noise, amid which the sharp sound of the glass breaking caught the butler's ear, a rumbling as when a tower falls, all the courses of the masonry coming down upon each other; and there lay the Squire, all huddled on the floor, with his purple face fallen back, and his breathing like the sound of a swollen stream.

Stephen left Mount Travers as hastily, and not much more pleasantly, than his father. The thing had come upon him which,

with horrible premonitions of shame and discomfiture, he had feared, ever since that night when his victim, at the moment of his triumph, had slipped out of his hands. The sensation had been almost worse than he had imagined it would be. The sight of Lily had filled him with a rage which he felt to be cowardly, and which he would have resisted had he known how to do so; a desire to strangle her, to crush her, to stop that explanation by any means, however brutal. And Elizabeth's look of horror, and even the little white face of Mrs. Travers, avowing with a sigh her partiality for military men, had been terrible to him. But after the shock and sting of that crisis, there came to Stephen a sense of relief. The story would have flown to all the winds, if but one of the fellows in the regiment had been there, or any man who could communicate to them this too delightful tale. But the ladies would not spread it abroad,—they were too much horrified; and the Squire and Edmund would be silent. They would know, and would not forget the story of his disgrace, and that was bad enough; but they would not tell it, for their own sake, if not for his. Nor would *she* repeat it, for her own sake. It was more safe than he could have hoped; the horrible moment of the disclosure had come, but it was over, and nothing was so bad as he had feared. True, Elizabeth's money was not for him; the tramp to whom he threw a sixpence was as likely now to be received as a wooer as he was; but what then? There were as good fish in the sea as had ever been drawn out of it. For his part, he had no taste for such women; he could very easily make up his mind to the loss of Elizabeth; a prim woman, with that sanctimonious horror in her eyes, she was no loss at all. They were as safe an audience as he could have chosen, had he had the choosing of them. Not one of them would repeat it; and that, not for Stephen's sake, but for their own. And to console him further, he had the comfort of having revenged himself, which was sweet. He had thrown a firebrand among them, for them to extinguish as best they could. On the whole, he said to himself, with fierce exultation, it was he who had come out of it best.

Therefore his excitement calmed down more easily than his father's. There remained the question as to what the Squire would do, which was a serious one. He had been furious; he had taken it as Stephen himself did, with rage and a sense of the mortification, the failure, the horrible ridicule to which he would be exposed. But Stephen hoped that he might make his father see what he so clearly saw himself; this shameful secret had been revealed to the most harmless audience that could have been

chosen; that from Mount Travers it was very unlikely to spread or be repeated, or even whispered about; that the ladies would not do it, nor Edmund; and that the little devil herself,—the little—— He set his teeth when he thought of her. He would like to meet her once more, only once more, in the park, and see what she would say then.

He went home more quickly than his father had done, thinking nothing of the length of the way, nor of the heat, nor of the want of shade. He must see what temper his father was in; and if it were very bad, he would pack up and be off. Happily, he had not sent in his papers; and if the worst came to the worst, there would be this compensation in losing his heirship,—that he should no longer be compelled to remain at home. There was always that to be said on the other side. He met a groom on horseback, tearing down the avenue, but paid no particular attention; nor was he roused by the scared face of Larkins who met him at the door. He thought, indeed, that Larkins had been sent to warn him that the Squire would not see him; but this alarm lasted only for a moment. The butler looked very pale and frightened. He came forward anxiously as soon as Stephen appeared.

'I'm very thankful as you've come, sir. I didn't know how to act on my own responsibility. Master's not at all well.'

'Not well? What is the matter?' Stephen said.

'He came in what I might make bold to call very queer, sir, calling out to shut the shutters, to keep the sun out. Now the sun's gone from the library, captain, an hour ago, as you know. John Thomas was clean scared, and came and told me as master was off his head. I says "Rubbish!" and I carries him in some of his own particular Cup as he's fond of. He was an awful colour, sir,—purple-like, and breathing hard. He told me to shut the shutters and then to send a man on horseback for Mr. Pouncefort. I turned my back for a moment, and there he was, smash down upon the floor.'

'A fit! Did you send for the doctor? Have you got the doctor?'

'I didn't lose a moment, captain. I sent off the groom at once. We laid him on the sofa, and Mrs. Simmons is with him. He looks awful bad. That's his breathing, sir, as you can hear.'

Stephen steadied himself by a chair. 'This is what Robson feared,' he said.

'Yes, captain, doctor always said as his was a risky life; and master's feared it too. Getting in a passion's bad for him, sir, and so is the great heat and being out in the sun. Mrs. Simmons

has got ice to his head, and we're doing all we know till the doctor comes. Had master been badly put out, sir, by anything? You will perhaps know?'

Stephen made no reply. He stood and listened to the loud breathing, with which the very house seemed to vibrate. 'Did you send for Mr. Pouncefort, as my father directed?'

'We've had no time to think of that. I thought the doctor was the first thing.'

'You were right, Larkins; it was better not to worry him, in that state.'

'Shall I telegraph now, sir, to Mr. Pouncefort? I thought I'd wait till one of you gentlemen came home.'

Stephen again stood silent for a long minute, paying no attention. At length, 'I don't think you need trouble yourself further,' he said.

XLV

AFTER THE STORM

TUMULT and trouble seemed to have died out of the house on the hill, the vacant room alone showed a few traces of the passion and conflict that had been there. The screen had been pushed aside, showing the little table and chair behind it, which Lily had used all the time she had been at Mount Travers, in her nervous dread of being seen by any visitors; and Mrs. Travers's chair with its cushions, her footstool, and the pretty stand with all her little requirements, stood astray, as they had been thrust to one side and another, in the sudden commotion which Stephen, before his exit, had flung into the enemy's country. There Elizabeth had knelt, distracted, imploring her aunt not to believe what was nevertheless true; and there the little lady had stood, thrusting them all away, repulsing her footstool, as though that, too, had been an enemy, in the heat of her indignation. The inanimate things showed these traces of human emotion in a way which was curiously telling, with a suggestiveness partly comic, partly pathetic. The footstool had been turned over with the vehemence of the foot which on ordinary occasions rested on it so peacefully. The chair in which Stephen had first seated himself kept its place,—turned with an ingratiating expression towards that of Elizabeth, which had been pushed back a little,—with its chintz cover all dragged out of place by the man's impetuous movements. But all was perfectly silent here, as on other fields of battle; and in a few minutes the butler, coming in with his tea-tray, had it all put straight again. Nothing could exceed the surprise of that respectable functionary; no bell had been rung, no one had been called to open the door; and yet the gentlemen whom he had admitted had all melted away, leaving no trace, and even the ladies had forgotten that it was time for tea.

Lily Ford came into the room while he was in the act of calling upon some of his subordinates to rearrange this place of conflict.

Lily had become Miss Ford,—she was a visitor, and had no dealings except in that capacity, with the servants; but they all knew who she was, and had a certain reluctance in serving her. It is all very well to talk of rising in the world, and bettering yourself; but to wait upon one of his own class who has succeeded in doing this is more than any free-born servant can be expected to do.

'Will you kindly take up tea to Mrs. Travers's room? She is not coming down,' Lily said.

She had been crying; her lips had still a faint quiver in them, and something like the echo of a sob came into her voice as she spoke. Though it had been her mother's delight to think that she was quite a lady, Lily, in fact, had rather the air of a very pretty, very refined lady's-maid. That is not saying much, for it is sometimes difficult enough to tell which is which, especially when the inferior in position is the prettier by nature, as sometimes happens. It is only, perhaps, a certain want of freedom, a greater self-restraint—such as is not unlikely to add to the air of refinement—which marks the difference. Lily was very quiet, very reticent and subdued, and those signs of emotion seemed to betray to the man's eyes tokens of 'a smash up.' That his two mistresses should have quarrelled did not, with his knowledge of them, appear very probable; but that Miss Ford—Miss, indeed!—should have found her level and got the 'sack,' according to the phraseology of the servants' hall, was the most natural, not to say pleasing, thing in the world.

'Tea for one, miss?' the butler said, with a look that gave meaning to the words.

Lily replied only with a wondering glance, but she said in a low voice, 'You may put away the screen, if you please.'

It was very evident then to the household, through which the news flashed in a moment, that there was an end of Miss Ford; that she had got the sack, and would trouble them with her obnoxious superiority no more.

What went on, however, in Mrs. Travers's room during the remainder of the afternoon was little like this. There the old lady sat, propped up with more cushions than usual, in a state of tearful dignity and exaltation. She had felt the blow profoundly,—as much as nature would allow her to feel. But there is this advantage in a very small body, possessed by a not very great mind,—that its physical capabilities are limited, and that the greatest anguish wears itself out proportionately soon. Mrs. Travers had been deeply wounded; she had been very indignant,

very angry, and then had recurred to the first pang, and felt the slight and the cruelty of her husband's injustice to the bottom of her little but affectionate heart. But when she had gone through that round of feeling twice or thrice she was exhausted, and for the time could feel no more. Everything that Elizabeth, in a compunction which was very deep though quite uncalled for, since she had no part in the offence, and in her anxiety to soothe, and in her real gratitude and affection, could do had been lavished upon her aunt; while Lily, all overwhelmed still by the event in which she had taken so great a share, and unable to restrain her sobbing, had lingered round the other sufferer with that fellowship which trouble has with trouble and pain with pain. Mrs. Travers, comforted by every outward appliance,—by cushions applied skilfully at the very angles of her back which wanted support, and tender bathings of her hot eyes and forehead, and gentle ministrations with a fan, and arrangements of blinds and curtains to temper the light,—sank at last into a condition of not disagreeable weakness, with all the superiority in it of undeserved affliction.

'Yes, I am a little better now. I believe that you mean well, Lizzy. I am sure you would never be unkind to me, my dear. Perhaps, as you say, it was all a muddle, just a muddle at the end. And Edmund Mitford spoke up very fair. Oh, I don't say it's your fault, or his fault. But I shouldn't wonder if I'd be better with Lily for a bit; leave me with Lily for a bit. We've both been badly used; and she's very feeling; and you can't be expected to feel just the same, when it's all to your advantage. Oh, I didn't mean to say anything unkind. Leave me for a bit with Lily, till I come to myself.'

This was what she had said, sending Elizabeth away; and then Mrs. Travers lay back in her chair, with that sense of being a martyr which is never without a faint touch of pleasure in it. She had been overwhelmed by sudden trouble, which nobody could say she had deserved; she had deserved nothing but good, and evil was what had come upon her. But now the sensation of quiet after a storm, of rest after suffering, was softly diffused through the atmosphere; the storm had passed over the gentle victim,—that storm which she had done nothing to bring down; her wrongs had subsided into that quiescent condition in which, while ceasing to hurt, they continued to give her a claim upon the respect and sympathy of all near. She said in a half-audible voice, 'Let them bring the tea here, Lily;' and after her docile companion had accomplished that commission, she called her close to her chair.

'Sit down by me, my poor dear, and tell me everything,' she said.

When Saunders, the butler, brought in the tea (which after all he had not ventured to bring in for only one), it is to be hoped it was a lesson to him to see Miss Ford seated on a stool close to Mrs. Travers's side, while the old lady held her hand, and patted it from time to time, saying, 'My poor dear, my poor dear!' Saunders said, in the servants' hall, that they were crying together and as thick as they could be; and that he shook in his shoes for fear Mrs. Travers should say something about the tea for one; but she might be keeping it up for him, for another time. They stopped talking while he was there, so he couldn't tell what the fuss was about; but they were as thick as thick,—that he could swear. He withdrew very quietly, treading as lightly as a man of fourteen stone could do, not to call Miss Ford's attention to him, and never was more thankful than when he found himself safe outside the door.

Mrs. Travers heard all Lily's story, every word, with the keenest interest. To have a romance in real life thus unfolded to her from the heroine's own lips, more exciting than any novel, would have been an enchantment to her at any time; and now afforded such a diversion from her own trouble as nothing else could have supplied, especially as her curiosity had been roused by partial revelations before. She would not miss a detail of the terrible night in the street, nor of how the poor girl felt when she found herself lying on a sofa in the railway waiting-room, with Miss Travers bending over her, and the kind woman who was the attendant there standing by her side with a cup of tea. Miss Travers had been her salvation, Lily said with tears; she had telegraphed at once to the mother, making it all appear quite natural, so that even her own people knew nothing, except that Miss Travers had taken her to town and was making a companion of her. They were not to say where she was, at first, on account of poor Mr. Roger, for whose sake the Fords had supposed their daughter had run away. All this had seemed most plausible to her father and mother; and thus Lily's terrible adventure had turned out the most fortunate incident in her life. Mrs. Travers asked and was told much more than this, especially about the state of Lily's heart, and how she now believed that she had never loved Stephen at all, but had only been flattered and excited by his attentions; for the sight of him, Lily declared, had not called her heart back to him at all, but made her feel that she wished never to see him again, and that if there was not another man in the world! This she protested with many tears.

'And all the time Lizzy thought it was poor Roger, and begged me to say nothing, for he was dead; and yet couldn't quite forgive poor Edmund, thinking he knew; and was angry, something about money that Roger had left, thinking they wanted to make it up to you with money. It has been hard for you, my poor dear,' Mrs. Travers said; 'but it is a good thing for Lizzy that all this has come out. It shows what a man he is, that in his revenge he should have taken it out on me. Lily, my child, give me a cup of tea. I want it very much, and so must you, my dear; there is nothing that revives one so, when one is exhausted with crying and trouble, and when one's nerves are shattered. Lily, there is one thing this discovery has done,—it has set me quite free. I always thought, whatever happened, I was bound to Lizzy, and to my own house, and all that. But now that I find out I have got no house, and Lizzy will be getting married, how should you like to go away travelling, to Switzerland, and all kinds of beautiful places, Lily Ford?'

'Oh, Mrs. Travers!' cried Lily, drying her eyes.

'You needn't say any more, my dear; it has brought back the light into your face in a moment. We'll go away and travel, you and I. I have thought of it a long time, but I have never said anything about it. In the first place, Lizzy never cared for going abroad; and then, though I'm very fond of Lizzy, she is a kind of tall character, you know, that does not always do to go about with a small body like me. I have always been on the lookout for a nice quiet girl that I could be fond of, that wouldn't be too serious or distracted, with other things to think of. Lily, since the first day you came here, I have always felt I could get on with you.' Mrs. Travers raised herself a little upon her cushions, as she sipped her tea, and a faint animation came into her face. 'I never could have done with a companion that had been got by an advertisement, or recommended by a clergyman, or anything of that sort. But getting fond of you before one ever thought of anything of the sort,—it is just a Providence, Lily! And your father and mother, —Lizzy has quite settled about them, so they can have no objections. We'll go abroad, you and I; we'll be quite comfortable, and take Martha, and perhaps a man too, if you think that would be a comfort,—for I have a little money of my own, enough for all we shall want. We'll make no plans, but just go wherever it will be nicest, wherever we like best; we'll be quite free and independent, for we'll be company for each other, which is what I have always wanted. Don't you think it will be very nice, Lily? It's what I've always wanted but never have seen my way to, till now.'

'Oh, Mrs. Travers, it is like a dream; like nothing but a dream!' Lily cried.

And these two innocent creatures dried their tears, and began to talk of travelling-dresses and the most beautiful places they had ever heard or read about. All the world was 'abroad' to them; it meant everything, from Boulogne to Bombay, the first seeming about as far off as the last; and in the novelty and delight of this thought, their troubles floated away.

Elizabeth had left her aunt's room with a beating heart. To reckon up all that had passed in this eventful afternoon was impossible: the one thing important was the question whether she should find Edmund waiting for her downstairs. The current of these hasty events had swept the two together in a way she had never intended, nor thought of. She had put out her hand to him in her first astonishment in the shock of Lily's revelation, and in the force and impetuosity of her feelings had called him by his name. Up to that moment, Elizabeth had sorrowfully believed that it was Roger who was the pitiful hero of Lily's adventure. The girl had not said it, had not, as Miss Travers now perceived, given any indication that it was he; but Elizabeth had convinced herself of it by reasonings which it is unnecessary to follow, by one piece of circumstantial evidence after another. In all that Roger had done, Edmund had involved himself. In her own hearing he had spoken of money which Roger had destined for Lily, and which, Elizabeth took it for granted, was given as compensation for the wrong he had intended to do. Her heart had been hot and sore with the secret which nobody knew. She could not bear to stand by and witness the love and the grief and the honour with which Roger's name was surrounded,—Roger, who she believed had stained that name with such schemes and artifices at the very end of his life! It had been intolerable to her to hear the universal praises that followed him, to feel herself compelled to acquiesce in what was said. She had stood silent, in painful repression, unwilling to consent, still more unwilling to condemn him who had gone before a higher tribunal. She had determined at last, that very day, to tell Edmund her secret,—that it was she who had recovered Lily and brought her home, and that she knew everything. When the discovery came, and she was made aware that she had been wronging Roger all the time, Elizabeth's generous heart had turned, with a bound of repentance and acknowledgment, to Roger's faithful brother, whom she had been holding at arm's length, knowing well—as how could she help knowing?—what was on his lips. Her subdued scream of horror and com-

punction, her call to Edmund to forgive her, her hand put into his, had all been signs which she had no power to restrain. She had done this involuntarily, throwing herself at Edmund's head, as the vulgar say. And afterwards it had all seemed to be taken for granted by him and every one, she could not tell how. He had spoken for her, and she had accepted his guidance with proud humility, standing up by him, putting her hand on his arm. It all appeared to have been settled for them without a word said between them, without anything which usually constitutes such a bond. He had not said that he loved her, nor that he wanted her; there had been no asking, no consent. If there had been any advance made, it had come from her, with that unconscious cry of 'Edmund!' with the giving of her hand. When she left her aunt's room, Elizabeth, for the first time able to think of herself, went down the stairs very slowly, in great agitation, not knowing what she was to find. Would he still be there? Would he have seized the opportunity to escape from a position which was not, after all, of his seeking? Or if he remained, would it be with an embarrassed acquiescence in what had happened, which had been none of his doing? She could not tell. Her heart was beating very fast, though her foot was slow. She was not a humble girl, ready to acknowledge her lord, but a woman full of natural pride and independence, very sensitive, deeply wondering what on his side the man had thought and now had to say.

She was not left long in doubt. Edmund was waiting in the hall, at the foot of the stairs. The first thought of her alarmed soul was that he was on his way out, that he was about to leave the house; and her heart stopped beating for a moment. But Edmund was not going away; he put out his hands to take hers, drawing one through his arm.

'Come out,' he said; 'now that you have come, I don't feel that the house can contain me. I have a thousand and a thousand more things to say.'

'Oh!' she cried, 'what must you think of me? What can I say to you? Everything seems to have been taken out of our hands.'

'Think of you? It will take a long time to tell you all that. Say to me? Everything, whatever comes into your mind; for now you are I, and I am you. Come out into the free air; there is too much of me to be contained in any house. Dear Elizabeth, ever dear, there is no ghost to stand between us now?'

'Did you feel it,' she said, 'that spectre? Oh, how could I ever have entertained such an unworthy thought!'

'I knew it was not Roger,' he said. 'Some time you shall hear what he said of you and me, that last night. But in the meantime we have everything to say between ourselves and about ourselves. I cannot withhold a word; events seem to have settled it for us. Elizabeth, I am going to begin at the beginning.'

They took refuge from the wide landscape in a summer-house which, but that nature had laden it with a wild and tangled growth of honeysuckle and jessamine, would have been an entirely cockney erection, in the taste of the late Mr. Travers, and there reviewed the complete rise and progress of a love which was now by mere force of development clear to both from the beginning, conscious as it had scarcely been, until a recent period, but of this both were now completely unaware. The sunny afternoon sped over them, the shadows lengthened, a cool breeze tempered the heat, blowing straight over the tree-tops from the sea. Everything was sweet to them,—the light and the shadows, the heat and the coolness, the sun and the breeze. The honeysuckle breathed out its sweetness into the air; and so did the birds, singing all manner of love songs and bridal ditties, selecting the best out of their stores, such as they had used on their own account in spring. These two, sitting wrapt in airs of heaven, neither heard the birds nor smelt the flowers; they had all music and fragrance and sweetness in themselves. They were as little concerned in, as little conscious, as little prescient of the scene going on at Melcombe as if they had lived in another world.

Thus the conflict and the misery which for an hour or so had seemed to concentrate in this innocent house, and which had overshadowed it with gloom, and given a tragic colour to every ray of light, passed away, being in no manner native to the place. Within doors, the two injured persons who had been the chief sufferers forgot everything, and planned their little consolatory travels with the freshness of delighted children; while here every cloud flitted away from the two most blest, united after long, tantalising drifts asunder, in the enjoyment of that most perfect hour of human fellowship, the lovers' first mutual understanding. It does not always happen; but here for once life and the hour brought no injustice. The clouds passed away from the innocent household, and did no harm.

The other house on the plain below was not so easily delivered. It was not innocent, but guilty; and on it the clouds descended, full of lightning and thunder and storm.

XLVI

THE LAST OF THE SQUIRE

EDMUND did not return to Melcombe till late. He stayed all the delightful evening through at Mount Travers, dining there, as in his present position it was the right and natural thing to do. That afternoon and evening fled like a dream. Sometimes it happens that to two people thus suddenly brought together, after long tending towards each other, and when the first flush of youthful security has passed, the moment of union brings a completion as well as a beginning of life, which is unique in its perfection. It combines the rapture of early bliss with that deep-seated satisfaction of maturity, which is rarer, and if not so exquisite, yet the most real version of happiness. Up to this moment, they had not lived for themselves. The life of Elizabeth had been spent in that most perfect of filial duty which is exercised towards relations who have the claims of love and kindness without those of warm sympathy and congeniality. She was not like the kind old couple who had been so good to her. Both in what they had done for her and in what they had withheld, they had often wounded a nature which was not like theirs. Her uncle had been generous beyond measure to her in his will, but had put her into the most false position, and made her the apparent instrument of a wrong which was abhorrent to her. Edmund, on the other side, had lived a neutral-coloured life, because, no doubt, of a certain spectatorship of nature, which often betrays a man who is without any prick of necessity or strong impulse of passion into indifference and mediocrity. He was one of those, not, perhaps, the least happy nor the least useful, who stand aside out of the conflicts of life and look on, and who seem to attain to little by persistence of wanting little,—by an interest which they have rather in life in the general than in any special objects to be appropriated to themselves. Such men can be emancipated and brought into a warmer existence only by love, which gives them a warmer and

stronger identity by adding another life to theirs. Love that 'smites the chord of self,' till it, 'trembling, passed in music out of sight,' is one thing; but there is another, in which the selfsame love, not less noble, takes up 'the harp of life, and smites on all its chords with might;' so that the musing spectator, the observer of other men, becomes himself a man by dint of the woman poured into him, filling his veins and his soul with an added vitality. This pair found themselves increased so, with a wonder and a delight beyond the reach of the simpler boy and girl, who only know themselves happy. They had each expanded, risen into a stronger individuality, become more in themselves by throwing everything into each other. To both the exquisite novelty of having another self was not only a blessedness indescribable, but a marvel, an exhilaration, an elevation of individual being, such as no prophecy or description had led them to anticipate. They both seemed to begin to live from that moment, to understand what it was to have that possession of human capability and power. At once out of a world mysteriously indifferent, uncomprehending, uninterested, never able to divine what they would be at, to possess each an ear into which to pour everything that came into the heart, each an eye always awake to what each was doing, each another who was themselves,—what a wonder, what a miracle, what an expansion of living; nay, what life and personal identity! This day was a revelation, a kind of gospel, a new communication direct out of heaven for both. They spent those sunny hours together, which seemed like so many moments, and yet were of more account in their life than a dozen previous years. They dined together at a table which derived a curious dignity from the thought that henceforth it was to be the centre of life dispensed to others; of meeting and communion; of breaking of bread, half sacramental with the sacred seal of domestic unity, of possession in common. All common life became splendid and noble in this illumination; they looked at each other, and read, radiant, the exposition of what existence actually was in each other's eyes.

Edmund walked home in the delicious darkness of the summer night. The road was white under his feet, the dark hedges standing up on either hand, the immense vault of sky over him sparkling with innumerable stars. In his present mood, moonlight would have been too much; it would have introduced a more dramatic element, strong shadows along with the intensity of its white light. He loved better that soft shining which filled the heavens with delightful company and silent fellowship. He walked along lightly, as if he trod upon air, that same road which his father had

traversed in a passion of physical and mental excitement, which made of it an awful, half-delirious pathway from life to death; and which Stephen had trod heavily, with anxious thoughts, subsiding rage, and rising care. He thought of neither of them, nor of what he should find when he reached home, nor of how he should communicate the great event which had happened to himself. None of these things disturbed Edmund's mind. The fact that he was shut out from his inheritance had made him perfectly independent. In comparison with Elizabeth he was poor; but that did not trouble him. It did not occur to him that any mean or mercenary motive could ever be associated with his name; nor did he think of Elizabeth's superior wealth any more than he thought of the dress she had worn, or any other matter of insignificant detail. Every trifle comes to be important in its time, and no doubt the day would come when he would be critical about his wife's dress, and like her to wear this or that. But in the meantime he had no leisure in his mind for anything but herself, and the wonderful possession that had come to him in her, Elizabeth. He said the name over to himself, looking up at the stars with a low laugh of pleasure, and moisture in his eyes. Elizabeth, —that was enough. Not Lizzy; Lizzy was not characteristic of her, as some pet names are. Elizabeth,—a name to be said slowly, savoured in all its syllables, which embodied not softness only, but strength; a queen's name, a common name, liquid in the beginning, coming up strong on the rock of that concluding sound. His laugh sounded into the silence, a low, congenial note, subdued, yet the uttermost expression of human pleasure, and satisfaction, and content. He was not laughing at himself in his lover's folly, as perhaps a wiser man might have done, but only for happiness, for pure pleasure, for delight.

The door was still standing wide open when Edmund reached Melcombe, and a dog-cart stood before the steps, with lamps, which made a contradictory yellow glimmer in the paleness of the night. As he approached, Larkins came out upon the threshold. 'You needn't wait,' he said to the driver. 'Doctor's going to stop all night.'

'How's master?' said the man.

'Don't say nothing in the house, but it's my opinion he's a dead man; and if Robson don't think so, too, I'm a—— But mind you, not a word; the family mightn't like——'

'What's that you are saying, Larkins?' Edmund laid a sudden hand upon the butler's shoulder, which made him jump.

'Mr. Edmund! I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir. I didn't

see you. I was telling James to put up—— Dr. Robson, sir, he's here, and will not be going—not for a bit.'

'Who is ill? My father? What is it? You said he was a dead man.'

'He's had a fit, sir. There was nobody there but me, and it's had that effect upon me that I don't know what I'm saying. I hope it ain't so bad as that, Mr. Edmund. Don't go to master's room, sir; Dr. Robson says no one's to go in. The captain, he's in the library.'

Edmund had gone half-way up the stairs, but he stopped at this, and came slowly down again. The shock of this intimation dispersed all that bright atmosphere about him, as if it had been a bubble, and brought him back with a sudden jar into so different a sphere. He was well aware of the significance of the words 'a fit,' and remembered, with a throb of painful sensation, his father's continual preoccupation on this subject, his occasional attempts at self-restraint, because of what had been said to him of the risks he ran. Poor father! overwhelmed at last by that tempest of rage and shame. His exclamation about the harm that had come to him from his sons recurred to Edmund's mind. The Squire had passed safely enough through the contrarieties brought upon him by Roger: he had seen his first-born die, and buried him, without any danger from emotion. But now—Edmund approached the library very unwillingly, with hesitating steps. The very sight of Stephen would, he felt, be intolerable; nor did he know how his brother could look him in the face. The door was ajar, and he pushed it open with a reluctant hand. The apartment was dimly lighted by candles on the mantelpiece, which was at the opposite end of the room from the Squire's writing-table, usually the central point, with its one brilliant lamp. The fact that the lamp had not been lighted was already a sign of approaching change. Edmund saw with relief that the doctor stood with Stephen before the fireplace,—two dark figures in the ineffectual light.

'What is the matter?' he asked. 'Doctor, I am most thankful at least to find you here.'

'Not for much good, I'm afraid,' returned the doctor, shaking his head. 'He has had a fit, and a bad one. I must not conceal from you that he is very ill. I've been afraid of it for some time back. Nothing we have done has been of any avail as yet.'

Edmund asked anxiously how it had happened, and received from the doctor Larkins's story, cut short of various details. 'He seems to have walked a considerable distance in the heat of the

sun. Your brother does not appear to be aware of any other circumstances.'

'He had been very much excited,—he had made a painful discovery.'

Stephen turned half round, with a dark glance from under his brows.

'Oh,' exclaimed the doctor. Then he added quickly, 'These things, of course, would be but secondary causes. I have warned him repeatedly that he must take the utmost care, in respect of diet and—many other things. But with all precautions, disease cannot be staved off. It was bound to come, sooner or later.'

'And you take a despondent view?'

'One can never tell,' replied Dr. Robson. 'He has had only threatenings, no attack before, and his strength is intact. I shall stay all night—or until—— In the meantime, I have been saying to your brother, if you would like to get a physician from London. The telegraph is closed by this time; but a message could be sent by the midnight train.'

'I think it would be well to send one, doctor, notwithstanding our perfect confidence in you.'

'I didn't see the use,' objected Stephen, with averted head.

'It is no question of confidence in me. I should prefer it,' the doctor said.

'Then I'll send at once.'

Stephen again gave his brother a darkling look. There was in it a curious defiance, yet timidity. Edmund was the eldest; he had the first right to act. He asked no advice from his junior, who was tacitly put aside altogether, while Edmund consulted with the doctor, after sending off his message, which was despatched by a servant, with authority to engage a special train to bring down the great physician with as little delay as possible. Stephen walked up and down the room, while everything was thus taken out of his hands. He might have attended to these matters on his own responsibility, and saved himself from being thus superseded in what he felt with a *sourd* mixture of anger and alarm and satisfaction, to be his own house. He did not wish to deprive his father of any care. He did not wish him to die, though that would be a solution of all the difficulties of the moment, which it was scarcely possible not to desire. Nothing so bad as this, however, was in his mind. He could not have told why he had not acted upon the doctor's suggestion and telegraphed, so long as there was time. Perhaps it had been with a vague idea of conciliating Dr. Robson, of having the doctor on his side;

perhaps merely from a reluctance to act, a hesitation, a resistance, of which he was now ashamed and wroth with himself. He might have done it, and asserted his authority, instead of letting that fellow cut in, as if he had any right. Meanwhile, Edmund acted as if he had the sole right. He went up with Dr. Robson to the patient's room, when the doctor thought it time for another visit, leaving Stephen still pacing about, agitated by feelings which he did not dare to show. His position was one to try the strongest spirit. The probabilities were that if Mr. Mitford got better everything would be changed; and though, when he heard from Larkins his father's order that Pouncefort should be sent for, he had stopped that communication, he had at the same time sent for his man, and ordered that everything should be packed up, that he might be ready to go off at once, if *that* was what was going to happen. He was determined he would not endure abuse and loss both. So that if the Squire got well, if he saw his lawyer and carried out his new intentions, Stephen had decided to leave the house in an hour's time, perhaps never to return; while if Mr. Mitford died, in a moment all would be his, without question or remark. The balance of possibilities was thus a very exciting and uncertain one; to be reduced to the position of a son banished from the paternal home, as Roger had been, or to be the master and owner of all; to feel himself set aside from all share in the matter by Edmund, who took the command naturally, by a right which everybody acknowledged, or to be the master, and turn Edmund out. And all this hanging upon a thread, upon the living or dying of the old man upstairs! Stephen did not wish his father to die. It was something, it was much, that he could resist that temptation. But he waited with sullen excitement, low-flaming, self-controlled. He was angry that the London physician had been sent for, and that he himself had not sent for him,—he scarcely knew which was most annoying,—and went on pacing in an angry mood, till Edmund and the doctor should come downstairs again, perhaps bringing news.

Edmund saw his brother's boxes packed, as he passed Stephen's room on his way downstairs, with some surprise. He would have preferred, had it been practicable, to have had no intercourse with him; but that, it was evident, could not be. He went, once more slowly and with reluctance, to the library, where he knew that Stephen was awaiting him. Captain Mitford stopped in his pacing up and down, and turned round, when Edmund came in. They stood and looked at each other for a moment silently; then, 'My father is no better,' Edmund said.

'I was afraid he would not be,' responded Stephen. 'Robson,' he added, 'seems to have very little hope.'

'Very little hope. Did you see him before the seizure?'

'No.'

'Then things are the same between you as when he left Mount Travers?'

'Yes.'

After this brief colloquy, they stood for another moment looking at each other. To think that this fellow should confront him, as if he were the master, and that at any moment it might be he, Stephen, who was the master, and able to turn Edmund out! This was the thought that burned in Stephen's mind. On the chance of a moment! But as yet, no one knew how that chance might turn.

XLVII

THE BREAK-UP

THE long night passed in discomfort and gloom, in broken dozes and broken conversations, with long pauses. The two young men sat opposite to each other, obliged to keep each other company, yet with nothing to say. A jealous alarm prevented Stephen from retiring to his room. He felt that something might happen, if he were not always on the watch. The Squire might recover his senses. Pouncefort might arrive, and find some means, which neither doctor nor nurse was capable of, to get him round. Who could tell what might happen? Edmund remained up to receive the report of the doctor, to watch for the possible arrival of the physician from town, and also partly because he could not sleep. Dr. Robson came and went from the sickroom to the library below, throwing himself on the sofa in the intervals, to take that rest which doctors as well as nurses know to be so indispensable in face of eventualities. The doctor thought in the breaks of his sleep that he had never seen anything more strange than the aspect of the two brothers, seated each in his corner, exchanging few words, taking little notice of each other, while their father lay between life and death, upstairs. Was it feeling? he asked himself, or what was it? He, too, had seen the packed and strapped portmanteaus within the open door of Stephen's room, and wondered who was going away, and why, and what had been the 'painful discovery' the patient had made, which one brother had not mentioned, and the other had at once identified as one of the causes of the seizure. This wonder did not prevent Dr. Robson, who was a young man in robust health, from sleeping, any more than anxiety for his patient did; but it passed through his mind, with some half guess at the cause, before he went to sleep, with these two dark figures before him,—one bolt upright in his chair, in a fictitious watchfulness, the other with his face hid in the shadow of the hand which supported his head. There was no

reason why they should both sit up. They seemed to be keeping a watch on each other, like sentinels of two contending parties. Their aspect was so strange, and the consciousness of their presence so strong, that they made the doctor dream. He could not shake from his mind the certainty that they were there.

The London doctor came in the morning, not having hurried himself unduly, and regretting, as he said, the great additional expense that would have been entailed upon the survivors had a special train been necessary. He arrived, fresh and neat, upon the exhausted and excited household, and with a mind quite free from any tortures of suspense. But his examination of the patient did not come to much. He said, when he came downstairs, that it was impossible to tell—the patient might linger a day or two; he might even rally, by extreme good fortune; or another attack might come on, and terminate the matter at once.

'There can be no doubt that it is to his advantage that he has survived so long,' said this great authority, with a meaning which was comprehensible enough. 'To be sure,' cried Dr. Robson, who was an imprudent young man, 'it is to his advantage that he has survived, or he would be dead by this time.'

But the fact was that no more light was to be thrown upon the question by science, and the London physician came and went, as such great authorities often do, in a case which is beyond the reach of mortal power.

The only incident in the miserable lingering day was the arrival of Mr. Pouncefort, who had, by some mysterious bird of the air carrying the matter, or other occult agency, found out that his client was dying, and had expressed a wish that he should be sent for. He arrived when Stephen had permitted himself to believe that danger was over, and was about to lie down for needful rest. But the sight of the lawyer roused the heir at once.

'I shouldn't advise you to stay,' Captain Mitford observed. 'He'll never be able for business again.'

'It's hard to tell,' said Mr. Pouncefort. 'I've seen a man turn everything upside down in his succession after that had been said of him.'

Stephen stared at the newcomer with glazed and weary eyes, in which a sullen fire burned behind the film of exhaustion, but restrained the impulse to reply. He sat down again, however, in the chair which he had occupied all night, determined to keep this dangerous visitor in sight. Mr. Pouncefort had no compassion for the supplanter who had been put into his brother's place, in

spite of all he had himself been able to do against it. He asked a hundred questions: how the attack came on; what was the cause; whether there had been any 'worry' at the bottom of so sudden a seizure. 'People say something occurred to put him out, but of course you must know.'

'I don't know; he was out in the sun, on one of those hot days,—that's what the doctor thinks.'

'Oh! that's what the doctor thinks? Robson, is it? He ought to know your father's constitution. I should have thought the Squire was pretty well used to being out in the sun.'

'You had better ask Robson,' said Stephen; 'he'll be here presently;' and then there was a silence between them.

The lawyer had a bag with papers, which he opened and looked over, perhaps ostentatiously; he had no desire to spare the young man. Stephen was overcome with fatigue. He kept dropping into momentary dozes, from which he started, opening wide in defiance his red and heavy eyes. But he would not now go to bed or do anything to refresh himself; he was like a jailer in attendance upon some troublesome prisoner; he would not let this new enemy out of his sight.

This suspense lasted till far on in the second night, when there was a sudden stir and commotion in the sickroom, and the doctor was hurriedly called upstairs. In a very short time the others were summoned. They stood about the bed, Mr. Pouncefort placing himself at the foot, with an anxious intention of catching what last glimpse of intelligence might come into the eyes of the dying man. But it was too late for anything of the kind. The Squire had been stricken down by another and more violent seizure. He was so strong in vitality, and his physical forces were so little impaired, that even now he made a struggle for his life; but in vain. Presently the loud breathing stopped. Silence replaced that awful, involuntary throbbing of the human mechanism, from which the inspiring force had gone. Love and grief had little place in that death-scene; but there is something overawing and impressive in every transit from life to death. The two sons stood side by side, without a word. Simmons, the housekeeper, half with a feminine sense of what was becoming, half perhaps with a real human regret for the master of so many years, sniffed a little behind the curtain. The others all stood in dead silence, while the doctor closed those staring, troubled eyes.

Stephen was the first to leave the room. He went straight to his own, where his servant was hanging about, in the agitation which fills a household at such a moment. He kicked the port-

manteaus with his foot, and said loudly, 'Undo all that,' before he closed the door. He wanted rest and sleep above all things, but he could not refrain from that one token of an anxiety now laid at rest. Only Mr. Pouncefort, however, took any notice of this symbolical action. Stephen had been of no account in the house during these two days, and when he disappeared without even a good-night, without a sign of civility, the others were too much preoccupied to notice. Dr. Robson was eager to get home, —he had spent the greater part of two nights out of his house; and Edmund went downstairs with him, to settle and arrange everything. The lawyer stole away to the room which had been prepared for him, and after a few hours' rest left the house in the morning, before any one was astir. His mission had been a failure. Sometimes there is a moment of possibility, a place of repentance, afforded to a man at the very end of his life. But in this case there was nothing of the kind. The wrong done was done permanently, and all was now over. That strange injustice which lies underneath the surface of life, which gives the lie to all the optimisms of philanthropy, which is restrained by no law, and is so often permitted to establish itself in absolute impunity, had again gained the upper hand. There was no appeal to be made, no redress possible. The dead man might have repented, had time been left him. But all the stars in their courses had fought for the unworthy. Mr. Pouncefort felt this angrily, almost shaking his fist at the serene heavens which overlooked everything, and, so far as appeared, took no heed. To Edmund the same thought came, but in a different form, as he stood at his window, looking out upon a firmament all living with innumerable lights. The real sufferer was not angry. He looked out with a profound sadness, yet with that half smile of spectatorship which had been habitual to him all his life. Perhaps at no period would he have felt his disinheritance so sharply as another man might; at this moment he did not feel it at all. Poor father! was what he thought,—who had taken that step of injustice in vain; who had rewarded the evil-doer, and punished him to whom he intended no wrong. It was hard to think of the Squire as changed into some heavenly semblance, a spiritual being moved by spiritual motives alone. Edmund's imagination could not reach so far. He thought of his father as perhaps suddenly enlightened as to this irony of fate, cognisant of the evil he had done, impotent to amend it, obliged to bow to the inexorable fact which his own arbitrary will had created, and carrying about the consciousness of this tremendous mistake and failure in a quickened being, to which, perhaps,

there would no longer belong the happy human faculty of forgetfulness. Would not that be hell enough,—or purgatory, at least?

Things went on at Melcombe without further change for some days. Stephen took no charge in respect to the funeral, or any of the immediate arrangements which had to be made. He stood by, passive, while Edmund gave all the orders and attended to everything. Not a word was said while the father lay dead in the house. They even dined together in silence, broken only by a few conventional phrases from time to time. The brothers-in-law were abroad, out of reach; and though the entire county came to the funeral, there were no relations except a distant cousin or two, and no one in the house to break the brothers' *tête-à-tête*. When all was over, they returned alone together to the house. Mr. Pouncefort was the principal executor, and there was no question between them about any of the details. Once more the family table was spread for the two brothers, who had walked side by side after their father's coffin. It would be impossible to describe the scarcely contained excitement of Larkins and his assistants as to how this dinner would go off. Stephen solved the question for them without delay. He came in first, with his hands plunged deeply into his pockets, and his eyebrows lowered over his eyes, and took his father's place. Instead of the restrained and formal conversation of the intervening days, he now began to talk. He spoke of what he was going to do.

'I'll very likely go out and join the Stathams, for a bit. I'm not fond of the Continent, but one doesn't know what to do with one's self, just at first. It's too early for Monte Carlo and that sort of thing. I don't know what sort of beastly place they may have got to, but Statham's sure to look out for himself, and get something or other to do. And one can't have a lot of fellows down all at once to fill up the old place.'

'No, that would hardly do,' Edmund answered.

His brother gave him a surly look from underneath his lowering brows. 'I don't see why it shouldn't do, if one made up one's mind to it. I don't mind gossip, for my part. But there would be nothing for them to do. I mean to have a lot of men down for September.'

'Yes?' said Edmund, for Stephen had hesitated.

'And I think,' he went on, after a moment, 'of shutting up the house till then. There's an idle lot of servants about.' He had paused to say this until all but Larkins were out of the room. 'I rather think of making a clean sweep. What does very well for an old lot, don't you know, doesn't do when a man's young.

So I thought may be it wouldn't be a bad plan to—let it, perhaps, for a month or two, or else shut up the house.'

'To let it—for a month or two!' exclaimed Edmund in consternation.

'Well, quantities of people do; but I don't say I've made up my mind to that. Only, I'll either take that course, or else shut up. It's dull enough here, Heaven knows. I was thinking, perhaps, if you could make it convenient—when it suits, don't you know—that is, as soon as you can manage it—to clear out.'

'That is exactly what I had meant to tell you. I think of going to-morrow.'

'All right,' rejoined Stephen. 'I didn't mean to put on the screw, but it's always best that fellows should understand each other, don't you know, from the first.'

'Much the best,' Edmund said.

XLVIII

THE MINGLED THREAD

THESE were almost the last words which passed at this period between Captain Mitford of Melcombe and his brother. Stephen left within a few days, having succeeded so well in clearing the house that the servants forestalled him by giving their demission *en masse*, headed by Mr. Larkins and Mrs. Simmons, whom Stephen's speech about the idle lot, duly reported by the equally offended Larkins, had wounded to the quick. He was obliged to leave the place in the hands of some of the lower drudges of the kitchen, who had no feelings, and were delighted to succeed to the positions vacated by their betters; and to have the house set up anew, with expensive menials, supplied by a London agent, when he returned. He failed in ousting the Fords, for the excellent reason that they had finally decided to take advantage of his first hasty dismissal; so that his emissaries found nothing but an empty house, when they went to carry his decision into effect. Stephen was not aware that he escaped an action for wages and board wages, which Ford was bent on bringing against him, only by means of Edmund's entreaties and the compensation he offered, in order that the family name should not be dragged through the mire, in public at least. But notwithstanding these efforts, the facts of the case got breathed about in the county, creating not only a strong feeling against the new lord of Melcombe, but, what he dreaded still more, a wave of riotous ridicule, such as went far, sweeping through half the mess-rooms in the country in echoes of inextinguishable laughter: 'Heard of Mitford of the Red Roans, —how he was sold? Thought he had got a simpleton in hand, that knew no better; but, by Jove! out she marched, colours flying, and left him *planté-là!*' The other tales about him, which roused a graver indignation,—how he had been the means of his brother Roger's death, and, by a sudden discovery of his ridiculous adventures and shameful conduct, of his father's,—though these

rumours were bad enough, were not, either in the estimation of his special public or in his own, so overwhelming as the story of Lily's escape and the ridicule of his failure. Even Statham and Markham, his brothers-in-law, 'roared,' as they described it, at Steve's absurd position.

'But I'd cut the whole concern, if I were you, for a year or two, old fellow,' Statham said. 'Don't go back there this year. Have a go at the big game, or something.'

'Try Africa,' said Markham.

'By Jove! I'll do neither the one nor the other!—What are you talking of? I'll see you all at—Jericho, first! And if you don't care to come to Melcombe for September,—why, you can try Africa yourselves,' Stephen said.

This somewhat changed the ideas of the brothers-in-law, who were not averse to coming to Melcombe for the partridges. They endeavoured to make their wives laugh too, at the story of Lily, with but partial success; for women are certainly destitute of a fine sense of humour.

'It was odious of Stephen, beyond anything!' Lady Statham said; 'but still, that little set-up thing!—what did she expect, I wonder?' And, 'It must have been her own fault,' Amy said. Nina told her little tale with the same gravity, without seeing the fun. '*I* knew Stephen was after Lily, when he used to go out in the park after dinner. What should he go out in the park for, if he was not after somebody? To smoke his cigar! Oh! as if a man went out like that only to smoke his cigar! Simmons always shook her head. She used to say a gentleman was up to no good, when he went out in the evenings. Would you let Statham go out like that, if you knew there was somebody at the West Lodge, Geraldine?'

'Bertie's got his smoking-room,' said Lady Statham, indignant, 'if there were twenty West Lodges. But I do think poor papa was to blame about the boys, never letting them smoke at home.'

'Boys are so ready to go wrong,' sighed Amy, who was ten years younger than her brothers. Then the party melted away, dispersing in different directions, and leaving only Nina, who knew better than any one how much neglected the boys had been, and how natural it was that they should stray to the West Lodge, while they smoked their cigars.

Stephen came back in September, and found his house perfectly established with fine footmen from London, and not an old face to remind him of the past. His friends arrived soon after, filling the house. But though the covers were in very good order, and the

birds abundant, it was not a successful performance, on the whole. Even the Tredgolds had other engagements, when he asked them to dinner. When the Stathams and the Markhams came, there was one entertainment which did well, and that was a garden-party, at which nobody was compelled to pay any particular attention to the master of the house. Otherwise the county cut him, to his intense astonishment and rage. And after that he took Statham's advice, and went abroad,—not to Africa, in search of big game, which would have been the best thing, but to Monte Carlo and other resorts of the same kind. Meantime, the London servants and the new establishment had cost him for three months more money than the old Squire had spent in a couple of years. Altogether, Stephen's affairs were not prosperous, nor his prospects bright. But, no doubt, if he stays away for a time, and keeps his estate at nurse, and especially if he marries well, and brings home a wife acceptable to the county, the weight of permanence and continuation will tell in his favour, and Captain Mitford will be received, if not with open arms, at least back again into a tolerable place.

Edmund left Melcombe the morning after his father's funeral. He did not see Stephen again. He made arrangements for the removal of all his special belongings and went away without much regret from the house that should have been his home. There are some who feel more than others the loss of houses and lands; and there are some who tear themselves with difficulty from the walls that have been their shelter all their life. In both points Edmund was a little at fault. He felt no despair at the loss of his inheritance; he had never thought of it as his. All the emotion he had on the subject he had spent when Roger was sent away, and perhaps the only pang that had moved him concerning his own share of the loss was when Roger, unaware of what had passed, had anticipated for Edmund the heirship he had himself lost. Edmund had experienced a constriction of his heart when his brother had indulged in that half-melancholy, half-smiling picture of what he believed was to be: himself with Lily, not happy perhaps, after the ordinary meaning of the word, yet feeling his only possibility of life to be by her side; and Edmund and his Elizabeth in Melcombe, the centres of a wider existence. Tears, which had not been drawn from Edmund's eyes by his own deposition, rose at the thought of that talk of things that were not to be.

He went, after he had left the house, to the corner of the parish church in which was the Melcombe vault. He was not unmindful of his father either. What disappointments, what

self-deception, what vain anticipations, never to be realised, were shut up there in the darkness, in that gloomy place where the ashes of the Mitfords were kept from mingling with common dust! Edmund could not think of any failure of his own, in the presence of the failure of all their plans and wishes. He stood leaning upon the old brick wall, with his feet among the rank herbage; then, with an ache in his heart to leave there all that had been Roger, all the human hopes and wishes that were never to be fulfilled, and with that ache of wonder which is in all our hearts as to what they know of us who have left us, in the mystery of their new existence, Edmund turned away, and set out upon his own. Happy Edmund in his mourning, in his deprivation, with his home shut against him, and all natural expectation cut off! He passed through these troubles lightly enough, having his own happiness to fall back upon, which waited serenely for him after all was over; holding open the gates of another paradise, the individual inheritance, which is for every man who has a centre of love to turn to, and a meet companion awaiting him there.

Stephen, as it turned out, had been of the greatest use to the household at Mount Travers, by the firebrand he had thrown into the midst of it. Mrs. Travers did not, indeed, recover from the shock all at once; at least, she did not relinquish the pleasure of taking up that exhausted firebrand, and thrusting it at Elizabeth, as a sort of offensive weapon, inflicting a wound which, when she saw how it hurt, the old lady wept over and kissed to make it well, with an alternation of reproach and conciliation which was not without its enjoyment. Elizabeth, delivered from the incessant strain of keeping this secret from her aunt, was now free to use what means she could to set the wrong right,—a thing which in her ignorance she had supposed to be attended by endless difficulties, but which, with Edmund's help and backing up, became the easiest matter in the world. Before they were married Elizabeth settled upon Mrs. Travers the great house on the hill, with its plate-glass windows and all its luxuries, with an income sufficient to make the keeping up of the establishment possible to the widow. This was a serious diminution of her wealth, but Edmund liked it all the better. They were still rich enough for all their desires. They had the luck to get possession of an old house which had been the Melcombe dower-house, a picturesque, old-fashioned place, which had passed out of the hands of the Mitfords several generations before, and now came suddenly into the market, to the great satisfaction of the disinherited son. We will not deny that it gave Elizabeth a pang to think of her husband settling down in the

same county, on a little bit of property so much inferior to Melcombe, and in a house which was nothing but a dependency of the family home possessed by his younger brother. But Edmund only laughed at this feminine grudge.

'Whatever he does, he must always carry that mark of cadency,' he said. 'It frightened my poor father almost out of changing his will, but it does not seem to impress you, Lizzy.' By this time, our young man had got so familiar with his own good fortune, and so possessed by the ease of his happiness, and felt it so difficult to realise that she had not always belonged to him, that he had forgotten that superlative sentiment of his about the name of Elizabeth, and called her Lizzy, like other people, with the best grace in the world.

'If that were the only sign of cadency, as you call it, I should not care much about it,' said his wife indignantly; 'but when I think what you are, Edmund, and what he is——'

'I am no such great things, if I had not you to back me up. But whatever poor Steve has, he can't get rid of that little mark. I must be the head of the family, though I have nothing, and he has all.'

'And you say "poor Steve"!' cried Elizabeth, with a flash of disdain in her eyes.

'Yes, my dearest,' Edmund said, 'poor Steve. And when he thinks, as he must do now and then, you may be sure he feels it too.'

Mrs. Mitford shook her head indignantly (it was very certain that she was Mrs. Mitford, and that the lady of Melcombe, when there might come to be one, could be nothing but Mrs. Stephen); and perhaps hers, though the less generous, was the truer estimate. Stephen had sundry pricks to put up with, but in the end, no doubt, people would forget, and he would remain the most important personage in the consciousness of many persons who forgot that old story. It is much to be doubted whether Edmund himself, though he produced it laughing, to smooth down his wife's indignation, thought very much of the mark of cadency, or of the fact that he himself bore the family coat without a difference. What pleased him most was that he had possession of certain simpler things; that is to say, that he had got the wife he wanted, and the happiness which he had long despaired of, and a home such as he had dreamed of, but up to his marriage had never known. He thought these things were enough for a man, with or without the position which befits the head of the family; and a number of persons, we hope, will think that Edmund was right.

Lily Ford remained Mrs. Travers's companion, and a most congenial one,—more congenial than Elizabeth, though it was not necessary to say so. When the old lady received the deed of gift which reinstated her in full possession of what her husband ought to have left her, she accepted it with difficulty and much resistance, and would really have preferred to keep her grievance instead, which was a thing that involved no responsibilities. She managed to retain a little of that, however, by making her will instantly, and leaving her property again to Elizabeth. 'What could I do?' she said. 'Of course, whatever I wished, she left me no alternative, after the step she took.' The plate-glass windows were all shut up for a long time, and the house stood blindly staring out upon the landscape, with no eyes to see it, while Mrs. Travers and her companion went abroad. It would be difficult to say which of the two more completely enjoyed these travels. Lily, with the honest, peasant foundation of her character, found it indispensable to give an equivalent for what she received, by bestowing double care and attention upon the old lady, who was not her mistress, but yet depended upon her for a great part of the comfort of her life. As she was quick and intelligent, and soon able to make her smattering of boarding-school French useful, and pretty, and well-dressed, and pleasant to behold, and incapable of conceiving anything happier or more elevated than the little course of commonplace tours, which were to both the most exciting of travels, she satisfied Mrs. Travers's every requirement as a companion. No mother and daughter could have been more happy together. To travel about in first-class carriages, to live in grand hotels, to be looked up to as one of the simple tourist ladies, to whom every innkeeper was obsequious, filled Lily with an elation which had, after all, something more in it than personal aggrandisement; it was the ideal after which she had sighed, the plan that pleased her childish thought. Perhaps the aspiration to be a lady, in the acceptation of the word which occurs to a gamekeeper's daughter,—to live among beautiful things, according to what her imagination holds for beautiful,—to have the leisure, the grace, the softness, the brightness, of ladyhood about her, instead of inhabiting a cottage and working at needlework for a living,—is not, after all, an aspiration to be despised. It was the best thing she knew, just as travelling on the Continent was the finest occupation she knew, the thing which the finest people did. She would not have bought that elevation, as she had proved, in anything but an honest way. Meantime, her father and mother had charge of Mount Travers, Mrs. Ford occupying the fine position of housekeeper, while the

'ladies'—oh! the delight of that word, which the mother, with profound self-abnegation, turned over in her mouth like a sweet morsel, as she said it—were absent on their tour. Lily had now a little fortune of her own,—the money which Roger had meant to settle upon her when she should be his wife. She was not sure that she could have chosen anything more desirable for herself, had she been permitted to choose her own fate.

Poor Roger! This was all his foolish love had come to,—the love which he knew to be foolish; which had cost him his inheritance, and, in a manner, his life. Was not his fate, perhaps, the best after all,—to escape from all the network of misery which would have caught his feet, the unsuitable companionship which never could have satisfied his mind, and to begin over again in a world where at least the same mistakes cannot be possible? But it is hard for men to think so, to whom it must always seem a better thing to fulfil the mortal course set before them, through whatever pains and troubles, and live out their life.

THE END

Printed by R. & R. CLARK, *Edinburgh.*