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QUISANTÉ

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QUISANTÉ

By

ANTHONY HOPE

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CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	DICK BENYON'S OUTSIDER	1
II.	MOMENTS	16

III. SANDRO'S WAY 31
IV. HE'S COMING! 46
V. WHIMSY-WHAMSIES 65
VI. ON DUTY HILL 84
VII. ADVICE FROM AUNT MARIA 101
VIII. CONTRA MUNDUM 120
IX. LEAD US NOT— 137
X. PRACTICAL POLITICS 155
XI. SEVENTY-SEVEN AND SUSY SINNETT 176
XII. A HIGHLY CORRECT ATTITUDE 196
XIII. NOT SUPERHUMAN 215
XIV. OPEN EYES 235
XV. A STRANGE IDEA 257
XVI. THE IRREVOCABLE 279
XVII. DONE FOR? 301
XVIII. FOR LACK OF LOVE? 321
XIX. DEATH DEFIED 339
XX. THE QUIET LIFE TO-MORROW 355
XXI. A RELICT 371

Transcriber's Note

The following sentence, found in Chapter IX., was originally printed with the "three several" error and has not been changed:

That evening Quisanté brought home to dinner the gentleman whom Dick Benyon called old Foster the maltster, and who had been Mayor of Henstead three several times.

QUISANTÉ.

CHAPTER I.

DICK BENYON'S OUTSIDER.

A shrunken sallow old lady, dressed in rusty ill-shaped black and adorned with an evidently false 'front' of fair hair, sat in a tiny flat whose windows overlooked Hyde Park from south to north. She was listening to a tall loose-built dark young man who walked restlessly about the little room as he jerked out his thoughts and challenged the expression of hers. She had known him since he was a baby, had brought him up from childhood, had always served him, always believed in him, never liked him, never offered her love nor conciliated his. His father even, her only brother Raphael Quisanté, she had not loved; but she had respected Raphael. Alexander—Sandro, as she alone of all the world called him—she neither loved nor respected; him she only admired and believed in. He knew his aunt's feelings well enough; she was his ally, not his friend; kinship bound them, not affection; for his brain's sake and their common blood she was his servant, his heart she left alone.

Thus aware of the truth, he felt no obligation towards her, not even when, as now, he came to ask money of her; what else should she do with her money, where else lay either her duty or her inclination? She did not love him, but he was her one interest, the only tie that united her with the living moving world and the alluring future years, more precious to her since she could see so few of them.

"I don't mean to make myself uncomfortable," said Miss Quisanté. "How much do you want?" He stopped and turned round quickly with a gleam of eagerness in his eyes, as though he had a vision of much wealth. "No, no," she added with a surly chuckle, "the least you'll take is the most I'll give."

"I owe money."

"Who to?" she asked, setting her cap uncompromisingly straight. "Jews?"

"No. Dick Benyon."

"That money you'll never pay. I shan't consider that."

The young man's eyes rested on her in a long sombre glance; he seemed annoyed but not indignant, like a lawyer whose formal plea is brushed aside somewhat contemptuously by an impatient truth-loving judge.

"You've got five hundred a year or thereabouts," she went on, "and no wife."

He threw himself into a chair; his face broke into a sudden smile, curiously attractive, although neither sweet nor markedly sincere. "Exactly," he said. "No wife. Well, shall I get one with five hundred a year?" He laughed a little. "An election any fine day would leave me penniless," he added.

"There's Dick Benyon," observed the old lady.

"They talk about that too much already," said Quisanté.

"Come, Sandro, you're not sensitive."

"And Lady Richard hates me. Besides if you want to impress fools, you must respect their prejudices. Give me a thousand a year; for the present, you know."

He asked nearly half the old lady's income; she sighed in relief. "Very well, a thousand a year," she said. "Make a good show with it. Live handsomely. It'll pay you to live handsomely."

A genuine unmistakable surprise showed itself on his face; now there was even the indignation which a reference to non-payment of debts had failed to elicit.

"I shall do something with it, you might know that," he said resentfully.

"Something honest, I mean."

"What?"

"Well, something not criminal," she amended, chuckling again. "I'm sorry to seem to know you so well," she added.

"Oh, we know one another pretty well," said he with a nod. "Never the jam without the powder from you."

"But always the jam," said old Maria. "And you'll find the world a good deal like your aunt, Sandro."

An odd half-cunning half-eager gleam shot across his eyes.

"A man finds the world what he makes it," he said. He rose, came and stood over her, and went on, laughing. "But the devil makes an aunt once and for all, and won't let one touch his handiwork."

"You can touch her savings, though!"

He blazed out into a sudden defiance. "Oh, refuse if you like. I can manage without you. You're not essential to me."

She smiled, her thin lips setting in a wry curve. Now and then it seemed hard that there could be no affection between her and the one being whom the course of events plainly suggested for her love. But, as Sandro said, they knew one another very well. In the result she felt entitled to assume no airs of superiority; he had not been a dutiful or a grateful nephew, she had not been a devoted or a patient aunt; as she looked back, she was obliged to remember one or two occasions when he had driven or betrayed her into a severity of which she did not willingly think. This reflection dictated the words with which she met his outburst.

"You can tell your story on Judgment Day and I'll tell mine," she said. "Oh, neither of 'em will lose in the telling, I'll be bound. Meanwhile let's be——"

"Friends?" he suggested with an obvious but not ill-natured sneer.

"Lord, no! Whatever you like! Banker and client, debtor and creditor, actor and audience? Take your choice—and send me your bank's address."

He nodded slightly, as though he concluded a bargain, not at all as though he acknowledged a favour. Yet he remarked in a ruminative tone, "I shall be very glad of the money."

A moment's pause followed. Then Miss Quisanté observed reluctantly,

"The only thing I ever care to know about you is what you're planning, Sandro. Don't I earn that by my thousand a year?"

"Well, here you are. I'm started, thanks to Dick Benyon and myself. I've got my seat, I can go on now. But I'm an outsider still." He paused a moment. "I feel that; Benyon feels it too. I want to obviate it a bit. I mean to marry."

"An insider?" asked the old lady. She looked at him steadily. "Your taste's too bad," she said; he was certainly dressed in a rather bizarre way. "And your manners," she added. "She won't have you," she ended. Quisanté took no notice and seemed not to hear; he stood quite still by the window, staring over the park. "Besides she'll know what you want her for."

He wheeled round suddenly and looked down at his aunt. His face was softer, the cunningness had gone from his smile, his eyes seemed larger, clearer, even (by a queer delusion of sight) better set and wider apart.

"Yes, I'll show her that," he said in a low voice, with a new richness of tone.

Old Maria looked up at him with an air of surprise.

"You do want her for that? As a help, I mean?" she asked.

His lips just moved to answer "Yes." Aunt Maria's eyes did not leave his face. She remembered that when he had come before to talk about contesting the seat in Parliament he had now won, there had been a moment (poised between long periods of calculation and elaborate forecasts of personal advantage) in which his face had taken on the same soft light, the same inspiration.

"You odd creature!" she murmured gently. "She's handsome, I suppose?"

"Superb—better than that."

"A swell?" asked old Maria scornfully.

"Yes," he nodded.

His aunt laughed. "A Queen among women?" was the form her last question took.

"An Empress," said Alexander Quisanté, the more ornate title bursting gorgeously from his lips.

"Just the woman for you then!" remarked Aunt Maria. A stranger would have heard nothing in her tone save mockery. Quisanté heard more, or did not hear that at all. He nodded again quite gravely, and turned back to the window. There were two reasonable views of the matter; either the lady was not what Quisanté declared her, or if she were she would have nothing to do with Quisanté. But Aunt Maria reserved her opinion; she was prepared to find neither of these alternatives correct.

For there was something remarkable about Sandro; the knowledge that had been hers so long promised fair to become the world's discovery. Society was travelling towards Aunt Maria's opinion, moved thereto not so much by a signally successful election fight, nor even by a knack of distracting attention from others and fixing it on himself, as by the monstrous hold the young man had obtained and contrived to keep over Dick Benyon. Dick was not a fool; here ended his likeness to Quisanté; here surely ought to end his sympathy with that aspiring person? But there was much more between them; society could see that for itself, while doubters found no difficulty in overhearing Lady Richard's open lamentations. "If Dick had known him at school or at Cambridge——" "If he was somebody very distinguished——" "If he was even a gentleman——" Eloquent beginnings of unfinished sentences flowed with expressive freedom from Amy Benyon's pretty lips. "I don't want to think my husband mad," she observed pathetically to Weston Marchmont, himself one of the brightest hopes of that party which Dick Benyon was understood to consider in need of a future leader. Was that leader to be Quisanté? Manners, not genius, Amy declared to be the first essential. "And I don't believe he's got genius," she added hopefully; that he had no manners did not need demonstration to Marchmont, whose own were so exquisite as to form a ready-make standard.

And it was not only Dick. Jimmy was as bad. Nobody valued Jimmy's intellect, but every one had been prepared to repose securely on the bedrock of his prejudices. He was as infatuated as his brother; Quisanté had swept away the prejudices. The brethren were united in an effort to foist their man into every circle and every position where he seemed to be least wanted; to this end they devoted time, their social reputation, enthusiasm, and, as old Maria knew, hard money. They were triple-armed in confidence. Jimmy met remonstrances with a quiet shrug; Dick had one answer, always the same, given in the same way—a confident assertion, limited and followed, an instant later, by one obvious condition, seemingly not necessary to express. "You'll see, if he lives," he replied invariably when people asked him what there was after all in Mr. Quisanté. Their friends could only wonder, asking plaintively what the Duke thought of his brothers' proceedings. The Duke, however, made no sign; making no sign ranked as a characteristic of the Duke's.

When Lady Richard discussed this situation with her friends the Gaston girls, she gained

hearty sympathy from Fanny, but from May no more than a mocking half-sincere curiosity.

"Is it possible for a man to like both me and Mr. Quisanté?" Lady Richard asked. "And after all Dick does like me very much."

"Likes both his wife and Mr. Quisanté! What a man for paradoxes!" May murmured.

"Jimmy's worse if anything," the aggrieved wife went on. This remark was levelled straight at Fanny; Jimmy being understood to like Fanny, a parallel problem presented itself. Fanny recognized it but, not choosing to acknowledge Jimmy's devotion, met it by referring to Marchmont's openly professed inability to tolerate Quisanté.

"I always go by Mr. Marchmont's judgment in a thing like that," she said. "He's infallible."

"There's no need of infallibility, my dear," observed Lady Richard irritably. "Ordinary common sense is quite enough." She turned suddenly on May. "You talked to him for nearly an hour the other night," she said.

"Yes—how you could!" sighed Fanny.

"I couldn't help it. He talked to me."

"About those great schemes that he's filled poor dear Dick's head with? Not that I doubt he's got plenty of schemes—of a sort you know."

"He didn't talk schemes," said Lady May. "He was worse than that."

"What did he do?" asked her sister.

"Flirted."

A sort of gasp broke from Lady Richard's lips; she gazed helplessly at her friends. Fanny began to laugh. May preserved a meditative seriousness; she seemed to be reviewing Quisanté's efforts in a judicial spirit.

"Well?" said Lady Richard after the proper pause.

"Oh well, he was atrocious, of course," May admitted; her tone, however, expressed a reluctant homage to truth rather than any resentment. "He doesn't know how to do it in the least."

"He doesn't know how to do anything," Lady Richard declared.

"Most men are either elephantine or serpentine," said Fanny. "Which was he, dear?"

"I don't think either."

"Porcine?" asked Lady Richard.

"No. I haven't got an animal for him. Well, yes, he was a little weaselly perhaps. But——" She glanced at Lady Richard as she paused, and then appeared to think that she would say no more; she frowned slightly and then smiled.

"I like his cheek!" exclaimed Fanny with a simplicity that had survived the schoolroom.

Lady Richard screwed her small straight features into wrinkles of disgust and a shrug seemed to run all over her little trim smartly-gowned figure; no presumption could astonish her in Quisanté.

"Why in the world did you listen to him, May?" Fanny went on.

"He interested me. And every now and then he was objectionable in rather an original way."

With another shrug, inspired this time by her friend's mental vagaries, Lady Richard diverged to another point.

"And that was where you were all the time Weston Marchmont was looking for you?" she asked.

May began to laugh. "Somehow I'm generally somewhere else when Mr. Marchmont looks for me," she said. "It isn't deliberate, really; I like him very much, but when he comes near me, some perverse fate seems to set my legs moving in the opposite direction."

"Well, Alexander Quisanté's a perverse fate, if you like," said Lady Richard.

"It's curious how there are people one's like that towards. You're very fond of them, but it seems quite certain that you'll never get much nearer to them. Is it fate? Or is it that in the end there's a—a solution of sympathy, a break somewhere, so that you stop just short of finding them absolutely satisfying?"

Neither of her friends answered her. Lady Richard did not deal in speculations; Fanny preferred not to discuss, even indirectly, her sister's feelings towards Marchmont; they bred in her a mixture of resentment and relief too complicated for public reference. It was certainly true enough that he and May got no nearer to one another; if the break referred to existed somewhere, its effect was very plain; how could it display itself more strikingly than in making the lady prefer Quisanté's weaselly flirtation to the accomplished and enviable homage of Weston Marchmont? And preferred it she had, for one hour of life at least. Fanny felt the anger which we suffer when another shows indifference towards what we should consider great good fortune.

But indifference was not truly May's attitude towards Marchmont. Nobody, she honestly thought, could be indifferent to him, to his handsomeness, his grace and refinement, the fine temper of his mind, his indubitable superiority of intellect; in everything he was immeasurably above the ordinary run of her acquaintance, the well-groomed inconsiderables of whom she knew such a number. Being accustomed to look this world in the face unblinkingly, she did not hesitate to add that he possessed great wealth and the prospect of a high career. He was all, and indeed rather more, than she, widowed Lady Attlebridge's slenderly dowered daughter, had any reason to expect. She wanted to expect no more, if possible really to regard this opportunity as greater luck than she had a right to anticipate. The dissatisfaction which she sought to explain by talking of a solution of sympathy was very obstinate, but justice set the responsibility down to her account, not to his; analysing her temperament, without excusing it, she found a spirit of adventure and experiment—or should she say of restlessness and levity?—which Marchmont did not minister to nor yet assuage. The only pleasure that lay in this discovery came from the fact that it was so opposed to the general idea about her. For it was her lot to be exalted into a type of the splendid calm patrician maiden. In that sort of vein her friends spoke of her when they were not very intimate, in that sort of language she saw herself described in gushing paragraphs that chronicled the doings of her class. Stately, gracious, even queenly, were epithets which were not spared her; it would have been refreshing to find some Diogenes of a journalist who would have called her, in round set terms, discontented, mutinous, scornful of the ideal she represented, a very hot-bed of the faults the beauty of whose absence was declared in her dignified demeanour. Now what May looked, that Fanny was; but poor Fanny, being slight of build, small in feature, and gay in manner, got no credit for her exalted virtues and could not be pressed into service as the type of them. For certainly types must look typical. May's comfort in these circumstances was that Marchmont's perfect breeding and instinctive avoidance of display, of absurdity, even of betraying any heat of emotion, saved her from the usual troubles which an unsatisfied lover entails on his mistress. He looked for her no doubt, but with no greater visible perturbation than if she had been his handkerchief.

An evening or two later Dick Benyon took her in to dinner. Entirely in concession to him—for the subject had passed from her own thoughts—she asked, "Well, how's your genius going on?" Before the meal was over she regretted her question. It opened the doors to Dick's confused eloquence and vague laudations of his *protégé*; putting Dick on his defence, it involved an infinite discussion of Quisanté. She was told how Dick had picked him up at Naples, gone to Pompeii with him, travelled home with him, brought him and Jimmy together, and how the three had become friends. "And if I'm a fool, my brother's not," said Dick. May knew that Jimmy would shelter himself under a plea couched in identical language. From this point Dick became less expansive, for at this point his own benefactions and services had begun. She could not get much out of him, but she found herself trying to worm out all she could. Dick had no objection to saying that he had induced Quisanté to go in for politics, and had "squared" the influential persons who distributed (so far as a free electorate might prove docile) seats in Parliament. Rumour and Aunt Maria would have supplemented his statement by telling of substantial aid given by the Benyon brothers. May, interested against her wish and irritated at her interest, yet not content, like Dick's wife, to shrug away Dick's aberrations, turned on him with a sudden, "But why, why? Why do you like him?"

"Like him!" repeated Dick half-interrogatively. He did not seem sure that his companion had chosen the right, or at any rate the best, word to describe his feelings. In response she amended her question.

"Well, I mean, what do you see in him?"

Here was another fatal question, for Dick saw everything in him. Hastily cutting across the eulogies, she demanded particulars—who was he, where did he come from, and so forth. On these heads Dick's account was scanty; Quisanté's father had grown wine in Spain; and Quisanté himself had an old aunt in London.

"Not much of a genealogy," she suggested. Dick was absurd enough to quote "*Je suis un ancêtre*." "Oh, if you're as silly as that!" she exclaimed with an annoyed laugh.

"He's the man we want."

"You and Jimmy?"

"The country," Dick explained gravely. He had plenty of humour for other subjects, but Quisanté, it seemed, was too sacred. "Look here," he went on. "Come and meet him again. Amy's going out of town next week and we'll have a little party for him."

"That happens best when Amy's away?"

"Well, women are so——"

"Yes, I know. I'm a woman. I won't come."

Dick looked at her not sourly but sadly, and turned to his other neighbour. May was left to sit in silence for five minutes; then a pause in Dick's talk gave her time to touch him lightly on the arm and to say when he turned, "Yes, I will, and thank you."

But she said nothing about the weaselly flirtation.

CHAPTER II.

MOMENTS.

At the little dinner which Lady Richard's absence rendered more easy there were only the Benyon brothers (a wag had recently suggested that they should convert themselves into Quisanté Limited), Mrs. Gellatly, Morewood the painter, and the honoured guest. Morewood was there because he was painting a kit-cat of Quisanté for the host (Heaven knew in what corner Lady Richard would suffer it to hang), and Mrs. Gellatly because she had expressed a desire to meet Lady May Gaston. Quisanté greeted May with an elaborate air of remembrance; his handshake was so ornate as to persuade her that she must always hate him, and that Dick Benyon was as foolish as his wife thought him. This mood lasted half through dinner; the worst of Quisanté was uppermost, and the exhibition depressed the others. The brothers were apologetic, Mrs. Gellatly gallantly suave; her much-lined, still pretty face worked in laborious smiles at every loudness and every awkwardness. Morewood was so savage that an abrupt conclusion of the entertainment threatened to be necessary. May, who had previously decided that Mr. Quisanté would be much better in company, was travelling to the conclusion that he was not nearly so trying when alone; to be weaselly is not so bad as to be inconsiderate and ostentatious.

Just then came the change which transformed the party. Somebody mentioned Mahomet; Morewood, with his love of a paradox, launched on an indiscriminate championship of the Prophet. Next to believing in nobody, it was best, he said, to believe in Mahomet; there, he maintained, you got most out of your religion and gave least to it; and he defended the criterion with his usual uncompromising aggressiveness. Then Quisanté put his arms on the table, interrupted Morewood without apology, and began to talk. May thought that she would not have known how good the talk was—for it came so easily—had she not seen how soon Morewood became a listener, or even a foil, ready and content to put his questions not as puzzles but as provocatives. Yet Morewood was proverbially conceited, and he was fully a dozen years Quisanté's senior. She stole a look round; the brothers were open-mouthed, Mrs. Gellatly looked almost frightened. Next her eyes scanned Quisanté's face; he was not weaselly now, nor ostentatious. His subject filled him and lit him up; she did not know that he looked as he had when he spoke to old Maria of his Empress among women, but she knew that he looked as if nothing mentally small, nothing morally mean, nothing that was not in some way or other, for good or evil, big and spacious could ever come near him from without or proceed out from him.

She was immensely startled when, in a pause, her host whispered in her ear, "One of his moments!" The phrase was to become very familiar to her on the lips of others, even more in her own thoughts. "His moments!" It implied a sort of intermittent inspiration, as though he were some ancient prophet or mediæval fanatic through whose mouth Heaven spoke sometimes, leaving him for the rest to his own low and carnal nature. The phrase meant at once a plenitude of inspiration and a rarity of it. Not days, nor hours, but moments were seemingly what his friends valued him for, what his believers attached their faith to, what must (if anything could) outweigh all that piled the scales so full against him. An intense curiosity then and there assailed her; she must know more of the man; she must launch a boat on this unexplored ocean—for the Benyons had not navigated it, they only stood gaping on the beach. Here was scope for that unruly spirit of hers which Marchmont's culture and Marchmont's fascination could neither minister to nor assuage.

She was gazing intently at Quisanté when she became conscious of Mrs. Gellatly's eyes on her. Mrs. Gellatly looked frightened still; accustomed tactfully to screen awkwardness, she was rather at a loss in the face of naked energy. She sought to share her alarm with May Gaston, but May was like a climber fronted by a mountain range.

"You may be right and you may be wrong," said Morewood. "At least I don't know anybody who can settle the quarrel between facts and dreams."

"There isn't any quarrel."

"There's a little stiffness anyhow," urged Morewood, still unwontedly docile.

"They'd get on better if they saw more of one another," suggested May timidly. It was her first

intervention. She felt its insignificance. She would not have complained if Quisanté had followed Morewood's example and taken no notice of it. He stopped, turned to her with exaggerated deference, and greeted her obvious little carrying out of the metaphor as though it were a heaven-sent light. Somehow in doing this he seemed to fall all in an instant from lofty heights to depths almost beyond eyesight. While he complimented her elaborately, Morewood turned away in open impatience. Another topic was started, the conversation was killed; or, to put it as she put it to herself, that moment of Quisanté's was ended. Did his moments always end like that? Did they fade before a breath, like the frailest flower? Did the contemptible always follow in a flash on the entrancing?

Presently she found a chance for a whisper to Morewood.

"How are you painting him?" she asked.

"You must come and see," he replied, with a rather sour grin.

"So I will, but tell me now. You know the difference, I mean?"

"Oh, and do you already? Well, I shall do him making himself agreeable to a lady."

"For heaven's sake don't!" she whispered, half-laughing yet not without seriousness. The man was a malicious creature and might well caricature what he was bound to idealise to the extreme limit of nature's sufferance. Such a trick would be hardly honest to Dick Benyon, but Morewood would plead his art with unashamed effrontery, and, if more were needed, tell Dick to take his cheque to the deuce and go with it himself.

The rest of the party was, to put it bluntly, a pleasant little gathering in no way remarkable and rather spoilt by the presence of one person who was not quite a gentleman. May struggled hard against the mercilessness of the judgment contained in the last words; for it ought to have proved quite final as regarded Alexander Quisanté. As a fact it would not leave her mind, it established an absolutely sure footing in her convictions; and yet it did not seem quite final in regard to Quisanté. Perhaps Dick Benyon would maintain the proud level of his remark about the genealogy, and remind her that somebody settled Napoleon's claims by the same verdict. But one did not meet Napoleon at little dinners, nor think of him with no countervailing achievements to his name.

Her mind was so full of the man that when she joined her mother at a party later in the evening, she had an absurd anticipation that everybody would talk to her about him. Nobody did; that evening an Arctic explorer and a new fortune-teller divided the attention of the polite; men came and discussed one or other of these subjects with her until she was weary. For once then, on Marchmont making an appearance near her, her legs did not carry her in the opposite direction; she awaited and even invited his approach; at least he would spare her the fashionable gossip, and she thought he might tell her something about Quisanté. In two words he told her, if not anything about Quisanté, still everything that he himself thought of Quisanté.

"I met Mr. Quisanté at dinner," she said.

"That fellow!" exclaimed Marchmont.

The tone was full of weariness and contempt; it qualified the man as unspeakable and dismissed him as intolerable. Was Marchmont infallible, as Fanny had said? At least he represented, in its finest and most authoritative form, the opinion of her own circle, the unhesitating judgment against which she must set herself if she became Quisanté's champion. It would be much easier, and probably much more sensible, to fall into line and acquiesce in the condemnation; then it would matter nothing whether the vulgar did or did not elect to admire Dick Benyon's peculiar friend. Yet a protest stirred within her; only her sense of the ludicrous prevented her from adopting Dick's word and asking Marchmont if he had ever seen the fellow in one of his "moments." But it would be absurd to catch up the phrase like that, and it was by no means certain that even the moments would appeal to Marchmont.

Looking round, she perceived that a little space in the crowded room had been left vacant about them; nobody came up to her, no woman, in passing by, signalled to Marchmont; the constant give-and-take of companions was suspended in their favour. In fine, people supposed that they wanted to talk to one another; it would not be guessed that one of the pair wished Quisanté to be the topic.

"He's got some brains," Marchmont went on, "though of rather a flashy sort, I think. Dick Benyon's been caught by them. But a more impossible person I never met. You don't like him?"

"Yes, I do," she answered defiantly. "At least I do every now and then."

"Pray make the occasions as rare as possible," he urged in his low lazy voice, with his pleasant smile and a confidential look in his handsome eyes. "And don't let them coincide with my presence."

"Really he won't hurt you; you're too particular."

"No, he won't hurt me, but I should feel rather as though he were hurting you."

"What do you mean?"

"By being near you, certainly by being anything in the least like a friend of yours."

"He'd defile me?" she asked, laughing.

"Yes," said he seriously; the next moment he smiled and shrugged his shoulders; he did not withdraw his seriousness but he apologised for it.

"Oh, I'd better get under a glass-case at once," she exclaimed, laughing again impatiently.

"Yes, and lock it, and——"

"Give you the key?"

He laughed as he said, "The most artistic emotions have some selfishness in them, I admit it."

"It would make a little variety if I sent a duplicate to Mr. Quisanté!"

Here he would not follow her in her banter. He grew grave and even frowned, but all he said was, "Really there are limits, you know." It was her own verdict, expressed more tersely, more completely, and more finally. There were limits, and Alexander Quisanté was beyond them; the barrier they raised could not be surmounted; he could not fly over it even on the wings of his moments.

"You above everybody oughtn't to know such people," Marchmont went on.

Now he was thinking of the type she was supposed to represent; that was the fashion in which it was appropriate to talk to the type.

"I'm not in the very least like that really," she assured him. "If you knew me better you'd find that out very soon."

"I'm willing to risk it."

Flirtation for flirtation—and this conversation was becoming one—there could be no comparison between Marchmont's and Quisanté's; the one was delightful, the other odious; the one combined charm with dignity; the other was a mixture of cringing and presumption. May put the contrast no less strongly than this as she yielded to the impulse of the minute and gave the lie to Marchmont's ideal of her by her reckless acceptance of the immediate delights he offered. The ideal would no doubt cause him to put a great deal of meaning into her acceptance; whether such meaning were one she would be prepared to indorse her mood did not allow her to consider. She showed him very marked favour that evening, and in his company contrived to forget entirely the puzzle of Quisanté and his moments, and the possible relation of those moments to the limits about which her companion was so decisive.

At last, however, they were interrupted. The interruption came from Dick Benyon, who had looked in somewhere else and arrived now at the tail of the evening. Far too eager and engrossed in his great theme to care whether his appearance were welcome, he dashed up to May, crying out even before he reached her, "Well, what do you say about him now? Wasn't he splendid?"

Clearly Dick forgot his earlier apologetic period; for him the moment was the evening. A cool question from Marchmont, the cooler perhaps for annoyance, forced Dick into explanations, and he sketched in his summary fashion the incident which had aroused his enthusiasm and made him look so confidently for a response from May. Marchmont was unreservedly and almost scornfully antagonistic.

"Oh, you're too cultivated to live," cried Dick. "Now isn't he too elegant, May?"

"I'm not the least elegant," said Marchmont, with quiet confidence. "But I'm—well, I'm what Quisanté isn't. So are you, Dick."

"Suppose we are, and by Jove, isn't he what we aren't? I'm primitive, I suppose. I think hands and brains are better than manners."

"I'll agree, but I don't like his hands or his brains either."

"He'll mount high."

"As high as Haman. I shouldn't be the least surprised to see it."

"Well, I'm not going to give him up because he doesn't shake hands at the latest fashionable angle."

"All right, Dick. And I'm not going to take him up because he's a dab at rodomontade."

"And you neither of you need fight about him," May put in, laughing. They joined in her laugh, each excusing himself by good-natured abuse of the other.

There was no question of a quarrel, but the divergence was complete, striking, and even startling. To one all was black, to the other all white; to one all tin, to the other all gold. Was there no possibility of compromise? As she sat between the two, May thought that a discriminating view of Quisanté ought to be attainable, not an oscillation from disgust to admiration, but a well-balanced stable judgment which should allow full value to merits and to defects, and sum up the man as a whole. Something of the sort she tried to suggest; neither disputant would hear of it, and Marchmont went off with an unyielding assertion that the man was a cad, no more and no less than a cad. Dick looked after him with a well-satisfied air; May fancied that opposition and the failure of others to understand intensified his satisfaction in his own discovery. But he grew mournful as he said to her,

"I shan't have a chance with you now. You'll go with Marchmont of course. And I did want you to like him."

"Mr. Marchmont doesn't control my opinions."

They were very old friends; Dick allowed himself a significant smile.

"I know what you mean," she said, smiling. "But it's nonsense. Besides, look at yourself and Amy! She hates him, and yet you——"

"Oh, she's only half-serious, and Marchmont's in deadly earnest under that deuced languid manner of his. I tell you what, he's a very limited fellow, after all."

May laughed; the limits were being turned to a new use now.

"Awfully clever and well-read, but shut up inside a sort of compartment of life. Don't you know what I mean? He's always ridden first-class, and he won't believe there's anybody worth knowing in the thirds."

"You think he's like that?" she asked thoughtfully.

"You can see it for yourself. There's no better fellow, no better friend, but, hang it, an oyster's got a broader mind."

"I like broad minds."

"Then you'll like Quis——"

"Absolutely you shan't mention that name again. Find mother for me and tell her to tell me that it's time to go home."

Going home brought with it a discovery. May was considered to have invited the world to take notice of her preference for Marchmont. This fact was first conveyed to her by Lady Attlebridge's gently affectionate and congratulatory air; at this May was little more than amused. Evidence of greater significance lay in Fanny's demeanour; she came into her sister's room and talked for a while; before leaving, but after the ordinary kiss of goodnight, she came back suddenly and kissed her again; she said nothing, but the embrace was emphatic and eloquent. It seemed to the recipient to be forgiving also; it meant "I want you to be happy, don't imagine I think of anything else." If Fanny kissed her like that, it was because Fanny supposed that she had made up her mind to marry Weston Marchmont. She was fully conscious that the inference was not a strange one to draw from her conduct that evening. But now the mood of impulse was entirely gone; she considered the matter in a cool spirit, and her talk with Dick Benyon assumed unlooked-for importance in her deliberations. To marry Marchmont was a step entirely in harmony with the ideal which her family and the world had of her, which Marchmont himself most thoroughly and undoubtingly believed in. If she were really what she was supposed to be, the match would satisfy her as well as it would everybody else. But if she were quite different in her heart? In that case it might indeed be urged that no marriage would or could permanently satisfy her or the whole of her nature. This was likely enough; to see how often something of that kind happened it was, unfortunately, only necessary to run over ten or a dozen names which offered themselves promptly enough from the list of her acquaintance. Still to marry knowing you would not be satisfied was to drop below the common fate of marrying knowing that you might not be; it gave up the golden chance; it abandoned illusion just where illusion seemed most necessary.

Oh for life, for the movement of life! It is perhaps hard to realise how often that cry breaks from the hearts of women. No doubt the aspiration it expresses is rather apt to end in antics, not edifying to the onlooker, hardly (it may be supposed) comforting to the performer. But the antics are one thing, the aspiration another, and they have the aspiration strongest who condemn and shun the antics. The matter may be stated very simply, at least if the form in which it presented itself to May Gaston in her twenty-third year be allowed to suffice. Most girls are bred in a cage, most girls expect to escape therefrom by marriage, most girls find that they have only walked into another cage. She had nothing to say, so far as her own case went, against the comfort either of the old or of the new cage; they were both indeed luxurious. But cages they were and such she knew them to be. Doubtless there must be limits, not only to the tolerance of Weston Marchmont and of society, but to everything else except infinity. But there are great expanses, wide spaces, short of infinity. When she walked out of her first cage, the one which her mother's careful fingers had kept locked on her, she would like not to walk into another, but to escape into some

park or forest, not boundless, yet so large as to leave room for exploring, for the finding of new things, for speculation, for doubt, excitement, uncertainty, even for the presence of apprehension and the possibility of danger. As she surveyed the manner in which she was expected to pass her life, the manner in which she was supposed (she faced now the common interpretation of her conduct this evening) already to have elected to pass it, she felt as a speculator feels towards Consols, as a gambler towards threepenny whist. It seemed as though nothing could be good which did not also hold within it the potency of being very bad, as though certainty damned and chance alone had lures to offer. She would have liked to take life in her hand—however precious a thing, what use is it if you hoard it?—and see what she could make of it, what usury its free loan to fate and fortune would earn. She might lose it; youth made light of the risk. She might crawl back in sad plight; the Prodigal Son did not think of that when he set out. She found herself wishing she had nothing, that she might be free to start on the search for anything.

Like Quisanté? Why, yes, just like Quisanté. Like that strange, intolerable, vulgar, attractive, intermittently inspired creature, who presented himself at life's roulette-table, not less various in his own person than were the varying turns he courted, unaccountable as chance, baffling as fate, changeable as luck. Indeed he was like life itself, a thing you loved and hated, grew weary of and embraced, shrank from and pursued. To see him then was in a way to look on at life, to be in contact with him was to feel the throb of its movement. In her midnight musings the man seemed somehow to cease to be odious because he ceased to be individual, to be no longer incomprehensible because he was no longer apart, because he became to her less himself and more the expression and impersonation of an instinct that in her own blood ran riot and held festivity.

"I'm having moments, like Mr. Quisanté himself!" she said with a sudden laugh.

CHAPTER III.

SANDRO'S WAY.

First to the City, then to the doctor, then to the House, then to the dinner of the Imperial League; this was Quisanté's programme for the second Wednesday in April. It promised a busy day. But of the doctor and the House he made light; the first was a formality, the second held out no prospect of excitement; the City and the dinner were the real things. They were connected with and must be made to promote the two aims which he had taken for his with perfect confidence. He wanted money and he wanted position; he saw no reason why he should not attain both in the fullest measure. Recent events had filled him with a sure and certain hope. Not allowing for the value of the good manners which he lacked, he failed to see that he excited any hostility or any distaste. Unless a man were downright rude to him, he counted him an adherent; this streak of a not unpleasing simplicity ran across his varied nature. He was far from being alive to his disadvantages; every hour assured him of his superiority. Most especially he counted on the aid and favour of women; the future might prove him right or wrong in his expectation; but he relied for its realisation not on the power which he did possess but on an accomplishment of manner and an insinuating fascination which he most absolutely lacked. The ultra-civility which repelled May Gaston was less a device than an exhibition; he embarked on it more because he thought he did it well than (as she supposed) from a desire to curry favour. He was ill-bred, but he was not mean; he was a vaunter but not a coward; he demanded adherence and did not beg alms. This was the attitude of his mind, but unhappily it was often apparently contradicted by the cringing of his body and the wheedling of his tongue. In attempting smoothness he fell into oiliness; where he aimed at polished brilliance, the result was blazing varnish. Had he known what to pray for, he would have supplicated heaven that he might meet eyes able to see the man beneath the ape. Such eyes, dimly penetrating with an unexpected vision, he had won to his side in the Benyon brothers; the rest of the world still stuck on the outside surface. But the brothers could only shield him, they could not change him; they might promote his fortunes, they could not cure his vices. He did not know that he had any vices; the first stage of amendment was still to come.

He had a cousin in the City, a stock-jobber, who made and lost large sums of money as fortune smiled or frowned. Quisanté had the first five hundred of Aunt Maria's thousand pounds in his pocket and told his kinsman to use it for him.

"A spec?" asked Mr. Josiah Mandeville. "Isn't that rather rough on Aunt Maria?"

Quisanté looked surprised. "She gave it me, I haven't stolen it," he said with a laugh.

"She gave it you to live on, to keep up your position, I suppose."

"I don't think she made any conditions. And if I can make money, I'll give it back to her."

"Oh, you know best, I suppose," said Mandeville. "Only if I lose it?"

"Losing money's no worse than spending it." And then he mentioned a certain venture in which the money might usefully be employed.

"How did you hear of that?" asked Mandeville with a stare; for his cousin had laid his finger on a secret, on the very secret which Mandeville had just decided not to reveal to him, kinsman though he was.

"I forget; somebody said something about it that made me think it would be a good thing." Quisanté's tone was vaguely puzzled; he often knew things when he could give no account of his knowledge.

"Well, you aren't far wrong. You'll take a small profit, I suppose? Shall I use my discretion?"

"No," smiled Quisanté. "I shan't take a small profit, and I'll use mine. But keep me well informed and you shan't be a loser."

Mr. Mandeville laughed. "One might think you had a million," he observed. "Or are you proposing to tip me a fiver?" The thought of his own thousands filled his tone with scorn; he did not do his speculating with Aunt Maria's money.

"If you're too proud, I can take my business somewhere else—and the name of the concern too," said Quisanté, lighting a cigar. Cousin Mandeville's stare had not escaped his notice.

Mandeville hesitated; he was very much annoyed; he liked his money, if not himself, to be respected. But business is business, to say nothing of blood being thicker than water.

"Oh, well, I'll do it for you," he agreed with lofty benevolence. Quisanté laughed. He would have covered his own retreat with much the same device.

The riches then were on the way; Quisanté had a far-seeing eye, and Aunt Maria's five hundred was to imagination already prolific of thousands. A hansom carried him up to Harley Street; he had been there three months before and had been told to come again in three weeks. The punishment for his neglect was a severe verdict. "No liquor, no tobacco, and three months' immediate and complete rest." Quisanté laughed—very much as he had at his kinsman in the City. Both doctor and stock-jobber showed such a curious ignorance of the conditions under which his life had to be lived and of his reasons for caring to live it.

"What's the matter then?" he asked.

The doctor became very technical, though not quite unreserved; the heart and the stomach were in some unholy conspiracy; this was as much as Quisanté really understood.

"And if I don't do as you say?" he asked. The doctor smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "I shan't outlive Methuselah anyhow, I suppose?"

"The present conditions of your life are very wearing," said the doctor.

Quisanté looked at him thoughtfully.

"But if you'd live wisely, there's no reason why you shouldn't preserve good health till an advanced age."

Aunt Maria's five hundred, invested in Consols, would bring in twelve pounds ten shillings or thereabouts every year for ever.

"Thank you," said Quisanté, rising and producing the fee. But he paused before going and said meditatively, "I should really like to be able to follow your advice, you know." His brow clouded in discontent; the one serious handicap he recognised was this arbitrary unfortunate doom of a body unequal to the necessary strain of an active life. "Anyhow I'm good for a little while?" he asked.

"Dear me, you're in no sort of immediate danger, Mr. Quisanté, or I should be more imperative. Only pray give yourself a chance."

On his way from Harley Street to the House, and again from the House to his own rooms in Pall Mall, his mind was busy with the speech that he was to make at the dinner. He had only to respond to the toast of the guests; few words and simple would be expected. He was thus the more resolved on a great effort; the surprise that the mere attempt at an oration would arouse should pave the way for the astonishment his triumph must create. He had no rival in the programme; the Chairman was Dick Benyon, the great gun an eminent Colonial Statesman who relied for fame on his deeds rather than his words. With his curiously minute calculation of chances Quisanté had discovered that there was no social occasion of great attraction to carry off his audience after dinner; they would stay and listen if he were worth listening to; the ladies in the gallery would stay too, if at the outset he could strike a note that would touch their hearts. This was his first really good chance, the first opening for such a *coup* as he loved. His eyes were bright as he opened an atlas and verified with precision the exact position of the Colonial Statesman's Colony; he had known it before of course—roughly.

Lady Richard had much affection in her nature and with it a fine spice of malice. The two

ingredients combined to bring her to the gallery; she wished to please Dick, and she wished to be in a position to annoy him by deriding Quisanté. So there she sat looking down on the men through a haze of cigar-smoke which afflicted the ladies' noses and threatened seriously to affect their gowns.

"They might give up their tobacco for one night," muttered a girl near her.

"They'd much rather give us up, my dear," retorted a dowager who felt that she would be considered a small sacrifice and was not unwilling to make others think the same about themselves.

By Lady Richard's side sat May Gaston. The time is happily gone by when any one is allowed even to assume indifference about the Empire, yet it may be doubted whether interest in the Empire had the chief share in moving her to accept Lady Richard's invitation. Nor did she want to hear Dick Benyon, nor the Colonial Statesman; quite openly she desired and expressed her desire to see what Quisanté would make of it.

"How absurd!" said Lady Richard crossly. "Besides he's only got a few words to say."

May smiled and glanced along the row of ladies. About ten places from her was a funny little old woman with an absurd false front of fair hair and a black silk gown cut in ancient fashion; her features showed vivid disgust at the atmosphere and she made frequent use of a large bottle of smelling-salts. Next to her, on the other side, was Mrs. Gellatly, who nodded and smiled effusively at May.

"Who's the funny old woman?" May asked.

Lady Richard looked round and made a constrained bow; the old lady smiled a little and sniffed the bottle again.

"Oh, she's an aunt of the man's; come to hear him, I suppose. Oh, Dick's getting up."

Amid polite attention and encouraging "Hear, hears" Dick made his way through a few appropriate sentences which his hearty sincerity redeemed from insignificance. The Colonial Statesman had a well-founded idea that the zeal of his audience outstripped its knowledge, and set himself to improve the latter rather than to inflame the former. His reward was a somewhat frigid reception. May noticed that old Miss Quisanté was dozing, and Lady Richard said that she wished she was at home in bed: Quisanté himself had assumed a smile of anticipation when the Statesman rose and preserved it unimpaired through the long course of the speech. The audience as a whole grew a little restless; while the next speaker addressed them, one or two men rose and slipped away unobtrusively. A quick frown and a sudden jerk of Quisanté's head betrayed his fear that more would go before he could lay his grip on them.

"Why doesn't this man stop?" whispered May.

"I suppose, my dear, he thinks he may as well put Mr. Quisanté off as long as possible," Lady Richard answered flippantly.

Amid yawns, the laying down of burnt-out cigars, and glances at watches, Quisanté rose to make his reply. Aunt Maria was wide-awake now, looking down at her nephew with her sour smile; Lady Richard leant back resignedly. Quisanté pressed back his heavy smooth black hair, opened his wide thin-lipped mouth, and began with a courteous commonplace reference to those who shared with himself the honour of being guests that night. Ordinary as the frame-work was, there was a touch of originality in what he said; one or two men who had meant to go struck matches and lit fresh cigars. Dick Benyon looked up at the gallery and nodded to his wife. Then Quisanté seemed suddenly to increase his stature by an inch or two and to let loose his arms; his voice was still not loud, but every syllable fell with incisive distinctness on his listener's ears. An old Member of Parliament whispered to an elderly barrister, "He can speak anyhow," and got an assenting nod for answer. And he was looking as he had when he spoke of his Empress among women, as he had when he declared that the Spirit of God could not live and move in the grave-clothes of dead prophets. He was far away from the guests now, and he was far away from himself; it was another moment; he was possessed again. Dick looked up with a radiant triumphant smile, but his wife was frowning, and May Gaston sat with a face like a mask.

"By Jove!" murmured the elderly barrister.

The whole speech was short; perhaps it had been meant to be longer, but suddenly Quisanté's pale face turned paler still, he caught his hand to his side, he stopped for a moment, and stumbled over his words; than he recovered and, with his hand still on his side, raised his voice again. But the logical mind of the elderly barrister seemed to detect a lacuna in the reasoning; the speaker had skipped something and flown straight to his peroration. He gave it now in tones firm but slower than before, with a pause here and there, yet in the end summoning his forces to a last flood of impassioned words. Then he sat down, not straight, but falling just a little on one side and making a clutch at his neighbour's shoulder; and while they cheered he sat quite still with closed eyes and opened lips. "Has he fainted?" ran in a hushed whisper round the room; Dick Benyon sprang from his chair, a waiter was hurried off for brandy, and Lady Richard observed in her delicately scornful tones, "How extremely theatrical!"

"Theatrical!" said May in a low indignant voice.

"You don't suppose he's really fainting, my dear, do you? Oh, I've seen him do the same sort of thing once before!"

An impulse carried May's eyes towards Miss Quisanté; the old lady was smiling composedly and sniffing her bottle. Her demeanour was in strong contrast to Mrs. Gellatly's almost tearful excitement.

"He couldn't, he couldn't!" May moaned in horror.

If the untrue suspicion entertained by Lady Richard and possibly shared by Miss Quisanté (the old lady's face was a riddle) spread at all to anybody else, the fault lay entirely at the sufferer's own door. He knew too well how real the attack had been; when the ladies mingled with the men to take tea and coffee, he was still suffering from its after-effects. But he treated the occurrence in so hopelessly wrong a way; he minced and smirked over it; he would not own to a straightforward physical illness, but preferred to hint at and even take credit for an exaggerated sensibility, as though he enhanced his own eloquence by pointing to the extraordinary exhaustion it produced. He must needs bring the frailty of his body to the front, not as an apology, but as an added claim to interest and a new title by which to win soft words, admiring looks, and sympathetic pressings from pretty hands. Who could blame Lady Richard for murmuring, "There, my dear, now you see!"? Who could wonder that Aunt Maria looked cynically indifferent? Was it strange that a good many people, without going to the length of declaring that the orator had suffered nothing at all, yet were inclined to think that he knew better than to waste, and quite well how to improve, the opportunity that a trifling fatigue or a passing touch of faintness gave him? "Knows how to fetch the women, doesn't he?" said somebody with a laugh. To be accused of that knowledge is not a passport to the admiration of men.

Before May Gaston came near Quisanté himself, Jimmy Benyon seized on her and introduced her to Aunt Maria. In reply to politely expressed phrases of concern the old lady's shrewd eyes twinkled.

"Sandro'll soon come round, if they let him alone," she said.

The words were consistent with either view of the occurrence, but the tone inclined them to the side of uncharitableness.

"Is he liable to such attacks?" May asked.

"He's always been rather sickly," Miss Quisanté admitted grudgingly.

"He's had a splendid triumph to-night. He was magnificent."

"Sandro makes the most of a chance."

May was surprised to find herself attracted to the dry old woman. Such an absence of feeling in regard to one who was her only relative and the hero of the evening might more naturally have aroused dislike; but Aunt Maria's coolness was funnily touched both by resignation and by humour; she mourned that things were as they were, but did not object to laughing at them. When immaculate Jimmy, a splendid type of the handsome dandified man about town, began to be enthusiastic over Quisanté, she looked up at him with a sneering kindly smile, seeming to ask, "How in the world do you come to be mixed up with Sandro?" When May expressed the hope that he would be more careful of himself Aunt Maria's smile said, "If you knew as much about him as I do, you'd take it quietly. It's Sandro's way." Yet side by side with all this was the utter absence of any surprise at his exhibition of power or at the triumph he had won; these she seemed to take as the merest matter of course. She knew Quisanté better than any living being knew him, and this was her attitude towards him. When they bade one another good-bye, May said that she was sure her mother would like to call on Miss Quisanté. "Come yourself," said the old lady abruptly; she at least showed no oiliness, no violence of varnish; they were not in the family, it seemed.

The crowd grew thinner, but the diminished publicity brought no improvement to Quisanté's manner. He was with Lady Richard and the brothers now—May noticed that nephew and aunt had been content to exchange careless nods—and Lady Richard made him nearly his worst. He knew that she did not like him, but refused to accept the defeat; he plied her more and more freely with the airs and affectations that rendered him odious to her; he could not help thinking that by enough attention, enough deference, and enough of being interesting he must in the end conciliate her favour. When May joined the group, his manner appealed from her friend to her, bidding Lady Richard notice how much more responsive May was and how pleasant he was to those who were pleasant to him. May would have despised him utterly at that instant but for two things: she remembered his moments, and she perceived that all the time he was suffering and mastering severe, perhaps poignant, pain. But again, when she asked him how he was, he smirked and flourished, till Lady Richard turned away in disgust and even the brothers looked a little puzzled and distressed as they followed her to the buffet and ministered to her wants.

"Sit down," said May, in a tone almost sharp. "No, sit at once, never mind whether I'm sitting or not."

He obeyed her with an overdone gesture of protest, but his face showed relief. She got a chair for herself and sat down by him.

"You spoke splendidly," she said, and hurried on, "No, no, don't thank me, don't tell me that you especially wished to please me, or that my approbation is your reward, or anything about beauty or bright eyes, or anything in the very least like that. It's all odious and I wonder why you —a man like you—should think it necessary to do it."

Quisanté looked startled; he had been leaning back in apparent exhaustion, but now he sat up straight and prepared to speak, a conciliatory smile on his lips.

"No, don't sit up, lean back. Don't talk, don't smile, don't be agreeable." She had begun to laugh at herself by now, but the laughter did not stop her. "You were ill, you were very ill, you looked almost dead, and you battled with it splendidly, and beat it splendidly, and went on and won. And then you must—Oh, why do you?"

"Why do I do what?" he asked, quietly enough now, with a new look of puzzle and bewilderment in his eyes, although his set smile had not disappeared.

"Why, go on as if there'd been nothing much really the matter, as if you'd had the vapours or the flutters, or something women have, or used to have when they were even sillier than they are." She laughed again, adding, "Really I was expecting Dick Benyon to propose to cut your stay-laces."

The Benyons were coming back; if she had more to say, there was no time for it; yet she managed a whisper as she shook hands with him, her gesture still forbidding him to rise. Her face, a little flushed with colour, bent down towards his and her voice was eager as she whispered,

"Good-night. Be simple, be yourself; it's worth while."

Then courage failed and she hurried off with a confused nervous farewell to her friends. Her breath came quick as she lay back in the brougham and closed her eyes.

Quisanté was tired and ill; he was unusually quiet in his parting talk with Lady Richard. Even she was sorry for him; and when pity entered little Lady Richard's heart it drove out all other emotions however strong, and routed all resolutions however well-founded.

"You look dead-beat, you do indeed," she said. She turned to her husband. "Dick, Mr. Quisanté must come and spend a few quiet days with us in the country. Something'll happen to him, if he doesn't."

Dick could hardly believe his ears, and was full of delighted gratitude; hitherto Lady Richard had been resolute that their country house at least should be sacred from Quisanté's feet. He took his wife's hand and pressed it as he joyfully seconded her invitation. Some of Quisanté's effusive politeness displayed itself again, but still he was subdued, and Lady Richard, full of her impulse of compassion, escaped without realising fully the enormity of the step into which it had tempted her.

CHAPTER IV.

HE'S COMING!

Dick Benyon was a man of plentiful ideas, but he found great difficulty in conveying them to others and even in expressing them to himself. Jimmy, his faithful disciple, could not help him here, and indeed was too much ashamed of harbouring such things as ideas to be of any service as an apostle. All the ideas were not Dick's own; in the case of the Imperial League, for example, he merely floated on the top of the flood-tide of opinion, and even the Crusade, his other and dearer pre-occupation, was the fruit of the Dean of St. Neot's brain as much as or even more than of his own. The Dean never got the credit of having ideas at all, first because he did not look like it, being short, stout, ruddy, and apparently very fond of his dinner, secondly because he never talked of his ideas to women. Mrs. Baxter did not care about ideas and possibly the Dean generalised rashly. More probably, perhaps, he had contracted a prejudice against talking confidentially to women from observing the ways of some of his brethren; he had dropped remarks which favoured this explanation. Anyhow he lost not only the soil most fruitful for propagation, but also the surest road to a reputation. Of the idea of the Crusade he was particularly careful to talk to men only; women, he felt sure, would tell him it was superb, and his wish was to be confronted with its difficulties and its absurdities, to overcome this initial opposition only with a struggle, and to enlist his antagonist as a fellow-warrior; he had especial belief in the persuasiveness of converts. Unluckily, however, as a rule only the first part of the programme passed into fact; he got the absurdities and difficulties pointed out freely enough, the

conversions hung fire. Dick Benyon was almost the sole instance of the triumphant carrying-out of the whole scheme; but though Dick could believe and work, and could make Jimmy believe and nearly make Jimmy work, he could not preach himself nor make Jimmy preach in tones commanding enough to engage the respect and attention of the world. Who could then? Dick had answered "Weston Marchmont;" the Dean shook his head confidently but wistfully; he would have liked but did not expect to find a convert there.

Weston Marchmont made, as might be expected, the Great Refusal, although not in the impressive or striking manner which such a phrase may seem to imply. Twisting his claret glass in his long thin fingers, he observed with low-voiced suavity that in ecclesiastical matters, as doubtless in most others, he was behind the times; he was a loyal Establishment man and had every intention of remaining such, and for his own part he found it possible to reconcile the ultimate postulates of faith with the ultimate truths of science. As soon as ultimates came on the scene, the Dean felt that the game was up; the Crusade depended on an appeal to classes which must be reached, if they could be reached at all, by something far short of ultimates. Ultimates were for the few; one reason, among others, why Marchmont fondly affected them. Marchmont proceeded to remark that in his doubtless out-of-date view the best thing was to preserve the traditions and the traditional limits of Church work and Church influence. He did not say in so many words that the Church was a good servant but a bad master, yet Dick and the Dean gathered that this was his opinion, and that he would look with apprehension on any movement directed to bringing ecclesiastical pressure to bear on secular affairs. In all this he assumed politely that the Crusade could succeed, but the lift of his brows which accompanied the concession was very eloquent.

"Then," he ended apologetically, "there's the danger of vulgarity. One puts up with that in politics, but I confess I shrink from it in religion."

"What appeals to everybody is not necessarily vulgar," said the Dean.

"Not necessarily," Marchmont agreed, with the emphasis on the second word. "But," he added, "it's almost of necessity untrue, and after all religion has to do with truth." He was getting near his ultimates again.

There was a pause; then Marchmont laughed and said jokingly,

"You'll have to go to the Radicals, Dick. They're the dogmatic party nowadays, and they'll be just as ready to manage your soul for you as they are your property."

"That's just what I don't mean to do," said Dick obstinately. But he looked a little uncomfortable. It was important to preserve the attitude that fighting the Radicals was no part of the scheme of the Crusade. Marchmont smiled at the Dean across the table.

"I love the Church, Mr. Dean," he said, "but I'm afraid of the churchmen."

"Much what I feel about politics and politicians."

"Then if churchmen are politicians too——?" Marchmont suggested; the Dean's laughter admitted a verbal defeat. But when Marchmont had gone he shook his head over him again, saying, "He'll not be great; he's much too sane."

"He's too scrupulous," said Dick. The Dean protested with a smile. "I mean too fastidious," Dick added, correcting himself.

"Yes, yes, too fastidious," agreed the Dean contentedly. "And when I said sane perhaps I rather meant cautious, unimaginative, and cold." Both felt the happier for the withdrawal of their hastily chosen epithets.

This conversation had occurred in the early days of Dick's acquaintance with Alexander Quisanté, when, although already much taken with the man, he had a clearer view of what he was than enthusiasm allowed later on. Rejecting Marchmont, or rather acquiescing in Marchmont's refusal, on the ground of his excessive caution, his want of imagination, and his fastidiousness, he had hesitated to sound Quisanté in regard to the great project. It seemed to him impossible to regard his new friend as an ideal leader for this purpose; one reason is enough to indicate—the ideal leader should be absolutely unselfish by nature. By nature Quisanté was very far from that, and his circumstances were not such as to enable him to overcome the bent of his disposition; whatever else he was or might become, he would be self-seeking too, and it would be impossible ever to make him steadily and deliberately forgetful of himself.

But as time went on, another way opened before Dick's eyes and was cautiously and tentatively hinted at to his confidant, the Dean. The Dean, having seen a little and heard much of Quisanté, was inclined to be encouraging. There were in him possibilities not to be found in Marchmont. He was not fastidious, he would not trouble himself or other people about ultimates, above all he could be fired with imagination. Once that was achieved, he would speak and seem as though he were all that the ideal leader ought to be, as though inspiration filled him; he would express what Dick could only feel and the Dean do no more than adumbrate; nay, in time, as he grew zealous in the cause, his self-interest and personal ambition would be conquered, or at least would be so blended and fused with the nobility of the cause as to lose any grossness or meanness which

might be thought to characterise them in an uncompounded condition. All this might be achieved if only the great idea could be made to seem great enough and the potentialities which lay in its realisation invested with enough pomp and dignity. After all was not such a blend of things personal and things beyond and higher than the personal as much as could reasonably be expected from human beings, and adequate to the needs of a work-a-day world?

"I don't want to be a bishop, but I do mean to stick to my deanery through thick and thin," said the Dean, smiling. Dick understood him to mean that allowance must be made for the personal element, and that a man might serve a cause very usefully without being prepared to go quite as far as the stake, or even the workhouse, for it; if this were not so, there would be less competition for places in State and Church.

Such great schemes for causing right ideas to prevail in things spiritual and temporal and for placing the right men in the right positions to ensure this important result are material here only so far as they influence the career or illustrate the character of individuals. The Crusade did not perhaps do as much towards altering the face of the world, or even of this island, as it was intended to, but it had a considerable, if temporary, effect on current politics, and it appeared to Quisanté to be at once a fine conception and a notable opportunity; between these two aspects he did not, as Dick Benyon had foreseen, draw any very rigid line. To make the Church again a power with the masses; this done, to persuade the masses to use their power under the leadership of the Church; this done, to harmonise unimpaired liberty of conscience with a whole-hearted devotion to truth, and to devote both to ends which should unite the maximum of zeal for the Community with the minimum of political innovation, were aims which, if they were nothing else, might at least claim to be worthy to exercise the intellect of superior men and to inspire the eloquence of orators. That a set of people on the other side was professing to do the same things, with totally different and utterly wrong notions of the results to be obtained, afforded the whet of antagonism, and let in dialectic and partisanship as a seasoning to relieve the high severity of the main topic. Quisanté's personal relations with the Church had never been intimate; he was perhaps the better able to lay hold of its romantic and picturesque aspect. The Dean, for instance, was hampered and at times discouraged by a knowledge of details. Dick Benyon had to struggle against the family point of view as regarded the family livings. Quisanté came almost as a stranger, ready to be impressed, to take what suited him, to form the desired opinion and no other; if a legal metaphor may be allowed, to master what was in his brief, to use that to the full, and to know nothing to the contrary. The Empire was very well, but it was a crowded field; the new subject had advantages all its own and especial allurements.

Yet Miss Quisanté laughed, as a man's relatives often will although the rest of the world is unimpeachably grave. For any person engaged in getting a complete view of Alexander Quisanté it was well to turn from Dick Benyon to Aunt Maria. So May Gaston found when she took the old woman at her word and went to see her, unaccompanied by Lady Attlebridge. She listened awhile to her caustic talk and then charged her roundly with not doing justice to her nephew.

"Sandro's caught you too, has he?" was her hostess's immediate retort.

"No, he hasn't caught me, as you call it, Miss Quisanté," said May, smiling. "I dislike a great deal in him." She paused before adding, "What's more, I've told him so."

"He'll be very pleased at that."

"He didn't seem to be."

"I didn't say he was pleased, I said he would be," remarked Aunt Maria placidly. "No doubt you vexed him at the time, but when he's thought it over, he'll be flattered at your showing so much interest in him."

"I shouldn't like him to take it like that," said May thoughtfully.

"It's the true way to take it, though."

"Well then, I suppose it is. Except that there's no reason why my interest should flatter anybody." She determined on an offensive movement against the sharp confident old lady. "All his faults are merely faults of bringing up. You brought him up; why didn't you bring him up better?"

Miss Quisanté looked at her for several moments.

"I didn't bring him up well, that's true enough," she said. "But, my dear, don't you run off with the idea that there's nothing wrong with Sandro except his manners."

"That's exactly the idea I have about him," May persisted defiantly.

"Ah!" sighed Aunt Maria resignedly. "Probably you'll never know him well enough to find out your mistake."

Warnings pique curiosity as often as they arouse prudence.

"I intend to know him much better if he'll let me," said May.

"Oh, he'll let you." The old lady's gaze was very intent; she had by now made up her mind that

this must be Sandro's Empress. Had she been omnipotent, she would at that moment have decreed that Sandro should never see his Empress again; she was quite clear that he and his Empress would not be good for one another. "I begin to hear them talking about him," she went on with a chuckle. "He's coming into fashion, he's to be the new man for a while. You London people love a new man just as you do a new craze. You're fine talkers too. I like your buzz. It's a great hum, hum, buzz, buzz. It turns some men's heads, but it only sharpens others' wits; it won't turn Sandro's head."

"I'm glad you allow him some virtues."

"Oh, if it's a virtue to look so straight forward to where you mean to get that nothing will turn your head away from it."

"That's twisting your own words, Miss Quisanté. I don't think he's that sort of man at all; he isn't the least your—your iron adventurer. He's full of emotion, of feeling, of—well, almost of poetry. Oh, not always good poetry, I know. But how funny that I should be defending him and you attacking him; it would be much more natural the other way round."

"I don't see that. I know him better than you do. Now he's to champion the Church—or some such nonsense! What's Sandro got to do with your Church? What does he care about it?"

"He cared about his subject the other evening; you must admit that."

"Oh, his subject! Yes, he cares about it while it's his subject."

May laughed. "I want to take just one liberty, Miss Quisanté," she said. "May I? I want to tell you that I think you're a great deal more than half wrong about your nephew."

"Even if I am, I'm right enough for practical purposes with the other part," said the obstinate old woman. She leant forward and spoke with a sudden bitter emphasis. "It's not all outside, he's wrong inside too."

"It's too bad of you, oh, it really is," cried May indignantly. "You who ought to stand up for him and be his greatest friend!"

"Oh, yes, I see! I've overshot my mark. I'm a blunderer."

"Your mark? What mark? Why do you want to tell me about him at all?"

"I don't," said Miss Quisanté, folding her hands in her lap and assuming an air of resolute reticence. But her eyes dwelt now with an imperfectly disguised kindness on the tall fair girl who pleaded for justice and saw no justice in the answers that she got. But the more Aunt Maria inclined to like May Gaston, the more determined was she not to palter with truth, the more determined to have no hand in giving the girl a false idea of Sandro. So far as lay in her power, Sandro's Empress should know the whole truth about Sandro.

The buzz of London, to which Miss Quisanté referred as beginning to sound her nephew's name, revealed to the ear three tolerably distinct notes. There were the people who laughed and said the thing was no affair of theirs; this section was of course the largest, embracing all the naturally indifferent as well as the solid mass of the opposite political party. There were the people who were angry at Dick Benyon's interference and at his *protégé's* impudence; in the ranks of these were most of Dick's political comrades, together with their wives and daughters. Here the resentment was at the idea that there was any vacancy, actual or prospective, which could not be filled perfectly well without the intrusion of such a person as Quisanté. Thirdly there was the small but gradually growing group which inclined to think that there was something in Dick's notions and a good deal in his friend's head. A reinforcement came no doubt from the persons who were naturally prone to love the new and took up Quisanté as a welcome change, as something odd, with a flavour of the unknown and just a dash of the mystery-man about him.

The Quisanté-ites had undoubtedly something to say for themselves and something to show for their faith. Handicapped as he was by his sensational success at the Imperial League dinner, with its theatrical and faintly suspicious climax, Quisanté had begun well in the House. He broke away from his mentor's advice; Dick had been for more sensation, for storming the House; Quisanté rejected the idea and made a quiet, almost hesitating, entry on the scene. He displayed here a peculiarity which soon came to be remarked in him; on public occasions and in regard to public audiences he possessed a tact and a power of understanding the feelings of his company which entirely and even conspicuously failed him in private life. The House did not like being stormed, especially on the strength of an outside reputation; he addressed it modestly, bringing into play, however, resources with which he had not been credited—a touch of humour and a pretty turn of sarcasm. He knew his facts too, and disposed of contradictions with a Blue-book and a smile. The hypercritical were not silenced; Marchmont still found the smile oily, and his friends traced the humour to districts which they supposed to lie somewhere east of the London Hospital; but they were bound to admit sorrowfully that, although all this was true, it might not, under democratic institutions, prove fatal to a career.

Dick Benyon was enthusiastic; he told his friend that he had scored absolutely off his own bat and that there was and could be no more question of help or obligation. He was rather surprised

by a display of feeling on Quisanté's part which seemed to indicate almost an excess of gratitude; but Quisanté felt his foot on the ladder, and the wells of emotion were full to overflowing. Dick escaped in considerable embarrassment, telling himself that remarkable men could not be expected to behave just like other men, like his sort of man, but wishing they would. None the less he praised what he hardly liked, and the reputation of being a good friend was added to Quisanté's credentials. Lastly, but far from least in importance, a story went the rounds that a very great veteran, who had taken a keen interest in Weston Marchmont, and designated him for high place in a future not remote, had recently warned him, in apparent jest indeed but with unmistakable significance, that it would not do to take things too easily, or let a rival obtain too long a start. There was nobody of whom the Statesman could be supposed to be thinking, except the dark horse that Dick Benyon had brought into the betting—Alexander Quisanté! Such predictions from such quarters have no small power of self-verification; they predispose lesser men to a fatalistic acquiescence which smoothes the way of the prophecy.

Marchmont, scorning the rival, was inclined to despise the dangers of the contest, but his supineness may have been in part due to the occupation of his mind by another interest. He had come to the conclusion that he wanted May Gaston for his wife and that she would accept his proposal. A few days before the Easter holidays began he betook himself to Lady Attlebridge's with the intention of settling the matter there and then. The purpose of his coming seemed to be divined; he was shown direct to May's own room, and found her there alone. She had been reading a letter and laid it down on a table by her; Marchmont could not help his eye catching the large printed address at the head of the sheet of paper, "Ashwood." Ashwood was Dick Benyon's country place. A moment later May explained the letter.

"I've had a wail from Amy Benyon," she said. "She wants me to go to them for Easter and comfort her. Look what she writes: "You must come, dear. I must be helped through, I must have a refuge. How in the world I ever did such a thing I don't know! But I did and I can't help it now. He's coming! So you must come. We expect the Baxters and Mr. Morewood. But I want *you*.""

"What has she done? Who's coming?" asked Marchmont.

"Mr. Quisanté."

He paused for a moment before he said, "You won't go, I suppose?"

"I must go if Amy wants me as much as that. Besides—well, perhaps it'll be interesting."

A chill fell on Marchmont, and its influence spread to his companion. Here at least he had hoped to be rid of Quisanté, to find a place where the man could not be met, and people to whom the man was as a friend impossible. May read his thoughts, but her purpose wavered. She liked him very much; that hot rebellious fit, which made her impatient of his limits, was not on her now. He had found her in a more reasonable normal mood, when his advantages pleaded hard for him, and the limits seemed figments of a disorderly transient fancy. Thus he had come happily, and success had been in the mood to kiss his standards.

"I wonder you can endure the man in the same house with you," he said.

She made no answer except to smile, and he spoke no more of Quisanté. To him it seemed that his enemy passed then and there from thought, as his name disappeared from the conversation. But his own words had raised difficulties and turned the smooth path rough. They had renewed something of the rebellious fit and given fresh life to the disorderly fancies. They had roused her ready apprehensive pride, her swift resentment at the idea of having her friends or her associates chosen for her. She would have said most sincerely then that Marchmont was far more to her in her heart than Quisanté was or could be, but neither from Marchmont nor from any man would she take orders to drop Quisanté. While he opened his tale of love, her fingers played with the invitation to Ashwood and her eyes rested on Lady Richard's despairing declaration of the inevitable—"He's coming!"

He almost won her; his soft "Can you love me?" went very near her heart. She wanted to answer "Yes" and felt sure that it would be in reality a true response, and that happiness would wait on and reward the decisive word. But she was held back by an unconquerable indecision, a refusal (as it seemed) of her whole being to be committed to the pledge. She had not resented the confidence of his wooing—she had given him some cause to be confident; she pitied and even hated the distress into which her doubt threw him. Yet she could do no more than say "I don't know yet." He moved away from her.

"You'd better go away and leave me altogether," she said.

"I won't do that. I can't."

"I can say nothing else—I don't know yet. You must give me time."

"Ah, you mean 'yes'!" His voice grew assured again and joyful.

She weighed the words in which she answered him.

"No. If I meant yes, I'd say it. I wouldn't shilly-shally. I simply don't know yet."

He left her and paced the length of the room, frowning. Her hesitation puzzled him; he failed to trace its origin and fretted against a barrier that he felt but could not see. She sat silent, looking at him in a distressed fashion and restlessly fingering Lady Richard's invitation. She was no less troubled than he and almost as puzzled; for the feeling that held her back even while she wanted to go forward was vague, formless, empty of anything definite enough to lay hold of and bring forward as the plea that justified her wavering.

"I ought to say no, since I can't say yes. This isn't fair to you," she murmured.

He protested that anything was better than no, and his protest was manifestly eager and sincere; but a touch of resentment could not be kept out of his voice. She should have a reason to give him, something he could combat, disprove, or ridicule; she gave him no opening, he could not answer an objection that she would not formulate. He pressed this on her and she made no attempt to defend herself, merely repeating that she could not say yes now.

"I've lost you, I suppose, and no doubt I shall be very sorry," she said.

At that he came up to her again.

"You haven't lost me and you never will," he said. "I'll come to you again before long. I think you're strange to-day, not quite yourself, not quite the old May. It's as if something had got between us. Well, I'll wait till it gets out of the way again."

Not so much his words as his voice and his eyes told her of a love deeper in him and stronger than she had given him credit for; he lived so much in repression and exercised so careful a guard over any display of feeling. She liked the repression no less than the feeling and was again drawn towards him.

"I wish I could," she murmured. "Honestly, I wish I could."

He pressed her no more; if he had, she might possibly at last have given a reluctant assent. That he would not have, even had it been in his power to gain it.

"I'll come back—after the holidays," he said.

She looked up and met his glance.

"Yes, after the holidays," she repeated absently.

"You go to Ashwood?"

There was a pause before she answered. It came into her mind suddenly that it would have been strange to go to Ashwood as Weston Marchmont's promised wife. Why she could not quite tell; perhaps because such a position would set her very much outside of all that was being thought and talked of there, indeed in a quasi-antagonism to it. Anyhow the position would make her feel quite differently towards it all.

"Yes," she answered at last, and mustered a laugh as she added, "I'm not so particular as you, you know. And Amy wants me."

"I wish you always did what people want you to," said he, smiling.

Their parting was in this lighter vein, although on his side still tender and on hers penitent. In both was a consciousness of not understanding, of being somehow apart, of an inexplicable difficulty in taking one another's point of view. The solution of sympathy, the break that May had talked of, made itself apparent again. In spite of self-reproaches, her strongest feeling, when she was left alone, was of joy that her freedom still was hers.

CHAPTER V.

WHIMSY-WHAMSIES.

At Ashwood the sun was sinking after a bright April afternoon. Mrs. Baxter sat in a chair on the lawn and discoursed wisdom to May Gaston and Morewood. The rest of the party had gone for a walk to the top of what Lady Richard called "Duty Hill"; it was the excursion obligatory on all guests.

"The real reason," remarked Mrs. Baxter, who was making a garment—she was under spiritual contract to make two a month—"why the Dean hasn't risen higher is because he always has some whimsy-whamsy in his head."

"What are they? I never have 'em," said Morewood, relighting his pipe.

"You never have anything else," said Mrs. Baxter in a brief but sufficient aside. "And, my dear," she continued to May, "what you want in a bishop is reliability."

"The only thing I want in a bishop is absence," grunted Morewood.

"Reliability?" murmured May, half assenting, half questioning.

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Baxter, biting her thread. "Reliability. I shall finish this petticoat to-morrow unless I have to drive with Lady Richard. You don't want him to be original, or to do much, except his confirmations and so on, of course; but you do want to be sure that he won't fly out at something or somebody. Dan got a reputation for not being quite reliable. I don't know how, because I haven't time to go into his notions. But there it was. Somebody told the Prime Minister and he crossed out Dan's name and put in John Wentworth's."

Morewood yawned obtrusively. "What a shame!" May murmured at random.

"It's just the same with a husband," Mrs. Baxter observed.

"Only it's rather more difficult to scratch out his name and put in John Wentworth's," Morewood suggested.

May laughed. "But anyhow the Dean's a good husband, isn't he, Mrs. Baxter?"

"Oh, yes, my dear. The same men very seldom fly out over notions and over women."

Morewood raised himself to a sitting posture and observed solemnly,

"The whole history of science, art, and literature contradicts that last observation."

Mrs. Baxter looked at him for a brief moment and went on with the petticoat. May interpreted her look.

"So much the worse for the whole history!" she laughed. But a moment later she went on, "I think I rather like whimsy-whamsies, though."

"I should think you did," said Morewood.

"A man ought to have a few," May suggested.

"A sort of trimming to the leg of mutton? Only take care the mutton's there!"

"Oh, not the mustard without the beef!" cried May.

"Now there's Canon Grinling," said Mrs. Baxter. "That's the man I admire."

"Pray tell us about him," urged Morewood.

"He's content to preach in his turn and work his parish."

"How much better than working his head!"

"And he'll be a bishop—at least."

"Is there anything worse?" growled Morewood disconsolately.

Mrs. Baxter never became angry with him; she turned a fresh side of the petticoat, smiled sedately, and went on with her work.

"We had whimsy-whamsies last night, hadn't we?" asked May.

"I went to bed," said Morewood.

"But Jenkins in the next parish, who has eight children, must take up with the Salvation Army. So there's an end of him," continued Mrs. Baxter. "Not that I pity him—only her."

"They talked till two. I sat up, looking plainer and plainer every minute."

"Who was talking?"

"Oh, the Dean and Dick." She paused and added, "And later on Mr. Quisanté."

"Quisanté grows more and more anomalous every day. It's monstrous of a man to defy one's power of judgment as he does."

"Does he defy yours?"

"Absolutely. And I hate it."

"I rather like it. You know so well what most people are like in half-an-hour."

"I'm splendidly forward," remarked Mrs. Baxter, "This isn't an April one. I've done them, and this is my first May."

It was impossible not to applaud and sympathise, for it was no later than the 27th of April. The friendly task performed, Morewood went on,

"You're friends again, aren't you?"

"Well, partly. He spoke to me last night for almost the first time."

"What was the quarrel?"

"I told him his manners were bad; and he proved how right I was by getting into a temper." She was silent a moment. Morewood saw her smile and then frown in apparent vexation. Then she looked down at him suddenly and said, "But then—if you'd heard him last night!"

"There it is again!" said Morewood. "That's what annoys me so. In common with most of mankind, I like to be able to label a man and put him in his compartment."

"That's just what you can't do with Mr. Quisanté."

A loud merry boyish laugh sounded from the shrubbery behind him. Then Lady Richard came out, attended by young Fred Wentworth, son of that John whose name had been put in when the Dean's was scratched out owing to a suspicion of whimsy-whamsies. Fred was a lively fellow, whose trinity of occupations consisted of shooting, polo, and flirting; they are set down in his own order of merit; by profession he was a soldier, and just now he adored Lady Richard hopelessly; he was tall, handsome, and no more steady than the sons of ordinary men.

"We gave them the slip beautifully, didn't we?" he was asking in exultation. "Think they're still on the top of the hill, jawing, Lady Richard?"

"I don't mind how long they stay there," she answered, as she came across to the group on the lawn, a dainty youthful little figure, in her white frock and straw hat. "And how have you three been amusing yourselves?" she inquired. "I declare my head aches, Fred," she complained. "Now is the Church to swallow the State, or the other way round, or are they to swallow one another, or what?"

"Such a fine day too!" observed Mrs. Baxter. Morewood burst into a laugh.

"To waste it on whimsy-whamsies!" cried May, joining in his mirth.

She looked so handsome in her merriment that Fred's eyes dwelt on her for a moment, a new notion showing in their pleasant expanse of blue simplicity. But loyalty's the thing—and a pleasant thing too when Lady Richard stood for it. Besides May Gaston was rather serious as a rule and given to asking questions; she might be able to flirt though; she just might—if there had happened to be anybody for her to flirt with; he pitied her a little because there was not.

"Mrs. Baxter," said Morewood suddenly, "have you ever thought what would happen if you stopped making petticoats?" She did not answer. "It illustrates," he went on, "the absurd importance we attach to ourselves. The race would get itself clothed somehow, even as Church and State will go on, although they fail to settle that question of the swallowing on the top of the hill."

May alone was listening. "Don't you think it all makes any difference?" she asked in a low voice.

"Not enough to stop enjoying one's self about, or to take any risks for."

"I disbelieve you with my whole heart and soul; and, what's more, you don't believe yourself," she said. "To take risks is what we were given life for, I believe."

"Whimsy-whamsies!" he jeered, jerking his thumb warningly towards Mrs. Baxter.

To May it seemed curious how an utter absence of speculation and an honest engrossment in everyday cares, hopes, and duties appeared to produce an attitude of mind similar in many ways to that caused by an extensive survey of thought and a careful detachment of spirit from the pursuits of the vulgar. The expression was different; the man who was now so much in her thoughts, Weston Marchmont, would not have denounced whimsy-whamsies. He would have claimed an open mind and protested that he was ready to entertain every notion on its merits. But temper and taste led to the same end as ignorance and simplicity; the philosopher and the housewife met on a common ground of disapproval and disdain. Mrs. Baxter kept her house and made petticoats. Marchmont read his books, mixed with his world, and did his share in his obvious duty of governing the country. Misty dreams, great cloudy visions, vague ideals, were forsworn of both; they were all whimsy-whamsies, the hardly excusable occupation of an idle day in the country. Was such a coincidence of opinion conclusive? Perhaps. But then, as she had hinted to Morewood, what of life? Was it not conclusive as to the merits of that also? Suddenly Fred Wentworth's voice broke across her meditation.

"If you asked me what I wanted," he said in a tone of great seriousness, "upon my honour I don't know what I should say, except another pony." He paused and added, "A real good 'un, you know, Lady Richard."

You might trust in God in an almost Quietist fashion (nothing less was at the bottom of Mrs. Baxter's homely serenity), you might exhaust philosophy and the researches of the wise, or you might merely be in excellent health and spirits. Any of these three seemed enough to exclude that painful reaching out to dim unlikely possibilities which must in her mind henceforward be nicknamed whimsy-whamsies. But to May's temper the question about life came up again. She swayed between the opposing sides, as she had swayed between yes and no when Marchmont challenged her with his love.

Lady Richard's verdict about Quisanté—she gave it with an air of laboured reasonableness—was that he proved worse on the whole than even she had anticipated. This pessimistic view was due in part to the constant and wearing difficulty of getting Fred Wentworth to be civil to him; yet May Gaston was half-inclined to fall in with it. The attitude of offence which he had at first maintained towards her was marked by peevishness, not by dignity, and when it was relaxed his old excessive politeness revived in full force. He had few 'moments' either; and the one reported to her with enthusiasm by Dick Benyon took place on Duty Hill while she was gossiping on the lawn. Disappointed in the half-conscious anticipation which had brought her to Ashwood, she began to veer towards the obvious, towards safety, and towards Weston Marchmont. He had allowed himself one letter, not urging her, but very gracefully and feelingly expressed. As she walked through the village, the telegraph-office tempted her; her life could be settled for sixpence, and there would be no need of further thought or trouble. She was again held back by a rather impalpable influence, by a vague unwillingness to cut herself off (as she would by such a step) from the mental stir which, beneath the apparent quiet of country-house life, permeated Ashwood. The stir was there, though it defied definition; it was not due to Dick or the Dean, though they shared in it; it was the mark of Quisanté's presence, the atmosphere he carried with him. She recognised this with a mixture of feelings; she was ashamed to dwell on his small faults in face of such a thing; she was afraid to find how strong his attraction grew in spite of the intolerable drawbacks. Wavering again, she could not decide whether his faults were fatal defects or trifling foibles.

She saw that the Dean shared her doubts and her puzzle. He had a little trick, an involuntary and unconscious shake of the head which indicated, as her study of it told her, not a mere difference of opinion, but a sort of moral distaste for what was said; it reminded her of a dog shaking his coat to get rid of a splash of dirty water. She came to watch for it when Alexander Quisanté was talking, and to find that it agreed wonderfully well with the invisible movements of her own mind; it came when the man was petty, or facetious on untimely occasions, or when he betrayed blindness to the finer shades of right and wrong. But for all this the Dean did not give up Quisanté; for all this he and Dick Benyon clung to their scheme and to the man who was to carry it out. In her urgent desire for guidance she took the Dean for a walk and tried to draw out his innermost opinions. He showed some surprise at her interest.

"He's the last man I should have thought you'd care to know about, Lady May," he said.

"That can be only because you think me stupid," she retorted, smiling.

"No! But I thought you'd be stopped *in limine*—on the threshold, you know."

"I see the threshold; and, yes, I don't like it. But tell me about the house too."

"I've not seen it all," smiled the Dean. "Well, to drop our metaphor, I think Mr. Quisanté has a wonderfully acute intellect."

"Oh, yes, yes."

"And hardly a wonderfully, but a rather noticeably, blunt conscience. Many men have, you'll say, I know. But most of the men we meet have substitutes."

"Substitutes for conscience?" May laughed reprovingly at her companion.

"Taste, tradition, the rules of society, what young men call 'good form.'"

"Ah, yes. And he hasn't?"

"His bringing up hasn't given them to him. He might learn them."

"Who from?"

"One would have hoped from our host, but I see no signs of it." The Dean paused, shaking his head "A woman might teach him." He paused again before adding with emphasis, "But I should be very sorry for her."

"Why?" The brief question was asked with averted eyes.

"Because the only woman who could do it must be the sort of woman who—whose teeth would be set on edge by him every day till the process—the quite uncertain process—was complete."

"Yes, she'd have to be that," murmured May Gaston.

"On the whole I think she'd have an unhappy life, and very likely fail. But I also think that it would be the only way." His round face broke again into its cheerful smile. "We shall have to make the best of him as he is, Lady May," he ended. "Heaven forbid that I should encourage any woman to the task!"

"I certainly don't think you seem likely to," she said with a laugh. "It seems to come to this: his manners are bad and his morals are worse."

"Yes, I think so."

"But, as Dick Benyon would say, so were Napoleon's."

"Exactly, and, as we know, Napoleon's wife was not to be envied."

May Gaston was silent for a moment; then she said meditatively, "Oh, don't you think so?", and fell again into a long silence. The Dean did not break it; his thoughts had wandered from the hypothetical lady who was to redeem Quisanté to the realities of the great Crusade.

There seemed to May something a little inhuman in the Dean's attitude, and indeed in the way in which everybody at Ashwood regarded Quisanté. Not even Dick Benyon was altogether free from this reproach, in spite of his enthusiasm and his resulting blindness to Quisanté's lesser, but not less galling, faults. Not even to Dick was he a real friend; none of them took him or offered to take him into their inner lives, or allowed him to share their deepest sympathies. Perhaps this was only to treat him as he deserved to be treated; if he asked nothing but a mutual usefulness and accommodation, that they should use him and he should rise by serving them, neither party was deceived and neither had any cause to complain. But if after all the man was like most men, if his chilly childhood and his lonely youth had left him with any desire for unreserved companionship, for true friendship, or for love, then to acquiesce in his bad manners and his worse morals, to be content (as the Dean said) to make the best of him—out of him would have been a more sincere form of expression—as he was, seemed in some sort cruelty; it was like growing rich out of the skill of your craftsmen and yet taking no interest in their happiness or welfare. It was to use him only as a means, and to be content in turn to be to him only a means; such a relative position excluded true human intercourse, and, it appeared to May, must intensify the faults from which it arose. Even here, in this house, Quisanté was almost a stranger; the rest were easy with one another, their presence was natural and came of itself; he alone was there for a purpose, came from outside, and required to be accounted for. If the talk with the Dean confirmed apprehensions already existing, on the other hand it raised a new force of sympathy and a fresh impulse to kindness. But the sympathy and the apprehensions could make no treaty; fierce war waged between them.

That night the turn of events served Quisanté. He seemed ill and tired, yet he had flashes of brilliancy. Again it was made plain that, all said and done, his was the master mind there; even Lady Richard had to listen and Fred Wentworth to wonder unwillingly where the fellow got his notions. After dinner he talked to them, and they gave him all their ears until he chose to cease and sank back wearied in his chair. But then came the contrast. The Dean went to the library, Lady Richard strolled out of doors with Fred, Mrs. Baxter withdrew into seclusion with a novel and a petticoat, Dick Benyon asked May to walk in the garden with him, and when she refused went off to play billiards with Morewood. May had pleaded letters to write and sat down to the task. The man who a little while ago had been the centre of attention was left alone. He wandered about idly for a few moments, then dropped into a chair, seeming too tired to read, looking fretful, listless, solitary and sad. She watched him furtively for some time from behind the tall sides of the old-fashioned escritoire; he sat very still, stretched out, frowning, pale. Suddenly she rose and crossed the room.

"It's too much trouble to write letters," she said. "Are you inclined for a stroll, Mr. Quisanté?"

He sprang up, a sudden gleam darting into his eyes. She was afraid he would make some ornate speech, but perhaps he was startled into simplicity, perhaps only at a loss; he stammered out no more than "Thanks, very much," and followed her through the doorway on to the gravel-walk. For a little while she did not speak, then she said,

"It's good of you to be friends with me again. I was very impertinent that night after your speech. I don't know what made me do it."

He did not answer, and she turned to find his eyes fixed intently on her face.

"We are friends again, aren't we?" she asked rather nervously; she knew that she risked a renewal of the flirtation, and if it were again what it had been her friendship could scarcely survive the trial. "I shouldn't have said it," she went on, "if I hadn't—I mean, if your speech hadn't seemed so great to me. But you forgive me, don't you?"

"Oh yes, Lady May. I know pretty well what you think of me." His lips shut obstinately for a moment. "But I shall go my way and do my work all the same—good manners or bad, you know."

"Those are very bad ones," she said, with a little laugh. Then she grew grave and went on

imploringly, "Don't take it like that. You talk as if we—I don't mean myself, I mean all of us—were enemies, people you had to fight and beat. Don't think of us like that. We want to be your friends, indeed we do."

"For whom are you speaking?" he asked in a low hard voice.

She glanced at him. Had he divined the thought which the Dean's talk had put into her head? Did he feel himself a mere tool, always an outsider, in the end friendless? If he discerned this truth, no words of hers could throw his keen-scented mind off the track. She fell back on simple honesty, on the strength of a personal assurance and a personal appeal.

"At any rate I speak for myself," she said. "I can answer for myself. I want to be friends."

"In spite of my manners?" He was bitter and defiant still.

"They grow worse every minute; and your morals are no better, I'm told."

"I daresay not," said Quisanté with a short laugh.

"Oh, say you won't be friends, if you don't want to! Be simple. There, I say it again. Be simple."

Lady Richard's merry laugh rang through the garden, and a brusque "Damn it!" of Morewood's floated out from the open window of the billiard-room. There was an odd contrast to this cheerful levity in the man's pale drawn face as he looked into May Gaston's eyes.

"Do you really mean what you say?" he asked. "Or are you only trying to be kind, to put me at my ease?"

"It's nobody's fault but your own that you're not always at your ease," she replied. The rest she let pass; when she asked him to walk with her she had only been trying to be kind, and she had been fearful of what her kindness might entail on her. But things went well; he was not flirting and he was not acting; his manners, if still bad, were just now at least not borrowed, they were home-grown.

"I am at my ease," he told her. "At least, I was till——" He hesitated, and then went on slowly, "Don't you suppose I've been thinking about what you said?"

"I hope not; it wasn't worth it."

"It was. But how can I change?" His voice had a touch of despair as well as of defiance. "I don't see what you mean; I don't feel what you mean. Yes, and you talk of morals too. Well, don't I know that every now and then I—I don't see those either?" He paused. "A man must get on as well as he can with what he's got," he resumed. "If he's only got one eye, he must learn to be sharper than other men in looking round."

They walked on in silence for some way. His pride and his recognition of his defects, his defiance and his pleading for himself, combined to touch her heart, and she could not at the moment speak to him more about them. And to find all that so near the surface, so eager for utterance, ready to break out at the least encouragement, at the first sign of sympathy! For it had not come home to her yet that another might have spoken to him as she had, but found no response and opened the gates to no confidence; she had not guessed what Aunt Maria had about the Empress among women.

"You're ill too," she said.

"No, not for me," he answered. "I'm pretty well for me."

"Are you never really well?"

"My body's not much better than the other things. But I must use that too, as long as it'll last." There was no appeal for pity in his voice; defiance was still uppermost. May felt that she must not let him see that she pitied him, either for his bad body, or his bad manners, or his bad morals, or his want of friends. He thought he had as much to give as to receive. She smiled for a moment. But swift came the question—Was he wrong? But whether he were in fact right or wrong, it was harder to deal with him on the basis of this equality than to stoop to him in the mere friendliness of compassion. The compassion touched him only, to accept the equality was to make admissions about herself.

He was very silent and quiet; this might be due to illness or fatigue. But he was also curiously free from tricks, simple, not exhibiting himself. These were the signs of one of his moments; but what brought about a moment now? A moment needed a great subject, a spur to his imagination, an appeal to his deep emotions, a theme, an ideal. The moments had not seemed to May things that would enter into or have any concern with private life and intimate talks; they belonged to Dick Benyon's dark horse, not to the mere man Alexander Quisanté. Or had she a little misunderstood the mere man? The thought crossed her mind that, even if she adopted this conclusion and contrived to come to a better understanding of him, it would be impossible to make the rest of the world, of the world in which she lived and to which she clung, see anything of what she saw. They would laugh if her new position were a passing whim; they would be

scornful and angry if it were anything more.

Suddenly Quisanté spoke. What he said was not free from consciousness of self, from that perpetual presence of self to self which is common enough in men of great ability and ambition, and yet never ceases to be a flaw; but he said it soberly enough; there were no flourishes.

"You can't be half-friends with me," he said. "I must be taken as I am, good and bad. You must let me alone, or take me for better for worse."

May smiled at the phrase he had happened on and its familiar associations—surely so out of place here. But she followed his meaning and appreciated his seriousness. She could answer him neither by an only half-sincere assurance that she was ready to be entire friends, nor yet by a joking evasion of his point.

"Yes, I see: I expect that is so," she said in a troubled voice; it was so very hard to take him for worse, and it was rather hard to resolve to make no effort at taking him for better. She forced a laugh, as she said, "I'll think about it, Mr. Quisanté."

As she spoke, she raised her eyes to his; a low, hardly audible exclamation escaped her lips before she was conscious of it. If ever a man spoke plainly without words what was in his soul, Quisanté spoke it then. She could not miss the meaning of his eyes; all unprepared as she was, it came home to her in a minute with a shock of wonder that forbade either pain or pleasure and seemed to leave her numb. Now she saw how truly she, no less than the others, had treated him as an outsider, as a tool, as something to be used, not as one of their own world. For she had never thought of his falling in love with her, and had never considered him in that point of view at all. Yet he had, and here lay the reason why he flirted no more, and why he would have her sympathy only on even terms. Here also, it seemed, was the reason why his tricks were forgotten, why he was simple and direct; here was the incitement to imagination, the ideal, the passion that had power to fire and purge his soul.

"We must go in," she whispered in a shaking voice. "We must go in, Mr. Quisanté."

CHAPTER VI.

ON DUTY HILL.

Another week had gone by, and, although nothing very palpable had happened, there was a sort of vague scare in the house-party. It touched everybody, affecting them in different ways according to their characters, but raising in all an indignant protest against a fact hardly credible and a danger scarcely to be named. Not even Mrs. Baxter, entrenched in placidity and petticoats, quite escaped its influence; even Morewood's cynical humour hesitated to play on a situation so unexpected, possibly so serious. Lady Richard's alarm was the most outspoken, and her dismay the most clamorous; yet perhaps in Dick Benyon himself was the strongest fear. For if that did happen which seemed to be happening beneath the incredulous gaze of their eyes, who but he was responsible, to whose account save his could the result be laid? He had brought the man into the circle, into the house, into the knowledge of his friends; but for him Quisanté might have been carving a career far away, or have given up any idea of one at all.

More than this, Dick, seeking approval and sympathy, had looked round for open and intelligent souls who would share his interest, his hopes, and his enthusiasm, and on no soul had he spent more pains or built higher anticipations than May Gaston's. She was to sympathise, to share the hopes and to understand the enthusiasm. Had he not asked her to dinner, had he not brought her to the Imperial League banquet, had he not incited Lady Richard to have her at Ashwood? And now she spread this scare through the house; she outran the limits—all the reasonable limits—of interest, she did far more than ever he had asked of her, she cast reflections on his judgment by pushing it to extremes whither it had never been meant to stretch. She had been bidden to watch Alexander Quisanté, to admire his great moments, to see a future for him, and to applaud the discerning eye which had seen that future first. But who had bidden her make a friend of the man, take him into the inner circle, treat him as one who belonged to the group of her intimates, to the company of her equals and of those with whom she had grown up? Almost passionately Dick disclaimed the responsibility for this; with no less heat his wife forced it on him; relentlessly the course of events seemed to charge him with it.

What would happen he did not know; none of them at Ashwood professed to know; they refused to forecast the worst. But what had actually happened was that Quisanté was undoubtedly in love with May Gaston, and that May Gaston was no less certainly wrapped up in Quisanté. The difference of terms was fondly clung to; and indeed she showed no signs of love as love is generally understood; she displayed only an open preference for his society and an engrossed interest in him. It was bad enough; who could tell when it might become worse? "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you." Allowing for difference of times and customs, that had

been the attitude of all towards Quisanté; a caste-feeling, almost a race-feeling, dictated it and kept it alive and strong under all superficial alliance and outward friendliness. But May had seen the barrier only to throw it down in a passion of scorn for its narrowness and an impulse of indignation at its cruelty. If she had gone so far, he was bold who dared to say that she would not go farther, or would set a limit to her advance on the path that the rest of them had never trodden.

"At any rate it shan't happen here," said Lady Richard. "I should never be able to look her mother in the face again."

"It won't happen anywhere," Dick protested. "But you can't turn him out, you know."

"I can't unless I absolutely literally do. He won't see that he isn't wanted."

"No; and he may be excused if he thinks he is—by May Gaston at all events."

The subject was one to be discussed between husbands and wives, Dick and Lady Richard, Mrs. Baxter and the Dean, rather than in any more public fashion, but the unexpressed thought pervaded every conversation, and was strongest when the presence of the persons concerned forbade even indirect reference. Once or twice Morewood broke into open comment to Lady Richard; he puzzled her rather, and did not console her at all.

"I know why you object and how silly your grounds are," he said. "It's snobbery in you, you know. Now in me it's good sound sense. Because in the first place, if I were ten years younger, and ten times richer, and rather more of a man, I should like to marry her myself; and in the second place I'm not sure Quisanté hasn't forged, or isn't about to forge, a cheque for a million."

"Don't talk about it," shuddered little Lady Richard. "She can't care for him, she can't, you know."

"Certainly not, in the sentimental sense that you women attach to that very weak form of expression."

"And I'm sure there's nothing else to tempt her."

"You'll be laying down what does and doesn't tempt me next."

"I've known her since she was a child."

"There's nothing that produces so many false judgments of people."

Lady Richard was far too prostrate to accept any challenge.

"You do hate it as much as I do, don't you?" she implored.

"Quite," said he with restrained intensity. "But if you ask me, I think she'll do it."

A pause followed. "Fred Wentworth must have been waiting ever so long for me," Lady Richard murmured apologetically, though an apology to Morewood could not soothe Fred. Her thoughts were busy, and a resolve was forming in her mind. "I shall ask Mrs. Baxter to speak to her," she announced at last.

"That'll be amusing if it's nothing else. I should like to be there."

Mrs. Baxter was by no means unwilling to help. She was mother to a large family and had seen all her children creditably married; such matters lay well within the sphere of legitimate feminine activity as she conceived it. Of course the Dean told her she had better leave the thing alone, but it was evident that this was no more than a disclaimer of responsibility in case her efforts did more harm than good.

Mrs. Baxter advanced on approved and traditional lines. She slid into the special topic from a general survey of matrimonial desirability; May did not shy, but seemed ready to listen. Mrs. Baxter ignored the possibility of any serious purpose on May's side and pointed out with motherly gentleness that her impulsive interest in Quisanté might possibly be misunderstood by him and give rise to an idea absolutely remote from any which it was May's intention to arouse. Then she would give pain; wouldn't it be better gradually, not roughly or rudely but by slow degrees, to diminish the time she spent with Quisanté and the attention she bestowed on him? Mrs. Baxter's remonstrance, if somewhat conventional, yet was artistic in its way.

But May Gaston laughed; it was all very familiar, sounded very old, and was ludicrously wide of the mark. She had not been careless, she had not suffered from the dangerous stupidity of ultra-maidenly blindness, she knew quite well how Quisanté felt. Accordingly she would not acquiesce in Mrs. Baxter's diplomatic ignoring of the only material point—how she felt herself. Of course if all Mrs. Baxter meant to convey was her own disapproval of the idea,—well, she conveyed so much. But then nobody needed to be told of that; it was quite obvious and it was not important; it was an insignificant atom in the great inevitable mass of disapproval which any marked liking for Quisanté (May shrank from even thinking of stronger terms) must arouse. She had far too much understanding of the disapproval and far too much sympathy with it to

underrate the probable extent and depth of it; to a half of herself she was with it, heart and soul; to a half of herself the impulse that drove her towards Quisanté was something hardly rational and wholly repulsive. What purpose, then, did Mrs. Baxter's traditional motherliness serve?

There was one person with whom she wished to talk, who might, she thought, help her to understand herself and thus to guide her steps. For every day it became more and more obvious that the matter would have to be faced and ended one way or the other. Quisanté was not patient, and he would not be dealt with by way of favour. And she herself was in a turmoil and a contradiction of feeling which she summed up antithetically by declaring that she disliked him more every hour he was there and missed him more every hour he was not; or, to adopt the Dean's metaphor, his presence set her teeth on edge and his absence made her feel as if she had nothing to eat. Morewood might help her; he would at least understand something of how she felt, if she could summon up courage to talk to him; they were old friends.

One afternoon Quisanté had been sitting with them on the lawn and, going off to walk with Dick, left them alone together. Quisanté had not been in a happy vein; he had been trying to be light and flippant, and gossiping about people; here, where good taste makes the whole difference between what is acceptable and what is odious, was not the field for him. Morewood had growled and May had flinched several times. She sat looking after Quisanté with troubled puzzled eyes.

"How funnily people are mixed!" she murmured, more to herself than her companion. Then she turned to him and said with a laugh, "How you hate him, don't you?"

"By all the nature of things you ought to hate him much more."

"Yes," she agreed. "But do you think that's the only way to look at people, any more than it is at books? You like or dislike a novel, perhaps; but you don't like or dislike—oh, what shall I say? Gibbon's Roman Empire. There you admire or don't admire; or rather you study or neglect; because, if you study, you must admire. Don't think me learned; it's only an illustration."

"Gibbon's a duty," said Morewood, "but I'm not clear that Alexander Quisanté is."

"Oh, no; exactly the opposite; for me at least."

"Is he then a curriculum?"

"He's partly a curriculum, and partly—I don't know—a taste for strong drink perhaps." She laughed reluctantly, adding, "I'm being absurd, I know."

"In talk or in conduct?"

"Both, Mr. Morewood. I can only see him in metaphors. I once thought of him as a mountain range; that's fine-sounding and dignified, isn't it? But now I'm humbler in my fancies; I think of him as a forest—as the bush, you know, full of wretched underwood that you keep tumbling over, but with splendid trees (I don't know whether there are in the bush, really) and every now and then a beautiful open space or a stately vista."

"From all this riot of your fancy," said Morewood grimly, "one only thing emerges quite plainly."

"Does even one thing?"

"Yes. That you think about Quisanté a mighty lot."

"Oh, yes. Of course I do, a mighty lot," she admitted, laughing. "But you aren't very much more useful than Mrs. Baxter, who told me that my innocent heedlessness might give Mr. Quisanté pain. I oughtn't to have told you that, but it was rather funny. I'm sure she's said it to all the Baxter girls in turn, and about all the girls that all the Baxter boys were ever in love with."

"Possibly Mrs. Baxter only perceives the wretched underwood."

"Inevitably," said May.

"For heaven's sake don't drift into thinking that you're the only person who can understand him. Once think that about anybody and you're his slave."

"Perhaps I'm the only person who takes the trouble. I don't claim genius, only diligence."

"Well, you're very diligent," Morewood grunted.

She sat looking straight in front of her for a few moments in silence, while Morewood admired the curve of her chin and the moulding of her throat.

"I feel," she said in a low voice and slowly, "as if I must see what becomes of him and as if it ought to be seen at close quarters."

Then Morewood spoke with deliberate plainness.

"You know better than I do that he's not of your class; I mean in himself, not merely where he

happens to come from. And for my part I'm not sure that he's an honest man, and I don't think he's a high-minded one."

"Do you believe people are bound to be always just what they are now?" she asked.

"Thinking you can improve them is the one thing more dangerous to yourself than thinking you've a special gift for understanding them. To be quite plain, both generally end in love-affairs and, what's more, unhappy love-affairs."

"Oh, I'm not in love with Mr. Quisanté. You're going back to your narrow loving-hating theory."

"Hum. I'm inclined to think that nature shares my narrowness."

If May got small comfort from this conversation, Morewood got less, and the rest of the party, judging from what he let drop about his impressions of May's state of mind, none at all. Lady Richard was of opinion that a crisis approached and re-echoed her cry, "Not here anyhow!" But Quisanté's demeanour at once confirmed her fears and ignored her protest. He had many faults and weaknesses, but he was not the man to shrink from a big stake and a great throw. His confidence in his powers was the higher owing to his blindness to his defects. May Gaston had indeed opened his eyes to some degree, but here again, as she showed him continued favour, he found good excuse for dwelling on the interest which inspired rather than on the frankness which characterised her utterance. She had bidden him be himself; then to her that was a thing worth being. As he believed himself able to conquer all external obstacles in his path, so he vaguely supposed that he could overcome and obliterate anything there might be wrong in himself, or at any rate that he could so outweigh it by a more prodigal display of his gifts as to reduce it to utter insignificance; try as he might to see him self as she saw him, he could not fully understand the gravity of her objections. And anyhow, grave as she thought them, she was his friend; at the cost of defying, perhaps of losing, her friends, she elected to be his friend.

To the appeal of this generosity his emotions responded passionately; now he worshipped his Empress among women for more than her grace, her stateliness, or her beauty; he loved her for her courage and her loyalty. There seemed nothing that he would not do for her; it did not, however, occur to him that perhaps the one thing he could do for her was to leave her. But short of this self-sacrifice—and to that even he might have risen had anyone pointed him the way—he was in just that state of exalted feeling which made him at his best, cured him of his tricks for the time being, and gave him the simplicity whose absence marred his ordinary hours. He always rose to the occasion, Dick Benyon maintained; and to this great occasion he came marvellously near to rising. This is not to say that he was altogether in the temper of a hero of romance. He loved the lady, but he loved the victory too, the report of it, the *éclat*, the talk it would make.

The tendency of events might seem to justify his growing hopes and almost to excuse confidence, but May's mood, had he seen it fully, would have rebuked him. She hung doubtful. She had succeeded, by the help of her far-fetched metaphors, in describing to Morewood the nature of the attraction which Quisanté exercised over her and of the force which drew her on; but to Morewood she had said nothing of the opposing influences. She had sent no letter to Marchmont, she had not yet refused to become his wife. Although she recognised the unfairness of this treatment of him she could not compel her hand to the writing of the letter; for Marchmont came to personify to her all that she lost, that at least she risked, if she yielded to her new impulse. Thus the hold which her liking for him, their old acquaintance, and all the obvious advantages gave him was further strengthened. Leaving on one side his position and the excellence of the match, things which now seemed to her less important, and coming to the more intimate and personal aspect of the matter, she realised with a pang how much Marchmont pleased her; he never offended her taste or jarred on her feelings; she would be absolutely safe with him, he would gratify almost every mood and satisfy almost every aspiration.

Dealing very plainly with herself, formulating the question that she could not put to Morewood, she asked whether she would not rather go as a wife to Marchmont than to any other man she had met, whether Quisanté or another. She had been, perhaps still was, more nearly in love with Weston Marchmont than with anybody else. But the "almosts" were obstinate; the nearly had never become the quite; she did not tell herself that it never could; on the contrary she recognised (though here she was inclined to shirk the probe) that if she married another, she might well awake to find herself loving Marchmont; she knew that she would not like Marchmont to love another woman. So far she carried her inquiry: then she grew in a way sick and disgusted with this exposure of her inmost feelings. She would not proceed to ask why precisely she could not say yes to Marchmont without being sensible of a loss greater than the gain. All she knew was that she would not think of becoming Quisanté's wife if that were not the only way of getting all she wanted from Quisanté. The wifehood she looked on as a means to something else, to what she could hardly say; in itself she did not desire it.

Lady Richard's prayer was answered—no thanks to herself or her hints, no thanks either to Mrs. Baxter's motherly remonstrance or to Morewood's blunt speech. It was May herself who sent Quisanté away. A thrill of relief ran round the table when he announced at dinner that if Lady Richard would excuse him he would leave by the early train. Excuse him! She would have hired a balloon to take him if he had declared a preference for that form of locomotion. But she expressed the proper regret and the proper interest in the reason (the pretext she called it in her own mind) for his departure. It appeared that a very large and important Meeting was to be held at

Manchester; two Cabinet ministers were to be there; Quisanté was invited to be the third speaker. He explained that he felt it would be a mistake to refuse the invitation, and the acceptance of it entailed a quiet day or two in London with his Blue-books and his papers. As he put it, the whole thing sounded like an excuse; Lady Richard hoped that it covered a retreat and that the retreat was after a decisive repulse from May Gaston. Even Dick was half inclined to share this opinion; for although he knew how a chance of shining with, and perhaps of outshining, such luminaries as were to adorn the Manchester platform would appeal to his friend, he did not think that for its sake Quisanté would abandon any prospect of success in his suit. In fact the impression was general, and the relief proportionate. The Dean beamed and Mrs. Baxter purred; Morewood was good-natured, and Fred Wentworth was lightened of a burden of bewilderment which had pressed heavily on his youthful mind. Quisanté was treated with a marked access of cordiality, and May was petted like a child who has displayed a strong inclination to be naughty, but has at last made up its mind to be good, and thereby saved those responsible for its moral welfare from the disagreeable necessity of showing displeasure and exercising discipline. She smiled to herself at the effusive affection with which Lady Richard bade her good-night.

For these people did not know the history, and had not been present at the interview between May and Quisanté on Duty Hill when the sun was sinking and the air was still. They did not know that it was by her command that he went and that his going rather strengthened than relaxed the bond there was between them. Always there stood out in her memory the scene on the hill, how he faced her there and told her that, great as the chance was and imperative as the call, yet he would not go; he could not leave her, he said, and then and there poured out his love for her. When he made love, he was not as when he flirted. Passion purged him; he was strong, direct, and simple; he was consumed then by what he felt and had no time to spoil the effect by asking what impression he made on others. Here was the thing that Marchmont could not give her, the great moment, the thrill, the sense of a power in the man which she had not measured, might spend her life in seeking to measure, and yet never to the end know in its fulness. But she answered not a word to his love-making, she neither accepted nor refused it; as often as he paused an instant and again when he came to the end, she had nothing to say or would say nothing except, "You must go."

"You're the only person in the world for whose sake I would hesitate about going."

She smiled. "That's not at all to your credit," she said; but she was not ill pleased.

He came a step nearer to her and said, still soberly, still quietly, "I'll go away from here to-morrow."

"Yes, to the meeting," she said, looking up at him brightly from her seat on the wooden bench on the hill-top.

"Away from here," he repeated. "But not to the meeting unless you send me." Then he stood quite still opposite to her for a minute. "Because unless you care for me to do it, I don't care to do it," he went on.

A long silence followed as she sat there, looking past him down into the rich valley that spread from the foot of the hill. The fascination was strong on her, the fear was strong on her too; but for the moment the repulsion was forgotten. For he had risen to the occasion, as Dick Benyon maintained that he always did; not a word too much, not an entreaty too extravagant, not an epithet too florid had found passage from his lips. His instinct of the way to treat a great and important situation had saved him and brought him triumphantly through all the perils. He did not ignore what he was, he did not disguise his knowledge of his powers; knowing what they were and the value of his offering, he laid them all at her feet and asked in return no more than her leave and her command to use them.

She raised her eyes to his pale eager face.

"I send you then," she said. "And now walk with me down the hill and tell me what you'll say at Manchester."

That night, before she went to bed, she wrote to Weston Marchmont;

> "Dear Friend,—I will not wait to see you again. I can't do what you wish. Everything else I could do for you, and everything else that you wish I wish for you. But I can't do that."

Alas for the renewed peace of Lady Richard's mind, alas for the returning quiet of Dick Benyon's conscience! Quisanté made his preparations for going with his eyes all agleam, murmuring again and again, "She sends me; she shall see what I'm worth." For one of his great moments had come in the nick of time and done a work that he himself, low as he might now and again fall, could hardly quite undo.

CHAPTER VII.

ADVICE FROM AUNT MARIA.

The two Cabinet Ministers brought back from Manchester different accounts of Quisanté's speech and its effects. One said it was frothy rhetoric heard in puzzled lethargy, the other that it was genuine eloquence received with the hush of profound attention, but hailed at the end with rapturous enthusiasm. This was a typical case of the division of opinion which began to prevail about Quisanté, and was not disposed of by observing that the unfavourable Minister belonged to that "old gang" which it was Quisanté's mission to shake up or shake out. Rich in merits, his speeches were nevertheless faulty to a critical ear; the ornate was apt to turn to the gaudy, the dignified to the pompous. To the critical, defects outweigh merits; but the mass of people, not being critical, fix on the fine things, contentedly and perhaps not unwisely ignoring the blemishes. So the speech was a great popular success, and Alexander Quisanté conceived that he had more than justified his reputation and had ornamented his Lady's colours with the laurel of victory. He wrote to her to say that he was staying a few days in Lancashire and had arranged to speak at one or two other places. "If I do at all well," he wrote, "it is because I forget my audience and think that I speak only to you and to earn the praise of your eyes."

"Oh, dear, why does he talk like that?" said May Gaston with a sigh and a smile. "Forget his audience! The praise of my eyes!" She read the compliment over again almost despairingly. "Yet he doesn't really think me an idiot," she ended. She had made up her mind to forgive him his habit of playing to the gallery, but he need not treat her as though she sat there. She felt able to understand the dumb and bewildered reproach which fronted her in her sister Fanny's face, but found spoken expression only in the news that Fanny had had a letter from Lady Richard.

The next day she went to see Miss Quisanté; the paying of this visit had been in her mind from the first moment she left Ashwood. In the little flat's narrow passage she had to squeeze by a short, stout, dark man, dressed with much elaboration; Miss Quisanté explained afterwards that he was a sort of cousin of her own and Sandro's.

"His name is Mandeville," she said. "His father's was Isaacs. You knew we had Jewish relations?"

"I thought it not improbable."

"I suppose we've got some of the blood, and some of it's a very good thing," pursued Aunt Maria. "This man's a stock-jobber; he came to talk to me about my money, but he let out a thing or two about Sandro."

"About Mr. Quisanté?"

"Yes. Well, I'm not surprised; I never am surprised at Sandro. Only if he speculates with my money I shan't give it him."

May listened and heard how Quisanté had embarked the five hundred pounds given him to support his new position in a hazardous, although not unpromising, speculation. Whether he would win or lose was still uncertain; Mandeville had hopes.

"And I don't know that it's exactly dishonest," said Aunt Maria meditatively. "But that's just like Sandro. He's always doing things that you can't be quite sure about—whether they're straight or not, you know. He was just the same as a boy."

May had a sense of treachery in listening, but how should she not listen? Morewood's opinion came into her memory. Miss Quisanté was confirming it out of her full acquaintance with its subject.

"I gave him the money, it was his own, I've got nothing to show," said Miss Quisanté with her vinegary little smile.

"Perhaps he—he misunderstood what you meant; I mean, that you intended the money for any special purpose."

"That's exactly what he'll say," remarked Aunt Maria with a triumphant nod.

"But if it's true——"

"I shan't know whether it's true or not. That's where Sandro's cleverness comes in."

It was hard to realise that the old lady talked of the man whom her hearer had seen on Duty Hill.

"I'm sure you don't do him justice." The plea sounded weak even to its utterer.

"To an ounce," said Aunt Maria emphatically. May laughed. "I lived with him for twelve years, and I'm not a fool any more than he is. If you ask him about me, you'll get the truth, and you get it when you ask me about him. After twelve years I ought to know."

"You've read his speech?" May asked. "Isn't it magnificent, parts of it anyhow?"

"Very few men have a brain like Sandro's."

"There I agree with you, Miss Quisanté." But May's face was troubled as she added, a moment later, "He ought to give you back your money, though."

"He will, if he makes a lot out of it, and he'll give me a nice present too. Then he'll feel that he's acted quite properly all through. And if he loses it—well, as I say, he's got his case, and I can't prove anything."

"Men like him are often careless about money affairs. It's only that, I expect."

"Careless! Sandro careless! Oh, dear me, no." and for once Miss Quisanté laughed heartily. The beads on her cap shook as her dumpy little form swayed gently with mirth; she looked impishly delighted at such a misconception of her nephew's character. May felt very foolish, but could not help laughing herself.

"Well, I won't plead his cause any more," she said. "Only I believe you're prejudiced." She paused, and then, looking the old woman in the face, added, "I ought to tell you that he and I have become great friends."

Miss Quisanté had stopped laughing; now she made a gesture which seemed to indicate that she washed her hands of any responsibility. But she appeared fretful and disturbed.

"I'm immensely impressed by him; and I think these faults you talk so much about are only superficial. They can't really belong to his nature when so much that's fine does." Her voice shook a little as she implored a merciful judgment from the relentless old lady. Aunt Maria's shrewd eyes grew softer.

"I used to say that to myself for ever so long," she said. "I catch myself saying it now and then even now."

"You're disappointed at not—not getting on better with him, and it makes you bitter."

"And you? You get on very well with him?"

"I don't think I'm blind about him. I see what you mean and what a lot of people feel. If there is a pit, I've walked into it open-eyed."

"He's in love with you, of course?"

A denial was hardly worth while and quite useless. "You must ask him that, Miss Quisanté," May replied. Aunt Maria nodded and gazed at her long and steadily.

"Yes, you're his Empress among women," she said at last with a little sneer. "Sandro has a phrase for everything and everybody. And are you in love with him?"

May had wanted to come to close quarters and was glad that Aunt Maria gave her a lead. But she did not return a direct answer to the question.

"You wouldn't be encouraging, if I were thinking of becoming his wife."

"It would be very extraordinary that you should."

"I've no particular desire to be ordinary," said May, smiling.

Miss Quisanté leant forward suddenly and held up a short forefinger.

"My dear, you'd be very unhappy," she said. Then she leant back again and received in complete stillness May's meditative gaze.

"In a good many ways perhaps I should," said May at last with a sigh, and her brow puckered with wrinkles. "Yes, I suppose so," she sighed again.

"But I know what it is. You've let yourself get interested in Sandro; you've let him lay hold of you." May nodded. "And it would seem rather dull now to lose him?" Again May nodded, laughing a little. Aunt Maria understood her feelings very well, it seemed. "I should be dull too if I lost him." The old lady folded her hands in her lap. "There is that about Sandro," she said with a touch of pride in her voice. "I don't like him; well, you've gathered that perhaps; but if anything happened to him, I should feel I might as well lie down and die. Of course I've got nobody else belonging to me; you're not like that." Again the forefinger was raised in admonition, and Miss Quisanté gave a piece of practical advice. "Marry a nice man of your own sort, my dear, and when you're safely married, be as much interested in Sandro as you like."

May was not quite sure of the morality of this counsel; it seemed possible that Aunt Maria shared the vagueness about right and wrong which she quarrelled with in her nephew. She laughed as she said,

"But then Mr. Quisanté would marry some other woman, and she mightn't like it. And my nice husband mightn't like it."

It was possible to discuss the matter far more frankly with Miss Quisanté than with anybody else, yet the talk with her was only the first of several in which May tried to glean what would be thought of such a step as marrying Alexander Quisanté. Almost everywhere she found, not only the lack of encouragement which Aunt Maria had shown, but an amazement hardly distinguishable from horror and an utter failure to understand her point of view; her care to conceal any personal interest in the discussions she found means to bring about gained her very candid expressions of opinion about Quisanté, and she became aware that her world would regard her as something like a lunatic if it awoke one morning to read of her engagement to the man.

Yet side by side with this feeling there was a great and a growing expectancy with regard to him in his public aspect. He began to be a figure, somebody of whom account would have to be taken; Dick Benyon's infatuation was less often mentioned, his sagacity more often praised. May was struck again with the sharp line drawn between the man himself, and what he was to do, with the way in which everybody proposed to invite him to his house, but nobody contemplated admitting him to his heart. The inhumanity made her angry again, but she was alone in perceiving it; and she was half-aware that her perception of it would be far keener than Quisanté's own. In fact it was very doubtful if he asked any more of the world than what the world was prepared to give him. But that, said May, was not because he lacked the power and the desire of love, but because his affections were withered by neglect or rusty from disuse. She knew well that they were there and would expand under the influence of sympathy. If people grew human towards him, he would respond in kind; in hitting on this idea she commended herself for a sagacity in questions of emotion not less than that which Dick Benyon had shown in matters of the intellect. Dick had discovered Quisanté, as he thought; May told herself that he had discovered only half of Quisanté, and that the other half had been left for her to explore, and to reveal to the world. The effect of her various conversations was rather to confirm her in her inclination towards Quisanté than to frighten her out of it.

There was one talk which she could not escape and had to face with what resolution she might. Weston Marchmont was not content with the brief dismissal which had reached him from Ashwood, and he was amazed beyond understanding at the hint of its cause which Dick Benyon had given him. He had no doubt some reason to think himself ill-used, but he was not inclined to press that side of the case. It was not his own failure so much as the threatened success of such a rival that staggered and horrified him. Few are wide-minded enough to feel a friendship quite untouched and unimpaired when their friend takes into equal intimacy a third person for whom they themselves entertain aversion or contempt; at the best they see in such conduct an unexpected failure of discernment; very often they detect in it evidence of a startling coarseness of feeling, an insensibility, and a grossness of taste difficult to tolerate in one to whom they have given their affection. Marchmont felt that, if May Gaston wronged him, she was wronging far more herself, and most of all his ideal of her. He could not believe such a thing of her without her own plain assurance, and would not suffer it until every effort to redeem and rescue her was exhausted.

"You don't mean," he said at last openly and bluntly to Dick Benyon, "that you think it's possible she'll marry him?"

"I do, quite," groaned poor Dick. "You can imagine how I feel about it; and if I didn't see it myself, Amy would soon let me know it."

Marchmont said no more, feeling that discussion was difficult for one in his position, but Dick did not spare him a description of what had happened at Ashwood, from which he realised the gravity of the danger.

"After all, he's a very remarkable man," Dick pleaded, in a forlorn effort at defending himself no less than the lady.

Marchmont found May in a mood most favourable to the cause he had at heart, if he had known how to use his opportunity to the best advantage. From day to day now she wavered between the fear and the fascination, and on this day the fear was stronger and, working together with her affection for Marchmont, might well have gained him the victory. Ill-usage of Quisanté would perhaps have been involved here, but May would not have stood at that, had it been made plain to her heart that in the end the man could not be accepted or endured. To win, Marchmont should have made love to her in his own way, refused to accept his dismissal, and pressed his own suit on his own merits, leaving his rival to stand the contrast as he best might, but not dragging him explicitly into the issue between himself and May. He did not take this course; to his pride it was difficult to plead passionately again when his former pleading had been rebuffed; and the intensity of his desire to show her the truth about Quisanté, and at all costs to rescue her from Quisanté, made him devote more energy to denouncing his rival than to recommending himself. Thus he set May to defend the absent friend rather than to pity and be drawn towards the suitor who was before her. Yet in spite of his mistaken tactics, he shook her sorely; all that was in his favour came home to her with renewed force; she looked on him with pleasure and heard his voice again with delight; it was very pleasant to her to be with him; she admitted to herself that very, very easily she might be in love with him. Old Miss Quisanté's advice recurred to her mind;

was this the nice husband who would give her a safety not incompatible with a continued interest in Alexander Quisanté? She smiled regretfully; Marchmont did not fit at all into Aunt Maria's scheme.

"I don't want to question you," he said, "but if you will speak plainly to me I shall be glad. The change came at Ashwood?"

"There's been no change; there's been a failure to change. When I saw you last, I thought I might change so as to be able to do what you wanted. Now I know I can't."

"And why?" She was silent; he went on, speaking lower. "Is there any truth at all in what Dick Benyon thinks? It seemed to me incredible. Will you tell me that I may utterly disbelieve that at all events?"

"No, I can't tell you to disbelieve it utterly."

The love for her which was his strongest appeal left his face; he looked aghast, at a loss, almost disgusted. His hands moved in a gesture of protest.

"I don't tell you to believe it. I can tell you nothing about it just now. I admit you had a right to ask me, but I can say nothing more now."

Again the chance offered for him to make her forget Quisanté or remember him only by a disadvantageous comparison. His honest desire to save her combined again with bitter prejudice to lead him wrong.

"I can't believe it of you," he declared. "I can't have been so wrong about you as that."

"I see nothing to prevent you from having been absolutely wrong about me," she said coldly, "as wrong about me as you are about—other people."

"If you mean——"

"Oh, yes, let's be open with one another," she cried. "I mean Mr. Quisanté; you're utterly wrong and prejudiced about him."

"He's not even a gentleman."

"I suppose he goes to the wrong tailor!" said May scornfully.

He came a step nearer to her. "You know I don't mean that sort of thing, nor even other things that aren't vital to life though they're desirable in society. He hasn't the mind of a gentleman."

Now she wavered; she sat looking at him with troubled eyes, feeling he was right, desiring to be persuaded, struggling against the opposing force. But Marchmont went on fretfully, almost peevishly,

"The astonishing thing is that you're blind to that, that you don't see him as he really and truly is."

"That's just what I do," she cried eagerly and almost angrily. Marchmont's words had brought back what Quisanté could be; surely a man's best must be what he really and truly is? Then his true self shows itself untrammelled; the measure of it is rather the heights to which it can rise than the level on which it moves at ordinary times. She remembered Quisanté on Duty Hill. "That's what I do, and you—you and all of them—don't. You fix on his small faults, faults of manner—oh, yes, and of breeding too, I daresay, perhaps of feeling too. But to see a man's faults is not to see the man." She rose to her feet and faced him. "I see him more truly than you do," she said proudly and defiantly. Then her face grew suddenly soft, and she caught his hand. "My dear friend, my dear, dear friend," she murmured, "don't be unkind to me. I'm not happy about it; how can I be happy about it? Don't make it worse for me; I'm trying to see the truth, and you might help me; but you only tell me what leaves out more than half the truth."

He would not or could not respond to her gentleness; his evil spirit possessed him; he gave expression to his anger with her and his scorn of his rival, not to his own love and his own tenderness.

"It turns me almost sick," he declared, "to think of you with him."

She let go his hand, moved away, and sat down. "If you're like that, I can say no more," she said. Her eyes were full of tears as she looked at him, but his heart was hard to her; to him she seemed to be humiliating both him and herself; the victory of Quisanté at once insulted him and degraded her. Here was a case where Alexander Quisanté, with all his defects, would have gone right, while Marchmont went wrong. It was a crisis, and Quisanté's insight would have taught him how to handle it, to assure her that whatever she did he would be the same to her, that though he might not understand he would be loyal, that his love only grew greater with his pain, that in everything that awaited her he would be ready with eager service and friendship unimpaired. None of this came from Marchmont's lips; he made no effort to amend or palliate his last bitter speech. He could not conquer his resentment, and it bred an answering resentment in her. "You

must think what you like of me," she said, her voice growing cold again.

With the end of this interview, with the departure of Marchmont, still sore, angry, and blind to her point of view, May felt that the matter had settled itself. She knew in her heart that she would not have turned Marchmont away unless she had meant to bid Quisanté come. For a little while she struggled against finality, telling herself that the question was still an open one, and that to refuse one man was not of necessity to marry another. Other friends came and talked to her, but none of them got within her guard or induced her to speak freely to them. In the end she had to settle this thing for herself; and now it was settled.

Even when undertaken in the conviction of a full harmony of feeling, a community of mind, and an identity of tastes, marriage may startle by the extent of its demands. She was to marry a man —she faced the matter and told herself this—a man from whom she was divided by the training of a lifetime, by antagonisms of feeling so acute as to bite deep into their every-day intercourse, by a jarring of tastes which made him sometimes odious to her. In spite of the resentment to which Marchmont's scorn had stung her, she understood very well how it was that her friends failed to appreciate the motives of her action. To herself she could not justify it; it was taken on impulse, not calculation, and had to rest in the end on the vague effects of what she had seen in Quisanté, not continually, not in his normal state, but by fits and snatches, in scraps of time which, all added together, would scarcely fill the hours between luncheon and dinner. She took him on the strength of his moments; that was the case in plain English, reduced to its lowest terms and its baldest statement. Of confidence, of security, of trust she had none; their place was filled by a vague expectancy, an insistent curiosity, and a puzzled fearful fascination. Not promising materials these, out of which to make happiness. She surprised herself by finding how little happiness in its ordinary sense entered into her reckoning. Or if anything that we happen to want is to be called our happiness, then her happiness consisted in, and refused to be analysed into anything more definite than, a sort of necessity which she felt of being near to Alexander Quisanté, of sharing his mind and partaking of his life. But if this were happiness, then happiness was not what she had been accustomed to think it; where were the rest, the contentment, the placidity and satisfaction which the word was usually considered to imply?

Quisanté came to her, wreathed in triumph. It was a mood she liked him in; he offended her not when he celebrated success, but when he intrigued for it. His new-born confidence seemed to make any drawing-back on her part impossible; she had sent him, she was bound to reward the happy issue of her mission. Another thing touched her very deeply; while protesting his unworthiness of her, he based his humility on the special and wonderful knowledge of her that he possessed and referred it entirely to this inner secret excellence of hers and not in the least to her position or to any difference between his and hers. He did not suppose that society would be aghast or that the world at large would see cause for dismay in the marriage. He expected hearty congratulations for himself, but it was evident that he thought she would have her full share of them too; he had, in fact, no idea that May Gaston would not be thought to be doing very well for herself. This mixture of simplicity and self-appreciation, of ignorance of the mind of others combined with a knowledge of the claims of his own, took May's fancy; she laughed a little as she determined that the general opinion of the matter must be kept from his ears, and his robust confidence in the world's admiration of him preserved.

"You say you know me so well," she said. "I know very, very little of you; and of what I know there's a lot that's bad."

He was not in the temper that had inspired his confession of bad manners and bad morals on Duty Hill. He was inclined, as at such a moment he might be pardonably, to make light of his faults. He was not alarmed when she declared that if she found out anything very bad she would not after all become his wife.

"At any moment that you repent, you're free," he said gaily. But she answered gravely,

"There'll be a great many moments when I shall repent. You see I don't think I really love you." He looked puzzled. "You know what I mean? Real love is so beautifully undiscriminating, isn't it? I'm not a bit undiscriminating about you; and that'll make me miserable often; it'll make you angry too. You'll forget that I said all this, that I told you and warned you. I shall be (she smiled again for a moment) a critic on the hearth. And nobody hardly understands criticism as badly as you do."

"What a lot of reasons for refusing me!" he said, still gay, though with a hint of disturbance in his manner. "And yet you don't refuse."

The old answer which was all she could give to herself was all that she found herself able to give him.

"Somehow I can't do without you, you see," she said. Then she suddenly leant forward and went on in a low imploring voice, "Don't be worse than I've ever thought. There are some things I couldn't stand. Please don't." Her eyes, fixed on to his, prayed a reassurance against a horde of vague dangers.

He laughed off the question, not understanding how or why she came to put it, and their talk passed to a lighter vein. But presently he said, with a half-embarrassed, half-vexed laugh, "Need we sit so far from one another?"

May had suffered from a dread of the beginning of sentiment. But she was laughing as she rose and, crossing the room, sat down by him on the sofa. "Here I am then," she said, "and you may kiss me. And if you will ask me I'll kiss you; only I don't particularly want to, you know. I don't think of you in the very least as a man to be kissed. I've thought of other men much more in that way—oh, only thought of them, Mr. Quisanté!"

The playful, yet not meaningless, defiance of a softer mood, and of his power to induce it in her, acted as a spark to Quisanté's ardour. It was just the opposition that he had wanted to rescue him from awkwardness. He recovered the splendid intensity which had marked his declaration on Duty Hill. If he did not succeed in changing her feelings, at least he set her wondering why they did not change and wrung from her the smiling admission, "You're very picturesque anyhow." She did not deny vehemently when he told her that he would make her love him as he loved her. "Well, I never use the word impossible about you," she said. "Only—it hasn't happened yet, you know." She paused and added, with a touch of reviving apprehension, "And I mayn't always like you to behave as if it had—though I don't mind much to-night."

His manner was good, almost defying criticism, as he reassured her on this point; and when he left her, her predominant impression was that, so far as their personal relations went, she had exaggerated the dangers and under-rated the attractions.

"I think he'll always be rather nice to me and not do anything very dreadful. But then, what will he do to other people?"

This was the fear which still possessed her and which no fine moment of his drove out. She seemed to have power to bring him to his best, to give him the cue for his fine scenes, to create in him the inspiration to great moments. But when he dealt with other people, her power would be useless. She would have to stand by and see him at his worst, looking on no longer as an irresponsible, as well as a helpless, spectator, but as one who had undertaken responsibility for him, who must feel for him what he did not for himself, who must be sensitive while he was callous, wounded while his skin went unpierced. She felt that she had taken up a very solitary position, between him and the world, not truly at home with either; a sense of loneliness came upon her.

"I shall have to fight the whole world," she said. "I wonder if my cause is a good one?"

CHAPTER VIII.

CONTRA MUNDUM.

It was impossible not to admire the wealth of experience which Mrs. Baxter had gathered from a singularly quiet life; many men have gone half a dozen times round the world for less. Whatever the situation, whatever the action, she could supply a parallel and thereby forecast an issue. Superficial differences did not hinder her; she pierced to the underlying likeness. When all the world was piteously crying out that never in its life had it heard of such an affair as this of May Gaston's, Mrs. Baxter dived into her treasure-chest and serenely produced the case of the Nonconformist Minister's daughter and the Circus Proprietor. Set this affair side by side with the Quisanté business, and a complete sum in double proportion at once made its appearance. The audacity of the man, the headlong folly of the girl, the hopeless mixing of incompatibles were common to the two cases; the issue of the earlier clearly indicated the fate that must attend the later. Lady Richard could do nothing but gasp out, "And what happened, Mrs. Baxter?"

Mrs. Baxter told her, punctuating the story with stitches on a June petticoat.

"She ran away from him twice; but he brought her back, and, they said, beat her well. At any rate she ended by settling down to her new life. They had seven children, all brought up to the circus; only the other day one was sent to prison for ill-treating the dancing bear. He's dead, but she still keeps the circus under his name. Of course all her old friends have dropped her; indeed I hear she drinks. Her father still preaches once on Sundays."

It was easy to disentangle the relevant from the merely reminiscent; the running away, the beating, the settling down, the complete absorption in the new life (vividly indicated by the seven children and their habits), stood out saliently. Add the attitude of old friends, and Lady Richard could not deny the value of the parallel. She acknowledged it with a long-drawn sigh.

"May Gaston must be mad," she observed. "You can imagine how Dick feels about it!"

"And all the while her cousin in the Bank was quite ready to marry her and give her a nice

little home. He was Church and sang in the choir at St. Dunstan's."

Without consciously appreciating the nicety of the parallel here, Lady Richard began to think of Weston Marchmont.

"I suppose Mr. Marchmont'll take Fanny now," she said. "I don't know, though; he won't like any sort of connection with Alexander Quisanté. How selfish people are! They never think of what their marriages mean to their relations."

This observation expressed a large part of what was felt by society; add friends to relations, and it summed up one side of the indictment against May Gaston. Lady Attlebridge's helpless and bewildered woe was one instance of its truth, Fanny's rage another; to look farther afield, May's friends and acquaintances discovered great cause for vexation in that they saw themselves somehow "let in for" Quisanté. At least the alternative was to drop May Gaston as entirely as the unfortunate circus proprietor's wife had been dropped; and this alternative was a difficult one. Had Quisanté's raid resulted in the seizure of some insignificant colourless girl who had been merely tolerated for the sake of who she was without possessing any claims in respect of what she was, the dropping would have been easy; but May was not of that kind. She was not only one of them, but very conspicuous among them, one of their ornaments, one in whom they took pride; they would have acknowledged in her a natural leader so soon as a suitable marriage gave her the necessary status and experience. Her treachery was the more flagrant, Quisanté's presumption the more enormous, their own course of action the more puzzling to decide.

Yet in their hearts they knew that they must swallow the man; events were too strong for them. Dick Benyon had forced him on them in one side of life, May Gaston now did the like in another; henceforward he must be and would be among them. This consciousness mingled an ingredient of asperity with their genuine pity for May. She would not merely have herself to thank for the troubles which would certainly come upon her; her misfortunes must be regarded as in part a proper punishment for the annoyance she was inflicting on her friends. As for Dick Benyon, it was impossible to speak to him without perceiving that if remorse be in truth the sharpest penalty of sin, he was already punished enough.

The poor man's state was indeed such as to move compassion. Besides his old friend Lady Attlebridge's dumbly accusing eyes, besides Fanny's and Lady Richard's by no means dumb reproaches, a very heavy blow had fallen on him. In the words of his own complaint, his brother Jimmy had gone back on him—and back on his allegiance to Alexander Quisanté. The engagement was too much for Jimmy, and in the revulsion of feeling he became downright hostile to Quisanté's claims and pretensions. How could he not when Fanny Gaston imperiously and almost tearfully commanded him to attach himself to her banner, and to behold with her eyes the indignity suffered by the noble family of Gaston? Logic was not Jimmy's strong point, and he confounded poor Dick by the twofold assertion that the thing was utterly incredible, and that Dick and he had been most inconceivably idiotic not to have foreseen it from the first hour that they took up Quisanté. In this stress of feeling the brothers spoke to one another with candour.

"You know how I feel about Fanny," said Jimmy, "so you can imagine how much I like it."

"Oh, yes, I know; and I quite understand that you wanted Marchmont to marry May," Dick retorted in an alien savageness born of his wounded spirit.

Jimmy was taken aback by this direct onslaught, but his native honesty forbade him to deny the charge point-blank.

"Supposing she came to like me," he grumbled, "it wouldn't be over and above pleasant to have Quisanté for a brother-in-law."

Dick was roused; he summoned up his old faith and his old admiration.

"I tell you what," he said, "the only chance you have of your name being known to posterity is if you succeed in becoming his brother-in-law."

"Damn posterity," said Jimmy, tugging at his moustache. He had never entertained the absurd idea of interesting future ages. He began to perceive more and more clearly how ridiculous his brother had made himself over the fellow; he had shared in the folly, but now at least he could repent and dissociate himself from it.

"What does the Dean say?" he asked maliciously.

"I dare say you won't understand," Dick answered in measured tones, "but the Dean's got sense enough to say nothing. Talking's no use, is it?"

Few indeed shared the Dean's wisdom, or the somewhat limited view that talking is only to be practised when it chances to be useful. Are we never to discuss the obvious or to deplore the inevitable? From so stern a code human nature revolts, and the storm of volubility went on in spite of the silence of the Dean of St. Neot's. Even this silence was imperfect in so far as the Dean said a word or two in private to Morewood when he visited him in his studio, and the pair were looking at Quisanté's picture. Dick Benyon was less anxious now to have it finished and sent home in the shortest possible time.

"You've seen some good in him," said the Dean, pointing to the picture.

"Well—something anyhow," said Morewood.

"I think, you know," the Dean pursued meditatively, "that a great woman might succeed in what she's undertaken (Morewood did not need the mention of May Gaston's name), at the cost of sacrificing all her other interests and most of her feelings."

Morewood was lighting his pipe and made no answer.

"Is our dear young friend a great woman, though?" asked the Dean.

"She aspires to be," said Morewood; he was sneering as usual, but rather at aspirations in general than at any unusual absurdity in May Gaston's; thus at least the Dean understood him.

"You mean that that's at the bottom of the trouble?" he inquired, smiling a little.

"Oh, yes," answered Morewood, weary of indicating what was so apparent.

"You've dived down to something in that picture; perhaps she has."

"Yes, she has." Morewood looked straight at the Dean as he added, "But I can leave out the other things, you see. That's the difference."

"And she can't? No. That is the difference. She'll have to live with the other things." He looked courageously at Morewood and ended, "We must trust in God." Either the sincerity or the unexpectedness of the remark kept Morewood silent.

No such ambition as these two imputed to her consciously animated May Gaston. Just now she was content if she could persuade her mother that people after all said nothing very dreadful (for what was said was always more to Lady Attlebridge than what was true), could keep on something like friendly relations with her sister, and could maintain a cheerful view of her own position and of her experiment. Inevitably the hostility of his future mother-in-law and of Fanny brought out the worst side of Quisanté's manners; in the effort to conciliate he almost fawned. May had to find consolation in a growth of openness and simplicity towards herself. And she had one notable triumph which more than anything else brought her through the trial with her purpose unshaken and her faith even a little strengthened. It was not a complete triumph, and in trying to push it too far she suffered a slight rebuff; but there was hope to be had from it, it seemed to open a prospect of successes more ample. She made Quisanté send back Aunt Maria's five hundred pounds before Mr. Mandeville's operations had resulted either in safety or in gain.

"You see, she never gave it you to use in speculation," she had said. "It isn't right, you must see it isn't. Have you got the money?"

"Yes; but I meant to buy you——"

"No, no, I wouldn't have it. Now do send it back. I know you see what I mean." Her voice grew doubtful and imploring.

"Oh, yes, in a way. But I shan't lose it, you know."

"That doesn't make the least difference."

"If it pleases you, I'll send it back."

"Well, do," she said with a little sigh. The motive was not that which she wished to rouse, but very likely it was that with which she must begin her work. Then she tried the further step. "And any profit you make, if you make any, you ought to send too," she said.

Genuine surprise was exhibited on Quisanté's face. "What, after sending back the five hundred?" he asked.

"Yes, you ought." She made a little concession by adding, "Strictly, you know." Quisanté looked at her, kissed her hand, and laughed. Her sense of humour, which she began to perceive would rather hamper her, made her join in the laugh. "Do you think me very absurd? No, no, not compliments! Truth, truth always!"

"I call the suggestion rather—well, rather fanciful," said he.

"Yes, I suppose you do," she sighed. "Do you know what I hope?" she went on. "I hope that some day that sort of suggestion will seem a matter of course to you."

He stopped laughing and looked put out. She saw that his vanity was hurt. "But I hope all sorts of unusual things about you," she went on, her conscience rebuking her for using the wile of flattery. But it served well; the cloud passed from his face, as he begged her not to expect to see him a saint too soon.

A few days later he came in radiant; the operation had gone splendidly, there was a cent. per cent. profit; she was to come with him and buy the necklace at once. May loved necklaces and

liked him for being so eager to give her one. And she did not wish to appear in the light of a prig (that had probably been his impression of her) again so soon. But had he not the evening before, as they talked over their prospects, told her that he owed Dick Benyon a thousand pounds or more, and was in arrears with the instalments by which the debt was to be liquidated? By a not unnatural turn of her mind she found herself less able to allow him to forget his obligation, less able to indulge him in the temporary extravagance of a lover, than if he had been a man on whose punctilious honour in all matters of money she relied absolutely. She was more affectionate and more effusive to him than usual, and it was with a kiss that she whispered,

"Give me the money, not the necklace."

"The money?" he said in surprise.

"Yes, to do what I like with. At least give me your promise to do what I ask with it."

He was suspicious and his face showed it. She laughed. "Yes, I'm worrying again," she said. "I can now, you see. When we're married I shan't have the power."

"You'll always have absolute power over me."

"Oh, I wish that was true!" she said. "No, I don't," came an instant later. "If I thought that, I'd never speak to you again." Moving away a little, she turned her head back towards him and went on, "Use it to pay Dick Benyon. I'd rather you did that than gave me a thousand necklaces."

"Oh, Dick's in no hurry; he's got lots of money." Quisanté was visibly vexed this time. "Aren't you going to allow me to give you anything?" he asked.

She had a struggle to win this time, and again had to call in the ally she distrusted, an appeal to his vanity. She told him that it hurt her idea, her great idea, of him, that he should be in any way under obligations to or dependent on anybody. This way of putting the matter caught his fancy, which had remained blind to the more prosaic aspect of the case. "You must stand by your own strength," she said. She had to go a step farther still. "It'll make Amy Benyon quite angry too; it'll take away one of her grievances. Don't pay only the arrears, pay all you can." Thus she won and was comforted, in spite of her suspicion of the weapons that she found herself obliged to use.

Comfort she needed sadly, and it could come only from Quisanté himself. For the rest the sense of loneliness was strong upon her, and with it a bitterness that this time in her life should be so different from what it was in the lives of most girls. The superficials were there; friends sent presents and Lady Attlebridge was as particular about the gowns and so forth as though the match had been absolutely to her liking. But there was no sincere congratulation, no sympathy, no envy. Her engagement was a mistake, her marriage a tragedy; that was the verdict; she saw it in every glance and discerned it under every civil speech. The common judgment, the opinion of the group we have lived with, has a force irrespective of its merit; there were times when May sank under the burden of it and almost retreated. Then she was outwardly most contented, took Quisanté everywhere with her, tried (as people said) to thrust him down everybody's throat, even pretended a love which she had expressly denied to the man himself. All this done, she would fly to solitude and there be a victim to her fears, shudder at the risk she had elected to run, and pray for any strange convulsion of events to rescue her.

None came; time went on, people settled down to the notion; only to a small circle the matter retained a predominant interest. The rest of the world could not go on talking about it for ever; they had a number of other people's affairs to attend to, and the vagaries of one fanciful young woman could not occupy their important minds for ever. None the less, they turned away with a pleasant sense that they might find good reason for turning back presently; let a year or two of the marriage run, and there might be something to look at again.

But to one man the thing never became less strange, less engrossing, or less horrible. Weston Marchmont abandoned as pure folly the attempt to accustom his mind to it or to acquiesce in it; he had not the power to cease to think of it. It was unnatural; to that he returned always; and it ousted what surely was natural, what his whole being cried out was meant, if there were such a thing as a purpose in human lives at all. Disguised by his habit of self-repression before others, his passion was as strong as Quisanté's own; it was backed by a harmony of tastes and a similarity of training which gave it increased intensity; it had been encouraged by an apparent promise of success, now turned to utter failure. Amy Benyon might think that he would now marry Fanny, if only he could endure such an indirect connection with Quisanté. To himself it seemed so impossible to think of anyone but May that in face of facts he could not believe that he was not foremost in her heart. The facts meant marriage, it seemed; he denied that they meant love. He discerned what May had said to Quisanté—although not of course that she had said it—and it filled him with a more unendurable revolt. He might have tolerated a defeat in love; not to be defeated and yet to suffer all the pains of the vanquished was not to be borne. But he was helpless, and when he had tried to plead his cause he had done himself no good. He had rather so conducted himself as to give May Gaston the right to shut the door on any further friendship with him; towards her future husband he had never varied from an attitude of cool disdain. It was more than a month since he had seen her, it was longer since he had done more than nod carelessly to Quisanté as they passed one another in the lobby or the smoking-room.

Then one day, a fortnight before the marriage, he met Quisanté as they were both leaving the

House about four o'clock. On a sudden impulse he joined his rival. He knew his man; Quisanté received him with friendliness and even effusion, and invited him to join him in a call at Lady Attlebridge's. They went on together, Quisanté elated at this new evidence of his power to reconcile opposition and conciliate support, Marchmont filled with a vague painful curiosity and a desire to see the two together at the cost of any suffering the sight might bring him.

The drawing-room at Lady Attlebridge's was a double room; in one half May sat reading, in the other her mother dozed. May rose with a start as the men entered together; her face flushed as she greeted Marchmont and bade Quisanté go and pay his respects to her mother.

"I hardly expected ever to see you again," she said. "And I didn't expect Mr. Quisanté to bring you." Her tone was oddly expressive at once of pleasure and regret, of anticipation and fear. "Have you made friends?" she asked.

He answered under the impulse of his mood.

"We must make friends," he said, "or I shall never see any more of you."

"I thought you didn't want to." She liked him too well not to show a little coquetry, a little challenge.

"I thought so too, or tried to think so."

"I was sure you had deserted me. You said such—well, such severe things."

"I say them all still."

"But here you are!" she cried, laughing.

"Yes, here I am," said he, but he was grave and looked intently at her. She grew red again as she met his gaze, and frowned a little.

"I'm not sure I'm glad you've come after all," she said after a pause. "Why have you come? I don't quite understand."

"I've come to see you, to look on at your happiness," he answered.

"You've no right to talk like that."

They became silent. From the inner room they heard Lady Attlebridge's nervous efforts at conversation and Quisanté's fluent, too fluent, responses. He was telling the good lady about her great social influence, and, little as she liked him, she seemed to listen eagerly. Marchmont looked at May and smiled. He was disappointed when she returned his smile.

"He's a little too much of a politician, isn't he?" she asked.

Her refusal to perceive the insinuation of his smile made him ashamed of it.

"We all are, when we've something to get, I suppose," he said with a shrug.

"Oh, I don't think you need reproach yourself," she exclaimed, laughing.

There was a short pause. Then he said suddenly,

"You're the one person in the world to talk to."

Now she neither laughed nor yet rebuked him, and, as his eyes met hers, he seemed to have no fear that she would do either the one or the other. Yet he could not quite understand her look; did she pity him or did she entreat for herself? For his life he could not answer. The only thing he knew was that she would follow her path and take for husband the man who flattered Lady Attlebridge in the inner room. Then she spoke in a low voice.

"Yes, do come, come and see us afterwards, come as often as you like." He raised his eyes to hers again. "Because the oftener you come, the more you'll understand him, and the better you understand him, the better you'll know why I'm doing what I am."

The soft look of pity or of entreaty vanished from her eyes now. She seemed to speak in a strong and even defiant confidence. But he met her with a resolute dissent.

"If you want me, I'll come. But I shan't understand why you did what you're doing and I shall never see in him what you want me to see." He looked round and saw Quisanté preparing to join them. "Am I to come, then?" he asked.

Quisanté was walking towards them; she answered with a nervous laugh, "I think you must come sometimes anyhow." Then she raised her voice and said to Quisanté, "I'm telling Mr. Marchmont that I shall expect to see him often at our house."

Quisanté seconded her invitation with more than adequate enthusiasm; if Marchmont were converted to him, who could still be obstinate? The two men began to talk, May falling more and

more into silence. She did not accuse Marchmont of deliberate malice, but by chance or the freak of some mischievous demon everything he said led Quisanté on to display his weaknesses. She knew that Marchmont marked them every one; he was too well bred to show his consciousness by so much as the most fleeting glance at her; yet she could have met such a glance with understanding, yes, with sympathy, and would have had to summon up by artificial effort the resentment that convention demanded of her. The sight of the two men brought home to her with a new and an almost terrible sharpness the divorce between her emotional liking and her intellectual interest. And in a matter which all experience declared to concern the emotions primarily, she had elected to give foremost place to the intellect, to suffer under an ever recurring jar of the feelings for the sake of an occasional treat to the brain. That was her prospect unless she could transform the nature of Alexander Quisanté. "Marry a nice man of your own sort, and then be as much interested as you like in Sandro." Aunt Maria's advice echoed in her ears as she watched the two men round whom the struggle of her soul centred, the struggle that she had thought was finished on the day when she promised to become Alexander Quisanté's wife.

"I shall keep you both to your word," said Marchmont when he left them. May nodded, smiling slightly. Quisanté said all and more than all the proper things.

CHAPTER IX.

LEAD US NOT.

After a long sojourn in kindlier climates, Miss Quisanté returned to England some eighteen months after May Gaston's marriage. From various hotels and boarding-houses she had watched with an interested eye the progress of public affairs so far as they concerned her nephew. She had seen how his name became more prominent and was more frequently mentioned, how the hopes and fears about him grew, how he had gained glory by dashing sorties in defence of the severely-pressed Government garrison; if the garrison decided (as rumour said they would) to sally out and try fortune in the open field of a General Election, and proved victorious, it could not be doubted that they would bestow a handsome reward on their gallant defender. Quisanté bid fair to eclipse his rivals and to justify to the uttermost Dick Benyon's sagacity and enthusiasm. The bitterness of the foe told the same story; unless a man is feared, he is not caricatured in a comic paper in the guise of a juggler keeping three balls in the air at once, the said balls being each of them legibly inscribed with one of the three words, "Gas—Gabble—Grab." Such a straining of the usual amenity of controversy witnesses to grave apprehension. Miss Quisanté in her *pension* at Florence smiled contentedly.

Of his private life her information had not been very ample. She had heard several times from May, but May occupied her pen chiefly with her husband's political aims. She had heard once from Sandro himself, when he informed her that his wife had borne him a daughter and that all had gone very well indeed. Again Miss Quisanté smiled approvingly. She sent her love to May and expressed to Sandro the hope that the baby would resemble its mother in appearance, constitution, and disposition; the passage was a good example of that *expressio unius* which is a most emphatic and unmistakable *exclusio alterius*. In the letter she enclosed a cheque for three hundred pounds; the *pensions* were cheaper than the flat, and thus this service had become possible.

The Quisantés had taken a house in Grosvenor Road, near Westminster for Quisanté's convenience, by the river, in obedience to his wife's choice. Here Miss Quisanté was welcomed by her nephew's wife and shown her nephew's daughter. May watched the old lady's face as she perfunctorily kissed and critically inspected the infant.

"Gaston!" said Aunt Maria at last; relief was clamorous in her tone.

"Yes, Miss Quisanté, Gaston, I think," said May, laughing.

The nurse admitted the predominance of Gaston, but with a professional keenness of eye began to point out minor points in which the baby "favoured" her father.

"Nonsense, my good woman," snapped Aunt Maria. "The child's got two legs and two arms, I suppose, as its father has, but that's all the likeness." Somewhat ruffled (her observations had been well meant) the nurse carried off her charge.

"You look very well," Aunt Maria went on, "but older, my dear."

"I am both well and older," said May cheerfully. "Think of my responsibilities! There's the baby! And then Alexander's been seedy. And we aren't as rich as we should like to be; you of all people must know that. And there's going to be an election and our seat's very shaky. So the cares of the world are on me."

"Sandro's been doing well."

"Splendidly, simply splendidly. It's impossible to doubt that he'll do great things if—if all goes well, and he doesn't make mistakes."

"Seems like making mistakes, does he?"

"Oh, no. I only said 'if.'"

"And you're as happy as you expected to be?"

"Quite, thanks."

"I see. Just about," was Miss Quisanté's next observation; since it was a little hard to answer, May smiled and rang the bell for tea.

"You're very gay, I suppose?" asked the old lady.

"Just as many parties as I can find gowns for," May declared.

"Seen anything of the Benyons lately?"

A little shadow came on May's face. "I hardly ever see Jimmy except at mother's," she answered. "Dick comes sometimes." She paused a moment, and then added, "I expect him this afternoon."

"Is he still as devoted to Sandro?"

"He believes in his abilities as enthusiastically as ever." The dry laugh which Miss Quisanté gave was as significant as her "Just about," a few minutes before. This time May did not laugh, but looked gravely at Aunt Maria. "They've had a little difference on a political matter. Did you ever hear of what Dick calls the Crusade? His great Church movement, you know."

"Lord, yes, my dear. Sandro once speechified to me about it for an hour."

"Well, he doesn't speechify so much now; he doesn't believe in it so much, and Dick's annoyed. That's natural, I think, though perhaps it's a little silly of him. However, if you wait, he'll tell you about it himself."

"Why doesn't Sandro believe in it so much?"

"Perhaps I ought to have said that he doesn't think the present time a suitable one for pressing it."

"I see," said Miss Quisanté sipping her tea. May looked at her again and seemed about to speak, but in the end she only smiled. She was amused at the old lady's questions, impelled to speak plainly to her, and restrained only by the sense that any admission she might seem to make would be used to the full against her husband by his faithful and liberal aunt.

"He says he has good reasons, and Dick Benyon says they're bad ones," she ended by explaining, though it was not much of an explanation after all.

Miss Quisanté had the curiosity to await Dick Benyon's coming, and, in spite of his evident expectation of a *tête-à-tête*, not to go immediately on his arrival. She was struck with the air of mingled affection and compassion with which he greeted his healthy, handsome, smiling young hostess. Moreover he was himself apologetic, as though suffering from a touch of remorse. He began to talk trifles, but May brought him to the point.

"I read the speech after I got your letter," she said. "I'm sorry you don't like it, but Alexander must consider the practical aspect of the matter. You won't do your cause any good by urging it out of season."

"In season and out of season; that's the only way."

"You might be an Irish member," said May, smiling.

Dick was too much in earnest to be diverted to mirth. The presence of Miss Quisanté still seemed to make him a little uncomfortable, but the old lady did not move. May gave her no hint, and he was too full of his subject to hold his tongue.

"I want you to speak to him about it," he went on.

"To urge him to do what he thinks a mistake?"

Dick grew a little hot. "To urge him not to go back on the cause and on—on his friends, and almost to laugh at them for——" He paused and looked at May; she was smiling steadily. He did not end quite as bluntly as he had meant. "I think that he has, unconsciously no doubt, allowed personal considerations to influence him."

A short sudden chuckle came from Aunt Maria; she rose to her feet and crossed the room to May.

"If he's going to abuse Sandro, I mustn't stay," she said. "I couldn't bear to lose any of my illusions, my dear." She kissed May and added, "You might tell him to come and see me, though. I should like to hear what he's got in his head now. Good-bye, Lord Richard. Don't you fret about your Crusade. Sandro'll take it up again when it's convenient." She chuckled again at the puzzled stare which accompanied Dick's shake of the hand.

"A very kind old woman, but with a rather malicious tongue," said May. She walked to the hearth and stood there, facing her visitor. "Now, Dick, what is it?" she asked.

"The Dean's tremendously hurt about it; he doesn't say much, but he feels it deeply."

"I'm very sorry. What are the personal considerations?"

"You know Henstead?" It was the borough for which Quisanté sat. "There's an old Wesleyan colony there; several of them are very rich and employ a lot of labour and so on. They've always voted for us. And they've found a lot of the money. They found a lot when Quisanté got in before."

"Yes?" Her voice displayed interest but nothing more. Dick grew rather red and hurried on with his story.

"Well, one of them, old Foster the maltster, came to your husband and—and told him they didn't like the Crusade and that it wouldn't do." He paused, glanced at May for an instant, and ended, "The seat's not safe, you know, and—and it wants money to fight it."

A silence of some few minutes followed. Dick fidgeted with his hat, while May looked out of the window on to the river.

"Why do you come and tell this to me?" she asked presently. "Supposing it was all true, what could I do?"

Dick's resentment got the better of him; he answered hotly, "Well, you might tell him that it was playing it pretty low down on us."

"Have you told him that?"

"Yes, I have, or I shouldn't have come to you. I don't mean I used just those words, but I made my meaning clear enough."

"And what did he say?"

"He said he didn't see it in the light I did."

A faint smile came on the face of Mr. Quisanté's wife.

"But you could make him see it," urged Dick. May smiled at him for a brief moment and then looked out to the river again.

"It'll be deuced awkward for him if they get hold of his back speeches," said Dick with gloomy satisfaction.

"Oh, everybody's back speeches are what you call deuced awkward." A moment later she went on, "What does it all come to, after all? We must take things as they are; we mustn't be quixotic, we mustn't quarrel with our bread-and-butter."

Dick looked at her with evident surprise, even with dismay.

"You think it all right?" he asked.

"It's not for me to say. Am I to sit in judgment on my husband? Anyhow people do just the same thing every day. You know that as well as I do, Dick." Just on the last words her voice grew softer; he might have caught a hint of entreaty, had not his mind been fixed on his own wrongs and the betrayal of his favourite cause. "I'm assuming that what you say is true," she added, more coldly again.

When Dick left her, it was to go home to his wife and tell her, and Mrs. Gellatly whom he found with her, that he did not understand what had come over May Gaston—May Quisanté, he corrected himself. Not understanding, he proved naturally quite unable to explain. Lady Richard was more equal to the occasion.

"That man's simply got hold of her," she said. "She'll think black's white if he says it is. Still she must see that he's treating you shamefully."

"She didn't seem to see it." moaned Dick mournfully. Then he laughed rather bitterly and added, "I tell you what, though. I think that old aunt of his has taken his measure pretty well."

The innate nobility which underlay Lady Richard's nature showed up splendidly at this moment; she sympathised heartily with Dick, and forbore to remind him of what she had said from the beginning, contenting herself with remarking that for her part she never had considered and did not now consider Mr. Quisanté even particularly clever.

"He's as clever as the deuce," said Dick. That conviction, at least, he need not surrender.

"I suppose," ventured Mrs. Gellatly, "that's how he convinces Lady May that he's always right."

Dick looked at her with a touch of covert contempt; clever people could convince the intellect, but there were instincts of honour, of loyalty, and of fidelity which no arguments should be able to blunt or to turn. Here was the thing which, vaguely felt, had so puzzled him in regard to May Quisanté; he had not doubted that she would see the thing as he had seen it—as Quisanté had professed himself unable to see it.

That evening Quisanté brought home to dinner the gentleman whom Dick Benyon called old Foster the maltster, and who had been Mayor of Henstead three several times. He was a tall, stout, white-haired old man with a shrewd kindly face, dressed all in broadcloth, showing an expanse of white shirt-front decorated with a big black stud and a very small black wisp of a tie. His conversation indicated now and then that he gave thought to the other world, always that he knew the ways of this. May liked him in spite of the rather ponderous deference he showed to her; with Quisanté, on the other hand, he was familiar, seeming to say that he could tell the younger man a thing or two; Quisanté's manner did nothing to contradict this implied assumption.

"What we want, sir," said Foster, "is to have you in the Government. Once you're there, you'll sit for Henstead till you die or go to the House of Lords. Nobody'll be able to touch you. But this time's critical, very critical. They'll have a strong candidate, and they'll do all they know to keep you out. It's not a time for offending anybody." He turned to May. "I hope your ladyship will let us see you very often in the town?" he said.

"When the election begins, I shall come down with my husband and stay all the time."

"That's right; you'll be worth a hundred votes." He threw himself back in his chair. "Under God," he said, "we ought to be safe. Your speech had an excellent effect; I sent it to Middleton, and Dunn, and Japhet Williams, and when I met 'em at the Council, they were all most pleasant about it. I think you've undone all the bad impression."

"I only said what I thought," observed Quisanté.

"Yes, yes, just so; oh, just so, of course." His tone was not in the least ironical, but a little hurried, as though, having put the thing in a way that might sound ambiguous, he hastened to prevent any possible misapprehension. May had looked for a twinkle in his eye, but his eye was guilty of no such frivolity.

"I had a letter from Mr. Japhet Williams the other day," said Quisanté. "He was annoyed at a vote I gave in Committee on the Truck Act. You know I voted against the Government once, in favour of what I thought fairer treatment of the men; not that any real hardship on the employer was involved."

"Just so, just so," said Mr. Foster. "That's the worst of Japhet. He doesn't look at the matter in a broad way. But I've put that all right, sir. I met him on the Cemetery Board, and walked home with him, and I said, 'Look here Japhet, that vote of Mr. Quisanté's 'll be worth fifty votes among the men.' 'I don't care for that,' he said; 'I'm against interference.' 'So am I,' I told him; 'but where's the harm? Mr. Quisanté must have his own opinion here and there—that comes of having a clever man—but (I said) the Government had a hundred majority there, and Mr. Quisanté knew it.' Well, he saw that, and admitted that he'd been wrong to make a fuss about it."

Quisanté nodded grave appreciation. May gave a little laugh, and suddenly poured out a glass of claret for Mr. Foster; turning, he found her eyes on his face, sparkling with amusement. His own large features relaxed into a slow smile; something like the twinkle was to be detected now.

"Nothing's the worse for a bit of putting, is it?" he said, and drank his wine at a gulp.

"You're a diplomatist, Mr. Foster," said she.

"Not to the detriment of truth; I assure you I don't sacrifice that," he replied, with renewed gravity and an apparently perfect sincerity.

May was sorry when he took his leave, partly for the temporary loss of a study which amused her, more because his departure brought the time for telling Quisanté of Dick Benyon's visit. She did not want to tell him and anticipated no result, yet she felt herself bound to let him know about it. To this mind her eighteen months of marriage had brought her. In the quite early days, while not blind to the way he looked at things when left to himself, she had been eager to show him how she looked at them, and, with the memory of her triumphs during their engagement, very sanguine that she would be able always to convert him from his view to hers, to open his eyes and show him the truth as it seemed to her. This hopeful mood she had for nearly a year past been gradually abandoning. She had once asked Morewood whether people must always remain what they were; now she inclined to answer yes to her own question. But she could not convince herself so thoroughly as to feel absolved from the duty of trying to prove that the true answer was no. She must offer her husband every chance still, she must not acquiesce, she must not give up the game yet; some day she might (she smiled at herself here) awake an impulse or happen on a moment so great as really to influence, to change, and to mould him. But she had come to hate

this duty; she would rather have left things alone; as a simple matter of inclination, she wished that she felt free to sit and smile at Quisanté as she had at old Foster the maltster. She could not; Foster was not part of her life, near and close to her, her chosen husband, the father of her child. Unless she clung to her effort, and to her paradoxical much-disappointed hope, her life and the thought of what she had done with it would become unendurable. Dick and his wife had not quite understood what had come over her.

If Mr. Foster was diplomatic, so was she; she set before her husband neither Dick's complaints nor her own misgivings in their crudity; she started by asking how his change of front would affect people and instanced Dick and herself only as examples of how the thing might strike certain minds. She must feed him with the milk of rectitude, for its strong meat his stomach was hopelessly unready. But he was suspicious, and insisted on hearing what Dick Benyon had said; so she told him pretty accurately. His answer was a long disquisition on the political situation, to which she listened with the same faint smile with which she had heard Dick himself; at last he roundly stigmatised the Crusade as a visionary and impracticable scheme.

"I stuck to it as long as I could," he said, "but you wouldn't have me risk everything for it?"

"Or even anything?" she asked.

The question was a spark to him. Gladly leaving the immediate question, he dilated on all that the coming contest meant to him, how victory would assure his prospects, how defeat might leave him hopelessly out in the cold, how it would be absurd to lose all that he was going to accomplish for the sake of a hasty promise and a cause that he had come to disbelieve in. "When did you come to disbelieve in it?" was the question in her heart; he saw it in her eyes.

"It's a little hard to have to explain everything in private as well as in public," he complained. "And my head's fit to split."

"Don't trouble any more about it; only I thought I'd better tell you what Dick said." She came to him as he lay back in his chair and put her hand on his brow. He was tired, not only looking tired; his head did ache, she had no doubt; to turn these afflictions to account had always been his way; so long ago as the Imperial League banquet she remembered it. "Go to bed," she said. "I'll write a few letters first."

"I want you to understand me," he said. He loved her and she had made him uneasy; her good opinion was very necessary to his happiness.

"I do understand you," she said, and persuaded him to go upstairs, while she sat down by the fire, forgetful apparently of the excuse that she had made for lingering.

Did she repent? That question came often into her mind. She well might, for one of the great hopes with which she had married was quite gone by now. There was no longer any possibility of maintaining that the faults were of manner only, no longer any reasonable expectation that she would be able to banish or materially to diminish them. It was for better for worse with a vengeance then. But did she repent? There were times when she wept, times when she shuddered, times when she scorned, even times when she hated. But had she ever so felt as to be confident that if Omnipotence had offered to undo the past, she would have had the past undone? There had perhaps been one such occasion quite early in the marriage, and the woe of it had been terrible; but it was followed almost immediately by a "moment," by an inspired outbreak of his over some case in the paper, by a vow to see an injustice remedied, a ceaseless, unsparing, unpaid month's work to that end, a triumph over wrong and prejudice in the cause of a helpless woman. He had nearly killed himself over it, the doctor said, and May had watched by his bed, without tears, but with a conviction that if he died she must die also; because it seemed as though he had faced death rather than her condemnation. That was not the truth of it, of course, but she and he between them had made it seem the truth to her.

And now, with all the meanness of this abandonment of his friends, with all this fawning on the moneyed Wesleyans before her eyes, she could not declare that she repented, lest he, waking again to greatness, should plunge her again into the depths of abasement. But that the same man should be great and mean, and should escape arraignment for his meanness by making play with his headache! She smiled now to remember how great the mere faults of manner had once seemed to her girlish fastidiousness; they were small to her now; her teeth were set on edge indeed, but by a sharper sourness than lay in them. To the faults of manner she had grown to some extent accustomed; she had become an adept in covering and excusing them. To-day, in her interview with Dick Benyon, she had turned alike art on to the other faults. A new thought and a new apprehension came into her mind.

"If I go on defending him," she murmured, "shall I end by getting like him and really think it all right? I wonder!" For it was difficult not to identify herself with her cause, and he was now her cause. Who asks a lawyer to disbelieve his own client, who asks a citizen to be extreme to mark what is done amiss in his country's quarrel?

"Now if the Dean did chance to do anything wrong, Mrs. Baxter simply wouldn't see that it was wrong," she meditated. "Neither would Amy Benyon, if Dick did. I see it's wrong and yet defend it. I'm the wrong sort of woman to have married Alexander."

Yes, from that point of view, undoubtedly. But there was another. What would Mrs. Baxter or Lady Richard have made of him at the times when he woke to greatness? Dick had appreciated him then; Dick's wife never had; she saw only the worst. Well, it was plain to see. May saw it so plain that night that she sat where she was till the night was old because, if she went upstairs, she might find him there. And she fell to wishing that the seat at Henstead was not shaky; so much hung on it, her hopes for him as well as his own hopes, her passionate interest in him as well as his ambition. Nay, she had a feeling or a fear that more still hung on it. Pondering there alone in the night, assessing her opinion and reviewing her knowledge of him, she told herself that there was hardly anything that he would not do sooner than lose the seat. So that she dreaded the struggle for the strain it might put on him; strains of that sort she knew now that he was not able to bear. "Lead us not into temptation," was the prayer which must be on her lips for him; if that were not answered, he was well-nigh past praying for altogether. For with temptation came his blindness, and he no longer saw the thing that tempted him for what it was. Oh, and what a fool she had been to think that she could make him see!

At last she went upstairs, slowly and reluctantly. Passing her own door, she mounted again to the baby's nursery, and entered softly. All was peace; both baby and nurse slept. May was smiling as she came down the stairs; she murmured, "Gaston!" mimicking the satisfied tones of old Aunt Maria's voice. Then she entered her own room; Quisanté's bed was empty. A sense of great relief rose in her, but she went out again and softly turned the handle of his dressing-room door. He had elected to sleep there, as he often did. The light was still high; a book lay open by him on the bed. He was in deep sleep, looking very pale, very tired, very peaceful. She stood looking at him for a moment; again she smiled as she stole forward and peeped at the book. It was a work on Bimetallism. Did he mean to win Henstead with that? Oh, no; he meant to preach the Majesty of the British Sovereign, King of coins, good tender from China to Peru. She imagined him making some fine rhetoric out of it.

He breathed gently and regularly; for once he rested, he really rested from his unresting efforts, from the cruel race he ran; he was for once free from all the thoughts of his brain, all the devices of his resourceful, unbaffled, unhesitating mind. With a sigh she turned away and lowered the light, that in darkness he might sleep more easily. In the darkness she stood a minute longer, seeing now only the dim outline of his body on the bed; again the smile came, but her lips moved to murmur softly, "Lead us not into temptation." And still murmuring the only prayer that might serve him, still smiling that it was the only prayer she could pray for her chosen husband, she left Quisanté to his rest.

CHAPTER X.

PRACTICAL POLITICS.

While Alexander Quisanté increased in promise and prominence, Weston Marchmont had begun to cause some anxiety to his best friends. His passion for ultimates grew upon him; sometimes it seemed as though he would put up with nothing less. At the same time a personal fastidiousness and a social exclusiveness, always to a certain extent characteristic of the man, gathered greater dominion over him. He was not civil to the people towards whom civility would be useful, and he refused to shut his eyes to the logical defects or moral shortcomings in the measures promoted by his party. His abilities were still conceded in ample terms, his charm still handsomely and sincerely acknowledged. But a suspicion gradually got about that he was impracticable, that he had a perverse affection for unpopular causes, for reasons of approval or disapproval that did not occur to the world at large, for having a private point of view of his own, differentiated from the common view by distinctions as unyielding as to the ordinary eye they were minute. The man who begins merely by being uncompromising as to his own convictions may end in finding an actual pleasure in disagreeing with those of others. Some such development was, according to acute observers, taking place in Marchmont; if the tendency became his master, farewell to the high career to which he had appeared to be destined. Plain men would call him finicking, and practical men would think it impossible to work with him. No impression is more damning about a man engaged in public life; the Whips have to put a query to his name, and he cannot be trusted to confine his revolts to such occasions as those on which Mr. Foster of Henstead thought an exhibition of independence a venial sin, or in certain circumstances a prudent act.

"The fact is," Morewood said to Marchmont once, when they had been talking over his various positions and opinions, "if you want to lead ordinary people, you must keep on roads that ordinary people can travel, roads broad enough for the *grande armée*. You may take them quicker or slower, you may lead them downhill or get them to follow you uphill, but you must keep to the road. A bye-path is all right and charming for yourself, for a *tête-à-tête*, or a small party of friends, but you don't take an army-corps along it."

The unusual length and the oratorical character of this warning were strong evidence of the painter's feelings. Marchmont nodded a grave and troubled assent.

"Still if I see the thing one way, I can't act as if I saw it the other."

"You mustn't see it one way," said Morewood irritably. "If you must be the slave of your conscience, hang it, you needn't be of your intellect. Ask the Dean there." (The Dean, who had been drinking his port in thoughtful peace, started a little.) "He'll tell you that belief is largely or altogether—which is it?—an affair of the will."

The Dean was prudent; he smiled and finished his glass.

"If I chose to believe in the Crusade, I could," Morewood went on with a satirical smile. "Or with an adequate effort I could think Jimmy Benyon brilliant, or Fred Wentworth wise, or Alexander Quisanté honest. That's it, eh, Mr. Dean?"

"Well, the ordinary view may be appreciated, even if it's not entirely embraced," said the Dean diplomatically. "The points of agreement are usually much more important, for practice at all events, than those of difference."

"In fact—shut one eye and go ahead?" asked Marchmont.

"Oh, shut 'em both and walk by the sound of the feet and the cheering."

"Don't say more than you mean, Mr. Morewood," the Dean advised mildly.

"I know what he means," said Marchmont. "And, yes, I rather wish I could do it."

Morewood began to instance the great men who had done it, including in his list many whom the common opinion that he praised would not have characterised at all in the same way. At each name Marchmont denied either the greatness or the pliancy. The Dean could see with what ardour he maintained his position; in spite of the unvarying suavity of his manner there was something naturally repulsive to him in yielding a hair's breadth in deference to the wishes or the weaknesses of a majority.

"Your independence is really half a prejudice," said the Dean at the end. "You're like a man who can't get a cab and misses his appointment sooner than ride in a 'bus."

"I suppose so—and I'm much obliged to you. But—well, you can argue against what a man does, but what's the use arguing against what he is?"

"No; he himself's the only man who can do that," said the Dean, but he knew as well as Marchmont himself that such an argument would never be victorious. The will to change was wanting; Marchmont might deplore what he lost by being what he was, and at times he felt very sore about it; but as a matter of taste he liked himself just as he was, even as he liked the few people in whom he found some of the same flavour and the same bent of mind.

His character was knit consistently all through; whether he dealt with public affairs or ordered his own life the same line of conduct was followed. If he could not have things as he wanted them or do them as he chose, he would not have them or do them at all. He was not modifiable. For example, having failed to win May Gaston, he had no thought of trying for Fanny, and this not (as Lady Richard had thought likely) because he objected to any sort of connection with Quisanté; that point of view did not occur to him; it was merely because Fanny was not May, and May was what he had wanted and did want. Fanny he left to the gradual, uphill, but probably finally successful, wooing of Jimmy Benyon. Even with regard to May herself he very nearly achieved consistency. His promise to be often at Quisanté's house had been flagrantly and conspicuously broken. Quisanté had pressed him often; on the three occasions on which he had called May had let him see how gladly she would welcome him more often. He had not gone more often. He was not sulking, for his temper was not touched; but he held aloof because it was not to his taste to go under existing circumstances. He knew that he gave pain to her and regretted the pain, but he could not go, any more than he could give a vote because his good friend Constantine Blair, the Whip, was very much put out when he wouldn't. "He wants a party all to himself," said Constantine angrily. "And then I'm hanged if he'd vote with it!"

Some of the things here indicated May Quisanté read about him in the papers, some Quisanté brought home from the House, some she heard from friends or divined for herself; and her heart went out to Marchmont under the cunning lure of contrast. The Dissolution drew near now, and political conferences, schemes, and manœuvres were the order of the day in Grosvenor Road and in many other houses which she frequented. Perhaps she exaggerated what she disliked, but it seemed to her that everybody, her husband of course among the first, was carefully considering how many of his previous utterances and how much of his existing opinions he might conveniently, and could plausibly, disclaim and suppress, and on the other hand to what extent it might be expedient, and would not be too startling, to copy and advocate utterances and opinions which were in apparent conflict therewith. This, she was told, was practical politics. Hence her impulse of longing to renew friendship and intimacy with a man who was dubbed unpractical. The change would be pleasant, and, if she found something to laugh at, she would find something to admire, just as if in the practical politicians she found something to frown at, she contrived to find also much matter for legitimate mirth. She had begun by thinking that a gift of humour would make her married life harder; she was conscious now that without that form of insight it would be utterly intolerable.

"I hear you're behaving very badly," she said to Marchmont, when he came in obedience to her invitation. "I was talking to Mr. Blair about you, and he had no words strong enough to denounce you in."

"Yes, it's atrocious. I'm thinking for myself," he said with a shrug, as he sat down.

"For yourself instead of about yourself! With a dissolution coming too!"

"Oh, I'm safe enough. I'm a martyr without a stake."

"Well, really, you're refreshing. I wish we were safe, and hadn't got to make ourselves safe; I don't think it's a very elevating process." She paused a moment and then added, "I ought to apologise for bringing you into such an atmosphere of it. We conspire here like Fenians or Women Suffragists, and I know how much you hate it all."

"And you?" he asked briefly.

"Oh, yes, as the clerk hates his desk or a girl her practising. The duties of life, you know."

She had received him in an exuberance of spirits, much as though she were the school-girl she spoke of and he a pleasant visitor from the outside world. When she reproached him for not having come before, it was only evidence of her pleasure that he had come now; in the days when he saw her often and was always at her call, there had been no such joy as this. Yet he had hesitated to add one more item to the score of simple perversity, of not wanting when you can have and *vice versâ*; what she said about the atmosphere she lived in showed him that his hesitation had been right.

"And I know you didn't want to come," she went on. "You've only come out of politeness, no, I mean out of kindness."

"There was an old invitation. An old promise too? Wasn't there?"

"One never withdrawn, the other terribly broken," she laughed. "You've heard of our difference with poor Dick Benyon?"

"Of your husband's?" May smiled slightly. "Yes, I have. Quisanté's quite right now, you know; the only pity is that he didn't see it sooner."

"Dick's not so charitable as you. He suspects our sincerity."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say again "Your husband's?" but looking at her he found her eyes full of fun, and began to laugh himself.

"I find it absolutely the only way," May explained. "I can't draw distinctions. Mrs. Baxter, now, says 'Our Cathedral' but 'My drawing-room.' Amy Benyon says 'Our relations,' when she means hers and 'Dick's relations' when she means his. I've quite given up the attempt to discriminate; a thorough-going identification of husband and wife is the only thing. The We matrimonial must be as universal as the We editorial."

"The theory is far-reaching, if you apply it to qualities."

"Yes, I don't quite know how far."

"Alliance becomes union, and union leads to fusion?"

"And fusion leads where?"

He escaped answering or covered inability to answer with a shrug.

"I'm sorry you don't please Mr. Blair," she said.

"Really I don't think I care so very much. I used to be ambitious, but——"

"Oh, don't tell me it's not worth while being ambitious. It's all I've got."

She had spoken on a hasty unthinking impulse; she grew a little red and laughed rather nervously when she found what she had said. His face did not change, his voice was quite unmoved, as he said, smiling, "In that case, no doubt, it is worth while."

She wanted to applaud his excellent manners; at the same time they annoyed her rather. She had been indiscreet no doubt, but her indiscretion might, if he had liked, have led the way to matters of interest, to that opening of the heart to somebody for which she was pining. His polite care not to embarrass her shut the door.

"I mean, just now," she resumed, "while our seat's so shaky, you know."

"Ah, yes," said he half-absently.

She leant back in her chair and looked at him.

"I think," she said, "you look as if you did care, about Mr. Blair or about something else. I wanted to tell you that I don't agree in the least with the criticisms on you." She leant forward, asking in a lower voice, "Do they hurt you?"

"Not much. A man likes to succeed, but there are things I like better."

"Yes. Well, there's nothing we—*we*—like better, Mr. Marchmont."

He rose and stood on the hearth; her eyes were upturned to his in a steady gaze.

"You were always very frank, weren't you?" he asked, looking down and smiling. "Well, you've known what you say for a long while, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes, even before—Oh, ever since the very beginning, you know. There now! We've left 'We' and got to 'I,' and whenever that happens I say something I oughtn't to. But one must sometimes. I believe I could serve anybody to the death if only I were allowed to speak my whole mind about him once a week. But it's disloyal, I suppose."

"Well, I suppose it is."

She laughed. "That's what Mr. Blair means," she said. "You must have seen that I wanted you to say 'No, it isn't.' Perhaps you would have to anybody else. You were always one of the people who attributed all the virtues to me. You made it so hard for me to be good. I loathed the girl you thought I was. One comfort is that as I am now——". Suddenly her eyes met his; she stopped. "We'd better talk about 'we' again," she ended with a laugh.

"Whom do you talk to?" he asked curiously.

"About 'we'? I talk to Miss Quisanté—You've met her? She's never tired of talking about 'we'—though she doesn't like us; but she doesn't care a bit to talk about me."

"Have a confidante," he suggested gravely.

"Yes—like Tilburina. Who shall I have?"

A run through their acquaintance suggested only Mrs. Gellatly, and her May rejected as being too suitable, too much the traditional confidante. "I should like one who might possibly have something to tell me in return, and she never could," she said.

They were interrupted by the arrival of the man of whom they had spoken, Constantine Blair. He came with important and, as he clearly considered, disquieting news for Quisanté. Sir Winterton Mildmay, one of the richest landowners near Henstead, who had been at loggerheads with his party, had made up the quarrel and consented to stand in opposition to Quisanté. "I thought the sooner your husband knew the better," said Constantine with a very grave face. "It makes a difference, you see. We only beat young Fortescue, a stranger in the town, by two hundred, and they had four hundred the time before." He paused and added, "Lady Mildmay's very much liked in the town."

"Come, Blair, I'm sure we shan't be worse off in that respect anyhow," said Marchmont, laughing.

"Oh, I've nothing to do with you, I've given you up," cried Blair, twisting his good-humoured face into a fierce scowl. "He's a man with convictions, Lady May; he's no sort of use to me."

Blair had convictions himself, but he and everybody else took them so much for granted that they might almost as well not have existed; they were polite convictions too, ready to give place not only to one another but even to circumstances, and waiting quite patiently their turn to be realised. He expected to be met in a like spirit, conceiving that the true function of a man's own opinions is to decide which party he shall belong to; with that decision their duty was ended. He possessed an extremely cordial manner, dressed perfectly, and never forgot anybody. He enjoyed his work immensely, quarrelling with nothing in it save that it often prevented him from being present at the first performances of new plays. May thought him pleasant, but did not welcome his appearance to-day; he smacked too strongly of those politics distinctively practical from which her talk with Marchmont had afforded a temporary escape.

"I know Mildmay," said Marchmont. "He's a capital fellow and, I should think, very popular. He'll give you a bit of a run."

"From what I hear he'll run us very close indeed," said Blair with an anxious look. "However I've unlimited confidence in your husband, Lady May. If Mildmay is to be beaten Quisanté'll beat him; if there is a weak spot he'll find it out."

May smiled faintly; what Blair said was so true.

"Perhaps," smiled Marchmont, "you'll be able to ferret out something about him."

May turned to him and said with a touch of sharpness, "We shall fight fairly anyhow, I hope." She saw that she surprised him and went on with a laugh, "You shouldn't talk as if we were going

to set detectives on him and use their information for electioneering."

"Well, hardly," said Constantine Blair. "Still, mind you, a constituency has a right to know that its member is an honourable and equitable man as well as a supporter of the principles it favours."

"Excellently well put, Blair," said Marchmont languidly. "Is it your own?"

"No!" said May, with a sudden laugh. "I believe it's my husband's."

Blair looked a little put out, but his good-humour triumphed. "I'm not above borrowing from my betters," he said. "Quisanté did say something of the sort to me, but how in the world did you know? Has he said it to you?"

"Oh, no; I knew by—oh, just by the subtle sympathy that exists between husband and wife, Mr. Blair." She laughed again and glanced at Marchmont. "Sir Winterton must look out for the detectives, mustn't he?" she ended.

Marchmont saw, though Blair did not, that she jested uneasily and reaped no pleasure, although she reaped amusement, from her clever recognition of her husband's style. She had spoken in much the same tone about the difference with Dick Benyon and the suspicions which Dick cast on "our sincerity." He came near to perceiving and understanding what was in her mind —what had been there as she watched Quisanté sleeping. The first suggestion of ferreting out something had come from him, purely in the way of a cynical jeer, just because nobody would ever suspect him of seriously contemplating or taking part in such a thing. Well, May Quisanté did not apparently feel quite so confident about her husband.

Blair bustled off, with a parting mysterious hint that they must lose no time in preparing for the fray—it might begin any week now—and May's face relaxed into a more genuine smile.

"He does enjoy it so," she explained. But Marchmont was not thinking of Blair. He asked her abruptly,

"You'll go to Henstead and help him, I suppose?"

"Of course. I shall be with him right through. He'll want all the help I can give him. It's everything to him to win this time."

"Yes, I know." Her voice had become troubled again; she was very anxious for her husband's success; but was she anxious about something else too? "If I can help you, let me," he said as he rose to go.

She gave him her hand and looked in his face.

"I'm afraid that most likely I shouldn't be able to ask you," she said gravely. The answer, as she gave it, meant so much to him, and even seemed to admit so much, that he wondered at once at her insight into his thoughts and at her frankness in facing what she found there. For did she not in truth mean that she might want help most on some occasion when the loyalty he had himself approved would forbid her to reveal her distress to him or to seek his succour? He ventured, after an instant's hesitation, on one word.

"After all," he said, "you can't trundle the world's wheelbarrow in white kid gloves; at least you soil them."

"Then why trundle it?" she asked. "At any rate you needn't say that sort of thing. Leave that to Mr. Blair."

Not only was the time when everybody had to be bestirring themselves approaching rapidly, but the appearance of Sir Winterton Mildmay in the list quickened the Quisantés' departure for the scene of action. Rooms were taken at the Bull in Henstead, an election agent appointed, resources calculated—this involved a visit to Aunt Maria—and matters got into fighting trim. During this period May had again full cause to thank her power of humour; it almost scattered the gloomy and (as she told herself) fanciful apprehensions which had gathered round, and allowed her to study with amusement her husband's preparations. He talked very freely to her always about his political views, and now he consulted her on the very important question of his Election Address. He reminded her of a man packing his portmanteau for a trip and not quite knowing what he would want, whether (for example) shooting boots would come in useful, or warm underclothing be essential. Space was limited, needs difficult to foresee, climate very uncertain. Some things were obviously necessary, such as the cry on which the Government was going to the country; others were sure to be serviceable; in went "something for Labour" (she gathered the phrase from Quisanté's rough notes); odd corners held little pet articles of the owner's things which he had found unexpectedly useful on a previous journey, or which might seem especially adapted to the part of the world he was going to visit. On the local requirements Mr. Foster the maltster was a very Baedeker. With constant effort on Quisanté's part, with almost unfailing amusement on his wife's, the portmanteau got itself filled.

"Are you sure there's nothing else, Alexander?" she asked.

"I think I've got everything that's of real service," said he. "I don't want to overload it."

Of course not; excess luggage may be very expensive. May was smiling as she handed back the Address.

"It's extraordinarily clever," she remarked. "You are extraordinarily clever, you know."

"There's nothing in it that isn't pretty obvious," said he, though he was well pleased.

"Oh, to you, yes, obvious to you; that's just it," she said.

But amongst all that was in the portmanteau there was nothing that could be construed into a friendly word for the Crusade; and were not the anxious minds of the Henstead Wesleyans meant to read a disclaimer of that great movement in a reference to "the laudable and growing activity of all religious denominations, each within the sphere of its own action"? Quisanté had put in "legitimate" before "sphere," but crossed it out again; the hint was plain enough without, and a superfluous word is a word too much. "Sphere," implies limitations; the Crusade had negatived them. This significant passage in the Address was fresh in May's mind when, a day or two later, her husband came in, fretful and out of humour. He flung a note down on the table, saying in a puzzled tone,

"I can't think what's come over Dick Benyon. You know my fight'll be over before his is half-way through, and I wrote offering to go and make a couple of speeches for him. He writes back to say that under existing circumstances he thinks it'll be better for him not to trouble me. Read his note; it's very stiff and distant."

"Can you wonder?" was what rose to her lips. She did not put the question. The odd thing was that most undoubtedly he could wonder and did wonder, that he did not understand why Dick should be aggrieved nor, probably, why, even though he chose to be aggrieved, he should therefore decline assistance of unquestionable value.

"Well, there'll be a lot of people glad to have me," said Quisanté in resentful peevishness. "And I daresay, if I have a big win, he'll change his mind. I shall be worth having then."

"I don't think that would make any difference to Dick," she said.

She spoke lightly, her tone was void of all offence, but Quisanté left the room, frowning and vexed. She had seemed to rebuke him and to accuse him of not seeing or not understanding something that was plain to her. He had become very sensitive on this point. Left to himself, he had been a self-contented man, quite clear about what he meant to do, troubling very little about what he was, quite confident that he could reason from his own mind to the mind of his acquaintances with absolute safety. When he fell in love with May Gaston, however, part of her attraction for him had lain in his sense of a difference between them, of her grasp on things and on aspects of things which eluded him; in this mood he had been prepared to worship, to learn, to amend. These things for a little while he had done or attempted, and had been met by zealous efforts to the same end on her part. His great moments had been frequent then, and May had felt that the risky work she had undertaken might prosper and at last be crowned with success. As for some months back this idea of hers had been dying, even so Quisanté's humble mood died. Now his suspicious vanity saw blame of what he was, or even contempt of him, in every word by which she might seem to invite him to become anything different. Though she had declared herself on his side by the most vital action of her life, he imputed to her a leaning towards treachery; her heart was more with his critics than with him. Yet he did not become indifferent to her praise or her blame, but rather grew morbidly sensitive and exacting, intolerant of questioning and disliking even a smile. He loved her, depended on her, and valued her opinion; but she became in a certain sense, if not an enemy, yet a person to be conciliated, to be hoodwinked, to be tricked into a favourable view. Hence there crept into his bearing towards her just that laboured insincerity which she had never ceased to blame in his attitude towards the world at large. He showed her the truth about himself now only as it were by accident, only when he failed to perceive that the truth would not be to her liking. But this was often, and every time it happened it seemed to him as well as to her at once to widen the gulf between them and to move further away any artificial means of crossing it. Thus the new sense of self-dissatisfaction and self-distrust which had grown upon him centred round his wife and seemed to owe its origin to her.

On her side there came a sort of settled, resigned, not altogether unhumorous, despair. She saw that she had over-rated her power alike over him and over herself. She could not change what she hated in him, and she could not cease to hate it. She could neither make the normal level higher nor yet bear patiently with the normal lower level; the great moments would not become perpetual and the small moments grew more irritating and more humiliating. But the great moments recurred from time to time and never lost their charm. Thus she oscillated between the moods produced by an intense intellectual admiration on the one hand and an intense antipathy of the feelings on the other; and in this uncomfortable balancing she had the prospect of spending her life. Well, Aunt Maria had lived in it for years, and Aunt Maria could not be called an unhappy woman. If only Quisanté would not do anything too outrageous, she felt that she would be able to endure. Since she could not change, she must be content to compromise, to ignore—if only he would not drive her from that refuge too.

"I suppose she sees what the man is by now," said Lady Richard to Morewood, whom she had

been trying to entice into sympathising with her over the scandalous treatment of the Crusade.

"My dear Lady Richard, she always saw what he is much better than you do, even better than I do. But it's one thing to see what a man is and quite another to see what effect his being it will have on yourself from time to time."

"What he's done about Dick and the Dean is so characteristic."

"For example," Morewood pursued, "you know what a bore is, but at one time he kills you, at another he faintly amuses you. You know what a Dean is" (he raised his voice so as to let the Dean, who was reading in the window, overhear); "at one time the abuse exasperates you, at another such splendid indifference to the progress of thought catches your fancy. No doubt Lady May experiences the same varieties of feeling towards her worthy husband."

"Well, I've done with him," said little Lady Richard. Morewood laughed.

"The rest of us haven't," he said, "and I don't think we ever shall till the fellow dies somehow effectively."

"What a blessing for poor May!" cried Lady Richard impulsively.

Morewood was a long while answering; even in the end what he said could not be called an answer. But he annoyed Lady Richard by shaking his finger at her and observing,

"Ah, there you raise a very interesting question."

"Very," agreed the Dean from the window seat.

"I didn't know you were listening," said Lady Richard, wheeling round.

"I always listen about Mr. Quisanté."

"Exactly!" exclaimed Morewood. "I told you so!" But Lady Richard did not even pretend to understand his exultation or what he meant. Whatever he had happened to mean about poor May, the Dean was not Alexander Quisanté's wife.

CHAPTER XI.

SEVENTY-SEVEN AND SUSY SINNETT.

The course of events gave to the Henstead election an importance which seemed rather adventitious to people not Henstead-born. It occurred among the earliest; the cry was on its trial. Quisanté was a prominent champion, his opponent commanded great influence, and the seat had always been what Constantine Blair used to call "pivotal," and less diplomatic tongues "wobbly." Such materials for conspicuousness were sure to lose nothing in the hands of Quisanté. The consciousness that he fought a larger than merely local fight, on a platform broader than parochial, under more eyes than gazed at him from the floor of the Corn-Exchange, was the spur he needed to urge him to supreme effort and rouse him to moments of inspiration. Add to this the feeling that his own career was at its crisis. Even Fanny Gaston, who rather unwillingly accompanied her sister to the Bull, was in twenty-four hours caught by the spirit of combat and acknowledged that Quisanté was a fine leader of a battle, however much he left to be desired as a brother-in-law. She flung herself into the fight with unstinted zeal, and was rewarded by Quisanté's conviction that he had at last entirely overcome her dislike of him.

"He's really splendid in his own way," she wrote to Jimmy Benyon—by now they had come to corresponding occasionally—"and I think that you anyhow—I don't ask Dick, who's got a fight of his own—might come and give him some help. People know how much you did for him, and it looks rather odd that you should neither of you be here." So Jimmy, after a struggle, packed up, and gave and received a reciprocal shock of surprise when he got into the same railway carriage as the Dean and Mrs. Baxter.

"What, are you going too?" cried Jimmy.

Mrs. Baxter explained that they were not going to join Mr. Quisanté; indeed they were bound for the opposite camp, being on their way to stay with the Mildmays. The Dean added that his presence had no political significance; the Mildmays were old friends, and the visit quite unconnected with the election. "Although," the Dean added, "I shall find it interesting to watch the fight." His manner indicated that his sympathies were divided. Jimmy hastened to explain his presence.

"I'm only going because of May and Fanny. I don't care a straw about Quisanté," he said, "although I'm loyal to the party, of course."

"I'm not a party man," observed the Dean. How should he be, when both parties contemptuously showed his dear Crusade the door?

"I want Sir Winterton to win," said Mrs. Baxter with mild firmness.

"Oh, I say!" murmured Jimmy, who was very ready to be made to feel uncomfortable. "Come now, why, Mrs. Baxter?"

Mrs. Baxter shook her head, and went on knitting the stocking which on journeys took the place of the wonted petticoat.

"My wife's taken a prejudice against Mr. Quisanté," the Dean explained apologetically.

"A prejudice!" said Mrs. Baxter with a patient withering smile; she implied that her husband would be calling religion and the virtues prejudices next.

"There's nothing particularly wrong with him," Jimmy protested weakly.

"There's nothing particularly right with him, Lord James. He's just like that coachman of the Girdlestones'; he never told the truth and never cleaned his harness, but, bless you, there was always a good reason for it. What became of the man, Dan?"

"I don't know, my dear."

"I remember. They had to get rid of him, and the Canon got him made night-watchman at the Institute. However, as I say, I called him Mr. Reasons, and that's what I call Alexander Quisanté. Poor girl!" The last words referred, by a somewhat abrupt transition, to Quisanté's wife.

The Dean smiled rather uneasily at Jimmy Benyon; Mrs. Baxter detected the smile, but was not disturbed. She shook her head again, saying,

"Sir Winterton you can trust, but if I were he I'd keep a sharp eye on all you Quisanté people."

"I say, hang it all!" moaned Jimmy Benyon. But his protest could not soften the old lady's convinced hostility. "You ask his aunt," she ended vindictively, and Jimmy was too timid to suggest that enquiries in such a quarter were not the usual way of forming a judgment on rising statesmen.

Moreover he had no opportunity, for Miss Quisanté did not come to Henstead; her explanation showed the mixture of malice and devotion which was her usual attitude towards Sandro.

"I'd give my ears to come," she had told May, "to see the fun and hear Sandro. But I'm old and ugly and scrubby, and Sandro won't want me. I'm not a swell like you and your sister. I should do him harm, not good. He'd be ashamed of me—oh, that'd only amuse me. But I'd best not come. Write to me, my dear, and send me all his speeches."

"I wish you'd come. I want you to talk to," May said.

"Talk to your sister!" jeered Aunt Maria; it was nothing less than a jeer, for she knew very well that May could not and would not talk to Fanny.

One thing the Quisanté people (as Mrs. Baxter called them) found out before they had been long in Henstead, and this was the important and delicate nature of anything and everything that touched or affected Mr. Japhet Williams. Something of this had been foreshadowed by Mr. Foster's account of his friend, but the reality went far beyond. Japhet was a small fretful-faced man; he was rich, liberal, and kind, but he plumed himself on a scrupulous conscience and was the slave of a trifle-ridden mind. As a member of a party, then, he was hard to work with, harder even than Weston Marchmont, of whom he seemed sometimes to May to be a reduced and travestied copy. Not a speech could be made, not a bill issued, but Japhet Williams flew round to the Committee Room with an objection to urge and a hole to pick. There he would find large, stout, shrewd old Foster, installed in an arm-chair and ready with native diplomacy, or Quisanté himself, earning Mrs. Baxter's nickname of "Mr. Reasons" by the suave volubility of his explanations. May laughed at such scenes half-a-dozen times in the first week of her stay at Henstead.

"Is he so very important to us?" she asked of Foster.

He answered her in a whisper behind a fat hand,

"His house is only a couple of miles from Sir Winterton's, and Lady Mildmay's been civil. He employs a matter of two hundred men up at the mills yonder."

"The position's very critical, isn't it, then?"

"So your good husband seems to think," said Foster, jerking his thumb towards where Quisanté leant over Japhet's shoulder, almost caressing him, and ingeniously justifying the statistics of an electioneering placard. May's eyes followed the direction of the jerk. She sighed.

"Yes, it's a waste of Mr. Quisanté's time, but we can't help that," Foster sighed responsively. It

was not, however, of Quisanté's time that his wife had been thinking.

Japhet rose. Quisanté took his hand, shook it, and held it.

"Now you're satisfied, really satisfied, Mr. Williams?" he asked. "I give you my word that what I've said is absolutely accurate."

"What that placard says, sir?"

"Yes, yes, certainly—what the placard says. It doesn't give the details and explanations, of course, but the results are accurately stated."

"I'm much relieved to hear it, much relieved," said Japhet.

He left them; Foster sat down again, smiling. May had come to drive her husband to a meeting and waited his leisure. He came across to Foster, holding the suspected placard in his hand.

"Smoothed him down this time, sir?" asked Foster cheerily.

"Yes," answered Quisanté, passing his hand over his smooth hair. "I think, Mr. Foster, we won't have any more of this Number 77. Make a note of that, will you?"

"No more of 77," Foster noted on a piece of paper.

"It's not one of the most effective," said Quisanté thoughtfully.

"Sails a little near the wind, don't it?" asked Foster with a wink.

"Brief summaries of intricate subjects are almost inevitably open to misunderstanding," observed Quisanté.

"Just so, just so," Foster hurried to say, his eyes grown quite grave again. May remembered Mr. Constantine Blair's plagiarism of her husband's style; had he been there, he must have appropriated this last example also. "I shall end by becoming very fond of Japhet Williams," she said as she got into the carriage. Quisanté glanced at her and did not ask her why.

Meanwhile, however, the other side had got hold of No. 77, and Smiley, the agent, a very clever fellow, wired up to the Temple for young Terence McPhair, who had an acquaintance with the subject. Young Terence, who possessed a ready tongue and no briefs to use it on, made fine play with No. 77; accusations of misrepresentation, ignorant he hoped, fraudulent he feared, flew about thick as snowflakes. The next morning Japhet was round at the Committee Room by ten o'clock. Foster was there, and a boy came up to the Bull with a message asking if Mr. Quisanté could make it convenient to step round. It was a bad morning with Quisanté; his head ached, his heart throbbed, and his stomach was sadly out of gear; he had taken up a report of young Terence's speech, and read it in gloomy silence while the others breakfasted. There was to be a great meeting that night, and they had hoped that he would reserve what strength he had for it. He heard the message, rose without a word, and went down to the Committee Room.

"What'll he do?" asked Jimmy Benyon. "They gave us some nasty knocks last night."

"He can prove that the placard has been withdrawn, at least that no more are to be ordered," said Fanny Gaston. "It wasn't his fault; he's not bound to defend it."

Quisanté came home to a late lunch; he was still ill, but his depression had vanished; he ate, drank, and talked, his spirit rising above the woes of his body.

"What have you done this morning?" Fanny asked.

"Held a meeting in the dinner-hour, had ten interviews, and the usual palaver with Japhet."

"How are Mr. Williams' feelings?" asked May.

"He's all right now," said Quisanté, smiling. Then he added, "Oh, and we've wired to town for two hundred and fifty more of 77."

Then May knew what was going to happen. Quisanté was roused. The placard was untrue, at least misleading, and he knew it was; he might have retreated before young Terence and sheltered himself by an inglorious disclaimer. That, as Aunt Maria said, was not Sandro's way. No. 77 came down by the afternoon train, a corps of bill-posters was let loose, and as they drove to the evening meeting the town was red with it. Withdrawn, disclaimed, apologised for? It was insisted on, relied on, made a trump card of, flung full in young Terence's audacious face. May sat by her husband in that strange mixed mood that he roused in her, half pride, half humiliation; scorning him because he would not bow before the truth, exulting in the audacity, the dash, and the daring of him, at the spirit that caught victory out of danger and turned mistake into an occasion of triumph. For triumph it was that night. Who could doubt his sincerity, who question the injured honour that rang like a trumpet through his words? And who could throw any further slur on No. 77, thus splendidly championed, vindicated, and almost sanctified? Never yet in Henstead had they heard him so inspired; to May herself it seemed the finest thing he had yet

done; and even young Terence, when he read it, felt glad that he had left Henstead by the morning train.

As Quisanté sank into his chair amid a tumult of applause, Foster winked across the platform at May; but little Japhet Williams was clapping his hands as madly as any man among them. Who could not congratulate him, who could not praise him, who could not feel that he was a man to be proud of and a man to serve? Yet most undoubtedly No. 77 was untrue or at least misleading, and Alexander Quisanté knew it. Undoubtedly he had said "No more of it." And now he had pinned it as his colours to the mast. May found herself looking at him with as fresh an interest and as great a fear as in the first weeks of their marriage. Would she in her heart have had him honest over No. 77, honest and inglorious? Or was she coming to think as he did, and to ask little concerning honesty? What would Weston Marchmont think of the affair? Or, short of that, how Morewood would smile and the Dean shake his head!

The No. 77 episode was very typical of that time, and most typical of Alexander Quisanté's conduct, of Sandro's way. His best and his worst, his highest and his lowest, were called out; at one moment he wheedled an ignorant fool with flattery, at another he roused keen honest men to fine enthusiasm; now he seemed to have no thought that was not selfish and mean, now imagination rapt him to a glow of heart-felt patriotism. The good and the bad both stood him in stead, and hope reigned in his camp. But all hung in the balance, for Sir Winterton was tall and handsome, bluff and hearty, a good landlord, a good sportsman, a good man, a neighbour to the town and a friend to half of it. And the great cry did not seem like proving a great success.

"It's up-hill work against Sir Winterton," said Japhet Williams, rubbing his thin little hands together.

A troubled look spread over the broad face of that provincial diplomatist, Mr. Foster the maltster; he knew where the danger lay. They would come to Quisanté's meetings, applaud him, admire him, be proud of his efforts to please them; but when the day came would they not think (and would not their wives remind them) that Sir Winterton was a neighbour and a friend and that Lady Mildmay was kind and sweet? Then, having shouted for Quisanté, would they not in the peaceful obscurity of the ballot put their cross opposite Mildmay's name?

"I'm not easy about it, sir, that I'm not," said Foster, wiping his broad red brow.

Quisanté was not easy either, as his lined face and his high-strung manner showed; he was half-killing himself and he was not easy. So much hung on it; before all England he had backed himself to win, and in the strain of his excitement it seemed to him that the stake he laid was his whole reputation. Was all that to go, and to go on no great issue, but just because Sir Winterton was bluff and cheery and Lady Mildmay kind and sweet? Another thing he knew about himself; if he lost this time, he must be out in the cold at least for a long time; he could not endure another contest, even if the offer of a candidature came to him, even though Aunt Maria found the funds. Everything was on this fling of the dice then; and it seemed to him almost iniquitous that he should lose because Sir Winterton was bluff and cheery and his wife kind and sweet. His face was hard and cunning as he leant across towards old Foster and said in a low voice, with a sneering smile,

"I suppose there's nothing against this admirable gentleman?"

Old Foster started a little, recollecting perhaps that fine passage in the speech which opened the campaign, the passage which defined the broad public lines of the contest and loftily disclaimed any personal attack or personal animosity. But the next moment he smiled in answer, smiled thoughtfully, as he tapped his teeth with the handle of his pen-knife. Quisanté sat puffing at a cigar and looking straight at him with observant searching eyes.

"Anything against him, eh?" asked Foster in a ruminative tone.

"They've been ready enough to ask where I come from, and how I live, and so on."

"They know all that about Sir Winterton, you see, sir."

"Yes, confound them." The keen eyes were still on Foster; the fat old man shifted his position a little and ceased to meet their regard. "We don't want to be beaten, you know," said Quisanté.

A silence of some minutes followed. Quisanté, rose and strolled off to a table, where he began to sort papers; Foster sat where he was, frowning a little, with his mouth pursed up. He stole a glance at Quisanté's back, a curious enquiring glance.

"I know nothing about the rights of it one way or the other," he said at last. "But some of the men up at the mills and in my place still remember Tom Sinnett's affair. Only the other night, as Sir Winterton drove by, one of them shouted out, 'Where's Susy Sinnett?'"

Quisanté went on sorting papers and did not turn round.

"Who the deuce is Susy Sinnett?" he asked indifferently, with a laugh.

"It was about five years ago—before Sir Winterton's split with the Liberals. Tom was a keeper in Sir Winterton's employ, and Sir Winterton charged him with netting game and sending it to

London on his own account." Foster's narrative ceased and he looked again at his candidate's back. The papers rustled and the cigar smoke mounted to the ceiling. "Well?" said Quisanté.

"Tom was found guilty at Sessions; but in the dock he declared Sir Winterton had trumped up the charge to shut his mouth."

"What about?"

"Well, because he'd found Sir Winterton dangling after Susy, and threatened to break his head if he found him there again." He paused, Quisanté made no comment. "Tom got nine months, and when he came out all the family emigrated to Manitoba."

After a short pause, filled by the arrangement of papers, Quisanté observed, "That must have cost money. He'd saved out of what he got for the game, eh?"

"It was supposed Sir Winterton found the money," said Foster, "but nothing was known. Sir Winterton refused to make any statement. He said his friends would know what to think, and he didn't care a damn (that was his word) about anybody else. Still some weren't satisfied. But the talk died away, except here and there among the men who'd been Tom's pals. I daresay Tom gave 'em a rabbit now and again in exchange for a pot of beer, and they missed him." Mr. Foster ended with a little chuckle.

"I think Sir Winterton might have been a little more explicit," Quisanté remarked. "There's some excuse for thinking an explanation not unnecessary. What became of the girl? Did she go to Manitoba?"

"I believe she did in the end, but she'd married a man from Dunn's works and left the town three months after her father was sent to prison."

Quisanté came back to the hearth and stood looking down on old Foster.

"Rather a queer story," he said. "But I meant, was there anything against him of a public nature, in his local record, anything of that sort, you know."

"I know nothing of that kind," said Foster, raising his eyes and meeting his leader's. He looked rather puzzled, as if he were still not quite sure what Quisanté's question had meant, in spite of Quisanté's explanation of it. "I'd almost forgotten this, but Japhet Williams mentioned it the other day. You know Japhet by now. He said he thought he ought to ask Sir Winterton to make a statement."

A sudden gleam shot through Quisanté's eyes.

"Mr. Williams' active conscience at work again?" he asked with a sneering laugh.

"That's it," said Foster, still looking stolidly at his chief. "But I know Sir Winterton; he'd only say what he did before."

Quisanté turned, flung the end of his cigar into the grate, and turned back to Foster, saying,

"Mr. Williams must do as he thinks right; but of course I can't have any hand in a matter of that kind."

"Just so, just so," murmured Foster as hurriedly but even more vaguely than usual. His chief was puzzling him still.

"I can't have anything at all to do with it," Quisanté repeated emphatically. Foster did not quite know whence he gathered the impression, but he was left with the feeling that, if he should chance ever to be asked what had passed between them on the subject, he must remember this sentence at least, whatever else of the conversation he recollected or forgot.

"Of course you can't, sir. I only mentioned it in passing," said he.

"And you'd better tell Japhet Williams so, if he mentions the matter." The slightest pause followed. "Or," added Quisanté, grinding his heel into the hearth rug as though in absence of mind, "if it happens to crop up in talk between you."

Whether the matter did crop up as suggested or not is one of those points of secret history which it seems useless to try to discover. But an incident which occurred the next evening showed that Japhet Williams' mind and conscience had, either of their own motion or under some outside direction, been concerning themselves with the question of Tom Sinnett and his daughter Susy. There was a full and enthusiastic meeting of Sir Winterton's supporters. In spite of Quisanté's victory over No. 77, they were in good heart and fine fighting fettle; Sir Winterton was good-tempered and sanguine; there was enough opposition to give the affair go, not enough to make itself troublesome. But at the end, after a few of the usual questions and the usual verbal triumphs of the candidate, a small man rose from the middle of the hall. He was greeted by hoots, with a few cheers mingling. The Chairman begged silence for their worthy fellow-townsman, Councillor Japhet Williams.

Japhet was perfectly self-possessed; he had been, he said, as a rule a supporter of the opposite party, but he kept his mind open and was free to admit that he had been considerably impressed by some of the arguments which had fallen from Sir Winterton Mildmay that evening. The meeting applauded, and Sir Winterton nodded and smiled. There was one matter, however, which he felt it his duty to mention. Now that Sir Winterton Mildmay (the full name came with punctilious courtesy every time) was appealing to a wider circle than that of his personal friends and acquaintances, now that he—was seeking the confidence of his fellow-townsmen in general (A voice "He's got it too," and cheers), would Sir Winterton Mildmay consider the desirability of reconsidering the attitude he had taken up some time ago, and consider the desirability (Japhet's speech was not very artistically phrased but he loved the long words) of making a fuller public statement with reference to what he (Mr. Japhet Williams) would term the Sinnett affair? And with this Japhet sat down, having caused what the reporters very properly described as a "Sensation"—and an infinite deal of hooting and groaning to boot. But there were cheers also from the back of the room, where a body of roughly dressed sturdy fellows sat sucking at black clay pipes; these were men from the various works, from Dunn's and from Japhet's own.

As Japhet proceeded Sir Winterton's handsome face had grown ruddier and ruddier; when Japhet finished, he sat still through the hubbub, but his hand twitched and he clutched the elbow of his chair tightly. The platform collectively looked uncomfortable. The chairman—he was Green, the linen-draper in High Street—glanced uneasily at Sir Winterton and then whispered in his ear. Sir Winterton threw a short remark at him, the chairman shrank back with the appearance of having been snubbed. Sir Winterton rose slowly to his feet, still very red in the face, still controlling himself to a calmness of gesture and voice. But all he said in answer to that most respected and influential townsman Mr. Japhet Williams was,

"No, I won't."

And down he plumped into his chair again.

Not a word of courtesy, not a word of respect for Japhet's motives, not even an appeal for trust, not even a simple pledge of his word! A curt and contemptuous "No, I won't," was all that Sir Winterton's feelings, or Sir Winterton's sensitiveness, or his temper, or his obstinacy, allowed him to utter. Sir Winterton was a great man, no doubt, but at election times the People also enjoys a transient sense of greatness and of power. The cheers were less hearty now, the groans more numerous; the audience felt that, in its own person and in the person of Japhet Williams, it was being treated with disrespect; already one or two asked, "If he's got a fair and square answer, why don't he give it?" The superfine sense of honour, which feels itself wounded by being asked for a denial and soiled by condescending to give one, is of a texture too delicate for common appreciation. "No, I won't," said Sir Winterton, red in the face, and the meeting felt snubbed. Why did he snub them? The meeting began to feel suspicious. There were no more questions; the proceedings were hurried through; Sir Winterton drove off, pompous in his anger, red from his hurt feelings, stiff in his obstinacy. The cheer that followed him had not its former heartiness.

"I only did my duty," said Japhet to a group who surrounded him.

"That's right, Mr. Williams," he was answered. "We know you. Don't you let yourself be silenced, sir." For everybody now remembered the Sinnett affair, which had seemed so forgotten, everybody had a detail to tell concerning it, his own views to set forth, or those of some shrewd friend to repeat. That night the taverns in the town were full of it, and at many a supper table the story was told over again. As for Japhet, he dropped in at Mr. Foster's and told what he had done, complaining bitterly of how Sir Winterton had treated him, declaring that he had been prepared to listen to any explanation, almost to take Sir Winterton's simple word, but that he was not to be bullied in a matter in which his own conscience and the rights of the constituency were plainly and deeply involved. Mr. Foster said as little as he could.

"It won't do for me to take any part," he remarked. "I'm too closely connected with Mr. Quisanté, and I know he wouldn't wish to enter into such a matter."

"I'm not acting as a party man," said Japhet Williams, "and this isn't a party matter. But a plain answer to a plain question isn't much to ask, and I mean to ask for it till I get it, or know the reason why I can't."

Dim rumours of a "row" at Sir Winterton's meeting reached the Bull that night, brought by Jimmy Benyon, who had been at a minor meeting across the railway bridge among the railway men. Somebody had brought up an old scandal, and the candidate's answer had not given satisfaction. The ladies showed no curiosity; Quisanté, very tired, lay on the sofa doing nothing, neither reading, nor talking, nor sleeping. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, he seemed hardly to hear what Jimmy said, and he also asked no questions. So Jimmy, dismissing the matter from his mind, went to bed, leaving Quisanté still lying there, with wide-open eyes.

There he lay a long while alone; once or twice he frowned, once or twice he smiled. Was he thinking over the opportunity that offered, and the instrument that presented itself? What chances might lie in Sir Winterton's dogged honour and tender sensitiveness on the one hand, and on the other in that conscience of little Japhet's, stronger now in its alliance with hurt pride and outraged self-importance! And nobody could say that Quisanté himself had had any part in it;

he had spoken to nobody except Foster, and he had told Foster most plainly that he would have nothing to do with such a matter. There he lay, making his case, the case he could tell to all the world, the case Foster also could tell, the case that both Foster and he could and would tell, if need be, to all the world, to all the world—and to May Quisanté.

"Sandro always has a case," said Aunt Maria. He had a case about what Japhet termed the Sinnett affair, just as he had had a case, and a very strong one as it had proved, about placard No. 77. When at last he dragged his weary overdone body to bed, his lips were set tight and his eyes were eager. It was the look that meant something in his mind, good or bad, but anyhow a resolution, and the prospect of work to be done. Had May seen him then, she would have known the look, and hoped and feared. But she was sleeping, and none asked Quisanté what was in his mind that night.

CHAPTER XII.

A HIGHLY CORRECT ATTITUDE.

Up to the present time all had gone most smoothly at Moors End, the Mildmays' old manor-house, eight miles from Henstead, and Lady Mildmay had confided many quiet self-congratulations to Mrs. Baxter's ear. For it had seemed possible that the election might prove a cause of perturbation. Lady Mildmay was still in love with her handsome well-preserved husband, and had every confidence in him, but to a chosen friend she would sometimes admit that he was "difficult"; she called him not proud and obstinate, but sensitive and a little touchy; she hinted that he could not bear unpleasant looks, and yet was not very ready to make concessions to friendship. No doubt he needed some management, and Lady Mildmay, like many wives, found one of her chief functions to consist in acting as a buffer between her husband and a world which did not always approach him with enough gentleness and consideration. Hence her joy at the prosperous passage of a critical time, at the enthusiasm of their supporters, and at the gratification and urbanity of Sir Winterton. Satisfaction begat charity, and Lady Mildmay had laughingly dismissed some portentous hints which Mrs. Baxter let fall about the certain character and the probable tactics of Mr. Quisanté.

"His wife looks so nice, he can't be very bad," said kind Lady Mildmay, using an argument of most uncritical charity.

Although the Dean, if pressed, must have ranked himself among his host's political opponents, he was so little of a party man and had so many points of sympathy with Sir Winterton (especially on Church matters) that he very contentedly witnessed the contest from Moors End and no longer troubled himself to conceal his hopes of a Moors End triumph. Nevertheless he was judiciously reticent about Quisanté, generously eulogistic of May. Sir Winterton looked forward to making the acquaintance of both, but thought that the occasion had better be postponed till they had ceased to be opponents.

"But I hope you and your wife'll go over as often as you like," he said to the Dean very cordially. But the Dean and Mrs. Baxter did not go, perhaps preferring not to divide their sympathies, perhaps fearing that they might seem like spies and be suspected of carrying back information to the rival camp. "I dare say you're wise," said Sir Winterton, rather relieved; he had made the suggestion because it was the handsome thing to do, but was not eager that it should be accepted. To do the handsome thing and to meet with pleasant looks were the two requisites most essential to Sir Winterton's happiness; given these he was at his best and his best was a fine specimen of the class to which he belonged. There was, however, a weak side to these two desires of his, as the history of the Sinnett affair to some extent indicated.

The first shock to Sir Winterton's good temper had been the matter of No. 77; until then he had been lavish of the usual polite compliments to his opponent's personal character. After No 77's prodigal reappearance and Quisanté's rhetorical effort in defence of it these assurances were no more on his lips, and for a time he bore himself with strict reserve when Quisanté was mentioned. He had been right in the dispute, and he had been beaten; silence was the utmost that could be expected of his tolerance or his self-control; his refusal to speak on the subject showed his opinion well enough, and he must not be blamed too severely if he listened without protest and perhaps with pleasure to Mrs. Baxter's pungent criticisms. Of course she had been reminded of something—of the strictures which a certain Provincial Editor had passed on the household arrangements of a certain Minor Canon; a libel action had ensued, and the jury had been beguiled into finding for the defendant on a bare literal construction of words which to anybody acquainted with local circumstances bore another and much blacker meaning. This Mrs. Baxter called a pettifogging trick, and she pursued her parallel till the same terms were obviously indicated as appropriate to Quisanté's conduct.

"My dear!" said the Dean in mild protest; but Sir Winterton laughed as though he had enjoyed the story. He was at once favoured with the further parallel of the Girdlestones' coachman and, as the conversation drifted to May, of the Nonconformist Minister's daughter and the Circus

Proprietor. All Mrs. Baxter's armoury of reminiscence was heartily at his service.

But No. 77 did not after all touch Sir Winterton very closely. His temper had begun to recover and he had nearly forgiven Quisanté when suddenly Japhet Williams produced a far more severe and deadly shock. His action was a bomb, and a bomb thrown from a hand which Moors End had been fain to think was or might be friendly. Was not Japhet a neighbour, only two miles off along the Henstead Road, and did not Lady Mildmay and Mrs. Williams, religious differences notwithstanding, work together every year on the Committee of the Cottage Gardens and Window-Boxes Show? Had not Japhet himself been understood to be reconsidering his political opinions? There was even more. The Sinnett affair was the one subject utterly forbidden, most rigidly tabooed, at Moors End. All Sir Winterton's relatives, friends, acquaintances, and dependents knew that well. Sir Winterton's honour and temper had never been so wounded as over that affair. By Japhet's hand it was dragged into light again; the odious thing became once more the gossip of Henstead, once more a disgusting topic which it was impossible wholly to ignore at Moors End. This was plain enough since, on the morning after Japhet's question had been put, Lady Mildmay was discussing the position with Mrs. Baxter in the morning-room, while the Dean and Sir Winterton walked round and round the lawn in gloomy conversation punctuated by gloomier silences.

What the actual history was Lady Mildmay's narrative showed pretty accurately. Sir Winterton's predominant desires, to do the handsome thing and to meet with pleasant looks, evidently had played a large part. Lady Mildmay blushed a little and smiled as she began by observing that Sir Winterton had distinguished the girl by some kind notice; he liked her, he always liked nice-spoken nice-looking girls; for her sake and her mother's (a very decent woman), he had forgiven Tom many irregularities. At last his patience gave out and Tom was prosecuted; when arrested, Tom had tried blackmail; Sir Winterton was not to be bullied, and Tom's speech from the dock was no more than an outburst of defeated malice.

Then came on the scene Sir Winterton's kind heart and his predominant desires. He had made the girl a present to facilitate her marriage and had got the husband work away from the town, where no gossip would have reached. This seemed enough, and so Doctor Tillman, an old and wise friend, urged. But as the time of Tom's release approached and his wife made preparations for receiving him in a cottage just on the edge of Sir Winterton's estate, it became odious to think of the black looks and scowls which would embitter every ride in that direction. "I want to forget the whole thing, to get rid of it, to blot it all out," said Sir Winterton fretfully. Prison had induced reason in Tom Sinnett; he made his submission and accepted the liberal help which carried him and his wife, his daughter and her husband, to a new life across the seas. Then Sir Winterton had peace in his heart and abroad; he had behaved most handsomely, and there were no scowling faces to remind him of the hateful episode. He had met the gossip boldly and defiantly; it had died away and had seemed utterly forgotten and extinct; the low grumbles and not very seemly jokes which still lingered among the men at the various works in Henstead, where Tom had been a *persona grata*, never reached the ears of the great folk at Moors End; it is perhaps only at election times that such things become audible in such quarters.

The poor lady ended with a careworn smile; she had suffered much during the episode, and perhaps the more because her faith in her husband had never wavered.

"I did so hope it was all over," she said.

"That's a good deal to hope about anything," observed Mrs. Baxter rather grimly.

"It does annoy Winterton so terribly. I'm afraid it'll quite upset him."

Mrs. Baxter had her own opinion about Sir Winterton; amid much that was favourable, she had no doubt that he was far too ready to get on the high horse.

"Well, my dear," she said, "Sir Winterton'll have to do what many people have; he must swallow his pride and tell the truth about it."

"I don't think he will," sighed Lady Mildmay, looking out at her husband's tall imposing figure, and marking the angry energy with which he was impressing his views on the Dean.

In this case at least Mrs. Baxter was right. Sir Winterton had got on the very highest of horses; he had mounted at the meeting, flinging back his "No, I won't," as he sprang to the saddle; he was firmly seated; having got up, he declared that he could not think of coming down. There, for good or evil, he sat. The Dean looked vexed and puzzled.

"This Mr. Williams is an honest man, I suppose?" he asked.

"Oh, honest as the day, too honest. But he's an infernal little ass," said Sir Winterton. "Somebody's got hold of him and is using him, or he's heard some gossip and caught it up. I won't say a word." And he went on to ask if he were to degrade himself by making explanations and excuses for his personal conduct to all the rowdies and loafers of Henstead. "If I have to do that to get in, why, I'll stay out, and be hanged to them." His face suggested that his language would have been still more vigorous but for a respect due to the Dean's cloth.

Later in the day they all had a turn at him, his wife pleading tenderly, Mrs. Baxter exhorting

trenchantly (he came nearer to being told he was a fool than had ever happened to him before), the Dean suggesting possible diplomacies, Dr. Tillman, whom they sent for as a reinforcement, declaring that a few simple words, authorised by Sir Winterton, would put the whole matter right. He was obstinate; he had taken up his position and meant to stand by it; his conscience was clear and his honour safe in his own keeping; he would not speak himself and explicitly forbade any statement to be made on his behalf. Surely some power fought for Alexander Quisanté in giving him an opponent of this temper!

"If any statement is to be made in reference to the matter," said Sir Winterton, rather red in the face again by now, "I confess to thinking that it would come best from Mr. Quisanté. In fact I think that a few words would come very gracefully from Mr. Quisanté."

Lady Mildmay caught at the hope. "If it was suggested to him, I'm sure——"

"Suggested!" cried Sir Winterton. "Is it likely I should suggest it or permit any of my friends to do so? I was merely speculating on what might not unnaturally suggest itself to a gentleman in Mr. Quisanté's position."

Mrs. Baxter's smile was very eloquent of her opinion on this particular point. The Dean frowned perplexedly.

"There are exigencies to be considered," he stammered. "The views of his supporters——"

"In a matter like this?" asked Sir Winterton in a tone of lofty surprise. The Dean felt that he had rather committed himself, and did not venture to remind his sensitive host that after all Quisanté had no knowledge of the truth or falsehood of the story, and could say nothing beyond that he had none. Mrs. Baxter, however, spoke plainly.

"Let me tell you," she said, "that if you expect anything of the sort from Alexander Quisanté, you'll find yourself mistaken."

"I don't know that I agree with you there, my dear," said the Dean, entering his usual *caveat*. "I think very likely Mr. Quisanté would be willing to do the proper thing if it were pointed out to him."

"Pointed out!" murmured Sir Winterton, raising his brows. Did gentlemen need to have the proper thing pointed out to them? Did they not see it for themselves and do it? Nay, one might look for more than the mere naked proper thing; from a gentleman the handsome thing was to be expected, and that of his own motion. There could, in Sir Winterton's view, be no doubt of what was in this case the handsome thing.

Unhappily, there is no subject on which greater divergence of opinion exists than that of the proper thing to be done under given circumstances. Here was Sir Winterton holding one view; Japhet Williams held another, and it is to be feared that a section of the inhabitants of Henstead adopted a third. Sir Winterton's cry was honour, Japhet's was duty; the inhabitants would have differed rather even among themselves as to how to describe their motive; party spirit, curiosity, the zest of a personal question, interest in a promising quarrel, mere mischief, all had a hand in producing the applause which greeted Japhet when he rose the next evening and with absolute imperturbability repeated the same question as nearly as possible in the same words. Sir Winterton's answer was not in the same words, but entirely to the same effect. "I've answered that question once, and I won't answer it again," he said. Then came the tumult, and after that a dull unenthusiastic ending, and the drive off through a grinning crowd, which enjoyed Sir Winterton's fury and added to it by a few hateful cries of "Where's Susy Sinnett?" From the outskirts of the town till his own gates were reached Sir Winterton did not speak to his wife. Then he turned to her and said very courteously but most decisively,

"Marion dear, you will oblige me by not accompanying me to any more meetings at present and by not visiting the town just now. I don't choose to expose you to any more such scenes. I can't teach these fellows to respect a lady's presence, but I can protect my wife by ensuring her absence." He looked very chivalrous and very handsome as he made this little speech. But his wife's heart sank; such an attitude could mean nothing but defeat.

"Can't you help us?" she implored of the Dean, when she had got him alone and told him of this new development of her husband's pride or temper. It was evident that Japhet Williams meant, as he had said, to go on putting his plain question till he got a plain answer, and so long as he put his question, Lady Mildmay was not to be present. How soon would Henstead understand that the gentleman who sought to be its member openly declared that he did not consider it a fit place for his wife to enter?

"Something must really be done," said the Dean nervously. "At all hazards." They both knew that "at all hazards" meant in spite of the prohibition and in face of the wrath of Sir Winterton.

Indeed this impulsive gentleman, seated on his high horse, was in urgent need of being saved from himself. Hitherto Japhet's importunity and the attacks of less conscientious opponents had had the natural effect of rousing his supporters to greater enthusiasm and greater zeal. When his fresh step began to be understood, when Lady Mildmay came with him no more, and it dawned upon Henstead that Sir Winterton would not bring her, the very supporters felt themselves

offended. Were a few ribald cries and the folly of a wrong-headed old Japhet Williams to outweigh all their loyalty and devotion? Was the town to be judged by its rowdies? They could not but remember that Lady May Quisanté sat smiling through the hottest meetings, and one evening had at the last moment saved her husband's platform from being stormed by sitting, composed and immovable, in the very middle of it till the rioters came to a stand a foot from her, and then retreated cowed before her laughter. That was the sort of thing Henstead liked; to be told that it was unworthy of Lady Mildmay's presence was not what it liked. A strong deputation came out to Sir Winterton; he replied from his high horse; the deputation averred that they could not answer for the consequences; Sir Winterton said he did not care a rush about the consequences; the deputation ventured timidly to hint that an excessive care to shield Lady Mildmay's ears from any mention of the Sinnett affair might be misunderstood; Sir Winterton said that he had nothing to do with that; his first duty was to his wife, his second to himself. The deputation retired downcast and annoyed.

"If you're going to do anything, Dan, you'd better do it at once," said Mrs. Baxter.

The Dean, resolved to risk Sir Winterton's anger in Sir Winterton's interest, did something; he wrote covertly to Jimmy Benyon at the Bull, begging him to be riding on the Henstead road at ten o'clock the next morning; the Dean would take a walk and the pair would meet, as it was to seem, accidentally; nothing had been said to Sir Winterton, nothing was to be said at present to Mr. Quisanté. The Dean was, in fact, most carefully unofficial, and in no small fright besides; yet he was also curious to know how this new phase of the fight was regarded at the Quisanté headquarters.

Jimmy came punctually, greeted the Dean most heartily, and listened to all that he said. The Dean could not quite make out his mood; he seemed uncomfortable and vexed, but he was not embarrassed, and was able to state what the Dean took to be the Quisanté position with so much clearness that the Dean could not help wondering whether he had received instructions.

"Quisanté's line has been to take absolutely no notice of the whole thing," said Jimmy. "He knows nothing about it, and has had nothing to do with its being brought forward; he's never mentioned it, and he won't. But on the other hand he doesn't feel called upon to fight Mildmay's battle, or to offend his own supporters by defending a man who won't defend himself. As for this business about Lady Mildmay, if Mildmay likes to make such an ass of himself he must take the consequences."

The Dean felt that the Quisanté case even put thus bluntly by Jimmy was very strong; Quisanté's deft tongue and skilful brain could make it appear irresistible. Strategically retiring from the ground of strict justice, he made an appeal to the feelings.

"Surely neither Mr. Quisanté himself nor any of you would wish to win through such an occurrence as this? That would be no satisfaction to you."

"Of course we'd rather win without it," said Jimmy irritably. "It's not our fault. Go to Japhet Williams, or, best of all, persuade Mildmay not to be a fool. Why won't he answer?"

"Have you had any talk with Quisanté about it?"

"Very little. He thinks pretty much what I've said."

"Or with Lady May?" asked the Dean with a direct glance.

"She's never mentioned it to me."

"The whole affair is deplorable."

"I don't see what we can do." Jimmy's tone was rather defiant.

The Dean fell into thought and, as the result thereof, made a proposition; it was very much that suggestion to Quisanté on which Sir Winterton had frowned so scornfully.

"If," said he, "I could persuade Sir Winterton to give Mr. Quisanté a private assurance that the scandal is entirely baseless, would Mr. Quisanté state publicly that he was convinced of its falsity and did not wish it to influence the electors in any way?"

"Perhaps he would," said Jimmy.

"I think it would be only the proper thing for him to do," said the Dean rather warmly.

"I don't know about that. Why can't Mildmay say it for himself? But I'll ask Quisanté, if you like."

The Dean was only too conscious of the weakness of his cause; he became humble again in thanking Jimmy for this small promise. "And Mr. Quisanté'll be glad to have done it, I know, whatever the issue of the fight may be," he ended. The remark received for answer no more than a smile from Jimmy. Jimmy was not sure that among the stress of emotions filling Quisanté's heart in case of defeat there would be room for any consoling consciousness of moral rectitude. Perhaps Jimmy himself would not care much about such a solatium. He wanted to win and he

wanted Quisanté to win; such was the effect of being much with Quisanté; and in this matter at least, so far as Jimmy's knowledge went, his champion had acted with perfect correctness. At other times Jimmy might have been, like Sir Winterton, apt to exact something a little beyond correctness, but now the spirit of the fight was on him.

The Dean returned with the rather scanty results of his mission, and after luncheon took his courage in both hands and told Sir Winterton what he had done. But for his years and his station, Sir Winterton would, at the first blush, have called him impertinent; the Dean divined the suppressed epithet and defended himself with skill, but, alas, not without verging on the confines of truth. To say that he had happened to meet Jimmy Benyon was to give less than its due credit to his own ingenuity; to say that Jimmy and he had agreed on the proper thing was rather to interpret than to record Jimmy's brief and not very sanguine utterances. However the Dean's motive was very good, and before the meal ended Sir Winterton forgave him, while still sternly negativing the course which his diplomacy suggested. In fact Sir Winterton was very hard to manage; the Dean understood the Quisanté position better and better; Mrs. Baxter gave up her efforts; she had an almost exaggerated belief in the inutility of braying fools in a mortar; she was content to show them the mortar, and if that were not enough to leave them alone. Only the wife persevered, for she thought neither of herself nor of what was right, but only of what might serve her husband. To the meetings he would not speak, to Quisanté he might be got to speak; she would not let him alone while there was a chance of it. And at last she prevailed, not by convincing his reason (which indeed was little involved in the matter either way), not by taming his pride, and not by pointing to his interest, but by the old illogical, perhaps in the strictest view immoral, appeal—"For my sake, because I ask you for your love of me!" For his love of her Sir Winterton consented to write a private note to Alexander Quisanté, stating for his own satisfaction and for his opponent's information the outline of the true facts of the Sinnett affair. Sir Winterton disliked his task very much but, having to do it, he did it as he did everything, as a gentleman would, frankly, simply, cordially, with an obvious trust in Quisanté's chivalry, good faith, and reluctance to fight with any weapons that were not stainless.

"Now we've put it straight," said the Dean gleefully. "He's bound to mention your note and to accept your account, and if he accepts it, his supporters can't help themselves, they must do the same." Sir Winterton agreed that, distasteful as this quasi-appeal to his opponent had been, it could not fail to have the beneficial results which the Dean forecast. There was more cheerfulness at Moors End that evening than had been seen since Japhet Williams rose from the body of the hall, a small but determined Accusing Angel.

It is not so easy to put straight what has once gone crooked, nor so safe to undertake to advise other folks, however much the task may by habit seem to lose half its seriousness. In his heart the Dean was thinking that he had "cornered" Quisanté, and Sir Winterton was hoping that he had combined the advantages of pliancy with the privilege of pride. The note that Quisanté wrote in answer did nothing to disturb this comfortable state of feeling—unless indeed any danger were foreshadowed in the last line or two; "While, as I have said, most ready to accept your assurance, and desirous, as I have always been, of keeping all purely personal questions in the background, I do not feel myself called upon to express any opinion on the course which you have, doubtless after full consideration, adopted in regard to the requests for a public explanation which have been addressed to you by duly qualified electors of the borough." The Dean felt a little uneasy when that sentence was read out to him; was it possible that he had underrated Quisanté's resources and not perceived quite how many ways of escaping from a corner that talented gentleman might discover? Yet there was nothing to quarrel with in the sentence; at the outside it was a courteous intimation of a difference of opinion and of the view (held by every man in the place except Sir Winterton himself) that a simple explanation on a public occasion would have done Sir Winterton's honour no harm and his cause a great deal of good.

Such was the private answer; the public reference was no less neat. First came a ready and ample acceptance of the explanation which Sir Winterton had given. "I accept it unreservedly, I do not repeat it only because it was given to me privately." Then followed an expression of gratitude for the manly and straightforward way in which the speaker felt himself to have been treated by his opponent; then there was an expression of hope that these personal matters might disappear from the contest. "Had I been sensitive, I in my turn might have found matter for complaint, but I was content to place myself in your hands, trusting to your good sense and fairness." (Sir Winterton had not been so content.) "I trust that the episode may be regarded as at an end." Then a pause and—"It is not for me, as I have already observed to my honourable opponent, to express any judgment on the course which he has seen fit to adopt. I have only to accept his word, which I do unhesitatingly, and it is no part of my duty to ask why he preferred to make his explanation to one who is trying to prevent him from sitting in Parliament rather than to those whom he seeks to represent in that high assembly."

This was said gravely and was much cheered. As the cheering went on, a smile gradually bent the speaker's broad expressive mouth; the crowded benches became silent, waiting the fulfilment of the smile's promise. A roguish look came into Quisanté's face, he glanced at his audience, then at his friends on the platform, lastly at his wife who sat on the other side of the chairman's table. He spoke lower than was his wont, colloquially, almost carelessly, with an amused intonation. "At any rate," he said, "I trust that Henstead may once more be thought worthy of the presence of ——" He paused, spread out his hands, and sank his voice in mock humility—"of other ladies besides—my wife."

It was well done. May's ready laugh was but the first of a chorus, and Quisanté, sitting down, knew that his shaft had sped home when somebody cried, "Three cheers for Lady May Quisanté!" and they gave them again and again, all standing on their feet. Alas for the Dean! For some men there are many ways out of a corner.

CHAPTER XIII.

NOT SUPERHUMAN.

"I don't set up for being superhuman," said Alexander Quisanté with a shrug and a smile at his sister-in-law, "and I should very soon be told of my mistake if I did. I had nothing to do with putting the story about. I never countenanced it in any way. But since it got about, since Mildmay chose to give himself airs and make a fool of himself, and then come to me to get him out of his trouble, I thought myself entitled to give him one little dig."

"Of course you were," agreed Fanny.

"And if they choose to decide the election on that instead of on the Government policy, why, in the first place we can't help it, and in the second we needn't talk about it." He paused and then added with greater gravity, "I have nothing to reproach myself with in the matter."

"What's Mr. Williams going to do?"

"Oh, he made one solemn protest and now, at my request, he'll hold his tongue."

"He's done all the mischief, though," said Jimmy Benyon with much satisfaction.

It was true enough, and the triumph at the Bull equalled the depression at Moors End, where the Dean was aghast at the result of his diplomacy, and Sir Winterton began to perceive that he had vindicated his honour at the cost of his good sense, and his dignity at the price of his popularity. It was not Henstead's moral sense that was against him now, but that far more formidable enemy, Henstead's wounded vanity. The best judges refused to estimate how many votes that ride on the high horse was likely to cost him; but all agreed that the bill would be heavy; even Smiley, his own agent, shook a rueful head over the probable figure. And all this advantage had accrued to the Quisanté faction without involving any reproach or any charge of unfair tactics; rather were they praised for moderation, magnanimity, and good-nature.

"To tell the truth," Jimmy whispered to Fanny, "I never felt sure that Quisanté would treat it in such a gentlemanly way."

"No, neither did I," Fanny confessed. "I'm so glad about it."

"He's rather proud of himself, though," chuckled Jimmy.

"Yes, I know. Well, we mustn't be too critical," urged Fanny. His public demeanour had been beyond reproach, and after all even persons of more delicate feeling and more exalted position than Quisanté are apt to plume their feathers a little in the family circle.

In the whirl of these last few days there was however little time for scrutinising the fine shades of manner or speculating on nice points of conscience. They were all worked to death, they were all inflamed with enthusiasm and the determination to win. As was only becoming, Quisanté's wife was the most enthusiastic and the most resolute; a thing not seeming so natural to herself was that she was also happier than she had ever been since her marriage. As the fight grew hotter, Quisanté grew greater in her eyes; he had less time to make postures, she less leisure to criticise; if he forgot himself in what he was doing, she could come near to forgetting the side of him she disliked in an admiration of the qualities that attracted her. His praises were in men's mouths beyond Henstead; letters of congratulation came from great folk, and Quisanté was told that his speeches had more than a local audience and more than a local influence. Sympathy joined with admiration; he was not only successful, he was brave; for it was a serious question whether his body and his nerves would last out, and every night found him utterly exhausted and prostrate. Yet he never spared himself, he was wherever work was to be done, refused no call, and surrendered not an inch to his old and hated enemy, the physical weakness which had always hindered him. May wrote to Miss Quisanté that he was "wonderful, wonderful, wonderful." There she paused, and added after a moment's thought, "It's something to be his wife." And to Mr. Foster she said, "They must elect him, they can't help it, can they?"

"Well, I think we shall win now," said old Foster, smiling, but directing a rather inquisitive glance at her. "Japhet Williams has helped us; not so much as Sir Winterton himself, though."

May's face fell a little. "I didn't mean that," she said. "Oh, I suppose I want to win anyhow, but I'd much rather not win through that."

"Must take what we can get," murmured Foster, quite resignedly.

"I suppose so; and it's not as if my husband, or you, or any of his friends had taken any part in it."

The inquisitive glance ceased; Foster had found out the answer to what it had asked; there were limits to the confidence which existed between Lady May Quisanté and her husband. But he only smiled comfortably; Quisanté wouldn't talk, he himself was safe, and, if anything had cropped up in talk between him and Japhet, his skill and Japhet's vanity had ensured that the little man should think himself the initiator, inventor, and sole agent in the whole affair.

"We're not responsible for Japhet Williams," said he. "His vote's safe for us now, though, and it means a few besides his own."

"I sometimes wonder," mused May, "whether anybody at an election ever votes one way and not the other simply because he thinks that way right and the other wrong." She laughed, adding, "You don't get the impression that they ever do, canvassing and going about like this."

"Must allow for local feelings, Lady May."

"Yes, I know; and everybody has feelings, and I suppose every place is local. You say a lot of people'll vote for us because Sir Winterton wouldn't let Lady Mildmay come to the town?"

"A better stroke for us than any even Mr. Quisanté has done."

"And there's something like that in every constituency, I suppose! How do we get governed even as well as we do?"

Foster looked thoughtful and nursed his foot (in which he had a touch of the gout). "It's all under God," he said gravely. "He turns things to account in ways we can't foresee, Lady May." Was it possible that he was remembering the peculiar qualities of Mr. Japhet Williams? May did not laugh, for Mr. Foster was obviously sincere, but she looked at him with surprise; his religion came in such odd flashes across the homely tints of his worldly wisdom and placid acceptance of things and men as he happened to find them. Henstead was not the Kingdom of Heaven, and he did not pretend to think it wise to act on the assumption that it was. Like Quisanté, he did not set up for being superhuman—nor set other people up for it either. May felt that there were lessons to be learnt here; nay, that she was making some progress in them; though she wondered now and then what Weston Marchmont would think of the lessons and of her progress in them.

"The worst of it is," she went on, "that I'm afraid one has to say a lot of things that are not exactly quite true."

"Truer than the other side," Mr. Foster affirmed emphatically, his corpulence seeming to give weight to the dictum as he threw himself forward in his chair.

"Relative truth!" laughed May. "Like No. 77?"

"You must ask Mr. Quisanté about that."

"Oh, no, I won't. I'll listen to his speeches about it." She grew grave as she went on. "I've only asked him about one thing all through the election. I had to ask him about that."

"Ah!" murmured Foster, cautiously, vaguely, safely.

"This wretched story about Sir Winterton, you know. And I got into terrible trouble by my question." She laughed a little. "He doesn't as a rule scold me, you know, but he really did. I was very much surprised. Fancy boring you with this! Well, I asked him if he'd had anything to do with reviving the story. I asked him right straight out. Did you think I was like that, Mr. Foster?"

"Pretty well, pretty well," said old Foster; he was smiling, but he was watching her again.

"Was it insulting? Well, you see——" She stopped abruptly; Foster was not, after all, Aunt Maria, and she could not tell him how it was that she might ask her husband questions that sounded insulting. "Anyhow he was very much offended."

Foster still nursed his foot, and now he shifted a little in his chair.

"He gave me his word directly, but told me he was very much hurt at my asking him." She smiled again. "There's a confession of a conjugal quarrel for you, Mr. Foster. Don't talk about it, or Mr. Smiley will have a caricature of us throwing the furniture at one another. I've been very humble ever since, I assure you."

Mr. Foster chuckled. May imagined that his fancy was touched by her suggestion of the caricature; in fact he was picturing Alexander Quisanté's indignant disclaimer.

"Don't tell him I said anything to you about it," she added.

"You may be sure I won't," he promised.

It would not have been out of harmony with Mr. Foster's general theological position to consider the sudden and serious development of his gout as a direct judgment on him for a diplomacy that perhaps overstepped legitimate limits, and in another man's case he might have adopted such a view with considerable complacency. When, however, he was laid up and placed *hors du combat* in the last three critical days, he needed all his faith to reconcile him to one of the most unfathomable instances of the workings of Providence. His grumbles were loud and long, and the directions which he sent from his sick bed were tinged with irritability. For at last the other side had come to its senses; Sir Winterton was affable again, Lady Mildmay was canvassing, and Mr. Smiley had high hopes. Despondency would have fallen on Foster's spirit but for the report of Quisanté's exploits, performed in the teeth of the orders of that same Dr. Tillman who had given Sir Winterton such excellent unprofessional advice touching the affair of Tom Sinnett. He gave Quisanté just as good counsel, and with just as little result. Then he tried Quisanté's wife and found in her what he thought a hardness or an insensibility, or, if that were an unjust view, a sort of fatalism which forbade her to seek to interfere, and reduced her to being a spectator of her husband's doings and destiny rather than a partner in them.

"How can he lie by now?" she asked. "It's impossible; he must see this out whatever happens." Quisanté had said exactly the same thing, but his wife's perfect agreement in it seemed strange to the doctor. It was making the man's success more than the man; there was too much of the Spartan wife about it, without the Spartan wife's excuse of patriotism. Something of these feelings found expression in the look with which he regarded May, and he allowed himself to express them more freely to Lady Mildmay, who would have disappointed the most important meeting sooner than face the risk of Sir Winterton's taking cold. He told her how May had said, "He won't stand being coddled," and then had added, with a frankness which the doctor had not become accustomed to, "Besides I should never do it. We aren't in the least like that to one another."

"I felt rather sorry for the man," said the doctor. "It's as if he was a racehorse, and they didn't think so much about him as about a win for the stable."

"Do you like him?" asked Lady Mildmay, merely in natural curiosity. But the doctor started a little as he answered, "Why, no, I don't like him at all." And as he drove home he was thoughtful.

"Well, here we are at last!" said Jimmy Benyon as he sat down to breakfast on the morning of the polling day. "I'm told Mildmay's people were asking for six to four last night. Where's Quisanté?"

"He went out just before eight, to catch some of the men who work on the line and can't be back to vote in the evening," said May.

"Lord!" sighed Jimmy in a self-reproachful tone; it was past nine now, and he was only just out of bed. "What are you going to do?"

"Drive and bow and smile and shake hands," said May. "And you're going to and fro in a wagonette of Mr. Williams'—without any springs, you know. And Mr. Dunn's going to take Fanny in one of his waggons; she'll have to sit on a plank without a back all day, so I told her to stay in bed till she has to start at ten."

"It's a devilish difficult question," said Jimmy meditatively, "whether it's all worth it, you know."

"Oh, it's worth more than that," said May lightly, as she sprang up and put on her hat. "It's worth—well, almost anything. Six to four? They expect us to win then?"

"By a neck, yes." He glanced at her and added rather uneasily, "They say friend Japhet's done the trick for us." She made no answer, and he went on hastily, "Old Foster's still in bed, and the waiter says he's written five notes to your husband already—a regular row of them in the bar, you know."

"Last instructions?"

"Oh, somebody else to be nobbled, don't you know; some fellow who wants to marry his deceased wife's sister—or else is afraid he'll have to if they pass the Bill. And there's the butcher in Market Street who's got some trouble about slaughterhouses that I'm simply hanged if I can understand. I jawed with him for half-an-hour yesterday, and then didn't hook him safe."

"Alexander must find time to go and hook him," said May, smiling. "Alexander'll be great on slaughter-houses."

"And at the last minute Smiley's been hinting something about Mildmay giving a bit of land to extend the Recreation Ground. A beastly unscrupulous fellow I call Smiley."

"Oh, poor Mr. Smiley! He wants to win."

"He might play fair, though."

"Might he? Oh, well, I suppose so. We've played fair anyhow—pretty fair, haven't we?"

"Rather!"

"You really think so, Jimmy?" She was serious now; Jimmy reached out his hand and touched hers for a moment; he divined that she was asking him for a verdict and was anxious what it might be.

"Rather!" he said again. "That's all right. We've kept to the rules square enough."

"Then I'm off to bow and smile!" she cried. As she went by she touched his hand again. "Thanks, Jimmy," she said.

Jimmy, left alone, stretched himself, sighed, and lit a cigar; they were nearly out of the wood now, and they had managed to play pretty fair. For his own sake he was glad, since he had been mixed up in the campaign; he had perception enough to be far more glad for May Quisanté's.

Through all the fever of that day the same gladness and relief were in her heart in a form a thousandfold more intense. They enabled her to do her bowing and smiling, to hope eagerly, to work unceasingly, to be gay and happy in the excitement of fighting and the prospect of victory. She could put aside the memory of Tom Sinnett; they had not been to blame; let that affair be set off against Smiley's hypothetical extension of the Recreation Ground. She felt that she could face people, above all that she could face the Mildmays when the time came for her to meet them at the declaration of the poll. And as regarded her husband she could do more than praise and more than admire; she could feel tenderness and a touch of remorse as she saw him battling against worse than the enemy, against a deadly weariness and weakness to which he would not yield. From to-morrow she determined to lay to heart the doctor's counsel, to try whether he could not be persuaded to stand a little coddling, whether he might not be brought to, if only she could persuade herself to show him more love. When she looked at the Mildmays she understood what had perhaps been in the doctor's mind; dear Lady Mildmay (she was a woman who immediately claimed that epithet with its expression of mingled affection and ridicule) no doubt overdid a little her pleasant part. She made Sir Winterton a trifle absurd. But then with what chivalry he faced and covered the touch of absurdity, or avoided it without offending the love that caused it! Very glad she was that, when Lady Mildmay asked to be introduced, she could clasp hands with the consciousness that her side had played fair, and by a delicate distant reference could honestly assure the enemy's wife that both she and her husband had looked with disfavour on that unpleasant episode.

She had known she would like Sir Winterton and was not disappointed; she saw that he was very favourably impressed by her, largely, no doubt, because she was handsome, even more because their ways of looking at things would be very much the same; they had the same pride and the same sensitiveness; in humour he was not her match, or he would not have ridden his high horse. She felt that he complimented her in begging her to make him known to Quisanté; and this office also she was able to perform with pleasure, because they had played fair. Hope was high in her that night, not merely for this contest, not merely now for her husband's career, but for her life and his, for her and him themselves. If her old fears had been proved wrong, if in face of temptation he had not yielded, if now by honourable means he had made good his footing, things might go better in the future, that constant terror vanish, and there be left only what she admired and what attracted her. For they had kept to the rules square enough; Quisanté had played fair.

She heard Sir Winterton tell him so in a friendly phrase, just touched with a pleasantly ornate pompousness; eagerly looking, she saw Quisanté accept the compliment just as he should, as a graceful tribute from an antagonist, as no more than his due from anyone who knew him. She smiled to think that she could write and tell Aunt Maria that Sandro was improving, that even his manners grew better and better as success gave him confidence, and confidence produced simplicity. Making a friendly group with their rivals in the ante-room, they were able to forget the little fretful man who paced up and down, carefully avoiding Sir Winterton's eye, but asserting by the obstinate pose of his head and the fierce pucker on his brow that he had done no more than his duty in asking a plain answer to a plain question, and that on Sir Winterton's head, not on his, lay the consequences of evasion.

Presently the group separated. The little heaps of paper on the long table in the inner room had grown from tens to hundreds; the end was near. Quisanté's agent stood motionless behind the clerks who counted, Jimmy Benyon looking over his shoulder eagerly. Smiley regarded the heaps for a moment or two and then walked across to Sir Winterton. Through the doorway May saw Sir Winterton bend his head, listen, nod, smile, and turn and whisper to his friends. At the next moment Jimmy Benyon came to the door, caught her eye, smiled, and nodded energetically. The presiding officer looked down the row of men counting to right and left. "Are you all agreed on your figures?" he asked. They exchanged papers, counted, whispered a little, recovered their own papers. "Yes," ran along the row, and the presiding officer pushed back his chair. In a single instant Quisanté was the centre of a throng of people shaking his hand, and everybody crowded into the inner room.

"How many?" asked Sir Winterton Mildmay.

"Forty-seven, Sir Winterton," answered Smiley.

So it was over, and Alexander Quisanté was again Member for Henstead. "Send somebody to

tell Foster," May heard him say before he followed to the window from which the announcement was to be made. He was very pale and walked rather unsteadily. "Stay by Mr. Quisanté; I think he's not very well," she whispered to the agent. The next moment two of Sir Winterton's prominent supporters passed her; one spoke to the other half in a whisper. "That damned Sinnett business has done us," he said.

Her cheek flushed suddenly; it was horrible to think that. Still they had played fair, and it was no fault of theirs.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you," said a gentle voice.

She turned and found Lady Mildmay beside her; Sir Winterton's wife was smiling, but there were tears in her eyes.

"And do get your husband home to bed; he looks terribly, terribly tired. I'm afraid he's not nearly as strong as Winterton; but I'm sure you take great care of him."

"Not so much as I ought to." Lady Mildmay, accustomed to straightforward emotions, was puzzled at the half-bitter half-merry tone. "I mean I egg him on when perhaps I ought to hold him back. I know he ought to rest, but I never want him to—never really want it, you know." Lady Mildmay still looked puzzled. "He's at his best working," said May.

"Well, but you must want him to yourself sometimes anyhow, and that's a rest for him."

Oh, the differences of people and fates! That was May's not original but irresistible reflection when Lady Mildmay left her. Want him to herself! Never—or never as Lady Mildmay meant, anyhow. She only wanted a good place whence to look at him.

She had one more encounter before Jimmy Benyon came to take her home. Japhet Williams came up to her and made her shake hands.

"We have got a representative in whom we can have confidence," he said.

"I hope so, Mr. Williams." She smiled to think how exactly she was speaking the truth—a rare privilege in social intercourse.

"Don't think that I resent in any way the distant attitude which Mr. Quisanté thought it desirable to take up in regard to my action," pursued Japhet; it seemed odd that such a coil of words could be unrolled from so small a body. "My course was incumbent on me. I recognise that his attitude was proper for him."

"I'm so glad, Mr. Williams," May murmured vaguely.

"I could take the course I did because I had nothing to gain by it, nothing personally. Being personally interested, he could not have moved in the matter. I hope you see my point of view as well as his, Lady May?"

"Oh, perfectly. I—I'm sure you're both right."

"My conscience doesn't blame me," said Japhet solemnly; and something in his manner made May remark to Jimmy, when he came to take her home, "What a lot of excellent people are spoilt by their consciences!"

Quisanté had disappeared, engulfed in a vortex of triumphant supporters, carried off by arms linked in his, or perhaps hoisted in uncomfortable grandeur on enthusiastic but unsteady shoulders. The street was densely packed, and Jimmy's apparently simple course of returning straight to the hotel proved to be a work of much time and difficulty. But the stir of life was there, all around them, and May's eyes grew bright as she felt it. Now at least it could not seem a difficult question whether the result were worth the effort; triumph drove out such doubts.

"I'm so glad we've won; I'm so glad we've won," she kept repeating in simple girlish enthusiasm as Jimmy steered her through the crowd, heading towards the Bull whenever he could make a yard or two. "Though I'm awfully sorry for Lady Mildmay," she added once.

So long were they in getting through that on their arrival they found that Quisanté had reached home before them. His journey had been hurried; he had been taken faint and the rejoicings were of necessity interrupted; he was upstairs now on the sofa. May ran up, followed by Fanny and Jimmy, passing many groups of anxious friends on the way. Quisanté was stretched in a sort of stupor; he was quite white, his eyes were closed. She knelt down by him and called him by his name.

"He's quite done up," said Jimmy, and he went to the sideboard and got hold of the brandy.

"Do keep everybody out," called May, and Fanny shut the door oh half-a-dozen inquisitive people. Both she and Jimmy were looking very serious; May grew frightened when she turned and saw their faces.

"He's only tired; he'll be all right again soon," she protested. "Give me a little brandy and

water, Jimmy."

They stood looking at her while she did her best for him; a slight surprise was in their faces; they had never seen her minister to him before. Did she really love him? The question escaped from Jimmy's eyes, and Fanny's acknowledged without answering it. Presently Quisanté sighed and opened his eyes.

"Drink some of this," said his wife low and tenderly. "Do drink some." She was kneeling by him, one arm under his shoulder, the other offering the glass.

"We've done it, haven't we?" he murmured, as she tilted the glass to his lips. The drink revived him; with her help he hoisted himself higher on the sofa and looked at her. A smile came on his face; they heard him whisper, "My darling!" Again it struck them both as a little strange that he should call her that. But she smiled in answer and made him drink again.

"Yes, you've won; you always win," they heard her whisper softly. She had forgotten all now, except that he had won, that her faith stood justified, and he lay half-dead from the work of vindicating it. At that moment she would have been no man's if she could not be Alexander Quisanté's.

There was a knock at the door; Jimmy Benyon went and opened it; he came back holding a note, and gave it to May; it was addressed to her husband in a pencil scrawl. "A congratulation for you," she said to Quisanté. He glanced carelessly and languidly at it, murmuring, "Read it to me, please," and she broke open the sealed envelope. Inside the writing was as negligent a scribble as on the outside, the writing of a man in bed, with a stump of pencil. Old Mr. Foster wrote better when he was up and abroad, so much better that Quisanté's tired eyes had not marked the hand for his. "Read it out to me," said Quisanté, his eyes now dwelling gratefully on his wife's face, his brain at last resting from the long strain of weeks of effort.

"Yes, I'll read it," she said cheerfully, almost merrily. "We shall be full of congratulations for days now, shan't we?"

She smoothed out the sheet of paper; there were but two or three lines of writing, and she read them aloud. She read aloud the simple indiscreet little hymn of triumph which victory and the safety of a private note lured from old Mr. Foster's usually diplomatic lips:—

"Just done it, thank God. Shouldn't have without Tom Sinnett, and we've got you to thank for that idea too."

She read it all before she seemed to put any meaning into it. A silence followed her reading. She knelt there by him, holding the sheet of note-paper in her hands. Fanny and Jimmy stood without moving, their eyes on her and Quisanté. Slowly May rose to her feet. Quisanté closed his eyes and moved restlessly on the sofa; he sighed and put his hand up to his head. The slightest of smiles came on May's lips as she stood looking at him for a minute; then she turned to Fanny, saying, "I think he'd better have a little more brandy-and-water." She walked across to the mantelpiece, the crumpled sheet of paper in her hand. She looked at Fanny with the little smile still on her lips as she lit a candle and burnt the note in its flame, dropping the ashes into the grate. Quisanté lay as though unconscious, taking no heed of his sister-in-law's proffered services. Jimmy Benyon stood in awkward stillness, looking at May. Suddenly May broke into a laugh.

"Just as well to burn it; it might be misunderstood," said she. Jimmy moved towards her quickly and impulsively. "No, no, I'm all right," she went on. "And we've won, haven't we? I'm going to my room. Look after him." She paused and added, smiling still, "His head's very bad, you know." And so, pale and smiling, she left her husband to their care.

The ashes of Mr. Foster's note seemed to crinkle into a sour grin where they lay on the black-leaded floor of the fire-grate.

CHAPTER XIV.

OPEN EYES.

It is a matter of common observation that the local influences and peculiarities which loom so large before the eyes of both parties during such a struggle as that at Henstead seem to be entirely forgotten after the declaration of the poll, at least by the victorious faction and their friends in the Press and the country. Out of a congeries of conflicting views, fancies, fads, interests, quarrels, and misunderstandings a reasoned and single political verdict is considered to emerge, and great is the credit of the advocate who extracts it from the multitudinous jury. When Quisanté had won Henstead, little more was heard of the gentleman with a deceased wife's sister, of the butcher in trouble about slaughter-houses, of Japhet Williams' conscience or Tom Sinnett's affair. The result was taken as an augury of triumph for the party all over the country, where

these things had never been heard of and the voices of Henstead did not reach. Unhappily however, as events proved, the victory of Henstead had in the end to be regarded not as the inauguration of a triumphant campaign but as a brilliant exploit performed in face of an overwhelming enemy. To be brief, the Government was beaten, somewhat badly beaten, the great cry was a failure, and there were many casualties in the ranks. Marchmont kept his seat by virtue of personal and hereditary popularity; but Dick Benyon, who had been considered quite safe, lost his, a fate shared by many who had deemed themselves no less secure.

"I suppose you preached your miserable Crusade, as you call it?" said Constantine Blair. They were at dinner at Marchmont's, Morewood and the Dean also being of the company.

"I did, and without it I should have got a worse thrashing," said Dick stoutly; it would be unkind to scrutinise too closely the sincerity of this statement.

"Quisanté had the sense to throw it over," growled Constantine; his equanimity was not up to its usual standard.

"It's wisdom to lighten the ship in a storm," smiled Marchmont.

"Yes, and to jettison other people's heavy luggage first," said Morewood.

"The duty of a captain, I suppose," murmured the Dean with a smile.

"You needn't begin with your best guns," argued Dick, a little hotly.

"We can't let Dick appropriate our metaphor to his own purposes," said Marchmont. "As a matter of fact now, had the Crusade much to do with it?"

Morewood interposed before Dick could answer.

"Oh, only as a Crusade. 'Causes' of any kind are properly suspected," said he. "For my part I should imitate the noble simplicity of municipal election bills. 'Down with the rates!' Quite enough, you know. The end is indisputably attractive, and you aren't such an ass as to try to indicate the means. So you get in."

"And don't do it?" The question was Marchmont's.

"Of course not—or what would you have to say next time?"

"The other side has always prevented your doing it?" the Dean suggested.

"Mostly, yes—by factious opposition."

"You fellows don't seem to care," observed Constantine Blair moodily, "but I tell you we're out for four or five years at least."

There was a pause; the accused persons looked at one another; then Marchmont had the courage to observe that the country would perhaps live through the period of calamity before it.

"The country, yes, but how about some of the party?" asked Morewood. "How about that, Blair? You're supposed to be the man who feeds the ravens and providently caters for the sparrows, you know. You'll have your hands full, I should think."

Blair's look expressed the opinion that they trenched on mysteries; he had these little traits of self-importance, sitting funnily on a round and merry face. Marchmont laughed as he turned to Dick and enquired after Jimmy.

"He was helping you, I suppose?"

"Yes, after Quisanté was in. He's all right." Dick's tone was slightly reserved.

"Did Quisanté help you? He seems to have helped everybody; the man ran about like an electric current."

"I didn't ask him to come to me. I felt, you know——"

"Yes, I see. But Jimmy didn't?"

Dick looked rather puzzled. "I don't quite make Jimmy out about Quisanté," he remarked. "He worked for him like a horse all the time, and wrote me letters praising him to the skies. Then when he was in and everybody was cracking him up Jimmy wouldn't open his mouth about him—seemed not to like the subject, you know."

Nobody spoke; they had heard rumours of an event which would bring Jimmy into new relations with Quisanté, and they waited for possible information. But Dick did not go on, so it was left to Morewood to make the necessary intrusion into private affairs; he did it willingly, with a malicious grin.

"Thinking him over in the light of a relation, perhaps?" he suggested.

"It would only be a connection anyhow," Dick corrected rather sharply.

"Oh, if that comforts you!" said Morewood, laughing.

"She's a charming girl and I'm awfully glad it's come off."

"Oh, it has?" asked Marchmont.

"Yes, the other day."

"And you're glad in spite of——?"

"Yes, I am. Besides I don't mean anything of that sort. I suppose I know as well as anybody what Quisanté is."

"As far as I'm concerned I'll admit you do, and still feel you don't know much," remarked the Dean.

"Well, I wish there were more men like him," said Blair, nodding vigorously.

"Some men would sacrifice anything for their party," remarked Morewood.

Marchmont took no part in the talk about Quisanté; he could not praise; for reasons very plain to himself he would not say a word in blame or depreciation. Not only had he been Quisanté's rival, but ever since his talk with May he had felt himself the repository of special information, imperfect indeed and shadowy, yet beyond that which the outside world possessed. Besides he had received two letters from her, one written in the course of the fight, gay in tone, expressing an eager interest in her husband's fortunes, keenly appreciative of her husband's brilliancy and bravery. The second, in reply to his telegram of congratulation, had run in another key; an utter weariness and an almost disgusted satiety seemed to have superseded her former interest. Side by side with these he had discovered in the repressed but eloquent words of her greeting to him an intense desire to see him. "I want a change so badly," she wrote. "I want somebody unpractical, unpushing. You must come directly we're back in town." They had been back in town ten days, he knew, but he had not yet obeyed her summons. The thought crossed his mind that the contrast between her two letters was an odd parallel to Dick's description of the puzzling demeanour of his brother Jimmy. Was it a characteristic of the man's to produce these sudden and startling changes of mood towards himself? Marchmont was puzzled at the notion; he was too little able to sympathise with the attraction to find himself capable of understanding the force and extent of the revulsion. "At all events she must be pretty well prepared for what he is by now," he said to himself with the mixture of pity and resentment which his love for her and her rejection of him in Quisanté's favour had bred in his mind. For her he was very sorry; it was harder to be quite simply and sincerely sorry that her blindness to what had been so obvious was working out its inevitable result; he would like to console her in any way short of refraining from pointing out how wrong she had been proved.

When, in obedience to another note, he went, he did not at first find May alone. Although he knew Sir Winterton Mildmay, he was not acquainted with his wife, and was surprised when the kind-looking woman who sat with May was introduced to him as Lady Mildmay. This was a quick and thorough burying of the hatchet indeed. "Would you see this in any country except England?" he asked jokingly. Lady Mildmay declared not, adding that there was no bitterness in England because there was only upstanding fighting which left no rancour and indeed bred personal liking. Marchmont thought to himself that Quisanté must have been very clever—or that this dear woman (he gave her the epithet at once as everybody did) was not very clever, no cleverer than he had long known handsome Sir Winterton to be. Glancing across at May, he seemed to see an expression of absolute pain on her face, as Lady Mildmay developed these amiable theories.

"I don't believe my husband will ever stand against yours again," she said.

May looked at Marchmont. "They really have taken quite a fancy to one another," she said with a laugh that sounded rather forced. "Funny, isn't it?"

"The speech you invite me to would be a very unfortunate one to address to the wives of the two gentlemen," he answered, smiling. "Funny indeed! I prefer to call it inevitable, don't you, Lady Mildmay?"

May made the slightest gesture of impatience, but a moment later smiled again at Lady Mildmay, saying, "Yes, I suppose that's what I ought to have said."

The visitor rose to go; approaching May, she first shook hands and then stood for a moment with a half-expectant half-imploring air. It was plain that she suggested a kiss. Marchmont looked on rather amused; he knew that May Quisanté was not given to effusiveness. It would, however, have been cruel not to kiss Lady Mildmay, and May kissed her with an excellent grace.

"Well," said Marchmont when the door was shut, "she takes defeat prettily. Evidently you've made a conquest, as well as your husband."

"I wish she wouldn't come here," said May, wandering to the window and speaking in a disconsolate voice.

"You don't like her?"

"Like her? Oh, of course I like the dear creature! Who wouldn't? And I like him too." She turned round, smiling a little. "He's so nice, and large, and clean, and direct, and obvious, and simple, you know. I like him just as I like a great rosy apple."

"Hum! I don't eat many of those, do you?"

She laughed, but rather reluctantly. "Perhaps that's more your fault than the apple's. Still I agree. A bite now and then. But they're mostly only to dress the table."

"Why don't you want her to come?"

May sat down and fidgeted with a nick-nack on the table.

"Don't you think being forgiven's rather tiresome work?" she asked. "They don't mean that, I know, but I can't help feeling as if they did."

"I don't see why you should."

She looked full at him for a moment. "No, I didn't suppose you would see it," she said. "Don't stand there, come and sit here,—near me. I've written you three letters, but you don't seem to understand yet that I want to see you." He took the chair near her to which she had pointed; she looked at him, evidently with both pleasure and amusement. "You don't look the least as if you'd been electioneering," she told him in an admiring congratulatory tone.

"I've had the egg-marks brushed off," he explained with the insincere gravity that he knew she liked.

"Will they brush off? Will they always brush off?" she asked, her voice low, her hands nursing her knee, her eyes on his.

"Parables, my lady?"

"Yes. Do you know that we won the election because rosy Sir Winterton was supposed to have flirted with his keeper's daughter, and wouldn't say he hadn't, and wouldn't bring that dear soul where anybody was likely to say he had?"

"No, I hadn't heard that. I thought your husband's——"

"Oh, yes, all that helped. He was splendid. But we shouldn't have done it without the keeper's daughter."

"*Vox populi, vox Dei*; they're both so hard to understand."

"I've been longing for you," she said, seeming to awake suddenly from her half-dreamy half-playful account of the life she had been living. The speech, with its cruel frankness and its more cruel affection, embittered him.

"When you're tired of a rosy apple, you like a bite at a bitter cherry? One bite; the rest of me, I suppose, is only to dress the table."

She understood him.

"Well, then, you shouldn't come," she protested. "I've been fair about it."

"No, not always; what you write and say now and then isn't fair unless it means something more."

"Oh, I don't know what it means."

Her misery drove away his resentment, and pity filled its place.

"You seem more than usually down on your luck," he said with a smile.

"Yes, a little," she confessed. "It's the Mildmays and—and—the general sham of it, you know." She glanced across at him, smiling. "That's why I longed for you," she said.

It seemed to him that never had fate and never had woman been so cruel. The one so nearly had given what he wanted, the other tantalised with the exhibition of a feeling only just short of what he hoped for, but the more merciless because it seemed not to understand by how narrow an inch it failed of his desires. He spoke to her hardly and coldly.

"You seem to me to choose to try a bit of everything and a bit of everybody," he said. "That's your affair. But I'm not surprised that you don't find it satisfactory."

"I have to try more than I like of some things and some people," she replied. She went on quickly, "I know, oh, I know! Now you're calling me disloyal!"

A curious vexation laid hold of him. Once he had liked her to speak of him in this strain, even as once he had loved to see in her the type of the pure, calm, gracious maiden. Now he knew better both her and himself. The impulse was on him to say that he cared nothing for her disloyalty so that he himself was the cause of it and he himself to reap the benefit. He was quick to read her, and he read in her restless misery some sore discontent with the lot that she had chosen. But he refrained from the words, not in his turn from any loyalty, but rather still from bitterness, from a perverse desire to give her nothing of what she had refused, to leave her in the solitude of spirit which came of her own action. Besides his fastidiousness revolted from plunging him into a position which was so common, and which he, with his dislike of things common, had always counted vulgar. Thus he was silent, and she also sat silent, looking straight before her. At last, however, she spoke.

"Alexander's gone to the city," she said, "to see his stockbroker. The stockbroker's a cousin of —ours." She smiled for a moment. "His name's Mandeville. Since the party's out, we've got to see if we can make some money."

His pity revived; whatever she deserved, it was not this horrible common-place lot of wanting money; that sat so ill on his still stately, no longer faultless, image of her.

"To make some money?" he repeated, half-scornful, half-puzzled.

"Oh, you're rich—you don't know. We spent a lot at Henstead. We must have money: I spend a lot, so does Alexander." She glanced at him, and he saw that something had nearly escaped her lips of which she repented. "Do you ever feel," she went on, apparently by way of amendment, "as if you might be dishonest—under stress of circumstances, you know?"

"I suppose I might. I've never thought about it."

"So dishonest as—as to get into trouble and be sent to prison and so on?"

"Oh, I should hope to be skilful enough to avoid that," he laughed. "Fools ought never to be dishonest; so they invented the 'best policy' proverb to keep themselves straight."

May nodded. "That's it, I think," she said, and fell into silence again. This time he spoke.

"I don't like your wanting money," he said in a low voice.

"No, I know," she smiled. "It's not like what you've always chosen to think I'm like. I ought to live in gilded halls and scatter largesse, oughtn't I?" She laughed a little bitterly. "Perhaps I will, if cousin Mandeville does his duty."

"Meanwhile you feel the temptation to dishonesty?" He paused, but then went on deliberately, "Or, to follow your rule of complete identification, shall I say 'we feel a temptation to dishonesty, do we?'"

"Oh, but we should be clever enough not to be found out, shouldn't we?"

"I think you would."

"You've not half such good reason to think it as I have." She rose, walked to the hearth-rug, and stood facing the grate, her back turned to him. She seemed to him to be looking at a photograph which he noticed now for the first time on the mantelpiece, the picture of a stout elderly man with large clean-shaven face and an expression of tolerant shrewdness. Marchmont moved close to her shoulder and looked also. Perceiving him, she half turned her head towards him. "That's my husband's right-hand man at Henstead," she said. "They understand each other perfectly."

"He looks a sharp fellow."

"So he may be able to understand Alexander? Thank you. I like to have his picture here." Suddenly she turned round full on him, stretching out her hand. "I wish you'd go now," she said. "Have you turned stupid, or don't you see that you must leave me alone, or—or I shall say all sorts of things I mustn't? That man on the mantelpiece there typifies it all. Bless his dear old fat face! I like him so much—and he's such a humbug, and I don't think he knows that he's in the least a humbug. Is sincerity just stupidity?" Her mirth broke out. "Alexander hates my having him there," she whispered; then she drew away, crying, "Go, go."

"I'm off," said he. "But why doesn't Quisanté like the old gentleman's picture, and why do you keep it there if he doesn't?"

"And why are none of us perfect—except perhaps the Mildmays? Good-bye." She gave him her hand. "Oh, by the way," she went on, calling him back after he had turned, "have you ever had anything to do with promoting companies or anything of that kind?"

"Well, no, I can't say I have."

"Is it necessarily disreputable?"

"Oh, no," he smiled. "Not necessarily. In fact it's an essential feature in the life of a commercial nation." He was mockingly grave again.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Marchmont. An essential feature of the life in a commercial nation! That's very good." She broke into a laugh. "Now I've got something agreeable to say," she said. He did not move till she shook her head violently at him and pointed to the door. As he went out, she turned back to Mr. Foster's picture, murmuring, "It's no use my setting up for a martyr. Martyrs don't giggle half the time." Had Marchmont heard her, the word "giggle" would have stirred him to real indignation; it was so inappropriate to that low reluctant mirth-laden laugh of hers, which seemed to reveal the feeling that it mocked and extorted the pity that it could not but deride. It sounded again as she stood looking at old Foster the maltster's picture there on the mantelpiece where Quisanté did not like to see it.

For what was the meaning of it to her, declared by her perverse determination to keep it there and plain enough to her husband's quick wit? It was the outward sign that her malicious fancy chose of the new state of feeling and the new relation between them which had emerged from the tempest of emotion that Foster's congratulatory note had thrown her into. The tempest had raged in solitude and silence; she had not spoken a word to her sister, or to Jimmy Benyon, hardly a word to Quisanté himself. He had his case of course, and she was obliged to hear it, to hear also Foster's own account of how he came to express himself so awkwardly and to write as though Mr. Quisanté had originally set the story afloat, whereas he meant only to applaud the tact with which his leader had regulated their conduct towards it after it was started. May said she was quite sure he had meant only this, thanked him for all his services, and begged the photograph. Quisanté approved this bearing towards the third party but was not deceived by it himself. When the picture was set on the mantelpiece, he understood that his case was not convincing, that the episode would not fall into the oblivion which he had suggested for it; it would not be forgotten and could not be forgiven. Deeply resentful of this treatment—for he saw nothing very bad in his manœuvre—he had been moved to protest passionately, to explain volubly, and to offer pledge on pledge. Protests, plaints, and promises broke uselessly against the cool, composed, indulgent friendliness of her bearing. She gave him to understand that no pretences were longer possible between them, but that they would get along without them. She allowed him to see that the one fear left to her on his account was the apprehension that some day he would be found out by other people. Here her terror was as great as it had ever been, for her pride was unbroken; but she did not show him the full extent of her anxiety.

"You ought to be particularly careful, so many people would like to see you come to grief." This, or something like it, was what she had said, by way of dismissing the subject for ever from their conversation with one another. It expressed very well her new position, how she had abandoned those mad hopes of changing him and fallen back on the resolve to see the truth of him herself and make the best of him to others. But the very calmness and friendliness of the warning told him how resolutely she had chosen her path, while they concealed the shame and the fear with which she set herself to tread it. One thing only Quisanté understood quite clearly; it was no use acting to her any more; what she wished was that he should cease to act to her. Yet, knowing this, he could not cease, it was not in his nature to cease, and he went on playing his part before eyes that he knew were not imposed on but saw through all his disguises. His old furtiveness of manner came back now when he talked over himself and his affairs with his wife.

But even here he had his triumph, he was not at her mercy, he wielded a power of his own; she recognised it with a smile. Like Aunt Maria, whatever she might think of him she was bound to think constantly of him, to be occupied with his doings and his success, to want to know what was in his mind, yes, although it might be what she hated to find there. For a while he had withdrawn himself from her, ceasing to tell of his life, aims, and doings. If he sought thus to bring her to terms, she proved an easy conquest; she surrendered at once, laughing at herself and at him. "We're partners," she said, "and I must hear all about what you're doing. I can't live without that, you know." And as the price of what she must have she gave him friendship, sympathy, and comradeship, crossing his wishes in nothing and never allowing herself to upbraid except in that small tacit jeer of Mr. Foster's picture on the mantelpiece. For now she believed herself to know the worst, and yet to be able to endure.

What sort of life promised to form itself out of this state of affairs? For after all she was at the beginning of life, and he hardly well into the middle of his. Neither of the two obvious things seemed possible; devotion was out of the question, alienation was forbidden by her unconquerable interest in him and his irrepressible instinct to hold her mind, even if he could not chain her affections. Perhaps a third thing was more usual still, tolerance. But for her at least neither was tolerance the mood, for that is ill to build out of a mixture of intense admiration and scornful contempt. These seemed likely to be the predominant features of her life with her husband, sharing it so equally that the one could never drive out the other nor yet come to fair terms and, dividing the territory, live at peace.

"Perhaps they will some day," she thought, "when I get old and quiet." She was neither old nor quiet now, and her youth cried out against so poor a consolation. Then she told herself that she had the child, only to reproach herself, a moment later, with the insincere repetition of a commonplace. The child was not enough; had her nature been such as to find the child enough, she would certainly never have become Alexander Quisanté's wife. Always when she was most strongly repelled by him, there was in the back of her mind the feeling that it was something to be his wife. Only—he mustn't be found out. The worst terror of all, at which her half-jesting words

to Marchmont had hinted, came back as she murmured, "I wish we had more money." For money was necessary, as votes had been, and—her eyes strayed to old Foster's portrait on the mantelpiece. The election had cost a lot; no salary was to be looked for now; both by policy and by instinct Quisanté was lavish; she herself had no aptitude for small economies. Money was wanted very much indeed in Grosvenor Road.

It was on the way, though. This was the news that Quisanté, in the interval between his return from electioneering and the meeting of Parliament, brought back day by day from his excursions to the City and his conversations with Mandeville. He was careful to explain to his wife that he was no "guinea-pig," that he did not approve of the animal, and would never use his position to pick up gain in that way. But he had leisure—at least he could make time—and some of it he proposed to devote to starting a really legitimate and highly lucrative undertaking. The Alethea Printing Press was to revolutionise a great many things besides the condition of Quisanté's finances; it was not an ordinary speculative company. Marchmont's phrase came in here, and May used it neatly and graciously. Quisanté, much encouraged, plunged into an account of the great invention; if only it worked as it was certain to work, there was not one fortune but many fortunes in it. "And it will work?" she asked. "If we can get the capital," he answered with a confident air. "I shall try to interest all my friends in it," he went on. "You can help me there." May looked doubtful, and Quisanté grew more eloquent. At last he held up a sheaf of papers, saying triumphantly,

"Here are favourable reports from all the leading experts. We shall have an array of them in the prospectus. Of course they're absolutely impartial, and they really leave no room for doubt." He held them out to her, but she leant back with her hands in her lap.

"I shouldn't understand them," she protested. "But they all agree, do they?"

"Yes, all," he said emphatically. "Well, all except one." His brow wrinkled a little. "Mandeville insisted on having an opinion from Professor Maturin. I was against it. Maturin's absurdly pessimistic."

"He's a great man, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so,—he's got a great reputation anyhow."

"And he's against you?"

"The fact is that his is only—only a draft report. So far as it goes, it's not encouraging, but he's never had the facts really laid before him."

"You'd better go and lay them before him," she said very gravely.

Quisanté caught eagerly at the suggestion.

"Exactly what I proposed to Mandeville!" he cried. "The prospectus won't be out for nearly a month yet, and I shall go and see Maturin. I know——" He rose and began to walk about. "I know Maturin is wrong, and I know that I can show him he's wrong. I only want an hour with him to bring him round to my view, to the true view."

"Well, why haven't you been to see him?"

"I tried to go, but he's ill and not equal to business. As soon as he gets better I shall go. To put his report in as it stands would not only do us infinite harm—in fact we couldn't think of it—but it wouldn't be just to him."

"But if he won't change his opinion?"

"Oh, he must, he will. I tell you it's as plain as a pikestaff, when once it's properly explained."

"I'm sure you'll be able to convert him, if anyone can," said May soothingly.

"I must," said Quisanté briefly, and sat down to his papers again.

For an hour or two he worked steadily, without a pause, without an apparent hesitation. That fine machine of his was ploughing its straight unfaltering way through details previously unfamiliar and through problems which he had never studied. From five to seven she sat with a book in her hands, feigning to read, really watching her husband. He could not fail, she said to herself; he would make the Alethea Printing Press a success, irrespective of the actual merits of it. Was that possible? It seemed almost possible as she looked at him.

"It's bound to go," he said at last, pushing away the papers. "I'm primed now, and I can convince old Maturin in half an hour." He held up the Professor's report. "He must withdraw this and give us another."

Alas, there are things before which even will and energy and brains must bow. As he spoke the servant came in, bringing the *Evening Standard*. May took it, glanced at the middle page, and then, with a little start, looked across at her husband. He saw her glance. "Any news?" he asked.

"The Professor can't be convinced," she said. "His illness took a sudden turn for the worse last night and he died this afternoon at three o'clock."

Quisanté sat quite still for a few minutes, the dead Professor's report on the Alethea Printing Press still in his fingers.

"What'll you do now?" she asked, with the smile of curiosity which she always had ready for his plans. Would he pursue the Professor beyond Charon's stream?

He hesitated a little, glancing at her rather uneasily. At last he spoke.

"One thing at all events is clear to me," he said. "This thing doesn't represent a reasoned and well-informed opinion." He folded it up carefully and placed it by itself in a long envelope. "We must consider our course," he ended.

In a flash, by an instinct, May knew what their course would be and at whose dictation it would be followed.

"Of course," said Quisanté, "all this is strictly between ourselves."

Her cheek flushed a little. "You mustn't tell me any more business secrets. I don't like them," said she, and she turned away to escape the quick, would-be covert glance that she knew he would direct at her.

Money was necessary; votes had been necessary; old Foster smiled in fat shrewdness from the mantelpiece. May Quisanté was less sure that she knew the worst.

CHAPTER XV.

A STRANGE IDEA.

The next few weeks were a time of restless activity with Alexander Quisanté. Again he was like an electric current, not travelling now from constituency to constituency, but between Westminster and his cousin Mandeville's offices in the City. In both places he was very busy. His leader had declared for a waiting policy, and an interval in which the demoralisation of defeat should pass away; the party must feel its feet again, the great man said. Constantine Blair was full of precedents for the course, quoting Lord Melbourne, Sir Robert Peel, Sir James Graham, and all the gods of the Parliamentarian. Brusquely and almost rudely Quisanté brushed him, his gods, and his leader on one side, and raised the standard of fierce and immediate battle. The majority was composite; his quick eye saw the spot where a wedge might be inserted between the two component parts and driven home till the gap yawned wide and scission threatened. The fighting men needed only to be shown where to fight; they followed enthusiastically the man who led them to the field. Leaders shook grey heads, and leader-writers disclaimed a responsibility which *primá facie* had never rested on them; Quisanté was told that he would wreck the party for a quarter of a century to come. It would perhaps have been possible to meet Constantine Blair's precedents with other precedents, to quote newer gods against his established deities. That was not "Sandro's way"; here again he was content to be an ancestor, the originator of his methods, and the sufficient authority for them.

He was justified. The spirit of his fighting men ran high, and his fighting men's wives grew gracious to him. The majority, if they scowled at him (as was only to be hoped), began to scowl furtively at one another also and to say that certain questions, on which they were by no means of one mind, could not permanently be shirked and kept in the background. Some of them asked what their constituents had sent them to Westminster for, a question always indicative of perturbation in the parliamentary mind; in quiet times it is not raised. The Government papers took to observing that they did not desire to hurry or embarrass the Government, but that time was running on and it would be no true friendship to advise it to ignore the feeling which existed among an important, if numerically small, section of its followers. Altogether at the opening of the session the majority was much less happy, the minority in far finer feather, than anybody had expected. Only officialdom or ignorance could refuse the main credit to Alexander Quisanté.

"I declare," said Lady Castlefort—and her opinion was not one to neglect—"May Gaston was right to take the man after all. He'll be Prime Minister." And she settled her *pince-nez* and looked round for contradiction. She loved argument but had made the mistake of growing too important to be differed from. None the less on this occasion a sweet little voice spoke up in the circle.

"I wouldn't marry him if he were fifty times Prime Minister," said Lady Richard Benyon. "He's odious."

"God bless me!" murmured the Countess, genuinely startled. "Well, you'll see, my dear," she went on, nodding emphatically. "He's the only man among them." Her eye fell on Weston Marchmont. "Oh, yes, I see you're there," she said, "and I'm very glad you should be."

"It's always a pleasure to be here," he smiled urbanely.

"Especially, apparently, when you ought to be at the House," she retorted, glancing at the clock. "However to-day you've heard more truth here than you're likely to there, so I forgive you."

"More truth here? But Quisanté's making a speech!"

"Oh, you're very neat," she said with an open impatience. "You can score off a woman at her tea-table; go and score off the other side, Weston, and then you may do it as much as you like to me. As if anybody cared whether Mr. Quisanté speaks the truth or not!" He came up to her and held out his hand, smiling good-naturedly. She gave him hers with a laugh, for she liked him much and did not like Quisanté at all. "It's your own fault, that's why you're so exasperating," she half-whispered as she bade him good-bye.

Here was one side; on the other the men of the City came to know Quisanté too, but, as befitted persons engaged in the serious pursuit of dealing with money, gave more hesitating and guarded opinions; no party spirit led them astray or fired them to desperate ventures. However there was no denying that the Alethea Printing Press sounded a very good thing, and moreover no denying that measures had been skilfully taken to prevent anybody having a share in that good thing without paying handsomely for the privilege. The Syndicate, speaking through Mr. Mandeville its mouthpiece, by no means implored support or canvassed new partners; it was prepared to admit one or two names of weight in return for substantial aid. Mandeville did nothing of himself; he referred to the Board, and the Board's answers came after Alexander Quisanté's hansom had flashed back to Westminster. But a few did gain admittance, and these few were much struck by the reports on the Alethea, all of which had been sent back for revision to their respective authors, accompanied by some new and important facts. These latter did not, as it turned out, alter the tenor of the reports, but it had been thought as well to afford an opportunity for reconsideration in the light of them; so Mandeville explained, seeming always just a little nervous over this matter of the reports.

"We had hoped," he said to one gentleman who was rather important and rather hard to satisfy, "to fortify ourselves with Professor Maturin's opinion. But unfortunately he died before he could complete his examination, and nothing on the subject was found among his papers."

"That's a pity. Maturin would have carried great weight."

"We were quite alive to that," Mandeville assured him with a somewhat uneasy smile. His feelings were not unlike those of a quiet steady-going member of Quisanté's party in Parliament. "We have no doubt of what his opinion would have been, had he been able to study our additional facts and been spared to complete his report. As it was, he had only discussed the matter informally with one or two of us." And when he was left alone, he murmured softly, "I suppose that's how Alexander meant me to put it." But he rather wished that Alexander had been there to put it himself.

It is perhaps needless to say that Aunt Maria, sturdily fulfilling her destiny in life, was deeply concerned in the fortunes of the Alethea Printing Press. But large as was her stake—and the possibilities of loss at least were for her very large—she was not disturbed; she said that heaven alone knew whether there was anything in the thing, but that she knew that Sandro would make people think there was. Nor did she share in any serious degree the fears which afflicted her nephew's wife; Sandro always had a case, and she did not doubt that he would have a very good one whereby to justify any proceedings he might take in regard to the Alethea. So she lived frugally, hoped magnificently, and came often to Grosvenor Road to pick up what crumbs of information she could. Here she met Lady Castlefort and nodded her rusty bonnet at that great personage with the remark that she was glad people were waking up to what there was in Sandro; it was time, goodness knew. Lady Castlefort was for the moment taken aback.

"Mr. Quisanté has had certain—er—difficulties to overcome," she murmured rather vaguely, and was not reassured by a dry chuckle and the heartfelt exclamation, "I should think so!" Altogether it was difficult to make out exactly what Mr. Quisanté's aunt thought of him.

Here the old lady met also the Dean of St. Neot's, who called every now and then because he liked May and wished to show that he bore no malice about the Crusade; but the subject was still a sore one, and he was as little prepared to be chuckled at over it as Lady Castlefort had been over her diplomatic indication of the fact that Quisanté's blood was not blue nor his manners those of a grand old English gentleman.

"Sandro knew all along that there wasn't much in that, but it was something to begin with," Aunt Maria remarked to the uncomfortable Dean. She herself had dragged in the Crusade, to which she referred so contemptuously.

"Miss Quisanté will do anything in the world for my husband," May interposed, "but nothing'll persuade her to say a good word for him."

"As long as that's understood, she does him no harm. We discount all you say, Miss Quisanté."

The Dean's affability was thrown away on Aunt Maria.

"I know what I'm talking about," she remarked grimly, "and as far as your Crusade goes, I should think you'd have seen it yourself by now."

The Dean had seen it himself by now, but he did not wish to say so in the presence of Quisanté's wife. May's laugh relieved him a little.

"The Dean's very forgiving," she said, "and Alexander's doing well now, anyhow, isn't he?"

The Dean agreed that he was doing well now—for in spite of his disclaimers of partisanship there was a spice of the fighting man in the Dean—and repeated Lady Castlefort's prophecy, reported to him by Lady Richard. The rusty black bonnet nodded approvingly. "I knew that was a sensible woman, in spite of her airs," said Miss Quisanté.

Lastly, among those whom Miss Quisanté encountered at her nephew's house was Lady Mildmay, and this interview took a rather more serious turn. In after days May used to look back to it as the first faint sign of the new factor which from now began to make itself felt in her life and to become a very pressing presence to her. She did not enjoy the friendship which the Mildmays forced on her, but it was impossible to receive it otherwise than with outward graciousness; the cordiality was so kind, the interest so frank, Sir Winterton's gallantry so chivalrous, his wife's gentleness so appealing. When Lady Mildmay was announced May found time for a hasty whisper to Aunt Maria: "Take care what you say about Alexander before her." Doubts must not be stirred in the Mildmay mind; the Mildmays must be kept in their delusion; to help in this was one of the duties of Quisanté's wife.

Lady Mildmay smiled gladly on Aunt Maria.

"I'm so pleased you're here," she said, "because I know you'll second me in what I'm going to venture to say to Lady May. I know I'm taking a liberty, but I can't help it. Meeting people now and then, you do sometimes see what people who are always with them don't. Now don't you, Miss Quisanté?"

"And *vice versâ*," murmured Aunt Maria; but May's eye rested on her warningly, and she refrained from pointing her observation by any reference to Sandro.

"I'm quite sure your husband is overdoing himself terribly," Lady Mildmay went on. "I saw him the other day walking through the Park, and he looked ghastly. I stopped him and told him so, but he said he'd just been to his doctor, and that there was really nothing the matter with him."

"I didn't know he'd been to the doctor lately. He seemed pretty well for him," said May. Aunt Maria said nothing; her keen little eyes were watching the visitor very closely.

"I've seen a lot of illness," pursued Lady Mildmay in her gentle voice, "and I know. He's working himself to death; he's killing himself." She raised her eyes and looked at May. Kind as the glance was, May felt in it a wonder, almost a reproach. "How comes it that you, his wife, haven't seen it too?" the eyes seemed to say in plaintive surprise. "Are you sure there's nothing wrong with him?" she asked.

"Wrong with him? What do you mean?" The question was Aunt Maria's, asked abruptly, roughly, almost indignantly. Lady Mildmay started. "I—I don't want to alarm you, I'm sure," she murmured, "but I don't like his looks. Do, do persuade him to take a rest."

Both of them were silent now; Lady Mildmay's wonder grew; she did not understand them; she saw them exchange a glance whose expression she could not analyse.

"He wants absolute rest and care, the care you could give him, my dear," she said to May—such a care she meant as her loving heart and hands would give to handsome Sir Winterton. "Go away with him for a few months and take care of him, now do. Keep all worries and—and ambitions and so on away from him."

May's face was grave and strained in a painful attention; but on Miss Quisanté's lips there came slowly a bitter little smile. What a picture this good lady drew of Sandro and his loving wife, together, apart from the world, with ambitions and worries set aside! Must the outlines of that picture be followed if—well, if Sandro was to live?

"I hope you're not offended? Seeing him only now and then I notice the change. Winterton and I have both been feeling anxious about it, and we decided that you wouldn't mind if I spoke to you."

"You're too good, too good," said May. "We don't deserve it." Lady Mildmay smiled.

"I know what a strain the election was," said she. "Even Winterton felt it, and Mr. Quisanté never seems to rest, does he?" She rose to go, but, as she said good-bye, she spoke one more word, half in a whisper and timidly, "I daresay I'm wrong, but are you sure his heart's quite sound?" And so she left them, excusing herself to the last for what might seem an intrusion, or even a slight on the careful watch that an affectionate wife keeps over her husband's health.

May walked to the hearthrug and stood there; Aunt Maria, sitting very still, glanced up with a frightened gaze, but her speech came bitter with aggressive scorn.

"What does the silly creature mean?" she asked. "There's nothing the matter with Sandro, is there?"

"I don't know that there is," May answered slowly.

"The woman talks as if he was going to die." Still the tone was contemptuous, still the look frightened. "Such nonsense!"

"I hope it is. He's not strong though, is he?"

Miss Quisanté had often said the same, but now she received the remark irritably. "Strong! He's not a buffalo like some men, like Jimmy Benyon or, I suppose, that poor creature's husband she's always talking about. But there's nothing the matter with him, there's no reason he shouldn't—no reason he should fall ill at all."

"She thinks he ought to rest, perhaps give up altogether."

"Altogether? Nonsense!" The tone was sharp.

"Well, then, for a long while."

"And go away, and let you coddle him?"

"Yes, and let me coddle him." May looked down on Aunt Maria, and for the first time smiled faintly.

"The woman's out of her senses," declared Aunt Maria testily. "Don't you think so? Don't you think so?"

"I don't know," was all May could say in answer either to the irritation of the voice or to the fear of the eyes. The old lady's hands were trembling as she raised them and gave a pull to the bow of her bonnet-strings.

"He'll see me out anyhow, I'll be bound," she said obstinately. She was fighting against the bare idea of being left with a remnant of life to live and no Sandro to fill it for her; what a miserable fag-end of empty waiting that would be! She glanced sharply at his wife; she did not know what his wife was thinking of.

"I'll ask him," said May, "and I must insist on knowing." She paused and added, "I ought to have noticed and I ought to have asked before. But somehow——" The sentence went unfinished, and Aunt Maria's sharp unsatisfied eyes drew no further answer. May kissed her when they parted; whatever this idea might mean to her, whatever the strange tumult it might raise in her, she read well enough the story of the old lady's rough tones, shaking hands and frightened eyes. To the old woman Sandro was the sum of life. She might sneer, she might scorn, she might rail, she might and would suffer at his hands. But he was the one thing, the sole support, she had to cling to; he kept her alive. Yet the last words that Miss Quisanté said were, "I expect Sandro wanted to wheedle something out of that woman, and has been playing one of his tricks to get a bit of sympathy." Then she climbed slowly and totteringly down the stairs.

Left alone, May Quisanté sat in apparent idleness, letting her thoughts play with a freedom which some people consider in itself blameworthy, though certainly no action and often no desire accompany the picture which the mind draws. She said to herself, "Supposing this is true, or that more than this is true, supposing his heart is unsound, what does it mean to me?" What it excluded was easier to realise than what it meant. Unless Quisanté were to have not existence only, but also health, such health at least as enables a man to do work although not, may be, to glory in the doing of it, unless there were to the engine wheels sound enough to answer to the spur of the steam that his brain's furnace made, nothing could come about of what Lady Castlefort's Mightiness prophesied, nothing of what friends and enemies had begun to look for, nothing of what May herself had grown to regard as his future and hers, as the basis, the condition, the circumstances, of her life and of his. An old thought of her own came to her, back from the dim region of ante-marriage days, the idea to which the Henstead doctor had given a terse, if metaphorical, expression. Quisanté was their race-horse, their money was on him, they wanted a win for the stable. If this or more than this were true, then there would be no win for the stable; the horse was a grand horse, but he wouldn't stand training. What was left then? An invalid and the wife of an invalid, coddlings, cossetings, devotion, ambition far away, life kept in him by loving heart and loving hands. Hers must be the heart and the hands. Hers also were the keen eyes that knew every weakness, every baseness, of the man to whom heart and hands must minister, but would see no more the battle and the triumph and the brilliance which set them sparkling and seemed to make the world alight for them.

For a little while the third thing, the remaining possibility, was unformulated in her thoughts; perhaps she had a scruple which made her turn away from it. But her speculations would not be denied their irresponsible freedom of ranging over all the field of chance. If it were true, if more than it, more than the kind timid woman had dared to say, were true, he might die. He might die, not in some dim far-off time when nature made the thing seem inevitable, when he had lived his life, been Prime Minister and so forth, and she had lived hers, filling it with work for him, and with looking on at him and with endurance of him, but sooner, much sooner, almost now, when he

had not lived his life, while hers was not exhausted, when there would still be left to her another of her own to live after he was gone. It was strange to think of that, to see how what had seemed to be irrevocable and for ever, to stretch in unfaltering perpetuity to the limits of old age, might so easily, by the occasion of so small a matter as a heart not sound, turn out to be a passing thing, and there come to her again freedom, choice, a life to be re-made. If that happened, how would she feel? At the new-learnt chance of that happening, how did she feel? Very strange, very bewildered, very upset; that was her answer. Such a thing—Quisanté's death she meant—would mean so much, change so much, take away so much—and might give so much. Her thoughts flew off to the new life that she might live then, to the new freedom from embarrassments, from fears and from disgusts, to a new love which it might be hers to gain and to enjoy. People said that it was always impossible to go back—*vestigia nulla*. But that event would open to her a sort of going back, such a return to her old life and her surroundings as might some day make the time she had spent with Quisanté and its experiences seem but an episode, studding the belt of long days with one strange bizarre ornament.

And on the other side? There was the greatest difficulty, the greatest puzzle. She had not failed to understand the roughness of Aunt Maria's tones, her frightened eyes and the shaking of her hands. It would be very strange to see an end of him, to know that he would never be Prime Minister and so forth, to look on at a world devoid of him, to live a life in which he was only a memory. How were the scales to be held, which way did the balance incline? She could not tell, and at last she smiled at her inability to answer the riddle. It would amuse people so much, and shock some people so much and doubtless so properly, if they knew that she was sitting in her drawing-room in the afternoon, trying to make up her mind whether she would rather her husband lived or that he died. Even there the fallacy crept in; she was not desiring either way; she was simply looking at the two pictures which the two events painted for her fancy; and she did not know which picture she preferred. So all was still bewilderment, all still rocking from the sudden gust that had proceeded out of dear Lady Mildmay's gentle lips. But the undercurrent of wonder and of reproach that there had been in the warning May Quisanté now almost missed. By an effort at last she realised its presence, the naturalness of it, and its rightness. But still it seemed to her a little conventional, something that might be supposed to be appropriate, but was not, if the truth were faced. "Alexander and I have never been like that to one another—at least never for more than a very little while," was the form her thought about it took.

When he came in that evening, she found herself looking at him with wonder, and with a sort of scepticism about what her visitor had said. He seemed so full of life; it was impossible to think of him as being likely, or even able, to die. But she had made up her mind to open the subject to him, to force something from him, and to learn about this visit to the doctor which he had so studiously concealed from her. She gave him tea, and was so far affected by her mood as to show unusual kindness towards him, or rather to let her uniform friendliness be tinged by an affection which was not part of her habitual bearing; with the help of this she hoped to lead up to a subject which her own strangely mixed meditations somehow made it hard for her to approach. But Quisanté also had a scheme; he also was watching and working for an opportunity, and seeing one now in her great cordiality of manner he seized it with his rapid decisiveness, cutting in before his wife had time to develop her attack. He pressed her hand as she gave him his cup, sighed as though in weariness, took a paper from his pocket, and laid it on the table, giving it a tentative gentle push in the direction of her chair.

"We've got the Alethea afloat at last," he said. "There's the prospectus, if you care to look at it." With this he glanced at the clock, sighed again and added, "I must be at the House early this evening. By Jove, I'm tired though!" This little odd ineradicable trick of his made May smile; he was never so tired as when he had a risky card to play; then, indeed, he affected for his purposes some sort of reconcilability with those incongruous ideas of collapse and mortality that Lady Mildmay had suggested. He inspired May, as he did sometimes now, with a malicious wish to make him show himself at his trickiest. Fingering the prospectus carelessly, she asked,

"I suppose it sets out all the wonderful merits of the Alethea, doesn't it? Well, I've heard a good deal about them. I don't think I need read it."

"It gives a full account of the invention," said Quisanté, wearily passing his hand across his brow.

"Have you put in Professor Maturin's report?" She was not looking at him, but smiling over to Mr. Foster on the mantelpiece. There was a moment's pause.

"The facts about Maturin are fully stated. You'll find it on the third page." He rose with a sigh and threw himself on the sofa; he groaned a little and shut his eyes. May glanced at him, smiled, and turned to the third page.

"In addition to the foregoing very authoritative opinions, steps were taken to obtain a report from the late Professor Maturin, F.R.S. Professor Maturin was very favourably impressed with several features of the invention, and was about to pursue his investigations with the aid of further information furnished to him, when he was unfortunately attacked by the illness of which he recently died. The Directors therefore regret to be unable to present any report of his examination. But they have every reason to believe that his opinion would have been no less encouraging than those of the other gentlemen consulted."

May turned back to the list of directors. Three out of the six she did not know; the other three were Quisanté himself, Jimmy Benyon, and Sir Winterton Mildmay. The presence of these two last names filled May with a feeling of helplessness; this was worse than she had expected. Of course neither Jimmy nor Sir Winterton had heard anything about the Maturin report; of the other three she knew nothing and took no thought. Jimmy, not warned, alas, by that affair of old Foster's note, and Sir Winterton, in the chivalrous confidence of perfect trust, had given their support to Quisanté. The use he made of their names was to attach them to a statement which she who knew of the Maturin report could describe only in one way. She looked round at her husband's pale face and closed eyes.

"I thought you were supposed to tell the—I mean, to state all the facts in a prospectus?" she said.

Quisanté sat up suddenly, leant forward, and spread his hands out. "My dear May," he replied with a smile, "the facts are stated, stated very fully."

"There's nothing about the report the Professor did give. You remember you told me about it?"

"Oh, no, he gave no report."

"Well, you called it a draft report."

"No, no, did I? That was a careless way of speaking if I did. He certainly sent me some considerations which had occurred to him at the beginning of his inquiry, but they were based on insufficient information and were purely provisional. They did not in any sense constitute a report. It would have been positively misleading to speak of them in any such way." He was growing eager, animated, almost excited.

May was not inclined to cross-examine him; she knew that he would develop his case for himself if she sat and listened.

"The whole thing was so inchoate as to be worth nothing," he went on. "We simply discarded it from our minds; we didn't let it weigh one way or the other."

"The directors didn't?" That little question she could not resist asking.

"Oh, it was never laid before them. As I tell you, Mandeville and I decided that it could not be regarded as a report, or even as an indication of Maturin's opinion. We only referred to Maturin at all because—because we wanted to be absolutely candid."

May smiled; absolute candour resulted, as it seemed to her, in giving rise to an impression that the Professor had been in favour of the merits of the Alethea.

"And you won't show it to the directors?"

"No," said Quisanté, "certainly not." He paused for a moment and then added slowly, "In fact it has not been preserved. What is stated there is based on my own personal discussions with the Professor, and on Mandeville's; the few lines he wrote added nothing."

It had not been preserved; it had sunk from a report to a draft report, from a draft report to considerations, from considerations to a few lines which added nothing; the minimising process, pursued a little further, had ended in a total disappearance. And nobody knew that it had ever existed, even as considerations, even as a few lines adding nothing, except her husband, cousin Mandeville, and herself.

"If the Professor himself," Quisanté resumed, "had considered it of any moment, he would have kept a copy or some memorandum of it; but there was not a word about it among his papers."

There was safety, then, so far as the Professor was concerned; and so far as Quisanté was concerned; of course, also, so far as cousin Mandeville was concerned. But Quisanté's restless eyes seemed to ask whether there were perfect safety all round, no possibility of Jimmy or Sir Winterton or anybody else picking up false ideas from careless talk about the few lines in which the Professor had added nothing. For an instant May's eyes met his, and she understood what he asked of her. She was to hold her tongue; that sounded simple. She had held her tongue before, and thus it happened that Sir Winterton was her husband's friend and trusted him. Now she was again to be a party to deceiving him, and this time Jimmy Benyon was to be hoodwinked too. She was to hold her tongue; if by any chance need arose, she was to lie. That was the request Quisanté made of her, part of the price of being Quisanté's wife.

She gave him no pledge in words; a touch of the tact that taught him how to deal with difficult points prevented him from asking one of her. But it was quite understood between them; no reference was to be made to the few lines that the Professor had written. Quisanté's uneasiness passed away, his headache seemed to become less severe; he was in good spirits as he made his preparations to go to the House. Apparently he had no consciousness of having asked anything great of her. He had been far more nervous and shamefaced about his betrayal of the Crusade, far more upset by the untoward incident of Mr. Foster's letter. May told herself that she understood why; he was getting accustomed to her and she to him; he knew her point of view and allowed for it, expecting a similar toleration in return. As she put it, they were getting equalised,

approaching more nearly to one another's level. You could not aid in queer doings and reap the fruits of them without suffering some gradual subtle moral change which must end in making them seem less queer. As the years passed by, the longer their companionship lasted, the more their partnership demanded in its community of interest and effort, the more this process must go on. As they rose before the world—for rise they would (even the Alethea would succeed in spite of the Professor's burked report)—they would fall in their own hearts and in one another's eyes. This was the prospect that stretched before her, as she sat again alone in the drawing-room, after Quisanté had set out, much better, greatly rested, in good spirits, serene and safe, and after she had pledged herself to his fortunes by the sacrifice of loyalty to friends and to truth.

Yes, that was the prospect unless—she started a little. She had forgotten what she had meant to ask him; she had not inquired about his visit to the doctor nor told him that kind Lady Mildmay was anxious about his health. It had all been driven out of her head, she said to herself in excuse at first. Then she faced her feelings more boldly. Just then she could have put no such questions, feigned no such interest, and assumed no show of affection or solicitude. That evening such things would have been mere hypocrisy, pretences of a desire to keep him for herself when her whole nature was in revolt at having to be near him. Her horror now was not that she might lose him, but of the prospect that lay before her and the road she must tread with him. Trodden it must be; unless by any chance there were truth, or less than the truth, in what good Lady Mildmay said.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE IRREVOCABLE.

So far as May Quisanté's distress had its rise in her husband's treatment of Sir Winterton Mildmay, she was entitled to take some comfort from that gentleman's extreme happiness. He had lost a seat in Parliament, thanks to Tom Sinnett and the account to which Tom Sinnett had been turned; he had been caused to represent to the world that the Alethea Printing Press had lost Professor Maturin's express approval only by the accident of the Professor's lamented decease. The one wrong he forgot, the other he did not know. It was a favourite tenet of his that an English gentleman ought to be able to turn his hand to everything—everything honourable, of course—and should at once shine in any sphere of practical activity. He saw the triumph of his opinion, and found his own delight, in his new part of a business man. His brougham rolled down to Dowgate Hill almost every day; he delighted to lunch with Mandeville or to entertain the Secretary of the Company at the midday meal; business could be made to last till three when there was no Board, till four if there were; then Sir Winterton drove to his club and sat down to his cards with a rich consciousness of commercial importance. He believed in the Alethea with a devotion and a thoroughness second only to the unquestioning faith and obedience which he now had at the service of Alexander Quisanté. Many an amazed secret stare and many a sour smile his eulogies drew from cousin Mandeville; for even in his enthusiasm Sir Winterton praised with discrimination; it was the sterling worth, the heart of the man, that he admired; shallow people stuck at superficial defects of manner; not such was Sir Winterton. "I trust him as I do myself," he used to say to Lady Mildmay, and she, in honest joy, posted off with the testimonial to May Quisanté; besides she was eager to seize a chance of throwing out another hint or two about Quisanté's health.

The Alethea, at least, seemed to be going to prove worthy of these laudations. There really had, it appeared, been some good reason why the Professor should reconsider his considerations. The invention stood the test of criticism and experiment; it saved a lot of expense; the idea got about more and more that it was an uncommonly good thing; the two or three papers which were inquisitive about the actual views of the Professor were treated with disdain (one with advertisements also) and their clamour went almost unnoticed. There was a demand for the shares. Sir Winterton pointed out to Weston Marchmont what a mistake he had committed in not accepting the offer of an allotment which had been made to him.

"The only thing for which I value independent means," said Marchmont, "is that they relieve me from the necessity of imposing on the public. I suppose my ancestors did it for me."

Sir Winterton laughed serenely. "We're serving the public," said he. Then he remembered the new man of business in him, and added, with a slyness obvious from across the street, "Oh, and ourselves too, ourselves too, I admit that."

"And you, Jimmy?" asked Marchmont, turning to him; they made a group of three at the club.

"I don't think Quisanté'll go far wrong," said Jimmy. "You know Dick's gone in too?"

"What, after the Crusade?"

"This is another sort of game," said Jimmy, with a grim smile; he had gone in after both the Crusade and the Sinnett affair. He turned to Sir Winterton; "Old Foster of Henstead's in it too;

he's pretty wide-awake, you know."

"Oh, we Henstead fellows have heads on our shoulders," said Sir Winterton, but he looked a little less happy; he had never acquitted Foster with the confidence that Quisanté had won from him.

"And you'll grow rich against your wedding, Jimmy?" asked Marchmont.

Again Jimmy smiled. The wedding was near now, and the next day he was going to Ashwood to meet Fanny Gaston.

"You're going to Dick's on Friday, aren't you?" he said to Marchmont.

"I believe I am."

"Ah, then you shall hear about our show from Quisanté himself."

"What?" Weston Marchmont's tone expressed surprise rather than pleasure.

"May's going to be there, and he's coming for the Sunday. Amy fought hard, but Dick said he must come, because he was going to be a connection." Jimmy's slow smile endured all through this speech; he had a sense of humour which he treated gravely.

"I didn't know he was coming," said Marchmont. Sir Winterton broke into a hearty laugh.

"You're the most prejudiced fellow in the world, Marchmont," he said. "I tell you what, though," he went on. "Do persuade Lady May to take care of her husband, or get him to take care of himself. My wife's been at her again and again, but nothing's done. The man's not well, he'll break up if they aren't careful." He paused, and a puzzled look came over his handsome candid face. "If I was half as bad as he is, my wife'd have me in bed or off to the seaside in a jiffy," he ended.

The silence that followed struck him much as May's and Aunt Maria's had struck his wife. Neither he nor his wife were accustomed to the way in which people who knew Quisanté close at hand came to stand towards him.

"I suppose Lady May's not what you'd call a very domestic woman?" he hazarded. "Charming, most charming, but full of politics and that sort of thing, eh?"

To Weston Marchmont it seemed simplest to laugh and say, "I suppose so." Sir Winterton's mind had need of categories, and was best not burdened with the complexities of an individual. But Jimmy was not so wise.

"I don't think she cares a hang about politics, except so far as Quisanté's concerned in them," he said.

Sir Winterton looked more puzzled still. "Nothing's any good unless he keeps his health," he murmured. He was uncomfortable; he liked May very much, and did not welcome the thought of there being any truth in the idea of indifference and carelessness about her husband at which Lady Mildmay had sorrowfully hinted. "That's his wife's first business anyhow," he ended, a trifle defiantly. But his challenge was not taken up by either of his friends. He went home with his high spirits rather dashed.

On the Friday Marchmont found himself travelling down to Ashwood in company with Mr. Morewood. The painter had an extreme fit of his mocking acidity; he refrained his tongue from nobody and showed no respect for what might be guessed to be delicate points with his companion. Quisanté's success was his principal theme; he exhibited it in its four aspects, political, social, commercial, and matrimonial.

"I've talked," he said, "to Constantine Blair, to Lady Castlefort, to Winterton Mildmay, and to Jimmy Benyon. There's nothing left for all of us but to fall down and worship. On to your knees with the rest of us, my friend! In every relation of life the man is great. You'll say he's objectionable. Quite so. Greatness always is. You're still pleasant, because you haven't become great."

"A few people think you a great artist."

"Quite a few," grinned Morewood. "I can still set up for being pleasant."

This mood did not leave him with his arrival at Ashwood. He reminded Marchmont of a monkey who had some trick to play, and grinned and chattered in anticipation of his cruel fun; his smile was most mocking when he greeted May Quisanté. She was in high spirits; girlish gaiety marked a holiday mood in her. Morewood seemed to encourage it with malicious care, letting it grow that he might strike at it with better effect later on. Yet what did the man know, what could he do? And though Dick Benyon winced at his darts, and Jimmy grew a little sulky, May herself seemed unconscious of them. She was ready to meet him in talk about her husband and her husband's plans; she laughed at his jibes in all the apparent security of a happy confidence. Such a state of things exactly suited Lady Richard; she would not wish May to be pained, but she enjoyed

infinitely any legitimate "dig" at her old enemy. May fought with equal gallantry and good temper.

"Success is our crime," she said gaily at dinner. "Mr. Morewood can't forgive it. You call us Philistines now, I expect, don't you?"

"Philistines in the very highest degree," he nodded.

"I know," she cried. "The only really cultivated thing is to fail elegantly."

"Let's bow our acknowledgments," Morewood called across to Marchmont.

"Oh, no, Mr. Marchmont isn't like that. He doesn't even try. Well, perhaps that's still more superior." She smiled at Marchmont, shaking her head. "But we try, we try everything."

The "we" grated still on Marchmont's feelings, and the worse because it seemed to come more easily and naturally from her lips. Yet that might be only the result of practice; she had looked at him in a merry defiance as the last words left her lips.

"And you get other people to try your things too," pursued Morewood.

"Look here, you don't mean me, do you?" Jimmy Benyon put in. "Because I'm not trying Fanny; on the contrary, she's trying me."

"What, already?" asked Dick with exaggerated apprehension. "What'll it be when you're married?"

"Ah," said Morewood, "now what is it when you're married? Does any duly qualified person wish to answer the question?" His mischievous glance rested again on May Quisanté.

"Oh, marriage is all right," said Dick, raising his voice to allow his wife to hear. "At least it's not so bad as things go in this world. It's giving a shilling and getting back eleven-pence."

There was a little murmur of applause. "I declare every married person at the table seems to endorse the opinion," said Marchmont with a laugh. "We'll keep our shillings, I think, Morewood."

"You'd better wait till somebody offers you change," advised Lady Richard.

"Meanwhile we've had an admirable expert opinion," said Marchmont.

"Which we believe," added Morewood, "as implicitly as we do in the excellence of the Alethea Printing Press."

"Hallo, are you in it too?" cried Dick. "You see we're all disciples," he added to May. She smiled slightly and turned to Jimmy Benyon who was by her, as though to speak to him; but Morewood's voice cut across her remark.

"No, I'm not. I'm a sceptic there," he said.

"Oh, well, you don't know anything about it," Dick assured him placidly. If plain-speaking were the order of the day, the Benyon family could hold their own.

"I bet he hasn't read the prospectus," said Jimmy.

"Couldn't understand it, if he had," added Dick, after a comforting gulp of champagne.

"You're really splendid people to be in with," said May, looking gratefully from one brother to the other. They were so staunch, and alas, how had they been treated!

For a moment Morewood said nothing; he sat smiling maliciously.

"Shall I give my authority?" he asked. "It won't do you any harm if I do, because I can't call him to give evidence."

"We had all the best authorities," said Dick Benyon, "as you'd know if you'd read the prospectus."

"Hang the prospectus! What's the good of reading a man's puff of his own wares? But I'm certain you hadn't one authority."

"Well, who's your authority?" asked Jimmy, with a contempt that he took no trouble to conceal.

"What he said was confidential, you know——"

"Oh, you won't get out of it like that. We're all friends here. Fire away."

Thus exhorted, and indeed nothing loth—for he had not read the prospectus and knew not the full extent of what he did—Morewood drew his malicious little bow and shot his arrow, sharper-pointed than he fancied. "I suppose you'll admit," said he with the exaggerated carelessness of a man with an unanswerable case, "that poor old Maturin was some authority, and he told me in

confidence—I asked him about it, you know, just to be able to warn you fellows—that there was an absolutely fatal defect in your machine."

To score too great a triumph is sometimes as disconcerting as to fail. There was no chorus of indignation, no denial of Maturin's authority, no good-natured scoffing such as Morewood had expected. He looked round on faces fallen into a sudden troubled seriousness; no voice was raised in protest, gay or grave. In an instant he knew that he had done something far beyond what his humour had suggested; but what it was or how it came about, he could not tell.

The Benyon brothers were not over-ready of speech in a difficulty; their thoughts were busy now, but their tongues tied. Marchmont found nothing to say; he could not help raising his eyes under half-drooped lids till they rested on May Quisanté's face. There was a moment more of silence; then, answering the tacit summons of the table, May Quisanté spoke. She leant forward a little, smiling, and spoke clearly and composedly.

"Oh, you misunderstood him," she said. "He was consulted, but fell ill before he could go into all the facts or write his report. But he had expressed a favourable opinion of the Alethea to my husband." She paused, and then added, "If you'd taken the trouble to read the prospectus you'd have known that, Mr. Morewood."

Little Lady Richard laughed nervously, glanced round, and rose from the table; it was sooner than the ladies were wont to move but, as she said, nobody seemed to be eating any fruit, and so there was nothing to stay for. The men sat down again. Morewood perceived very clearly that a constraint had come upon them; but he was possessed by curiosity.

"Well, I should like to see the prospectus now," he said.

"You'll find one or two over there," said Dick, jerking his head towards a writing-table, but not rising.

Morewood made in the direction indicated, a low mutter from Dick following him. Then Jimmy observed:

"He doesn't understand a thing about it, you know, and of course he didn't follow what Maturin said."

The others nodded. This explanation was indeed the simple one; in most cases it would have been accepted without demur; or recourse would have been had to the hypothesis of a sudden change in the Professor's opinion; indeed Marchmont broached this solution in an off-hand way. Neither view was explicitly rejected, but a third possibility was in their minds, one which would not and could not have been there, had any one of the three had the settling of the prospectus and conducted the business with Maturin. But Alexander Quisanté, assisted only by cousin Mandeville, had conducted the business and drawn the prospectus.

Morewood came back, sat down, and poured out a glass of wine.

"Yes, I see what it says," he observed. His mood of malice was gone, he looked troubled and rather remorseful. "Well, I only repeated what Maturin said. I'd no idea there was anything about him in the prospectus."

The two reasonable views were suggested again by Dick and Marchmont.

"It's impossible that I misunderstood him, but of course he may have changed his mind." He paused, seeming to think. "I gather that he put nothing in writing?" he went on. "He only talked to you about it?"

After a little pause Jimmy Benyon said, "Not exactly to us—to the people at the office, you know. And there was nothing in writing as you say—at least so I understand too."

Morewood passed his hand through his hair; the ruffled locks intensified the ruefulness of his aspect; he had before his eyes the picture of May Quisanté's silence and her so careful, so deliberate little speech after it. He tossed off his wine almost angrily, as Dick Benyon rose, saying, "Let's have coffee in the garden. It's a splendid night." He added with a rather uneasy laugh, "Quisanté's coming to-morrow! We'll leave him to tackle you himself, Morewood."

Lady Richard and Fanny Gaston were sitting in the garden by the drawing-room window when the men joined them; Morewood dropped into a chair by Lady Richard and, looking across the lawn, saw May strolling by herself on the walk that bounded the shrubberies. He took his coffee in silence and then lighted his pipe; the vanity of cigarettes was not for him. At last he said confidentially,

"I've a sort of feeling that I've made an ass of myself."

Lady Richard glanced round; Fanny had gone across to the other group; nobody was in hearing.

"Do you know," she said in a low voice, "I believe that man's been up to some trick again. You know how he treated us over the Crusade? Now I suppose he's going to ruin us!" The satisfaction

of a justified prophet seemed to mingle with the dismay of a wife and the anger of a sufferer; Lady Richard had expected nothing less all along!

"I'm afraid I rather—well, that Lady May didn't like it."

"Poor dear May must know what to expect by now."

"Perhaps she never knows what to expect. That'd be worse." The remark was a little too subtle for Lady Richard's half-attentive ear. She contented herself with sighing expressively. Morewood looked across the lawn again; the slow-walking figure had disappeared, presumably into the shrubberies. Two or three moments later he saw Marchmont strolling off in that direction, cigar in mouth and hands in pockets. He rose, shook himself, and cried to the brothers, "Oh, in heaven's name, come and play pool." Jimmy refused and paired off with his *fiancée*, but Dick agreed to billiards, saying as they went in, "It'll keep you from making a fool of yourself any more." Morewood, finding his own impression of his conduct thus confirmed, grunted remorsefully as he took down his cue.

Marchmont crossed the lawn and the path, and was hidden by the shrubberies. Lady Richard watched till she could see him no more, and then went indoors with another sigh; this last was a disclaimer of responsibility; if Marchmont liked to comfort May, it was no business of hers.

He loitered on, not admitting that he was looking for May, but very sore to think that she had wandered away to a sad solitude rather than be with her friends; since she did that, she was wounded indeed. There was a seat round an old tree-trunk at the farther side of the shrubbery; the memory of it really directed his apparently aimless steps, and as he approached it he threw away his half-smoked cigar; he thought he would find her there; what he would say to her he did not know.

He was right. There, she sat, very still, and looking pale under the moon. Coming up to her he said, "I know you want to be alone, don't you?" She smiled and answered, "No, stay. I'm glad to have you," and he sat down by her. She was silent, her eyes gazing steadily in front of her; the air was sweet and very still. Now he needed no telling that his guess at the situation had been right, that she had shielded her husband at her own cost; her face told him what the cost seemed to her. A great indignation against the man filled him, gaining unacknowledged reinforcement from the love he himself had for the woman. He had wrought for himself a masterpiece of pure and faultless beauty; when another took it from him, he had endured; now the other spoilt and stained and defiled it; could he still endure? It seems sometimes as though the deep silence of night carries thoughts from heart to heart that would be lost in the passage through the broken tumultuous sea of day. The thought that was in him he felt to be in her also, changed as her mind would change it, yet in essence the same. She had now no ironical smiles for him, no fencing, and no playing with her fate; and he had for her no talk of loyalty. The time for these was gone in the light of the confidence that her silence gave him; it told him everything, and he had no rebuke for its openness. At last he put out his hand and lightly pressed hers for a moment. She turned her eyes on him.

"It's a little hard, isn't it?" she asked. "I can stand most things, but it's hard to have to tell lies to your friends." Her voice rose a little and shook as the composure which she had so long kept failed her. "And they know I'm lying. Oh, I don't deceive them, however hard I try. They don't tell me so, but they know. I can't help it, I must do it. I must sit and do it, knowing that they know it's a lie. For decency's sake I must do it, though. Some people believe, the Mildmays believe; but you here don't. You know me too well, and you know him too well."

"For God's sake, don't talk like that," said Marchmont.

"Don't talk like that! The talk's not the harm. If you could tell me how not to live like that!" Her self-control broke utterly; she covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

"For God's sake!" he murmured again.

"Oh, you don't know. This is only the crown of it. It goes on every day. I'm coming not to know myself, not to be myself. I live scheming and lying. I've given everything, all my life. Must I give myself, my own self, too? Must I lose that for him?"

Her bitter despairing words seemed to him what at that moment her mood made them seem to herself, the all-sufficient all-embracing summary of her life; she had then no thought of another side to it, and into that she gave him no insight. He counted as dead for her all the high hopes and the attractive imaginings with which Quisanté once had fired her. Dead for her they were at that moment; she could see nothing but her husband's baseness and a baseness bred by it in herself; her bond to him was an obligation to dishonour and a chain of treachery. She abandoned to Marchmont's eyes all the hidden secrets of her misery; in this she seemed also to display before him the dead body of her hopes, her interest, her ambitions. Giving all, she had gained nothing; so her sobs said. But only for moments does life seem so simple that a sob can cover all of it.

Presently she grew calmer. "I've never broken out like this before," she said, "but it's rather bad to have to look forward to a life of it. And it'll get worse, not better; or if it doesn't get worse it'll mean that I'm getting worse, and that'll be worse than all." She smiled forlornly. "What a tangle of 'worses' I've tied it up in, haven't I?"

She did not seem to be ashamed of her breaking-out, but rather to be relieved by it, and to feel that it had helped to establish or renew an intimacy in which she found some pleasure and some consolation; at least there was one friend now who knew exactly how she stood and would not set down to that own self of hers the actions that he might see her perform in Quisanté's service. "You once told me I ought to take a confidante," she reminded him. "I don't suppose you thought I should take you, though."

She had had her outburst; his was still to come. Yet it seemed rather as though he acted on a deliberate purpose than was carried away by any irresistible impulse; he spoke simply and plainly.

"I love you as I've always loved you," he said.

"I know, and I've taken advantage of it to inflict all this on you." Her eyes rested on his for some moments, and she answered his glance. "No, I can't escape that way. I'm not talking of running away; of course I couldn't do that." She laughed a little and even he smiled. "But I can't escape even in—in spirit by it. Sometimes I wish I could. It would change the centre of my life, wouldn't it? Perhaps I shouldn't mind the things that distress me so much now. But I can't."

"You don't love me? Well, you never did." He paused an instant and added in a puzzled way, "Somehow."

"Yes, it's all 'somehow.' Somehow I didn't; I ought to have. Somehow I've got where I am; and somehow, I suppose, I shall endure it." She laid her hand on his. "I should actually like to love you—in a way I do. I'm afraid I've very little conscience about it. But somehow—yes, somehow again—it's all a hopeless puzzle—I can't altogether, not as you mean. I understand it very little myself, and I know you won't understand it at all, but—well, Alexander imprisons me; I can't escape from him; as long as he's there he keeps me." She looked in Marchmont's face and then shook her head, half-sadly, half-playfully. "You don't understand a bit, do you?" she asked.

"No, I don't," he said bluntly, with an accent of impatience and almost of exasperation. Recognising it, she gave the slightest shrug of her shoulders.

"It's my infatuation again, I suppose, as you all said when I married him. It makes you all angry. Oh, it makes me angry too, as far as that goes."

"He's ruining your whole life."

She made no answer, relapsing into the still silence which had preceded her tears. Marchmont was baffled again by his old inability to follow the movements of her mind and the old sense of blindness in dealing with her to which it gave rise. Owing to this he had lost her at the first; now it seemed to prevent him from repairing the loss. In spite of all that they had in common, in spite of the strong attraction she felt towards him and of the love he bore her, there was always, as she had said once, at last a break somewhere, some solution in the chain of sympathy that should have bound them together. But he would not admit this, and chose to see the only barrier between them in the man who was ruining her life.

"You'd be yourself again if only you could get away from him," he murmured resentfully.

"Perhaps; I never shall, though." She added, laughing a little, "Neither will you. I've made you an accomplice, you're bound to a guilty silence now." Then, growing grave, she leant towards him. "Don't look like that," she said, "pray, pray, pray don't. I haven't spoilt your life as well as my own? No, you mustn't tell me that." Her voice grew very tender and low. "But I can say almost all you want. I wish I had loved you, I wish I had married you. Oh, how I wish it! I should have been happy, I think, and I know I—I shouldn't have had to live as I do now and do the things I have to do now. Well, it's too late."

"You're very young," he said in a voice as low as hers. "It mayn't always be too late."

She started a little, drawing away from him. He had brought back thoughts which the stress of pain and excitement had banished from her mind.

"You mean——?" she murmured. "I know what you mean, though." Her face showed again a sort of puzzle. "I can't think of that happening. I tried the other day—*à propos* of something else; but I couldn't. I couldn't see it, you know. It doesn't fit my ideas about him. No, that won't happen. We must just go on."

The wind had begun to rise, the trees stirred, leaves rustled, the whole making, or seeming to her ears to make, a sad whimsical moaning. She rose, gathering her lace scarf closer round her neck, and saying, "Do you hear the wood crying for us? It's sorry for our little troubles." She stood facing him and he took both her hands in his. "You look so unhappy," she said in a fresh access of pity. "No use, no use; it'll all go on, right to the end of everything. So—good-bye."

"He's coming to-morrow, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's coming to-morrow. Good-bye." She smiled a little, feeling Marchmont's hands drawing her to him. "Oh, kiss me then," she said, turning her cheek to him. "It'll feel friendly. And now we'll go in."

They had just started to return when they heard steps in the wood, and a moment later her name was called in Dick Benyon's voice. Marchmont shouted in answer, "Here we are," and Dick came along the path.

"I couldn't think where you'd got to," he said.

"That's because you've no romance in you," said May. "Or you'd have known we should be wandering in the wood in the moonlight. Ah, she's gone under a cloud now, but she was beautiful. Are we wanted, though?"

"Well, in the first place I think you've been quite long enough for propriety, and in the second a man's brought a wire for you, and he's waiting to see if there's an answer."

"Under that combination of moral and practical reasons we'll go in," said May, laughing. Marchmont, less ready in putting on his mask, said nothing but followed a step or two behind. "I expect the wire's from Alexander," she went on, "to say he's going to make a speech somewhere and won't come to-morrow."

Dick turned to her with a quick jerk of the head; a moment later he was covered with confusion, for her bitter little smile told him that he had betrayed the joy which such a notion gave him. To all of them it would be a great relief that Quisanté should not come while the memory of the scene that Morewood had caused at dinner was still so fresh. Dick, though he attempted no excuse, felt himself forgiven when May took his arm and thus walked back to the house.

> "Your husband had a slight seizure while dining with us to-night. He is comfortable now, and there is no immediate reason for anxiety. But doctor thinks you had better come up earliest convenient train to-morrow. WINTERTON MILDMAY."

May read the telegram, standing between Marchmont and Dick. She handed it to Dick, saying, "Read it, and will you send an answer that I'll come as early as possible in the morning;" then she walked to the table and sat down by it. Dick gave Marchmont the slip of paper and went off to despatch the answer. Nobody else was in the room, except Fanny Gaston, who was playing softly on the piano in the corner. Marchmont came up to May and put the telegram down on the table by her.

"I'm so sorry," he said formally and constrainedly.

"I don't suppose it's very serious," she said. "But I must go, of course." She went on under the cover of Fanny's gentle music. "It's all rather odd though—its coming to-night and its happening at the Mildmays'. I forgot, though, you don't know why I feel that so odd. How Lady Mildmay'll nurse him! I expect I shall have a struggle to get him out of the house and home again."

Marchmont made no answer but stood looking down on her face. She met his glance fairly, and knew what it was that had forced itself into his mind and now found expression in his eyes. She had declared to him that her fate was irrevocable, that the lines of her life were set, that nothing but death could alter them, and that death had no part in her thoughts about her husband. The telegram did not prove her wrong; yet seizure was a vague word under which much might lie hidden. But her mood and her feeling still remained; it was not in hope or in any attempt at self-consolation, but in the expression of an obstinate conviction which dominated her mind that she said in answer to Marchmont's glance, "I can't believe it's anything really amiss. I expect I shall find him at work again when I get back to-morrow."

With a little movement of his hands Marchmont turned away. He had at command no conventional phrases in which to express a desire that she might prove right. It was impossible to say that he wished she might prove wrong; even in his own mind a man leaves a hope like that vague and unformulated. But he marvelled, still without understanding, at the strange obstinate idea which seemed almost to exalt Quisanté above the ordinary lot of mortals, to see in him a force so living that it could not perish, a vitality so intense that death could lay no hand on it. He glanced at her as he crossed the room to the piano; she sat now with the telegram in her hands and her eyes fixed on the floor in front of her. It needed a sharper summons, a nearer reality, to rouse her from the conviction that her life was bound for ever to that of the man whom she had chosen and for whom she had given so much. It would all go on, right to the end of everything. The telegram had not shaken that faith in her, nor altered that despair.

CHAPTER XVII.

DONE FOR?

A knotty point of casuistry was engaging the thoughts of the Dean of St. Neot's. Morewood had been to see him, had told without disguise the whole story of his blunder at the dinner-table at

Ashwood, had referred to Alexander Quisanté's serious illness, and had finally, without apology and without periphrasis, expressed the hope that Alexander Quisanté would die. The Dean's rebuke had produced a strenuous effort at justification. Quisanté was, the painter pointed out, no doubt a force, but a force essentially immoral (Morewood took up morality when it suited his purpose); he did work, but he made unhappiness; he affected people's lives, but not so as to promote their well-being. Or if the Dean chose to champion the man, Morewood was ready for him again. If Quisanté were good, were moral, were deserving of defence, then the merely natural process lugubriously described as death, and fantastically treated with black plumes and crape, would, so far as he himself was concerned, be no more than a transition to a better state of existence, while certain solid and indisputable benefits would accrue to those who were condemned to wait a little longer for their summons. Whether the Dean elected to be for Quisanté or against him, Morewood claimed a verdict.

This challenging of a man's general notions by the putting of a thorny special case was rather resented by the Dean; it reminded him of the voluble atheist in Hyde Park, who bases his attack on the supernatural on the obsolete enactments of the Book of Leviticus. None the less he was rather puzzled as to what he had a right to wish about Alexander Quisanté, and so he had recourse to his usual remedy—a consultation with his wife. He had the greatest faith in Mrs. Baxter's eye for morality; perhaps generations of clerical ancestry had bred in her such an instinct as we see in sporting-dogs; she could not go wrong. On this question she was immediately satisfactory.

"We are forbidden," she said, removing a piece of tape from her mouth, "to wish anybody's death; you know that as well as I do, Dan." She made a stitch or two. "We must leave it to Providence," she ended serenely.

At first sight there was nothing much in this dictum; it appeared even commonplace. But Mrs. Baxter had been lunching with the Mildmays, had heard a full account of what the doctors said about Quisanté, and had expressed her conviction that he could not possibly last long. So far as could be judged then, the confidence which she proposed to show ran no appreciable risk of being misplaced, while at the same time she avoided committing herself by any expression of a personal opinion.

"Doubtless, my dear," said the Dean with a little cough.

"If he had thought less about himself and more about other people——" she resumed.

"That can't have anything to do with an apoplectic seizure," the Dean pleaded.

Mrs. Baxter looked up with a patient smile.

"If you weren't in such a hurry, Dan, to show what you call your enlightenment (though heaven knows you may be wrong all the time, and a judgment is a perfectly possible thing) you'd have found out that I was only going to say that, if he'd thought more of other people, he'd find other people thinking more about him now."

"There I quite agree with you, my dear."

Mrs. Baxter looked less grateful than she might have for this endorsement of her views; self-confidence is apt to hold external support in cheap esteem.

"When the first Mrs. Greening died," she remarked, "they gave the maids very nice black frocks, with a narrow edging of good crape. The very first Sunday-out that Elizabeth had—the butcher's daughter near the Red Cow—you remember?—she stuck a red ribbon round the neck."

The Dean looked puzzled.

"Mrs. Greening was the most selfish woman I've ever known," explained Mrs. Baxter; and she added with a pensive smile, "And I've lived in a Cathedral town for thirty years."

The red-ribbon became intelligible; it fell into line with Morewood's ill-disciplined wish. Both signified an absence of love, such a departing without being desired as serves for the epitaph of a Jewish king. The Dean cast round for somebody who would prove such an inscription false on Alexander Quisanté's tomb.

"Anyhow it would break the old aunt's heart," he said.

"It'd save her money," observed Mrs. Baxter.

"And his wife!" mused the Dean. It was impossible to say whether there were a question in his words or not. But his first instance had not been Quisanté's wife; the old aunt offered a surer case.

"If you always knew what a man's wife thought about him, you'd know a great deal," said Mrs. Baxter. She possessed in the fullest degree her sex's sense of an ultimate superiority in perception; men knew neither what their wives did nor what they were; wives might not know what their husbands did, but they always knew what they were. It would be rash to differ from a person of her observation and experience; half a dozen examples would at once have confounded

the objector.

Mrs. Baxter took perhaps a too private and domestic view of the man whose fate she was discussing; she judged the husband and friend, she had nothing to say to the public character. The voices of his political associates and acquaintances, of his fellow-workers in business, of his followers and enthusiastic adherents in his constituency, did not reach her ears, and perhaps, if they had, would not have won much attention. The consternation of Constantine Blair, Lady Castlefort's dismay, the sad gossiping and head-shaking that went on in the streets of Henstead and round old Mr. Foster's comfortable board, witnessed to a side of Quisanté in which Mrs. Baxter did not take much interest. She did not understand the sort of stupor with which they who had lived with him and worked with him saw the force he wielded and the anticipations he filled them with both struck down by a sudden blow; she did not share the feeling that all at once a gap had been made in life.

But something of this sort was the effect in all the circles which Quisanté had invaded and in which he had moved. The philosophical might already be saying that there was no necessary man; to the generality that reflection would come only later, when they had found a new leader, a fresh inspiration, and another personality in which to see the embodiment of their hopes. Now the loss was too fresh and too complete; for although it might be doubtful how long Quisanté's life would last, there seemed no chance of his ever filling the place to which he had appeared to be destined. Only a miracle could give that back to one who must cling to life, if he could keep his hold on it at all, at the cost of abandoning all the efforts and all the activities which had made it what it was alike for himself and for others. He was rallying slowly and painfully from his blow; a repetition of it would be the certain penalty of any strenuous mental exertion or any sustained strain of labour. In inactivity, in retirement, in the placid existence of a recognised invalid he might live years, indeed probably would; but otherwise the authorities declined to promise him any life at all. His body had played him false in the end. Constantine Blair began to look out for a candidate for Henstead and to wonder whether Sir Winterton would again expose himself to the unpleasantness of a contested election; Lady Castlefort must find another Prime Minister, the fighting men another champion, even the Alethea Printing Press Limited a new chairman. The places he had filled or made himself heir to were open to other occupants and fresh pretenders. That the change seemed so considerable proved how great a figure he had become in men's eyes no less than how utterly his career was overthrown. The comments on his public life were very flattering, but already they praised in the tone of an obituary notice, and the hopes they expressed of his being able some day to return to the arena were well understood to be no more than a kind or polite refusal to display naked truth in the merciless clearness of print.

Here was the state of things which extorted from Morewood the blunt wish that Quisanté might die. Such a desire was hardly cruel to the man himself, since he must now lose all that he had loved best in the market of the world; but it was not the man himself who had been most in Morewood's thoughts. With a penetration sharpened by the memory of his blunder he had appreciated the perverse calamity which had fallen on the man's wife, and had passed swiftly to the conclusion that for her an end by death was the only chance, the only turn of events which could give back to her the chance of a real life to be lived. He knew by what Quisanté had attracted and held her; all that, it seemed, was gone now. He divined also in what Quisanté repelled and almost terrified her; that would remain so long as breath was in the man and might grow even more intense. A sense of fairness somehow impelled him to his wish; her bargain had turned out so badly; the underlying basis of her marriage was broken; she was left to pay the price to the last penny, but was to get nothing of what she had looked to purchase. Was it not then the part of a courageous man to face his instinctive wish, and to accept it boldly? Cant and tradition apart, it must be the wish of every sensible person. For she knew, she had realised most completely on the very evening when Quisanté was struck down, what manner of man he was. She might have endured if she had still been able to tell herself of the wonderful things that he would do. No such comfort was open now. The man was still what he was; but he would do nothing. There came the change.

"That's the weak point about marriage as compared with other contractual arrangements," said Morewood to Dick Benyon. "You can never in any bargain ensure people getting what they expect to get—because to do that you'd have to give all of them sense—but in most you can to a certain extent see that they're allowed to keep what they actually did get. In marriage you can't. Something of this sort happens and the whole understanding on which the arrangement was based breaks down."

"Do people marry on understandings?" asked Dick doubtfully.

"The only way of getting anything like justice for her is that he should die. You must see that?"

"I don't know anything about it," said Dick morosely, "but I hear there's no particular likelihood of his dying if he obeys orders and keeps quiet."

"Just so, just so," said Morewood. "That's exactly what I mean. Do you suppose she'd ever have taken him if he'd been going to keep quiet? You know why you took him up; well, she did just the same. You know what you found him; she's found him just the same. What's left now? The *rôle* of a loving nurse! She's not born a nurse; and how in the devil's name is she to be expected to love him?"

Dick Benyon found no answer to questions which put with a brutal truthfulness the salient facts of the position. The one thing necessary, the one thing which would have made the calamity bearable, perhaps better than bearable, was wanting. She might love or have loved things in him, or about him, or done by him; himself she did not love; and now nothing but himself remained to her. Seeing the matter in this light, Dick was dumb before Morewood's challenge to him to say, if he dared, that he hoped a long life for Alexander Quisanté. Yet neither would he wish his death; for Dick had been an enthusiast, the spell had been very strong on him, and there still hung about him something of that inability to think of Quisanté as dead or dying, something of the idea that he must live and must by very strength of will find strength of body, which had prevented May herself from believing that the news which came in her telegram could mean anything really serious. While Quisanté lived, there would always be to Dick a possibility that he would rise up from his sickness and get to work again. Death would end this, death with its finality and its utter incongruous stillness. Death was repose, and neither for good nor for evil had Quisanté ever embraced repose. He had never been quiet; when he was not achieving, he had been grimacing. In death he could do neither.

"I can't fancy the fellow dead," said Dick to his wife and his brother. "I should be expecting him to jump up again every minute."

Lady Richard shuddered. The actual Quisanté had been bad; the idea of a dead Quisanté horribly galvanized into movement by a restlessness that the tomb could not stifle was hideous. Jimmy came to her aid with a rather unfeeling but apparently serious suggestion.

"We must cremate him," he said gravely.

"No, but, barring rot," Dick pursued, "I don't believe he'll die, you know."

"Poor May!" said Lady Richard. Neither of them pressed her to explain the precise point in May Quisanté's position which produced this exclamation of pity. It might have been that the death was possible, or that the death was not certain, or at least not near, or it might have sprung from a purely general reflection on the unhappiness of having life coupled with the life of such a man as Quisanté.

All these voices of a much interested, much pitying, much (and on the whole not unenjoyably) discussing world were heard only in dim echoes in the Mildmays' big quiet house in Carlton-House Terrace, where Quisanté had been stricken by his blow. There May had found him on her hasty return from Ashwood, and here he was still, thanks to the host's and hostess's urgent entreaties. They declared that he was not fit to be moved; the doctors hardly endorsed this view heartily but went so far as to say that any disturbance was no doubt bad in its degree; Lady Mildmay seized eagerly on the grudging support. "Let him stay here till he's fit to go to the country," she urged. "I'm sure we can make him comfortable. And—" she smiled apologetically, "I'm a good nurse, if I'm nothing else, you know."

"But won't Sir Winterton——?"

"My dear, you don't know what a lot Winterton thinks of Mr. Quisanté; he's proud to be of the least service to him. And you do know, I think, how it delights him to be any use at all to you."

In spite of that reason buried in her own heart which made every kindness received from these kind hands bitter to her, May let him stay. He wanted to stay, she thought, so far as his relaxed face and dimmed eyes gave evidence of any desire. And besides—yes, Lady Mildmay was a good nurse; he might find none so good if he were moved away. No sense of duty, no punctilious performance of offices, no such constancy of attendance as a wife is bound to render, could give what Lady Mildmay gave. Yet more than these May could not achieve. It was rather cruel, as it seemed to her, that the great and sudden call on her sympathy should come at the moment of all others when the spring of her sympathy was choked, when anger still burnt in her heart, when passionate resentment for a wound to her own pride and her own honour still inflamed her, when the mood in which she had broken out in her talk with Marchmont was still predominant. Such a falling-out of events sometimes made this real and heavy sickness seem like one of Quisanté's tricks, of at least suggested that he might be making the most of it in his old way, as he had of his faintness at the Imperial League banquet, or of his headache when old Foster's letter followed on the declaration of the poll at Henstead. Such feelings as these, strong enough to chill her pity till Lady Mildmay wondered at a wife so cold, were not deep or sincere enough to blind May Quisanté's eyes. Even without the doctor's story—which she had insisted on being told in all its plainness—she thought that she would have known the meaning of what had befallen her husband and herself, and have grasped at once its two great features, the great certainty and the great uncertainty; the certainty that his career was at an end, the uncertainty as to how near his life was to its end. Such a position chimed in too well with the bitter mood of Ashwood not to seem sent to crown it by a malicious device of fate's. At the very moment when she least could love, she was left no resource but love; at the moment when she would have turned her eyes most away from him and most towards his deeds, the deeds were taken away and he only was left; at the time when her hot anger against him drove her into a cry for release, she received no promise of release, or a promise deferred beyond an indefinitely stretching period of a worse imprisonment. For she clung to no such hope as that which made Dick Benyon dream of a resurrection of activity and of power, and had nothing to look for save years of a life both to herself and to him miserable. It might be sin to wish him dead; but was it sin to wish him either alive or dead, either in vigour

or at rest? Sin or no sin, that was the desire in her heart, and it would not be stifled however much she accused its inhumanity or recognised the want of love in it. Was the fault all hers? With her lips still burning from the lie that she had told for him, she could not answer 'yes.'

Still and silent Quisanté lay on his bed. His head was quite clear now and his eyes grew brighter. He watched Lady Mildmay as she ministered to him, and he watched his wife with his old quick furtive glances, so keen to mark every shade of her manner towards him. She had never really deceived him as to her thoughts of him; she did not deceive him now. He knew that her sympathies were estranged, more estranged than they had ever been before. So far as the reason lay in the incident of Ashwood, it was hidden from him; he knew nothing of the last great shame that he had put on her. But long before this he had recognised where his power over her lay, by what means he had gained and by what he kept it; he had been well aware that if she were still to be under his sway, the conquest must be held by his achievements; he himself was as nothing beside them. Now, as he lay, he was thinking what would happen. He also had heard the doctor's story or enough of it to enable him to guess the purport of their sentence on him; he was to live as an invalid, to abandon all his ambitions, to throw away all that made people admire him or made him something in the world's eyes and something great in hers. On these terms and on these only life was offered to him now; if he refused, if he defied nature, then he must go on with the sword ever hanging over him, in the knowledge that it soon must fall. He told himself that, yet was but half-convinced. Need it fall? With the first spurt of renewed strength he raised that question and argued it, till he seemed able to say 'It may fall,' rather than 'It must.'

What should be his course then? The world thought it had done with him. All seemed gone for which his wife had prized him. Should he accept that, and in its acceptance take up his life as valetudinarian, his life forgotten of the world which he had loved to conquer, barren of interest for the woman whom it had been his strongest passion to win against her instincts, to hold as it were against her will, and to fascinate in face of her distaste? Such were the terms offered; Alexander Quisanté lay long hours open-eyed and thought of them. There had come into his head an idea that attracted him mightily and suited well with his nature, so oddly mixed of strength and weakness, greatness and smallness, courage and bravado, the idea of a means by which he might keep the world's applause and his wife's fascinated interest, aye, and increase them too, till they should be more intense than they had ever been. That would be a triumph, played before admiring eyes. But what would be the price of it, and was the price one that he would pay. It might be the biggest price a mortal man can pay. So for a few days more Alexander Quisanté lay and thought about it.

Once old Miss Quisanté came to see him, at his summons, not of her own volunteering. Since the blow fell she had neither come nor written, and May, with a sense of relief, had caught at the excuse for doing no more than sending now and again a sick-room report. Aunt Maria looked old, frail, and very yellow, as she made her way to a chair by her nephew's bed. He turned to her with the smile of mockery so familiar to her eyes.

"You haven't been in any hurry to see me, Aunt Maria," said he.

"You've always sent for me when you wanted me before, Sandro, and I supposed you would this time."

"May's kept you posted up? You know what those fools of doctors say?" The old woman nodded. Quisanté was smiling still. "I'm done then, eh?" he asked.

Her hands were trembling, but her voice was hard and unsympathetic. "It sounds like it," she said.

Quisanté raised himself on his elbow.

"You'll see me out after all," said he, "if I'm not careful. That's what it comes to." He gave a low laugh as Aunt Maria's lips moved but no words came. He leant over a little nearer to her and asked, "Have you had any talk with my wife about it?"

"No," said Aunt Maria. "Not a word, Sandro."

"Nothing to be said, eh? What does she think, though? Oh, you know! You've got your wits about you. Don't take to considering my feelings at this time of day."

Now the old woman smiled too.

"I'm sorry you're done for, Sandro," she said. "So's your wife, I'll be bound."

"You both love me so much?" he sneered.

"We've always understood one another," said Aunt Maria.

"I tell you, I love my wife." Aunt Maria made no remark. "And you both think I'm done for? Well, we'll see!"

Aunt Maria looked up with a gleam of new interest in her sharp eyes, so like the eyes of the man on the bed. Quisanté met her glance and understood it; it appealed at once to his malice and to his vanity; it was a foretaste of the wonder he would raise and the applause he would win, if he

determined to face the price that might have to be paid for them. He had listened with exasperated impatience to kind Lady Mildmay's pleadings with him, to her motherly insisting on perfect rest for his mind, and to her pathetically hopeful picture of the new interests and the new pleasure he would find in days of rest and peace, with his wife tenderly looking after him. To such charming as that his ears were deaf; they pricked at the faintest sound of distant cheering. It would be something to show even Aunt Maria that he was not done with; what would it not be to show it to the world—and to that wife of his whom he loved and could hold only by his deeds?

"I only know what the doctors say," remarked Miss Quisanté. "They say you must throw up everything."

"You wouldn't have me risk another of those damned strokes, would you?" he asked, the mockery most evident now in his voice and look. "Lady Mildmay implores me to be careful, almost with tears. I suppose my own aunt'll be still more anxious, and my own wife too?"

"Doctors aren't infallible. And they don't know you, Sandro. You're not like other men." Hard as the tone was, his ears drank in the words eagerly. "They don't know how much there is in you."

Again he leant forward and said almost in a whisper,

"May thinks I'm done for?" Aunt Maria nodded. "And she'll nurse me? Take me to some infernal invalids' place, full of bath-chairs, and walk beside mine, eh?" Aunt Maria smiled grimly. "She'll like that, won't she?" he asked.

"You won't die," she said suddenly and abruptly, her eyes fixed on his.

"What?" he asked sharply. "Well, who said I was going to die?"

"The doctors—unless you go to the invalids' place."

"Oh, and my dear aunt doesn't agree with them?" Eagerness now broke through the mockery in his tones. He had longed so for a word of hope, for someone to persuade him that he might still live and could still work. "But suppose they proved right? Well, that's no worse than the other anyhow."

"Not much," said Aunt Maria. "But I don't believe 'em." Her faith in him came back at his first summons of it. He had but to tell her that he would live and need not die, and she would believe him. Sandro's ways were not as other men's; she could not believe that for Sandro as for other men there were necessities not to be avoided, and a fate not to be mastered by any defiant human will. So there she sat, persuading him that he was not mortal; and he lay listening, mocking, embittered, yet still lending an ear to the story, eager to believe her fable, rejoicing in the power that he had over her mind. If he felt all this for Aunt Maria, what would he not feel for the world, and for that wife of his? If old Aunt Maria could so wake in him the love of life and the hatred of that living death to which he had been condemned, what passionate will to live would rise in answer to the world's wonder and his wife's?

"I wish you'd give me that little book on the table there," he said. Aunt Maria obeyed. "My engagement-book," he explained. "Look. I had things booked for five months ahead. See—speeches, meetings, committees, the Alethea—so on—so on. They're all what they call cancelled now." He turned the leaves and Aunt Maria stood by him, watching.

"They won't get anybody to do 'em like you, Sandro," she said.

He flung the book down on the floor in sudden peevishness, with an oath of anger and exasperation.

"By God, why haven't I a fair chance?" he asked, and fell back on his pillows.

Lady Mildmay would have come and whispered softly to him, patted his hand, given him lemonade, and bade him try to sleep while she read softly to him. His old Aunt Maria Quisanté stood motionless, saying not a word, looking away from him. Yet she was nearer to his mood and suited him better than kind Lady Mildmay.

"You've done a good bit already, Sandro," she said. "And you're only thirty-nine."

"And I'm to die at thirty-nine, or else live like an idiot, bored to death, and boring to death everybody about me!"

"I shall go now," said Aunt Maria. "Good-bye, Sandro. Send for me again when you want me."

"Aunt Maria!" She stopped at his call. "Go and see May. Go and talk to her."

"Yes, Sandro."

"Tell her what you think. You know: I mean, tell her that perhaps it's not as bad as the doctors say; that I may get about a bit soon and—and so on—You know."

"I'm to tell her that?" asked Aunt Maria.

"She's not to conclude it's all over with me yet." Miss Quisanté nodded and moved towards the door.

"Oh, and before you go, just pick up that book and give it me again, will you?"

She returned, picked up the engagement-book and gave it him; then she stood for a moment by the bed, beginning to smile a little.

"You've got a lot to fret about," she said. "Don't you fret about money, Sandro. I can manage a thousand in a month or so. No use hoarding it; it looks as if we should neither of us want it long."

"You've got a thousand? What, now? Available?"

"In a week or so it could be."

"Then in God's name put it in the Alethea. What are you thinking about? It's the biggest thing out."

"In the Alethea? I meant to give it to you."

"All right. I shall put it in, if you do. I tell you that in three years' time you'll be rich out of it, and I shall draw an income of a couple of thousand a year at least as long as the patent lasts, if not longer."

"How long does it last?"

"Fourteen years; then we'll try for an extension, for another seven, you know, and we ought to get it. First and last I expect to get fifty thousand out of the Alethea alone, besides another thing that I've talked over with Mandeville. I'll tell you about it some day, I can't to-day. I—I'm a little tired. But anyhow the Alethea's sure. I'll put the thousand into it for you, and I'll hand you back double the money this time next year."

He was leaning on his left elbow, talking volubly; his eyes were bright, his right hand moved in rapid apt gestures; his voice was sanguine as he spoke of the seven years' extension of the Alethea patent; he had forgotten his stroke and the verdict of his doctors. Aunt Maria nodded her head to him, saying, "I'll send it you as soon as I can," and made for the door. She was smiling now; Sandro seemed more himself again. He, left alone, lay back on his pillow, breathing fast, rather exhausted; but after awhile he opened the engagement-book again and ran his eyes up and down its columns. Lady Mildmay found him thus occupied when she came to give him a cup of milk.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOR LACK OF LOVE?

Weston Marchmont, punctilious to the verge of fastidiousness, or even over it, in his conduct towards the world and his friends, allowed himself easily enough a liberty of speculative opinion which the Dean of St. Neot's would have hesitated about and the Dean's wife decidedly veiled by a reference to Providence. To him the blow that had fallen on Quisanté seemed no public evil. Allowing the man's talents, he distrusted both his aims and his methods; they would not have come to good; the removal of his personality meant relief from an influence which was not healthy and an example which taught nothing beyond the satisfaction of ambition and the pursuit of power. It was well then if Quisanté were indeed, as he himself said, "done with," so far as public activity went. Marchmont, not concealing his particular interest but rather facing it and declaring it just, went on to say that, since Quisanté was done with publicly, it was well that he should be done with privately also, and that as speedily as might be. Love for May Quisanté might be the moving spring of this conclusion, but he insisted that it was not necessary thereto. Any reasonable person her friend, nay, anybody whose attention was fairly directed to the case, must hold the same view. There was a hideous mistake to be undone, and only one way of undoing it. Permanent unions in marriage, immense and indispensable engines of civilisation, yet exacted their price. One instance of the compensating payment was that deaths sometimes became desirable; you had to wish a death sooner than life-long misery for a friend; to wish it was not wrong, though to have to wish it might be distasteful. In this self-justification he contrived to subordinate, while he admitted, his own strong interest in the death and his violent dislike of the sufferer which robbed the death of its pain so far as he was concerned. People's infatuation with Quisanté, above all May's infatuation, had so irritated him that he did not scruple to accept the only means of ending them; that they would be thus ended it never came into his mind to doubt. His regret was only for the stretch of delay, for the time of waiting, for the respite promised to the doomed man if he would be docile and obedient; for all of them life was passing, and too much had already in tragic mistake been spent on Alexander Quisanté.

"I think you're damnably inhuman," said Dick Benyon, expressing, as he often did, an

unsophisticated but not perhaps an altogether unsound popular judgment. "He's a remarkable man. And after all she married him. She needn't have. As for the party—well, I don't know how we shall replace him."

"I don't want him replaced," said Marchmont. "Everything that he was doing had better be left undone; and everything that he is had better not be. You call me inhuman. Well, people who repress their pity for individuals in the interests of the general welfare are always called that."

"Yes, but you don't pity him," retorted Dick.

Marchmont thought for a moment. "No, I don't," he admitted. "I see why one might; but I can't do it myself." He paused and added, smiling, "I suppose that's the weak point in my attitude."

"One of them," said Dick, but he said no more. There are limits to candid discussion even among the closest friends; he could not tell Marchmont in so many words that he wanted Quisanté dead so as to be able to marry Quisanté's wife, however well aware of the fact he might be and Marchmont might suspect him to be. Or, if he had said this, he could have said it only in vigorous reproof, perhaps even in horror; and to this he was not equal. For Dick was sorely torn. On the one hand he had never ceased to hang on Quisanté's words and to count on Quisanté's deeds; on the other, he had never acquitted himself of responsibility for a marriage which he believed to have been most disastrous. Worst of all then for him was what threatened now, an end of the illuminating words and the stirring deeds, but no end to the marriage yet in sight. To him too death seemed the best thing, unless that wonderful unlikely resurrection of activity and power could come. And even then—Dick remembered the face of Quisanté's wife as she lied for him to her friends at Ashwood. The resurrection must be not only with a renewed but with a transformed mind, if it were to bring happiness, and to bring no more of things like that.

The world at large, conceiving that the last word had been said and the last scene in which it was interested played, had soon turned its curious eyes away from Quisanté's sick bed, leaving only the gaze of the smaller circle personally concerned in the dull and long-drawn-out ending of a piece once so full of dramatic incident. But the world found itself wrong, and all the eyes spun round in amazed staring when the sick man leapt from his bed and declared that he was himself again. The news came in paragraphs, to the effect that after another week's rest Mr. Quisanté, whose health had made a rapid and great improvement, hoped to return to his Parliamentary duties and to fulfil the more urgent of his public engagements. Here was matter enough for surprise, but it was needful to add the fast-following well-authenticated stories of how the doctors had protested, how Sir Rufus Beaming had washed his hands of the case, and how Dr. Claud Manton had addressed an energetic warning to Lady May Quisanté. This last item came home most closely to the general feeling, and the general voice asked what Lady May was thinking of. There was warrant for the question in the wondering despair of Lady Mildmay and the sad embarrassment of debonair Sir Winterton. The Mildmays knew all about it, the whole thing had happened in their house; but Sir Winterton, challenged with the story about Sir Rufus, could only hum and ha, and Lady Mildmay had not denied the interview between Quisanté's wife and the energetic Dr. Manton. What was the meaning of it? And, once again, what was Lady May Quisanté thinking of? Was she blind, was she careless? Or were the doctors idiots? The world, conscious of its own physical frailty, shrank from the last question and confined its serious attention to the two preceding ones. "Does she want to kill him?" asked the honest graspers of the obvious. "Does she think him above all laws?" was the question of those who wished to be more subtle. At least she was a puzzle. All agreed on that.

Lady Richard discountenanced all speculation and all questionings. For her part she did her duty, mentioning to Mrs. Baxter that this was what she meant to do and that, whatever happened, she intended to be able, *salvâ conscientiâ*, to tell herself that she had done it; Mrs. Baxter approved, saying that this was what the second Mrs. Greening had done when her husband's sister's daughter, a very emancipated young woman as it seemed, had incomprehensibly flirted with the auctioneer's apprentice and had scouted Mrs. Greening's control; Mrs. Greening had told the girl's mother and sent the girl home, second class, under the care of the guard. Similarly then Lady Richard, without embarking on any consideration of ultimate problems, wrote to May, suggesting that Mr. Quisanté wanted rest and putting Ashwood at her disposal for so long as she and her husband might be pleased to occupy it. "If they don't choose to go, it's not my fault," said Lady Richard with the sigh which declares that every reasonable requirement of conscience has been fulfilled. Happy lady, to be able to repose in this conviction by the simple expedient of lending a house not otherwise required at the moment! So kind are we to our own actions that Lady Richard felt meritorious.

They chose to go, and went unaccompanied save by their baby girl and Aunt Maria—this last a strange addition made at Quisanté's own request. He had not been wont to show such a desire for the old lady's society when there was nothing to be gained by seeking it; nor had it seemed to May altogether certain that Miss Quisanté would come. Yet she came with ardent eagerness and her nephew was plainly glad to have her. It took May a little while to understand why, but soon she saw the reason. Aunt Maria was deep in the conspiracy, or the infatuation, or whatever it was to be called; she flattered Quisanté's hope of life, she applauded his defiance of the inevitable; she hung on him more and more, herself forgetting and making him forget the peril of the way he trod. He wanted to be told that he was right, and he wanted an applauding audience. In both ways Aunt Maria satisfied him. She would talk of the present as though it were no more than a passing interruption of a long career, of the future as though it stretched in assured leisure

through years of great achievement, of his life and his life's work as though both were in his own hand and subject to nothing save his own will and power. She was to him the readiest echo of the world's wonder and applause, the readiest assurance that his great effort was not going unrecognised. Hence he would have her with him, though there seemed no more love and no more tenderness between them than when in old days they had quarrelled and he had grumbled and she had flung him her money with a bitter jeer. But she lived in him and could think of him only as living, and through her he could cheat himself into an assurance that indeed he could live and work.

Then Aunt Maria was very bad for him. That could not be denied, but something more nearly touching herself pressed on May Quisanté. She had seen the Mildmays' painful puzzle; she had listened to Dr. Claud Manton's energetic warning; it was before her, no less than before the patient, that Sir Rufus had washed his hands. She was not ignorant of the questions the world asked. She was not careless, nor was she any longer the dupe of her old delusion that such a man as Quisanté could not die. Her eye for truth had conquered; now she believed that, if he persisted in his rebellion, he must surely die; unless all medical knowledge went for nothing, he would surely die, and die not after long years of lingering, but soon, perhaps very soon. A moment of excitement, say one of the moments that she had loved so much, might kill him; so Claud Manton said. A life of excitement would surely and early do the work. And why was he rebellious? She accused herself, she accused Aunt Maria, she accused the foolishly wondering, foolishly chattering world; and in every accusation there was some justice. Was there enough to acquit the other defendant who stood arraigned? To that she dared not answer "Yes," because of the fear which was in her that the strongest amongst all the various impulses driving him to his defiance was in the end to be found in his relations to her, in the attitude of his own wife towards him. Ashwood was full of associations; there was Duty Hill, where he had risen to his greatest and thereby won her; there was the tree beneath which she had sat with Marchmont on the evening when the knowledge of her husband's worst side had been driven like a sharp knife into her very heart. But more vivid than these memories now was the recollection of that first evening when she had seen him sitting alone, nobody's friend, and had determined to be human towards him and to treat him in a human way. There had been the true beginning of her great experiment. Now she told herself that she had failed in it, had never been human to him, and had never treated him in a human way, had not been what a man's wife should be, had stood always outside, a follower, an admirer, a critic, an accuser, never simply the woman who was his wife. His fault or hers, or that of both—it seemed to matter little. The experiment had been hers; and because she had made it and failed, it seemed to her that he was braving death. Had she been different, perhaps he would not have rebelled and could have lived the quiet life with her. It needed little more to make her tell herself that she drove him to his death, that she was with the enemy, with the chattering world and with poor deluded old Aunt Maria; she was of the conspirators; she egged him on to brave his doom.

In darker vein still ran her musings sometimes, when there came over her that haunting self-distrust; the fear that she was juggling with herself, shutting her eyes to the sin of her own heart, and, in spite of all her protestations, was really inspired by a secret hope too black and treacherous to put in words. However passionately she repudiated it, it still cried mockingly, "I am here!" It asked if her prayers for her husband's life were sincere, if her care for him were more than a due paid to decency, if the doom were in truth a thing she dreaded, and not a deliverance which convention alone forbade her openly to desire. Plainly, plainly—did she wish the doom to fall, did she wish him dead, was the rebellion that threatened death the course which the secret craving of her heart urged him to take? To do everything for him was not enough, if the doubt still lurked that her heart was not in the doing. For now she could no more ask coolly what she wished; the thing had come too near; it was odious to have a thought except of saving him by all means and at every cost; it was intolerable not to know at least that no part of the impulse which drove him to his rebellion lay at her door, not to feel at least that she had nothing but dread and horror for the threatened doom. She had no love for him; it came home to her now with a strange new sense of self-condemnation; she had married him for her own pleasure, because he interested her and made life seem dull without him. She pleaded no more that he had killed her love; it had never been there to kill. Had she left him to find a woman who loved him in and for himself, not for his doings, not for the interest of him, that woman might now be winning him by love from the open jaws of death.

Yet again laughter, obstinate and irrepressible, shot often in a jarring streak of inharmonious colour across the sombre fabric of her thoughts. He was not only mad, not only splendid—he seemed both to her—he was absurd too at moments, often when he was with Aunt Maria. Letters came in great numbers, from political followers, from women prominent in society, from constituents, from old Foster and Japhet Williams at Henstead, even from puissant Lady Castlefort; they wondered, applauded, implored, flattered, in every key of that sweet instrument called praise. Quisanté read them out, pluming and preening his feathers, strutting about, crowing. He would repeat the passages he liked, asking his wife's approbation; that he must have, it seemed. She gave it with what heartiness she could, and laughed only in her sleeve. Surely a man facing death could have forgotten all this? Not Alexander Quisanté. He could die, and die bravely; but the world must stand by his bedside. So till the end, whenever that most uncertainly dated end might come, the old mixture promised to go on, the great and small, the mean and grand, the call for tears and throbs of the heart alternating with the obstinate curling or curving of lips swift to respond to the vision of the contemptible or the ludicrous.

But she had her appeal to make, the one thing, it seemed, she could do to put herself at all in

the right, the offer she must make, and try to make with a sincerity which should rise unimpaired from the conflicts of her heart. She had caught at coming to Ashwood because she thought she could make it best there, not indeed in the room where she had lied for him, nor by the tree where she had turned to Marchmont in a pang of wild regret, but there, on Duty Hill, where he had won her, had touched his highest, and had seemed a conqueror. She took him there, climbing with him very slowly, very gently; there she made him sit and sat by him. Again it was a quiet evening, and still the valley stretched below; nothing changed here made all the changes of her life seem half unreal. Here she told him he must live, he must be docile and must live.

"You may get strong again, but for the time you must do as the doctors say. You ought to; for the little girl's sake, if for nothing else, you ought to. You know you're risking another seizure now, and you know what that might mean."

His eyes were fixed keenly on her, though he lay back motionless in weariness.

"You ought to live for your daughter." She paused a minute and added, "And some day we might have a son, and you'd live again in him; we both should; we should feel that we were doing —that you were doing—everything he did. I think your son would be a great man, and I should be proud to be his mother. Isn't the hope of that worth something?"

He was silent, watching her closely still.

"I know what you think of me," she continued. "You think an active life essential to me, that I can't do without it. God knows I loved all you did, I loved your triumphs, I loved to hear you speak and see them listen. You know I loved all that, loved it too much perhaps. But I'll do without it. I'm your wife, your fate's mine. It'll be the braver thing for you to face it, really; I'm ready to face it with you."

Still he would only look at her.

"We know what we both are," she went on with a little smile. "We're not Mildmays, you and I. But let's try. I must tell you. I can't bear to think that it's partly at least because of me that you won't try, that if I were a different sort of woman it might be much easier for you to try. If it's that at all, imagine what I should feel if—if anything happened such as the doctors are afraid of."

"I've chosen my course. I believe the doctors are all wrong."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked quickly.

He shrugged his shoulders, seeming to say that he would not discuss it. "A great many considerations influence me," he said with a touch of pompousness.

"Am I one of them?" she persisted. "Because I don't want to be. I'm ready to share your life, whatever it is."

"Are you?" he asked, with something of the same malicious smile that he was wont to bestow on Aunt Maria. "Do you think you could share my life? Do you think you have?"

"I know what you mean," she said, flushing a little. "I daresay I've been hard and—and didn't take the pains to understand, and was uncharitable perhaps. Anyhow there'll be no opportunity for any more—any more misunderstandings of that sort."

"No; the understanding's clear enough now," said he.

She looked at him almost despairingly; he seemed so strangely hostile, so bitterly sensitive to her judgment of him.

"You think me," he went on, with his persistent eyes unwaveringly set on her, "a not over-honest mountebank; that's what you and your friends think me."

"Oh, I wish I'd never tried to talk to you about it!" she cried. "You take hold of some hasty mood or look of mine and treat it as if it were everything. You know it isn't."

"It's there, though."

"It never need be, never, never."

"You'll forget it all when we're settled down at—where was it?—Torquay or somewhere—in our villa, like two old tabby-cats sitting in the sun? No time to think it all over then? No, only all the hours of every day!" He paused and then added in a low hard voice, "I'm damned if I'll do it. I may have to die, but I'll die standing." His eyes gleamed now, and for the first time they turned from her and roamed over the prospect that lay below Duty Hill. But they were back on her face soon.

"No, no," she implored. "Not because of me, for heaven's sake, not because of me!"

"Because of it all. Yes, and because of you too. You don't love me, you never have." He leant towards her. "But I love you," he said, "yes, as I loved you when I asked you to be my wife on this hill where we are. Then don't you understand? I won't go and live that old cat's life with you." He

laid his hand on hers. "Your eyes shall still sparkle for me, your breath shall still come quick for me, your heart beat for me; or I'll have no more of it at all."

The touch of rhetoric, so characteristic of him, so unlike anything that Marchmont or Dick Benyon would have used in such a case, did not displease her then. And it hit the truth as his penetration was wont to hit it. That was what he wanted, that was what she could and should and must give, or he would have nothing from her. Here was the truth; but the truth was what she had struggled so hard to deny and feared so terribly to find true. He was not indeed led by a sense of obligation towards her; the need was for himself. It was not that he felt in her a right to call on him for exertions or for a performance of his side of the bargain; it was that he could not bear to lose his tribute from her. But still she stood self-condemned. Again the thought came—with a woman who loved him there might have been another tribute that she could have paid and he been content to levy. He would have believed such a woman if she told him that he would be as much to her, and she as much absorbed in him, in the villa at Torquay as ever in the great world; and perhaps—oh, only perhaps, it is true—he would have made shift with that and fed his appetite on the homage of one, since his wretched body denied him the rows on rows of applauding spectators that he loved. But from his wife's lips he would not accept any such assurance, and from her no such homage could be hoped for to solace him.

Then the strange creature began to talk to her, not of what he had done, nor even of what he had hoped to do, but of what he meant and was going to do; how he would grow greater and richer, of schemes in politics and in business, of the fervour and devotion of the fighting men behind him and how they were sick of the old gang and would have no leader but Alexander Quisanté; of the prosperity of the Alethea, how the shares rose, how big orders came in, how utterly poor old Maturin had blundered. He spoke like a strong man with a wealth of years and store-houses of force, who sees life stretched long before him, material to be shaped by his hand and forced into what he will make it. He talked low and fast, his eyes again roaming over the prospect; the evening fell while he still talked. Almost it seemed then that the doctors were wrong, that his courage was no folly, that indeed he would not die. O for the faith to believe that! For his spell was on her again now, and now she would not have him die. Once again he had his desire; once more her heart beat and her eyes gleamed for him. But then it came on her, with a sudden fierce light of conviction, that all this was hollow, useless, vain, that the sentence was written and the doom pronounced. No pleading however eloquent could alter it. Quisanté was stopped in mid-career by a short sharp sob that escaped from his wife's lips. He turned and looked at her, breaking off the sentence that he had begun. She met his glance with a frightened look in her eyes.

"What's the matter?" he asked slowly, rather resentfully.

"Nothing, nothing," she stammered. "I—I was excited by what you were saying." She tried to laugh. "I'm emotional, you know, and you can always rouse my emotions."

"Was it that?" For a moment longer he sat upright, looking hard at her; then his body relaxed, and he lay back, his lower lip dropping and his eyes half closed. An expression of great weariness and despair came over him. He had read the meaning of her sob; and now he hid his face in his hands. His pretences failed him, and he was assailed by the bitterness of truth and of death.

She rose, saying, "It's late, we must go in; you'll be over-tired."

After an instant Quisanté rose slowly and falteringly; he laid his arm in hers, and they stood side by side, gazing down into the valley. This hill had come to mean much in their lives, and somehow now they seemed to be saying good-bye to it.

"I could never forget this hill," she said, "any more than I could forget you. You told me just now that I didn't love you. Well, as you mean it, perhaps not. But you've been almost everything in the world to me. Everything in the world isn't all good, but it's—everything." She turned to him suddenly and kissed him on the cheek. "Lean on me as we go down the hill," she said. There was pity and tenderness in the words and the tone. But Quisanté drew his arm sharply away and braced his body to uprightness.

"I'm not tired. I can go quite well by myself. You look more tired than I do," he said. "Come, we shall be late," and he set off down the hill at a brisk pace.

Her appeal then had failed; this last little incident told her that with unpitying plainness. If he had yielded for a moment before the face of reality, he soon recovered himself, turned away from the sight, and went back to his masquerading. She lacked the power to lead him from it, and again she feared that she lacked the power because her will was not sincere and single. Now they must go on to that uncertain end, he playing his part before the world, before her and Aunt Maria, she looking on, sometimes in admiration, sometimes in contempt, always in fear of the moment when the actor's speeches would be suddenly cut short and the curtain, falling on the interrupted scene, hide him for ever from the audience whom he had made wondering applauding partners in his counterfeit. The last of his life was to be like the rest of it, with the same elements of tragedy and of farce, of what attracted and of what revolted, of the great and the little. It was to be like in another way too; it was to be lived alone, without any true companion for his soul, without the love that he had not asked except of one, and, asking of that one, had not obtained. As the days went on, the fascination of the spectacle she watched grew on her; it was more poignant

now than in the former time, and it filled all her life. Thus in some sort Alexander Quisanté had his way; his hold on her was not relaxed, his dominion over her not abrogated, to the end of his life he would be what she told him he had been—almost everything. When the end came, what would he be? The question crossed her thoughts, but found no answer; some day it would fall to be answered. Now she could only watch and wait, half persuaded that the pretence was no pretence, yet always dreading the summons of reality to end the play. So the world asked in vain what May Quisanté was thinking of, whether she wanted to kill him, or whether she thought him above all laws. A puzzle to the world and a puzzle to her friends, she waited for the falling of the blow which Quisanté daily challenged.

Sir Rufus Beaming met Dr. Claud Manton at the Athenaeum and showed him a newspaper paragraph.

"To address a great meeting at Henstead!" said Manton, raising his brows and shaping his lips for a whistle. "'From his own and neighbouring constituencies.'"

"He might just as well take chloroform comfortably by his fireside," said Sir Rufus. "It would be a little quicker, perhaps, but not a bit more sure."

And again they washed their hands of the whole affair very solemnly.

CHAPTER XIX.

DEATH DEFIED.

Constantine Blair, no less active and soon little less serene in opposition than in power, felt himself more than justified in all that he had ever said about Weston Marchmont when he received an intimation of Marchmont's intention to apply for the Chiltern Hundreds. Yet he was aghast at this voluntary retirement into the wilderness of private life, a life without bustle, without gossip, without that sense of being intimate with the march of affairs and behind the scenes of the national theatre. There were reasons assigned, of course. One was that Marchmont found himself ("I'll bet he does!" groaned Constantine with anticipatory resignation) more in agreement with the other side than with his own on an important question of foreign politics then to the front. But this state of matters had ceased to be unusual with him and hardly in itself accounted for the step he was now taking. The care of his estate was the second reason, properly dismissed as plainly frivolous. In the end of the letter more sincerity peeped out, as the writer lapsed from formality into friendship. "I know I shall surprise many people and grieve some, but I'm sick of the thing. I can't endure the perpetual haggling between what I ought to do and what I'm expected to do; the compromises that result satisfy me as little as anybody. In fine, my dear Constantine, I'm going back to my pictures, my books, my hills, and my friends." Constantine read with a genuine sorrow and criticised with a contemptuous sniff. Pictures, books—and hills! Hills! It was insulting his intelligence. And though friends were all very well, yet where was the use of them if a man deprived himself of all the sources of entertaining conversation? But there was nothing to be done—except to tell Lady Castlefort a day before the rest of the world knew. Constantine held her favour on that tenure. She showed no surprise.

"A loss to the country, but not to us," she said.

"Just what I think," agreed Constantine, with a revival of cheerfulness.

"If I hadn't known him since he was so high, I'd wish he had the what-do-you-call-it seizures instead of the other man."

"But Quisanté's not going, he means to hold on," said Constantine. "I'm glad of it. Henstead's very shaky. But we shall hold Marchmont's seat all right. We're going to put up Dick Benyon."

"He's safe enough, he won't worry you," said Lady Castlefort. "You'll have to fight Henstead before long, all the same. The man'll die, you know."

"Think so?" asked Constantine uneasily.

"And he will be a loss—a loss to us, whatever one may think about the country." Constantine looked troubled. "Oh, it's not your business to think about the country—or mine either, thank goodness," she added rather irritably. She was more distressed about Weston Marchmont than she chose to tell; and it was impossible not to be annoyed at the perversity. Of the two men whom she had singled out for greatness one might go on but would not, the other asked nothing but to be allowed to go on, and found refusal at the hands of fate. There was another thing in her thoughts too. She had a strong belief in hostesses, natural to her, perhaps not unreasonable. In either of two events she had foreseen an ideal hostess for the party in the woman she still thought of as May Gaston. There was no need to detail the two events; suffice it to say that, whichever of them now happened, it appeared that May Gaston would not be able to figure as a great hostess;

at least there would have to rise for her some star not yet visible in the heavens.

Marchmont and May had neither met nor written to one another since their talk under the tree at Ashwood. He had not doubted that she would understand silence and like silence best; from him any word seemed impossible. But on the day when his determination was made public he received a summons from her and at once obeyed it. He found her alone, though she told him that she expected Quisanté back from the City in a little while.

"He wants to see you," she said. "I don't know why, unless it's just as a curiosity." She smiled for a moment. "I'm sorry you find you can't stand it," she went on.

"You understand? You've been in that state of mind or pretty near it, I know."

"Yes, pretty near at times, but I'm not as honest as you. I may see all you see, but I should always go on." She glanced at him. "I'm more like my husband than I'm like you," she ended.

"I don't believe that," he said gravely.

"I know you don't, but it's true. I daresay you never will understand it, because of the other May Gaston you've made for yourself. But it's true. And you know what he is. He's ready to give body and soul—Oh, I'm not just using a phrase—body and soul to keep the things that you've given up for your hills. How scornful your hills made Constantine Blair!"

"Are you importing metaphorical meanings into my hills?" he asked, sitting down near her.

"Yes," she answered. "Mr. Blair didn't, but I do."

"Perhaps it was rather a silly thing to say."

"No, I don't think so."

"I mean to Constantine."

"Oh, well then, perhaps it was," she admitted, smiling. "But that's all consistent, isn't it? You couldn't trim your sails to suit the breeze even in a letter like that."

"Are you rebuking me? Are you contemptuous? What are you?" He leant back and looked at her, smiling.

"If my husband would do what you've done, he might live," she said.

Marchmont nodded gravely; it was easy to see the odd way in which his action fitted into the drama of her life.

"But we've no hills," she went on. "You leave London—all London means—to wander on hills, high glorious hills; he'd leave it for a villa, a small villa at a seaside place."

"Metaphors again?"

"It comes easier to talk in them sometimes. And I—I'm of my husband's way of thinking."

"I don't believe it," he said again, but looking at her now with a little touch of doubt.

"You'll never come back, will you?" she asked.

"Never," said he with a quiet certainty.

She rose with a restless sigh and walked to the fireplace.

"I couldn't," he went on. "I'm not fit for it; that's the end of the matter. Use your own term of abuse. I shall hear plenty of them."

"I don't want to abuse you," she said. She walked quickly over to him, gave him her hand for a moment, and then returned to her place. "But it makes me feel rather strange to you." She looked full at him with a plain distress in her eyes, and her voice shook a little. "I'm coming to feel more strange towards you," she went on. "I thought we had got nearer at Ashwood, we did for the moment. But now I'm farther off again."

"I would have you always very near," he said in low tones, his eyes saying more than his lips.

"I know. And perhaps you've had thoughts——" She paused before she added, "Alexander's quite set on his course, nothing will stop him—except the thing that I expect to stop him. You know what I mean?"

Marchmont nodded again.

"And he's doing it a good deal because of me. I wonder if you understand that?"

"I don't know that I do."

"No; he knows more of me than you do."

She became silent, and he, watching her, was silent too. What was this strangeness of which she spoke? He felt it too but without understanding it. It caused in him a vague discomfort, an apprehension that some obstacle was between them, something more than any external hindrance, a thing which might perhaps remain though all external hindrance were removed. Her last words both puzzled and wounded him with their implication of a deeper sympathy between Quisanté and herself than existed or could exist between her and him. That he did not understand, and could not without giving up his own idea of her, the May Gaston which, as she said, he had made for himself. Was his image gone indeed? Had Alexander Quisanté's chisel altered the features beyond recognition and till true identity was gone? Yet Alexander Quisanté was the man who had put on her the shame for which she had sobbed under the tree on that evening at Ashwood. Before such a seeming contradiction his penetration stood baffled. She had said then that her present life would, she supposed, go on right to the end, and had said it as though the prospect were unendurable; now a new and to him unnatural resignation seemed to have come upon her, just when her present life had shown that it was not likely to go on right to the end.

"I've prayed my husband to give up," she said, "I don't beg you not to give up. To begin with, you wouldn't listen to me any more than he did. And then, I suppose, you're right for yourself."

"You're about the only person who'll say so."

"I daresay. I've learnt about you in learning about myself. And I can feel it just as you do—Oh, how intolerably strongly sometimes!" She added with a smile, "We've only just missed suiting one another," and then, "Yes, but we have missed, you know."

"I don't believe it," he persisted, struggling to throw off the new doubt she was thrusting into his mind. His thought was that, once she got free of her husband, she would indeed be his. That he must hold to. It was Quisanté, not she herself, who made her now feel strange to him; and Quisanté's spell was not to last; her quiet certitude that her husband's days were numbered carried conviction to him also. "But I won't talk any more about it now," he said.

"No, it seems inhuman," she agreed. "I spend all my days cheating myself into a hope that he'll get better. I know you don't like him, but if you lived with him as I do, you'd come to hope as I do. Yes, in spite of all you know about us; and you know more than anybody alive. I've not been so—so disloyal—to anybody else." She smiled as she quoted the word against him.

"One must admire him," said Marchmont.

May Quisanté laughed at his tone almost scornfully. "The way you say that shows how little you understand," she exclaimed. "It's not a bit like that." She took a step nearer to him. "When it comes," she said slowly, "I shan't shed a single tear, but I shall feel that my life's over. He'll have had it all."

"God forbid you should feel anything like that," he said, looking up at her.

She laughed again, asking bitterly, "Does God forbid what Alexander wants—except one thing? And what I tell you is what he would want. He would want to have had it all."

He raised his hand in protest.

"You're right; we won't talk any more," she said. "But don't think that it's all only because I'm overwrought, or something feminine of that kind. It's the truth. When it comes, Aunt Maria'll die and I shall live; but the difference won't be as great as it sounds."

This time he was about to speak, but she stopped him, saying, "No, no more now. Tell me about Dick Benyon. He's to have your seat, isn't he?"

"Yes, I'm gathered to my fathers, and Dick reigns in my stead."

"You're sorry?" she asked, forgetting Dick and coming back again to the man before her.

"Yes; but I accept the inevitable and contrive to be quite cheerful about it."

"We don't do either of those things. Hark, I hear my husband's step."

Quisanté ran quickly up the stairs and burst into the room. His face was alight with animation, and before greeting Marchmont he cried, "I've carried it, I've brought them round. We attack all along the line, and I open the ball at Henstead next week! They'll be out in six months, and I shall ——" Suddenly he paused. "They'll be out in six months," he said again.

Marchmont rose and shook hands, "It doesn't matter to me now if they are," he said, laughing. "Blair's troubles and mine are both over now."

"I know," nodded Quisanté. "Well, I suppose you know best. But hasn't May been trying to convert you?"

"No, I haven't tried to convert him," she said. "I'm not going to try to convert people any more."

After this she fell into silence, listening and watching while the two men talked. Talk between them could never be intimate and could hardly be even easy, but they interested one another to-day. On Quisanté's face especially there was a look of searching, of wonder, of a kind of protest. Once he flung himself back and stared at his guest with a fixity of gaze painful to see. But he said nothing of what was passing in his mind. At last Marchmont turned to May again.

"I shall hear of you at Henstead," he said. "I'm going to pay the Mildmays a visit. I suppose, as you're on the war-path, you won't come over?"

"I might," she said, "if we were there long enough. I expect Alexander mustn't. Friendship with the enemy is not always appreciated."

"Oh, I might go," Quisanté remarked. "The Alethea's an admirable excuse." He spoke with a laugh but then, glancing at his wife, saw her face flush. He turned to Marchmont and found him rising to his feet. Much puzzled, Quisanté looked again from one to the other, noting the sudden constraint that had fallen on them. What had he said? What was there in the mention of the Alethea to disturb a conversation so harmonious? That there was something his quick wit told him in a moment. While Marchmont said good-bye to May he stood by, frowning a little, and then escorted his guest downstairs. While he was away his wife stood quite still in the middle of the room, a little flushed and breathing rather quickly.

Quisanté came back, sat down, and took up a newspaper. May sat in her usual chair, doing nothing. Presently he asked, "Did I say anything wrong?"

"No. But I'd rather you didn't talk about the Alethea when Mr. Marchmont is with us." He looked up in, surprise. "It embarrasses me—and him too."

"Embarrasses you? Why should it?"

"There's no use in my telling you."

"I can't see why it should embarrass you. Pray tell me."

She sat silent for a moment or two. "It's no good," she said, looking over to him with a forlorn smile. He moved his hand impatiently. "Very well. At dinner at Ashwood, on the night you were taken ill, somebody talked about the Alethea and said Professor Maturin had told him there was a fatal defect in it. He hadn't seen the prospectus. And I——" She paused a moment. "I had to back up your version." Again she broke off for a moment. "And after dinner Mr. Marchmont talked to me; and I cried about it. So, you see, references are embarrassing."

After a pause of a minute or two Quisanté said, "Cried about it? About what?"

She raised her eyes, looked at him a moment, and said simply, "About having to tell a lie to them." And she added with a sudden quiver in her voice, "I've known them all my life."

"Maturin was quite wrong. There's absolutely no doubt about that now."

"Was he?" she asked listlessly.

"What did you say?"

"That he'd expressed a favourable opinion about it to you. I kept to the prospectus. Oh, there's no use talking. It's only with Mr. Marchmont that it matters. I can't keep it up before him, because he found me crying, you know."

"Crying!" murmured Quisanté. "Crying!" She nodded at him, with the same faint smile on her lips. The silence seemed very long as she looked at him and he gazed straight before him, the forgotten paper falling with a rustle from his knees on to the floor.

"You never told me," he said at last.

"Why should I? What was the good of telling you?"

"It was on the night of my—when I was taken ill?"

"Yes. The telegram came later in the evening. Don't bother about it now, Alexander."

"Did you hope it meant I was dead?"

For a moment she sat still; then she sprang up, ran across the room, and fell on her knees before him, grasping his arms in her hands. "No, no, no, I didn't. Indeed, indeed, I didn't."

He sat still in her clasp, looking intently in her face. His was hard and sneering.

"Yes, you did. You wished me dead. By God, you wish me dead now. Well, you can wait a little. I shall be dead soon." With a sudden rough movement he freed himself from her hands and

pushed her away. "I suppose wives often wish their husbands dead, but they don't tell them so quite so plainly."

"It's not true, I've never told you so."

"Oh, I'm not a fool. I don't need to have it spelt out for me in syllables."

She rose slowly to her feet, and, turning, went back to her own chair. Quisanté sat where he was, quite motionless. She could not endure to look at him and, rising, went and stood by the window, looking out on the river she loved. This moment was in strange contrast with their talk on Duty Hill; the two together summed up her married life and the nature of the man she had married. But it was not true that she wished him dead; not true now, at all events, even though the charge he brought against her of its having been so once might have some truth in it. For if ever that thought had crept into her mind as a dreaded shameful wish, it was when she seemed able to look forward to a new life. It seemed to her now that no new life was possible; that impression had grown and grown while she talked with Weston Marchmont, and it pressed upon her now with the weight of conviction.

She heard her husband get up and go out of the room; his steps sounded going upstairs, in the direction of his study. She went and drew the chair up to the hearthrug, and sat down, resting her elbows on the arms and holding her head between her hands. It was very wanton that a chance allusion of his should have brought about this scene between them. Perhaps she could have put him off with excuses, but that had not occurred to her. The scene had told her nothing new, but it had torn away the last of the veil from before his eyes. He had known that she disapproved, he had even braved her disapproval when he could not hoodwink or evade it. It was a little strange that he should be moved to such a transport of bitterness by hearing that she had cried over telling a lie for him. Yet that was it; she was sure that he had not cared whether Marchmont saw her crying or not. The tears themselves made him think that she had wished him dead, yes, that she still wished him dead.

He must not die thinking that. She started across the room towards the door, at a quick step; it was in her mind to follow him and tell him again that it was not true, that he would ruin and empty her life if he died, that there was no man in the world who could be what he was to her. But her impulse failed her; he would sneer again. There was one thing that would drive away his sneer if she said it and got him to believe it—that she loved him as he loved her. Well, she couldn't tell him that, and he would not believe her if she did. She stopped and returned to her chair. She leant back now, resting her head on the cushion. The afternoon grew old, and a gleam of sinking sun, escaping from the grey red-edged clouds that hung over the river, troubled her eyes; she closed them and reclined in stillness. She felt very tired, worn out with the stress of it, with the conflict and the strain. Strange notions, half fancies, half dreams, began to flit through her mind. She saw the end come in many ways, now while they were alone together, now in some public place, even in the House, or while he addressed his shareholders. She seemed to hear the buzz of talk that followed the event, the wonder at him, the blame of her; she saw poor old Aunt Maria's trembling hands and hopeless face. Presently, as she fell into an unquiet drowsiness, she seemed to see even beyond the end, as though the end were no end and he were with her still, his spirit being about her, enveloping her, still wrapping her round so that the rest of the world was kept away and she was still with him, though she could not see him nor hear his voice. For her alone he existed now. Soon the rest who had wondered and praised and blamed and gossipped forgot about him; they had no more attention to give him, no more flattery, no more allegiance. For them he had ceased to exist. Only for her he went on existing still, nay, it seemed that it was through her that he clung to the life he had loved, and was even now not dead because he lived in and through her. And sometimes—she shivered in her broken sleep, for she had not the love which would have made the dream all joy—he became more than a spirit or an impalpable presence; he was again almost corporeal, almost to be felt and touched, almost a living man. Shrinking and fearing, yet she was glad; she welcomed his exemption from the grave and abetted him in his rebellion against death; and for her that restless spirit almost clothed itself again in flesh.

She sat up with a great start and a low cry. Her hand had been hanging over the arm of the chair, it had grown cold; now it was held in another cold hand, and it was raised. Awake but thinking she still dreamed, she waited in mingled fear and anticipation. Cold lips pressed her hand. She dreamed then, and in her dream he came from the grave to kiss her hand. He came not only back to the world where he had triumphed, he came also to the woman he had loved, who had not loved him. Again the kiss came cold on her hand. She fell back with a sudden sob, not knowing whether terror or repulsion or joy, held greater, sway in her. The kisses covered her hand. Ah, the marvel! They grew living, they were warm now and passionate. This was not a dead man's kiss. With a second cry she turned her head. Quisanté himself knelt by her, kissing her hand. His eyes rose to hers, and she cried, "It is you! You're not dead! Thank God, thank God!"

His eyes were gleaming in the strong excitement of his heart; he knew how he had found her.

"No, not dead, not dead yet," he said. "But by heaven, when I am dead, I won't leave you. I can't leave you. As I kiss your hand now, so will I kiss it always, and with my soul I will worship you. But neither now nor then will I kiss your lips."

"You won't kiss my lips?"

"No. They have lied for me; I won't stain them any more."

For a moment she looked at him. Then she caught her hand away and flung her arms round his neck. She kissed him on his lips, crying, "For good or evil, for good or evil, but always, always, always!" Then she drew away, and, with her arms still round his neck, she broke into her low laugh: "Oh, but how like you to make that little speech about my lips!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE QUIET LIFE TO-MORROW.

Old Miss Quisanté was not as sympathetic as might have been wished. She acquiesced indeed (as who would not?) in the new programme of at least a year's complete rest; she offered to find funds—happily it was not necessary, since the sale of some Alethea shares at a handsome premium supplied them; she admitted that May had done her duty in persuading her husband to yield a limited obedience to his doctors' orders. But she looked disappointed, uninterested, dull; she awoke only for a sparkle of malice, when she remarked how happy they would be together in the country, with nothing to disturb them, nothing but just their two selves.

"Not as unhappy as you think," said May, smiling.

"All nonsense, I call it," pursued the old lady. "Sandro knew best; now you've put notions into his head. Oh, I daresay you were bound to, my dear."

"How can you be so blind?" murmured May. Aunt Maria shook her head derisively; she was not blind, it was the wife and the doctors who were blind. "You're not to say that sort of thing to Alexander," May went on imperiously. Aunt Maria put her head on one side and smiled sardonically.

"You used to agree with me," she said. "Has the Mildmay woman been here again?"

"No; she's at home. We shall see her perhaps at Henstead."

"Henstead! What are you going there for?"

"And you said you knew Alexander!" laughed May. "You don't suppose he's going into retirement without a display of fireworks? The Henstead speech is to be made. Then we put up the shutters—for a year at least, as I say."

"That's something. Is he interested in it?"

"Oh, yes, working all day. But he's wonderfully well. I've never seen him better." She hesitated and laughed a little. "How shall we ever stick to our year?" she asked. "He means it now and I mean it. But——"

"You won't do it," said Aunt Maria emphatically. "Nobody could keep Sandro quiet for a year!"

"Don't tell me that. We're going to try."

"Oh, I won't interfere, my dear. Try away. After all he'll be young still, and they won't forget him in a year. Or if they do, he'll soon make them remember him again."

The buoyant confidence was hard to resist. It seemed to grow greater in face of all reason, and more and more to fill the old woman's mind as she herself descended towards the grave which she scorned as a possibility for Sandro. For now she was very small and frail, thin and yellow; she too, like her nephew, seemed to hold on to life rather because she chose of her arbitrary will, than thanks to any physical justification that she could adduce. Could Quisanté not only make himself live but make Aunt Maria live too? Full of the influence of that last great moment, May, laughing at herself, yet hesitated to answer "No." But the year was to be tried, lest, if die he must, he should die to please her or thinking that she wanted him to die. He did not think now that she wanted that; she was happier with him than she had ever been before. She had found a new indulgence for him, even for what she had hated in him. Justice would have turned to harshness, clearness of vision to a Pharisaic strictness, had she not found indulgence for the man who had crept back to kiss her hand. She was very indulgent towards him, and he seemed happy, save that now and then he looked at her wistfully, and began to fall into the way of reminding her of past occasions when he had shone and she admired, asking whether she remembered this and that. He dropped hints too that the Henstead speech was to be memorable. She was a little afraid that already he was feeling indulgence insufficient and mere kindness, or indeed mere affection, not the great thing that he asked of her, just as peace and quiet, or pictures, books, and hills, were not the things that he asked of life. If this were so, the compromise she had brought him to consent to was precarious; it was, as she had hinted to Aunt Maria, doubtful whether they could stick to their year.

There was another question in her mind, not less persistent, not less troubling. Perhaps the greater harmony between them, which had induced and enabled her to obtain that consent from him, was as precarious as the compromise itself; it too was liable to be overthrown by a return of Quisanté's old self, or at least of that side of him which was for the time hidden. The temptation to work would overthrow the compromise, the temptation to win might again produce action in him and impose action on her which would bring death to their newly-achieved harmony, even as exertion would to his worn-out body.

The great speech, the last speech, was to be on Wednesday. They arrived in Henstead on Tuesday morning and were plunged at once into a turmoil of business. There was a luncheon, a deputation, a meeting of the party association; Japhet Williams had half a dozen difficulties, and old Foster as many bits of shrewd counsel. Over all and through all was the air of congratulation, of relief from the fear of losing Quisanté, of enthusiastic applause for his magnificently courageous struggle against illness and its triumphant issue. When May hinted at a period of rest —the full extent of it was not disclosed—Foster nodded tolerantly, Japhet said times were critical, and the rest declared that they would not flog a willing horse, but knew that Mr. Quisanté would do his duty. Unquestionably Henstead's effect was bad, both for the compromise and for Quisanté. Minute by minute May saw how the old fascination grew on him, how more and more he forgot that this was to be the last effort, that it was an end, not a beginning. He gave pledges of action, he would not positively decline engagements, he talked as though he would be in his place in Parliament throughout the session. While doing all this he avoided meeting her eye; he would have found nothing worse than pity touched with amusement. But he kept declaring to her, when they had a chance of being alone, that he was loyal to their compact. "Though it's pretty hard," he added with a renewal of his bitterness against the fate that constrained him.

"We ought never to have come," she said. "It makes it worse. I wish we hadn't."

"Wait till you've heard me to-morrow night," he whispered, pressing her hand and looking into her eyes with the glee of anticipated triumph.

He was going to make a great speech, she knew that very well; there were all the signs about him, the glee, the pride, the occasional absence of mind, the frequent appeal for sympathy, the need of a confidence to answer and confirm his own. Such a mood, in spite of its element of childishness, was yet a good one with him. It raised him above pettiness and made him impatient of old Foster's cunning little devices for capturing an enemy or confirming the allegiance of a doubtful friend. He had for the time forgotten himself in his work, the position in what he meant to do with it; he would have delivered that speech now if the price had been the loss of his seat; whatever the price was, that speech now would have its way, all of it, whole and unimpaired, even the passage on which Foster was consulted with the result that its suppression was declared imperative in view of Japhet Williams' feelings. "Damn Japhet Williams," said Quisanté with a laugh, and Quisanté's wife found herself wishing that he would "damn" a few more men and things. It was just the habit that he wanted, just the thing that Marchmont and Dick Benyon and men like them had. Oh, if he could win and keep it!

"He must consider local feeling," said old Foster, pinching a fat chin in fear and doubt.

"No, he needn't, no, he needn't now," she cried. "He'll carry it with him, whatever he does now. Don't you see? He can take them all with him now. Wait till you've heard him to-morrow night!"

Here was happiness for her and for him, but where else? Not in the compromise, not in the year of quiet. It seemed to be for this that they had come together, in this that they could help one another, feel with one another, be really at one. And this could not be. The tears stood in May Quisanté's eyes as she turned away from the pleasant shrewd old schemer; his picture should stand no more on the mantelpiece. But now it seemed again strange and incredible that this, the great career, could not be; Aunt Maria's was the creed for a time like this.

The great night came, and a great crowd in the Corn Exchange. Old Foster was in the chair and the place seemed full of familiar faces; the butcher who was troubled about slaughter-houses sat side by side with the man who was uneasy about his deceased wife's sister; Japhet Williams was on the platform and his men sat in close ranks at the back of the hall, they and Dunn's contingent hard-by smoking their pipes as the custom was at Henstead. There were other faces, not so usual; for far away, in a purposely chosen obscurity, May saw Weston Marchmont and the Dean of St. Neot's. The Mildmays themselves could not be present, but these two had come over from Moors End and sat there now, the Dean beaming in anticipation of a treat, Marchmont with a rather supercilious smile and an air of weariness. May could not catch their eyes but she felt glad to have them there; it was always pleasant to her that her friends should see Quisanté when he was at his best, and he was going to be at his best to-night.

"We are rejoiced to welcome our Member back among us in good health and strength again," old Foster began, quite in the Aunt Maria style, and he went on to describe the grief caused by Quisanté's illness and the joy now felt at the prospect of his being able to render services to his Queen, his country, and his constituency no less long than valuable and brilliant. Quisanté listened with a smile, gently tapping the table with his fingers. May turned from him to seek again her friends' faces in the hall; this time she met their gaze; they were both looking at her with pitying eyes; the instant they saw her glance, they avoided it. What did that mean? It meant that they were not of Aunt Maria's party. The kindly compassionate look of those two men went to her

heart; it brought back reality and pierced through the pretence, the grand pretence, which everybody, herself included, had been weaving. An impulse of fear laid hold of her; involuntarily she put out her hand towards Foster who had just finished his speech and was sitting down. She meant to tell him to stop the meeting, to send the people home, to help her to persuade Quisanté to go back to the hotel and not to speak. Foster looked round to see what she wanted, but at the moment Quisanté was already on his feet. "It's nothing," May whispered, withdrawing her hand. It was too late now, the thing must go forward now, whatever the end of it might be, whatever the friendly pity of those eyes might seem to say. To-morrow quiet would begin; but she had a new, strange, intense terror of to-night. This feeling lasted through the early part of Quisanté's speech, when he was still in a quiet vein and showed some signs of physical weakness. But as he went on it vanished and in its place came the old faith and the old illusion. For he gathered force, he put out his strength, he exhaled vitality. Again she sought her friends' faces and marked with joy and triumph that their eyes were now set on the speaker and their attention held firmly, as the fine resonant voice filled the building and seemed to resent the confinement of its walls, or even more when a whisper, heard only by a miracle as she thought, thrilled even the most distant listener. The speech was being all that it had been going to be, his confidence and hers were to be justified. The pronouncement that the country waited for was coming, the fighting men were to get the lead they wanted, the attack was sounded, the battle was being opened to the sound of a trumpet-call. May leant forward, listening. A period reached its close, and applause delayed the beginning of the next. Quisanté glanced round and saw his wife; their eyes met; a slow smile came on his lips, a smile of great delight. Once more her heart beat and her eyes gleamed for him, once more she would be no man's if she could not be his. His air was gay and his face joyful as, the next minute, he threw himself into a flood of eloquence where indignation mingled with ridicule; he made men doubt whether they must laugh or fight. Now he had all that he desired, men hung on his words, and she sat by, and saw, and felt, and shared.

At the next pause, when the cheering again imposed a momentary silence, the Dean turned to Marchmont, raising his hands and dropping them again.

"Yes, he can do it," said Marchmont in a curious tone; envy and scorn and admiration all seemed to find expression.

"Look at her!" whispered the Dean, but this time Marchmont made no answer. He had been looking at her, and knew now why she had tied her life to Alexander Quisanté's.

"If I could do it like that I couldn't stop doing it," said the Dean.

"He never will as long as he lives," answered Marchmont with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But he won't live?" whispered the Dean. "You mean that?"

The applause ended; there was no need for Marchmont to answer, even if he could have found an answer. Quisanté took up his work again. He was near the end now, an hour and a quarter had passed. May's eyes never left him; he was going to get through, she thought, and she had no thought now of the compromise or the year of quiet, no thought except of his triumph that to-morrow would ring through the land. He paused an instant, whether in faltering or for effect she could not tell, and then began his peroration. It was short, but he gave every word slowly, apart, as it were in a place of its own, in the sure and superb confidence that every word had its own office, its own weight, and its own effect. But before he ended there came one interruption. Suddenly, as though moved by an impulse foreign to himself, old Foster pushed back his chair and rose to his feet; after an instant the whole audience imitated him. Quisanté paused and looked round; again he smiled; then, taking a step forward to clear himself of those who surrounded him, he went on. Thus he ended his speech, he standing, to men and women one and all standing about and before him.

"I never saw such a thing," whispered the Dean of St. Neot's. But his words were lost in the cheers, and Weston Marchmont's "Bravo" rang out so loud that May Quisanté heard it on the platform and bent forward to kiss her hand to him.

In the tea-room, to which all the important persons withdrew after the meeting, festivity reigned. Quisanté was surrounded by admirers, busy listening to compliments and congratulations, and receiving the advice of the local wise men. May did not attempt to get near him, but surrendered herself to a like process. Old Foster came up to her and shook hands, saying, "I'm proud to have had a hand in making Mr. Quisanté member for Henstead. You were right too; he can say what he likes now."

Then came Japhet Williams' thin voice. "I hope it won't be many days before Mr. Quisanté tells the House of Commons what he's told us to-night."

Should she say that he would not tell anything to the House of Commons for many days, probably not ever, that his voice would not be heard there? They would not believe her, she hardly would believe herself. In that hour illness and retirement seemed dim and distant, unreal and a little ludicrous. She abandoned herself to the temptation pressed upon her and talked as though her husband were to lead all through the campaign that he had opened.

"I never saw him looking better in my life," said Foster.

As he spoke a short thick-set man with grey hair pushed by him. Old Foster caught him by the wrist, crying with a laugh, "Why, Doctor, what are you doing here? You're one of the enemy!"

"I came to hear the speech."

"A good'un, eh?"

"Never mind the speech. Take me over to Mr. Quisanté—now, directly."

"What for?"

"He must go home."

"Go home? Nonsense. He's all right."

Dr. Tillman wrenched his hand away, shook his head scornfully, and started across the room toward where Quisanté was. May laid her hand on old Foster's arm.

"What did he say? Does he think my husband ill?"

"I don't know. It's all nonsense."

Another voice broke in.

"A triumph, Lady May, a triumph indeed!"

She turned to find the Dean and Marchmont close behind her, and the Dean holding out his hand as he spoke.

"Yes, yes," she said hurriedly and uncomfortably. "It was fine, wasn't it?"

"It was magnificent," said Marchmont.

"Thanks, thanks." Her tone was still hurried, absent, ungracious. The two looked at her in surprise. Where was the radiance of triumph that had lit up her face as she signalled to them from the platform? They had expected to find her full of the speech and had been prepared to give her joy by the warmth and sincerity of their praise.

"What's the matter?" whispered Marchmont.

"Do you see that short man, the one with grey hair, trying to get near Alexander It's the doctor —Dr. Tillman. He can't get near Alexander."

"What does he want?"

"I don't know. He thinks he ought to go home. He thinks—Ah, now he's getting to him! Look! He's speaking to him now!"

They saw the doctor come up to Quisanté and Quisanté smile as he waited for the visitor to introduce himself. The doctor began to speak quickly and energetically. "Oh, thank you very much, but I'm all right," came suddenly in loud clear tones from Quisanté. The doctor spoke again. Quisanté shook his head, laughing merrily. Marchmont looked at May; her eyes were on her husband and they were full of fear. "I'd forgotten," he heard her murmur. She turned to him with an imploring air. "He won't listen," she said.

A burst of laughter came from Quisanté's group; he had made some joke and they all applauded him. Tillman stood for a moment longer before him, then gave a queer jerk of his head, and turned sharp round on his heel. He came back towards where she stood. She took a step forward and thus crossed his path, Marchmont and the Dean standing on either side of her.

"You remember me, Dr. Tillman?" she asked. "I'm Mr. Quisanté's wife, you know."

He stood still, looking at her angrily from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Take him home then," he said sharply. "It was madness to let him come here at all. You're flying in the face of the advice you've had. Oh, I know about it. Let me tell you, you're very lucky to have got through so far."

"We—we're through all right now," she said.

"Are you? I hope so. The man's in a high state of excitement now, and high states of excitement aren't good for him." He paused and added impatiently, "Have you no influence over him? Can none of you do anything with him?"

"He won't like it if I go to him," May whispered.

"I'll go," said the Dean, stepping forward.

"Yes," said Tillman, "go and tell him Lady May Quisanté wants him."

The Dean started off on his errand. The doctor's manner grew a little gentler.

"You couldn't be expected to know," he said. "But in a thing like this you mustn't think he's all right because he looks all right. He'll look his best just at the time when there's most—well, when he isn't. I hope he's going to keep quiet after this?"

"Yes, yes. At least we've arranged that. Weston, do go and bring him to me."

"Look, he's coming now with the Dean."

Quisanté's group opened, and he began to move towards them. But at every step somebody stopped him, to shake hands and to say a few words of thanks or praise. The Dean kept urging him on gently, but he would not be hurried.

"Now take him straight home," said Tillman. "Good-night." And hardly waiting for May's bow he turned away and disappeared among the throng that was making for the door.

Quisanté, at last escaping from his admirers, came up to his wife. His eyes were very bright, and he ran to her, holding out both his hands. She put hers in his and said, "We must go home. You'll be worn out."

"Worn out? Not I! But you look worn out. Come along. Ah, Marchmont, this is a compliment indeed."

They were almost alone in the room now. May took her husband's arm and they walked thus together.

"Are you pleased?" he whispered.

"Am I pleased!" she said with the laugh he knew and an upward glance of her eyes. Quisanté himself laughed and drew himself to his full height, carrying his head defiantly. For though he sought and loved to please all, it was pleasing her that had been foremost in his mind that night. He had remembered the boast he made on Duty Hill; now it was justified, and he had once again tasted his sweetest pleasure.

They had to wait in an ante-room while their carriage was sent for. Here the Dean and Marchmont joined them again. They were there when old Foster rushed in in great excitement.

"The whole town's in the square," he cried. "There's never been anything like it in Henstead. You'll say just a word to them from the steps, sir? Only a word! They're all waiting there for you. You'll say just a word? I'll be back in an instant." And he bustled out again.

Quisanté walked across to a window that opened on to the Market Square. He looked out, then turned and beckoned to his wife. The whole town seemed to be in the square, as Foster said, and the people caught sight of him as he stood in the window with the lighted room behind him. They broke into loud cheering. Quisanté bowed to them. Then a sudden short shiver seemed to run through him; he put his hand first to his side, then to his head.

"I feel queer" he said to his wife. "I think I—I won't—I won't speak any more. I feel so—so queer." Her eyes were fixed on him now, and his on hers. He smiled and tapped his forehead lightly with his hand. "It's nothing," he said. "You were pleased, weren't you, to-night?" Again he put his hands in hers. She found no word to say and they stood like this for a moment. The cheers ceased, the crowd outside was puzzled. Marchmont jumped up from his chair and walked forward hastily.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

Neither heeded him. May's eyes were set in terror on her husband's face; for now she was holding him up by the power of her hands gripped in his; without them he would fall. Nay, he would fall now!

He spoke in a low thick voice. "It's come," he said, "it's come." And he sank back into Weston Marchmont's arms, his wife letting go his hands and standing rigid.

Old Foster ran in again, calling, "Are you ready, sir?" He found his answer. Alexander Quisanté would speak no more in Henstead. He was leaning against Marchmont, breathing heavily and with sore difficulty. May went to him; she was very white and very calm; she took his hand and kissed it.

"I—I—I spoke well?" he muttered. "Didn't I?"

"Very very finely, Alexander."

"They were—were all wrong in saying I couldn't do it," he murmured. He shivered again and then was still. The Dean had brought a chair and they put him in it. But he moved no more. May looked at old Foster who stood by, his face wrung with helpless distress and consternation.

"We've killed him among us, I and you and the people out there," she said.

CHAPTER XXI.

A RELICT.

"Yes, I asked her," said Weston Marchmont, "but—Well, I don't think she'd mind you reading her letter, and I should rather like you to." He flung it across the table to Dick Benyon. "I half see what she means," said he, lighting a cigarette.

Dick took the letter with an impatient frown. "I don't," he said, as he settled himself to read it.

"My dear Friend, I have thought it over, many times, in many different moods, and in all of them I have always wanted to do what you ask. Not for your sake, not because you ask me, but for my own. I think I should be very happy, and as you know I have never yet been very happy. I wasn't while my husband was alive. Imagine my finding side by side in his desk the doctor's letter saying it was certain death to go to Henstead and that report of Professor Maturin's which he suppressed and told me had been destroyed. That brought him back to me just as he was. With you I think I should be happy. I should never be afraid, I should never be ashamed. What fear and what shame I used to feel! I write very openly to you about myself and about him; if I were answering as you wish, I would not say a word against him. But I can't. That's just the feeling. You tell me I am free, that two years have gone by, that I might find a new life for myself, that you love me. I know it all, but except the last none of it sounds true. You know that once I thought about being free and that then you were in my thoughts. Who should be, if you were not? Except him and you I have never thought of any man. And I want to come to you now. He is too strong for me. Is it really two years ago? Surely not! I seem still to hear his speech, and still to see him fall into your arms. I should always hear him, and always see that. I'm afraid you won't understand me, least of all when I say I don't feel sure that I want him back. That would mean the fear and the shame again. But he was so marvellous. How right he was! They followed the lead he gave them at Henstead; and even you, dear recluse, know that there was a change of Government last year. And I am quite rich out of the Alethea. For he was right and the poor Professor, who was supposed to know all about it, was absolutely, utterly, hopelessly wrong. And the Crusade's come to nothing, and—and so on.

I wish I was convincing you; but I never did. You didn't understand why I married him, why in face of everything I behaved pretty well to him, why his death left everything blank to me. Nobody quite understood, except old Aunt Maria who just quietly died as soon as he was gone. And you'll understand me no better now. I resent the way the world forgets him. There seems nothing of him left. My little girl is all Gaston; she lives with Gastons, she has the Gaston face and the Gaston ways. She's not a bit Quisanté; she's nothing of him, nothing that he has left behind. If we'd had a son, a boy like him, I might feel differently. But, as it is, what's left? Only me. I am left, and I am not altogether a Gaston now, though it's the Gaston and nothing else that you like. No, I'm not all Gaston now. I've become Quisanté in part—not in every way, or I shouldn't have felt as I did when I found the Professor's report. But he has laid hold of me, and he doesn't let go. I can't help thinking that he needn't have died except on my account. You feel sore that I don't love you, not as you want me to. He was sore too because I didn't love him; and since he couldn't make me love him, he had to make me wonder at him; he was doing that when he died. So I feel that I can't do anything to blot him out, and that I must stay Quisanté, somebody bearing his name, representing him, keeping him in a way alive, being still his and not anybody else's.

For I still feel his and I still feel him alive. You can love people, and then forget them, and love somebody else; or love somebody else without forgetting. Love is simple and gentle and, I suppose, gives way. Alexander doesn't give way. I shall hurt you now, I'm afraid, but I must say it. After him there can be no other man for me. I think I'm sorry I ever married him, for I could have loved somebody else and yet looked on at him. Or couldn't I? You'll say I couldn't. Anyhow, as it is, I've come too near to him, seen too much of him, become too much a part of him. You might think me mad if I told you he often seemed to be with me and that I'm not frightened, but admire and laugh as I used; I needn't fear any more. So it is; and since it is so, how can I come to you? What is it they call widows on tombstones and in the *Times*? Relicts, isn't it? I'm literally his relict, something he's left behind. As I say, the only thing. He can't come back for me, I suppose. But I feel as if he'd pick me up somewhere some time, and we should begin over again, and go on together. Where to I don't know. I never knew where he would end by taking me to. And you, dear friend, mustn't make his relict your wife. It's not right for you, it wouldn't be right for me. We should pretend that nothing had happened, that I'd made a mistake, that it was luckily and happily over, and that I was doing now what I ought to have done in the beginning. All that's quite false. I suppose everybody has one great thing to do in life, one thing that determines what they're to be and how they're to end. I did my great thing, for good or evil, when I became his wife. I can't undo it or go back on it, I can't become what I was before I did it. I can't be now what you think me and wish me to be. His stamp is on me.

I write very sadly; for I didn't love him. And now I can love nobody. I shall never quite know what that means. Or is it possible that I loved him without knowing it, and hated him sometimes just because of that? I mean, felt so terribly the times when he was—well, what you know he was sometimes. I find no answer to that. It never was what I thought love meant, what they tell you it means. But if love can mean sinking yourself in another person, living in and through him, meaning him when you say life, then I did love him. At any rate, whatever it was, there it is. Yet I'm not very unhappy. I have a feeling—it will seem strange to you, like all my feelings—that I have had a great share in something great, that without me he wouldn't have been what he was, that I gave as well as took, and brought my part into the common stock. We did odd things, he and I in our partnership, things never to be told. My poor cheeks burn still, and you remember that I cried. But we did great things too, he and I, and at the end we were for a little while together in heart. It wouldn't have lasted? Perhaps not. As it was it lasted long enough—till 'it came', as he said, and he died asking me to tell him that he had spoken well. I'm very glad he knew that I thought he had spoken well.

So out of this rambling letter comes the end of it. Be kind to me, be my friend, and be somebody else's lover, dear Weston. For I am spoilt for you. 'Her mad folly'—that was what you thought it. Well, it isn't ended, not even death has ended it. He reaches me still from where he is—Ah, and what is he doing? I can't think of him doing nothing. Shall I hear of all he's done some day? Will he tell me himself, and watch my lips and my eyes as I listen to him? I don't know. These are dreams, and perhaps I wouldn't have them come true; for he might do dreadful things again. But I can't marry you. For to me he is not dead, he lives still, and I am his. I can as little say whether I like it as I could while he was here. But now, as then, it is so; whether I like it is little; it is what has come to me, my lot, my place, my fate, the end of me, the first and last word about me. And—yes—I am content to have it so. He loved me very much, and he was a very great man. You'll wonder again, but I'm a proud woman among women, Weston dear. Goodbye."

Dick Benyon laid down the letter, and pushed it back to Weston Marchmont.

"Yes, I see," said he.

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