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Not Like Other Girls

BY

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CHAPTER I.

FIVE-O'CLOCK TEA.

Five-o'clock tea was a great institution in Oldfield.

It was a form of refreshment to which the female inhabitants of that delightful place were strongly addicted. In vain did Dr. Weatherby, the great authority in all that concerned the health of the neighborhood, lift up his voice against the mild feminine dram-drinking of these modern days, denouncing it in no measured terms: the ladies of Oldfield listened incredulously, and, softly quoting Cowper's lines as to the "cup that cheers and not inebriates," still presided over their dainty little tea-tables, and vied with one another in the beauty of their china and the flavor of their highly-scented Pekoe.

In spite of Dr. Weatherby's sneers and innuendoes, a great deal of valuable time was spent in lingering in one or another of the pleasant drawing-rooms of the place. As the magic hour approached, people dropped in casually. The elder ladies sipped their tea and gossiped softly; the younger ones, if it were summer-time, strolled out through the open windows into the garden. Most of the houses had tennis-grounds, and it was quite an understood thing that a game should be played before they separated.

With some few exceptions, the inhabitants of Oldfield were wealthy people. Handsome houses standing in their own grounds were dotted here and there among the lanes and country roads. Some of the big houses belonged to very big people indeed; but these were aristocrats who only lived in their country houses a few months in the year, and whose presence added more to the dignity than to the hilarity of the neighborhood.

With these exceptions, the Oldfield people were highly gregarious and hospitable; in spite of a few peculiarities, they had their good points; a great deal of gossip prevailed, but it was in the main harmless and good-natured. There was a wonderful simplicity of dress, too, which in these days might be termed a cardinal virtue. The girls wore their fresh cambrics and plain straw hats: no one seemed to think it necessary to put on smart clothing when they wished to visit their friends. People said this Arcadian simplicity was just as studied: nevertheless, it showed perfection of taste and a just appreciation of things.

The house that was considered the most attractive in Oldfield, and where, on summer afternoons, the sound of youthful voices and laughter were the loudest, was Glen Cottage, a small white house adjoining the long village street, belonging to a certain Mrs. Challoner, who lived here with her three daughters.

This may be accounted strange in the first instance, since the Challoners were people of the most limited income,—an income so small that nothing but the most modest of entertainments could be furnished to their friends; very different from their neighbors at Longmead, the large white house adjoining, where sumptuous dinners and regular evening parties were given in the dark days when pleasures were few and tennis impossible.

People said it was very good-natured of the Maynes; but then when there is an only child in the case, an honest, pleasure-loving, gay young fellow, on whom his parents dote, what is it they will not do to please their own flesh and blood? and, as young Richard Mayne—or Dick, as he was always called—loved all such festive gatherings, Mrs. Mayne loved them too; and her husband tried to persuade himself that his tastes lay in the same direction, only reserving certain groans for private use, that Dick could not be happy without a houseful of young people.

But no such entertainments were possible at Glen Cottage: nevertheless, the youth of the neighborhood flocked eagerly into the pleasant drawing-room where Mrs. Challoner sat tranquilly summer and winter to welcome her friends, or betook themselves through the open French windows into the old-fashioned garden, in which mother and daughters took such pride.

On hot afternoons the tea-table was spread under an acacia-tree, low wicker-chairs were brought out, and rugs spread on the lawn, and Nan and her sisters dispensed strawberries and cream, with the delicious home-made bread and butter; while Mrs. Challoner sat among a few chosen spirits knitting and talking in her pleasant low-toned voice, quite content that the burden of responsibility should rest upon her daughters.

Mrs. Challoner always smiled when people told her that she ought to be proud of her girls. No daughters were ever so much to their mother as hers; she simply lived in and for them; she saw with their eyes, thought with their thoughts,—was hardly herself at all, but Nan and Phillis and Dulce, each by turns.

Long ago they had grown up to her growth. Mrs. Challoner's nature was hardly a self-sufficing one. During her husband's lifetime she had been braced by his influence and cheered by his example, and had sought to guide her children according to his directions; in a word, his manly strength had so supported her that no one, not even her shrewd young daughters, guessed at

the interior weakness.

When her stay was removed, Mrs. Challoner ceased to guide, and came down to her children's level. She was more like their sister than their mother, people said; and yet no mother was more cherished than she.

Her very weakness made her sacred in her daughters' eyes; her widowhood, and a certain failure of health, made her the subject of their choicest care.

It could not be said that there was much amiss, but years ago a doctor whom Mrs. Challoner had consulted had looked grave, and mentioned the name of a disease of which certain symptoms reminded him. There was no ground for present apprehension; the whole thing was very shadowy and unsubstantial,—a mere hint,—a question of care; nevertheless the word had been said, and the mischief done.

From that time Mrs. Challoner was wont to speak gloomily of her health, as of one doomed. She was by nature languid and lymphatic, but now her languor increased; always averse to effort, she now left all action to her daughters. It was they who decided and regulated the affairs of their modest household, and rarely were such wise young rulers to be found in girls of their age. Mrs. Challoner merely acquiesced, for in Glen Cottage there was seldom a dissentient voice, unless it were that of Dorothy, who had been Dulce's nurse, and took upon herself the airs of an old servant who could not be replaced.

They were all pretty girls, the three Misses Challoner, but Nan was *par excellence* the prettiest. No one could deny that fact who saw them together. Her features were more regular than her sisters', and her color more transparent. She was tall too, and her figure had a certain willowy grace that was most uncommon; but what attracted people most was a frankness and unconsciousness of manner that was perfectly charming.

Phillis, the second sister, was not absolutely pretty, perhaps, but she was nice-looking, and there was something in her expression that made people say she was clever; she could talk on occasions with a fluency that was quite surprising, and that would cast Nan into the shade. "If I were only as clever as Phillis!" Nan would sigh.

Then there was Dulce, who was only just eighteen, and whom her sisters treated as the family pet; who was light and small and nimble in her movements, and looked even younger than she really was.

Nobody ever noticed if Dulce were pretty; and one questioned if her features were regular or not, or cared to do such a thing. Only when she smiled, the prettiest dimple came into her cheek, and her eyes had a fearless child-like look in them; for the rest, she was just Dulce.

The good-looking daughters of a good-looking mother, as somebody called them; and there was no denying Mrs. Challoner was still wonderfully well preserved, and, in spite of her languor and invalid airs, a very pretty woman.

Five-o'clock tea had long been over at the cottage this afternoon, and a somewhat lengthy game of tennis had followed; after which the visitors had dispersed as usual, and the girls had come in to prepare for the half-past seven-o'clock dinner; for Glen Cottage followed the fashion of its richer neighbors, and set out its frugal meal with a proper accompaniment of flower-vases and evening toilet.

The three sisters came up the lawn together, but Nan carried her racquet a little languidly; she looked a trifle grave.

Mrs. Challoner laid down her knitting and looked at them, and then she regarded her watch plaintively.

"Is it late, mother?" asked Nan, who never missed any of her mother's movements. "Ten minutes past seven! No wonder the afternoon seemed long."

"No one found it long but Nan," observed Dulce, with an arch glance at her sister at which Nan slightly colored, but took no further notice. "By the bye," she continued, as though struck by a sudden recollection, "what can have become of Dick this afternoon? he so seldom fails us without telling us beforehand."

"That will soon be explained," observed Phillis, oracularly, as the gate-bell sounded, and was immediately followed by sharp footsteps on the gravel and the unceremonious entrance of a young man through the open window.

"Better late than never," exclaimed two of the girls. Nan said, "Why, what has made you play truant, Dick?" in a slightly injured voice. But Mrs. Challoner merely smiled at him, and said nothing; young men were her natural enemies, and she knew it. She was civil to them and endured their company, and that was all.

Dick Mayne was not a formidable-looking individual; he was a strong, thick-set young fellow, with broad shoulders, not much above middle height, and decidedly plain, except in his mother's eyes; and she thought even Dick's sandy hair beautiful.

But in spite of his plainness he was a pleasant, well-bred young fellow, with a fund of good humor and drollery, and a pair of honest eyes that people learned to trust. Every one liked him, and no one ever said a word in his dispraise; and for the rest, he could tyrannize as royally as any other young man who is his family's sole blessing.

"It was all my ill luck," grumbled Dick. "Trevanion of Exeter came over to our place, and of course the mater pressed him to stay for luncheon, and then nothing would do but a long walk

over Hillberry Downs."

"Why did you not bring him here?" interrupted Dulce, with a pout. "You tiresome Dick, when you must know what a godsend a strange young man is in these wilds!"

"My dear!" reproved her mother.

"Oh, but it is true, mamma," persisted the outspoken Dulce. "Think how pleased Carrie and Sophy Paine would have been at the sight of a fresh face! it was horrid of you, sir!"

"I wanted him to come," returned the young man, in a deprecating voice. "I told him how awfully jolly it always is here, and that he would be sure to meet a lot of nice people, but there was no persuading him: he wanted a walk and a talk about our fellows. That is the worst of Trevanion, he always will have his own way."

"Never mind," returned Nan, pleasantly; she seemed to have recovered her sprightliness all at once. "It is very good of you to come so often; and we had Mr. Parker and his cousin to look after the Paines."

"Oh, yes! we did very well," observed Phillis, tranquilly. "Mother, now Dick has come so late, he had better stay."

"If I only may do so?" returned Dick; but his inquiry was directed to Nan.

"Oh, yes, you may stay," she remarked, carelessly, as she moved away; but there was a little pleased smile on her face that he failed to see. She nodded pleasantly to him as he darted forward to open the door. It was Nan who always dispensed the hospitalities of the house, whose decision was unalterable. Dick had learned what it was to be sent about his business; only once had he dared to remain without her sovereign permission, and on that occasion he had been treated by her with such dignified politeness that he would rather have been sent to Coventry.

This evening the fates were propitious, and Dick understood that the sceptre of favor was to be extended to him. When the girls had flitted into the little dusky hall he closed the door, and sat down happily bedside Mrs. Challoner, to whom he descanted eloquently of the beauties of Hilberry and the virtues of Ned Trevanion.

Mrs. Challoner listened placidly as the knitting-needles flashed between her long white fingers. She was very fond of Dick, after her temperate fashion; she had known him from a child, and had seen him grow up among them until he had become like a son of the house. Dick, who had no brothers and sisters of his own, and whose parents had not married until they were long past youth, had adopted brotherly airs with the Challoner girls; they called each other by their Christian names, and he reposed in them the confidences that young men are wont to give to their belongings.

With Nan this easy familiarity had of late merged into something different: a reserve, a timidity, a subtile suspicion of change had crept into their intimacy. Nan felt that Dick's manner had altered, but somehow she liked it better: his was always a sweet bountiful nature, but now it seemed to have deepened into greater manliness. Dick was growing older; Oxford training was polishing him. After each one of his brief absences Nan saw a greater change, a more marked deference, and secretly hoped that no one else noticed it. When the young undergraduate wrote dutiful letters home the longest messages were always for Nan; when he carried little offerings of flowers to his young neighbors, Nan's bouquet was always the choicest; he distinguished her, too, on all occasions by those small nameless attentions which never fail to please.

Nan kept her own counsel, and never spoke of these things. She said openly that Dick was very nice and very much improved, and that they always missed him sadly during the Oxford terms; but she never breathed a syllable that might make people suspect that this very ordinary young man with the sandy hair was more to her than other young men. Nevertheless Phillis and Dulce knew that such was the case, and Mrs. Challoner understood that the most dangerous enemy to her peace was this lively-spoken Dick.

Dick was very amusing, for he was an eloquent young fellow: nevertheless Mrs. Challoner sighed more than once, and her attention visibly wandered; seeing which, Dick good-humoredly left off talking, and began inspecting the different articles in Nan's work-basket.

"I am afraid I have given your mother a headache," he said when they were sitting round the circular table in the low, oddly-shaped dining-room. There was a corner cut off, and the windows were in unexpected places, which made it unlike other rooms; but Dick loved it better than the great dining-room at Longmead; and somehow it never had looked cosier to him than it did this evening. It was somewhat dark, owing to the shade of the veranda: so the lamp was lighted, and the pleasant scent of roses and lilies came through the open windows. A belated wasp hovered round the specimen glasses that Nan had filled; Dick tried to make havoc of the enemy with his table-napkin. The girls' white dresses suited their fresh young faces. Nan had fastened a crimson rose in her gown; Phillis and Dulce had knots of blue ribbon. "Trevanion does not know what he lost by his obstinacy," thought Dick, as he glanced round the table.

"What were you and the mother discussing?" asked Dulce, curiously.

"Dick was telling me about his friend. He seemed a very superior young man," returned Mrs. Challoner. "I suppose you have asked him for your party next week?"

Dick turned very red at this question. "Mater asked him, you may trust her for that. If it were not for father, I think she would turn the whole house out of the windows: every day some one

fresh is invited."

"How delightful! and all in your honor," exclaimed Dulce, mischievously.

"That spoils the whole thing," grumbled the heir of the Maynes: "it is a perfect shame that a fellow cannot come of age quietly, without his people making this fuss. I begin to think I was a fool for my pains to refuse the ball."

"Yes, indeed; just because you were afraid of the supper speeches," laughed Dulce, "when we all wanted it so."

"New mind," returned Dick, sturdily; "the mater shall give us one in the winter, and we will have Godfrey's band, and I will get all our fellows to come."

"That will be delightful," observed Nan, and her eyes sparkled,—already she saw herself led out for the first dance by the son of the house,—but Dulce interrupted her:

"But all the same I wish Dick had not been so stupid about it. No one knows what may happen before the winter. I hate put-off things."

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,—eh, Miss Dulce?"

"Yes, indeed; that proverb is truer than people think," she replied, with a wise nod of her head. "Don't you remember, Nan, when the Parkers' dance was put off, and then old Mr. Parker died; and nearly the same thing happened with the Normatons, only it was an uncle in that case."

"Moral: never put off a dance, in case somebody dies."

"Oh, hush, please!" groaned Nan, in a shocked voice; "I don't like to hear you talk about such dreadful things. After all, it is such delicious weather that I am not sure a garden-party will not be more enjoyable; and you know, Dulce, that we are to dance on the lawn if we like."

"And supposing it should rain," put in that extremely troublesome young person, at which suggestion Dick looked very gloomy.

"In that case I think we must persuade Mrs. Mayne to clear a room for us," returned Nan, cheerfully. "If your mother consults me," she continued, addressing Dick, who visibly brightened at this, "I shall recommend her to empty the front drawing-room as much as possible. There is the grand piano, or the band might come in-doors; there will be plenty of room for the young people, and the non-dancers can be drafted off into the inner drawing-room and conservatory."

"What a head you have!" exclaimed Dick, admiringly; and Phillis, who had not joined in the argument, was pleased to observe that she was quite of Nan's opinion: dancing was imperative, and if the lawns were wet they must manage in-doors somehow. "It would never do for people to be bored and listless," finished the young lady, sententiously, and such was Phillis's cleverness that it was understood at once that the oracle had spoken; but then it was never known for Nan and Phillis to differ.

Things being thus amicably arranged, the rest of the conversation flowed evenly on every other point, such as the arrangements of the tennis-matches in the large meadow, and the exact position of the marquees; but just as they were leaving the table Dick said another word to Nan in a somewhat low voice:

"It is all very well, but this sort of thing does make a fellow feel such a conceited fool."

"If I were you I would not think about it at all," she returned, in her sensible way. "The neighborhood will expect something of the kind, and we owe a little to other people; then it pleases your mother to make a fuss, as you call it, and it would be too ungrateful to disappoint her."

"Well, perhaps you are right," he returned, in a slightly mollified tone, for he was a modest young fellow, and the whole business had occasioned him some soreness of spirit. "Take it all in all, one has an awful lot to go through in life: there are the measles, you know, and whooping cough, and the dentist, and one's examination, and no end of unpleasant things; but to be made by one's own mother to feel like an idiot for a whole afternoon! Never mind; it can be got through somehow," finished the young philosopher, with a sigh that sent Nan into a fit of laughter.

CHAPTER II.

DICK OBJECTS TO THE MOUNTAINS.

"Shall we have our usual stroll?" asked Phillis, as Nan and Dick joined her at the window.

This was one of the customs at Glen Cottage. When any such fitting escort offered itself, the three girls would put on their hats, and, regardless of the evening dews and their crisp white dresses, would saunter, under Dick's guidance through the quiet village, or down and up the country roads "just for a breath of air," as they would say.

It is only fair to Mrs. Challoner's views of propriety to say that she would have trusted her three pretty daughters to no other young man but Dick; and of late certain prudential doubts had crossed her mind. It was all very well for Phillis to say Dick was Dick, and there was an end of it. After all, he belonged to the phalanx of her enemies, those shadowy invaders of her hearth that threatened her maternal peace. Dick was not a boy any longer; he had outgrown his hobbledehoy ways; the slight sandy moustache that he so proudly caressed was not a greater proof of his manhood than the undefinable change that had passed over his manners.

Mrs. Challoner began to distrust these evening strolls, and to turn over in her own mind various wary pretexts for detaining Nan on the next occasion.

"Just this once, perhaps, it does not matter," she murmured to herself, as she composed herself to her usual nap.

"We shall not be long, little mother; so you must not be dull," Dulce had said, kissing her lightly over her eyes. This was just one of the pleasant fictions at the cottage,—one of those graceful little deceptions that are so harmless in families.

Dulce knew of those placid after-dinner naps. She knew her mother's eyes would only unclose when Dorothy brought in the tea-tray; but she was also conscious that nothing would displease her mother more than to notice this habit. When they lingered in-doors, and talked in whispers so as not to disturb her, Mrs. Challoner had an extraordinary facility for striking into the conversation in a way that was somewhat confusing.

"I don't agree with you at all," she would say, in a drowsy voice. "Is it not time for Dorothy to bring in the tea? I wish you would all talk louder. I must be getting a little deaf, I think, for I don't hear half you say."

"Oh, it was only nonsense talk, mammie," Dulce would answer; and the sisterly chit-chat would recommence, and her mother's head nid-nodded on the cushions until the next interruption.

"We shall not have many more of these strolls," observed Dick, regretfully, as they all walked together through the village, and then branched off into a long country road, where the air blew freshly in their faces and low mists hung over the meadow land. Though it was not quite dark, there was a tiny moon, and the glimmer of a star or two; and there was a pleasant fragrance as of new-mown grass.

They were all walking abreast, and keeping step, and Dick was in the middle, with Nan beside him. Dulce was hanging on to her arm, and every now and then breaking into little snatches of song.

"How I envy you!" exclaimed Phillis. "Think of spending three whole months in Switzerland. Oh, you lucky Dick!"

For the Maynes had decided to pass the long vacation in the Engadine. Some hints had been dropped that Nan should accompany them, but Mrs. Challoner had regarded the invitation with some disfavor, and Mrs. Mayne had not pressed the point. If only Nan had known! but her mother had in this matter kept her own counsel.

"I don't know about that," dissented Dick; he was rather given to argue from the mere pleasure of opposition. "Mountains and glaciers are all very well in their way; but I think, on the whole, I would as soon be here. You see, I am so accustomed to mix with a lot of fellows, that I am afraid of finding the pater's sole company rather slow."

"For shame!" remarked his usual monitress. But she spoke gently: in her heart she knew why Dick failed to find the mountains alluring.

"Why could not one of you girls join us?" he continued, wrathfully. The rogue had fairly bullied the unwilling Mrs. Mayne into giving that invitation.

"Do ask her, mother; she will be such a nice companion for you when the pater and I are doing our climbing; do, there's a dear good soul!" he had coaxed. And the dear good soul, who was secretly jealous of Nan, and loved her about as much as mothers usually love an only son's choice, had bewailed her hard fate in secret; and had then stepped over to the cottage with a bland and cheerful exterior, which grew more cheerful as Mrs. Challoner's reluctance made itself felt.

"It is not wise; it will throw them so much together," Nan's mother had said. "If it were only Phillis or Dulce; but you must have noticed––"

"Oh, yes, I have noticed!" returned Mrs. Mayne, hastily. She was a stout, comely-looking woman, but beside Mrs. Challoner she looked like a housekeeper dressed in her mistress's smart clothes. Mrs. Mayne's dresses never seemed to belong to her; it could not be said that they fitted her ill, but there was a want of adaptability,—a lack of taste that failed to accord with her florid style of beauty.

She had been a handsome woman when Richard Mayne married her, but a certain deepening of tints and broadening of contour had not improved the mistress of Longmead. Her husband was a decided contrast: he was a small, wiry man, with sharp features that expressed a great deal of shrewdness. Dick had got his sandy hair; but Richard Mayne the elder had not his son's honest, kindly eyes. Mr. Mayne's were small and twinkling; he had a way of looking at people between his half-closed lids, in a manner half sharp and half jocular.

He was not vulgar, far from it; but he had a homely air about him that spoke of the self-made man. He was rather fond of telling people that his father had been in trade in a small way and

that he himself had been the sole architect of his fortune. “Look at Dick,” he would say; “he would never have a penny, that fellow, unless I made it for him: he has come into the world to find his bread ready buttered. I had to be content with a crust as I could earn it. The lad’s a cut above us both, though he has the good taste to try and hide it.”

This sagacious speech was very true. Dick would never have succeeded as a business man; he was too full of crotchets and speculations to be content to run in narrow grooves. The notion of money-making was abhorrent to him; the idea of a city life, with its hard rubs and drudgery, was utterly distasteful to him. “One would have to mix with such a lot of cads,” he would say. “English, pure and undefiled, is not always spoken. If I must work, I would rather have a turn at law or divinity; the three old women with the eye between them knows which.”

It could not be denied that Dick winced a little at his father’s homely speeches; but in his heart he was both proud and fond of him, and was given to assert to a few of his closest friends “that, take it all in all, and looking at other fellows’ fathers, he was a rattling good sort, and no mistake.”

When Mrs. Challoner had entered her little protest against her daughter’s acceptance of the invitation, Mrs. Mayne had risen and kissed her with some effusion as she took her leave.

“It is so nice of you to say this to me; of course I should have been pleased, delighted to have had Nan with us” (oh, Mrs. Mayne, fie for shame! when you want your boy to yourself), “but all the same I think you are so wise.”

“Poor child! I am afraid I am refusing her a great treat,” returned Mrs. Challoner, in a tone of regret. It was the first time since her husband’s death that she had ever decided anything without reference to her daughters; but for once her maternal fears were up in arms, and drove her to sudden resolution.

“Yes, but, as you observed, it would throw them so entirely together; and Dick is so young. Richard was only saying the other night that he hoped the boy would not fancy himself in love for the next two years, as he did not approve of such early engagements.”

“Neither do I,” returned Mrs. Challoner, quickly. “Nothing would annoy me more than for one of my daughters to entangle herself with so young a man. We know the world too well for that, Mrs. Mayne. Why, Dick may fall in and out of love half a dozen times before he really makes up his mind.”

“Ah, that is what Richard says,” returned Dick’s mother, with a sigh; in her heart she was not quite of her husband’s opinion. She remembered how that long waiting wasted her own youth,—waiting for what? For comforts that she would gladly have done without,—for a well-furnished house, when she would have lived happily in the poorest lodging with the Richard Mayne who had won her heart,—for whom she would have toiled and slaved with the self-abnegating devotion of a loving woman; only he feared to have it so.

“‘When poverty enters the door, love flies out of the window:’ we had better make up our minds to wait, Bessie. I can better work in single than double harness just now.” That was what he said to her, and Bessie waited,—not till she grew thin, but stout, and the spirit of her youth was gone; and it was a sober, middle-aged woman who took possession of the long-expected home.

Mrs. Mayne loved her husband, but during that tedious engagement her ardor had a little cooled, and it may be doubted whether the younger Richard was not dearer to her than his father; which was ungrateful, to say the least of it, as Mr. Mayne doted on his comely wife, and thought Bessie as handsome now as in the days when she came out smiling to welcome him, a slim young creature with youthful roses in her cheeks.

From this brief conversation it may be seen that none of the elders quite approved of this budding affection. Mrs. Challoner, who belonged to a good old family, found it hard to forgive the Maynes’ lowliness of birth; and though she liked Dick, she thought Nan could do better for herself. Mr. Mayne pooh-poohed the whole thing so entirely that the women could only speak of it among themselves.

“Dick is a clever fellow; he ought to marry money,” he would say. “I am not a millionaire, and a little more would be acceptable;” and though he was always kind to Nan and her sisters, he was forever dealing sly hits at her. “Phillis has the brains of the family,” he would say: “that is the girl for my money. I call her a vast deal better looking than Nan, though people make such a fuss about the other one;” a speech he was never tired of repeating in his son’s presence, and at which Dick snapped his fingers metaphorically and said nothing.

When Dick wished that one of them were going to Switzerland, Nan sighed furtively. Dick was going away for three months, for the remainder of the long vacation. After next week they would not see him until Christmas,—nearly six months. A sense of dreariness, as new as it was strange, swept momentarily over Nan as she pondered this. The summer months would be grievously clouded. Dick had been the moving spirit of all the fun; the tennis-parties, the pleasant dawdling afternoons, would lose their zest when he was away.

She remembered how persistently he had haunted their footsteps. When they paid visits to the Manor House, or Gardenhurst, or Fitzroy Lodge, Dick was sure to put in an appearance. People had nicknamed him the “Challoners’ Squire;” but now Nan must go squireless for the rest of the summer, unless she took compassion on Stanley Parker, or that dreadful chatterbox his cousin.

The male population was somewhat sparse at Oldfield. There were a few Eton boys, and one or two in that delightful transition age when youth is most bashful and uninteresting,—a sort of

unfledged manhood, when the smooth boyish cheek contradicts the deepened bass of the voice,—an age that has not ceased to blush, and which is full of aggravating idosyncrasies and unexpected angles.

To be sure, Lord Fitzroy was a splendid specimen of a young guardsman, but he had lately taken to himself a wife; and Sir Alfred Mostyn, who was also somewhat attractive and a very pleasant fellow, and unattached at present, had a tiresome habit of rushing off to Norway, or St. Petersburg, or Niagara, or the Rocky Mountains, for what he termed sport, or a lark.

"It seems we are very stupid this evening," observed Phillis for Dick had waxed almost as silent as Nan. "I think the mother must nearly have finished her nap, so I propose we go back and have some tea;" and, as Nan languidly acquiesced they turned their faces towards the village again, Dulce still holding firmly to Nan's arm. By and by Dick struck out in a fresh direction.

"I say, don't you wish we could have last week over again?"

"Yes! oh, yes! was it not too delicious?" from the three girls; and Nan added, "I never enjoyed anything so much in my life," in a tone so fervent that Dick was delighted.

"What a brick your mother was, to be sure, to spare you all!"

"Yes; and she was so dull, poor dear, all the time we were away. Dorothy gave us quite a pitiful account when we got home."

"It was a treat one ought to remember all one's life," observed Phillis, quite solemnly; and then ensued a most animated discussion.

The treat to which Phillis alluded had been simply perfect in the three girls' eyes. Dick, who never forgot his friends, had so worked upon his mother that she had consented to chaperon the three sisters during Commemoration; and a consent being fairly coaxed out of Mrs. Challoner, the plan was put into execution.

Dick, who was in the seventh heaven of delight, found roomy lodgings in the High Street, in which he installed his enraptured guests.

The five days that followed were simply hours snatched out of fairyland to these four happy young creatures. No wonder envious looks were cast at Dick as he walked in Christ Church Meadows with Nan and Dulce, Phillis bringing up the rear somewhat soberly with Mrs. Mayne.

"One pretty face would content most fellows," his friends grumbled; "but when you come to three, and not his own sisters either, why, it isn't fair on other folk." And to Dick they said, "Come, it is no use being so awfully close. Of course we see what's up: you are a lucky dog. Which is it, Mayne?—the pretty one with the pink and white complexion or the quiet one in gray, or the one with the mischievous eyes?"

"Faix, they are all darlints and jewels, bless their purty faces!" drawled one young rogue, in his favorite brogue. "Here's the top of the morning to ye, Mayne; and it is mavourneen with the brown eyes and the trick of the smile like the sunshine's glint that has stolen poor Paddy's heart."

"Oh, shut up, you fellows!" returned Dick, in a disgusted voice. "What is the good of your pretending to be Irish, Hamilton, when you are a canny Scotchman?"

"Hoots, man, mind your clavers! You need not grizzle at a creature because he admires a wee gairl that is just beyond the lave,—a sonsie wee thing with a glint in her een like diamonds."

"Hamilton, will you leave off this foolery?"

"Nae doubt, nae doubt; would his honor pe axing if he pe wrang in the head, puir thing? Never mind that, put pe giving me the skene-dhu, or I will fight with proud-swords like a gentleman for the bit lassie;" but here a wary movement on Dick's part extinguished the torrent of Highland eloquence, and brought the canny Scotchman to the ground.

Perfectly oblivious of all these compliments, the Challoners enjoyed themselves with the zest of healthy, happy English girls. They were simply indefatigable: poor Mrs. Mayne succumbed utterly before the fine days were over.

They saw the procession of boats; they were at the flower-show at Worcester; Sunday afternoon found them in the Broad Walk; and the next night they were dancing at the University ball.

They raved about the beauty of Magdalen cloisters; they looked down admiringly into the deer-park; Addison's Walk became known to them, and the gardens of St. John's. Phillis talked learnedly about Cardinal Wolsey as she stood in Christ Church hall: and in the theatre "the young ladies in pink" invoked the most continuous cheers.

"Can they mean us?" whispered Dulce, rather alarmed, to their faithful escort Dick. "I don't see any other pink dresses!"

And Dick said, calmly,—

"Well, I suppose so. Some of those fellows up there are such a trumpery lot."

So Dulce grew more reassured.

But the greatest fun of all was the afternoon spent in Dick's room, when all his special friends were bidden to five o'clock tea, over which Nan, in her white gown, presided so gracefully.

What a dear, shabby old room it was, with old-fashioned window-seats, where one could look down into the quadrangle. Dick was an Oriel man, and thought his college superior even to

Magdalen.

It became almost too hot and crowded at last, so many were the invitations given; but then, as Dick said afterwards, “he was such a soft-hearted beggar that he could not refuse the fellows that pestered him for invitations.”

Mrs. Mayne, looking very proud and happy, sat fanning herself in one of these windows. Phillis and Dulce were in the other attended by that rogue Hamilton and half a dozen more. Nan was the centre of another clique, who hemmed her and the tea-table in so closely that Dick had to wander disconsolately round the outskirts: there was no getting a look from Nan that afternoon.

How hot it was! It was a grand *coup* when the door opened and the scout made his appearance carrying a tray of ices.

“It is well to be Mayne!” half grumbled young Hamilton, as Dulce took one gratefully from his hand. “He is treating us like a prince, instead of the thin bread-and-butter entertainment he led us to expect. Put down that tea, Miss Challoner. I see iced claret-cup and strawberries in the corner. There is nothing like being an only child; doting parents are extremely useful articles. I am one of ten; would you believe it?” continued the garrulous youth. “When one has six brothers older than one’s self, I will leave you to imagine the consequences.”

“How nice!” returned Dulce, innocently; “I have always so longed for a brother. If it had not been for Dick, we should have had no one to do things for us.”

“Oh, indeed! Mayne is a sort of adopted brother!” observed her companion, looking at her rather sharply.

“We have always looked upon him as one. We do just as we like with him,—scold and tease him, and send him on our errands;” which intelligence fairly convinced the envious Hamilton that the youngest Miss Challoner was not his friend’s fancy.

Dick always recalled that evening with a sense of pride. How well and gracefully Nan had fulfilled her duties! how pretty she had looked, in spite of her flushed cheeks! He had never seen a girl to compare with her,—not he!

They were so full of these delightful reminiscences that they were at the cottage gate before they knew it; and then Dick astonished them by refusing to come in. He had quite forgotten, he said, but his mother had asked him to come home early, as she was not feeling just the thing.

“Quite right; you must do as she wishes,” returned Nan, dismissing him far too readily, as he thought; but she said “Good-night!” with so kind a smile after that, that the foolish young fellow felt his pulses quicken.

Dick lingered at the corner until the cottage door was closed, and then he raced down the Longmead shrubbery and set the house-bell pealing.

“They are in the library, I suppose?” he asked of the butler who admitted him; and, on receiving an answer in the affirmative, he dashed unceremoniously into the room, while his mother held up her finger and smiled at the truant.

“You naughty boy, to be so late; and now you have spoiled you father’s nap!” she said, pretending to scold him.

“Tut! tut! what nonsense you talk sometimes!” said Mr. Mayne, rather crossly, as he stood on the hearth-rug rubbing his eyes. “I was not asleep, I will take my oath of that; only I wish Dick could sometimes enter a room without making people jump;” by which Dick knew that his father was in one of his contrary moods, when he could be very cross,—very cross indeed!

CHAPTER III.

MR. MAYNE MAKES HIMSELF DISAGREEABLE.

The library at Longmead was a very pleasant room, and it was the custom of the family to retire thither on occasions when guests were not forthcoming, and Mr. Mayne could indulge in his favorite nap without fear of interruption.

A certain simplicity, not to say homeliness, of manners prevailed in the house. It was understood among them that the dining-room was far too gorgeous for anything but occasions of ceremony. Mrs. Mayne, indeed, had had the good taste to cover the satin couches with pretty, fresh-looking cretonne, and had had arranged hanging cupboards of old china until it had been transformed into a charming apartment, notwithstanding which the library was declared to be the family-room, where the usual masculine assortment of litter could be regarded with indulgent eyes, and where papers and pamphlets lay in delightful confusion.

Longmead was not a pretentious house—it was a moderate-sized residence, adapted to a gentleman of moderate means; but in summer no place could be more charming. The broad gravel walk before the house had a background of roses; hundreds of roses climbed up the

railings or twined themselves about the steps: a tiny miniature lake, garnished with water-lilies, lay in the centre of the lawn; a group of old elm-trees was beside it; behind the house lay another lawn, and beyond were meadows where a few sheep were quietly grazing. Mr. Mayne, who found time hang a little heavily on his hands, prided himself a good deal on his poultry-yard and kitchen-garden. A great deal of his spare time was spent among his favorite Bantams and Dorkings, and in superintending his opinionated old gardener—on summer mornings he would be out among the dews in his old coat and planter's hat, weeding among the gooseberry-bushes.

"It is the early bird that finds the worm," he would say, when Dick sauntered into the breakfast-room later on; for, in common with the youth of his generation, he had a wholesome horror of early rising, which he averred was one of the barbarous usages of the dark ages in which his elders had been bred.

"I never took any interest in worms, sir," returned Dick, helping himself to a tempting rasher that had just been brought in hot for the pampered youth. "By the bye, have you seen Darwin's work on 'The Formation of Vegetable Mould'? he declares that worms have played a more important part in the history of the world than most people would at first suppose: they were our earliest ploughmen."

"Oh, ah! indeed, very interesting!" observed his father, dryly; "but all the same, I beg to observe, no one succeeded in life who was not an early riser."

"A sweeping assertion, and one I might be tempted to argue, if it were not for taking up your valuable time," retorted Dick, lazily, but with a twinkle in his eye. "I know my constitution better than to trust myself out before the world is properly aired and dried. I am thinking it is less a case of worms than of rheumatism some early birds will be catching;" to which Mr. Mayne merely returned an ungracious "Pshaw!" and marched off, leaving his son to enjoy his breakfast in peace.

When Dick entered the library on the evening in question, Mr. Mayne's querulous observation as to the noisiness of his entrance convinced him at once that his father was in a very bad humor indeed, and that on this account it behooved him to be exceedingly cool.

So he kissed his mother, who looked at him a little anxiously, and then sat down and turned out her work-basket, as he had done Nan's two or three hours ago.

"You are late after all, Dick," she said, with a little reproach in her voice. It was hardly a safe observation, to judge by her husband's cloudy countenance; but the poor thing sometimes felt her evenings a trifle dull when Dick was away. Mr. Mayne would take up his paper, but his eyes soon closed over it; that habit of seeking for the early worm rather disposed him to somnolent evenings, during which his wife knitted and felt herself nodding off out of sheer *ennui* and dulness. These were not the hours she had planned during those years of waiting; she had told herself that Richard would read to her or talk to her as she sat over her work, that they would have so much to say to each other; but now, as she regarded his sleeping countenance evening after evening, it may be doubted whether matrimony was quite what she expected, since its bliss was so temperate and so strongly infused with drowsiness.

Dick looked up innocently. "Am I late, mother?"

"Oh, of course not," returned his father, with a sneer; "it is not quite time to ring for Nicholson to bring our candles. Bessie, I think I should like some hot water to-night; I feel a little chilly." And Bessie rang the bell obediently, and without any surprise in her manner. Mr. Mayne often woke up chilly from his long nap.

"Are you going to have a 'drap of the cratur'?" asked his son, with alacrity. "Well, I don't mind joining you, and that's the truth, for we have been dawdling about, and I am a trifle chilly myself."

"You know I object to spirits for young men," returned Mr. Mayne, severely: nevertheless he pushed the whiskey to Dick as soon as he had mixed his own glass, and his son followed his example.

"I am quite of your opinion, father," he observed, as he regarded the handsome cut-glass decanter somewhat critically; "but there are exceptions to every rule, and when one is chilly––"

"I wish you would make an exception and stay away from the cottage sometimes," returned Mr. Mayne, with ill-suppressed impatience. "It was all very well when you were all young things together, but it is high time matters should be different."

Dick executed a low whistle of surprise and dismay. He had no idea his father's irritability had arisen from any definite cause. What a fool he had been to be so late! it might lead to some unpleasant discussion. Well, after all, if his father chose to be so disagreeable it was not his fault; and he was no longer a boy, to be chidden, or made to do this or that against his own will.

Mr. Mayne was sufficiently shrewd to see that his son was somewhat taken aback by this sudden onslaught, and he was not slow to press his advantage. He had wanted to give Dick a bit of his mind for some time, and after all there is no time like the present.

"Yes, it was all very well when you were a lot of children together," he continued. "Of course, it is hard on you, Dick, having no brothers and sisters to keep you company; your mother and I were always sorry about that for your sake."

"Oh, don't mention it," interrupted Dick: "on the whole, I am best pleased as it is."

"But it would have been better for you," returned his father, sharply: "we should not have had

all this fooling and humbug if you had had sisters of your own."

"Fooling and humbug!" repeated Dick, hotly; "I confess, sir, I don't quite understand to what you are referring." He was growing very angry, but his mother flung herself between the combatants.

"Don't, my boy, don't; you must not answer your father in that way. Richard, what makes you so hard on him to-night? It must be the gout, Dick: we had better send for Dr. Weatherby in the morning," continued the anxious woman, with tears in her eyes, "for your dear father would never be so cross to you as this unless he were going to be ill."

"Stuff and nonsense, Bessie! Dr. Weatherby indeed!" but his voice was less wrathful. "What is it but fooling, I should like to know, for Dick to be daundering his time away with a parcel of girls as he does with these Challoners!"

"I suppose you were never a young man yourself, sir."

"Oh, yes, I was, my boy," and the corners of Mr. Mayne's mouth relaxed in spite of his efforts to keep serious. "I fell in love with your mother, and stuck to her for seven or eight years; but I did not make believe that I was brother to a lot of pretty girls, and waste all my time dancing attendance on them and running about on their errands."

"You ought to have taken a lesson out of my book," returned his son, readily.

"No, I ought to have done no such thing, sir!" shouted back Mr. Mayne, waxing irate again. It could not be denied that Dick could be excessively provoking when he liked. "Don't I tell you it is time this sort of thing was stopped? Why, people will begin to talk, and say you are making up to one of them, it is not right, Dick; it is not, indeed," with an attempted pathos.

"I don't care that for what people say," returned the young fellow, snapping his fingers. "Is it not a pity you are saying all this to me just when I am going away and am not likely to see any of them for the next six months? You are very hard on me to-night, father; and I can't think what it is all about."

Mr. Mayne was silent a moment, revolving his son's pathetic speech. It was true he had been cross, and had said more than he had meant to say. He had not wished to hinder Dick's innocent enjoyments; but if he were unknowingly picking flowers at the edge of a precipice, was it not his duty as a father to warn him?

"I think I have been a little hard, my lad," he said, candidly, "but there, you and your mother know my bark is worse than my bite. I only wanted to warn you; that's all, Dick."

"Warn me!—against what, sir?" asked the young man, quickly.

"Against falling in love, really, with one of the Challoner girls!" returned Mr. Mayne, trying to evade the fire of Dick's eyes, and blustering a little in consequence. "Why, they have not a penny, one of them, and, if report be true, Mrs. Challoner's money is very shakily invested. Paine told me so the other day. He said he should never wonder if a sudden crash came any minute."

"Is this true, Richard?"

"Paine declares it is; and think of Dick saddling himself with the support of a whole family!"

"It strikes me you are taking things very much for granted," returned his son, trying to speak coolly, but flushing like a girl over his words. "I think you might wait, father, until I proposed bringing you home a daughter-in-law."

"I am only warning you, Dick, that the Challoner connection would be distasteful to me," replied Mr. Mayne, feeling that he had gone a little too far. "If you had brothers and sisters it would not matter half so much; but it would be too hard if my only son were to cross my wishes."

"Should you disinherit me, father?" observed Dick, cheerfully. He had recovered his coolness and pluck, and began to feel more equal to the occasion.

"We should see about that, but I hardly think it would be for your advantage to oppose me too much," returned his father with an ominous pucker of his eyebrows, which warned Dick, that it was hardly safe to chaff the old boy too much to-night.

"I think I will go to bed, Richard," put in poor Mrs. Mayne. She had wisely forborne to mix in the discussion, fearing that it would bring upon her the vials of her husband's wrath. Mr. Mayne was as choleric as a Welshman, and had a reserve force of sharp cynical sayings that were somewhat hard to bear. He was disposed to turn upon her on such occasions, and to accuse her of spoiling Dick and taking his part against his father; between the two Richards she sometimes had a very bad time indeed.

Dick lighted his mother's candle, and bade her good-night; but all the same she knew she had not seen the last of him. A few minutes afterwards there was a hasty tap at the bedroom door, and Dick thrust in his head.

"Come in, my dear; I have been expecting you," she said, with a pleased smile. He always came to her when he was ruffled or put out, and brought her all his grievances; surely this was the very meaning and essence of her motherhood,—this healing and comfort that lay in her power of sympathy.

When he was a little fellow, had she not extracted many a thorn and bound up many a cut finger? and now he was a man, would she be less helpful to him when he wanted a different kind

of comfort?

“Come in, my son,” she said, beckoning him to the low chair beside her, into which Dick threw himself with a petulant yawn.

“Mother, what made the pater so hard on me to-night? he cut up as rough as though I had committed some crime.”

“I don’t think he is quite himself to-night,” returned Mrs. Mayne, in her soft, motherly voice. “I fancy he misses you, Dick, and is half jealous of the Challoners for monopolizing you. You are all we have, that’s where it is,” she finished, stroking the sandy head with her plump hand; but Dick jerked away from her with a little impatience.

“I think it rather hard that a fellow is to be bullied for doing nothing at all,” replied Dick, with a touch of sullenness. “When the pater is in this humor it is no use saying anything to him; but you may as well tell him, mother, that I mean to choose my wife for myself.”

“Oh, my dear, I dare not tell him anything of the kind,” returned Mrs. Mayne, in an alarmed voice; and then, as she glanced at her son, her terror merged into amusement. There was something so absurdly boyish in Dick’s appearance, such a ludicrous contrast between the manliness of his speech and his smooth cheek; the little fringe of hirsute ornament, of which Dick was so proud, was hardly visible in the dim light; his youthful figure, more clumsy than graceful, had an unfledged air about it, nevertheless, the boldness of his words took away her breath.

“Every man has a right to his own choice in such a matter,” continued Dick, loftily. “You may as well tell him, mother, that I intend to select my own wife.”

“My dear, I dare not for worlds––” she began; and then she stopped, and laid her hand on his shoulder. “Why do you say this to me? there is plenty of time,” she went on hastily; “that is what your father says, and I think he is right. You are too young for this sort of thing yet. You must see the world; you must look about you; you must have plenty of choice,” continued the anxious mother. “I shall be hard to please, Dick, for I shall think no one good enough for my boy; that is the worst of having only one, and he the best son that ever lived,” finished Mrs. Mayne, with maternal pride in her voice.

Dick took this effusion very coolly. He was quite used to all this sort of worship; he did not think badly of himself; he was not particularly humble-minded or given to troublesome introspection; on the whole, he thought himself a good fellow, and was not at all surprised that people appreciated him.

“There are such a lot of cads in the world, one is always glad to fall in with a different sort,” he would say to himself. He was quite of his mother’s opinion, that an honest, God-fearing young fellow, who spoke the truth and shamed the devil, who had no special vices but a dislike for early rising, who had tolerable brains, and more than his share of muscle, who was in the Oxford eleven, and who had earned his blue ribbon,—that such a one might be considered to set an example to his generation.

When his mother told him she would be hard to please, Dick looked a little wicked, and thought of Nan; but the name was not mentioned between them. Nevertheless, Mrs. Mayne felt with unerring maternal instinct that, in spite of his youth, Dick’s choice was made, and sighed to herself at the thought of the evil days that were to come.

Poor woman, she was to have little peace that night! Hardly had Dick finished his grumble and sauntered away, before her husband’s step was heard in his dressing-room.

“Bessie,” he called out to her, “why do you allow that boy to keep you up so late at night? Do you know that it is eleven, and you are still fully dressed?”

“Is it so late, Richard?”

“Yes, of course,” he snapped; “but that is the care you take of your health; and the way you cosset and spoil that boy is dreadful.”

“I don’t think Dick is easily spoiled,” plucking up a little spirit to answer him.

“That shows how little you understand boys,” returned her husband. Evidently the whiskey, though it was the best Glenlivat, had failed to mollify him. It might be dangerous to go too far with Dick, for he had a way of turning around and defending himself that somewhat embarrassed Mr. Mayne, but with his wife there would be no such danger. He would dominate her by his sharp speeches, and reduce her to abject submission in a moment, for Bessie was the meekest of wives. “Take care how you side with him,” he continued, in a threatening voice. “He thinks that I am not serious in what I said just now, and is for carrying it off with a high hand; but I tell you, and you had better tell him, that I was never more in earnest in my life. I won’t have one of those Challoner girls for a daughter-in-law!”

“Oh, Richard! and Nan is such a sweet girl!” returned his wife, with tears in her eyes. She was awfully jealous of Nan, at times she almost dreaded her; but for her boy’s sake she would have taken her now to her heart and defied even her formidable husband. “She is such a pretty creature, too; no one can help loving her.”

“Pshaw!” returned her husband; “pretty creature indeed! that is just your soft-hearted nonsense. Phillis is ten times prettier, and has heaps more sense. Why couldn’t Dick have taken a fancy to her?”

“Because I am afraid he cares for the other one,” returned Mrs. Mayne, sadly. She had no wish

to deceive her husband and she knew that the golden apple had rolled to Nan's feet.

"Stuff and rubbish!" he responded, wrathfully. "What is a boy of his age to know about such things? Tell him from me to put this nonsense out of his head for the next year or two; there is plenty of time to look out for a wife after that. But I won't have him making up his mind until he has left Oxford." And Mrs. Mayne, knowing that her husband had spoken his last word, thankfully withdrew, feeling that in her heart she secretly agreed with him.

CHAPTER IV.

DICK'S FÊTE.

As Mr. Mayne's wrath soon evaporated, and Dick was a sweet-tempered fellow and bore no malice, this slight altercation produced no lasting effect, except that Dick, for the next few days, hurried home to his dinner, talked a good deal about Switzerland, and never mentioned a Challoner in his father's hearing.

"We must keep him in a good temper for the 25th," he said to his mother, with a touch of the Mayne shrewdness.

That day was rapidly approaching, and all sorts of festive preparations were going on at Longmead. Dick himself gravely superintended the rolling of the tennis-ground in the large meadow, and daubed himself plentifully with lime in marking out the courts, while Mr. Mayne stood with his hands in the pockets of his shooting-coat watching him. The two were a great deal together just then: Dick rather stuck to his father during one or two mornings; the wily young fellow knew that Nan was closeted with his mother, helping her with all sorts of feminine arrangements, and he was determined to keep them apart. Nan wondered a great deal why Dick did not come to interrupt or tease them as usual, and grew a little absent over Mrs. Mayne's rambling explanations. When the gong sounded, no one asked her to stay to luncheon. Mrs. Mayne saw her put on her hat without uttering a single protest.

"It is so good of you to help me, dear," she said, taking the girl into her embrace. "You are quite sure people won't expect a sit-down supper?"

"Oh no; the buffet system is best," returned Nan, decidedly. "Half the people will not stay, and you need not make a fuss about the rest. It is an afternoon party, you must remember that; only people who are very intimate will remain for the fun of the thing. Tell Nicholson to have plenty of ices going; people care most for that sort of refreshment."

"Yes, dear; I will be sure to remember," returned her friend, meekly.

She was very grateful to Nan for these hints, and was quite willing to follow her guidance in all such matters; but when Nan proposed once sending for Dick to ask his opinion on some knotty point that baffled their women's wits, Mrs. Mayne demurred.

"It is a pity to disturb him; he is with his father; and we can settle these things by ourselves," she replied, not venturing to mar the present tranquillity by sending such a message to Dick. Mr. Mayne would have accompanied his son, and the consultation would hardly have ended peaceably. "Men have their hobbies. We had better settle all this together, you and I," she said hurriedly.

Nan merely nodded, and cut the Gordian knot through somewhat ruthlessly; but on that occasion she put on her hat before the gong sounded.

"You must be very busy, for one never has a glimpse of you in the morning," she could not help saying to Dick, as he came in that afternoon to escort them to Fitzroy Lodge.

"Well, yes, I am tolerably busy," he drawled. "I am never free to do things in the afternoons,"—a fact that Nan felt was unanswerable.

When Nan and her sisters woke on the morning of the memorable day, the bright sunshine of a cloudless June day set all their fears at rest. If the sun smiled on Dick's fête, all would be well. If Nan's devotions were longer than usual that morning, no one was the wiser; if she added a little clause, calling down a blessing on a certain head, no one would be the poorer for such pure prayers; indeed, it were well if many such were uttered for the young men who go forth morning after morning into the temptations of life.

Such prayers might stretch like an invisible shield before the countless foes that environ such a one; fiery darts may be caught upon it; a deadly thrust may be turned away. What if the blessing would never reach the ear of the loved one, who goes out unconscious of sympathy? His guardian angel has heard it, and perchance it has reached the very gate of heaven.

Nan came down, smiling and radiant, to find Dick waiting for her in the veranda and chattering to Phillis and Dulce.

"Why, Dick!" she cried, blushing with surprise and pleasure, "to think of your being here on

your birthday morning!”

“I only came to thank you and the girls for your lovely presents,” returned Dick, becoming rather incoherent and red at the sight of Nan’s blush. “It was so awfully good of you all, to work all those things for me;” for Nan had taken secret measurements in Dick’s room, and had embroidered a most exquisite mantelpiece valance, and Phillis and Dulce had worked the corners of a green cloth with wonderful daffodils and bulrushes to cover Dick’s shabby table: and Dick’s soul had been filled with ravishment at the sight of these gifts.

Nan would not let him go on, but all the same his happy face delighted her.

“No, don’t thank us, we liked doing it,” she returned, rather coolly. “You know we owed you something after all your splendid hospitality, and work is never any trouble to us.”

“But I never saw anything I liked better,” blurted out Dick. “All the fellows will be jealous of me. I am sure I don’t know what Hamilton will say. It was awfully good of you, Nan, and so it was of the others: and if I don’t make it up to you somehow, my name is not Dick:” and he smiled round at them as he spoke. “Fancy putting in all those stitches for me!” he thought to himself.

“We are so glad you are pleased,” returned Nan, with one of her sweet, straightforward looks; “that is what we wanted to give you,—a little surprise on your birthday. Now you must tell us about your other presents.” And Dick, nothing loath, launched into eloquent descriptions of the silver-fitted dressing-case from his mother, and the gun and thorough-bred collie that had been his father’s gifts.

“He is such a fine fellow; I must show him to you this afternoon,” went on Dick, eagerly. “His name is Vigo, and he has such a superb head. Was it not good of the pater? he knew I had a fancy for a collie, and he has been in treaty for one ever so long. Is he not a dear old boy?” cried Dick, rapturously. But he did not tell his friends of the crisp bundle of bank-notes with which Mr. Mayne had enriched his son; only as Dick fingered them lovingly, he wondered what pretty foreign thing he could buy for Nan, and whether her mother would allow her to accept it.

After this Nan dismissed him somewhat peremptorily; he must go back to his breakfast, and allow them to do the same.

“Mind you come early,” were Dick’s last words as he waved his straw hat to them. How often the memory of that morning recurred to him as he stood solitarily and thoughtful, contemplating some grand sketch of Alpine scenery!

The snow peaks and blue glaciers melted away before his eyes; in their place rose unbidden a picture framed in green trellis-work, over which roses were climbing.

Fresh girlish faces smiled back at him; the brightest and kindest of glances met his. “Good-bye, Dick; a thousand good wishes from us all.” A slim white hand had gathered a rose-bud for him; how proudly he had worn it all that day! Stop, he had it still; it lay all crushed and withered in his pocket-book. He had written the date under it; one day he meant to show it to her. Oh, foolish days of youth, so prodigal of minor memories and small deeds of gifts, when a withered flower can hold the rarest scent, and in a crumpled roseleaf there is a whole volume of ecstatic meaning! Oh, golden days of youth, never to be surpassed!

Never in the memory of Oldfield had there been a more delicious day.

The sky was cloudless; long purple shadows lay under the elm-trees; a concert of bird-music sounded from the shrubberies: in the green meadows flags were waving, tent-draperies fluttering; the house-doors stood open, showing a flower-decked hall and vista of cool shadowy rooms.

Dick, looking bright and trim, wandering restlessly over the place, and Mr. Mayne fidgeted after him; while Mrs. Mayne sat fanning herself under the elm-trees and hoping the band would not be late.

No there it was turning in now at the stable-entrance, and playing “The girl I left behind me;” and there at the same moment was Nan coming up the lawn in her white gown, closely followed by her mother and sisters.

“Are we the first?” she asked, as Dick darted across the grass to meet her. “That is nice; we shall see all the people arrive. How inspiriting that music is, and how beautiful everything looks!”

“It is awfully jolly of you to be the first,” whispered Dick; “and how nice you look, Nan! You always do, you know, but to-day you are first-rate. Is this a new gown?” casting an approving look over Nan’s costume, which was certainly very fresh and pretty.

“Oh, yes; we have all new dresses in your honor, and we made them ourselves,” returned Nan, carelessly. “Mother has got her old silk, but for her it does not so much matter; at least that is what she says.”

“And she is quite right. She is always real splendid, as the Yankees say, whatever she wears,” returned Dick, wishing secretly that his mother in her new satin dress looked half so well as Mrs. Challoner in her old one. But it was no use. Mrs. Mayne never set off her handsome dresses; with her flushed, good-natured face and homely ways, she showed to marked disadvantage beside Mrs. Challoner’s faded beauty. Mrs. Challoner’s gown might be antique, but nothing could surpass the quiet grace of her carriage, or the low pleasant modulations of her voice. Her figure was almost as slim as her daughters’, and she could easily have passed for their elder sister.

Lady Fitzroy, who was a Burgoyne by birth,—and every one knows that for haughtiness and a certain exclusive intoleration none could match the Burgoynes,—always distinguished Mrs. Challoner by the marked attention she paid her.

“A very lady-like woman, Percival. Certainly the most lady-like person in the neighborhood,” she would say to her husband, who was not quite so exclusive, and always made himself pleasant to his neighbors; and she would ask very graciously after her brother-in-law, Sir Francis Challoner. “He is still in India, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes; he is still in India,” Mrs. Challoner would reply, rather curtly. She had not the faintest interest in her husband’s brother, whom she had never seen more than twice in her life, and who was understood to be small credit to his family. The aforesaid Sir Francis Challoner had been the poorest of English baronets. His property had dwindled down until it consisted simply of a half ruined residence in the north of England.

In his young days Sir Francis had been a prodigal, and, like the prodigal in the parable, he had betaken himself into far countries, not to waste his substance, for he had none, but if possible to glean some of the Eastern riches.

Whether he had been successful or not Mrs. Challoner hardly knew. That he had married and settled in Calcutta,—that he had a son named Harry, who had once written to her in round hand and subscribed himself as her affectionate nephew, Henry Ford Challoner—this she knew; but what manner of person Lady Challoner might be, or what sort of home her brother-in-law had made for himself, those points were enveloped in mystery.

“I suppose she is so civil to me because of your uncle Francis,” she used to say to her girls, which was attributing to Lady Fitzroy a degree of snobbishness that was quite undeserved. Lady Fitzroy really liked Mrs. Challoner and found intercourse with her very pleasant and refreshing. When one is perfectly well-bred, there is a subtile charm in harmony of voice and manner. Mrs. Challoner might have dressed in rags if she liked, and the young countess would still have aired her choicest smiles for her.

It was lucky Nan had those few words from Dick, for they fell apart after this, and were separated the greater portion of the afternoon.

Carriages began to drive in at the gates; groups of well-dressed people thronged the lawn, and were drafted off to the field where the band was playing.

Nan and her sisters had their work cut out for them; they knew everybody and they were free of the house. It was they who helped Dick arrange the tennis-matches, who pointed out to the young men of the party which was the tea-tent, and where the ices and claret-cup were to be found. They marshalled the elder ladies into pleasant nooks, where they could be sheltered from the sun and see all that was going on.

“No, thank you; I shall not play tennis this afternoon; there are too many of us, and I am so busy,” Nan said, dismissing one after another who came up to her. “If you want a partner, there is Carrie Paine, who is dying for a game.”

Dick, who was passing with Lady Fitzroy on his arm, whom he was hurrying somewhat unceremoniously across the field, threw her a grateful glance as he went by.

“What a sweet-looking girl that is!” said Lady Fitzroy, graciously, as she panted a little over her exertion.

“Who?—Nan? Yes; isn’t she a brick?—and the others too?” for Phillis and Dulce were just as self-denying in their labors. As Mr. Mayne said afterwards, “They were just everywhere, those Challoners, like a hive of swarming bees;” which, as it was said in a grumbling tone, was ungrateful, to say the least of it.

Dick worked like a horse too; he looked all the afternoon as though he had a tough job in hand that required the utmost gravity and despatch. He was forever hurrying elderly ladies across the field towards the refreshment-tent, where he deposited them, panting and heated, in all sorts of corners.

“Are you quite comfortable? May I leave you now? or shall I wait and take you back again?” asked Dick, who was eager for a fresh convoy.

“No, no; I would rather stay here a little,” returned Mrs. Paine, who was not desirous of another promenade with the hero of the day. “Go and fetch some one else, Dick: I am very well off where I am,” exchanging an amused glance with one of her friends, as Dick, hot and breathless, started off on another voyage of discovery.

Dick’s behavior had been simply perfect all the afternoon in his father’s eyes; but later on, when the band struck up a set of quadrilles, he committed his first solecism in manners: instead of asking Lady Fitzroy to dance with him, he hurried after Nan.

“This is our dance; come along,” he said, taking her unwilling hand; but she held back a moment.

“Are you sure? Is there not some one else you ought to choose?—Lady Fitzroy, for example?” questioned Nan, with admirable forethought.

“Bother Lady Fitzroy!” exclaimed Dick, under his breath; he had had quite enough of that lady. “Why are you holding back, Nan, in this fashion?” a cloud coming over his face. “Haven’t you promised weeks ago to give me the first dance?” And Nan, seeing the cloud on his face, yielded without another word. Dick always managed to have his own way somehow.

“Dick! Dick!” cried his father, in a voice of agony, as they passed him.

“All in good time; coming presently,” returned the scapegrace, cheerfully. “Now, Nan, this is our place. We will have Hamilton and Dulce for our *vis-a-vis*. What a jolly day; and isn’t this first-rate?” exclaimed Dick, rubbing his hands, and feeling as though he were only just beginning to enjoy himself.

Nan was not quite so easy in her mind.

“Your father does not look very pleased. I am afraid, after all, you ought to have asked Lady Fitzroy,” she said, in a low voice; but Dick turned a deaf ear. He showed her the rose in his buttonhole; and when Nan told him it was withered, and wanted him to take it out, he gave her a reproachful look that made her blush.

They were very happy after this; and, when the dance was over, Dick gave her his arm, and carried her off to see Vigo, who was howling a deep mournful bass at the back of the gardener’s cottage.

Nan made friends with him, and stroked his black curly head, and looked lovingly into his deep melancholy eyes; and then, as her flowers were fading, they strolled off into the conservatory, where Dick gathered her a fresh bouquet and then sat down and watched her arrange it.

“What clever fingers you have got!” he said, looking at them admiringly, as Nan sorted the flowers in her lap; and at this unlucky moment they were discovered by Mr. Mayne, who was bringing Lady Fitzroy to see a favorite orchid.

He shot an angry suspicious glance at his son.

“Dick, your mother is asking for you,” he said, rather abruptly; but Dick growled something in an undertone, and did not move.

Nan gave him a frightened nudge. Why was he so imprudent?

“I cannot move, because of my flowers; do go, Dick. You must indeed, if your mother wants you;” and she looked at him in such a pleading way that Dick dared not refuse. It was just like his father to come and disturb his first happy moments and to order him off to go and do something disagreeable. He had almost a mind to brave it out, and remain in spite of him; but there was Nan looking at him in a frightened, imploring way.

“Oh, do go, Dick,” giving him a little impatient push in her agitation; “if your mother wants you, you must not keep her waiting.” But Nan in her heart knew, as Dick did in his, that the message was only a subterfuge to separate them.

CHAPTER V.

“I AM QUITE SURE OF HIM.”

Nan would willingly have effected her escape too, but she was detained by the flowers that Dick had tossed so lightly into her lap. She was rather dismayed at her position, and her fingers trembled a little over their work. There was a breath—a sudden entering current—of antagonism and prejudice that daunted her. Lady Fitzroy cast an admiring look at the girl as she sat there with glowing cheeks and downcast lids.

“How pretty she is!” she said, in a low voice, as Mr. Mayne pointed out his favorite orchid. “She is like her mother; there is just the same quiet style, only I suspect Mrs. Challoner was even better looking in her time.”

“Humph! yes, I suppose so,” returned her host, in a dissatisfied tone. He had not brought Lady Fitzroy there to talk of the Challoners, but to admire his orchids. Then he shot another glance at Nan between his half-closed eyes, and a little spice of malice flavored his next words.

“Shall we sit here a moment? Let me see: you were asking me, Lady Fitzroy, about Dick’s prospects. I was talking to his mother about them the other day. I said to her then, Dick must settle in life well; he must marry money.”

“Indeed?” replied Lady Fitzroy, somewhat absently; she even indulged in a slight yawn behind her fan. She liked Dick well enough, as every one else did, but she was not partial to his father. How tiresome it was of Fitzroy to insist so much on their neighborly duties!

Mr. Mayne was not “one of them,” as she would have phrased it; he did not speak their language or lead their life; their manners and customs, their little tricks and turns of thought were hieroglyphics to him.

A man who had never had a grandfather,—at least a grandfather worth knowing,—whose father’s hands had dabbled in trade,—actually trade,—such a one might be a very worthy man, an excellent citizen, an exemplary husband and father, but it behooved a woman in her position not to descend too freely to his level.

“Percival is such a sad Radical,” she would say to herself; “he does not make sufficient distinction between people. I should wish to be neighborly, but I cannot bring myself to be familiar with these Maynes;” which was perhaps the reason why Lady Fitzroy was not as popular at Longmead and in other places as her good-natured husband.

“Oh, indeed?” she said, with difficulty repressing another slight yawn behind her fan, but speaking in a fatigued voice: but Mr. Mayne was too intent on his purpose to notice it.

“If Dick had brothers and sisters it would not matter so much; but when one has only a single hope—eh, Lady Fitzroy?—things must be a little different then.”

“He will have plenty of choice,” she returned, with an effort at graciousness. “Oldfield is rich in pretty girls:” and she cast another approving glance at poor Nan, but Mr. Mayne interrupted her almost rudely.

“Ah, as to that,” he returned, with a sneer, “we want no such nonsense for Dick. Here are the facts of the case. Here is an honest, good-tempered young fellow, but with no particular push in him; he has money, you say,—yes, but not enough to give him the standing I want him to have. I am ambitious for Dick. I want him to settle in life well. Why, he might be called to the bar; he might enter Parliament; there is no limit to a man’s career nowadays. I will do what I can for him, but he must meet me half-way.”

“You mean,” observed Lady Fitzroy, with a little perplexity in her tone, “that he must look out for an heiress.” She was not in the secret, and she could not understand why her host was treating her to this outburst of confidence. “It was so disagreeable to be mixed up with this sort of thing,” as she told her husband afterwards. “I never knew him quite so odious before; and there was that pretty Miss Challoner sitting near us, and he never let me address a word to her.”

Nan began to feel she had had enough of it. She started up hastily as Lady Fitzroy said the last words, but the entrance of some more young people compelled her to stand inside a moment, and she heard Mr. Mayne’s answer distinctly: “Well, not an heiress exactly; but the girl I have in view for him has a pretty little sum of money, and the connection is all that could be wished; she is nice-looking, too, and is a bright, talking little body––” But here Nan made such a resolute effort to pass, that the rest of the sentence was lost upon her.

Dick, who was strolling up and down the lawn rather discontentedly, hurried up to her as she came out.

“They are playing a valse; come, Nan,” he said, holding out his hand to her with his usual eagerness; but she shook her head.

“I cannot dance; I am too tired: there are others you ought to ask.” She spoke a little ungraciously, and Dick’s face wore a look of dismay, as she walked away from him with quick even footsteps.

Tired! Nan tired! he had never heard of such a thing. What had put her out? The sweet brightness had died out of her eyes, and her cheeks were flaming. Should he follow her and have it out with her, there and then? But, as he hesitated, young Hamilton came over the grass and linked his arm in his.

“Come and introduce me to that girl in blue gauze, or whatever you call that flimsy manufacture. Come along, there’s a good fellow,” he said, coaxingly; and Dick’s opportunity was lost.

But he was wrong; for once in her life Nan was tired; the poor girl felt a sudden quenching of her bright elasticity that amounted to absolute fatigue.

She had spoken to Dick sharply; but that was to get rid of him and to recall him to a sense of his duty. Not for worlds would she be seen dancing with him, or even talking to him, again!

She sat down on a stump of a tree in the shrubbery, and wondered wearily what had taken it out of her so much. And then she recalled, sentence by sentence, everything that had passed in the conservatory.

She had found out quite lately that Mr. Mayne did not approve of her intimacy with Dick. His manner had somewhat changed to her, and several times he had spoken to her in a carping, fault-finding way,—little cut-and-dried sentences of elderly wisdom that she had not understood at the time.

She had not pleased him of late, somehow, and all her little efforts and overtures had been lost upon him. Nan had been quite aware of this, but it had not troubled her much: it was a way he had, and he meant nothing by it. Most men had humors that must be respected, and Dick’s father had his. So she bore herself very sweetly towards him, treating his caustic remarks as jokes, and laughing pleasantly at them, never taking his hints in earnest; he would know better some day, that was all; but she had no idea of any deeply-laid plan against their happiness. She felt as though some one had struck her hard; she had received a blow that set all her nerves tingling. It was very funny, what he said; it was so droll that it almost made her laugh; and yet her eyes smarted, and her cheeks felt on fire.

“‘Dick must marry money.’ Why must he?—that was so droll. ‘Well, not an heiress exactly, but a pretty little sum of money, and a bright, taking little body.’ Who was this mysterious person whom he had in view, whose connections were so desirable, who was to be Dick’s future wife? Dick’s future wife!” repeated Nan, with an odd little quiver of her lip. “And was it not droll,

settling it all for him like that?”

Nan fell into a brown study, and then woke up with a little gasp. It was all clear to her now, all these cut-and-dried sentences,—all those veiled sneers and innuendoes.

They were poor,—poor as church-mice,—and Dick must marry money. Mr. Mayne had laid his plans for his son, and was watching their growing intimacy with disapproving eyes. Perhaps “the bright, taking little body” might accompany them to Switzerland; perhaps among the mountains Dick would forget her, and lend a ready acquiescence to his father’s plans. Who was she? Had Nan ever seen her? Could she be here this afternoon, this future rival and enemy of her peace?

“Ah, what nonsense I am thinking!” she exclaimed to herself, starting up with a little shame and impatience at her own thoughts. “What has this all got to do with me? Let them settle it between them,—money-bags and all. Dick is Dick, and after all, I am not afraid!” And Nan marched back to the company, with her head higher, and a great assumption of cheerfulness, and a little gnawing feeling of discomfort at her heart, to which she would not have owned for worlds.

Nan was the gayest of the gay that evening, but she would not dance again with Dick: she sent the poor boy away from her with a decision and peremptoriness that struck him with fresh dismay.

“You are not tired now, Nan; and have been waltzing ever so long with Cathcart and Hamilton.”

“Never mind about me to-night: you must go and ask Lady Fitzroy. No, I am not cross. Do you think I would be cross to you on your birthday? but all the same I will not have you neglect your duties. Go and ask her this moment, sir!” And Nan smiled in his face in the most bewitching way, and gave a little flutter to her fan. She accepted Mr. Hamilton’s invitation to a valse under Dick’s very eyes, and whirled away on his arm, while Dick stood looking at her ruefully.

Just at the very last moment Nan’s heart relented.

“Walk down to the gate with us,” she whispered, as she passed him on her way to the cloak-room.

Dick, who was by this time in a somewhat surly humor, make no sort of response; nevertheless Nan found him out on the gravel path waiting for them in company with Cathcart and Hamilton.

Nan shook off the latter rather cleverly, and took Dick’s arm, in cheerful unconsciousness of his ill-humor.

“It is so good of you to come with us. I wanted to get you a moment to myself, to congratulate you on the success of the evening. It was admirably managed; every one says so: even Lady Fitzroy was pleased, and her ladyship is a trifle fastidious. Have the band in-doors, and set them to dancing,—that is what I said; and it has turned out a complete success,” finished Nan, with a little gush of enthusiasm; but she did not find Dick responsive.

“Oh! bother the success and all that!” returned that very misguided young man; “it was the slowest affair to me, I assure you, and I am thankful it is over. You have spoiled the evening to me, and that is what you have done,” grumbled Dick, in his most ominous voice.

“I spoiled your evening, you ungrateful boy!” replied Nan, innocently; but she smiled to herself in the darkness, and the reproach was sweet to her. They had entered the garden of Glen Cottage by this time, and Dick was fiercely marching her down a side-path that led to the kitchen. The hall door stood open. Cathcart and Hamilton were chattering with the girls in the porch, while Mrs. Challoner went inside. They peered curiously into the summer dusk, as Dick’s impatient footsteps grated on the gravel path.

“I spoiled your evening!” repeated Nan, lifting her bright eyes with the gleam of fun still in them.

“Yes,” blurted out Dick. “Why have you kept me at such a distance all the evening? Why would you not dance with me? and you gave Hamilton three valses. It was not like you, Nan, to treat me so,—and on my birthday too,” went on the poor fellow, with a pathos that brought another sort of gleam to Nan’s eyes, only she still laughed.

“Ah, you foolish boy!” she said, and gave his coat-sleeve a coaxing little pat. “I would rather have danced with you than Mr. Hamilton, though he does reverse beautifully, and I never knew any one who waltzed more perfectly.”

“Oh, I do not presume to rival Hamilton,” began Dick hotly, but she silenced him.

“Listen to me, you foolish Dick! I would have danced with you, and willingly, but I knew my duty better, or rather I knew yours. You were a public man to-day; the eyes of the county were upon you. You had to pay court to the big ladies, and to take no notice of poor little me. I sent you away for your own good, and because I valued your duty above my pleasure,” continued this heroic young person, in a perfectly satisfied tone.

“And you wanted to dance with me, Nan, and not with that goose of a Hamilton?” in a wheedling voice.

“Yes, Dick; but he is not a goose for all that: he is more of a swan in my opinion.”

“He is a conceited ass!” was the very unexpected reply, which was a little hard on Dick’s chum, who was in many ways a most estimable young man and vastly his superior. “Why are you laughing, when you know I hate prigs? and Hamilton is about the biggest I ever knew.” But this

did not mend matters, and Nan's laugh still rang merrily in the darkness.

"What are those two doing?" asked Phillis, trying to peep between the lilac-bushes, but failing to discover more than the white glimmer of Nan's shawl.

Nan's laugh, though it was full of sweet triumph, only irritated Dick; the lord of the evening was still too sore and humiliated by all these rebuffs and repulses to take the fun in good part.

"What is it that amuses you so?" he asked, rather crossly. "That is the worst of you girls; you are always so ready to make merry at a fellow's expense. You are taking Hamilton's part against me, Nan,—I, who am your oldest friend, who have always been faithful to you ever since you were a child," continued the young man, with a growing sense of aggravation.

"Oh, Dick!" and Nan's voice faltered a little; she was rather touched at this.

Dick took instant note of the change of key, and went on in the same injured voice:

"Why should I look after all the big people and take no notice of you? Have I not made it my first duty to look after you as long as I can remember? Though the whole world were about us, would you not be the first and the principal to me?"

"Don't, Dick," she said, faintly, trying to repress him; "you must not talk in that way, and I must not listen to you; your father would not like it." The words were sweet to her,—precious beyond everything,—but she must not have him speak them. But Dick, in his angry excitement, was not to be repressed.

"What does it matter what he likes? This is between you and me, Nan; no one shall meddle between us two." But what imprudent speech Dick was about to add was suddenly quenched in light-pealing laughter. At this critical moment they were met and surrounded; before them was the red glow of Cathcart's cigar, the whiteness of Phillis's gown; behind were two more advancing figures. In another second the young people had joined hands: a dusky ring formed round the startled pair.

"Fairly caught!" cried Dulce's sunshiny voice; the mischievous little monkey had no idea of the sport she was spoiling. None of the young people thought of anything but fun; Dick was just Dick, and he and Nan were always together.

Dick muttered something inaudible under his breath; but Nan was quite equal to the occasion; she was still palpitating a little with the pleasure Dick's words had given her, but she confronted her tormentors boldly.

"You absurd creatures," she said, "to steal a march on us like that! Dick and I were having a quarrel; we were fighting so hard that we did not hear you."

"I enjoy a good fight above everything," exclaimed Cathcart, throwing away his cigar. He was a handsome dark-eyed boy, with no special individuality, except an overweening sense of fun. "What's the odds, Mayne? and who is likely to be the winner?"

"Oh, Nan, of course," returned Dick, trying to recover himself. "I am the captive of her spear and of her bow: she is in possession of everything, myself included."

The rest laughed at Dick's jest, as they thought it; and Mr. Hamilton said, "Bravo, Miss Challoner! we will help to drag him at your chariot-wheels." But Nan changed color in the darkness.

They went in after this, and the young men took their leave in the porch. Dick's strong grip of the hand conveyed his meaning fully to Nan: "Remember, I meant it all," it seemed to say to her.

"What did it matter? I am quite sure of him. Dick is Dick," thought Nan, as she laid her head happily on the pillow.

As for Dick, he had a long ordeal before him ere he could make his escape to the smoking-room, where his friends awaited him. Mr. Mayne had a great deal to say to him about the day, and Dick had to listen and try to look interested.

"I am sure Dick behaved beautifully," observed Mrs. Mayne, when the son and heir had at last lounged off to his companions.

"Well, yes; he did very well on the whole," was the grudging response; "but I must say those Challoner girls made themselves far too conspicuous for my taste;" but to this his wife prudently made no reply.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. TRINDER'S VISIT.

The next few days passed far too quickly for Nan's pleasure, and Dick's last morning arrived. The very next day the Maynes were to start for Switzerland, and Longmead was to stand empty for the remainder of the summer. It was a dreary prospect for Nan, and in spite of her high

spirits her courage grew somewhat low. Six months! who could know what might happen before they met again? Nan was not the least bit superstitious, neither was it her wont to indulge in useless speculations or forebodings; but she could not shake off this morning a strange uncanny feeling that haunted her in spite of herself—a presentiment that things were not going to be just as she would have them,—that Dick and she would not meet again in exactly the same manner.

“How silly I am!” she thought, for the twentieth time, as she brushed out her glossy brown hair and arranged it in her usual simple fashion.

Nan and her sisters were a little behind the times in some ways; they had never thought fit to curl their hair *en garcon*, or to mount a pyramid of tangled curls in imitation of a poodle; no pruning scissors had touched the light-springing locks that grew so prettily about their temples; in this, as in much else, they were unlike other girls, for they dared to put individuality before fashion, and good taste and a sense of beauty against the specious arguments of the multitude.

“How silly I am!” again repeated Nan. “What can happen, what should happen, except that I shall have a dull summer, and shall be very glad when Christmas and Dick come together;” and then she shook her little basket of housekeeping keys until they jingled merrily, and ran downstairs with a countenance she meant to keep bright for the rest of the day.

They were to play tennis at the Paines’ that afternoon, and afterwards the three girls were to dine at Longmead. Mrs. Challoner had been invited also; but she had made some excuse, and pleaded for a quiet evening. She was never very ready to accept these invitations; there was nothing in common between her and Mrs. Mayne; and in her heart she agreed with Lady Fitzroy in thinking the master of Longmead odious.

It was Mr. Mayne who had tendered this parting hospitality to his neighbors, and he chose to be much offended at Mrs. Challoner’s refusal.

“I think it is very unfriendly of your mother, when we are such old neighbors, and on our last evening, too,” he said to Nan, as she entered the drawing-room that evening bringing her mother’s excuses wrapped up in the prettiest words she could find.

“Mother is not quite well; she does not feel up to the exertion of dining out to-night,” returned Nan, trying to put a good face on it, but feeling as though things were too much for her this evening. It was bad enough for Mr. Mayne to insist on them all coming up to a long formal dinner, and spoiling their chances of a twilight stroll; but it was still worse for her mother to abandon them after this fashion.

The new novel must have had something to do with this sudden indisposition; but when Mrs. Challoner had wrapped herself up in her white shawl, always a bad sign with her, and had declared herself unfit for any exertion, what could a dutiful daughter do but deliver her excuses as gracefully as she could? Nevertheless, Mr. Mayne frowned and expressed himself ill pleased.

“I should have thought an effort could have been made on such an occasion,” was his final thrust, as he gave his arm ungraciously to Nan, and conducted her with ominous solemnity to the table.

It was not a festive meal, in spite of all Mrs. Mayne’s efforts. Dick looked glum. He was separated from Nan by a vast silver epergne, that fully screened her from view. Another time she would have peeped merrily round at him and given him a sprightly nod or two; but how was she to do it when Mr. Mayne never relaxed his gloomy muscles, and when he insisted on keeping up a ceremonious flow of conversation with her on the subjects of the day?

When Dick tried to strike into their talk, he got so visibly snubbed that he was obliged to take refuge with Phillis.

“You young fellows never know what you are talking about,” observed Mr. Mayne, sharply, when Dick had hazarded a remark about the Premier’s policy; “you are a Radical one day, and a Conservative another. That comes of your debating societies. You take contrary sides, and mix up a balderdash of ideas, until you don’t know whether you are standing on your head or your heels;” and it was after this that Dick found his refuge with Phillis.

It was little better when they were all in the drawing-room together. If Mr. Mayne had invited them there for the purpose of keeping them all under his own eyes and making them uncomfortable, he could not have managed better. When Dick suggested a stroll in the garden, he said,—

“Pshaw! what nonsense proposing such a thing, when the dews are heavy and the girls will catch their deaths of cold!”

“We do it every evening of our life,” observed Nan, hardily; but even she dared not persevere in the face of this protest, though she exchanged a rebellious look with Dick that did him good and put him in a better humor.

They found their way into the conservatory after that, but were hunted out on pretence of having a little music; at least Nan would have it that it was pretence.

“Your father does not care much for music, I know,” she whispered, as she placed herself at the grand piano, while Dick leaned against it and watched her. It was naughty of Nan, but there was no denying that she found Mr. Mayne more aggravating than usual this evening.

“Come, come, Miss Nancy!” he called out,—he always called her that when he wished to annoy her, for Nan had a special dislike to her quaint, old-fashioned name; it had been her mother’s and grandmother’s name; in every generation there had been a Nancy Challoner,—“come,

come, Miss Nancy! we cannot have you playing at hide-and-seek in this fashion. We want some music. Give us something rousing, to keep us all awake." And Nan had reluctantly placed herself at the piano.

She did her little best according to orders, for she dared not offend Dick's father. None of the Challoners were accomplished girls. Dulce sang a little, and so did Nan, but Phillis could not play the simplest piece without bungling and her uncertain little warblings, which were sweet but hardly true, were reserved for church.

Dulce sang very prettily, but she could only manage her own accompaniments or a sprightly valse. Nan, who did most of the execution of the family, was a very fair performer from a young lady's point of view, and that is not saying much. She always had her piece ready if people wanted her to play. She sat down without nervousness and rose without haste. She had a choice little repertory of old songs and ballads, that she could produce without hesitation from memory,—"My mother bids me bind my hair," or "Bid your faithful Ariel fly," and such-like old songs, in which there is more melody than in a hundred new ones, and which she sang in a simple, artless fashion that pleased the elder people greatly. Dulce could do more than this, but her voice had never been properly tutored, and she sang her bird-music in bird-fashion, rather wildly and shrilly, with small respect to rule and art, nevertheless making a pleasing noise, a young foreigner once told her.

When Nan had exhausted her little stock, Mr. Mayne peremptorily invited them to a round game; and the rest of the evening was spent in trying to master the mysteries of a new game, over the involved rules of which Mr. Mayne as usual, wrangled fiercely with everybody, while Dick shrugged his shoulders and shuffled his cards with such evident ill-humor that Nan hurried her sisters away half an hour before the usual time, in terror of an outbreak.

It was an utterly disappointing evening; and, to make matters worse, Mr. Mayne actually lit his cigar and strolled down the garden-paths, keeping quite close to Nan, and showing such obvious intention of accompanying them to the very gate of the cottage that there could be no thought of any sweet lingering in the dusk.

"I will be even with him," growled Dick, who was in a state of suppressed irritation under this unexpected surveillance; and in the darkest part of the road he twitched Nan's sleeve to attract her attention, and whispered, in so low a voice that his father could not hear him, "This is not good-bye. I will be round at the cottage to-morrow morning;" and Nan nodded hurriedly, and then turned her head to answer Mr. Mayne's last question.

If Dick had put all his feelings in his hand-shake, it could not have spoken to Nan more eloquently of the young man's wrath and chagrin and concealed tenderness. Nan shot him one of her swift straightforward looks in answer.

"Nevermind," it seemed to say; "we shall have to-morrow;" and then she bade them cheerfully good-night.

Dorothy met her in the hall, and put down her chamber-candlestick.

"Has the mother gone to bed yet, Dorothy?" questioned the young mistress, speaking still with that enforced cheerfulness.

"No, Miss Nan; she is still in there," jerking her head in the direction of the drawing-room. "Mr. Trinder called, and was with her a long time. I thought she seemed a bit poorly when I took in the lamp."

"Mamsie is never fit for anything when that old ogre has been," broke in Dulce, impatiently. "He always comes and tells her some nightmare tale or other to prevent her sleeping. Now we shall not have the new gowns we set our hearts on, Nan."

"Oh, never mind the gowns," returned Nan, rather wearily.

What did it matter if they had to wear their old ones when Dick would not be there to see them? And Dorothy, who was contemplating her favorite nursling with the privileged tenderness of an old servant, chimed in with the utmost cheerfulness:

"It does not matter what she wears; does it, Miss Nan? She looks just as nice in an old gown as a new one; that is what I say of all my young ladies; dress does not matter a bit to them."

"How long are you all going to stand chattering with Dorothy?" interrupted Phillis, in her clear decided voice. "Mother will wonder what conspiracy we are hatching, and why we leave her so long alone." And then Dorothy took up her candlestick, grumbling a little, as she often did, over Miss Phillis's masterful ways, and the girls went laughingly into their mother's presence.

Though it was summer-time, Mrs. Challoner's easy-chair was drawn up in front of the rug, and she sat wrapped in her white shawl, with her eyes fixed on the pretty painted fire-screen that hid the blackness of the coals. She did not turn her head or move as her daughters entered; indeed, so motionless was her attitude that Dulce thought she was asleep, and went on tiptoe round her chair to steal a kiss. But Nan, who had caught sight of her mother's face, put her quickly aside.

"Don't, Dulce; mother is not well. What is the matter, mammie, darling?" kneeling down and bringing her bright face on a level with her mother's. She would have taken her into her vigorous young arms, but Mrs. Challoner almost pushed her away.

"Hush, children! Do be quiet, Nan; I cannot talk to you. I cannot answer questions to-night." And then she shivered, and drew her shawl closer round her, and put away Nan's caressing

hands, and looked at them all with a face that seemed to have grown pinched and old all at once, and eyes full of misery.

“Mammie, you must speak to us,” returned Nan, not a whit daunted by this rebuff, but horribly frightened all the time. “Of course, Dorothy told us that Mr. Trinder has been here, and of course we know that it is some trouble about money.” Then, at the mention of Mr. Trinder’s name, Mrs. Challoner shivered again.

Nan waited a moment for an answer: but, as none came, she went on in coaxing voice:

“Don’t be afraid to tell us, mother darling; we can all bear a little trouble, I hope. We have had such happy lives, and we cannot go on being happy always,” continued the girl, with the painful conviction coming suddenly into her mind that the brightness of these days was over. “Money is very nice, and one cannot do without it, I suppose; but as long as we are together and love each other––”

Then Mrs. Challoner fixed her heavy eyes on her daughter and took up the unfinished sentence:

“Ah, if we could only be together!—if I were not to be separated from my children! it is that—that is crushing me!” and then she pressed her dry lips together, and folded her hands with a gesture of despair; “but I know that it must be, for Mr. Trinder has told me everything. It is no use shutting our eyes and struggling on any longer; for we are ruined—ruined!” her voice sinking into indistinctness.

Nan grew a little pale. If they were ruined, how would it be with her and Dick! And then she thought of Mr. Mayne, and her heart felt faint within her. Nan, who had Dick added to her perplexities, was hardly equal to the emergency; but it was Phillis who took the domestic helm as it fell from her sister’s hand.

“If we be ruined, mother,” she said, briskly, “it is not half so bad as having you ill. Nan, why don’t you rub her hands! she is shivering with cold, or with the bad news, or something. I mean to set Dorothy at defiance, and to light a nice little fire, in spite of the clean muslin curtains. When one is ill or unhappy, there is nothing so soothing as a fire,” continued Phillis as she removed the screen and kindled the dry wood, not heeding Mrs. Challoner’s feeble remonstrances.

“Don’t, Phillis: we shall not be able to afford fires now;” and then she became a little hysterical. But Phillis persisted, and the red glow was soon coaxed into a cheerful blaze.

“That looks more comfortable. I feel chilly myself; these summer nights are sometimes deceptive. I wonder what Dorothy will say to us; I mean to ask her to make us all some tea. No, mamma, you are not to interfere; it will do you good, and we don’t mean to have you ill if we can help it.” And then she looked meaningly at Nan, and withdrew.

There was no boiling water, of course, and the kitchen fire was raked out; and Dorothy was sitting in solitary state, looking very grim.

“It is time for folks to be in their beds, Miss Phillis,” she said, very crossly. “I don’t hold with tea myself so late: it excites people, and keeps them awake.”

“Mother is not just the thing, and a cup of tea will do her good. Don’t let us keep you up, Dorothy,” replied Phillis, blandly. “I have lighted the drawing-room-fire, and I can boil the kettle in there. If mother has got a chill, I would not answer for the consequences.”

Dorothy grew huffy at the mention of the fire, and would not aid or abet her young lady’s “fad,” as she called it.

“If you don’t want me, I think I will go to bed, Miss Phillis. Susan went off a long time ago.” And, as Phillis cheerfully acquiesced in this arrangement, Dorothy decamped with a frown on her brow, and left Phillis mistress of the situation.

“There, now, I have got rid of the cross old thing,” she observed, in a tone of relief, as she filled the kettle and arranged the little tea-tray.

She carried them both into the room, poising the tray skilfully in her hand. Nan looked up in a relieved way as she entered. Mrs. Challoner was stretching out her chilled hands to the blaze. Her face had lost its pinched unnatural expression; it was as though the presence of her girls fenced her in securely, and her misfortune grew more shadowy and faded into the background. She drank the tea when it was given to her, and even begged Nan to follow her example. Nan took a little to please her, though she hardly believed its solace would be great; but Phillis and Dulce drank theirs in a business-like way, as though they needed support and were not ashamed to own it. It was Nan who put down her cup first, and leaned her cheek against her mother’s hand.

“Now, mother dear, we want to hear all about it. Does Mr. Trinder say we are really so dreadfully poor?”

“We have been getting poorer for along time,” returned her mother, mournfully; “but if we had only a little left us I would not complain. You see, your father would persist in these investments in spite of all Mr. Trinder could say, and now his words have come true.” But this vague statement did not satisfy Nan; and patiently, and with difficulty, she drew from her mother all that the lawyer had told her.

Mr. Challoner had been called to the bar early in life, but his career had hardly been a successful one. He had held few briefs, and, though he worked hard, and had good capabilities, he had never achieved fortune; and as he lived up to his income, and was rather fond of the

good things of this life, he got through most of his wife's money, and, contrary to the advice of older and wiser heads, invested the remainder in the business of a connection who only wanted capital to make his fortune and Mr. Challoner's too.

It was a grievous error; and yet, if Mr. Challoner had lived, those few thousands would hardly have been so sorely missed. He was young in his profession, and if he had been spared, success would have come to him as to other men; but he was cut off unexpectedly in the prime of life, and Mrs. Challoner gave up her large house at Kensington, and settled at Glen Cottage with her three daughters, understanding that life was changed for her, and that they should have to be content with small means and few wants.

Hitherto they had had sufficient; but of late there had been dark whispers concerning that invested money; things were not quite square and above-board; the integrity of the firm was doubted. Mr. Trinder, almost with tears in his eyes, begged Mrs. Challoner to be prudent and spend less. The crash which he had foreseen, and had vainly tried to avert, had come to-night. Gardiner & Fowler were bankrupt, and their greatest creditor, Mrs. Challoner, was ruined.

"We cannot get our money. Mr. Trinder says we never shall. They have been paying their dividends correctly, keeping it up as a sort of blind, he says: but all the capital is eaten away. George Gardiner, too, your father's cousin, the man he trusted above every one,—he to defraud the widow and the fatherless, to take our money—my children's only portion—and to leave us beggared." And Mrs. Challoner, made tragical by this great blow, clasped her hands and looked at her girls with two large tears rolling down her face.

"Mother, are you sure? is it quite as bad as that?" asked Nan; and then she kissed away the tears, and said something rather brokenly about having faith, and trying not to lose courage; then her voice failed her, and they all sat quiet together.

CHAPTER VII.

PHILLIS'S CATECHISM.

A veil of silence fell over the little party. After the first few moments of dismay, conjecture, and exclamation, there did not seem to be much that any one could say. Each girl was busy with her own thoughts and private interpretation of a most sorrowful enigma. What were they to do? How were they to live without separation, and without taking a solitary plunge into an unknown and most terrifying world?

Nan's frame of mind was slightly monotonous. What would Dick say, and how would this affect certain vague hopes she had lately cherished? Then she thought of Mr. Mayne, and shivered, and a sense of coldness and remote fear stole over her.

One could hardly blame her for this sweet dual selfishness, that was not selfishness. She was thinking less of herself than of a certain vigorous young life that was becoming strongly entwined with hers. It was all very well to say that Dick was Dick; but what could the most obstinate will of even that most obstinate young man avail against such a miserable combination of adverse influences,—"when the stars in their courses fought against Sisera"? And at this juncture of her thoughts she could feel Phillis's hand folding softly over hers with a most sisterly pressure of full understanding and sympathy. Phillis had no Dick to stand sentinel over her private thoughts; she was free to be alert and vigilant for others. Nevertheless, her forehead was puckered up with hard thinking, and her silence was so very expressive that Dulce sat and looked at her with grave unsmiling eyes, the innocent child-look in them growing very pathetic at the speechlessness that had overtaken them. As for Mrs. Challoner, she still moaned feebly from time to time, as she stretched her numb hands towards the comforting warmth. They were fine delicate hands, with the polished look of old ivory, and there were diamond rings on them that twinkled and shone as she moved them in her restlessness.

"They shall all go; I will keep nothing," she said, regarding them plaintively; for they were heirlooms, and highly valued as relics of a wealthy past. "It is not this sort of thing that I mind. I would live on a crust thankfully, if I could only keep my children with me." And she looked round at the blooming faces of her girls with eyes brimming over with maternal fondness.

Poor Dulce's lips quivered, and she made a horrified gesture.

"Oh, mamsie, don't talk so. I never could bear crusts, unless they were well buttered. I like everything to be nice, and to have plenty of it,—plenty of sunshine, and fun, and holiday-making, and friends; and—and now you are talking as though we must starve, and never have anything to wear, and go nowhere and be miserable forever?" And here Dulce broke into actual sobs; for was she not the petted darling? and had she not had a life so gilded by sunshine that she had never seen the dark edge of a single cloud? So that even Nan forgot Dick for a moment, and looked at her young sister pityingly; but Phillis interposed with bracing severity:

"Don't talk such nonsense, Dulce. Of course we must eat to live, and of course we must have

clothes to wear. Aren't Nan and I thinking ourselves into headaches by trying to contrive how even the crusts you so despise are to be bought?" which was hardly true as far as Nan was concerned, for she blushed guiltily over this telling point in Phillis's eloquence. "It only upsets mother to talk like this." And then she touched the coals skilfully, till they spluttered and blazed into fury. "There is the Friary, you know," she continued, looking calmly round on them, as though she felt herself full of resources. "If Dulce chooses to make herself miserable about the crusts, we have, at least, a roof to shelter us."

"I forgot the Friary," murmured Nan, looking at her sister with admiration; and, though Mrs. Challoner said nothing, she started a little as though she had forgotten it too. But Dulce was not to be comforted.

"That horrid, dismal, pokey old cottage!" she returned, with a shrill rendering of each adjective. "You would have us go and live in that damp, musty, fusty place?"

Phillis gave a succession of quick little nods.

"I don't think it particularly dismal, or Nan either," she returned, in her brisk way. Phillis always answered for Nan, and was never contradicted. "It is not dear Glen Cottage, of course, but we could not begin munching our crusts here," she continued, with a certain grim humor. Things were apparently at their worst; but at least she,—Phillis,—the clever one, as she had heard herself called, would do her best to keep the heads of the little family above water. "It is a nice little place enough if we were only humble enough to see it; and it is not damp, and it is our own," running up the advantages as well as she could.

"The Friary!" commented her mother, in some surprise: "to think of that queer old cottage coming into your head! And it so seldom lets. And people say it is dear at forty pounds a year; and it is so dull that they do not care to stay."

"Never mind all that, mammy," returned Phillis, with a grave business-like face. "A cottage, rent-free, that will hold us, is not to be despised; and Hadleigh is a nice place, and the sea always suits you. There is the house, and the furniture, that belongs to us; and we have plenty of clothes for the present. How much did Mr. Trinder think we should have in hand?"

Then her mother told her, but still mournfully, that they might possibly have about a hundred pounds. "But there are my rings and that piece of point-lace that Lady Fitzroy admired so––" but Phillis waved away that proposition with an impatient frown.

"There is plenty of time for that when we have got through all the money. Not that a hundred pounds would last long, with moving, and paying off the servants, and all that sort of thing."

Then Nan, who had worn all along an expression of admiring confidence in Phillis's resources, originated an idea of her own.

"The mother might write to Uncle Francis, perhaps;" but at this proposition Mrs. Challoner sat upright and looked almost offended.

"My dear Nan, what a preposterous idea! Your uncle Francis!"

"Well, mammy, he is our uncle; and I am sure he would be sorry if his only brother's children were to starve."

"You are too young to know any better," returned Mrs. Challoner, relapsing into alarmed feebleness; "you are not able to judge. But I never liked my brother-in-law,—never; he was not a good man. He was not a person whom one could trust," continued the poor lady, trying to soften down certain facts to her innocent young daughters.

Sir Francis Challoner had been a black sheep,—a very black sheep indeed: one who had dyed himself certainly to a most sable hue; and though, for such prodigals, there may be a late repentance and much killing of fatted calves, still Mrs. Challoner was right in refusing to intrust herself and her children to the uncertain mercies of such a sinner.

Now, Nan knew nothing about the sin; but she did think that an uncle who was a baronet threw a certain reflected glory or brightness over them. Sir Francis might be that very suspicious character, a black sheep; he might be landless, with the exception of that ruined tenement in the North; nevertheless, Nan loved to know that he was of their kith and kin. It seemed to settle their claims to respectability, and held Mr. Mayne in some degree of awe; and he knew that his own progenitors had not the faintest trace of blue blood, and numbered more aldermen than baronets.

It would have surprised and grieved Nan, especially just now, if she had known that no such glory remained to her,—that Sir Francis Challoner had long filled the cup of his iniquities, and lay in his wife's tomb in some distant cemetery, leaving a certain red-headed Sir Harry to reign in his stead.

"I don't think we had better talk anymore," observed Phillis, somewhat brusquely: and then she exchanged meaning looks with Nan. The two girls were somewhat dismayed at their mother's wan looks; her feebleness and uncertainty of speech, the very vagueness of her lamentations, filled them with sad forebodings for the future. How were they to leave her, when they commenced that little fight with the world? She had leaned on them so long that her helplessness had become a matter of habit.

Nan understood her sister's warning glance, and she made no further allusion to Sir Francis; she only rose with assumed briskness, and took her mother in charge.

"Now I am going to help you to bed, mammy darling," she said, cheerfully. "Phillis is quite right:

we will not talk any more to-night; we shall want all our strength for to-morrow. We will just say our prayers, and try and go to sleep, and hope that things may turn out better than we expect." And, as Mrs. Challoner was too utterly spent to resist this wise counsel, Nan achieved her pious mission with some success. She sat down by the bedside and leaned her head against her mother's pillow, and soon had the satisfaction of hearing the even breathing that proved that the sleeper had forgotten her troubles for a little while.

"Poor dear mother! how exhausted she must have been!" thought Nan, as she closed the door softly. She was far too anxious and wide awake herself to dream of retiring to rest. She was somewhat surprised to find her sisters' room dark and empty as she passed. They must be still downstairs, talking over things in the firelight: they were as little inclined for sleep as she was. Phillis's carefully decocted tea must have stimulated them to wakefulness.

The room was still bright with firelight. Dulce was curled up in her mother's chair, and had evidently been indulging in what she called "a good cry." Phillis, sombre and thoughtful, was pacing the room, with her hands clasped behind her head,—a favorite attitude of hers when she was in any perplexity. She stopped short as Nan regarded her with some astonishment from the threshold.

"Oh, come in, Nan: it will be such a relief to talk to a sensible person. Dulce is so silly, she does nothing but cry."

"I can't help it," returned Dulce, with another sob; "everything is so horrible, and Phillis will say such dreadful things."

"Poor little soul!" said Nan, in a sympathetic voice, sitting down on the arm of the chair and stroking Dulce's hair; "it is very hard for her and for us all," with a pent-up sigh.

"Of course it is hard," retorted Phillis, confronting them rather impatiently from the hearth-rug; "it is bitterly hard. But it is not worse for Dulce than for the rest of us. Crying will not mend matters, and it is a sheer waste of tears. As I tell her, what we have to do now is to make the best of things, and see what is to be done under the circumstances."

"Yes, indeed," repeated Nan, meekly; but she put her arm round Dulce, and drew her head against her shoulder. The action comforted Dulce, and her tears soon ceased to flow.

"I am thinking about mother," went on Phillis, pondering her words slowly as she spoke; "she does look so ill and weak. I do not see how we are to leave her."

Mrs. Challoner's moral helplessness and dread of responsibility were so sacred in her daughters' eyes that they rarely alluded to them except in this vague fashion. For years they had shielded and petted her, and given way to her little fads and fancies, until she had developed into a sort of gentle hypochondriac.

"Mother cannot bear this; we always keep these little worries from her," Nan had been accustomed to say; and the others had followed her example.

The unspoken thought lay heavy upon them now. How were they to prevent the rough winds of adversity from blowing too roughly upon their cherished charge? The roof, and perhaps the crust, might be theirs; but how were they to contrive that she should not miss her little comforts? They would gladly work; but how, and after what fashion?

Phillis was the first to plunge into the unwelcome topic, for Nan felt almost as helpless and bewildered as Dulce.

"We must go into the thing thoroughly," began Phillis, drawing a chair opposite to her sisters. She was very pale, but her eyes had a certain brightness of determination. She looked too young for that quiet care-worn look that had come so suddenly to her; but one felt she could be equal to any emergency. "We are down-hearted, of course; but we have plenty of time for all that sort of thing. The question is, how are we to live?"

"Just so," observed Nan, rather dubiously; and Dulce gave a little gasp.

"There is the Friary standing empty; and there is the furniture; and there will be about fifty pounds, perhaps less, when every thing is settled. And we have clothes enough to last some time, and––" here Dulce put her hands together pleadingly, but Phillis looked at her severely, and went on: "Forty or fifty pounds will soon be spent, and then we shall be absolutely penniless; we have no one to help us. Mother will not hear of writing to Uncle Francis; we must work ourselves or starve."

"Couldn't we let lodgings?" hazarded Dulce, with quavering voice; but Phillis smiled grimly.

"Let lodgings at the Friary! why, it is only big enough to hold us. We might get a larger house in Hadleigh; but no, it would be ruinous to fail, and perhaps we should not make it answer. I cannot fancy mother living in the basement story; she would make herself wretched over it. We are too young. I don't think that would answer, Nan: do you?"

Nan replied faintly that she did not think it would. The mere proposition took her breath away. What would Mr. Mayne say to that? Then she plucked up spirit and went into the question vigorously.

There were too many lodging-houses in Hadleigh now; it would be a hazardous speculation, and one likely to fail; they had not sufficient furniture for such a purpose, and they dare not use up their little capital too quickly. They were too young, too, to carry out such a thing, Nan did not add "and too pretty," though she colored and hesitated here. Their mother could not help them; she was not strong enough for housework or cooking. She thought that plan must be given up.

“We might be daily governesses, and live at home,” suggested Dulce, who found a sort of relief in throwing out feelers in every direction. Nan brightened up visibly at this, but Phillis’s moody brow did not relax for a moment.

“That would be nice,” acquiesced Nan, “and then mother would not find the day so long if we came home in the evening; she could busy herself about the house, and we could leave her little things to do, and she would not find the hours so heavy. I like that idea of yours, Dulce; and we are all so fond of children.”

“The idea is as nice as possible,” replied Phillis, with an ominous stress on the noun, “if we could only make it practicable.”

“Phil is going to find fault,” pouted Dulce, who knew every inflection of Phillis’s voice.

“Oh, dear, no, nothing of the kind!” she retorted, briskly. “Nan is quite right: we all dote on children. I should dearly like to be a governess myself; it would be more play than work; but I am only wondering who would engage us.”

“Who?—oh, anybody!” returned Nan, feeling puzzled by the smothered satire of Phillis’s speech. “Of course we are not certificated, and I for one could only teach young children; but––” here Phillis interrupted her:

“Don’t think me horrid if I ask you and Dulce some questions, but do—do answer me just as though I were going through the Catechism: we are only girls, but we must sift the whole thing thoroughly. Are we fit for governesses? what can you and I and Dulce teach?”

“Oh, anything!” returned Nan, still more vaguely.

“My dear Nanny, anything won’t do. Come, I am really in earnest; I mean to catechise you both thoroughly.”

“Very well,” returned Nan, in a resigned voice; but Dulce looked a little frightened. As for Phillis, she sat erect, with her finger pointed at them in a severely ominous fashion.

“How about history, Nan? I thought you could never remember dates; you used to jumble facts in the most marvellous manner. I remember your insisting that Anne of Cleves was Louis XII.’s second wife; and you shocked Miss Martin dreadfully by declaring that one of Marlborough’s victories was fought at Cressy.”

“I never could remember historical facts,” returned Nan, humbly. “Dulce always did better than I; and so did you, Phillis. When I teach the children I can have the book before me.” But Phillis only shook her head at this, and went on:

“Dulce was a shade better, but I don’t believe she could tell me the names of the English sovereigns in proper sequence;” but Dulce disdained to answer. “You were better at arithmetic, Nan. Dulce never got through her rule of three; but you were not very advanced even at that. You write a pretty hand, and you used to talk French very fluently.”

“Oh, I have forgotten my French!” exclaimed Nan, in a panic-stricken voice. “Dulce, don’t you remember me quite settled to talk in French over our work three times a week, and we have always forgotten it; and we were reading Madame de Sevigne’s ‘Letters’ together, and I found the book the other day quite covered with dust.”

“I hate French,” retuned Dulce, rebelliously. “I began German with Phillis, and like it much better.”

“True, but we are only beginners,” returned the remorseless Phillis: “it was very nice, of course, and the Taugenichts’ was delicious; but think how many words in every sentence you had to hunt out in the dictionary. I am glad you feel so competent, Dulce; but I could not teach German myself, or French either. I don’t remember enough of the grammar; and I do not believe Nan does either, though she used to chatter so to Miss Martin.”

“Did I not say she would pick our idea to pieces?” returned Dulce, with tears in her eyes.

“My dear little sister don’t look so dreadfully pathetic. I am quite as disheartened and disappointed as you are. Nan says she has forgotten her French, and she will have to teach history with an open book before her; we none of us draw—no, Dulce please let me finish our scanty stock of accomplishments. I only know my notes,—for no one cares to hear me lumber through my pieces,—and I sing at church. You have the sweetest voice Dulce, but it is not trained; and I cannot compliment you on your playing. Nan sings and plays very nicely, and it is a pleasure to listen to her; but I am afraid she knows little about the theory of music, harmony and thorough-bass: you never did anything in that way, did you, Nan?”

Nan shook her head sadly. She was too discomfited for speech. Phillis looked at them both thoughtfully; her trouble was very real, but she could not help a triumphant inflection in her voice.

“Dear Nan, please do not look so unhappy. Dulce, you shall not begin to cry again. Don’t you remember what mother was reading to us the other day, about the country being flooded with incompetent governesses,—half-educated girls turned loose on the world to earn their living? I can remember one sentence of that writer, word for word: ‘The standard of education is so high at the present day, and the number of certificated reliable teachers so much increased, that we can afford to discourage the crude efforts to teach, or un-teach, our children.’ And then he goes on to ask, ‘What has become of womanly conscientiousness, when such ignorance presses forward to assume such sacred responsibilities? Better the competent nurse than the incompetent governess.’ ‘Why do not these girls,’ he asks, ‘who, through their own fault or the

fault of circumstances, are not sufficiently advanced to educate others—why do they not rather discharge the exquisitely feminine duties of the nursery? What an advantage to parents to have their little ones brought into the earliest contact with refined speech and cultivated manners,—their infant ears not inoculated by barbarous English!'" but here Phillis was arrested in her torrent of reflected wisdom by an impatient exclamation from Dulce.

"Oh, Nan, do ask her to be quiet! She never stops when she once begins. How can we listen to such rubbish, when we are so wretched? You may talk for hours, Phil, but I never, never will be a nurse!" And Dulce hid her face on Nan's shoulder in such undisguised distress that her sisters had much ado to comfort her.

CHAPTER VIII.

"WE SHOULD HAVE TO CARRY PARCELS."

It was hard work to tranquillize Dulce.

"I never, never will be a nurse!" she sobbed out at intervals.

"You little goose, who ever thought of such a thing? Why will you misunderstand me so?" sighed Phillis, almost in despair at her sister's impracticability. "I am only trying to prove to you and Nan that we are not fit for governesses."

"No, indeed; I fear you are right there," replied poor Nan, who had never realized her deficiences before. They were all bright, taking girls, with plenty to say for themselves, lady-like, and well-bred. Who would have thought that, when weighed in the balance, they would have been found so wanting? "I always knew I was a very stupid person; but you are different,—you are so clever, Phil."

"Nonsense, Nanny! It is a sort of cleverness for which there is no market. I am fond of reading. I remember things, and do a great deal of thinking; but I am destitute of accomplishments: my knowledge of languages is purely superficial. We are equal to other girls,—just young ladies, and nothing more; but when it comes to earning our bread-and-butter––" Here Phillis paused, and threw out her hands with a little gesture of despair.

"But you work so beautifully; and so does Nan," interrupted Dulce, who was a little comforted, now she knew Phillis had no prospective nurse-maid theory in view. "I am good at it myself," she continued, modestly, feeling that, in this case, self-praise was allowable. "We might be companions,—some nice old lady who wants her caps made, and requires some one to read to her," faltered Dulce, with her child-like pleading look.

Nan gave her a little hug; but she left the answer to Phillis, who went at once into a brown study, and only woke up after a long interval.

"I am looking at it all round," she said, when Nan at last pressed for her opinion; "it is not a bad idea. I think it very possible that either you or I, Nan,—or both, perhaps,—might find something in that line to suit us. There are old ladies everywhere; and some of them are rich and lonely and want companions."

"You have forgotten me?" exclaimed Dulce, with natural jealousy, and a dislike to be overlooked, inherent in most young people. "And it is I who have always made mammy's caps and you know how Lady Fitzroy praised the last one."

"Yes, yes; we know all that," returned Phillis, impatiently. "You are as clever as possible with your fingers; but one of us must stop with mother, and you are the youngest, Dulce; that is what I meant by looking at it all round. If Nan and I were away, it would never do for you and mother to live at the Friary. We could not afford a servant, and we should want the forty pounds a year to pay for bare necessaries; for our salary would not be very great. You would have to live in lodgings,—two little rooms, that is all; and even then I am afraid you and mother would be dreadfully pinched, for we should have to dress ourselves properly in other people's houses."

"Oh, Phillis, that would not do at all!" exclaimed Nan, in a voice of despair. She was very pale by this time: full realization of all this trouble was coming to her, as it had come to Phillis. "What shall we do? Who will help us to any decision? How are you and I to go away and live luxuriously in other people's houses, and leave mother and Dulce pining in two shabby little rooms, with nothing to do, and perhaps not enough to eat, and mother fretting herself ill, and Dulce losing her bloom? I could not rest; I could not sleep for thinking of it. I would rather take in plain needlework, and live on dry bread if we could only be together, and help each other."

"So would I," returned Phillis, in an odd, muffled voice.

"And I too," rather hesitatingly from Dulce.

"If we could only live at the Friary, and have Dorothy to do all the rough work," sighed Nan, with a sudden yearning towards even that very shabby ark of refuge: "if we could only be together, and see each other every day, things would not be quite so dreadful."

“I am quite of your opinion,” was Phillis’s curt observation: but there was a sudden gleam in her eyes.

“I have heard of ladies working for fancy-shops; do you think we could do something of that kind?” asked Nan, anxiously. “Even mother could help us in that; and Dulce does work so beautifully. It is all very well to say we have no accomplishments,” went on Nan, with apathetic little laugh, “but you know that no other girls work as we do. We have always made our own dresses. And Lady Fitzroy asked me once who was our dressmaker, because she fitted us so exquisitely; and I was so proud of telling her that we always did our own, with Dorothy to help––”

“Nan,” interrupted Phillis, eagerly, and there was a great softness in her whole mien, and her eyes were glistening,—“dear Nan, do you love us all so that you could give up the whole world for our sakes,—for the sake of living together, I mean?”

Nan hesitated. Did the whole world involve Dick, and could even her love for her sisters induce her voluntarily to give him up? Phillis, who was quick-witted, read the doubt in a moment, and hastened to qualify her words:

“The outside world, I mean,—mere conventional acquaintances, not friends. Do you think you could bear to set society at defiance, to submit to be sent to Coventry for our sakes; to do without it, in fact to live in a little world of our own and make ourselves happy in it?”

“Ah, Phillis, you are so clever, and I don’t understand you,” faltered Nan. It was not Dick she was to give up; but what could Phillis mean? “We are all fond of society; we are like other girls, I suppose. But if we are to be poor and work for our living, I dare say people will give us up.”

“I am not meaning that,” returned her sister, earnestly; “it is something far harder, something far more difficult, something that will be a great sacrifice and cost us all tremendous efforts. But if we are to keep a roof over our heads, if we are to live together in anything like comfort, I don’t see what else we can do, unless we go out as companions and leave mother and Dulce in lodgings.”

“Oh, no, no; pray don’t leave us!” implored Dulce, feeling that all her strength and comfort lay near Nan.

“I will not leave you, dear, if I can possibly help it,” returned Nan, gently. “Tell us what you mean, Phillis, for I see you have some sort of plan in your head. There is nothing,—nothing,” she continued, more firmly, “that I would not do to make mother and Dulce happy. Speak out; you are half afraid that I shall prove a coward, but you shall see.”

“Dear Nan, no; you are as brave as possible. I am rather a coward myself. Yes; I have a plan; but you have yourself put it into my head by saying what you did about Lady Fitzroy.”

“About Lady Fitzroy?”

“Yes; your telling her about our making our own dresses. Nan, you are right: needlework is our forte; nothing is a trouble to us. Few girls have such clever fingers, I believe; and then you and Dulce have such taste. Mrs. Paine once told me that we were the best-dressed girls in the neighborhood, and she wished Carrie looked half as well. I am telling you this, not from vanity, but because I do believe we can turn our one talent to account. We should be miserable governesses; we do not want to separate and seek situations as lady helps or companions; we do not mean to fail in letting lodgings; but if we do not succeed as good dressmakers, never believe me again.”

“Dressmakers!” almost shrieked Dulce. But Nan, who had expressed herself willing to take in plain needlework, only looked at her sister with mute gravity; her little world was turned so completely upside down, everything was so unreal, that nothing at this moment could have surprised her.

“Dressmakers!” she repeated, vaguely.

“Yes, yes,” replied Phillis, still more eagerly. The inspiration had come to her in a moment, full-fledged and grown up, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter. Just from those chance words of Nan’s she had grasped the whole thing in a moment. Now, indeed she felt that she was clever; here at least was something striking and original; she took no notice of Dulce’s shocked exclamation; she fixed her eyes solemnly on Nan. “Yes, yes; what does it matter what the outside world says? We are not like other girls; we never were; people always said we were so original. Necessity strikes out strange paths some times. We could not do such a thing here; no, no, I never could submit to that myself,” as Nan involuntarily shuddered; “but at Hadleigh, where no one knows us, where we shall be among strangers. And then, you see, Miss Monks is dead.”

“Oh, dear! oh, dear! what does she mean?” cried Dulce, despairingly; “and what do we care about Miss Monks, if the creature be dead, or about Miss Anybody, if we have got to do such dreadful things?”

“My dear,” returned Phillis, with compassionate irony, “if we had to depend upon you for ideas––” and here she made an eloquent pause. “Our last tenant for the Friary was Miss Monks, and Miss Monks was a dressmaker; and, though perhaps I ought not to say it, it does seem a direct leading of Providence, putting such a thought into my head.”

“I am afraid Dulce and I are very slow and stupid,” returned Nan, putting her hair rather wearily from her face: her pretty color had quite faded during the last half-hour. “I think if you

would tell us plainly, exactly what you mean, Phillis, we should be able to understand everything better."

"My notion is this," began Phillis, slowly: "remember, I have not thought it quite out, but I will give you my ideas just as they occur to me. We will not say anything to mother just yet, until we have thoroughly digested our plan. You and I, Nan, will run down to the Friary, and reconnoitre the place, judge of its capabilities, and so forth; and when we come back we will hold a family council."

"That will be best," agreed Nan, who remembered, with sudden feelings of relief, that Dick and his belongings would be safe in the Engadine by that time. "But, Phillis, do you really and truly believe that we could carry out such a scheme?"

"Why not?" was the bold answer. "If we can work for ourselves, we can for other people. I have a presentiment that we shall achieve a striking success. We will make the old Friary as comfortable as possible," she continued, cheerfully. "The good folk of Hadleigh will be rather surprised when they see our pretty rooms. No horse-hair sofa; no crochet antimacassars or hideous wax flowers; none of the usual stock-in-trade. Dorothy will manage the house for us; and we will all sit and work together, and mother will help us, and read to us. Aren't you glad, Nan, that we all saved up for that splendid sewing-machine?"

"I do believe there is something, after all, in what you say," was Nan's response; but Dulce was not so easily won over.

"Do you mean to say that we shall put up a brass plate on the door, with 'Challoner, dressmaker,' on it?" she observed, indignantly. A red glow mounted to Nan's forehead; and even Phillis looked disconcerted.

"I never thought of that: well, perhaps not. We might advertise at the Library, or put cards in the shops. I do not think mother would ever cross the threshold if she saw a brass plate."

"No, no; I could not bear that," said Nan, faintly. A dim vision of Dick standing at the gate, ruefully contemplating their name—her name—in juxtaposition with "dressmaker," crossed her mind directly.

"But we should have to carry parcels, and stand in people's halls, and perhaps fit Mrs. Squails, the grocer's wife,—that fat old thing, you know. How would you like to make a dress for Mrs. Squails, Phil?" asked Dulce, with the malevolent desire of making Phillis as uncomfortable as possible; but Phillis, who had rallied from her momentary discomfiture, was not to be again worsted.

"Dulce, you talk like a child; you are really a very silly little thing. Do you think any work can degrade us or that we shall not be as much gentlewomen at Hadleigh as we are here?"

"But the parcels?" persisted Dulce.

"I do not intend to carry any," was the imperturbable reply, "Dorothy will do that; or we will hire a boy. As for waiting in halls, I don't think any one will ask me to do that, as I should desire to be shown into a room at once; and as for Mrs. Squails, if the poor old woman honors me with her custom, I will turn her out a gown that shall be the envy of Hadleigh."

Dulce did not answer this, but the droop of her lip was piteous; it melted Phillis at once.

"Oh, do cheer up, you silly girl!" she said, with a coaxing face. "What is the good of making ourselves more miserable than we need? If you prefer the two little rooms with mother, say so; and Nan and I will look out for old ladies at once."

"No! no! Oh, pray don't leave me!" still more piteously.

"Well, what will you have us do? we cannot starve; and we don't mean to beg. Pluck up a little spirit, Dulce; see how good Nan is! You have no idea how comfortable we should be!" she went on, with judicious word-painting. "We should all be together,—that is the great thing. Then we could talk over our work; and in the afternoon, when we felt dreary, mother could read some interesting novel to us,"—a tremulous sigh from Nan at this point.

What a contrast to the afternoons at Glen Cottage,—tennis, and five-o'clock tea, and the company of their young friends! Phillis understood the sigh, and hurried on.

"It will not be always work. We will have long country walks in the evening; and then, there will be the garden and the sea-shore. Of course we must have exercise and recreation, I am afraid we shall have to do without society, for no one will visit ladies under such circumstances; but I would rather do without people than without each other, and so would Nan."

"Yes, indeed!" broke in Nan; and now the tears were in her eyes.

Dulce grew suddenly ashamed of herself. She got up in a little flurry, and kissed them both.

"I was very naughty; but I did not mean to be unkind. I would rather carry parcels, and stand in halls,—yes, and even make gowns for Mrs. Squails,—than lose you both. I will be good. I will not worry you any more, Phil, with my nonsense; and I will work; you will see how I will work," finished Dulce, breathlessly.

"There's a darling!" said Nan; and then she added, in a tired voice, "But it is two o'clock; and Dick is coming this morning to say good-bye; and I want to ask you both particularly not to say a word to him about this. Let him go away and enjoy himself, and think we are going on as usual; it would spoil his holiday; and there is always time enough for bad news," went on Nan, with a little tremble of her lip.

“Dear Nan, we understand,” returned Phillis, gently; “and you are right, as you always are. And now to bed,—to bed,” she continued, in a voice of enforced cheerfulness; and then they all kissed each other very quietly and solemnly, and crept up as noiselessly as possible to their rooms.

Phillis and Dulce shared the same room; but Nan had a little chamber to herself very near her mother’s: a door connected the two rooms. Nan closed this carefully, when she had ascertained that Mrs. Challoner was still sleeping, and then sat down by the window, and looked out into the gray glimmering light that preceded the dawn.

Sleep; how could she sleep with all these thoughts surging through her mind, and knowing that in a few hours Dick would come and say good-bye? and here Nan broke down, and had such a fit of crying as she had not had since her father died,—nervous, uncontrollable tears, that it was useless to stem in her tired, overwrought state.

They exhausted her, and disposed her for sleep. She was so chilled and weary that she was glad to lie down in bed at last and close her eyes; and she had scarcely done so before drowsiness crept over her, and she knew no more until she found the sunshine flooding her little room, and Dorothy standing by her bed asking rather crossly why no one seemed disposed to wake this beautiful morning.

“Am I late? Oh, I hope I am not late!” exclaimed Nan, springing up in a moment. She dressed herself in quite a flurry, for fear she should keep any one waiting. It was only at the last moment she remembered the outburst of the previous night, and wondered with some dismay what Dick would think of her pale cheeks and the reddened lines round her eyes, and only hoped that he would not attribute them to his going away. Nan was only just in time, for as she entered the breakfast-room Dick came through the veranda and put in his head at the window.

“Not at breakfast yet? and where are the others?” he asked in some surprise, for the Challoners were early people, and very regular in their habits.

“We sat up rather late last night, talking,” returned Nan, giving him her hand without looking at him, and yet Dick showed to advantage this morning in his new tweed travelling suit.

“Well, I have only got ten minutes. I managed to give the pater the slip: he will be coming after me, I believe, if I stay longer. This is first-rate, having you all to myself this last morning. But what’s up, Nan? you don’t seem quite up to the mark. You are palish, you know, and––” here Dick paused in pained embarrassment. Were those traces of tears? had Nan really been crying? was she sorry about his going away? And now there was an odd lump in Dick’s throat.

Nan understood the pause and got frightened.

“It is nothing. I have a slight headache; there was a little domestic worry that wanted putting to right,” stammered Nan; “it worried me, for I am stupid at such things, you know.”

She was explaining herself somewhat lamely, and to no purpose, for Dick did not believe her in the least. “Domestic worry!” as though she cared for such rubbish as that; as though any amount could make her cry,—her, his bright, high spirited Nan! No; she had been fretting about their long separation, and his father’s unkindness, and the difficulties ahead of them.

“I want you to give me a rose,” he said, suddenly, *a propos* of nothing, as it seemed; but looking up, Nan caught a wistful gleam in his eyes, and hesitated. Was it not Dick who had told her that anecdote about the queen, or was it Lothair? and did not a certain meaning attach to this gift? Dick was forever picking roses for her; but he had never given her one, except with that meaning look on his face.

“You are hesitating,” he said, reproachfully; “and on my last morning, when we shall not see each other for months;” And Nan moved towards the veranda slowly, and gathered a crimson one without a word, and put it in his hand.

“Thank you,” he said, quite quietly; but he detained the hand as well as the rose for a moment. “One day I will show you this again, and tell you what it means if you do not know; and then we shall see, ah, Nan, my––” He paused as Phillis’s step entered the room, and said hurriedly, in a low voice, “Good-bye; I will not go in again. I don’t want to see any of them, only you,—only you. Good-bye: take care of yourself for my sake, Nan.” And Dick looked at her wistfully, and dropped her hand.

“Has he gone?” asked Phillis, looking up in surprise as her sister came through the open window; “has he gone without finding anything out?”

“Yes, he has gone, and he does not know anything,” replied Nan, in a subdued voice, as she seated herself behind the urn. It was over now, and she was ready for anything. “Take care of yourself for my sake, Nan!”—that was ringing in her ears; but she had not said a word in reply. Only the rose lay in his hand,—her parting gift, and perhaps her parting pledge.

CHAPTER IX.

A LONG DAY.

Nan never recalled the memory of that “long gray day,” as she inwardly termed it, without a shiver of discomfort.

Never but once in her bright young life had she known such a day, and that was when her dead father lay in the darkened house, and her widowed mother had crept weeping into her arms as to her only remaining refuge; but that stretched so far back into the past that it had grown into a vague remembrance.

It was not only that Dick was gone, though the pain of that separation was far greater than she would have believed possible, but a moral earthquake had shattered their little world, involving them in utter chaos.

It was only yesterday that she was singing ballads in the Longmead drawing-room,—only yesterday; but to-day everything was changed. The sun shone, the birds sang, every one ate and drank and moved about as usual. Nan talked and smiled, and no stranger would have guessed that much was amiss; nevertheless, a weight lay heavy on her spirits, and Nan knew in her secret heart that she could never be again the same light-hearted, easy-going creature that she was yesterday.

Later on, the sisters confessed to each other that the day had been perfectly interminable; the hours dragged on slowly; the sun seemed as though it never meant to set; and to add to their trouble, their mother looked so ill when she came downstairs, wrapped in her soft white shawl in spite of the heat, that Nan thought of sending for a doctor, and only refrained at the remembrance that they had no right to such luxuries now except in cases of necessity.

Then Dorothy was in one of her impracticable moods, throwing cold water on all her young mistress’s suggestions, and doing her best to disarrange the domestic machinery. Dorothy suspected a mystery somewhere; her young ladies had sat up half the night, and looked pale and owlish in the morning. If they chose to keep her in the dark and not take her into their confidence, it was their affair; but she meant to show them what she thought of their conduct. So she contradicted and snapped, until Nan told her wearily that she was a disagreeable old thing, and left her and Susan to do as they liked. She knew Mr. Trinder was waiting for her in the dining-room, and, as Mrs. Challoner was not well enough to see him, she and Phillis must entertain him.

He had slept at a friend’s house a few miles from Oldfield, and was to lunch at Glen Cottage and take the afternoon train to London.

He was not sorry when he heard that Mrs. Challoner was too indisposed to receive him. In spite of his polite expressions of regret, he had found the poor lady terribly trying on the previous evening. She was a bad manager, and had muddled her affairs, and she did not seem to understand half of what he told her; and her tears and lamentations when she had realized the truth had been too much for the soft hearted old bachelor, though people did call him a woman-hater.

“But I never could bear to see a woman cry; it is as bad as watching an animal in pain,” he half growled, as he drew out his red pocket-handkerchief and used it rather noisily.

It was easier work to explain everything to these two bright, sensible girls. Phillis listened and asked judicious questions; but Nan sat with downcast face, plaiting the table-cloth between her restless fingers, and thinking of Dick at odd intervals.

She took it all in, however, and roused up in earnest when Mr. Trinder had finished his explanations, and Phillis began to talk in her turn; she was actually taking the old lawyer into her confidence, and detailing their scheme in the most business-like way.

“The mother does not know yet,—this is all in confidence; but Nan and I have made up our minds to take this step,” finished the young philosopher, calmly.

“Bless my soul,” ejaculated Mr. Trinder,—he had given vent to this expression at various intervals, but had not further interrupted her. “Bless my soul! my dear young ladies, I think—but excuse me if I am too abrupt, but you must be dreaming.”

Phillis shook her head smilingly; and as Dorothy came into the room that moment to lay the luncheon, she proposed a turn in the garden, and fetched Mr. Trinder’s hat herself, and guided him to a side-walk, where they could not be seen from the drawing-room windows. Nan followed them, and tried to keep step with Mr. Trinder’s shambling footsteps, as he walked between the girls with a hot perplexed face, and still muttering to himself at intervals.

“It is all in confidence,” repeated Phillis, in the same calm voice.

“And you are actually serious? you are not joking?”

“Do your clients generally joke when they are ruined?” returned Phillis, with natural exasperation. “Do you think Nan and I are in such excellent spirits that we could originate such a piece of drollery? Excuse me, Mr. Trinder, but I must say I do not think your remark quite well timed.” And Phillis turned away with a little dignity.

“No, no! now you are put out, and no wonder!” returned Mr. Trinder, soothingly; and he stood quite still on the gravel path, and fixed his keen little eyes on the two young creatures before him,—Nan, with her pale cheeks and sad eyes, and Phillis, alert, irritated, full of repressed energy. “Dear, dear! what a pity!” groaned the old man; “two such bonnie lasses and to think a

little management and listening to my advice would have kept the house over your heads, if only your mother would have hearkened to me!”

“It is too late for all that now, Mr. Trinder,” replied Phillis, impatiently: “isn’t it waste of time crying over spilt milk when we must be taking our goods to market? We must make the best of our little commodities,” sighed the girl. “If we were only clever and accomplished, we might do better; but now––” and Phillis left her sentence unfinished, which was a way she had, and which people thought very telling.

“But, my dear young lady, with all your advantages, and––” Here Phillis interrupted him rather brusquely.

“What advantages? do you mean we had a governess? Well, we had three, one after the other; and they were none of them likely to turn out first-rate pupils. Oh, we are well enough, compared to other girls: if we had not to earn our own living, we should not be so much amiss. But, Nan, why don’t you speak? why do you leave me all the hard work? Did you not tell us last night that you were not fit for a governess?”

Nan felt rather ashamed of her silence after this. It was true that she was leaving all the onus of their plan on Phillis, and it was certainly time for her to come to her rescue. So she quietly but rather shyly endorsed her sister’s speech, and assured Mr. Trinder that they had carefully considered the matter from every point of view, and, though it was a very poor prospect and involved a great deal of work and self-sacrifice, she, Nan, thought that Phillis was right, and that it was the best—indeed the only—thing they could do under the circumstances.

“For myself, I prefer it infinitely to letting lodgings,” finished Nan: and Phillis looked at her gratefully.

But Mr. Trinder was obstinate and had old-fashioned views, and argued the whole thing in his dictatorial masculine way. They sat down to luncheon, and presently sent Dorothy away,—a piece of independence that bitterly offended that crabbed but faithful individual,—and wrangled busily through the whole of the meal.

Mr. Trinder never could remember afterwards whether it was lamb or mutton he had eaten; he had a vague idea that Dulce had handed him the mint-sauce, and that he had declined it and helped himself to salad. The doubt disturbed him for the first twenty miles of his homeward journey. “Good gracious! for a man not to know whether he is eating lamb or mutton!” he soliloquized, as he vainly tried to enjoy his usual nap; “but then I never was so upset in my life. Those pretty creatures, and Challoners too,—bless my soul!” And here the lawyer’s cogitations became confused and misty.

Nan, who had more than once seen tears in the lawyer’s shrewd little gray eyes, had been very gentle and tolerant over the old man’s irritability; but Phillis had resented his caustic speeches somewhat hotly. Dulce, who was on her best behavior, was determined not to interfere or say a word to thwart her sisters: she even went so far as to explain to Mr. Trinder that they would not have to carry parcels, as Phillis meant to hire a boy. She had no idea that this magnanimous speech was in a figurative manner the last straw that broke the camel’s back. Mr. Trinder pushed back his chair hastily, made some excuse that his train must be due, and beat a retreat an hour before the time, unable to pursue such a painful subject any longer.

Nan rose, with a sigh of relief, as soon as the door closed upon their visitors, and took refuge in the shady drawing-room with her mother, whom she found in a very tearful, querulous state, requiring a great deal of soothing. They had decided that no visitors were to be admitted that afternoon.

“You may say your mistress is indisposed with a bad headache, Dorothy, and that we are keeping the house quiet,” Nan remarked, with a little dignity, with the remembrance of that late passage of arms.

“Very well, Miss Nan,” returned the old servant. However, she was a little cowed by Nan’s manner: such an order had never before been given in the cottage. Mrs. Challoner’s headaches were common events in every-day life, and had never been known before to interfere with their afternoon receptions. A little eau de Cologne and extra petting, a stronger cup of tea served up to her in her bedroom, had been the only remedies; the girls had always had their tennis as usual, and the sound of their voices and laughter had been as music in their mother’s ears.

“Very well, Miss Nan,” was all Dorothy ventured to answer; but she withdrew with a face puckered up with anxiety. She took in the tea-tray unbidden at an earlier hour than usual; there were Dulce’s favorite hot cakes, and some rounds of delicately-buttered toast, “for the young ladies have not eaten above a morsel at luncheon,” said Dorothy in explanation to her mistress.

“Never mind us,” returned Nan, with a friendly nod at the old woman: “it has been so hot to-day,” And then she coaxed her mother to eat, and made believe herself to enjoy the repast while she wondered how many more evenings they would spend in the pretty drawing-room on which they had expended so much labor.

Nan had countermanded the late dinner, which they all felt would be a pretence and mockery; and as Mrs. Challoner’s headache refused to yield to the usual remedies, she was obliged to retire to bed as soon as the sun set, and the three girls went out in the garden, and walked up and down the lawn with their arms interlaced, while Dorothy watched them from the pantry window, and wiped away a tear or two, as she washed up the tea-things.

“How I should like a long walk?” exclaimed Dulce, impatiently. “It is so narrow and confined

here; but it would never do: we should meet people."

"No, it would never do," agreed her sisters, feeling a fresh pang that such avoidance was necessary. They had never hidden anything before, and the thought that this mystery lay between them and their friends was exquisitely painful.

"I feel as though I never cared to see one of them again!" sighed poor Nan, for which speech she was rather sharply rebuked by Phillis.

They settled a fair amount of business before they went to bed that night; and when Dorothy brought in the supper-tray, bearing a little covered dish in triumph, which she set down before Nan, Nan looked at her with grave, reproachful eyes, in there was a great deal of kindness.

"You should not do this, Dorothy," she said, very gently: "we cannot afford such delicacies now."

"It is your favorite dish, Miss Nan," returned Dorothy, quite ignoring this remark. "Susan has cooked it to a nicety; but it will be spoiled if it is not eaten hot." And she stood over them, while Nan dispensed the dainty. "You must eat it while it is hot," she kept saying, as she fidgeted about the room, taking up things and putting them down again. Phillis looked at Nan with a comical expression of dismay.

"Dorothy, come here," she exclaimed, at last, pushing away her plate. "Don't you see that Susan is wasting all her talents on us, and that we can't eat to-day?"

"Every one can eat if they try, Miss Phillis," replied Dorothy, oracularly. "But a thing like that must be hot, or it is spoiled."

"Oh, never mind about it being hot," returned Phillis, beginning to laugh. She was so tired, and Dorothy was such a droll old thing; and how were even stewed pigeons to be appetizing under the circumstances?

"Oh, you may laugh," began Dorothy, in an offended tone; but Phillis took hold of her and nearly shook her.

"Oh, what a stupid old thing you are! Don't you know what a silly, aggravating old creature you can be when you like? If I laugh, it is because everything is so ludicrous and wretched. Nan and Dulce are not laughing."

"No, indeed," put in Dulce; "we are far, far too unhappy!"

"What is it, Miss Nan?" asked Dorothy, sidling up to her in a coaxing manner. "I am only an old servant, but it was me that put Miss Dulce in her father's arms,—'the pretty lamb,' as he called her, and she with a skin like a lily. If there is trouble, you would not keep it from her old nurse, surely?"

"No, indeed, Dorothy: we want to tell you," returned Nan touched by this appeal; and then she quietly recapitulated the main points that concerned their difficulties,—their mother's loss, their future poverty, the necessity for leaving Glen Cottage and settling down at the Friary.

"We shall all have to work," finished Nan, with prudent vagueness, not daring to intrust their plan to Dorothy: "the cottage is small, and, of course, we can only keep one servant."

"I dare say I shall be able to manage if you will help me a little," returned Dorothy, drying her old eyes with the corner of her apron. "Dear, dear! to think of such an affliction coming upon my mistress and the dear young ladies! It is like an earthquake or a flood, or something sudden and unexpected,—Lord deliver us! And to think of my speaking crossly to you Miss Nan, and you with all this worry on your mind!"

"We will not think of that," returned Nan, soothingly. "Susan's quarter will be up shortly, and we must get her away as soon as possible. My great fear is that the work may be too much for you, poor Dorothy; and that—that—we may have to keep you waiting sometimes for your wages," she added, rather hesitatingly fearing to offend Dorothy's touchy temper, and yet determined to put the whole matter clearly before her.

"I don't think we need talk about that," returned Dorothy, with dignity. "I have not saved up my wages for nineteen years without having a nest-egg laid up for rainy days. Wages,—when I mention the word, Miss Nan," went on Dorothy, waxing somewhat irate, "it will be time enough to enter upon that subject. I haven't deserved such a speech; no, that I haven't," went on Dorothy, with a sob. "Wages, indeed!"

"Now, nursey, you shan't be cross with Nan," cried Dulce, throwing her arms round the old woman; for, in spite of her eighteen years, she was still Dorothy's special charge. "She's quite right; it may be an unpleasant subject, but we will not have you working for us for nothing."

"Very well, Miss Dulce," returned Dorothy, in a choked voice preparing to withdraw; but Nan caught hold of the hard work-worn hand, and held her fast.

"Oh, Dorothy, you would not add to our trouble now, when we are so terribly unhappy! I never meant to hurt your feelings by what I said. If you will only go to the Friary and help us to make the dear mother comfortable, I, for one, will be deeply grateful."

"And you will not talk of wages?" asked Dorothy, mollified by Nan's sweet, pleading tones.

"Not until we can afford to do so," returned Nan, hastily, feeling that this was a safe compromise, and that they should be eked out somehow. And then, the stewed pigeons being regarded as a failure, Dorothy consented to remove the supper tray, and the long day was declared at an end.

CHAPTER X.

THE FRIARY.

Oldfield was rather mystified by the Challoners' movements. There were absolutely three afternoons during which Nan and her sisters were invisible. There was a tennis-party at the Paines' on one of these days, but at the last minute they had excused themselves. Nan's prettily-worded note was declared very vague and unsatisfactory, and on the following afternoon there was a regular invasion of the cottage,—Carrie Paine, and two of the Twentyman girls, and Adelaide Sartoris and her young brother Albert.

They found Dulce alone, looking very sad and forlorn.

Nan and Phillis had gone down to Hadleigh that morning, she explained in rather a confused way: they were not expected back until the following evening.

On being pressed by Miss Sartoris as to the reason of this sudden trip, she added, rather awkwardly, that it was on business; her mother was not well,—oh, very far from well; and they had to look at a house that belonged to them, as the tenant had lately died.

This was all very plausible; but Dulce's manner was so constrained, and she spoke with such hesitation, that Miss Sartoris was convinced that something lay behind. They went out in the garden, however, and chose sides for their game of tennis; and, though Dulce had never played so badly in her life, the fresh air and exercise did her good, and at the end of the afternoon she looked a little less drooping.

It was felt to be a failure, however, by the whole party; and when tea was over, there was no mention of a second game. "No, we will not stay any longer," observed Isabella Twentyman, kissing the girl with much affection. "Of course we understand that you will be wanting to sit with your mother."

"Yes, and if you do not come in to-morrow we shall quite know how it is," added Miss Sartoris, good-naturedly, for which Dulce thanked her and looked relieved.

She stood at the hall door watching them as they walked down the village street, swinging their racquets and talking merrily.

"What happy girls!" she thought, with a sigh. Miss Sartoris was an heiress, and the Twentymans were rich, and every one knew that Carrie and Sophy Paine would have money. "None of them will have to work," said poor Dulce sorrowfully to herself: "they can go on playing tennis and driving and riding and dancing as long as they like." And then she went up to her mother's room with lagging footsteps and a cloudy brow.

"You may depend upon it there is something amiss with those Challoners," said Miss Sartoris, as soon as they were out of sight of the cottage; "no one has seen anything of them for the last three or four days, and I never saw Dulce so unlike herself."

"Oh, I hope not," returned Carrie, gravely, who had heard enough from her father to guess that there was pecuniary embarrassment at the bottom. "Poor little thing, she did seem rather subdued. How many people do you expect to muster to-morrow, Adelaide?" and then Miss Sartoris understood that the subject was to be changed.

While Dulce was trying to entertain her friends, Nan and Phillis were reconnoitring the Friary.

They had taken an early train to London, and had contrived to reach Hadleigh a little before three. They went first to Beach House,—a small unpretending house on the Parade, kept by a certain Mrs. Mozley, with whom they had once lodged after Dulce had the measles.

The good woman received them with the utmost cordiality. Her place was pretty nearly filled, she told them proudly; the drawing-room had been taken for three months, and an elderly couple were in the dining-room.

"But there is a bedroom I could let you have for one night," finished Mrs. Mozley, "and there is the little side parlor where you could have your tea and breakfast." And when Nan had thanked her, and suggested the addition of chops to their evening meal, they left their modest luggage and set out for the Friary.

Phillis would have gone direct to their destination, but Nan pleaded for one turn on the Parade. She wanted a glimpse of the sea, and it was such a beautiful afternoon.

The tide was out, and the long black breakwaters were uncovered; the sun was shining on the wet shingles and narrow strip of yellow sand. The sea looked blue and unruffled, with little sparkles and gleams of light, and white sails glimmered on the horizon. Some boatmen were dragging a boat down the beach; it grated noisily over the pebbles. A merry party were about to embark,—a tall man in a straw hat, and two boys in knickerbockers. Their sisters were watching them. "Oh, Reggie, do be careful!" Nan heard one of the girls say, as he waded knee-deep into the water.

“Come, Nan, we ought not to dawdle like this!” exclaimed Phillis, impatiently; and they went on quickly, past the long row of old-fashioned white houses with the green before them and that sweet Sussex border of soft feathery tamarisk, and then past the cricket-field, and down to the whitewashed cottage of the Preventive Station; and then they turned back and walked towards the Steyne, and after that Nan declared herself satisfied.

There were plenty of people on the Parade, and most of them looked after the two girls as they passed. Nan’s sweet bloom and graceful carriage always attracted notice; and Phillis, although she generally suffered from comparison with her sister, was still very uncommon-looking.

“I should like to know who those young ladies are,” observed a military-looking man with a white moustache, who was standing at the Library door waiting for his daughter to make some purchases. “Look at them, Elizabeth: one of them is such a pretty girl, and they walk so well.”

“Dear father, I suppose they are only some new-comers: we shall see their names down in the visitors’ list by and by;” and Miss Middleton smiled as she took her father’s arm, for she was slightly lame. She knew strangers always interested him, and that he would make it his business for the next few days to find out everything about them.

“Did you see that nice-looking woman?” asked Phillis, when they had passed. “She was quite young, only her hair was gray: fancy, a gray-haired girl!”

“Oh, she must be older than she looks,” returned Nan, indifferently.

She was not looking at people: she was far too busily engaged identifying each well-remembered spot.

There was the shabby little cottage, where she and her mother had once stayed after an illness of Mrs. Challoner’s. What odd little rooms they had occupied, looking over a strip of garden-ground full of marigolds! “Marigolds-all-in-a-row Cottage,” she had named it in her home letters. It was nearly opposite the White House where Mrs. Cheyne lived. Nan remembered her, —a handsome, sad-looking woman, who always wore black, and drove out in such handsome carriages.

“Always alone; how sad!” Nan thought; and she wondered, as they walked past the low stone walls with grassy mounds slopping from them, and a belt of shrubbery shutting out views of the house, whether Mrs. Cheyne lived there still.

They had reached a quiet country corner now; there was a clump of trees, guarded by posts and chains; a white house stood far back. There were two or three other houses, and a cottage dotted down here and there. The road looked shady and inviting. Nan began to look about her more cheerfully.

“I am glad it is so quiet, and so far away from the town, and that our neighbors will not be able to overlook us.”

“I was just thinking of that as a disadvantage,” returned Phillis, with placid opposition. “It is a pity, under the circumstances, that we are not nearer the town.” And after that Nan held her peace.

They were passing an old-fashioned house with a green door in the wall, when it suddenly opened, and a tall, grave looking young man, in clerical attire, came out quickly upon them, and then drew back to let them pass.

“I suppose that is the new vicar?” whispered Phillis, when they had gone a few steps. “You know poor old Dr. Musgrave is dead, and most likely that is his successor.”

“I forgot that was the vicarage,” returned Nan. But happily she did not turn round to look at it again; if she had done so, she would have seen the young clergyman still standing by the green door watching them. “It is a shabby, dull old house in front; but I remember that when mother and I returned Mrs. Musgrave’s call we were shown into such a dear old-fashioned drawing-room, with windows looking out on such a pleasant garden. I quite fell in love with it.”

“Well, we shall be near neighbors,” observed Phillis, somewhat shortly, as she paused before another green door, set in a long blank wall; “for here we are at the Friary, and I had better just run over the way and get the key from Mrs. Crump.”

Nan nodded, and then stood like an image of patience before the shabby green door. Would it open and let them into a new untried life? What sort of fading hopes, of dim regrets, would be left outside when they crossed the threshold? The thought of the empty rooms, not yet swept and garnished, made her shiver: the upper windows looked blankly at her, like blind, unrecognizing eyes. She was quite glad when Phillis joined her again, swinging the key on her little finger, and humming a tune in forced cheerfulness.

“What a dull, shut-in place! I think the name of Friary suits it exactly,” observed Nan, disconsolately, as they went up the little flagged path, bordered with lilac-bushes. “It feels like a miniature convent or prison: we might have a grating in the door, and answer all outsiders through it.”

“Nonsense!” returned Phillis, who was determined to take a bright view of things. “Don’t go into the house just yet, I want to see the garden.” And she led the way down a gloomy side-path, with unclipped box and yews, that made it dark and decidedly damp. This brought them to a little lawn, with tall, rank grass that might have been mown for hay, and some side-beds full of old fashioned flowers, such as lupins and monkshood, pinks and small pansies; a dreary little greenhouse, with a few empty flower-pots and a turned-up box was in one corner, and an

attempt at a rockery, with a periwinkle climbing over it, and an undesirable number of oyster-shells.

An old medlar tree, very warped and gnarled, was at the bottom of the lawn, and beyond this a small kitchen-garden, with abundance of gooseberry and currant-bushes, and vast resources in the shape of mint, marjoram, and lavender.

“Oh, dear! oh, dear! what a wretched little place after our dear old Glen Cottage garden!” And in spite of her good resolutions, Nan’s eyes grew misty.

“Comparisons are odious,” retorted Phillis, briskly. “We have just to make the best of things,—and I don’t deny they are horrid,—and put all the rest away, between lavender, on the shelves of our memory.” And she smiled grimly as she picked one of the gray spiky flowers.

And then, as they walked round the weedy paths, she pointed out how different it would look when the lawn was mown, and all the weeds and oyster-shells removed, and the box and yews clipped, and a little paint put on the greenhouse.

“And look at that splendid passion-flower, growing like a weed over the back of the cottage,” she remarked, with a wave of her hand: “it only wants training and nailing up. Poor Miss Monks has neglected the garden shamefully; but then she was always ailing.”

They went into the cottage after this. The entry was rather small and dark. The kitchen came first: it was a tolerable-sized apartment, with two windows looking out on the lilacs and the green door and the blank wall.

“I am afraid Dorothy will find it a little dull,” Nan observed, rather ruefully. And again she thought the name of Friary was well given to this gruesome cottage; but she cheered up when Phillis opened cupboards and showed her a light little scullery, and thought that perhaps they could make it comfortable for Dorothy.

The other two rooms looked upon the garden: one had three windows, and was really a very pleasant parlor.

“This must be our work-room,” began Phillis, solemnly, as she stood in the centre of the empty room, looking round her with bright knowing glances. “Oh, what an ugly paper, Nan! but we can easily put up a prettier one. The smaller room must be where we live and take our meals: it is not quite so cheerful as this. It is so nice having this side-window; it will give us more light, and we shall be able to see who comes in at the door.”

“Yes, that is an advantage,” assented Nan. She was agreeably surprised to find such a good-sized room in the cottage; it was decidedly low, and the windows were not plate-glass, but she thought that on summer mornings they might sit there very comfortably looking out at the lawn and the medlar-tree.

“We shall be glad of these cupboards,” she suggested, after a pause, while Phillis, took out sundry pieces of tape from her pocket and commenced making measurements in a business-like manner. “Our work will make such a litter, and I should like things to be as tidy as possible. I am thinking,” she continued, “we might have mother’s great carved wardrobe in the recess behind the door. It is really a magnificent piece of furniture, and in a work-room it would not be so out of place; we could hang up the finished and unfinished dresses in it out of the dust. And we could have the little drawing-room chiffonnier between the windows for our pieces, and odds and ends in the cupboards. It is a pity our table is round; but perhaps it will look all the more comfortable. The sewing-machine must be in the side-window,” added Nan, who was quite in her element now, for she loved all housewifely arrangements; “and mother’s easy-chair and little table must stand by the fireplace. My davenport will be useful for papers and accounts.”

“It is really a very convenient room,” returned Phillis, in a satisfied voice, when they had exhausted its capabilities; and, though the second parlor was small and dull in comparison, even Nan dropped no disparaging word.

Both of them agreed it would do very well. There was a place for the large roomy couch that their mother so much affected, and their favorite chairs and knick-knacks would soon make it look cosey: and after this they went upstairs hand in hand.

There were only four bedrooms, and two of these were not large; the most cheerful one was, of course, allotted to their mother, and the next in size must be for Phillis and Dulce. Nan was to have a small one next to her mother.

The evening was drawing on by the time they had finished their measurements and left the cottage. Nan, who was tired and wanted her tea, was for hurrying on to Beach House; but Phillis insisted on calling at the Library. She wanted to put some questions to Miss Milner. To-morrow they would have the paper-hanger, and look out for a gardener, and there was Mrs. Crump to interview about cleaning down the cottage.

“Oh, very well,” returned Nan, wearily, and she followed Phillis into the shop, where good-natured bustling Miss Milner came to them at once.

Phillis put the question to her in a low voice, for there were other customers exchanging books over the counter. The same young clergyman they had before noticed had just bought a local paper, and was waiting evidently for a young lady who was turning over some magazines quite close to them.

“Do we know of a good dressmaker in the place?” repeated Miss Milner, in her loud cheerful voice, very much to Nan’s discomfort, for the clergyman looked up from his paper at once. “Miss

Monks was a tolerable fit, but, poor thing! she died a few weeks ago; and Mrs. Slasher, who lives over Viner's the haberdasher's, cannot hold a candle to her. Miss Masham there,"—pointing to a smart ringleted young person, evidently her assistant,—"had her gown ruined by her: hadn't you, Miss Masham?"

Miss Masham simpered, but her reply was inaudible; but the young lady who was standing near them suddenly turned round:

"There is Mrs. Langley, who lives just by. I shall be very happy to give these ladies her address, for she is a widow with little children, and I am anxious to procure her work—" and then she looked at Nan, and hesitated; "that is, if you are not very particular," she added, with sudden embarrassment, for even in her morning dress there was a certain style about Nan that distinguished her from other people.

"Thank you, Miss Drummond," returned Miss Milner, gratefully. "Shall I write down the address for you, ma'am?"

"Yes,—no,—thank you very much, but perhaps it does not matter," returned Nan, hurriedly, feeling awkward for the first time in her life. But Phillis, who realized all the humor of the situation, interposed:

"The address will do us no harm, and we may as well have it, although we should not trouble Mrs. Langley. I will call in again, Miss Milner, to-morrow morning, and then I will explain what it is we really want. We are in a hurry now," continued Phillis, loftily, turning away with a dignified inclination of her head toward the officious stranger.

Phillis was not prepossessed in her favor. She was a dark, wiry little person, not exactly plain, but with an odd, comical face; and she was dressed so dowdily and with such utter disregard of taste that Phillis instinctively felt Mrs. Langley was not to be dreaded.

"What a queer little body! Do you think she belongs to him?" she asked Nan, as they walked rapidly toward Beach House.

"What in the world made you strike in after that fashion?" demanded the young man, as he and his companion followed more slowly in the strangers' footsteps. "That is just your way, Mattie, interfering and meddling in other folks' affairs. Why cannot you mind your own business sometimes," he continued, irritably, "instead of putting your foot into other people's?"

"You are as cross as two sticks this afternoon, Archie," returned his sister, composedly. She had a sharp little pecking voice that seemed to match her, somehow; for she was not unlike a bright-eyed bird, and had quick pouncing movements. "Wait a moment: my braid has got torn, and is dragging."

"I wish you would think a little more of my position, and take greater pains with your appearance," returned her brother, in an annoyed voice. "What would Grace say to see what a fright you make of yourself? It is a sin and a shame for a woman to be untidy or careless in her dress; it is unfeminine! it is unlady-like!" hurling each separate epithet at her.

Perhaps Miss Drummond was used to these compliments, for she merely pinned her braid without seeming the least put out.

"I think I am a little shabby," she remarked, tranquilly, as they at last walked on. "Perhaps Mrs. Langley had better make me a dress too," with a laugh, for, in spite of her sharp voice, she was an even-tempered little body; but this last remark only added fuel to his wrath.

"You really have less sense than a child. The idea of recommending a person like Mrs. Langley to those young ladies,—a woman who works for Miss Masham!"

"They were very plainly dressed, Archie," returned poor Mattie, who felt this last snub acutely; for, if there was one thing upon which she prided herself, it was her good sense. "They had dark print dresses,—not as good as the one I have on,—and nothing could be quieter."

"Oh, you absurd little goose!" exclaimed her brother, and he burst into a laugh, for the drollery of the comparison restored him to instant good humor. "If you cannot see the difference between that frumpish gown of yours, with its little bobtails and fringes, and those pretty dresses before us, I must say you are as blind as a bat, Mattie."

"Oh, never mind my gown," returned Mattie, with a sigh.

She had had these home-thrusts to meet and parry nearly every day, ever since she had come to keep house for this fastidious brother. She was a very active, bustling little person, who had done a great deal of tough work in her day, but she never could be made to see that unless a woman add the graces of life to the cardinal virtues she is, comparatively speaking, a failure in the eyes of the other sex.

So, though Mattie was a frugal housekeeper, and worked from morning to night in his service,—the veriest little drudge that was ever seen,—she was a perpetual eyesore to her brother, who loved feminine grace and repose,—whose tastes were fastidious and somewhat arbitrary. And so it was poor Mattie had more censure than praise, and wrote home piteous letters complaining that nothing she did seemed to satisfy Archie, and that her mother had made a great mistake in sending her, and not Grace, to preside over his bachelor establishment.

"Oh, Phillis, how shall we have courage to publish our plan?" exclaimed Nan, when they were at last discussing the much-needed tea and chops in the little parlor at Beach House.

The window was wide open. The returning tide was coming in with a pleasant ripple and wash

over the shingle. The Parade was nearly empty; but some children's voices sounded from the green space before the houses. The brown sail of a fishing craft dipped into the horizon. It was so cool, so quiet, so restful; but Nan's eyes were weary, and she put the question wistfully.

Phillis looked into the teapot to gain a moment's reprieve; the corners of her mouth had an odd pucker in them.

"I never said it was not hard," she burst out at last. "I felt like a fool myself while I was speaking to Miss Milner; but then that clergyman was peeping at us between the folds of his paper. He seemed a nice-looking, gentlemanly sort of man. Do you think that queer little lady in the plaid dress could be his wife? Oh, no; I remember Miss Milner addressed her as Miss Drummond. Then she must be his sister: how odd!"

"Why should it be odd?" remarked Nan, absently, who had not particularly noticed them.

"Oh, she was such a dowdy little thing, not a bit nice-looking, and he was quite handsome, and looked rather distinguished. You know I always take stock of people, and make up my mind about them at once. And then we are to be such close neighbors."

"I don't suppose we shall see much of them," was Nan's somewhat depressed reply; and then, as they had finished their tea they placed themselves at the open window, and began to talk about the business of next day; and, in discussing cupboards and new papers, Nan forgot her fatigue, and grew so interested that it was quite late before they thought of retiring to rest.

CHAPTER XI.

"TELL US ALL ABOUT IT, NAN."

Nan overslept herself, and was rather late the next morning; but as she entered the parlor, with an exclamation of penitence for her tardiness, she found her little speech was addressed to the empty walls. A moment after, a shadow crossed the window, and Phillis came in.

She went up to Nan and kissed her, and there was a gleam of fun in her eyes.

"Oh, you lazy girl!" she said; "leaving me all the hard work to do. Do you know, I have been around to the Library, and have had it all out with Miss Milner; and in the Steyne I met the clergyman again, and—would you believe it; he looked quite disappointed because you were not there!"

"Nonsense!" returned Nan, sharply. She never liked this sort of joking speeches: they seemed treasonable to Dick.

"Oh, but he did," persisted Phillis, who was a little excited and reckless after her morning's work. "He threw me a disparaging glance, which said, as plainly as possible, 'Why are you not the other one?' That comes from having a sister handsomer than one's self."

"Oh, Phillis! when people always think you so nice, and when you are so clever!"

Phillis got up and executed a little courtesy in the prettiest way, and then she sank down upon her chair in pretended exhaustion.

"What I have been through! But I have come out of it alive. Confess, now, there's a dear, that you could not have done it!"

"No; indeed," with an alarmed air. "Do you really mean to say that you actually told Miss Milner what we meant to do?"

"I told her everything. There, sit down and begin your breakfast, Nan, or we shall never be ready. I found her alone in the shop. Thank goodness, that Miss Masham was not there. I have taken a dislike to that simpering young person, and would rather make a dress for Mrs. Squails any day than for her. I told her the truth, without a bit of disguise. Would you believe it, the good creature actually cried about it! she quite upset me too. 'Such young ladies! dear, dear: one does not often see such,' she kept saying over and over again. And then she put out her hand and stroked my dress, and said, 'Such a beautiful fit, too; and to think you have made it yourself! such a clever young lady! Oh, dear! whatever will Mr. Drummond and Miss Mattie say?' Stupid old thing! as though we cared what he said!"

"Oh, Phillis! and she cried over it?"

"She did indeed. I am not exaggerating. Two big round tears rolled down her cheeks. I could have kissed her for them. And then she made me sit down in the little room behind the shop, where she was having her breakfast, and poured me out a cup of tea and––" But here Nan interrupted her, and there was a trace of anxiety in her manner.

"Poured you out a cup of tea! Miss Milner! And you drank it!"

"Of course I drank it; it was very good, and I was thirsty."

But here Nan pounced upon her unexpectedly, and dragged her to the window.

“Your fun is only make-believe: there is no true ring about it. Let me see your eyes. Oh, Phil, Phil! I thought so! You have been crying, too!”

Phillis looked a little taken aback. Nan was too sharp for her. She tried to shake herself free a little pettishly.

“Well, if I choose to make a fool of myself for once in my life, you need not be silly about it; the old thing was so upsetting, and—and it was so hard to get it out.” Phillis would not have told for worlds how utterly she had broken down over that task of hers; how the stranger’s sympathy had touched so painful a chord that, before she knew what she was doing, she had laid her head down on the counter and was crying like a baby,—all the more that she had so bravely pent up her feelings all these days that she might not dishearten her sisters.

But, as Nan petted and praised her, she did tell how good Miss Milner had been to her.

“Fancy a fat old thing like that having such fine feelings,” she said, with an attempt to recover her sprightliness. “She was as good as a mother to me,—made me sit in the easy-chair, and brought me some elder-flower water to bathe my eyes, and tried to cheer me up by saying that we should have plenty of work. She has promised not to tell any one just yet about us; but when we are really in the Friary she will speak to people and recommend us: and—” here Phillis gave a little laugh—“we are to make up a new black silk for her that her brother has just sent her. Oh, dear, what will mother say to us, Nan?” And Phillis looked at her in an alarmed, beseeching way, as though in sore need of comfort.

Nan looked grave; but there was no hesitation in her answer:

“I am afraid it is too late to think of that now, Phil: it has to be done, and we must just go through with it.”

“You are right, Nanny darling, we must just go through with it,” agreed Phillis; and then they went on with their unfinished breakfast, and after that the business of the day began.

It was late in the evening when they reached home. Dulce who was at the gate looking out for them, nearly smothered them with kisses.

“Oh, you dear things! how glad I am to get you back,” she said, holding them both. “Have you really only been away since yesterday morning? It seems a week at least.”

“You ridiculous child! as though we believe that! But how is mother?”

“Oh, pretty well: but she will be better now you are back. Do you know,” eying them both very gravely, “I think it was a wise thing of you to go away like that? it has shown me that mother and I could not do without you at all: we should have pined away in those lodgings; it has quite reconciled me to the plan,” finished Dulce, in a loud whisper that reached her mother’s ears.

“What plan? What are you talking about, Dulce? and why do you keep your sisters standing in the hall?” asked Mrs. Challoner, a little irritably. But her brief nervousness vanished at the sight of their faces: she wanted nothing more, she told herself, but to see them round her, and hear their voices.

She grew quite cheerful when Phillis told her about the new papers, and how Mrs. Crump was to clean down the cottage, and how Crump had promised to mow the grass and paint the greenhouse, and Jack and Bobbie were to weed the garden-paths.

“It is a perfect wilderness now, mother: you never saw such a place.”

“Never mind, so that it will hold us, and that we shall all be together,” she returned, with a smile. “But Dulce talked of some plan: you must let me hear it, my dears; you must not keep me in the dark about anything. I know we shall all have to work,” continued the poor lady; “but if we be all together, if you will promise not to leave me, I think I could bear anything.”

“Are we to tell her!” motioned Nan with her lips to Phillis; and as Phillis nodded, “Yes,” Nan gently and quietly began unfolding their plan.

But, with all her care and all Phillis’s promptings, the revelation was a great shock to Mrs. Challoner; in her weakened state she seemed hardly able to bear it.

Dulce repented bitterly her incautious whisper when she saw her sisters’ tired faces, and their fruitless attempts to soften the effects of such a blow. For a little while, Mrs. Challoner seemed on the brink of despair; she would not listen; she abandoned herself to lamentations; she became so hysterical at last that Dorothy was summoned from the kitchen and taken into confidence.

“Mother, you are breaking our hearts,” Nan said, at last. She was kneeling at her feet, chafing her hands, and Phillis was fanning her; but she pushed them both away from her with weak violence.

“It is I whose heart is breaking! Why must I live to see such things? Dorothy, do you know my daughters are going to be dressmakers?—my daughters, who are Challoners,—who have been delicately nurtured,—who might hold up their heads with any one?”

“Dorothy, hold your tongue!” exclaimed Phillis, peremptorily. “You are not to speak; this is for us to decide, and no one else. Mammy, you are making Nan look quite pale: she is dreadfully tired, and so am I. Why need we decide anything to-night? Every one is upset and excited, and when that is the case one can never arrive at any proper conclusion. Let us talk about it to-morrow, when we are rested.” And, though Mrs. Challoner would not allow herself to be comforted, Nan’s fatigue and paleness were so visible to her maternal eyes that they were more

eloquent than Phillis's words.

"I must not think only of myself. Yes, yes, I will do as you wish. There will be time enough for this sort of talk to-morrow. Dorothy, will you help me? The young ladies are tired; they have had a long journey. No, my dear, no," as Dulce pressed forward; "I would rather have Dorothy." And, as the old servant gave them a warning glance, they were obliged to let her have her way.

"Mammy has never been like this before," pouted Dulce, when they were left alone. "She drives us away from her as though we had done something purposely to vex her."

"It is because she cannot bear the sight of us to-night," returned Phillis, solemnly. "It is worse for her than for us; a mother feels things for her children more than for herself; it is nature, that is what it is," she finished philosophically; "but she will be better to-morrow." And after this the miserable little conclave broke up.

Mrs. Challoner passed a sleepless night, and her pillow was sown with thorns. To think of the Challoners falling so low as this! To think of her pretty Nan, her clever, bright Phillis, her pet Dulce coming to this; "oh, the pity of it!" she cried in the dark hours, when vitality runs lowest, and thoughts seem to flow involuntarily towards a dark centre.

But with the morning came sunshine, and her girl's faces,—a little graver than usual, perhaps, but still full of youth and the brightness of energy; and the sluggish nightmare of yesterday's grief began to fade a little.

"Now, mammy, you are not going to be naughty to-day!" was Dulce's morning salutation as she seated herself on the bed.

Mrs. Challoner smiled faintly:

"Was I very naughty last night, Dulce?"

"Oh, as bad as possible. You pushed poor Nan and Phillis away, and would not let any one come near you but that cross old Dorothy, and you never bade us good-night; but if you promise to be good, I will forgive you and make it up," finished Dulce, with those light butterfly kisses to which she was addicted.

"Now, Chatterbox, it is my turn," interrupted Phillis; and then she began a carefully concocted little speech, very carefully drawn out to suit her mother's sensitive peculiarities.

She went over the old ground patiently point by point. Mrs. Challoner shuddered at the idea of letting lodgings.

"I knew you would agree with us," returned Phillis, with a convincing nod; and then she went on to the next clause.

Mrs. Challoner argued a great deal about the governess scheme. She was quite angry with Phillis, and seemed to suffer a great deal of self-reproach, when the girl spoke of their defective education and lack of accomplishments. Nan had to come to her sister's rescue; but the mother was slow to yield the point:

"I don't know what you mean. My girls are not different from other girls. What would your poor father say if he were alive? It is cruel to say this to me, when I stinted myself to give you every possible advantage, and I paid Miss Martin eighty pounds a year," she concluded, tearfully, feeling as though she were the victim of a fraud.

She was far more easily convinced that going out as companions would be impracticable under the circumstances. "Oh, no, that will never do!" she cried, when the two little rooms with Dulce were proposed; and after this Phillis found her task less difficult. She talked her mother over at last to reluctant acquiescence. "I never knew how I came to consent," she said, afterwards, "but they were too much for me."

"We cannot starve. I suppose I must give in to you," she said, at last; "but I shall never hold up my head again." And she really believed what she said.

"Mother, you must trust us," replied Phillis, touched by this victory she had won. "Do you know what I said to Dulce? Work cannot degrade us. Though we are dressmakers, we are still Challoners. Nothing can make us lose our dignity and self-respect as gentlewomen."

"Other people will not recognize it," returned her mother, with a sigh. "You will lose caste. No one will visit you. Among your equals you will be treated as inferiors. It is this that bows me to the earth with shame."

"Mother, how can you talk so?" cried Nan, in a clear, indignant voice. "What does it matter if people do not visit us? We must have a world of our own, and be sufficient for ourselves, if we can only keep together. Is not that what you have said to us over and over again? Well, we shall be together, we shall have each other. What does the outside world matter to us after all?"

"Oh, you are young; you do not know what complications may arise," replied Mrs. Challoner, with the gloomy forethought of middle age. She thought she knew the world better than they, but in reality she was almost as guileless and ignorant as her daughters. "Until you begin, you do not know the difficulties that will beset you," she went on.

But notwithstanding this foreboding speech, she was some what comforted by Nan's words: "they would be together!" Well, if Providence chose to inflict this humiliation and afflictive dispensation on her, it could be borne as long as she had her children around her.

Nan made one more speech,—a somewhat stern one for her.

“Our trouble will be a furnace to try our friends. We shall know the true from the false. Only those who are really worth the name will be faithful to us.”

Nan was thinking of Dick; but her mother misunderstood her, and grew alarmed.

“You will not tell the Paines and the other people about here what you intend to do, surely? I could not bear that! no, indeed, I could not bear that!”

“Do not be afraid, dear mother,” returned Nan, sadly, “we are far too great cowards to do such a thing, and, after all, there is no need to put ourselves to needless pain. If the Maynes were here we might not be able to keep it from them, perhaps, and so I am thankful they are away.”

Nan said this quite calmly, though her mother fixed her eyes upon her in a most tenderly mournful fashion. She had quite forgotten their Longmead neighbors, but now, as Nan recalled them to her mind, she remembered Mr. Mayne, and her look had become compassionate.

“It will be all over with those poor children,” she thought to herself: “the father will never allow it,—never; and I cannot wonder at him.” And then her heart softened to the memory of Dick, whom she had never thought good enough for Nan, for she remembered now with a sore pang that her pride was laid low in the dust, and that she could not hope now that her daughters would make splendid matches: even Dick would be above them, though his father had been in trade, and though he had no grandfather worth mentioning.

A few days after their return from Hadleigh, there was an other long business interview with Mr. Trinder, in which every thing was settled. A tenant had already been found for the cottage. A young couple, on the eve of their marriage, who had long been looking for a suitable house in the neighborhood had closed at once with Mr. Trinder’s offer, and had taken the lease off their hands. The gentleman was a cousin of the Paines and, partly for the convenience of the in-coming tenants, and partly because the Challoners wished to move as soon as possible, there was only a delay of a few weeks before the actual flitting.

It would be impossible to describe the dismay of the neighborhood when the news was circulated.

Immediately after their return from Hadleigh, Nan and Phillis took counsel together, and, summoning up their courage, went from one to another of their friends and quietly announced their approaching departure.

“Mother has had losses, and we are now dreadfully poor, and we are going to leave Glen Cottage and go down to a small house we have at Hadleigh,” said Nan, who by virtue of an additional year of age was spokeswoman on this occasion. She had fully rehearsed this little speech, which she intended to say at every house in due rotation. “We will not disguise the truth; we will let people know that we are poor, and then they will not expect impossibilities,” she said, as they walked down the shady roads towards the Paines’ house,—for the Paines were their most intimate friends and had a claim to the first confidence.

“I think that will be sufficient; no one has any right to know more,” she continued, decidedly, fully determined that no amount of coaxing and cross-examination should wring from her one unnecessary word.

But she little knew how difficult it would be to keep their own counsel. The Paines were not alone: they very seldom were. Adelaide Sartoris was there, and the younger Miss Twentyman, and a young widow, a Mrs. Forbes, who was a distant connection of Mrs. Paine.

Nan was convinced that they had all been talking about them, for there was rather an embarrassed pause as she and Phillis entered the room. Carrie looked a little confused as she greeted them.

Nan sat down by Mrs. Paine, who was rather deaf, and in due time made her little speech. She was rather pale with the effort, and her voice faltered a little, but every word was heard at the other end of the room.

“Leave Glen Cottage, my dear? I can’t have heard you rightly. I am very deaf, to-day,—very. I think I must have caught cold.” And Mrs. Paine turned a mild face of perplexity on Nan; but, before she could reiterate her words, Carrie was on the footstool at her feet, and Miss Sartoris, with a grave look of concern on her handsome features, was standing beside her:

“Oh, Nan! tell us all about it! Of course we saw something was the matter. Dulce was so strange that afternoon; and you have all been keeping yourselves invisible for ever so long.”

“There is very little to tell,” returned Nan, trying to speak cheerfully. “Mother has had bad news. Mr. Gardiner is bankrupt, and all our invested money is gone. Of course we could not go on living at Glen Cottage. There is some talk, Carrie, of your cousin, Mr. Ibbetson, coming to look at it: it will be nice for us if he could take the lease off our hands, and then we should go down to the Friary.”

“How I shall hate to see Ralph there!—not but what it will suit him and Louisa well enough, I dare say. But never mind him: I want to know all about yourselves,” continued Carrie, affectionately. “This is dreadful, Nan! I can hardly believe it. What are we to do without you? and where is the Friary? and what is it like? and what will you do with yourselves when you get there?”

“Yes, indeed, that is what we want to know,” agreed Miss Sartoris, putting her delicately-gloved hand on Nan’s shoulder; and then Sophy Paine joined the little group, and Mrs. Forbes and Miss Twentyman left off talking to Phillis, and began listening; with all their might. Now it was that

Nan began to foresee difficulties.

“The Friary is very small,” she went on, “but it will just hold us and Dorothy. Dorothy is coming with us, of course. She is old, but she works better than some of the young ones. She is a faithful creature––”

But Carrie interrupted her impatiently:

“But, Nan, what will you do with yourselves? Hadleigh is a nice place, I believe. Mamma, we must all go down there next summer, and stay there,—you shall come with us, Adelaide,—and then we shall be able to cheer these poor things up; and Nan, you and Phillis must come and stay with us. We don’t mean to give you up like this. What does it matter about being poor? We are all old friends together. You shall give us tea at the Friary; and I dare say there are tennis-grounds at Hadleigh, and we will have nice times together.”

“Of course we will come and see you,” added Miss Sartoris, with a friendly pressure of Nan’s shoulder; but the poor girl only colored up and looked embarrassed, and then it was that Phillis, who was watching her opportunity, struck in:

“You are all very good; but, Carrie, I don’t believe you understand Nan one bit. When people lose their money they have to work. We shall all have to put our shoulder to the wheel. We would give you tea, of course, but as for paying visits and playing tennis, it is only idle girls like yourselves who have time for that sort of thing. It will be work and not play, I fear, with us.”

“Oh, Phillis!” exclaimed poor Carrie, with tears in her eyes, and Miss Sartoris looked horrified, for she had West-Indian blood in her veins and was by nature somewhat indolent and pleasure-loving.

“Do you mean you will have to be governesses?” she asked, with a touch of dismay in her voice.

“We shall have to work,” returned Phillis, vaguely. “When we are settled at the Friary we must look round us and do the best we can.” This was felt to be vague by the whole party; but Phillis’s manner was so bold and well assured that no one suspected that anything lay beyond the margin of her speech. They had not made up their minds, perhaps; Sir Francis Challoner would assist them; or there were other sources of help: they must move into the new house first, and then see what was to be done. It was so plausible, so sensible, that every one was deceived.

“Of course you cannot decide in such a hurry: you must have so much to do just now,” observed Carrie. “You must write and tell us all your plans, Phillis, and if there be anything we can do to help you. Mamma, we might have Mrs. Challoner here while the cottage is dismantled. Do spare her to us, Nan, and we will take such care of her!” And they were still discussing this point, and trying to overrule Nan’s objections,—who knew nothing would induce her mother to leave them,—when other visitors were announced, and in the confusion they were allowed to make their escape.

CHAPTER XII.

“LADDIE” PUTS IN AN APPEARANCE.

“I think we have managed that as well as possible!” exclaimed Phillis, when they found themselves outside the gates. “What a good thing Adelaide and Mrs. Forbes and Lily were there! Now we need only call at those three houses to say good-bye. How hot you look, Nan! and how they all hemmed you in! I was obliged to come to your rescue, you were so beset; but I think I have put them off the scent.”

“Yes, for the present; but think, Phil, if Carrie really carries out her intention, and all the Paine tribe and Adelaide come down to Hadleigh next summer! No wonder I am hot; the bare idea suffocates me.”

“Something may turn up before then; it is no good looking so far ahead,” was the philosophical rejoinder. “Adelaide is rather formidable, certainly, and, in spite of her good nature, one does not feel at home with her. There is a flavor of money about her, I think; she dresses, talks, and lives in such a gilded way one finds her heavy; but she may get married before then. Mr. Dalrymple certainly seemed to mean it when he was down here last winter, and he will be a good match for her. But here we are at Fitzroy Square. I wonder what sort of humor her ladyship will be in?”

Lady Fitzroy received them very graciously. She had just been indulging in a slight dispute with her husband, and the interruption was welcome to both of them; besides, she was always gracious to the Challoners.

“You have just come in time, for we were boring each other dreadfully,” she said, in her pretty languid way, holding out a hand to each of them. “Percival, will you ring the bell, please? I cannot think why Thorpe does not bring up the tea as usual!”

Lord Fitzroy obeyed his wife’s behest, and then he turned with a relieved air to his old friend

Phillis. She was the clever one; and though some people called her quiet, that was because they did not draw her out, or she had no sympathy with them. He had always found her decidedly amusing and agreeable in the days of his bachelorhood.

He had married the beauty of a season, but the beauty was not without her little crotchets and tempers; and though he was both fond and proud of his wife, he found Phillis's talk a relief this afternoon.

But Phillis was a little *distraite* on this occasion: she wanted to hear what Nan was saying in a low voice across the room, and Thorpe and his subordinate were setting the tea-table, and Lord Fitzroy would place himself just before her.

"Now look here, Miss Challoner," he was saying, "I want to tell you all about it;" but here Thorpe left the room, and Lady Fitzroy interrupted them:

"Oh, Percival, what a pity! Do you hear?—we are going to lose our nicest neighbors? Dear little Glen Cottage is to be empty in a week or so!"

"Mr. Ralph Ibbetson will decide to take it, I think; and he and Miss Blake are to be married on the 16th of next month," returned Nan, softly.

"Ibbetson at Glen Cottage! that red-headed fellow! My dear Miss Challoner, what sacrilege!—what desecration! What do you mean by forsaking us in this fashion? Are you all going to be married? Has Sir Francis died and left you a fortune? In the name of all that is mysterious, what is the meaning of this?"

"If you will let a person speak, Percival," returned his wife, with dignity, "you shall have an answer:" and then she looked up in his handsome, good-natured face, and her manner softened insensibly. "Poor dear Mrs. Challoner has had losses! Some one has played her false, and they are obliged to leave Glen Cottage. But Hadleigh is a nice place," she went on, turning to Nan: "it is very select."

"Where did you say, Evelyn?" inquired her husband, eagerly. "Hadleigh, in Sussex? Oh, that is a snug little place; no Toms and Harries go down there on a nine hours' trip. I was there myself once, with the Shannontons. Perhaps Lady Fitzroy and I may run down one day and have a look at you," he continued, with a friendly look at Phillis. It was only one of his good-natured speeches, but his wife took umbrage at it.

"The sea never agrees with me. I thought you knew that, Percival!" rather reproachfully; "but I dare say we shall often see you here," she went on, fearing Nan would think her ungracious. "You and the Paines are so intimate that they are sure to have you for weeks together; it is so pleasant revisiting an old neighborhood, is it not? I know I always feel that with regard to Nuneaton."

"Nuneaton never suits my constitution. I thought you would have remembered that, Evelyn," returned her husband, gravely; and then they both laughed. Lord Fitzroy was not without a sense of humor, and often restored amity by a joking word after this fashion, and then the conversation proceeded more smoothly.

Nan and Phillis felt far more at their ease here than they had felt at the Paines'. There were no awkward questions asked: Lady Fitzroy was far too well bred for that. If she wondered at all how the Challoners were to live after they had lost their money, she kept such remarks for her husband's private ear.

"Those girls ought to marry well," observed Lord Fitzroy, when he found himself alone again with his wife. "Miss Challoner is as pretty a creature as one need see, but Miss Phillis has the most in her."

"How are they to meet people if they are going to bury themselves in a little sea-side place?" she returned, regretfully. "Shall I put on my habit now, Percy? do you think it will be cool enough for our ride?"

"Yes, run along, my pet, and don't keep me too long waiting." Nevertheless, Lord Fitzroy did not object when his wife made room for him a moment beside her on the couch, while she made it up to him for her cross speeches, as she told him.

"There, little mother, it is all done!" exclaimed Phillis, in a tone of triumph, as later on in the afternoon they returned to the cottage; but in spite of her bravado, both the girls looked terribly jaded, and Nan especially seemed out of spirits; but then they had been round the Longmead garden, and had gathered some flowers in the conservatory, and this alone would have been depressing work to Nan.

From that time they lived in a perpetual whirl, a bustle of activity that grew greater; and not less, from day to day. Mrs. Challoner had quietly but decidedly refused the Paines' invitation. Nan was right; nothing would have induced her to leave her girls in their trouble: she made light of their discomfort, forgot her invalid airs, and persisted in fatiguing herself to an alarming extent.

"You must let me do things; I should be wretched to sit with my hands before me, and not help you," she said with tears in her eyes, and when they appealed in desperation to Dorothy, she took her mistress's side:

"Working hurts less than worrying. Don't you be fretting about the mistress too much, or watching her too closely. It will do her no harm, take my word for it." And Dorothy was right.

But there was one piece of work that Nan set her mother to do before they left the cottage.

“Mother,” she said to her one day when they were alone together. “Mrs. Mayne will be wondering why you do not answer her letter. I think you had better write, and tell her a little about things. We must not put it off any longer, or she will be hurt with us.” And Mrs. Challoner very reluctantly set about her unpleasant task.

But, after all, it was Nan who furnished the greater part of the composition. Mrs. Challoner was rather verbose and descriptive in her style. Nan cut down her sentences ruthlessly, and so pruned and simplified the whole epistle that her mother failed to trace her own handiwork: and at the last she added a postscript in her own pretty handwriting.

Mrs. Challoner was rather dissatisfied with the whole thing.

“You have said so little, Nan! Mrs. Mayne will be quite affronted at our reticence.”

“What is the use of harrowing people’s feelings?” was Nan’s response.

It was quite true she had dwelt as little as possible on their troubles.

The few opening sentences had related solely to their friends’ affairs.

“You will be sorry to hear,” Mrs. Challoner wrote after this, “that I have met with some severe losses. I dare say Mr. Mayne will remember that my poor husband invested our little income in the business of his cousin, Mark Gardiner. We have just heard the unwelcome news that Gardiner & Fowler have failed for a large amount. Under these circumstances, we think it more prudent to leave Glen Cottage as soon as possible, and settle at Hadleigh, where we have a small house belonging to us called the Friary. Fortunately for us, Mr. Trinder has found us a tenant, who will take the remainder of the lease off our hands. Do you remember Mr. Ralph Ibbetson, the Paines’ cousin, that rather heavy-looking young man, with reddish hair, who was engaged to that pretty Miss Blake?—well, he has taken Glen Cottage; and I hope you will find them nice neighbors. Tell Dick he must not be too sorry to miss his old friends, but of course you will understand this is a sad break to us. Settling down in a new place is never very pleasant; and as my girls will have to help themselves, and we shall all have to learn to do without things, it will be somewhat of a discipline to us; but as long as we are together, we all feel, such difficulties can be easily borne.

“Tell Mr. Mayne that, if I had foreseen how things were to turn out, I would have conquered my indisposition, and not have forfeited my last evening at Longmead.”

And in the postscript Nan wrote hurriedly,—

“You must not be too sorry for us, dear Mrs. Mayne, for mother is as brave as possible, and we are all determined to make the best of things.

“Of course it is very sad leaving dear Glen Cottage, where we have spent such happy, happy days; but, though the Friary is small, we shall make it very comfortable. Tell Dick the garden is a perfect wilderness at present, and that there are no roses,—only a splendid passion-flower that covers the whole back of the house.”

Nan never knew why she wrote this. Was it to remind him vaguely that the time of roses was over, and that from this day things would be different with them?

Nan was quite satisfied when she had despatched this letter. It told just enough, and not too much. It sorely perplexed and troubled Dick; and yet neither he nor his father had the least idea how things really were with the Challoners.

“Didn’t I tell you so, Bessie?” exclaimed Mr. Mayne, almost in a voice of triumph, as he struck his hand upon the letter. “Paine was right when he spoke of a shaky investment. That comes of women pretending to understand business. A pretty mess they seem to have made of it!”

“Mother,” said poor Dick, coming up to her when he found himself alone with her for a moment, “I don’t understand this letter. I cannot read between the lines, somehow, and yet there seems something more than meets the eye.”

“I am sure it is bad enough,” returned Mrs. Mayne, who had been quietly crying over Nan’s postscript. “Think of them leaving Glen Cottage, and of these poor dear girls having to make themselves useful!”

“It is just that that bothers me so,” replied Dick, with a frowning brow. “The letter tells us so little; it is so constrained in tone; as though they were keeping something from us. Of course they have something to live upon, but I am afraid it is very little.”

“Very likely they will only have one servant,—just Dorothy and no one else; and the girls will have to help in the house,” returned his mother, thoughtfully. “That will not do them any harm, Dick: it always improves girls to make them useful. I dare say the Friary is a very small place, and then I am sure, with a little help, Dorothy will do very well.”

“But, mother,” pleaded Dick, who was somewhat comforted by this sensible view of the matter, “do write to Nan or Phillis and beg of them to give us fuller particulars.” And, though Mrs. Mayne promised she would do so, and kept her word, Dick was not satisfied, but sat down and scrawled a long letter to Mrs. Challoner, so incoherent in its expressions of sympathy and regret that it quite mystified her; but Nan thought it perfect, and took possession of it, and read it every day, until it got quite thin and worn. One sentence especially pleased her. “I don’t intend ever to cross the threshold of the cottage again,” wrote Dick: “in fact, Oldfield will be hateful without you all. Of course I shall run down to Hadleigh at Christmas and look you up, and see for myself what sort of a place the Friary is. Tell Nan I will get her lots of roses for her garden so she need not trouble about that; and give them my love, and tell them how awfully sorry I am

about it all."

Poor Dick! the news of his friends' misfortunes took off the edge of his enjoyment for a long time. Thanks to Nan's unselfishness, he did not in the least realize the true state of affairs; nevertheless, his honest heart was heavy at the thought of the empty cottage, and he was quite right in saying Oldfield had grown suddenly hateful to him, and, though he kept these thoughts to himself as much as possible, Mr. Mayne saw that his son was depressed and ill at ease, and sent him away to the Swiss Tyrol, with a gay party of young people, hoping a few weeks' change would put the Challoners out of his head. Meanwhile Nan and her sisters worked busily, and their friends crowded round them, helping or hindering, according to their nature.

On the last afternoon there was a regular invasion of the cottage. The drawing-room carpet was up, and the room was full of packing-cases. Carrie Paine had taken possession of one and her sister Sophy and Lily Twentyman had a turned-up box between them. Miss Sartoris and Gussie Scobell had wicker chairs. Dorothy had just brought in tea, and had placed before Nan a heterogeneous assemblage of kitchen cups and saucers, mugs, and odds and ends of crockery, when Lady Fitzroy entered in her habit, accompanied by her sister, the Honorable Maud Burgoyne, both of whom seemed to enjoy the picnic excessively.

"Do let me have the mug," implored Miss Burgoyne: she was a pretty little brunette with a *nez retrousse*. "I have never drunk out of one since my nursery days. How cool it is, after the sunny roads! I think carpets ought to be abolished in the summer. When I have a house of my own, Evelyn, I mean to have Indian matting and nothing else in the warm weather."

"I am very fond of Indian matting," returned her sister, sipping her tea contentedly. "Fitzroy hoped to have looked in this afternoon, Mrs. Challoner, to say good-bye, but there is an assault-at-arms at the Albert Hall, and he is taking my young brother Algernon to see it. He is quite inconsolable at the thought of losing such pleasant neighbors, and sent all sorts of pretty messages," finished Lady Fitzroy, graciously.

"Here is Edgar," exclaimed Carrie Paine; "he told us that he meant to put in an appearance; but I am afraid the poor boy will find himself *de trop* among so many ladies."

Edgar was the youngest Paine,—a tall Eton boy, who looked as though he would soon be too big for jackets, and an especial friend of Nan's.

"How good of you to come and say good-bye, Gar!" she said summoning him to her side, as the boy looked round him blushing and half terrified. "What have you got there under your jacket?"

"It is the puppy I promised you," returned Edgar, eagerly; "don't you know?—Nell's puppy? Father said I might have it." And he deposited a fat black retriever puppy at Nan's feet. The little beast made a clumsy rush at her and then rolled over on its back. Nan took it up in high delight, and showed it to her mother.

"Isn't it good of Gar, mother? and when we all wanted a dog so! We have never had a pet since poor old Juno died; and this will be such a splendid fellow when he grows up. Look at his head and curly black paws; and what a dear solemn face he has got!"

"I am glad you like him," replied Edgar, who was now perfectly at his ease. "We have christened him 'Laddie:' he is the handsomest puppy of the lot, and our man Jake says he is perfectly healthy." And then, as Nan cut him some cake, he proceeded to enlighten her on the treatment of this valuable animal.

The arrival of "Laddie" made quite a diversion, and, when the good-byes were all said, Nan took the little animal in her arms and went with Phillis for the last time to gather flowers in the Longmead garden, and when the twilight came on the three girls went slowly through the village, bidding farewell to their old haunts.

It was all very sad, and nobody slept much that night in the cottage. Nan's tears were shed very quietly, but they fell thick and fast.

"Oh, Dick, it is hard—hard!" thought the poor girl, burying her face in the pillow; "but I have not let you know the day, so you will not be thinking of us. I would not pain you for worlds, Dick, not more than I can help." And then she dried her eyes and told herself that she must be brave for all their sakes to-morrow; but, for all her good resolutions, sleep would not come to her any more than it did to Phillis, who lay open-eyed and miserable until morning.

CHAPTER XIII.

"I MUST HAVE GRACE."

When the Rev. Archibald Drummond was nominated to the living of Hadleigh in Sussex, it was at once understood by his family that he had achieved a decided success in life.

Hadleigh until very recently had been a perpetual curacy, and the perpetual curate in charge had lived in the large, shabby house with the green door on the Braidwood Road, as it was

called. There had been some talk of a new vicarage, but as yet the first brick had not been laid, the building-committee had fallen out on the question of the site, and nothing had been definitely arranged: there was a good deal of talk, too, about the church restoration, but at the present moment nothing had been done.

Mr. Drummond had not been disturbed in his mind by the delay of the building-committee in the matter of the new vicarage, but on the topic of the church restoration he had been heard to say very bitter things,—far too bitter, it was thought, to proceed from the lips of such a new-comer. It is not always wise to be outspoken, and when Mr. Drummond expressed himself a little too frankly on the ugliness of the sacred edifice, which until lately had been a chapel-of-ease, he had caused a great deal of dissatisfaction in the mind of his hearers; but when the young vicar, still strongly imbued with the beauties of Oxford architecture, had looked round blankly on the great square pews and galleries, and then at the wooden pulpit, and the Ten Commandments that adorned the east end, he was not quite so sure in his mind that his position was as enviable as that of other men.

Church architecture was his hobby, and, if the truth must be told, he was a little “High” in his views; without attaching himself to the Ultra-Ritualistic party, he was still strongly impregnated with many of their ideas; he preferred Gregorian to Anglican chants, and would have had no objection to incense if his diocesan could have been brought to appreciate it too.

An ornate service was decidedly to his taste. It was, therefore, a severe mortification when he found himself compelled to minister Sunday after Sunday in a building that was ugly enough for a conventicle, and to listen to the florid voices of a mixed choir, instead of the orderly array of men and boys in white surplices to which he had been accustomed. If he had been combative by nature,—one who loved to gird his armor about him and to plunge into every sort of *melee*,—he would have rejoiced after a fashion at the thought of the work cut out for him, of bringing order and beauty out of this chaos; but he was by nature too impatient. He would have condemned and destroyed instead of trying to renovate.

“Why not build a new church at once?” he said, with a certain youthful intolerance that made people angry. “Never mind the vicarage; the old house will last my time: but a place like this—a rising place—ought to have a church worthy of it. It will be money thrown away to restore this one,” finished the young vicar, looking round him with sorely troubled eyes; and it was this outspoken frankness that had lost him popularity at first.

But, if the new vicar had secret cause for discontent in the Drummond family there was nothing but the sweetness of triumph.

“Archie has never given me a moment’s trouble from his birth,” his proud mother was wont to declare; and it must be owned that the young man had done very fairly for himself.

There had been plenty of anxiety in the Drummond household while Archibald was enjoying his first Oxford term. Things had come to a climax: his father, who was a Leeds manufacturer, had failed most utterly, and to a large amount. The firm of Drummond & Drummond, once known as a most respectable and reliable firm, had come suddenly, but not unexpectedly to the ground; and Archibald Drummond the elder had been compelled to accept a managership in the very firm that, by competition and underselling, had helped to ruin him.

It was a heavy trial to a man of Mr. Drummond’s proud temperament; but he went through with it in a tough, dogged way that excited his wife’s admiration. True, his bread was bitter to him for a long time, and the sweetness of life, as he told himself, was over for him; but he had a large family to maintain, sons and daughters growing up around him, and the youngest was not yet six months old; under such circumstances a man may be induced to put his pride in his pocket.

“Your father has grown quite gray, and has begun to stoop. It makes my heart quite ache to see him sometimes,” Mrs. Drummond wrote to her eldest son; “but he never says a word to any of us. He just goes through with it day after day.”

At that time Archie was her great comfort. He had begun to make his own way early in life, understanding from the first that his parents could do very little for him. He had worked well at school, and had succeeded in obtaining one or two scholarships. When his university life commenced, and the household at Leeds became straitened in their circumstances, he determined not to encumber them with his presence.

He soon became known in his college as a reading-man and a steady worker; he was fortunate, too, in obtaining pupils for the long vacation. By and by he became a fellow and tutor of his college, and before he was eight-and-twenty the living of Hadleigh was offered to him. It was not at all a rich living,—not being worth more than three hundred a year,—and some of his Oxford friends would have dissuaded him from accepting it; but Archibald Drummond was not of their opinion. Oxford did not suit his constitution; he was never well there. Sussex air, and especially the sea-side, would give him just the tone he required. He liked the big old-fashioned house that would be allotted to him. He could take pupils and add to his income in that way; at present he had his fellowship. It was only in the event of his marriage that his income might not be found sufficient. At the present moment he had no matrimonial intentions: there was only one thing on which he was determined, and that was, that Grace must live with him and keep his house.

Grace was the sister next to him in age. Mattie,—or Matilda, as her mother often called her,—was the eldest of the family, and was two years older than Archibald. Between him and Grace there were two brothers, Fred and Clyde, and beyond Grace a string of girls ending in Dottie,

who was not yet ten. Archibald used to forget their ages and mix them up in the most helpless way; he was never quite sure if Isabel were eighteen or twenty, or whether Clara or Susie came next. He once forgot Laura altogether, and was only reminded of her existence by the shock of surprise at seeing the awkward-looking, ungainly girl standing before him, looking shyly up in his face.

Archibald was never quite alive to the blessing of having seven sisters, none of them with any pretension to beauty, unless it were Grace, though he was obliged to confess on his last visit to Leeds that Isabel was certainly passable-looking. He tried to take a proper amount of interest in them and be serenely unconscious of their want of grace and polish; but the effort was too manifest, and neither Clara nor Susie nor Laura regarded their grave elder brother with any lively degree of affection. Mrs. Drummond was a somewhat stern and exacting mother, but she was never so difficult to please as when her eldest son was at home.

“Home is never so comfortable when Archie is in it,” Susie would grumble to her favorite confidante, Grace. “Every one is obliged to be on their best behavior; and yet mother finds fault from morning to night. Dottie is crying now because she has been scolded for coming down to tea in a dirty pinafore.”

“Oh, hush, Susie dear! you ought not to say such things,” returned Grace, in her quiet voice.

Poor Grace! these visits of Archie were her only pleasures. The brother and sister were devoted to each other. In Archie’s eyes not one of the others was to be compared to her; and in this he was perfectly right.

Grace Drummond was a tall, sweet-looking girl of two-and-twenty,—not pretty, except in her brother’s opinion, but possessing a soft, fair comeliness that made her pleasant to look upon. In voice and manner she was extremely quiet,—almost grave; and only those who lived with her had any idea of the repressed strength and energy of her character, and the almost masculine clearness of intellect that lay under the soft exterior. One side of her nature was hidden from every one but her brother, and to him only revealed by intermittent flashes, and that was the passionate absorption of her affection in him. To her parents she was dutiful and submissive, but when she grew up the yoke of her mother’s will was felt to be oppressive. Her father’s nature was more in sympathy with her own; but even with him she was reticent. She was good to all her brothers and sisters, and especially devoted to Dottie; but her affection for them was so strongly pervaded by anxiety and the overweight of responsibility that its pains overbalanced its pleasures. She loved them, and toiled in their service from morning to night; but as yet she had not felt herself rewarded by any decided success. But in Archie her pride was equal to her love; she was critical, and her standard was somewhat high, but he satisfied her. What other people recognized as faults, she regarded as the merest blemishes. Without being absolutely faultless, which was of course impossible in a creature of flesh and blood, he was still as near perfection, she thought, as he could be. Perhaps her affection for him blinded her somewhat, and cast a sort of loving glamour over her eyes; for it must be owned that Archibald was by no means extraordinary in either goodness or cleverness. From a boy she had watched his career with dazzled eyes, rejoicing in every stroke of success that came to him as though it were her own. Her own life was dull and laborious, spent in the overcrowded house in Lowder Street, but she forgot it in following his. Now and then bright days came to her,—few in number, but absolutely golden, when this dearly-loved brother came on a brief visit,—when they had snatches of delicious talk in the empty school-room at the top of the house, or he took her out with him for a long, quiet walk.

Mrs. Drummond always made some dry sarcastic remark when they came in, for she was secretly jealous of Archie’s affection for Grace. Hers was rather a monopolizing nature, and she would willingly have had the first share in her son’s affections. It somewhat displeased her to see him so wrapt up in the one sister to the exclusion of all the others, as she told him.

“I think you might have asked Matilda or Isabel to accompany you. The poor girls never see anything of you, Archie,” she would say plaintively to her son. But to Grace she would speak somewhat sharply, bidding her fulfil some neglected duty, which another could as well have performed, and making her at once understand by her manner that she was to blame in leaving Mattie at home.

“Mother,” Archibald said to her one day, when she had spoken with unusual severity, and the poor girl had retreated from the room, feeling as though she had been convicted of selfishness, “we must settle the matter about which I spoke to you last night. I have been thinking about it ever since. Mattie will not do at all. I must have Grace!”

Mrs. Drummond looked up from her mending, and her thin lips settled into a hard line that they always took when her mind was made up on a disagreeable subject. She had a pinafore belonging to Dottie in her hand; there was a jagged rent in it, and she sighed impatiently as she put it down; though she was not a woman who shirked any of her maternal duties, she had often been heard to say that her work was never done, and that her mending-basket was never empty.

“But if I cannot spare Grace,” she said, rather shortly, as she meditated another lecture to the delinquent Dottie.

“But, mother, you must spare her!” returned her son, eagerly, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, and watching her rapid manipulations with apparent interest. “Look here; I am quite in earnest. I have set my heart on having Grace. She is just the one to manage a clergyman’s household. She would be my right hand in the parish.”

“She is our right hand too, Archie; but I suppose we are to cut it off, that it may benefit you and

your parish."

Mrs. Drummond seldom spoke so sharply to her eldest son; but this request of his was grievous to her.

"I think Grace ought to be considered, too, in the matter," he returned, somwhat sullenly. "She works harder than any paid governess, and gets small thanks for her trouble."

"She does her duty," returned Mrs. Drummond, coldly,—she very seldom praised any of her children,—"but not more than Mattie does hers. You are prejudiced strongly against your sister, Archie; you are not fair to her in any way. Mattie is a capital little housekeeper. She is economical, and full of clever contrivances. It is not as though I asked you to try Isabel. She is well enough, too, in her way, but a little flighty, and rather too pretty, perhaps—" but here a laugh from Archie grated on her ear.

"Too pretty!—what an absurd idea! The girl is passable-looking, and I will not deny that she has improved lately; but, mother, there is not one of the girls that can be called pretty except Grace."

Mrs. Drummond winced at her son's outspoken words. The plainness of her daughters was a sore subject.

She had never understood why her girls were so ordinary-looking. She had been a handsome girl in her time, and was still a fine-looking woman. Her husband, too, had had a fair amount of good looks, and, though he stooped, was still admirable in her eyes. The boys, too, were thoroughly fine fellows. Fred was decidedly handsome, and so was Clyde; and as for her favorite Archie, Mrs. Drummond glanced up at him as he stood beside her.

He certainly looked a model young clergyman. His features were good, but the lower part of his face was quite hidden by the fair mustache and the soft silky beard. He had thoughtful gray eyes, which could look as severe as hers sometimes; and, though his shoulders were somewhat too sloping, there could be no fault found with his figure. He was as nice-looking as possible, she thought, and no mother could have been better satisfied. But why, with the exception of Grace and Isabel, were her girls so deficient in outward graces? It could not be denied that they were very ordinary girls. Laura was overgrown and freckled, and had red hair; Susie was sickly-looking, and so short-sighted that they feared she would have to take to spectacles; and Clara was stolid and heavy-looking, one of those thick-set girls that dress never seems to improve. Dottie had a funny little face; but one could not judge of her yet. And Mattie,—Mrs. Drummond sighed again as she thought of her eldest daughter,—Mattie was thirty; and her mother felt she would never marry. It was not that she was so absolutely plain,—people who liked her said Mattie had a nice face,—but she was so abrupt, so uncouth in her awkwardness, such a stranger to the minor morals of life, that it would be a wonder indeed if she could find favor in any man's eyes.

"I do think you are too hard on your sisters," returned Mrs. Drummond, stung by her son's remark. "Isabel was very much admired at her first party last week. Mrs. Cochrane told me so, and so did Miss Blair." She could have added that her maternal interest had been strongly stirred by the mention of a certain Mr. Ellis Burton, who she had understood had paid a great deal of attention that evening to Isabel, and who was the eldest son of a wealthy manufacturer in Leeds. But Mrs. Drummond had some good old-fashioned notions, and one of these was never to speak on such delicate subjects as the matrimonial prospects of her daughters: indeed, she often thanked heaven she was not a match-making mother,—which was as well, under the circumstances.

"Well, well, we are not talking about Isabel," returned her son, impatiently. "The question is about Grace, mother. I really do wish very much that you and my father would stretch a point for me here. I want her more than I can say."

"But, Archie, you must be reasonable. Just think a moment. Your father cannot afford to send the girls to school, or to pay for a good finishing governess. We have given Grace every advantage; and just as she is making herself really useful to me in the school-room, you want to deprive me of her services."

"You know I offered to pay for Clara's schooling," returned her son, reproachfully. "She is more than sixteen, is she not! Surely Mattie could teach the others?"

But Mrs. Drummond's clear, concise voice interrupted him:

"Archie, how can you talk such nonsense? You know poor Mattie was never good at book-learning. She would hardly do for Dottie. Ask Grace, if you doubt my word."

"Of course I do not doubt it, mother," in rather an aggravated voice, for he felt he was having the worst of the argument.

"Then why do you not believe me when I tell you the thing you ask is impossible?" replied his mother more calmly. "I am sorry for you if you are disappointed, Archie; but you undervalue Mattie,—you do indeed. She will make you a nice little housekeeper, and, though she is not clever, she is so amiable that nothing ever puts her out; and visiting the poor and sick-nursing are more in her line than in Grace's. Mrs. Blair finds her invaluable. She wanted her for one of her district visitors, and I said she had too much to do at home."

Archie shrugged his shoulders. Mrs. Blair was the wife of the vicar of All Saints', where the Drummonds attended, and from a boy she had been his pet aversion. She was a bustling, managing woman, and of course Mattie was just to her taste. He did not see much use in

continuing the conversation; with all his affection for his mother,—and she was better loved by her sons than by her daughters,—he knew her to be as immovable as a rock when she had once made up her mind. He thought at first of appealing to his father on Grace's behalf, but abandoned this notion after a few minutes' reflection. His father was decided and firm in all matters relating to business, but for many years past he had abandoned the domestic reins to his wife's capable hands. Perhaps he had proved her worth and prudence; perhaps he thought the management of seven daughters too much for any man. Anyhow, he interfered less and less as the years went on; and if at any time he differed from his wife, she could always talk him over, as her son well knew.

When the subject had been first mooted in the household, he had said a word or two to his father, and had found him very reluctant to entertain the idea of parting with Grace. She was his favorite daughter, and he thought how he should miss her when he came home weary and jaded at night.

"I don't think it will do at all," he had said, in an undecided dissatisfied tone. "Won't one of the other girls serve your turn? There's Mattie, or that little monkey Isabel, she is as pert and lively as possible. But Grace; why, she is every one's right hand. What would the mother or the young ones do without her?"

No; it was no use appealing to his father, Archie thought, and might only make mischief in the house. He and Grace must make up their mind to a few more years' separation. He turned away after his mother's last speech, and finally left the room without saying another word. There was a cloud on his face, and Mrs. Drummond saw that he was much displeased; but, though she sighed again as she took up a pair of Clyde's socks and inspected them carefully, there was no change in her resolution that Mattie, and not Grace, should go to the vicarage for the year's visit that was all Archie had asked.

There are mothers and mothers in this world,—some who are capable of sacrificing their children to Moloch, who will barter their own flesh and blood in return for some barren heritage or other. There are those who will exact from those dependent on them heavy tithes of daily patience and uncomplaining drudgery; while others, who are "mothers indeed" give all, asking for nothing in return.

Mrs. Drummond was a good woman. She had many virtues and few faults. She was lady-like, industrious and self-denying in her own personal comforts, an exemplary wife, and a tolerant mistress; but she was better understood by her sons than by her daughters.

Her maternal instincts were very strong, and no mother had more delighted in her nursery than she had in hers. As long as there was a baby in the house the tenderness of her love was apparent enough. She wore herself out tending her infants, and no one ever heard her say a harsh word in her nursery.

But as her children grew up, there was much clashing of wills in the household. Her sons did not fear her in the least; but with her daughters it was otherwise. They felt the mother's strong will repressive; it threatened to dwarf their individuality and cramp that free growth that is so necessary to young things.

Dottie, who by virtue of being the last baby had had more than her fair amount of petting, was only just beginning to learn her lesson of unquestioning obedience; and, as she was somewhat spoiled, her lesson was hard one. But Laura and Susie and Clara had not yet found out that their mother loved them and wished to be their friend; they were timid and reserved with her, and took all their troubles to Grace. Even Mattie, who was her first-born, and who was old enough to be her mother's companion, quailed and blushed like a child under the dry caustic speeches at which Clyde and Fred only laughed.

"You don't understand the mother. Her bark is worse than her bite," Clyde would say to his sister sometimes. "She is an awfully clever woman, and it riles her to see herself surrounded by such a set of ninnies. Now, don't sulk, Belle. You know Mattie's a duffer compared to Grace; aren't you, Matt?"

At which truism poor Mattie would hang her head.

"Yes, Clyde; I know I am dreadfully stupid sometimes, and that makes mother angry."

Mrs. Drummond often complained bitterly of her daughters' want of confidence in her, but she never blamed herself for the barrier that seemed between them. She was forever asserting maternal authority, when such questions might have been safely laid to rest between her and her grown-up daughters. Mrs. Challoner's oneness of sympathy with her girls, her lax discipline, her perfect equality, would have shocked a woman of Mrs. Drummond's calibre. She would not have tolerated or understood it for a moment.

"My girls must do as I wish," was a very ordinary speech in her mouth. "I always do as my girls wish," Mrs. Challoner would have said. And, indeed, the two mothers were utterly dissimilar; but it may be doubted whether the Challoner household were not far happier than the family in Lowder Street.

CHAPTER XIV.

“YOU CAN DARE TO TELL ME THESE THINGS.”

Archibald Drummond had left his mother’s presence with a cloud on his brow. He had plenty of filial affection for her, but it was not the first time that he had found her too much for him. She had often angered him before by her treatment of Grace, but he had told himself that she was his mother, that a man could have but one, and so he had brought himself to forgive her. But this time she had set herself against the cherished plan of years. He had always looked forward to the time when he could have Grace to live with him; they had made all sorts of schemes together, and all their talk had concentrated itself towards this point; the disappointment would place a sort of blankness before them; they would be working separately, far away from each other, and the distance would not be bridged for years.

He stood for a moment in the dark, narrow hall, thinking intently over all this, and then he went slowly upstairs. He knew where he should find Grace. His mother had paid an unwonted visit to the school-room during their walk, and on their return had expressed herself with some degree of sharpness on the disorder she had found there. Grace would be busily engaged in putting everything to rights. It was Clara’s business, but she had gone out, and had, as usual, forgotten all about it. Grace had taken the blame upon herself, of course: she was always shielding her younger sisters.

Everything was done when he entered the room, and Grace was sitting by the window, with her hands folded in her lap, indulging in a few minutes’ rare idleness. She looked up eagerly as her brother made his appearance.

The school-room was a large, bare-looking room at the top of the house, with two narrow windows looking out over a lively prospect of roofs and chimney-pots. Mrs. Drummond had done her utmost to give it an air of comfort, but it was, on the whole, a dull, uncomfortable apartment, in spite of the faded Turkey carpet, and the curtains that had once been so handsome, but had now merged into unwholesome neutral tints.

Laura, who was the wit of the family, had nicknamed it the Hospital, for it seemed to be a receptacle for all the maimed and rickety chairs of the household, footstools in a dilapidated condition, and odd pieces of lumber that had no other place. Archibald regarded it with a troubled gaze; somehow, its dinginess had never before so impressed him; and then as he looked at his sister the frown deepened on his face.

“Well, Archie?”

“Oh, Grace, it is no use! I have talked myself hoarse, but the mother is dead against it: one might as well try to move a rock. We shall have to make up our minds to bear our disappointment as well as we can.”

“I knew it was hopeless from the first,” returned Grace, slowly; but, as she spoke, a sort of dimness and paleness crept over her face, belying her words.

She was young, and in youth hope never dies. Beyond the gray daily horizon there is always a possible gleam, a new to-morrow; youth abounds in infinite surprises, in probabilities which are as large as they are vague. Grace told herself that she never hoped much from Archie’s mission; yet when he came to her with his ill success plainly stamped upon his countenance, the dying out of her dream was bitter to her.

“I knew it was hopeless from the first,” had been her answer, and then breath for further words failed her, and she sat motionless, with her hands clasped tightly together, while Archie placed himself on the window-seat beside her and looked out ruefully at the opposite chimneys.

Well, it was all over, this dearly-cherished scheme of theirs; she must go on now with the dull routine of daily duties, she must stoop her neck afresh to the yoke she had long found so galling; this school-room must be her world, she must not hope any longer for wider vistas, for more expansive horizons, for tasks that should be more congenial to her, for all that was now made impossible.

Mattie, not she, must go and keep Archie’s house, and here for a moment she closed her eyes, the pain was so bitter; she thought of the old vicarage, of the garden where she and Archie were to have worked, of the shabby old study where he meant to write his sermons, while she was to sit beside him with her book or needlework, of the evenings when he had promised to read to her, of the walks they were to have taken together, of all the dear delightful plans they had made.

And now her mother had said them nay; it was Mattie who was to be his housekeeper, who would sit opposite to him and pour out his coffee, who would mend his socks and do all the thousand-and-one things that a woman delights in doing for the mankind dependent on her for comfort.

Mattie would visit his poor people, and teach in the schools, entertain his friends, and listen to his voice every Sunday; here tears slowly gathered under the closed eyelids. Yes, Mattie would do all that, but she would not be his chosen friend and companion; there would be no long

charming talks for her in the study or the sunny garden; he would be as lonely, poor fellow, in his way as she would be in hers, and for this her mother was to blame.

“Well, Gracie, haven’t you a word to say?” asked her brother, at last, surprised at her long silence.

“No, Archie; it does not bear talking about,” she returned, so passionately that he turned round to look at her. “I must not even think of it. I must try and shut it all out of my mind, or I shall be no good to any one. But it is hard—hard!” with a quiver of her lip.

“I call it a shame for my father and mother to sacrifice you in this way!” he burst out, moved to bitter indignation at the sight of her trouble. “I shall tell my father what I think about it pretty plainly!”

But this speech recalled Grace to her senses.

“Oh, no, dear! you must do no such thing: promise me you will not. It would be no good at all; and it would only make mother so angry. You know he always thinks as she does about things, so it would be no use. I suppose”—with an impatient sigh—“that I ought to feel myself complimented at knowing I cannot be spared. Some girls would be proud to feel themselves their mother’s right hand; but to me it does not seem much of a privilege.”

“Don’t talk in that way, Grace: it makes me miserable to hear you. I am more sorry for you than I am for myself, and yet I am sorry for myself too. If it were not that my mother would be too deeply offended, I would refuse to have Mattie at all. We never have got on well together. She is a good little thing in her way, but her awkwardness and left-handed ways will worry me incessantly. And then we have not an idea in common––” but here Grace generously interposed:

“Poor old fellow! as though I did not know all that; but you must not vent it on poor Mattie. She is not to blame for our disappointment. She would gladly give it up to me if she could. I know she will do her utmost to please you, Archie, and she is so good and amiable that you must overlook her little failings and make the best of her.”

“It will be rather difficult work, I am afraid,” returned her brother, grimly. “I shall always be drawing invidious comparisons between you both, and thinking what you would do in her place.”

“All the same you must try and be good to her for my sake, for I am very fond of Mattie,” she returned, gently; but he could not help feeling gratified at the assurance that he would miss her. And then she put her hand on his coat-sleeve, and stroked it, a favorite caress with her. “It does not bear talking about: does it, Archie? It only makes it feel worse. I think it must be meant as a discipline for me, because I am so wicked, and that it would not do at all for me to be too happy.” And here she pressed his arm, and looked up in his face, with an attempt at a smile.

“No, you are right: talking only makes it worse,” he returned, hurriedly; and then he stooped—for he was a tall man—and kissed her on the forehead just between her eyes, and then walked to the door, whistling a light air.

Grace did not think him at all abrupt in thus breaking off the conversation. She had caught his meaning in a moment, and knew the whole business was so painful to him that he did not care to dwell on it. When the tea-bell rang, she prepared herself at once to accompany him downstairs.

It was Archibald’s last evening at home, and all the family were gathered round the long tea-table. Since Mr. Drummond’s misfortunes, late dinners had been relinquished, and more homely habits prevailed in the household. Mrs. Drummond had, indeed, apologized to her son more than once for the simplicity of their mode of life.

“You are accustomed to a late dinner, Archie. I wish I could have managed it for you; but your father objects to any alteration being made in our usual habits.”

“He is quite right; and I should have been much distressed if you had thought such alteration necessary,” returned her son, very much surprised at this reference to his father. For Mrs. Drummond rarely consulted her husband on such matters. In this case, however, she had done so, and Mr. Drummond had been unusually testy—indeed, affronted—at such a question being put to him.

“I don’t know what you mean, Isabella,” he had replied; “but I suppose what is good enough for me is good enough for Archie.” And then Mrs. Drummond knew she had made a mistake, for her husband had felt bitterly the loss of his late dinner. So Archie tried to fall in with the habits of his family, and to enjoy the large plum or seed-cake that invariably garnished the tea-table; and, though he ate but sparingly of the supper, which always gave him indigestion, Grace was his only confidante in the matter. Mr. Drummond, indeed, looked at his son rather sharply once or twice, as though he suspected him of fastidiousness. “I cannot compliment you on your appetite,” he would say, as he helped himself to cold meat; “but perhaps our home fare is not so tempting as Oxford living?”

“I always say your meat is unusually good,” returned Archibald, amicably. “If there be any fault, it is in my appetite; but that Hadleigh air will soon set right.” But, though he answered his father after this tolerant fashion, he always added, in a mental aside, that nine-o’clock suppers were certainly barbarous institutions, and peculiarly deleterious to the constitution of an Oxford fellow.

Mrs. Drummond looked at them both somewhat keenly as they entered. In spite of her

resolution, she was secretly uncomfortable at the thought that Archie was displeased with her: her daughter's vexation was a burden that could be more easily borne; but her maternal heart yearned for some token that her boy was not estranged from her. But no such consolation was to be vouchsafed to her. She had kept his usual place vacant beside her; Archie showed no intention of taking it. He placed himself by his father, and began talking to him of a change of ministry that was impending, and which would overthrow the Conservative party. Mrs. Drummond, who was one of those women who can never be made to take any interest in politics, was reduced to the necessity of talking to Mattie in an undertone, for the other boys never put in an appearance at this meal; but as she talked she took stock of Grace's pale, abstracted looks as she sat with her plate before her, not pretending to eat, and taking no notice of Susie and Laura, who chatted busily across her.

It was not a festive meal; on the contrary, there was an unusual air of restraint over the whole party. The younger members felt instinctively that there was something amiss. Archie looked decidedly glum; and there was an expression on the mother's face that they were not slow to interpret. No one could hear what it was she was saying to Mattie that made her look so red and nervous all at once; but presently she addressed herself abruptly to her husband:

"It is all settled, father. I have arranged with Archie that Matilda should go down to Hadleigh next month."

Archie stroked his beard, but did not look up or make any remark, though poor Mattie looked at him beseechingly across the table, as though imploring a word. His mother would carry her point; but he would not pretend for a moment that he was otherwise than displeased, or that Mattie would be welcome.

His silence attracted Mr. Drummond's attention.

"Oh, what, you have settled it, you say? I hope you are satisfied, Archie, and properly grateful to your mother for sparing Mattie. She is to go for a year. Well, it will be a grand change for her. I should not be surprised if you were to pick up a husband, Miss Mattie;" for Mr. Drummond was a man who, in spite of his cares, was not without his joke; but, as usual, it was instantly frowned down by his wife:

"I wonder at you, father, talking such nonsense before the children. Why are you giggling, Laura? It is very unseemly and ill-behaved. I hope no daughter of mine has such unmaidenly notions. Mattie is going to Hadleigh to be a comfort to her brother, and to keep his house as a clergyman's house ought to be kept."

"And you are satisfied, Archie?" asked Mr. Drummond, not quite pleased at his wife's reprimand, and struck anew by his son's silence.

"I consider these questions somewhat unnecessary. You know my wishes, sir, on the subject, and my mother also," was the somewhat uncompromising remark; "but it appears that they are not to be met in this instance. I hope Mattie will be comfortable and not miss her sisters;" but he did not look at the poor girl, and the tears came into her eyes.

"Oh, Archie, I am so sorry! I never meant–––" she stammered; but her mother interrupted her:

"There is no occasion for you to be sorry about anything; you had far better be silent, Mattie. But you have no tact. Father, if you have finished your tea, I suppose you and Archie are going out." And then Archie rose from the table, and followed his father out of the room.

It was Isabel's business to put Dottie to bed. The other girls had to prepare their lessons for the next day, and went up to the school-room. Mattie made some excuse, and went with them, and Mrs. Drummond and Grace were left alone.

Grace had some delicate work to finish, and she placed herself by the lamp. Her mother had returned to her mending-basket; but as the door closed upon Mattie, she cleared her throat, and looked at her daughter.

"Grace, I must say I am surprised at you!"

"Why, mother?" But Grace did not look up from the task she was running with such fine even stitches.

"I am more than surprised!" continued Mrs. Drummond, severely. "I am disappointed to see in what a bad spirit you have received my decision. I did not think a daughter of mine would have been so blind to her sense of duty!"

"I have said nothing to make you think that."

"No, you have said nothing, but looks can be eloquent sometimes. I am not speaking of Archie, though I can see he is put out too, for he is a man, and men are not always reasonable; but that you should place yourself in such silent opposition to my wishes, it is that that shocks me."

There was an ominous sparkle in Grace's gray eyes, and then she deliberately put down her work on the table. She had hoped that her mother would have been contented with her victory, and not have spoken to her on the subject. But if she were so attacked, she would at least defend herself.

"You have no right to speak to me in this way, mother!"

"No right, Grace?" Mrs. Drummond could hardly believe her ears. Never once had a daughter of hers questioned her right in anything.

"No; for I have said nothing to bring all this upon me! I have been perfectly quiet, and have

tried to bear the bitterness of my disappointment as well as I could. No one is answerable for their looks, and I, at least, will not plead guilty on that score."

"Grace, you are answering me very improperly."

"I cannot say that I think so, mother. I would have been silent, if you had permitted such silence; but when you drive me to speech, I must say what I feel to be the truth,—that I have not been well treated in this matter."

"Grace!" And Mrs. Drummond paused in awful silence. Never before had a recusant daughter braved her to her face.

"I have not been well treated," continued Grace, firmly, "in a thing that concerns me more than any one else. I have not even been consulted. You have arranged it all, mother, without reference to me or my feelings. Perhaps I ought to be grateful for being spared so painful a decision; but I think such a decision should have been permitted to me."

"You can dare to tell me such things to my very face!"

"Why should I not tell them?" returned Grace, meeting her mother's angry glance unflinchingly. "It seems to me that one should speak the truth to one's mother. You have treated me like a child; and I have a right to feel sore and indignant. Why did you not put the whole thing before me, and tell me that you and my father did not see how you could spare me? Do you really believe that I should have been so wanting to my sense of duty as to follow my own pleasure?"

"Grace, I insist upon your silence! I will not discuss the matter with you."

"If you insist upon silence, you must be obeyed, mother: but it is you who have raised the question between us. But when you attack me unjustly, I must defend myself."

"You are forgetting yourself strangely. Your words are most disrespectful and unbecoming in a daughter. You tell me to my face that I am unjust—I, your mother—because I have been compelled to thwart your wishes."

"No, no—not because of that!" returned Grace, in a voice of passionate pain; "why will you misunderstand me so?—but because you have no faith in me. You treat me like a child. You dispute my privilege to decide in a matter that concerns my own happiness. You bid me work for you, and you give me no wage—not a word of praise; and because I remonstrate for once in my life, you insist on my silence."

"It seems that I am not to be obeyed."

"Oh, yes; you will be obeyed, mother. After to-night I will not open my lips to offend you again. If I have said more than I ought to have said as a daughter, I will ask your pardon now; but I cannot take back one of my words. They are true,—true!"

"I must say your apology is tardy, Grace."

"Nevertheless, it is an apology; for, though you have hurt me, I must not forget you are my mother. I know my life will be harder after this, because of what I have said; and yet I would not take back one of my words!"

"I am more displeased with you than I can say," returned her mother, taking up her neglected work; and her mouth looked stern and hard.

Never had her aspect been so forbidding, and yet never had her daughter feared her less.

"Then, if you are displeased with me, I will go away," replied Grace, moving from her seat with gentle dignity. "I wish you had not compelled me to speak, mother, and then I should not have offended you: but as it is there is no help for it." And then she gathered up her work and walked slowly out of the room.

Mrs. Drummond sat moodily in the empty room that had somehow never seemed so empty before. Her attitude was as rigid and uncompromising as usual; but there was a perplexed frown on her brow. For the first time in her life one of her girls had dared to assert her own will and to speak the truth to her; and she was utterly nonplussed. It was not too much to say that she had received a blow. Her justice and sense of fairness had been questioned,—her very maternal authority impugned,—and that by one of her own children! Mattie, who was eight years older, would not have ventured to cross her mother's will. Grace had so dared; and she was bitterly angry with her. And yet she had never so admired her before.

How honestly and bravely she had battled for her rights! her gray eyes had shone with fire, her pale cheeks had glowed with the passion of her words: for once in her life the girl had looked superbly handsome.

"You have no faith in me; you treat me like a child." Well, she was right; it was no child, it was a proud woman who was flinging those hard words at her. For the first time Mrs. Drummond recognized the possibility of a will as strong as her own. In spite of all her authority, Grace had been a match for her mother: Mrs. Drummond knew this, and it added fuel to her bitterness.

"I know my life will be harder for what I have said." Ah, Grace was right there; it would be long before her mother would forgive her for all those words, true as they were; and yet in her heart she had never so feared and admired her daughter. Grace went up to her own room, where Dottie was asleep in a little bed very near her sister's: it was dark and somewhat cold, but the atmosphere was less frigid than the parlor downstairs. Grace's frame was trembling with the force of her emotion; her face was burning, and her hands cold. It was restful and soothing to put down her aching head on the hard window-ledge and close her eyes and think out the pain!

It seemed hours before Isabel came to summon her to supper, but she made an excuse that she was not hungry, and refused to go downstairs.

“But you ate nothing at tea, and your head is aching!” persisted Isabel, who was a bright, good-natured girl, and, in spite of Archie’s strictures, decidedly pretty. “Do let me bring you something. Mother will not know.”

But Grace refused: she could not eat, and the sight of food would distress her.

“Why not go to bed at once, then?” suggested Isabel,—which was certainly sensible counsel. But Grace demurred to this; she knew Archie would be up presently to say good-night to her: so, when Isabel had gone, she lighted the candle, shading it carefully from Dottie’s eyes, and then she bathed her hot face, and smoothed her hair, and took up her work again.

Archie found her quite calm and busy, but he was not so easily deceived.

“Now, Gracie, you have got one of your headaches: it is the disappointment and the bother, and my going away to-morrow. Poor little Gracie!”

“Oh, Archie, I feel as though I shall never miss you so much!” exclaimed the poor girl, throwing down her work and clinging to him. “When shall I see your dear face again?—not until Christmas?”

“And not then, I expect. I shall most likely run down some time in January, and then I shall try hard to take you back with me, just for a visit. Mattie will be dull, and wanting to see some of you, and I will not have one of the others until you have been.”

“I don’t believe mother will spare me even for that,” returned Grace, with a sudden conviction that her mother’s memory was retentive, and that she would be punished in that way for her sins of this evening; “but promise me, Archie, that you will come, if it be only for a few days.”

“Oh, I will promise you that. I cannot last longer without seeing you, Grace!” And he stroked her soft hair as she still clung to him.

The next day Archibald bade his family good-bye: his manner had not changed toward his mother, and Mrs. Drummond thought his kiss decidedly cold.

“You will be good to Mattie, and try to make the poor girl happy; you will do at least as much as this,” she said, detaining him as he was turning from her to see Grace.

“Oh, yes, I will be good to her,” he returned, indifferently, “but I cannot promise that she will not find her life dull.” And then he took Grace in his arms, and whispered to her to be patient, and that all would be well one day; and Mrs. Drummond, though she did not hear the whisper, saw the embrace and the long lingering look between the brother and sister, and pressed her thin lips together and went back to her parlor and mending-basket, feeling herself an unhappy mother, whose love was not requited by her children, and disposed to be harder than ever towards Grace, who had inflicted this pain on her.

CHAPTER XV.

A VAN IN THE BRAIDWOOD ROAD.

One bright July morning, Mattie Drummond walked rapidly up the Braidwood Road, and, unlatching the green door in the wall, let herself into the large square hall of the vicarage. This morning it looked invitingly cool, with its summer matting and big wicker-work chairs; but Mattie was in too great haste to linger; she only stopped to disencumber herself of the various parcels with which she was ladened, and then she knocked at the door of her brother’s study, and, without waiting for the reluctant “Come in” that always answered her hasty rap, burst in upon him.

It was now three months since Mattie had entered upon her new duties, and it must be confessed that Archie’s housekeeper had rather a hard time of it. As far as actual management went, Mattie fully justified her mother’s eulogiums in her household arrangements: she was orderly and methodical,—far more so than Grace would have been in her place; the meals were always punctual and well served, the domestic machinery worked well and smoothly. Archie never had to complain of a missing button or a frayed wrist-band. Nevertheless, Mattie’s presence at the vicarage was felt by her brother as a sore burden. There was nothing in common between them, nothing that he cared to discuss with her, or on which he wished to know her opinion; he was naturally a frank, outspoken man, one that demanded sympathy from those belonging to him; but with Mattie he was reticent, and as far as possible restrained in speech.

One reason for this might be that Mattie, with all her virtues,—and she was really a most estimable little person,—was sadly deficient in tact. She never knew when she was treading on other people’s pet prejudices. She could not be made to understand that her presence was not always wanted, and that it was as well to keep silence sometimes.

She would intrude her advice when it was not needed, in her good-natured way; she had always interfered with everything and everybody. “Meddlesome Mattie” they had called her at home.

She was so wonderfully elastic, too, in her temperament, that nothing long depressed her. She took all her brother’s snubbings in excellent part: if he scolded her at dinner-time, and made the ready tears come to her eyes,—for it was not the least of Mattie’s sins that she cried easily and on every possible occasion,—she had forgotten it by tea-time, and would chatter to him as happily as ever.

She was just one of those persevering people who seem bound to be snubbed; one cannot help it. It was as natural to scold Mattie as it was to praise other people; and yet it was impossible not to like the little woman, though she had no fine feelings, as Archie said, and was not thin-skinned. Grace always spoke a good word for her; she was very kind to Mattie in her way,—though it must be owned that she showed her small respect as an elder sister. None of her brothers and sisters respected Mattie in the least; they laughed at her, and took liberties with her, presuming largely on her good nature. “It is only Mattie; nobody cares what she thinks,” as Clyde would often say. “Matt the Muddler,” as Frederick named her.

“I wonder what Mattie would say if any one ever fell in love with her?” Grace once observed in fun to Archie. “Do you know, I think she would be all her life, thanking her husband for the unexpected honor he had done her, and trying to prove to him that he had not made such a great mistake, after all.”

“Mattie’s husband! He must be an odd sort of person, I should think.” And then Archie laughed, in not the politest manner. Certainly Mattie was not appreciated by her family. She was not looking her best this morning when she went into her brother’s study. She wore the offending plaid dress,—a particular large black-and-white check that he thought especially ugly. Her hat-trimmings were frayed, and the straw itself was burnt brown by the sun, and her hair was ill arranged and rough, for she never wasted much time on her own person, and, to crown the whole, she looked flushed and heated.

Archie, who was sitting at his writing-table in severely-cut ecclesiastical garments, looking as trim and well-appointed a young clergyman as one might wish to see, might be forgiven for the tone of ill-suppressed irritation with which he said,—

“Oh, Mattie! what a figure you look! I am positively ashamed that any one should see you. That hat is only fit to frighten the birds.”

“Oh, it will do very well for the mornings,” returned Mattie, perfectly undisturbed at these compliments. “Nobody looks at me: so what does it matter?” But this remark, which she made in all simplicity, only irritated him more.

“If you have no proper pride, you might at least consider my feelings. Do you think a man in my position likes his sister to go about like an old beggar-woman? You are enough to try any one’s patience, Mattie; you are, indeed!”

“Oh, never mind me and my things,” returned Mattie coaxingly; “and don’t go on writing just yet,” for Archie had taken up his pen again with a great show of being busy. “I want to tell you something that I know will interest you. There are some new people come to the Friary.”

“What on earth do you mean?—what Friary? I am sure I never heard of such a place.”

“Dear me, Archie, how cross you are this morning!” observed Mattie, in a cheerful voice, as she fidgeted the papers on the table. “Why, the Friary is that shabby little cottage just above us,—not a stone’s throw from this house.”

“Indeed? Well, I cannot say I am much interested in the movements of my neighbors. I am not a gossip like you, Mattie!”—another fling at poor Mattie. “I wish you would leave those papers alone. You know I never allow my things to be tidied, as you call it, and I am really very busy just now. I am in the middle of accounts, and I have to write to Grace and––”

“Well, I thought you would like to know.” And Mattie looked rather crestfallen and disappointed. “You talked so much about those young ladies some weeks ago, and seemed quite sorry not to see them again; and now––” but here Archie’s indifference vanished, and he looked up eagerly.

“What young ladies? Not those in Milner’s Library, who asked about the dressmaker?”

“The very same,” returned his sister, delighted at this change of manner. “Oh, I have so much to tell you that I must sit down,” planting herself comfortably on the arm of an easy-chair near him. Another time Archie would have rebuked her for her unlady-like attitude, and told her, probably, that Grace never did such things; but now his interest was so excited that he let it pass for once. He even suffered her to take off her old hat and deposit it unreproved on the top of his cherished papers. “I was over at Crump’s this morning, to speak to Bobbie about weeding the garden, when I was surprised to see a railway-van unloading furniture at the Friary.”

“What an absurd name!” *sotto voce* from Archie: but he offered no further check to Mattie’s gossip.

“I asked Mrs. Crump, as a matter of course, the name of the new people; and she said it was Challoner. There was a mother and three daughters, she believed. She had seen two of them,—pretty, nice-spoken young creatures, and quite ladies. They had been down before to see the cottage and to have it done up. It looks quite a different place already,—nicely painted, and the shrubs trimmed. The door was open, and as I stood at Mrs. Crump’s window, peeping between her geraniums, I saw such a respectable gray-haired woman, like an upper servant, carrying

something into the house; and a moment after one of those young ladies we saw in the Library—not the pretty one, but the other—came to the door and spoke to the men."

"Are you sure you did not make a mistake, Mattie?" asked her brother, incredulously. "You are very short-sighted: perhaps you did not see correctly. How can those stylish-looking girls live in such a shabby place? I can hardly believe it possible."

"Oh, it was the same, I am positive about that. She was in the same cambric dress you admired. I could see distinctly. I watched her for a long time; and then the pretty one came out and joined her. She is pretty, Archie, she has such a lovely complexion."

"But are they poor?—they don't look so. What on earth can it mean?" he asked, in a perplexed voice; but Mattie only shook her head, and went on:

"We must find out all about them by and by. They are worth knowing, I am sure of that. Poor?—well, they cannot be rich, certainly, to live in the Friary; but they are gentle-people, one can see that in a moment."

"Of course! who doubted it?" was the somewhat impatient answer.

"Well, but that is not all," went on Mattie, too delighted with her brother's interest to try to curtail her story. "Of course I could not stand long watching them, so I did my errand and came away; and then I met Miss Middleton, and we walked down to the Library together to change those books. Miss Milner was talking to some ladies when we first went in and, as Miss Masham was not in the shop, we had to wait our turn, so I had a good look at them. The elder one was such a pretty, aristocratic-looking woman,—a little too languid, perhaps for my taste; and the younger one was a little like Isabel, only nicer-looking. I shouldn't have stared at them so much,—at least, I am afraid I stared," went on Mattie, forgetting for the moment how often she had been taken to task for this very thing,—"but something Miss Milner said attracted my attention, 'I am not to send it to the Friary, then, ma'am?' 'Well, no,' the lady returned, rather hesitatingly. She had such a nice voice and manner, Archie. 'My youngest daughter and I are at Beach House at present; I am rather an invalid, and the bustle would be too much for me. Dulce, we had better have these things sent to Beach House.' And then the young lady standing by her said, 'Oh, yes, mother; we shall want them this evening.' And then they went out."

"There is a third sister, then?" observed Archie, not pretending to disguise his interest in Mattie's recital.

"Yes, there is a third one: she is certainly a little like Isabel; she has a dimple like hers, and is of the same height. I asked Miss Milner, when they were out of hearing, if their name were Challoner, and if they were the new people who were coming to live at the empty cottage on the Braidwood Road. I thought she did not seem much disposed to give me information. Yes, their name was Challoner, and they had taken the Friary; but they were quite strangers in the town, and no one knew anything about them. And then Miss Middleton chimed in; she said her father had noticed the young ladies some weeks ago, and had called her attention to them. They were very pretty girls, and had quite taken his fancy; he had not forgotten them, and had spoken of them that very morning. She supposed Mrs. Challoner must be a widow, and not very well off: did Miss Milner know. Would you believe it, Archie? Miss Milner got quite red, and looked confused. You know how she enjoys a bit of gossip generally; but the questions seemed to trouble her. 'They were not at all well off, she knew that, but nicer young ladies she had never seen, or wished to see; and she hoped every one would be kind to them, and not forget they were real born ladies, in spite of––' And here the old thing got more confused than ever, and came to a full stop, and begged to know how she could serve us."

"It is very strange,—very strange indeed," returned her brother, in a meditative voice; but, as Mattie had nothing more to tell him, he did not discuss the matter any further, only thanked her for her news, and civilly dismissed her on the plea that his business was at a stand-still.

But he did not resume his accounts for sometime after he was left alone. Instead of doing so, he walked to the window and looked out in a singularly absent manner. Mattie's news was somewhat exciting. The idea of having such pleasant neighbors located within a stone's throw of the vicarage was in itself disturbing to the imagination of a young man of eight-and-twenty, even though a clergyman. And then, it must be confessed, Nan's charming face and figure had never been forgotten: he had looked out for the sisters many times since his chance encounter with Phillis, and had been secretly disappointed at their total disappearance. And now they proved not mere visitors, but positively inhabitants of Hadleigh. He would meet them every day; and, as there was but one church in the place, they would of course be numbered among his flock. As their future clergyman he would have a right of entrance to the cottage.

"How soon do you think we ought to call upon them, Mattie?" he asked, when he was seated opposite to his sister at the luncheon-table. The accounts had not progressed very favorably, and the letter to Grace was not yet commenced. Mattie's news had been a sad interruption to his morning's work.

"Whom do you mean, Archie," she returned, a little bewildered at this abrupt remark; and then, as he frowned at her denseness, she bethought herself of the new people. It was not often Archie asked her advice about anything, but on this occasion the young vicar felt himself incompetent to decide.

"I suppose you mean the new folk at the Friary," she continued, carelessly. "Oh, they are only moving in to-day, and they will be in a muddle for a week, I should think. I don't think we can intrude for ten days or so."

“Not if you think it will be intrusive,” he returned, rather anxiously; “but they are strangers in the place, and all ladies—there does not seem to be a man belonging to them—would it not be neighborly, as we live so close, just to call, not in a formal way, you know, but just to volunteer help? There are little things you could do for them, Mattie; and, as a clergyman, they could not regard my visit as an intrusion, I should think. Do you not agree with me?” looking at his sister rather gravely.

“Well, I don’t know,” replied Mattie, bluntly: “I should not care for strangers prying into my concerns, if I were in their place. And yet, as you say, we are such close neighbors, and one would like to be kind to the poor things, for they must be lonely, settling in a strange new place. I’ll tell you what, Archie,” as his face fell at this matter-of-fact speech: “it is Thursday, and they will be sure to be at church on Sunday; we shall see them there, and that will be an excuse for us to call on Monday. We can say then that we are neighbors, and that we would not wait until they were all in order. We can offer to send them things from the vicarage, or volunteer help in many little ways. I think that would be best.”

“Yes, perhaps you are right, and we will wait until Monday,” returned Archie, taking off his soft felt hat. “Now I must go on my rounds, and not waste any more time chattering.” But, though he spoke with unusual good nature, he did not invite Mattie to be his companion, and the poor little woman betook herself to the solitary drawing-room and some plain sewing for the rest of the afternoon.

The young clergyman stood for a moment irresolutely at the green door, and cast a longing glance in the direction of the Friary, where the van was still unloading, and then he bethought himself that, though Mattie had given orders about the weeding of the garden-paths, it would be as well to speak to Crump about the wire fence that was wanted for the poultry-yard; and as soon as he had made up his mind on this point he walked on briskly.

The last piece of furniture had just been carried in; but, as Mr. Drummond was picking his way through the straw and debris that littered the side-path, two girlish figures came out of the doorway full upon him.

He raised his hat involuntarily, but they drew back at once, and, as he went out, confused at this sudden rencontre, the sound of a light laugh greeted his ear.

“How annoying that we should always be meeting him!” observed Nan, innocently. “Don’t laugh, Phillis: he will hear you.”

“My dear, it must be fate,” returned Phillis solemnly. “I shall think it my duty to warn Dick if this goes on.” But, in spite of her mischievous speech, she darted a quick, interested look after the handsome young clergyman as he walked on. Both the girls stood in the porch for some minutes after they had made their retreat. They had come out to cool themselves and to get a breath of air, until a July sun and Mr. Drummond’s sudden appearance defeated their intention. They had no idea that they were watched from behind the screening geraniums in Mrs. Crump’s window. Both of them were enveloped in Dorothy’s bib-aprons, which hid their pretty rounded figures. Phillis’s cheeks were flushed, and her arms were bare to the dimpled elbows; and Nan’s brown hair was slightly dishevelled.

“We look just like cooks!” exclaimed Phillis, regarding her coarse apron with disfavor; but Nan stretched her arms with a little indifference and weariness.

“What does it matter how we look,—like cooks or housemaids? I am dreadfully tired; but we must go in and work, Phil. I wonder what has become of Dulce?” And then the charming vision disappeared from the young clergyman’s eyes, and he was free to fix his mind on the wire fence that was required for the poultry-yard.

As soon as he had accomplished his errand he set his face towards the vicarage, for he made up his mind suddenly that he would call on the Middletons, and perhaps on Mrs. Cheyne. The latter was a duty that he owed to his pastoral conscience; but there was no need for him to go to the Middletons’. Nevertheless, the father and daughter were his most intimate friends, and on all occasions he was sure of Miss Middleton’s sympathy. They lived at Brooklyn,—a low white house a little below the vicarage. It was a charming house, he always thought, so well arranged and well managed; and the garden—that was the colonel’s special hobby—was as pretty as a garden could be. The drawing-room looked shady and comfortable, for the French windows opened into a cool veranda, fitted up with flower-baskets and wicker chairs; and beyond lay the trim lawn, with beds of blazing verbenas and calceolarias. Miss Middleton’s work-table was just within one of the windows; but the colonel, in his gray summer suit, reclined in a lounging-chair in the veranda. He was reading the paper to his daughter, and was just in the middle of last night’s debate; nevertheless, he threw it aside, well pleased at the interruption.

“I knew how I should find you occupied,” observed Mr. Drummond, as he exchanged a smile with Miss Middleton. He was fully aware that politics were not to her taste, and yet every afternoon she listened to such reading, well content even with the sound of her father’s voice.

Elizabeth Middleton was certainly a charming person. Phillis had called her the “gray-haired girl,” and the title suited her. She was not a girl by any means, having reached her six-and-thirtieth year; but her hair was as silvery as an old woman’s, gray and plentiful, and soft as silk, and contrasted strangely with her still youthful face.

Without being handsome, Elizabeth Middleton was beautiful. Her expression was sweet and restful, and attracted all hearts. People who were acquainted with her said she was the happiest creature they knew,—that she simply diffused sunshine by her mere presence; such a contrast,

they would add, to her neighbor Mrs. Cheyne, who bore all her troubles badly and was of a proud, fretful disposition. But then Mrs. Cheyne had lost her husband and her two children, and led such a sad, lonely life; and no such troubles had fallen to Miss Middleton.

Elizabeth Middleton could afford to be happy, they said, for she was the delight of her father's eyes. Her young half-brother, Hammond, who was with his regiment in India, was not nearly so dear to the old man; and of course that was why she had never married, that her father's house might not be left desolate.

This is how people talked; but not a single person in Hadleigh knew that Elizabeth Middleton had had a great sorrow in her life.

She had been engaged for some years most happily, and with her father's consent, to one of his brother officers. Captain Sedgwick was of good family, but poor; and they were waiting for his promotion, for at that time Colonel Middleton would have been unable to give his daughter any dowry. Elizabeth was young and happy, and she could afford to wait. No girl ever gloried in her lover more than she did in hers. Capel Sedgwick was not only brave and singularly handsome, but he bore a reputation through the whole regiment for having a higher standard of duty than most men.

Promotion came at last, and, just as Elizabeth was gayly making preparations for her marriage, fatal tidings were brought to her. Major Sedgwick had gone to visit an old servant in the hospital who had been struck down with cholera; he had remained with him some time, and on his return to his bungalow the same fell disease had attacked him, and before many hours were over he was dead. The shock was a terrible one; in the first moments of her bitter loss, Elizabeth cried out that her misery was too great,—that all happiness was over for her in this world, and that she only prayed that she might be buried in the same grave with Capel.

The light had not yet come to the poor soul that felt itself afflicted past endurance and could find no reason for such pain. It could not be said that Elizabeth bore her trouble better than other girls would have borne theirs under like circumstances. She fretted and grew thin, and dashed herself wildly against the inevitable, only reproaching herself for her selfishness and want of submission when she looked at her father's care-worn face.

But then came a time when light and peace revisited the wrecked heart,—when confused reasonings no longer beset the poor weak brain and filled it with dismay and doubt,—when the Divine will became her will, and there was no longer submission, but a most joyful surrender. And no one, and least of all she herself, knew when the darkness was vanquished by that clear uprising of pure radiance, or how those brooding wings of peace settled on her soul. From that time, every human being that came within her radius was welcome as a new object of love. To give and yet to give, and never to be satisfied, was a daily necessity of life to Elizabeth. "Now there is some one more to love," she would say to herself, when a new acquaintance was brought to her; and, as the old adage is true that tells us love begets love, there was no more popular person in Hadleigh than Elizabeth Middleton. She had something to say in praise of every one; not that she was blind to the faults of her neighbors, but she preferred to be silent and ignore them.

And she was especially kind to Mattie. In the early days of their intimacy, the young vicar would often speak to her of his sister Grace and lament their enforced separation from each other. Miss Middleton listened sympathetically, with the same sweet attention that she gave to every man, woman, and child that laid claim to it; but once, when he had finished, she said, rather gravely,—

"Do you know, Mr. Drummond, that I think your mother was right?"

"Right in dooming Grace to such a life?" he said, pausing in utter surprise at her remark.

"Pardon me; it is not her mother who dooms her," returned Miss Middleton, quickly, "but duty,—her own sense of right,—everything that is sacred. If Mrs. Drummond had not decided that she could not be spared, I am convinced from all you tell me, that Grace would still have remained at home: her conscience would have been too strong for her."

"Well, perhaps you are right," he admitted, reluctantly. "Grace is a noble creature, and capable of any amount of self-sacrifice."

"I am sure of it," returned Miss Middleton, with sparkling eyes. "How I should like to know her! it would be a real pleasure and privilege; but I am very fond of your sister Mattie, too."

"Fond of Mattie!" It was hardly brotherly, but he could not help that incredulous tone in his voice. How could such a superior woman as Miss Middleton be even tolerant of Mattie?

"Oh, yes," she replied, quite calmly; "I have a great respect for your sister. She is so unselfish and amiable, and there is something so genuine in her. Before everything one wants truth," finished Elizabeth, taking up her work.

Now, as the young clergyman entered the room, she stretched out her hand to him with her usual beaming smile.

"This is good of you, to come so soon again," she said, making room for him between her father and herself. "But why have you not brought Mattie?" and Archie felt as though he had received a rebuke.

"She is finishing some work," he returned, a little confused; "that is, what you ladies call work. It is not always necessary for the clergywoman to pay visits, is it?"

“The clergywoman, as you call her, is doing too much. I was scolding her this morning for not sparing herself more: I thought she was not looking quite well, Mr. Drummond.”

“Oh, Mattie is well enough,” he replied, carelessly. He had not come to talk about his sister: a far more interesting subject was in his mind. “Do you know, colonel,” he went on, with some animation, “that you and I have new neighbors? Do you remember the young ladies in the blue cambric dresses?” And at this question the colonel threw aside his paper at once.

“Elizabeth has been telling me. I remember the young ladies perfectly. I could not help noticing them. They walked so well,—heads up, and as neat and trim as though they were on parade; pretty creatures, both of them. Elizabeth pretends not to be interested, but she is quite excited. Look at her!”

“Nay, father, it is you who can talk of nothing else; but it will be very nice to have such pleasant neighbors. How soon do you think we may call on them?”

And then Archie explained, with some little embarrassment, that he and Mattie thought of calling the following Monday and offering their services.

“That is very thoughtful of Mattie. She is such a kind-hearted little creature, and is always ready to serve everybody.”

And then they entered into a discussion on the new-comers that lasted so long that the tea-things made their appearance; and shortly afterwards Mr. Drummond announced that he must go and call on Mrs. Cheyne.

CHAPTER XVI.

A VISIT TO THE WHITE HOUSE.

Hitherto Mr. Drummond had acknowledged his afternoon to be a success. He had obtained a glimpse of the new-comers through Mrs. Crump’s screen of geraniums, and had listened with much interest to Colonel Middleton’s innocent gossip, while Miss Middleton had poured out their tea. Indeed, his attention had quite flattered his host.

“Really, Drummond is a very intelligent fellow,” he observed to his daughter, when they were at last left alone,—“a very intelligent fellow, and so thoroughly gentlemanly.”

“Yes, he is very nice,” returned Elizabeth; “and he seems wonderfully interested in our new neighbors.” And here she smiled a little archly.

There was no doubt that Mr. Drummond had fully enjoyed his visit. Nevertheless, as he left Brooklyn, and set his face towards the White House, his manner changed, and his face became somewhat grave.

He had told himself that he owed it to his pastoral conscience to call on Mrs. Cheyne; but, notwithstanding this monition, he disliked the duty, for he always felt on these occasions that he was hardly up to his office, and that this solitary member of his flock was not disposed to yield herself to his guidance. He was ready to pity her if she would allow herself to be pitied; but any expression of sympathy seemed repugnant to her. Any one so utterly lonely, so absolutely without interest in existence, he had never seen or thought to see; and yet he could not bring himself to like her, or to say more than the mere commonplace utterances of society. Though he was her clergyman, and bound by the sacredness of his office to be specially tender to the bruised and maimed ones of his flock, he could not get her to acknowledge her maimed condition to him, or to do anything but listen to him with cold attention, when he hinted vaguely that all human beings are in need of sympathy. Perhaps she thought him too young, and feared to find his judgments immature and one-sided; but certainly his visits to the White House were failures. Mrs. Cheyne was still young enough and handsome enough to need some sort of chaperonage: and though she professed to mock at conventionality, she acknowledged its claims in this respect by securing the permanent services of Miss Mewlstone—a lady of uncertain age and uncertain acquirements. It must be confessed that every one wondered at Mrs. Cheyne and her choice, for no one could be less companionable than Miss Mewlstone.

She was a stout, sleepy-looking woman, with a soft voice, and in placidity and a certain cosyness of exterior somewhat resembled a large white cat. Some people declared she absolutely purred, and certainly her small blue eyes were ready to close on all occasions. She always dressed in gray,—a very unbecoming color to a stout person,—and when not asleep or reading (for she was a great reader) she seemed always busy with a mass of soft fleecy wool. No one heard her ever voluntarily conversing with her patroness. They would drive together for hours, or pass whole evenings in the same room, scarcely exchanging a word. “Just so, my dear,” she would say, in return to any observation made to her by Mrs. Cheyne. “Just so Mewlstone,” a young wag once nicknamed her.

People stared incredulously when Mrs. Cheyne assured them her companion was a very superior woman. They thought it was only her satire, and did not believe her in the least. They

would have stared still more if they had really known the extent of Miss Mewlstone's acquirements.

"She seems so stupid, as though she cannot talk," one of Mrs. Cheyne's friends said.

"Oh, yes, she can talk, and very well too," returned that lady, quietly, "but she knows that I do not care about it; her silence is her great virtue in my eyes. And then she has tact, and knows when to keep out of the way," finished Mrs. Cheyne, with the utmost frankness; and, indeed, it may be doubted whether any other person would have retained her position so long at the White House.

Mrs. Cheyne was no favorite with the young pastor, nevertheless she was an exceedingly handsome woman. Before the bloom of her youth had worn off she had been considered absolutely beautiful. As regarded the form of her features, there was no fault to be found, but her expression was hardly pleasing. There was a hardness that people found a little repelling,—a bitter, dissatisfied droop of the lip, a weariness of gloom in the dark eyes, and a tendency to satire in her speech, that alienated people's sympathy.

"I am unhappy, but pity me if you dare!" seemed to be written legibly upon her countenance; and those who knew her best held their peace in her presence, and then went away and spoke softly to each other of the life that seemed wasted and the heart that was so hardened with its trouble. "What would the world be if every one were to bear their sorrows so badly?" they would say. "There is something heathenish in such utter want of resignation. Oh, yes, it was very sad, her losing her husband and children, but it all happened four or five years ago; and you know"—And here people's voices dropped a little ominously, for there were vague hints afloat that things had not always gone on smoothly at the White House, even when Mrs. Cheyne had her husband. She had been an only child, and had married the only survivor of a large family. Both were handsome, self-willed young people; neither had been used to contradiction. In spite of their love for each other, there had been a strife of wills and misunderstandings from the earliest days of their marriage. Neither knew what giving up meant, and before many months were over the White House witnessed many painful scenes. Herbert Cheyne was passionate, and at times almost violent; but there was no malice in his nature. He stormed furiously and forgave easily. A little forbearance would have turned him into a sweet-natured man; but his wife's haughtiness and resentment lasted long; she never acknowledged herself in the wrong, never made overtures of peace, but bore herself on every occasion as a sorely-injured wife, a state of things singularly provoking to a man of Herbert Cheyne's irritable temperament.

There was injudicious partisanship as regarded their children: while Mrs. Cheyne idolized her boy, her husband lavished most of his attentions on the baby girl,—"papa's girl," as she always called herself in opposition to "mother's boy."

Mrs. Cheyne really believed she loved her boy best, but when diphtheria carried off her little Jane also, she was utterly inconsolable. Her husband was far away when it happened: he had been a great traveller before his marriage, and latterly his matrimonial relations with his wife had been so unsatisfactory that virtual separation had ensued. Two or three months before illness, and then death, had devastated the nursery at the White House, he had set out for a long exploring expedition in Central Africa.

"You make my life so unbearable that, but for the children, I would never care to set foot in my home again," he had said to her, in one of his violent moods; and, though he repented of this speech afterwards, she could not be brought to believe that he had not meant it, and her heart had been hard against him even in their parting.

But before many months were over she would have given all she possessed—to her very life—to have recalled him to her side. She was childless, and her health was broken; but no such recall was possible. Vague rumors reached her of some miserable disaster: people talked of a missing Englishman. One of the little party had already succumbed to fever and hardship; by and by another followed; and the last news that reached them was that Herbert Cheyne lay at the point of death in the kraal of a friendly tribe. Since then the silence had been of the grave: not one of the party had survived to bring the news of his last moments: there had been illness and disaster from the first.

When Mrs. Cheyne recovered from the nervous disorder that had attacked her on the receipt of this news, she put on widow's mourning, and wore it for two years; then she sent for Miss Mewlstone, and set herself to go through with the burden of her life. If she found it heavy, she never complained: she was silent on her own as on other people's troubles. Only at the sight of a child of two or three years of age she would turn pale, and draw down her veil, and if it ran up to her, as would sometimes happen, she would put it away from her angrily, pushing it away almost with violence, and no child was ever suffered to cross her threshold.

The drawing-room at the White House was a spacious apartment, with four long windows opening on the lawn. Mrs. Cheyne was sitting in her low chair, reading, with Miss Mewlstone at the farther end of the room, with her knitting-basket beside her; two or three grayhounds were grouped near her. They all rushed forward with furious barks as Mr. Drummond was announced, and then leaped joyously round him. Mrs. Cheyne put down her book, and greeted him with a frosty smile.

She had laid aside her widow's weeds, but still dressed in black, the sombreness of her apparel harmonizing perfectly with her pale, creamy complexion. Her dress was always rich in material, and most carefully adjusted. In her younger days it had been an art with her,—almost a passion,—and it had grown into a matter of custom.

“You are very good to come again so soon, Mr. Drummond,” she said, as she gave him her hand. The words were civil, but a slight inflection on the word “soon” made Mr. Drummond feel a little uncomfortable. Did she think he called too often? He wished he had brought Mattie; only last time she had been so satirical, and had quizzed the poor little thing unmercifully; not that Mattie had found out that she was being quizzed.

“I hardly thought I should find you at home, it is so fine an afternoon; but I made the attempt, you see,” he continued, a little awkwardly.

“Your parochial conscience was uneasy, I suppose, because I was missing at church?” she returned, somewhat slyly. “You would make a capital overseer, Mr. Drummond,”—with a short laugh. “A headache is a good excuse, is it not? I had a headache, had I not, Miss Mewlstone?”

“Yes, my dear, just so,” returned Miss Mewlstone. She always called her patroness “my dear.”

“Miss Mewlstone gave me the heads of the sermon, so it was not quite labor lost, as regards one of your flock. I am afraid you think me a black sheep because I stay away so often,—a very black sheep, eh, Mr. Drummond?”

“It is not for me to judge,” he said, still more awkwardly. “Headaches are very fair excuses; and if one be not blessed with good health––”

“My health is perfect,” she returned, interrupting him ruthlessly. “I have no such convenient plea under which to shelter myself. Miss Mewlstone suffers far more from headaches than I do. Don’t you, Miss Mewlstone?”

“Just so; yes, indeed, my dear,” proceeded softly from the other end of the room.

“I am sorry to hear it,” commenced Mr. Drummond, in a sympathizing tone of voice. But his tormentor again interrupted him.

“I am a sad backslider, am I not? I wonder if you have a sermon ready for me? Do you lecture your parishioners, Mr. Drummond, rich as well as poor? What a pity it is you are so young! Lectures are more suitable with gray hair; a hoary head might have some chance against my satire. A woman’s tongue is a difficult thing to keep in order, is it not? I dare say you find that with Miss Mattie?”

Mr. Drummond was literally on thorns. He had no repartee ready. She was secretly exasperating him as usual, making his youth a reproach, and rendering it impossible for him to be his natural frank self with her. In her presence he was always at a disadvantage. She seemed to take stock of his learning and to mock at the idea of his pastoral claims. It was not the first time she had called herself a black sheep, or had spoken of her scanty attendances at church. But as yet he had not dared to rebuke her; he had a feeling that she might fling back his rebuke with a jest, and his dignity forbade this. Some day he owed it to his conscience to speak a word to her,—to tell her of the evil effects of such an example; but the convenient season had not yet arrived.

He was casting about in his own mind for some weighty sentence with which to answer her; but she again broke in upon his silence:

“It seems that I am to escape to-day. I hope you are not a lax disciplinarian; that comes of being young. Youth is more tolerant, they say, of other people’s errors: it has its own glass houses to mind.”

“You are too clever for me, Mrs. Cheyne,” returned the young man, with a deprecating smile that might have disarmed her. “No, I have not come to lecture: my mission is perfectly peaceful, as befits this lovely afternoon. I wonder what you ladies find to do all day?” he continued, abruptly changing the subject, and trying to find something that would not attract her satire.

Mrs. Cheyne seemed a little taken aback by this direct question; and then she drew up her beautiful head a little haughtily, and laughed.

“Ah, you are cunning, Mr. Drummond. You found me disposed to take the offensive in the matter of church-going, and now you are on another track. There is a lecture somewhere in the background. How doth the little busy bee, etc. Now, don’t frown,”—as Mr. Drummond knitted his brows and really looked annoyed: “I will not refuse to be catechised.”

“I should not presume to catechise you,” he returned, hastily. “I appeal to Miss Mewlstone if my question were not a very innocent one.”

“Just so; just so,” replied Miss Mewlstone; but she looked a little alarmed at this appeal. “Oh, very innocent; oh, very so.”

“With two against me I must yield,” returned Mrs. Cheyne, with a curl of her lip. “What do we do with our time, Miss Mewlstone? Your occupation speaks for itself: it is exquisitely feminine. Don’t tell Miss Mattie, Mr. Drummond, but I never work. I would as soon arm myself with a dagger as a needle or a pair of scissors. When I am not in the air, I paint. I only lay aside my palette for a book.”

“You paint!” exclaimed Archie, with sudden interest. It was the first piece of information he had yet gleaned.

“Yes,” she returned, indifferently: “one must do something to kill time, and music was never my forte. I sketch and draw and paint after my own sweet will. There are portfolios full of my sketches in there,”—with a movement of her hand towards a curtained recess. “No, I know what you are going to say: you will ask to see them; but I never show them to any one.”

“For what purpose, then, do you paint them?” were the words on his lips; but he forbore to utter them. But she read the question in his eyes.

“Did I not say one must kill time?” she returned, rather irritably: “the occupation is soothing: surely that is reason enough.”

“It is a good enough reason, I suppose,” he replied, reluctantly, for surely he must say a word here; “but one need not talk about killing time, with so much that one could do.”

Then there came a gleam of suppressed mischief in her eyes:

“Yes, I know: you may spare me that. I will listen to it all next Sunday, if you will, when you have it your own way, and one cannot sin against decorum and answer you. Yes, yes, there is so much to do, is there not?—hungry people to be fed, and sick to visit,—all sorts of disagreeables that people call duties. Ah, I am a sad sinner! I only draw for my own amusement, and leave the poor old world to get on without me. What a burden I must be on your conscience, Mr. Drummond,—heavier than all the rest of your parish. What, are you going already? and Miss Mewlstone has never given you any tea.”

Then Archie explained, very shortly, that he had partaken of that beverage at Brooklyn, and his leave-taking was rather more formal than usual. He was very much surprised, as he stood at the hall door, that always stood open in the summer, to hear the low sweep of a dress over the tessellated pavement behind him, and to see a white pudgy hand laid on his coat-sleeve.

“My dear Miss Mewlstone, how you startled me!”

“Just so; yes, I am afraid I did, Mr. Drummond; but I just wanted to say, never mind all that nonsense; come again: she likes to see you; she does, indeed. It is only her way to talk so; she means no harm, poor dear,—oh, none at all!”

“Excuse me,” returned Archie, in a hurt voice, “but I think you are mistaken. Mrs. Cheyne does not care for my visits, and shows me she does not: if it were not my duty, I should not come so often.”

“No, no; just so, but all the same it rouses her and does her good. It is a bad day with her, poor dear!—the very day the darlings were taken ill, four years ago. Now, don’t go away and fancy things, don’t, there’s a dear young man; come as often as you can, and try and do her good.”

“Oh, if I only knew how that is to be done!” returned Archie, slowly; but he was mollified in spite of himself. There were tears in Miss Mewlstone’s little blue eyes: perhaps she was a good creature after all.

“I will come again, but not just yet,” he said, nodding to her good-humoredly; but as he walked down the road he told himself that Mrs. Cheyne had never before made herself so disagreeable, and that it would be long before he set foot in the White House again.

CHAPTER XVII.

“A FRIEND IN NEED.”

Human nature is weak, and we are told there are mixed motives to be found even in the holiest actions. Mr. Drummond never could be brought to acknowledge even to himself the reason why he took so much pains to compose his sermon for that Sunday. Without possessing any special claim to eloquence, he had always been earnest and painstaking, bestowing much labor on the construction and finish of his sentences, which were in consequence more elaborate than original. At times, when he took less pains and was simpler in style, he seldom failed to satisfy his hearers. His voice was pleasant and well modulated, and his delivery remarkably quiet and free from any tricks of gestures.

But on this occasion his subject baffled him; he wrote and rewrote whole pages, and then grew discontented with his work. On the Sunday in question he woke with the conviction that something out of the common order of events distinguished the day from other days; but even as this thought crossed his mind he felt ashamed of himself, and was in consequence a little more dictatorial than usual at the breakfast-table.

The inhabitants of Hadleigh were well accustomed to the presence of strangers in their church. In the season there was a regular influx of visitors that filled the lodging-houses to overflowing. Hadleigh had always prided itself on its gentility, as a watering-place it was select and exclusive; only the upper middle classes, and a sprinkling of the aristocracy, were the habitual frequenters of the little town. It was too quiet; it offered too few attractions to draw the crowds that flocked to other places. Mr. Drummond’s congregation was well used by this time to see new faces in the strangers’ pew; nevertheless, a little thrill of something like surprise and excitement moved a few of the younger members as Nan and her sisters walked down the aisle, with their mother following them.

“The mother is almost as good-looking as her daughters,” thought Colonel Middleton, as he

regarded the group through his gold-mounted eye-glasses, and Miss Middleton looked up for an instant from her prayer-book. Even Mrs. Cheyne roused from the gloomy abstraction which was her usual approach to devotion, and looked long and curiously at the three girlish faces before her. It was refreshing even to her to see anything so fresh and bright-looking.

Nan and her sisters were perfectly oblivious of the sensation they were making. Nan's pretty face was a trifle clouded: the strange surroundings, the sight of all those people unknown to them, instead of the dear, familiar faces that had always been before her, gave the girl a dreary feeling of oppression and dismay. Her voice quavered audibly as she sang, and one or two drops fell on her prayer-book as she essayed to join in the petitions.

"Why is there not a special clause in the Litany for those who are perplexed and in poverty? It is not only from murder and sudden death one need pray to be delivered," thought Nan, with much sinking of heart. "Oh, how helpless they were,—so young, and only girls, with a great unknown world before them, and Dick away, ignorant of their worst troubles, and too youthful a knight to win his spurs and pledge himself to their service!"

Nan's sweet downcast face drew many eyes in the direction of the great square pew in which they sat. Phillis intercepted some of these looks, as her attention insensibly wandered during the service. It was wrong, terribly wrong of course, but her thoughts would not concentrate themselves on the lesson the young vicar was reading in his best style. She was not heavy-hearted like Nan; on the contrary, little thrills of excitement, of impatience, of repressed amusement, pervaded her mind, as she looked at the strange faces round her "They would not be long strange," she thought: "some of them would be her neighbors. What would they say, all these people, when they knew––" And here Phillis held her breath a moment. People were wondering even now who they were. They had dressed themselves that morning, rehearsing their parts, as it were, with studied simplicity. The gown Nan wore was as inexpensive as a gown could be; her hat was a model of neatness and propriety: nevertheless, Phillis groaned in spirit as she glanced at her. Where had she got that style? She looked like a young princess who was playing at Arcadia. Would people ever dare to ask her to work for them? Would they not beg her pardon, and cry shame on themselves for entertaining such a thought for a moment? Phillis almost envied Nan, who was shedding salt tears on her prayer-book. She thought she was absorbed in her devotions, while her own thoughts would wander so sadly; and then a handsome face in the opposite pew attracted her attention. Surely that must be Mrs. Cheyne, who lived in the White House near them, of whom Nan had talked,—the poor woman who had lost husband and children and who lived in solitary state. The sermon had now commenced, but Phillis turned a deaf ear to the sentences over which Mr. Drummond had expended so much labor: her attention was riveted by the gloomy beautiful face before her, which alternately attracted and repelled her.

As though disturbed by some magnetic influence, Mrs. Cheyne raised her eyes slowly and looked at Phillis. Something in the girl's keen-eyed glance seemed to move her strangely. The color crept into her pale face, and her lip quivered: a moment afterwards she drew down her veil and leaned back in her seat and Phillis, somewhat abashed, endeavored fruitlessly to gather up the thread of the sermon.

"There! it is over! We have made our *debut*," she said, a little recklessly, as they walked back to Beach House, where Mrs. Challoner and Dulce were still staying. And as Nan looked at her, a little shocked and mystified by this unusual flippancy, she continued in the same excited way:

"Was it not strange Mr. Drummond choosing that text, 'Consider the lilies'? He looked at us; I am sure he did, mother. It was quite a tirade against dress and vanity; but I am sure no one could find fault with us."

"It was a very good sermon, and I think he seems a very clever young man," returned Mrs. Challoner, with a sigh, for the service had been a long weariness for her. She had not been unmindful of the attention her girls had caused; but if people only knew—And here the poor lady had clasped her hands and put up petitions that were certainly not in the Litany.

Phillis seemed about to say something, but she checked herself, and they were all a little silent until they reached the house. This first Sunday was an infliction to them all: it was a day of enforced idleness. There was too much time for thought and room for regret. In spite of all Phillis's efforts,—and she rattled on cheerily most of the afternoon,—Mrs. Challoner got one of her bad headaches, from worry, and withdrew to her room, attended by Dulce, who volunteered to bathe her head and read her to sleep.

The church-bells were just ringing for the evening service, and Nan rose, as usual, to put on her hat; but Phillis stopped her:

"Oh, Nan, do not let us go to church again this evening. I am terribly wicked to-day, I know, but somehow I cannot keep my thoughts in order. So what is the use of making the attempt? Let us take out our prayer-books and sit on the beach: it is low tide, and a walk over the sands would do us good after our dreadful week."

"If you are sure it would not be wrong," hesitated Nan, whose conscience was a little hard to convince in such matters.

"No, no. And the run will do Laddie good. The poor little fellow has been shut up in this room all day. We need not tell the mother. She would be shocked, you know. But we never have stayed away from church before, have we? And, to tell you the truth," continued Phillis, with an unsteady laugh that betrayed agitation to her sister's ear, "though I faced it very well this morning, I do not feel inclined to go through it again. People stared so. And I could not help

thinking all the time, ‘If they only knew!’—that was the thought that kept buzzing in my head. If only Mr. Drummond and all those people knew!”

“What does it matter what people think?” returned Nan. But she said it languidly. In her heart she was secretly dismayed at this sudden failure of courage. Phillis had been quite bold and merry all the day, almost reckless in her speeches.

“I am glad we came. This will do us both good,” said Nan, gently, as they left the parade behind them, and went slowly over the shelving beach, with Laddie rolling like a clumsy black ball about their feet. Just before them there was a pretty black-timbered cottage, covered with roses, standing quite low on the shore, and beyond this was nothing but shingly beach, and a stretch of wet, yellow sand, on which the sun was shining. There was a smooth white boulder standing quite alone, on which the girls seated themselves. The tide was still going out; and the low wash of waves sounded pleasantly in their ears as they advanced and then receded. A shimmer of silvery light played upon the water, and a rosy tinge began to tint the horizon.

“How quiet and still it is!” said Phillis, in an awe-struck voice. “When we are tired we must come here to rest ourselves. How prettily those baby waves seem to babble! it is just like the gurgle of baby laughter. And look at Laddie splashing in that pool: he is after that poor little crab. Come here, you rogue!” But Laddie, intent upon his sport, only cocked his ear restlessly and refused to obey.

“Yes, it is lovely,” returned Nan. “There is quite a silvery path over the water; by and by the sunset clouds will be beautiful. But what is the matter, dear?” as Phillis sighed and leaned heavily against her; and then, as she turned, she saw the girl’s eyes were wet.

“Oh, Nan! shall we have strength for it? That is what I keep asking myself to-day. No you must not look so frightened. I am brave enough generally, and I do not mean to lose pluck; but now and then the thought will come to me, Shall we have strength to go through with it?”

“We must think of each other; that must keep us up,” returned Nan, whose ready sympathy fully understood her sister’s mood. Only to Nan would Phillis ever own her failure of courage or fears for the future. But now and then the brave young heart needed comfort, and always found it in Nan’s sympathy.

“It was looking at your dear beautiful face that made me feel so suddenly bad this morning,” interrupted Phillis, with a sort of sob. “It was not the people so much; they only amused and excited me, and I kept thinking, ‘If they only knew!’ But, Nan, when I looked at you—oh, why are you so nice and pretty, if you have got to do this horrid work?”

“I am not a bit nicer than you and Dulce,” laughed Nan, embracing her, for she never could be made to understand that by most people she was considered their superior in good looks. The bare idea made her angry. “It is worse for you, Phillis, because you are so clever and have so many ideas. But there! we must not go on pitying each other, or else, indeed, we shall undermine our little stock of strength.”

“But don’t you feel terribly unhappy sometimes?” persisted Phillis. Neither of them mentioned Dick, and yet he was in both their minds.

“Perhaps I do,” returned Nan, simply; and then she added, with quaintness that was pathetic, “You see, we are so unused to the feeling, and it is over-hard at first: by and by we shall be more used to not having our own way in things.”

“I think I could give up that readily, if I could be sure you and Dulce were not miserable,” sighed Phillis.

“That is what I say,” returned Nan. “Don’t you see how simple and beautiful that is? Thinking of each other gives us strength to go through with it all. This evening trying to cheer you up has done me good. I do not feel the least afraid of people to-night. Looking at that sea and sky makes one feel the littleness and unreality of all these worries. What does it matter—what does anything matter—if we only do our duty and love each other, and submit to the Divine will?” finished Nan, reverently, who seldom spoke of her deeper feelings, even to Phillis.

“Nan, you are a saint,” returned Phillis, enthusiastically. The worried look had left her eyes; they looked clear and bright as usual. “Oh, what a heathen I have been to-day! but, as Dulce is so fond of saying, ‘I am going to be good. I will read the evening Psalms to you, in token of my resolution, if you like. But wait: is there not some one coming across the sand! How eerie it looks, such a tall black figure standing between the earth and sky!”

Phillis had good sight, or she would hardly have distinguished the figure, which was now motionless, at such a distance. In another moment she even announced that its draperies showed it to be a woman, before she opened her book and commenced reading.

There is something very striking in a lonely central figure in a scene, the outline cuts so sharply against the horizon. Nan’s eyes seemed riveted on it as she listened to Phillis’s voice; it seemed to her as immovable as a Sphinx, its rigidity lending a sort of barrenness and forlornness to the landscape, a black edition of human nature set under a violet and opal sky.

She almost started when it moved, at last, with a steady bearing, as it seemed, towards them; then curiosity quickened into interest, and she touched Phillis’s arm, whispering breathlessly,—

“The Sphinx moves! Look—is not that Mrs. Cheyne, the lady who lives at the White House near us, who always looks so lonely and unhappy?”

“Hush!” returned Phillis, “she will hear you;” and then Mrs. Cheyne approached with the same

swift even walk. She looked at them for a moment, as she passed, with a sort of well-bred surprise in her air, as though she marvelled to see them there; her black dress touched Laddie, and he caught at it with an impotent bark.

The sisters must have made a pretty picture, as they sat almost clinging together on the stone: one of Nan's little white hands rested on Laddie's head, the other lay on Phillis's lap. Phillis glanced up from her book, keen-eyed and alert in a moment; she turned her head to look at the stranger that had excited her interest, and then rose to her feet with a little cry of dismay.

"Oh, Nan, I am afraid she has hurt herself! She gave such a slip just now. I wonder what has happened? She is leaning against the breakwater, too. Shall we go and ask her if she feels ill or anything?"

"You may go," was Nan's answer. Nevertheless, she followed Phillis.

Mrs. Cheyne looked up at them a little sharply as they came towards her. Her face was gray and contracted with pain.

"I have slipped on a wet stone, and my foot has somehow turned on me," she said, quickly, as Phillis ran up to her. "It was very stupid. I cannot think how it happened; but I have certainly sprained my ankle. It gives me such pain. I cannot move."

"Oh, dear, I am so sorry!" returned Phillis, good-naturedly; and, in the most natural manner, she knelt down on the beach, and took the injured foot in her hands. "Yes, I can feel it is swelling dreadfully: we must try and get your boot off before the attempt gets too painful." And she commenced unfastening it with deft fingers.

"How am I to walk without my boot?" observed Mrs. Cheyne, a little drily, as she looked down on the girl; but here Nan interposed in her brisk sensible way:

"You must not walk; you must not think of such a thing. We will wet our handkerchiefs in the salt water, and bind up your ankle as well as we can; and then one of us will walk over to the White House for assistance. Your servants could easily obtain a wheeled chair."

"You knew I lived at the White House, then?" returned Mrs. Cheyne, arching her eyebrows in some surprise; but she offered no opposition to Nan's plan. The removal of the boot had brought on a sensation of faintness, and she sat perfectly still and quiet while the girls swathed the foot in wet bandages.

"It is a little easier now," she observed, gratefully. "How neatly you have done it! you must be used to such work. I am really very much obliged to you both for your kindly help; and now I am afraid I must trouble you further if I am ever to reach home."

"I will go at once," returned Nan, cheerfully; "but I will leave my sister for fear you should feel faint again: besides, it is so lonely."

"Oh, I am used to loneliness!" was the reply, as a bitter expression crossed her face.

Phillis, who was still holding the sprained foot in her lap, looked up in her eager way.

"I think one gets used to everything; that is a merciful dispensation; but all the same I hope you will not send me away. I dearly like to be useful; and at present my object is to prevent your foot coming into contact with these stones. Are you really in less pain now?—you look dreadfully pale."

"Oh, that is nothing!" she returned, with a smile so sudden and sweet that it quite startled Phillis, for it lit up her face like sunshine; but almost before she caught it, it was gone. "How good you are to me! and yet I am a perfect stranger!" and then she added, as though with an afterthought, "But I saw you in church this morning."

Phillis nodded: the question certainly required no answer.

"If I knew you better, I should ask why your eyes questioned me so closely this morning. Do you know, Miss—Miss-–" And here she hesitated and smiled, waiting for Phillis to fill up the blank.

"My name is Challoner,—Phillis Challoner," replied Phillis, coloring a little; and then she added, frankly, "I am afraid you thought me rude, and that I stared at you, but my thoughts were all topsy-turvy this morning and refused to be kept in order. One feels curious, somehow, about the people among whom one has come to live."

"Have you come to live here?" asked Mrs. Cheyne, eagerly, and a gleam of pleasure shot into her dark eyes,—"you, and your mother and sisters?"

"Yes; we have just come to the Friary,—a little cottage standing on the Braidwood Road."

Her manner became a little constrained and reserved as she said this: the charming frankness disappeared.

"The Friary!" echoed Mrs. Cheyne; and then she paused for a moment, and her eyes rested searchingly on Phillis. "That shabby little cottage!" was the thought that filled up the outline of her words; but, though she felt inward surprise and a momentary disappointment, there was no change in the graciousness of her manner. Never before had she so thawed to any one: but the girl's sweet ministry had won her heart. "Then you will be near me,—just at my gates? We shall be close neighbors. I hope you will come and see me, Miss Challoner."

Poor Phillis! the blood suddenly rushed over her face at this. How was she to answer without appearing ungracious?—and yet at this moment how could she explain?

“If you please, we are dressmakers.” Oh, no! such words as these would not get themselves said. It was too abrupt, too sudden, altogether: she was not prepared for such a thing. Oh, why had she not gone to the White House instead of Nan? Her officiousness had brought this on her. She could not put the poor foot off her lap and get up and walk away to cool her hot cheeks.

“Thank you; you are very good,” she stammered, feeling herself an utter fool: she,—Phillis,—the clever one!

Mrs. Cheyne seemed rather taken aback by the girl’s sudden reserve and embarrassment.

“I suppose you think I should call first, and thank you for your kindness,” she returned, quickly; “but I was afraid my foot would keep me too long a prisoner. And, as we are to be neighbors, I hardly thought it necessary to stand on ceremony; but if you would rather wait––”

“Oh, no,” replied Phillis, in despair; “we will not trouble you to do that! Nan and I will call and ask after your foot, and then we will explain. There is a little difficulty: you might not care to be friends with us if you knew,” went on Phillis with burning cheeks; “but we will call and explain. Oh, yes, Nan and I will call!”

“Do; I shall expect you,” returned Mrs. Cheyne, half amused and half mystified at the girl’s obvious confusion. What did the child mean? They were gentle-people,—one could see that at a glance. They were in reduced circumstances: they had come down to Hadleigh to retrench. Well, what did that matter? People’s wealth or poverty never affected her; she would think none the less well of them for that; she would call at the Friary and entertain them at the White House with as much pleasure as though they lived in a palace. The little mystery piqued her, and yet excited her interest. It was long since she had interested herself so much in anything. To Miss Middleton she had always been cold and uncertain. Mr. Drummond she treated with a mixture of satire and haughtiness that aroused his ire. Phillis’s frankness and simplicity had won her for a moment to her earlier and better self: she conceived an instantaneous liking for the girl who looked at her with such grave kindly glances. “I shall expect you, remember,” she repeated, as Nan at that moment appeared in sight.

“Oh, yes, Nan and I will come,” returned Phillis, slowly, and almost solemnly; but an instant afterwards a flicker of amusement played round her mouth. It was painful, of course; but, still, how droll it was!

“How long you have been, Nan!” she exclaimed, a little unreasonably, as Nan ran towards them, flushed and breathless from her haste.

“It has not been long to me,” observed Mrs. Cheyne, pointedly. She talked more to Nan than to Phillis after this, until the servants appeared with the wheeled chair; but nevertheless her last words were for Phillis. “Remember your promise,” was all she said, as she held out her hand to the girl; and Phillis tried to smile in answer, though it was rather a failure after all.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DOROTHY BRINGS IN THE BEST CHINA.

“What a fool I made of myself yesterday! but to-day Richard is himself again,” said Phillis, as she gathered up another muslin curtain in her arms ready to hand to Nan, who was mounted on some steps. It was only Monday afternoon, but the girls had done wonders: the work-room, as they called it, was nearly finished. The great carved wardrobe and mahogany table had been polished by Dorothy’s strong hands. Mrs. Challoner’s easy-chair and little work-table at one window looked quite inviting; the sewing-machine and Nan’s rosewood davenport were in their places. A hanging cupboard of old china, and a few well-bound books, gave a little coloring and finish, and one or two fine old prints that had hung in the dining-room at Glen Cottage had been disposed with advantage on the newly-papered walls. An inlaid clock ticked on the mantelpiece, and some handsome ruby-colored vases stood on either side of it. Nan was quite right when she had glanced round her a few minutes ago in a satisfied manner and said no one need be ashamed of living in such a room.

“Our pretty things make it look almost too nice for the purpose,” she continued, handling a precious relic, a Sevres cup and saucer, that had been her especial pride in old days. “I think you were wrong, Phil, not to have the china in the other room.”

“No, indeed; I want people to see it and be struck with our taste,” was Phillis’s frank answer. “Think what pleasure it will give the poor ladies when their dresses are being tried on. Don’t you remember the basket of wax fruit at Miss Slinders’s, when we were small children? I thought it the loveliest work of art, and feasted my eyes all the time Miss Slinders was fitting my pink frock. Now, our pictures and china will refresh people’s eyes in the same way.”

Nan smiled and shook her head, as she dusted and arranged her treasures. The china was very dear to her,—far more than the books Phillis was arranging on the chiffonnier. The Dresden figures that Dick had given to her mother were among them. She did not care for strangers to

look at them and appraise their value. They were home treasures,—sacred relics of their past. The last time she had dusted them, a certain young man of her acquaintance had walked through the open window whistling “Blue bonnets over the Border,” and had taken up his station beside her, hindering her work with his chattering. Dulce was in the upper regions, unpacking a box in her mother’s room. Mrs. Challoner was coming home the next day, and Dorothy and she were hard at work getting things in order.

When Phillis made her downright speech, Nan looked down from her lofty perch, and held out her arms for the curtain.

“Richard is always himself, my dear,” she said, softly. “Do you know when you are down, Phil, I feel as though we are all at a stand-still, and there’s no getting on at all? and then at one of your dear droll speeches the sunshine comes out again, and we are all as right as possible.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” was Phillis’s blunt answer; but she could not help being pleased at the compliment. She looked up archly at Nan, as the mass of soft white drapery lay between them; and then they both broke into a laugh, just as two shadows seemed to glide past the window, and a moment afterwards the house-bell sounded. “Visitors!—oh, Nan!” And Phillis glanced down at the neat bib apron that she wore over her cambric dress.

“Don’t be afraid; Dorothy will have too much sense to admit them,” returned Nan, quite indifferently, as she went up a step higher to hang up the curtain.

Phillis was still holding it; but her manner was not quite so well assured. She thought she heard Dulce’s voice in confabulation with the stranger. A moment afterwards Dulce came briskly into the room.

“Nan, Mr. Drummond and his sister have kindly called to see us. We are not in order, of course. Oh, dear!” as Nan looked down on them with startled eyes, not venturing to descend from her perch. “I ought not to have brought them in here,” looking half mischievously and half guiltily at the young clergyman, who stood hat in hand on the threshold.

“It is I who ought not to have intruded,” he began, in a perfect agony of embarrassment, blushing over his face like a girl as Nan looked down at him in much dignity, but Mattie, who was behind him, pushed forward in her usual bustling way.

“Oh, Miss Challoner, it is too bad! I told Archie that we ought not to come too soon––” but Phillis stopped her with an outstretched hand of welcome.

“What is too bad? I call it very kind and friendly of you both: one hardly expected to find such good neighbors. Nan, if that curtain is finished I think you had better come down. Take care; those steps are rickety: perhaps Mr. Drummond will help you.”

“Let me do the other ones for you. I don’t think those steps are safe!” exclaimed Archie, with sudden inspiration.

No one at home would have believed such a thing of him. Mattie’s eyes grew quite round and fixed with astonishment at the sight. He had not even shaken hands with Nan, yet there he was, mounted in her place, slipping in the hooks with dexterous hands, while Nan quietly held up the curtain.

Months afterwards the scene came back on Archibald Drummond with a curious thrill half of pain and half of amusement. How had he done it? he wondered. What had made him all at once act in a way so unlike himself?—for, with the best intention, he was always a little stiff and constrained with strangers. Yet there he was laughing as though he had known them all his life, because Nan had rebuked him gravely for slipping two hooks into one ring. Months afterwards he recalled it all: Nan glancing up at him with quietly amused eyes, Phillis standing apart, looking quaint and picturesque in her bib-apron, Dulce with the afternoon sunshine lighting up her brown hair; the low old-fashioned room, with the great carved wardrobe, and the cupboard of dainty china; the shady little lawn outside, with Laddie rolling among the daisies. What made it suddenly start up in his memory like a picture one has seen and never quite forgotten?

“Thank you, Mr. Drummond. You have done it so nicely,” said Nan, with the utmost gravity, as he lingered, almost unwilling to descend to conventionality again. Dulce and Phillis were busily engaged looping up the folds. “Now we will ask Dorothy to remove the steps and then we can sit down comfortably.”

But here Archie interposed:

“Why need you call any one? Tell me where I shall put them.” Mattie broke into a loud laugh. She could not help it. It was too droll of Archie. She must write and tell Grace.

Archie heard the laugh as he marched out of the room with his burden, and it provoked him excessively. He made some excuse about admiring Laddie, and went out on the lawn for a few minutes, accompanied by Nan. When they came back, the curtains were finished and the two girls were talking to Mattie. Mattie seemed quite at ease with them.

“We have such a dear old garden at the vicarage,” she was saying, as her brother came into the room. “I am not much of a gardener myself but Archie works for hours at a time. He talks of getting a set of tennis down from town. We think it will help to bring people together. You must promise to come and play sometimes of an afternoon when you have got the cottage in order.”

“Thank you,” returned Phillis; and then Nan and she exchanged looks. A sort of blankness came over the sisters’ faces,—a sudden dying out of the brightness and fun.

Mr. Drummond grew a little alarmed:

“I hope you will not disappoint my sister. She has few friends, and is rather lonely, missing so many sisters; and you are such close neighbors.”

“Yes, we are close neighbors,” returned Phillis. But her voice was a little less clear than usual; and, to Archie’s astonishment,—for they all seemed talking comfortably together,—her face had grown suddenly pale. “But you must not think us unkind if we refuse your hospitality,” she went on, looking straight at him, and not at Mattie. “Owing to painful circumstances, we have made up our minds that no such pleasure are in store for us. We must learn to do without things: must we not, Nan?”

“Yes, indeed,” returned Nan, very gravely. And then the tears came into Dulce’s eyes. Was Phillis actually going to tell them? She would have run away, only she was ashamed of such cowardice.

“I hope you do not mean to do without friends,” stammered Archie. “That would be too painful to bear.” He thought they were excusing themselves from partaking of their neighbors’ hospitality because they were too poor to return it, and wanted to set them at their ease. “You may have reasons for wishing to be quiet. Perhaps Mrs. Challoner’s health, and—and—parties are not always desirable,” he went on, floundering, a little in his speech, and signing to Mattie to come to his help, which she did at once, breathlessly:

“Parties! Oh, dear, no! They are such a trouble and expense. But tennis and tea on the lawn is just nothing,—nothing at all. One can give a little fruit and some home-made cake. No one need scruple at that. Archie is not rich,—clergymen never are, you know,—but he means to entertain his friends as well as he can. I should like you to see Miss Middleton. She is a charming person. And the colonel is as nice as possible. We will just ask them to meet you in a quiet way, and, if your mother is not too much of an invalid, I hope she will give us the pleasure of her company, for when people are such close neighbors it is stupid to stand on ceremony,” finished Mattie, bringing herself rapidly to a full stop.

“You are very kind. But you do not understand,” returned Phillis. And then she stopped, and a gleam of fun came into her eyes. Her sharp ears had caught the rattle of cups and saucers. Actually, that absurd Dorothy was bringing in tea in the old way, making believe that they were entertaining their friends in Glen Cottage fashion! She must get out the truth somehow before the pretty purple china made its appearance. “Oh,” she went on, with a sort of gulp, as though she felt the sudden touch of cold water, “you come here meaning kindly, and asking us to your house, and taking compassion upon us because we are strangers and lonely, and you do not know that we are poor, and that we have lost our money, and––” But here Mr. Drummond was absolutely rude enough to interrupt her:

“What does that matter, my dear Miss Challoner? Do you think that is of any consequence in mine or my sister’s eyes? I suppose if I be your clergyman––” And then he stopped, and stroked his beard in an embarrassed way; for though Phillis’s face was pale, there was laughter in her eyes.

“Oh, if this be a parochial visit,” she began, demurely; “but you should not have talked of tennis, Mr. Drummond. How do you know we are not Roman Catholics, or Wesleyans, or even Baptists, or Bible Christians? We might have gone to your church out of curiosity on Sunday, or to see the fashions. There is not a Quaker cut about us; but, still, we might be Unitarians, and people would not find it out,” continued Phillis, looking with much solemnity at the bewildered young Anglican.

The situation was too absurd; there was no knowing to what length Phillis’s recklessness and sense of humor would have brought her, only Nan’s good sense came to the rescue:

“Phillis is only in fun, Mr. Drummond. Of course we are Church-people: and of course we hope to attend your services. I am sure my mother will be pleased to see you, when you are kind enough to call. At Oldfield we were always good friends with our clergyman: he was such a dear old man.”

“Do you mean to forbid my sister’s visits, then?” asked Archie, looking anxiously at her sweet face; Nan looked so pretty, in spite of her discomposure.

“Oh, no! we do not mean to be so rude: do we, Phillis? We shall be so glad to see Miss Drummond; but—but,” faltered Nan, losing breath a little, “we have been unfortunate, and must work for our living; and your sister perhaps would not care to visit dressmakers.”

“What!” exclaimed Archie: he almost jumped out of his chair in his surprise.

Phillis had uttered a faint “Bravo, Nan!” but no one heard her. Dulce’s cheeks were crimson, and she would not look at any one; but Nan, who had got out the dreaded word, went on bravely, and was well hugged by Phillis in private afterwards.

“We are not clever enough for governesses,” continued Nan, with a charming smile, addressing Mattie, who sat and stared at her, “and there was nothing we dreaded so much as to separate: so, as we had capable fingers and were fond of work, my sister Phillis planned this for us. Now you see, Miss Drummond, why we could not accept your kind hospitality. Whatever we have been, we cannot expect people to visit us now. If you would be good enough to recommend us, and help us in our efforts to make ourselves independent, that is all we can ask of you.”

“Well, I don’t know,” returned Mattie, bluntly: “as far as I am concerned, I am never ashamed of any honest calling. What do you say, Archie?”

“I say it is all very proper and laudable,” he returned, hesitating; “but surely—surely there must

be some other way more suitable to ladies in your position! Let me call again when your mother comes, and see if there is nothing that I can do or recommend better than this. Yes, I am sure if I can only talk to your mother, we could find some other way than this."

"Indeed, Mr. Drummond, you must do nothing of the kind," replied Phillis, in an alarmed voice: "the poor dear mother must not be disturbed by any such talk! You mean it kindly, but we have made up our own minds, Nan and I: we mean to do without the world and live in one of our own; and we mean to carry out our plan in defiance of everything and everybody; and, though you are our clergyman and we are bound to listen to your sermons, we cannot take your advice in this."

"But—but I would willingly act as a friend," began the young man, confusedly, looking not at her, but at Nan.

He was so bewildered, so utterly taken aback, he hardly knew what he said.

"Here comes Dorothy with the tea," interrupted Nan, pleasantly, as though dismissing the subject: "she has not forgotten our old customs. Friends always came around us in the afternoon. Mr. Drummond, perhaps you will make yourself useful and cut the cake. Dorothy, you need not have unpacked the best silver teapot." Nan was moving about in her frank hospitable way. Laddie was whining for cake, and breaking into short barks of impatience. "This is one of our Glen Cottage cakes. Susan always prides herself on the recipe," said Nan, calmly, as she pressed it on her guests.

Mr. Drummond almost envied his sister as she praised the cake and asked for the recipe. He had always found fault with her manners; but now nothing could be finer than her simplicity. Pure good nature and innate womanliness were teaching Mattie something better than tact. Nan had dropped a painful subject, and she would not revive it in her brother's presence. There would be plenty of time for her to call and talk it over with them quietly. Help them!—of course she would help them. They should have her new silk dress that Uncle Conway had just sent her. It was a risk, for perhaps they might spoil it; but such fine creatures should have a chance. At present she would only enjoy the nice tea, and talk to poor little frightened Dulce, who seemed unable to open her lips after her sister's disclosure.

Archie could not emulate her ease: a man is always at a disadvantage in such a case. His interest had sustained no shock: it was even stimulated by what he had just heard; but his sympathy seemed all at once congealed, and he could find no vent for it. In spite of his best efforts his manner grew more and more constrained every moment.

Nan looked at him more than once with reproachful sweetness. She thought they had lost caste in his eyes; but Phillis, who was shrewd and sharp-set in her wits, read him more truly. She knew—having already met a score of such—how addicted young Englishmen are to *mauvaise honte*, and how they will hide acute sensibilities under blunt and stolid exteriors; and there was a certain softness in Mr. Drummond's eye that belied his stiffness. Most likely he was very sorry for them, and did not know how to show it; and in this she was right.

Mr. Drummond was very sorry for them; but he was still more grieved for himself. The Oxford fellow had not long been a parish priest, and he could not at all understand the position in which he found himself,—taking tea with three elegant young dressmakers who talked the purest English and had decided views on tennis and horticulture. He had just been congratulating himself on securing such companionship for his sister and himself. Being rather classical-minded, he had been calling them the gray-eyed Graces, and one of them at least "a daughter of the gods,—divinely tall and most divinely fair;" for where had he seen anything to compare with Nan's bloom and charming figure? Dressmakers!—oh, if only Grace were at hand, that he might talk to her, and gain her opinion how he was to act in such case! Grace had the stiff-necked Drummond pride as well as he, and would hesitate long behind the barriers of conventionality. No wonder, with all these thoughts passing through his mind, that Nan, with her bright surface talk, found him a little vague.

It was quite a relief to all the party when Mattie gave the signal for departure and the bell was rung for Dorothy to show them out.

"Well, Nan, what do you think of our visitors?" asked Phillis, when the garden-door had clanged noisily after them, and she had treated Nan to the aforesaid hugs; "for you were so brave, darling, and actually took the wind out of my sails!" exclaimed the enthusiastic Phillis. "Miss Drummond is not so bad, after all, is she, in spite of her dowdiness and fussy ways?"

"No; she means well; and so does her brother. He is very nice, only his self-consciousness spoils him," returned Nan, in a calm, discursive tone, as though they were discussing ordinary visitors.

It was impossible for these young girls to see that their ordinary language was not humble enough for their new circumstances. They would make mistakes at every turn, like Dorothy, who got out the best china and brewed her tea in the melon-shaped silver teapot.

Phillis opened her eyes rather widely at this. Nan was not often so observant. It was true: self-consciousness was a torment to Archibald Drummond, a Frankenstein of his own creation, that had grown imperceptibly with his growth to the fell measure of his manhood, as inseparable as the shadow from the substance. Phillis had recognized it at once; but then, as she said, no one was faultless; and then, he was so handsome. "Very handsome" chimed in Dulce, whose opinions were full-fledged in such matters.

"Is he? Well, I never cared for a man with a long fair beard," observed Nan, carelessly. Poor Archie! how his vanity would have suffered if he had heard her! for, in a masculine way, he prided himself excessively on the soft silky appendage that Grace had so often praised. A certain

boyish countenance, with kindly honest eyes and a little sandy moustache, was more to Nan's taste than the handsome young Anglican.

"Oh, we all know Nan's opinion in such matters," said Dulce, slyly; and then Nan blushed, and suddenly remembered that Dorothy was waiting for her in the linen-closet, and hurried away, leaving her sisters to discuss their visitors to their hearts' content.

CHAPTER XIX.

ARCHIE IS IN A BAD HUMOR.

"Oh, Archie, I was never more astonished in my life!" exclaimed Mattie, as she tried to adapt her uneven trot to her brother's long swinging footsteps; and then she glanced up in his face to read his mood: but Archie's features were inscrutable and presented an appalling blank. In his mind he was beginning his letter to Grace, and wondering what he should say to her about their new neighbors. "Writing is such a nuisance when one wants to talk to a person," he thought, irritably.

"Oh, Archie, won't you tell me what we are to do?" went on Mattie, excitedly. She would not take Archie's silence as a hint that he wanted to keep his thoughts to himself. "Those poor girls! oh, how nice and pretty they all are, especially the eldest! and is not the youngest—Dulce, I think they called her—the very image of Isabel?"

"Isabel! not a bit. That is so like you, Mattie. You always see likenesses when other people cannot trace the faintest resemblance," for this remark was sure to draw out his opposition. Isabel was a silly flirting little thing in her brother's estimation, and, he thought, could not hold a candle to the youngest Miss Challoner.

"Oh dear! now I have made you cross!" sighed poor Mattie, who especially wanted to keep him in good humor. "And yet every one but you thinks Isabel so pretty. I am sure, from what Grace said in her last letter, that Mr. Ellis Burton means to propose to her."

"And I suppose you will all consider that a catch," sneered Archie. "That is so like a parcel of women, thinking every man who comes to the house and makes a few smooth-tongued speeches —is, in fact, civil—must be after a girl. Of course you have all helped to instill this nonsense into the child's head."

"Dear me, how you talk, Archie!" returned Mattie, feeling herself snubbed as usual. Why, Archie had been quite excited about it only the other day, and had said quite seriously that with seven girls in a family, it would be a great blessing if Isabel could make such a match; for it was very unlikely that Laura and Susie, or even Clara, would do much for themselves in that way, unless they decidedly improved in looks.

"Well, it is nothing to me," he returned in a chilling manner; "we all know our own mind best. If an angular lantern-jawed fellow like Burton, who, by the bye, does not speak the best English, is to Isabel's taste, let her have him by all means: he is well-to-do, and I dare say will keep a carriage for her by and by: that is what you women think a great advantage," finished Archie, who certainly seemed bent on making himself disagreeable.

Mattie heaved another great sigh, but she did not dare to contradict him. Grace would have punished him on the spot by a dose of satire that would have brought him to reason and good nature in a moment; but Mattie ventured only on those laborious sighs which she jerked up from the bottom of her honest little heart.

Archie heard the sigh, and felt ashamed of his bad temper. He did not know himself why he felt so suddenly cross; some secret irritation was at work within him, and he could scarcely refrain from bidding Mattie quite roughly to hold her tongue and not tease him with her chatter. If she expected him in his present state of mind, which was at once contradictory and aggressive, to talk to her about the Challoners, she must just make up her mind to be disappointed, for he could not bring himself to speak of them to her just now: he wanted to hold counsel with his own thoughts and with Grace. He would call at the Friary again and see Mrs. Challoner, and find out more of this strange matter; but as to talking it over with Mattie, he quite shrugged his shoulders as he swung open the green door.

"Are you going in?" faltered Mattie, as she noticed this movement.

"Well, yes; I have letters to write, and it is too hot for a longer walk," he returned, decidedly; and then, as Mattie stood hesitating and wistful in the middle of the road, he strode off, leaving the door to close noisily after him, and not caring to inquire into her further movements, such being the occasional graceless manners of brothers when sisterly friendship is not to their liking.

Mattie felt snubbed; but for the first time in her life, she did not take her snubbing meekly. It was too much to expect of her, who was only a woman and not one of Archie's divinities, that she should follow him into the house and hold her tongue just because he was pleased to refrain

from speaking. Water must find its vent; and Mattie's tongue could not be silenced in this way. If Archie would not talk to her, Miss Middleton would: so at once she trotted off for Brooklyn, thereby incurring Archie's wrath if he could only have known her purpose; for gossip was to him as the sin of witchcraft, unless he stooped to it himself, and then it was amiable sociability.

Miss Middleton was listening to her father's reading as usual, but she welcomed Mattie with open arms, literally as well as metaphorically, for she kissed Mattie on either cheek, and then scolded her tenderly for looking so flushed and tired; "for somebody who is always looking after other people, and never has time to spare for herself, is growing quite thin; is she not, father? and we must write to Grace if this goes on," finished Miss Middleton, with one of her kind looks.

All this was cordial to poor Mattie, who, though she was used to snubbing, and took as kindly to it as a spaniel to water, yet felt herself growing rather like a thread-paper and shabby with every-day worries and never an encouraging word to inspirit her.

So she gave Elizabeth a misty little smile,—Mattie's smile was pretty, though her features were ordinary,—and then sat up straight and began to enjoy herself,—that is, to talk,—never noticing that Colonel Middleton looked at his paper in a crestfallen manner, not much liking the interruption and the cessation of his own voice.

"Oh, dear!" began Mattie: she generally prefaced her remarks by an "Oh, dear!" ("That was one of her jerky ways," as Archie said.) "I could not help coming straight to you, for Archie would not talk, and I felt I must tell somebody. Oh, dear, Miss Middleton! What do you think? We have just called at the Friary—and––" but here Colonel Middleton's countenance relaxed, and he dropped his paper.

"Those young ladies, eh? Come, Elizabeth, this is interesting. Well, what sort of place is the Friary, seen from the inside, eh, Miss Drummond?"

"Oh, it is very nice," returned Mattie, enthusiastically. "We were shown into such a pretty room, looking out on the garden. They have so many nice things,—pictures, and old china, and handsomely-bound books, and all arranged so tastefully. And before we went away, the old servant—she seems really quite a superior person—brought in an elegant little tea-tray: the cups and saucers were handsomer even than yours, Miss Middleton,—dark-purple and gold. Just what I admire so––"

"Ah, reduced in circumstances! I told you so, Elizabeth," ejaculated the colonel.

"I never saw Archie enjoy himself so much or seem so thoroughly at home anywhere. Somehow, the girls put us so at our ease. Though they were hanging up curtains when we went in,—and any one else would have been annoyed at our intruding so soon,—actually, before we were in the room a moment, Archie was on the steps, helping the eldest Miss Challoner fasten the hooks."

Miss Middleton exchanged an amused look with her father. Mattie's narrative was decidedly interesting.

"Oh, don't tell him I repeated that, for he is always calling me chatterbox!" implored Mattie, who feared she had been indiscreet, and that the colonel was not to be trusted, which was quite true as far as jokes were concerned. No one understood the art of teasing better than he, and the young vicar had already had a taste of his kindly satire. "Archie only meant to be good-natured and put every one at their ease."

"Quite right. Mr. Drummond is always kind," returned Elizabeth, benignly. She had forgotten Mattie's frequent scoldings, and the poor little thing's tired face, or she would never have hazarded such a compromise with truth. But somehow Elizabeth always forgot people's weaknesses, especially when they were absent. It was so nice and easy to praise people; and if she always believed what she said, that was because her faith was so strong, and charity that is love was her second nature.

"Oh, yes, of course," returned Mattie, innocently. She was far too loyal a little soul to doubt Archie's kindness for a moment. Was he not the pride and ornament of the family,—the domestic pope who issued his bulls without possibility of contradiction? Whatever Archie did must be right. Was not that their domestic creed?—a little slavish, perhaps, but still so exquisitely feminine. Mattie was of opinion that—well, to use a mild term—irritability was a necessary adjunct of manhood. All men were cross sometimes. It behooved their womankind, then, to throw oil on the troubled waters,—to speak peaceably, and to refrain from sour looks, or even the shadow of a frown. Archie was never cross with Grace: therefore it must be she, Mattie, on whom the blame lay; she was such a silly little thing, And so on. There is no need to follow the self-accusation of one of the kindest hearts that ever beat.

"Did not your visit end as pleasantly as it began?" asked Elizabeth, who, though she was over-merciful in her judgments, was not without a good deal of sagacity and shrewdness. Something lay beyond the margin of Mattie's words, she could see that plainly; and then her father was getting impatient.

"Well, you see, that spoiled everything," returned Mattie, jumbling her narrative in the oddest manner. "Archie was so sorry, and so was I; and he got quite—you know his way when he feels uncomfortable. I thought Miss Challoner was joking at first,—that it was just a bit of make-believe fun,—until I saw how grave Miss Phillis, that is the second one, looked: and then the little one—at least, she is not little, but somehow one fancies she is—seemed as though she were going to cry."

“But what did Miss Challoner say to distress you and Mr. Drummond so?” asked Elizabeth, trying patiently to elicit facts and not vague statements from Mattie.

“Oh, she said—no, please don’t think I am exaggerating, for it is all true—that they had lost their money, and were very poor, and, that she and her sisters were dressmakers.”

“Dressmakers!” shouted the colonel, and his ruddy face grew almost purple with the shock: his very moustache seemed to bristle. “Dressmakers! my dear Miss Drummond, I don’t believe a word of it! Those girls! It is a hoax!—a bit of nonsense from beginning to end!”

“Hush, father! you are putting Mattie out,” returned Elizabeth, mildly. It was one of her idiosyncrasies to call people as soon as possible by their Christian names, though no one but her father and brother ever called her Elizabeth. Perhaps her gray hair, and a certain soft dignity that belonged to her, forbade such freedom. “Dear father, we must let Mattie speak.” But even Elizabeth let her work lie unheeded in her lap in the engrossing interest of the subject.

“I do not mean they have been dressmakers all this time, but this is their plan for the future. Miss Challoner said they were not clever enough for governesses, and that they did not want to separate. But that is what they mean to do,—to make dresses for people who are not half so good as themselves.”

“Preposterous! absurd!” groaned the colonel. “Where is their mother? What can the old lady be thinking about?” Mrs. Challoner was not an old lady by any means; but then the choleric colonel had never seen her, or he would not have applied that term to the aristocratic-looking gentlewoman whom Mattie had admired in Miss Milner’s shop.

“I had a good look round the room afterwards,” went on Mattie, letting this pass. “They had got a great carved wardrobe,—I thought that funny in a sitting-room; but of course it was for the dresses,”—another groan from the colonel,—“and there was a sewing-machine, and a rosewood davenport for accounts, and a chiffonnier of course for the pieces. Oh, they mean business; and I should not be surprised if they understand their work well,” went on Mattie, warming up to her subject and thinking of the breadths of green silk that reposed so snugly between silver paper in her drawers at the vicarage,—the first silk dress she had ever owned, for the Drummond finances did not allow of such luxuries,—the new color, too; such a soft, invisible, shadowy green, like an autumn leaf shrivelled by the sun’s richness. “Oh, if they should spoil it!” thought Mattie, with a sigh, as the magnitude of her intended sacrifice weighed heavily upon her mind.

“It is sheer girlish nonsense,—I might say foolery; and the mother must be a perfect idiot!” began the colonel, angrily.

He was an excitable man; and his wrath at the intelligence was really very great. He had taken a fancy to the new-comers, and was prepared to welcome them heartily in his genial way; but now his old-fashioned prejudices were grievously wounded. It was against his nice code of honor that women should do anything out of the usual beaten groove: innovations that would make them conspicuous were heinous sins in his eyes.

“Come, Mattie, you and I will have a chat about this by ourselves,” observed Elizabeth, cheerfully, as she noticed her father’s vexation. He would soon cool down if left to himself: she knew that well. “Suppose we go down to Miss Milner, and hear what she has to say: you may depend upon it that it was this that made her so reserved with us the other day.”

“Oh, do you think so?” exclaimed Mattie; but she was charmed at the idea of fresh gossip. And then they set off together.

Miss Milner seemed a little surprised to see them so soon, for Mattie had already paid her a visit that day; but at Miss Middleton’s first words a look of annoyance passed over her good-natured face.

“Dear, dear! to think of that leaking out already,” she said, in a vexed voice; “and I have not spoken to a soul, because the young ladies asked me to keep their secret a few days longer. ‘You must give us till next Monday,’ one of them said this very morning: ‘by that time we shall be in order, and then we can set to work.’”

“It was Miss Challoner who told me herself,” observed Mattie, in a deprecating manner. “My brother and I called this afternoon: you see, being the clergyman, and such close neighbors, he thought we might be of some use to the poor things.”

“Poor things indeed!” ejaculated Miss Milner. “I cannot tell you how bad I felt,” she went on, her little gray curls bobbing over her high cheek-bones with every word, “when that dear young lady put down her head there”—pointing to a spot about as big as a half-crown on the wooden counter—“and cried like a baby. ‘Oh, how silly I am!’ she said, sobbing-like; ‘and what would my sisters say to me? But you are so kind, Miss Milner; and it does seem all so strange and horrid.’ I made up my mind, then and there,” finished the good woman, solemnly, “that I would help them to the best of my powers. I have got their bits of advertisements to put about the shop; and there’s my new black silk dress, that has laid by since Christmas, because I knew Miss Slasher would spoil it; not but what they may ruin it finely for me; but I mean to shut my eyes and take the risk,” with a little smile of satisfaction over her own magnanimity.

Elizabeth stretched out her hand across the counter.

“Miss Milner, you are a good creature,” she said, softly. “I honor you for this. If people always helped each other and thought so little of a sacrifice, the world would be a happier place.” And then, without waiting for a reply from the gratified shopwoman, she went out of the library with

a thoughtful brow.

“Miss Milner has read me a lesson,” she said, by and by, when Mattie had marvelled at her silence a little. “Conventionality makes cowards of the best of us. I am not particularly worldly-minded,” she went on, with a faint smile, “but all the same I must plead guilty to feeling a little shocked myself at your news; but when I have thought a little more about it, I dare say I shall see things by a truer light, and be as ready to admire these girls as I am now to wonder at them.” And after this she bade Mattie a kindly good-bye.

Meanwhile, Phillis was bracing herself to undergo another ordeal. Mr. Drummond and his sister had only just left the cottage when a footman from the White House brought a note for her. It was from Mrs. Cheyne, and was worded in a most friendly manner.

She thanked the sisters gracefully for their timely help on the previous evening, and, though making light of her accident, owned that it would keep her a prisoner to her sofa for a few days; and then she begged them to waive ceremony and come to her for an hour or two that evening.

“I will not ask you to dinner, because that will perhaps inconvenience you, as you must be tired or busy,” she wrote; “but if one or both of you would just put on your hats and walk up in the cool of the evening to keep Miss Mewlstone and myself company, it would be a real boon to us both.” And then she signed herself “Magdalene Cheyne.”

Phillis wore a perplexed look on her face as she took the note to Nan, who was still in the linen-closet.

“Very kind; very friendly,” commented Nan, when she had finished reading it; “but I could not possibly go, Phil. As soon as I have done this I have promised to sit with mother. She has been alone all day. You could easily send an excuse, for Mrs. Cheyne must know we are busy.”

“I don’t feel as though an excuse will help us here,” returned Phillis, slowly. “When an unpleasant thing has to be done, it is as well to get it over: thinking about it only hinders one’s sleep.”

“But you will surely not go alone!” demanded Nan, in astonishment. “You are so tired, Phil: you have been working hard all day. Give it up, dear, and sit and rest in the garden a little.”

“Oh, no,” returned Phillis, disconsolately. “I value my night’s rest too much to imperil it so lightly: besides, I owe it to myself for a penance for being such a coward this afternoon.” And then, without waiting for any further dissuasion, she carried off the letter and wrote a very civil but vague reply, promising to walk up in the evening and inquire after the invalid; and then she dismissed the messenger, and went up to her room with a heavy heart.

Dulce came to help her, like a dutiful sister, and chattered on without intermission.

“I suppose you will put on your best dress?” she asked, as she dived down into the recesses of a big box.

Phillis, who was sitting wearily on the edge of her bed, roused up at this:

“My best blue silk and cashmere, that we wore last at Fitzroy Lodge? Dulce, how can you be so absurd! Anything will do,—the gray stuff, or the old foulard. No, stop; I forgot: the gray dress is better made and newer in cut. We must think of that. Oh, what a worry it is going out when one is tired to death!” she continued, with unusual irritation.

Dulce respected her sister’s mood, and held her peace, though she knew the gray dress was the least becoming to Phillis, who was pale, and wanted a little color to give her brightness.

“There, now, you look quite nice,” she said, in a patronizing voice, as Phillis put on her hat and took her gloves. Phillis nodded her thanks rather sadly, and then bethought herself and came back and kissed her.

“Thank you, dear Dulce; I am not nearly so tired now; but it is getting late, and I must run off.” And so she did until she had turned the corner, and then, in spite of herself, her steps became slower and more lagging.

CHAPTER XX.

“YOU ARE ROMANTIC.”

Human nature is prone to argument; a person will often in the course of a few moments bring himself or herself to the bar of conscience, and accuse, excuse, and sum up the case in the twinkling of an eye.

On arriving at the lodge-gates Phillis began to take herself to task. Conscience, that “makes cowards of us all,” began its small inner remonstrance; then followed self-flagellation and much belaboring of herself with many remorseful terms. She was a pitiful thing compared to Nan; she was conventional; there were no limits to her pride. Where were that freedom and nobility of

soul which she once fancied would sweep over worldly prejudices, and carry her into purer air? She was still choking in the fogs of mere earthly exhalations; no wonder Nan was a little disappointed in her, though she was far too kind to say so. Well, she was disappointed in herself.

By this time she had reached the hall door; and now she began to hold up her head more boldly, and to look about her; when a very solemn-looking butler confronted her, she said to herself, “It will be all the same a hundred years hence, and I am determined this time not to be beaten;” and then she asked for Mrs. Cheyne with something of her old sprightliness, and nothing could exceed the graceful ease of her entrance.

All the Challoners walked well. There was a purity of health about them that made them delight in movement and every bodily exercise,—an elasticity of gait that somehow attracted attention.

No girls danced better than they. And when they had the chance, which was seldom, they could ride splendidly. Their skating was a joy to see, and made one wish that the ice would last forever, that one could watch such light, skimming practice; and as for tennis, no other girl had a chance of being chosen for a partner unless the Challoners good-naturedly held aloof, which ten times out of twelve they were sure to do.

Phillis, who, from her pale complexion, was supposed to possess the least vitality, delighted in exercise for its own sake. “It is a pleasure only to be alive and to know it,” was a favorite speech with her on summer mornings, when the shadows were blowing lightly hither and thither, and the birds had so much to say that it took them until evening to finish saying it.

Mrs. Cheyne, who was lying on her couch, watched with admiring eyes the girl’s straightforward walk, so alert and business-like, so free from fuss and consciousness, and held out her hand with a more cordial welcome than she was accustomed to show her visitors.

It was a long room; and as the summer dusk was falling, and there was only a shaded lamp beside Mrs. Cheyne, it was full of dim corners. Nevertheless, Phillis piloted herself without hesitation to the illuminated circle.

“This is good of you, Miss Challoner, to take me at my word. But where is your sister? I wanted to look at her again, for it is long since I have seen any one so pretty. Miss Mewlstone, this is the good Samaritan who bound up my foot so cleverly.”

“Ah, just so,” returned Miss Mewlstone. And a soft, plump hand touched Phillis’s, and then she went on picking up stitches and taking no further notice.

“Nan could not come,” observed Phillis. “She had to run down to Beach House to report progress to mother. We hope she is coming home to-morrow. But, as you were so kind as to write, I thought I would just call and inquire about your foot. And then it would be easier to explain things than to write about it.”

“Oh! so your mother is coming home!” returned Mrs. Cheyne, with so much interest in her voice that Miss Mewlstone left off counting to look at her. (“Just so, just so,” Phillis heard her mutter.) “You must have worked hard to get ready for her so soon. When my foot will allow me to cross a room without hobbling, I will do myself the pleasure of calling on her. But that will be neither this week nor the next, I am afraid. But I shall see a good deal of you and your sister before then,” she concluded, with the graciousness of one who knows she is conferring an unusual honor.

“I do not know,” faltered Phillis. And then she sat upright, and looked her hostess full in the face. “That will be for you to decide when you hear what I have to say. But I fear”—with a very poor attempt at a smile—“that we shall see very little of each other in the future.”

“Oh, there is a mystery, is there?” returned Mrs. Cheyne, with a little scorn in her manner; and her mouth took one of the downward curves that Mr. Drummond so thoroughly disliked. She had taken an odd fancy to these girls, especially to Phillis, and had thought about them a good deal during a sleepless, uneasy night. Their simplicity, their straightforward unconsciousness, had attracted her in spite of her cynicism. But at the first suspicion of mystery she withdrew into herself rather haughtily. “Do speak out, I beg, Miss Challoner; for if there be one thing that makes me impatient, it is to have anything implied.”

“I am quite of your opinion,” replied Phillis, with equal haughtiness, only it sat more strangely on her girlishness. “That is why I am here to-night,—just to inquire after your foot and explain things.”

“Well?” still more impatiently, for this woman was a spoiled child, and hated to be thwarted, and was undisciplined and imperious enough to ruin all her own chances of happiness.

“I told you that we were very poor,” went on Phillis, in a sweet and steady voice; “but that did not seem to impress you much, and I thought how noble that was,”—catching her breath an instant; “but it will make a difference and shock you dreadfully, as it did Mr. Drummond, when I tell you we are dressmakers,—Nan and Dulce and I: at least that will be our future occupation.”

“Ah, just so!” ejaculated Miss Mewlstone; but she said it with her lips far apart, and a mistiness came into her sleepy blue eyes. Perhaps, though she was stout and middle-aged and breathed a little too heavily at times, she remembered—long ago when she was young and poor and had to wage a bitter war with the world—when she ate the dry bread and drank the bitter water of dependence and felt herself ill nourished by such unpalatable sustenance. “Oh, just so, poor thing!” And a little round tear dripped on to the ball of scarlet fleecy wool.

But Mrs. Cheyne listened to the announcement in far different mood. There was an incredulous

stare at Phillis, as though she suspected her of a joke; and then she laughed, a dry, harsh laugh, that was not quite pleasant to hear.

“Oh, this is droll, passing droll!” she said, and leaned back on her cushions, and drew her Indian cashmere round her and frowned a little.

“I am glad you find it so,” returned Phillis, who was nonplussed at this, and did not know what to say, and was a little angry in consequence; and then she got up from her chair with a demonstration of spirit. “I am glad you find it so; but to us it is sad earnestness!”

“What! are you going?” asked Mrs. Cheyne, with a keen glance through her half-shut eyes at poor Phillis standing so tall and straight before her. “And you have not told me the reason for taking so strange a step!”

“The reason lies in our poverty and paucity of resources,” was Phillis’s curt reply.

“It is not to make a sensation, then? no, I did not mean that,” as Phillis shot an indignant glance at her,—“not exactly; but there is no knowing what the emancipated girl will do. Of course I have no right to question, who was a stranger to you four-and-twenty hours ago, and had never heard the name of Challoner, except that it was a good and an old name; but when one sees young things like you about to forfeit caste and build up a barrier between yourselves and your equals that the bravest will fear to pass, it seems as though one must lift up one’s voice in protest.”

“Thank you; but it will be of no use,” returned Phillis, coldly.

“You are determined to make other people’s dresses?” And here her lip curled a little, perhaps involuntarily.

“We must must make dresses or starve; for our fingers are cleverer than our brains,” replied Phillis, defiantly; for she knew nothing about it, and her powers were so immature and unfledged that she had never tried her wings, and had no notion whether she could fly or not, and yet no girl had a clearer head. “We have chosen work that we know we can do well, and we mean not to be ashamed of our occupation. In the old days ladies used to spin and weave, and no one blamed them, though they were noble; and if my work will bring me money, and keep the mother comfortable, I see nothing that will prevent my doing it.”

“Ah, you are romantic, Miss Challoner; you will soon be taught matter-of-fact!”

“I am willing to learn anything, but I must choose my teachers,” retorted Phillis, with a little heat, for the word “romantic,” and the satirical droop of Mrs. Cheyne’s lip made her decidedly cross. “But I must not detain you any more with our uninteresting affairs,” dropping a little courtesy, half in pique and half in mockery, for her spirits were rising under this rough treatment.

“It is far from uninteresting; I have not heard anything so exciting for a long time. Well, perhaps you had better go before I say anything very rude, for I am terribly outspoken, and I think you are all silly self-willed young people.” Then, as Phillis bridled her neck like an untamed colt, she caught hold of the girl’s dress to detain her, and the sharpness passed out of her eyes. “Now, don’t go away and believe that I think any worse of you for telling me this. I am a cross-grained body, and contradiction makes me worse. I don’t know how I shall act: I must have time to consider this extraordinary bit of news. But all the same, whatever I do, whether I know you or do not know you, I shall always think you the very bravest girl I ever saw.” And then she let her go, and Phillis, with her head in the air and her thoughts all topsy-turvy, marched out of the room.

But when she reached the end of the corridor there was a soft but distinctly audible breathing behind her, and, as in Mr. Drummond’s case Miss Mewlstone’s shadowy gray gown swept between her and the door.

“Miss Mewlstone, how you startled me! but the carpets are so soft and thick!”

“Yes, indeed! just so, my dear; but Phillips must be asleep as he does not answer the bell, and so I thought I would let you out. You are young to walk alone: shall I throw a shawl over my cap, and walk down the road with you?”

“Not for worlds, my dear Miss Mewlstone;” but Phillis was quite touched at this unexpected kindness. Miss Mewlstone did not look sleepy now; her small blue eyes were wide open, and her round placid face wore a most kindly expression, and there was a tremulous movement of her hands, as though they were feeling after something. “It is only such a little bit of road; and though the trees make it dark, I am not the least afraid of going alone.”

“Ah! just so. When we are young, we are brave; it is the old who are afraid of the grasshopper. I like your spirit, my dear; and so does she, though she is a little taken aback and disappointed; but anything that interests and rouses her is welcome. Even this may do her good; for it will give her something to think about besides her own troubles.”

“I have heard of her troubles––” began Phillis; but a moving door arrested Miss Mewlstone’s attention, and she interrupted her hurriedly:

“Ah! there is Phillips at last. Just so; you shall hear from me again. It is a gray satin,—one of her presents,—but I have never had it made up; for what is the use, when we keep no company?” went on Miss Mewlstone incoherently. “Oh! is that you, Phillips? Please go with this young lady to the lodge-gate.—You shall make it after your own fashion,” she whispered in Phillis’s ear; “and I am not as particular as other people. There is Magdalene now. Ah! just so. Good-night,

my dear; and mind the scraper by the gate."

Phillis was almost sorry when the obsequious Phillips left her; for the road certainly looked terribly dark. There was no moon, and the stars chose to be invisible; and there was a hot thundery feeling in the air that suggested a storm. And she moved aside with a slight sensation of uneasiness—not fear, of course not fear—as a tall, gloomy-looking figure bore swiftly down on her; for, even if a girl be ever so brave, a very tall man walking fast on a dark night with a slouching hat like a conspirator's is rather a terrifying object; and how could she know that it was only Archie Drummond in his old garden-hat, taking a constitutional?

But he brought himself up in front of her with a sudden jerk.

"Miss Challoner!—alone at this time of night!"

"Why, it is not ten; and I could not wait for Dorothy to fetch me," returned Phillis, bound to defend herself, and quite palpitating with relief; not that she was afraid—not a bit of it!—but still, Mr. Drummond's presence was very welcome.

"I suppose I shall do as well as Dorothy?" he returned veering round with the greatest ease, just as though he were Dick, and bound to escort a Challoner. "Challoners' Squire,"—that was Dick's name among people.

"Oh poor Dick!" thought Phillis, with a sudden rush of tenderness for her old playmate; and then she said, demurely but with a spice of malice,—

"Thank you, Mr. Drummond. The road is so gloomy that I shall be glad of your escort this evening, but we shall have to do without that sort of thing now, for our business may often bring us out after dark, and we must learn not to be too particular."

"Oh, this must not be!" he returned, decidedly; and, though it was too dark to see his face, she knew by his voice that he was dreadfully shocked. "I must see your mother and talk to her about this; for it would never do for you to run such risks. I could not allow it for a moment; and as your clergyman"—coming down from his high horse, and stammering a little,—"I have surely—surely a right––" But Phillis snapped him up in a moment, and pretty sharply too, for she had no notion of a young man giving himself airs and torturing her.

"Oh, no right at all!" she assured him: "clergymen could only rebuke evil-doers, to which class she and her sisters did not belong, thank heaven!" to which Mr. Drummond devoutly said an "amen." "And would he please tell her if dressmakers were always met two and two, like the animals in the ark? and how would it sound when she or Nan had been fitting on a dress, on a winter's evening, if they were to refuse to leave the house until Dorothy fetched them? and how––" But here Mr. Drummond checked her, and the darkness hid his smile.

"Now you are beyond me, Miss Challoner. In a matter of detail, a man, even a parson, is often at fault. Is there no other way of managing this odious business? Forgive me; the word slipped out by accident! Could you not do the fitting, or whatever you call it, by daylight, and stay at home quietly in the evening like other young ladies?"

"Of course not," returned Phillis, promptly. She had not the least idea why it could not be done; indeed, if she had been perfectly cool—which she was not, for Mrs. Cheyne had decidedly stroked her the wrong way and ruffled her past endurance—she would have appreciated the temperate counsel vouchsafed her, and acquiesced in it without a murmur; but now she seemed bent on contradiction.

"Our opinions seem to clash to-night," returned Mr. Drummond, good-humoredly, but feeling that the young lady beside him had decidedly a will of her own. "She is very nice, but she is not as gentle as her sister," he said to himself; which was hard on Phillis, who, though she was not meek, being a girl of spirit, was wholesomely sweet and sound to the heart's core.

"One may be supposed to know one's business best," she replied rather dryly to this. And then, fearing that she might seem ungracious to a stranger, who did not know her and her little ways, she went on in a more cordial tone: "I am afraid you think me a little cross to-night; but I have been having a stand-up fight, and am rather tired. Trying to battle against other people's prejudices makes one irritable. And then, because I am down and out of heart about things, our clergyman thinks fit to lecture me on propriety."

"Only for your good. You must forgive me if I have taken too much upon myself," returned Mr. Drummond, with much compunction. "You seem so lonely,—no father or brother; at least—pardon me—I believe you have no brother?"

"Oh, no; we have no brother," sighed Phillis. Their acquaintance was in too early a stage to warrant her in bringing in Dick's name. Besides, that sort of heterogeneous relationship is so easily misconstrued. And then she added, "I see. You meant to be very kind, and I was very ungrateful."

"I only wish I could find some way of helping you all," was his reply to this. But it was said with such frank kindness that Phillis's brief haughtiness vanished. They were standing at the gate of the Friary by this time; but Mr. Drummond still lingered. It was Phillis who dismissed him.

"Good-night, and many thanks," she said, brightly. "It is too late to ask you in, for you see, even dressmakers have their notions of propriety." And as she uttered this malicious little speech, the young man broke into a laugh that was heard by Dorothy in her little kitchen.

"Oh, that is too bad of you, Miss Challoner," he said, as soon as he recovered himself; but, nevertheless, he liked the girl better for her little joke.

Mr. Drummond's constitutional had lasted so long that Mattie grew quite frightened, and came down in her drab dressing-gown to wait for him. It was not a becoming costume, but it was warm and comfortable; but then Mattie never considered what became her. If any one had admired her, or cared how she looked or what she wore, or had taken an interest in her for her own sake, she would doubtless have developed an honest liking for pretty things. But what did it matter under the present circumstances? Mr. Drummond was lighting his chamber candle when Mattie rushed out on him,—a grotesque little figure, all capes and frills.

"Oh, Archie, how you frightened me! Where have you been?"

Archie shrugged his shoulders at this.

"I am not aware, Matilda,"—for in severe moods he would call her by her full name, a thing she especially disliked from him,—"I did not know before that I was accountable to you for my actions. Neither am I particularly obliged to you for spying upon me in this way." For the sight of Mattie at this time of night was peculiarly distasteful. Why was he to be watched in his own house?

"Oh, dear, Archie! How can you say such things? Spy on you, indeed! when there is a storm coming up, and I was so anxious."

"I am very much obliged to you," returned Archie, ironically; "but, as you see I am safe, don't you think you had better take off that thing"—pointing to the obnoxious garment—"and go to bed?" And such was his tone that poor Mattie fled without a word, and cried a little in her dark room, because Archie would not be kind to her and let her love him, but was always finding fault with one trifle or other. To-night it was her poor old dressing-gown, which had been her mother's, and had been considered good enough for Mattie. And then he had called her a spy. And here she gave a sob that caught Archie's ears as he passed her door.

"Good-night, you little goose!" he called out, for the sound made him uncomfortable; and though the words were contemptuous, the voice was not, and Mattie at once dried her eyes and was comforted.

But before Archie went to sleep that night he made up his mind that it was his duty as a clergyman and a Christian to look over Phillis's wilfulness, and to befriend to the utmost of his power the strangers, widow and fatherless, that Providence had placed at his very gates.

"They are so very lonely, poor things!" he said to himself; "not a man about them. By the bye, I noticed she did not wear an engagement-ring." But which was the "she" he meant, was an enigma known only to himself. "Not a man about them!" he repeated, in a satisfied manner, for as yet the name of Dick had not sounded in his ear.

CHAPTER XXI.

BREAKING THE PEACE.

Nan went to Beach House to fetch her mother home, escorted by Laddie, who was growing a most rollicking and friendly little animal, and a great consolation to his mistress, whom he loved with all his doggish heart.

They all three came back in an old fly belonging to their late host, and found Phillis waiting for them on the door-step, who made her mother the following little speech:

"Now, mammie, you are to kiss us, and tell us what good industrious girls we have been; and then you are to shut your eyes and look at nothing, and then sit down in your old arm-chair, and try and make the best of everything."

"Welcome home, dearest mother," said Nan, softly kissing her. "Home is home, however poor it may be; and thank God for it," finished the girl, reverently.

"Oh, my darlings!" exclaimed the poor mother; and then she cried a little, and Dulce came up and put a rose-bud in her hand; and Dorothy executed an old-fashioned courtsey, and hoped that her mistress and the dear young ladies would try and make themselves as happy as possible.

"Happy, you silly old Dorothy! of course we mean to be as busy as bees, and as frolicsome as kittens!" returned Phillis, who had recovered her old sprightliness, and was ready to-day for a dozen Mrs. Cheynes and all the clergy of the diocese. "Now, mammie, you are only to peep into this room: this is our work-room, and those are the curtains Mr. Drummond was kind enough to hang. In old days," continued Phillis, with mock solemnity, "the parson would have pronounced a benediction; but the modern Anglican performs another function, and with much gravity ascends the steps, and hooks up the curtains of the new-comers."

"Oh, Phillis, how can you be so absurd! I am sure it was very good-natured of him. Come, mother, dear, we will not stand here listening to her nonsense." And Nan drew the mother to the parlor.

It was a very small room, but still snug and comfortable, and full of pretty things. Tea was laid on the little round table that would hardly hold five, as Nan once observed, thinking of Dick; and the evening's sunshine was stealing in, but not too obtrusively. Mrs. Challoner tried not to think it dull, and endeavored to say a word of praise at the arrangements Dulce pointed out to her; but the thought of Glen Cottage, and her pretty drawing-room, and the veranda with its climbing roses, and the shady lawn with the seat under the acacia-trees, almost overpowered her. That they should come to this! That they should be sitting in this mean little parlor, where there was hardly room to move, looking out at the little strip of grass, and the medlar-tree, and the empty greenhouse! Nan saw her mother's lip quiver, and adroitly turned the subject to their neighbors. She had so much to say about Mr. Drummond and his sister that Mrs. Challoner grew quite interested; nevertheless, it was a surprise even to Nan when Dorothy presently opened the door, and Mr. Drummond coolly walked in with a magnificent basket of roses in his hand.

Nan gravely introduced him to her mother, and the young man accosted her; but there was a little surprise on his face. He had taken it into his head that Mrs. Challoner would be a far older-looking and more homely person; but the stately-looking woman before him might have been an older and faded edition of Nan. Somehow, her appearance confused him; and he commenced with an apology for his intrusion:

"I ought not to have been so unceremonious. I am afraid, as you have just arrived, my visit will seem an intrusion; but my sister thought you would like some of our roses,"—he had obliged poor Mattie to say so,—"and, as we had cut some fine ones, we thought you ought to have them while they are fresh."

"Thank you; this is very kind and neighborly," returned Mrs. Challoner; but, though her tone was perfectly civil, Nan thought her manner a little cold, and hastened to interpose with a few glowing words of admiration.

"The roses were lovely; they were finer than those at Longmead, or even at Fitzroy Lodge, though Lady Fitzroy prided herself on her roses." Archie pricked up his ears at this latter name, which escaped quite involuntarily from Nan. "And was it not good of Miss Drummond to spare them so many, and of Mr. Drummond to carry them?" all of which Nan said with a sweet graciousness that healed the young man's embarrassment in a moment.

"Yes, indeed!" echoed Mrs. Challoner, obedient, as usual, to her daughter's lead. "And you must thank your sister, Mr. Drummond, and tell her how fond my girls are of flowers." But, though Mrs. Challoner said this, the roses were not without thorns for her. Why had not Miss Drummond brought them herself? She was pleased indeed that, under existing circumstances, any one should be civil to her girls; but was there not a little patronage intended? She was not quite sure that she rejoiced in having such neighbors. Mr. Drummond was nice and gentlemanly, but he was far too young and handsome for an unmarried clergyman; at least, that was her old-fashioned opinion; and when one has three very good-looking daughters, and dreads the idea of losing one, one may be pardoned for distrusting even a basket of roses.

If Mr. Drummond perceived her slight coldness, he seemed quite determined to overcome it. He took small notice of Nan, who busied herself at once arranging the flowers under his eyes; even Phillis, who looked good and demure this evening, failed to obtain a word. He talked almost exclusively to Mrs. Challoner, plying her with artful questions about their old home, which he now learned was at Oldfield, and gaining scraps of information that enabled him to obtain a pretty clear insight into their present circumstances.

Mrs. Challoner, who was a soft hearted woman, was not proof against so much sympathy. She perceived that Mr. Drummond was sorry for them, and she began to warm a little towards him. His manner was so respectful, his words so discreet; and then he behaved so nicely, taking no notice of the girls, though Nan was looking so pretty, but just talking to her in a grave responsible way, as though he were a gray-haired man of sixty.

Phillis was not quite sure she approved of it: in the old days she had never been so excluded from conversation: she would have liked a word now and then. But Nan sat by quite contented: it pleased her to see her mother roused and interested.

When Mr. Drummond took his leave, she accompanied him to the door, and thanked him quite warmly.

"You have done her so much good, for this first evening is such a trial to her, poor thing!" said Nan, lifting her lovely eyes to the young man's face.

"I am so glad! I will come again," he said, rather incoherently. And as he went out of the green door he told himself that it was his clear duty to befriend this interesting family. He ought to have gone home and written to Grace, for it was long past the time when she always expected to hear from him. But the last day or two he had rather shirked this duty. It would be difficult to explain to Grace. She might be rather shocked, for she was a little prim in such things, being her mother's daughter. He thought he would ask Mattie to tell her about the Challoners, and that he was busy and would write soon; and when he had made up his mind to this, he went down to the sea-shore and amused himself by sitting on a breakwater and staring at the fishing-smacks,—which of course showed how very busy he was.

"I think I shall like Mr. Drummond," observed Mrs. Challoner, in a tolerant tone, when Nan had accompanied the young vicar to the door. "He seems an earnest, good sort of young man."

"Yes, mammie dear. And I am sure he has fallen in love with you," returned Phillis, naughtily,

“for he talked to no one else. And you are so young-looking and pretty that of course no one could be surprised if he did.” But though Mrs. Challoner said, “Oh, Phillis!” and looked dreadfully shocked in a proper matronly way, what was the use of that, when the mischievous girl burst out laughing in her face?

But the interruption had done them all good, and the evening passed less heavily than they had dared to hope. And when Mrs. Challoner complained of fatigue and retired early, escorted by Dorothy, who was dying for a chat with her mistress, the three girls went out in the garden, and walked, after their old fashion, arm in arm up and down the lawn, with Nan in the middle; though Dulce pouted and pretended that the lawn was too narrow, and that Phillis was pushing her on the gravel path.

Their mother’s window was open, and they could have heard snatches of Dorothy’s conversation if they had chosen to listen. Dulce stood still a moment, and wafted a little kiss towards her mother’s room.

“Dear old mamsie! She has been very good this evening, has she not, Nan? She has only cried the least wee bit, when you kissed her.”

“Yes, indeed. And somebody else has been good too. What do you say, Phillis? Has not Dulce been the best child possible?”

“Oh, Nan, I should be ashamed to be otherwise,” returned Dulce, in such an earnest manner that it made her sisters laugh, “Do you think I could see you both so good and cheerful, making the best of things, and never complaining, even when the tears are in your eyes,—as yours are often, Nan, when you think no one is looking,—and not try and copy your example? I am dreadfully proud of you both,—that is what I am,” continued the warm-hearted girl. “I never knew before what was in my sisters. And now I feel as though I want the whole world to come and admire my Phillis and Nan!”

“Little flatterer!” but Nan squeezed Dulce’s arm affectionately. And Phillis said, in a joking tone,—

“Ah, it was not half so bad. This evening there was mother looking so dear and pretty: and there were you girls; and, though the nest is small, it feels warm and cosy. And if we could only forget Glen Cottage, and leave off missing the old faces, which I never shall—” (“Nor I,” echoed Nan, with a deep sigh, fetched from somewhere)—“and root ourselves afresh, we should contrive not to be unhappy.”

“I think it is our duty to cultivate cheerfulness,” added Nan, seriously; and after this they fell to a discussion on ways and means. As usual, Phillis was chief spokeswoman, but to Nan belonged the privilege of the casting vote.

The next few days were weary ones to Mrs. Challoner: there was still much to be done before the Friary could be pronounced in order. The girls spent most of the daylight hours unpacking boxes, sorting and arranging their treasures, and, if the truth must be told, helping Dorothy to polish furniture and wash glass and china.

Mrs. Challoner, who was not strong enough for these household labors, found herself condemned to hem new dusters and mend old table-linen, to the tune of her own sad thoughts. Mr. Drummond found her sorting a little heap on the parlor table when he dropped in casually one morning,—this time with some very fine cherries that his sister thought Mrs. Challoner would enjoy.

When Mr. Drummond began his little speech he could have sworn that there were tears on the poor lady’s cheeks; but when he had finished she looked up at him with a smile, and thanked him warmly, and then they had quite a nice chat together.

Mr. Drummond’s visit was quite a godsend, she told him, for her girls were busy and had no time to talk to her; and “one’s thoughts are not always pleasant companions,” she added, with a sigh. And Mr. Drummond, who had caught sight of the tears, was at once sympathetic, and expressed himself in such feeling terms—for he was more at ease in the girls’ absence—that Mrs. Challoner opened out in the most confiding way, and told him a great deal that he had been anxious to learn.

But she soon found out, to her dismay, that he disapproved of her girls’ plans; for he told her so at once, and in the coolest manner. The opportunity for airing his views on the subject was far too good to be lost. Mrs. Challoner was alone; she was in a low, dejected mood; the rulers of the household were gathered in an upper chamber. What would Phillis have said, as she warbled a rather flat accompaniment to Nan’s “Bonnie Dundee,” which she was singing to keep up their spirits over a piece of hard work, if she had known that Mr. Drummond was at that moment in possession of her mother’s ear?

“Oh, Mr. Drummond, this is very sad, if every one should think as you do about my poor girls! and Phillis does so object to being called romantic;” for he had hinted in a gentlemanly way that he thought the whole scheme was crude and girlish and quixotic to a degree.

“I hope you will not tell her, then,” returned Mr. Drummond in a soothing tone, for Mrs. Challoner was beginning to look agitated. “I am afraid nothing I say will induce Miss Challoner to give up her pet scheme; but I felt, as your clergyman, it was my duty to let you know my opinion.” And here Archie looked so very solemn that Mrs. Challoner, being a weak woman, and apt to overvalue the least expression of masculine opinion, grew more and more alarmed.

“Oh, yes!” she faltered; “it is very good—very nice of you to tell me this.” Phillis would have

laughed in his face and Mrs. Cheyne would have found something to say about his youth; but in Mrs. Challoner's eyes, though she was an older woman, Archie's solemnity and Oriental beard carried tremendous weight with them. He might be young, nevertheless she was bound to listen meekly to him, and to respect his counsel as one who had a certain authority over her. "Oh, you are very good! and if only my girls had not made up their minds so quickly! but now what can I do but feel very uncomfortable after you have told me this?"

"Oh, as to that, there is always time for everything; it is never too late to mend," returned Mr. Drummond, tritely. "I meant from the first to tell you what I thought, if I should ever have an opportunity of speaking to you alone. You see, we Oxford men have our own notions about things: we do not always go with the tide. If your daughters—" here he hesitated and grew red, for he was a modest, honest young fellow in the main—"pardon me, but I am only proposing an hypothesis—if they wanted to make a sensation and get themselves talked about, no doubt they would achieve a success, for the novelty–-" But here he stopped, reduced to silence by the shocked expression of Mrs. Challoner's face.

"Mr. Drummond! my girls—make a sensation—be talked about?" she gasped; and all the spirit of her virtuous matronhood, and all the instinctive feeling that years of culture and ingrained refinement of nature had engendered, shone in her eyes. Her Nan and Phillis and Dulce to draw this on themselves!

Now, at this unlucky moment, when the maternal fires were all alight, who should enter but Phillis, wanting "pins, and dozens of them,—quickly, please," and still warbling flatly that refrain of "Bonnie Dundee!"

"Oh, Phillis! Oh, my darling child!" cried Mrs. Challoner, quite hysterically; "do you know what your clergyman says? and if he should say such things, what will be the world's opinion? No, Mr. Drummond, I did not mean to be angry. Of course you are telling us this for our good; but I do not know when I have been so shocked."

"Why, what is this?" demanded Phillis, calmly; but she fixed her eyes on the unlucky clergyman, who began to wish that that last speech had not been uttered.

"He says it is to make a sensation—to be talked about—that you are going to do this," gasped Mrs. Challoner, who was far too much upset to weigh words truly.

"What!" Phillis only uttered that very unmeaning monosyllable: nevertheless, Archie jumped from his seat as though he had been shot.

"Mrs. Challoner, really this is too bad! No, you must allow me to explain," as Phillis turned aside with a curling lip, as though she would leave them. He actually went between her and the door, as though he meant to prevent her egress forcibly. There is no knowing to what lengths he would have gone in his sudden agitation. "Only wait a moment, until I explain myself. Your mother has misunderstood me altogether. Never has such a thought entered my mind!"

"Oh," observed Phillis. But now she stood still and began to collect her pins out of her mother's basket. "Perhaps, as this is rather unpleasant, you will have the kindness to tell me what it was you said to my mother?" And she spoke like a young princess who had just received an insult.

"I desire nothing more," returned Archie, determined to defend himself at all costs. "I had been speaking to Mrs. Challoner about all this unfortunate business. She was good enough to repose confidence in me, and, as your clergyman, I felt myself bound to tell her exactly my opinions on the subject."

"I do not quite see the necessity; but no doubt you know best," was Phillis's somewhat sarcastic answer.

"At least, I did it for the best," returned the young man, humbly. "I pointed out things to Mrs. Challoner, as I told you I should. I warned her what the world would say,—that it would regard your plan as very singular and perhaps quixotic. Surely there is nothing in this to offend you?"

"You have not touched on the worst part of all," returned Phillis, with a little disdain in her voice. "About making a sensation, I mean."

"There it was that your mother so entirely misunderstood. What I said was this: If this dressmaking scheme were undertaken just to make a sensation, it would of course, achieve success, for I thought the novelty might take. And then I added that I was merely stating an hypothesis by way of argument, and then Mrs. Challoner looked shocked, and you came in."

"Is that all?" asked Phillis, coming down from her stilts at once, for she knew of old how her mother would confuse things sometimes; and, if this were the truth, she, Phillis, had been rather too hard on him.

"Yes. Do you see now any necessity for quarrelling with me?" returned Mr. Drummond, breathing a little more freely as the frown lessened on Phillis's face. He wanted to be friends with these girls, not to turn them against him.

"Well, no, I believe not," she answered, quite gravely. "And I am sure I beg your pardon if I was rude." But this Archie would not allow for a moment.

"But, Mr. Drummond, one word before peace is quite restored," went on Phillis, with something of her old archness, "or else I will fetch my sisters, and you will have three of us against you."

"Oh, do, Phillis, my dear," interrupted her mother; "let them come and hear what Mr. Drummond thinks."

“Mammy, how dare you!—how dare you be so contumacious, after all the trouble we have taken to set your dear fidgety mind at rest? Just look what you have done, Mr. Drummond,” turning upon him. “Now I am not going to forgive you, and we will not trust the mother out of our sight, unless you promise not to say this sort of thing to her when we are not here to answer them.”

“But, Miss Challoner, my pastoral conscience!” but his eyes twinkled a little.

“Oh, never mind that!” she retorted, mischievously. “I will give you leave to lecture us collectively, but not individually: that must not be thought about for a moment.” She had not a notion what the queer expression on Mr. Drummond’s face meant, and he did not know himself; but he had the strongest desire to laugh at this.

They parted after this the best of friends; and Phillis tasted the cherries, and pronounced them very good.

“You have quite forgiven me?” Mr. Drummond said, as she accompanied him to the door before rejoining her sisters. “You know I have promised not to do it again until the next time.”

“Oh, we shall see about that!” returned Phillis, good-humoredly. “Forewarned is forearmed; and there is a triple alliance against you.”

“Good heavens, what mockery it seems! I never saw such girls,—never!” thought Mr. Drummond, as he took long strides down the road. “But Mattie is right: they mean business, and nothing in the world would change that girl’s determination if she had set herself to carry a thing out. I never knew a stronger will!” And in this he was tolerably right.

CHAPTER XXII.

“TRIMMINGS, NOT SQUAILS.”

The longest week must have an end; and so at last the eventful Monday morning arrived,—“Black Monday,” as Dulce called it, and then sighed as she looked out on the sunshine and the waving trees, and thought how delicious a long walk or a game of tennis would be, instead of stitch, stitch, stitching all day. But Dulce was an unselfish little soul, and kept all these thoughts to herself, and dressed herself quickly; for she had overslept herself, and Phillis had long been downstairs.

Nan was locking up the tea-caddy as she entered the parlor, and Phillis was standing by the table, drawing on her gloves, and her lips were twitching a little,—a way they had when Phillis was nervous.

Nan went up and kissed her, and gave her an encouraging pat.

“This is for luck, my dear; and mind you make the best of poor Miss Milner’s dumpy, roundabout little figure. There I have put the body-lining, and the measuring-tape, and a paper of pins in this little black bag; and I have not forgotten the scissors,—oh, dear, no! I have not forgotten the scissors,” went on Nan, with such surprising cheerfulness that Phillis saw through it, and was down on her in a moment.

“No, Nan; there! I declare I will not be such a goose. I am not nervous,—not one bit; it is pure fun, that’s what it is. Dulce, what a naughty child you are to oversleep yourself this morning, and I had not the heart to wake you, you looked so like a baby: and we never wake babies because they are sure to squall!”

“Oh, Phil, are you going to Miss Milner’s? I would have walked with you if I had had my breakfast; but I am so hungry.”

“I could not possibly wait,” returned Phillis; “punctuality is one of the first duties of—hem!—dressmakers; all orders executed promptly, and promises performed with undeviating regularity: those are my maxims. Eat a good breakfast, and then see if mammy wants any help, for Nan must be ready for me at the work-table, for she is our head cutter-out.” And then Phillis nodded briskly, and walked away.

By a singular chance, Mr. Drummond was watering his ferns in the front court as Phillis passed, and in spite of her reluctance, for somehow he was the last person she wanted to encounter that day, she was obliged to wish him good-morning.

“Good-morning! Yes, indeed, it is a glorious morning,” observed Archie, brightly. “And may I ask where you are going so early?”

“Only to the Library,” returned Phillis, laconically; but the color mounted to her forehead. “We begin business to-day.”

And then Archie took up his watering-pot and refrained from any more questions. It was absurd, perhaps, but at the moment he had forgotten, and the remembrance was not pleasing.

Phillis felt quite brave after this, and walked into the Library as though the place belonged to

her. When it came to details, Miss Milner was far more nervous than she.

She would keep apologizing to Phillis for making her stand so long, and she wanted to hold the pins and to pick up the scissors that Phillis had dropped; and when the young dressmaker consulted her about the trimmings, she was far too humble to intrude her opinions.

“Anything you think best, Miss Challoner, for you have such beautiful taste as never was seen; and I am sure the way you have fitted that body-lining is just wonderful, and would be a lesson to Miss Slasher for life. No, don’t put the pins in your mouth, there’s a dear.”

For, in her intense zeal, Phillis had thought herself bound to follow the manner of Mrs. Sloper, the village factotum, and she always did so, though Nan afterwards assured her that it was not necessary, and that in this particular they might be allowed to deviate from example.

But she was quite proud of herself when she had finished, for the material seemed to mould under her fingers in the most marvellous way, and she knew the fit would be perfect. She wanted to rush off at once and set to work with Nan; but Miss Milner would not let her off so easily. There was orange wine and seed-cake of her own making in the back parlor, and she had just one question—a very little question—to ask. And here Miss Milner coughed a little behind her hand to gain time and recover her courage.

“The little papers were about the shop, and Mrs. Trimmings saw one, and—and–-” Here Phillis came promptly to her relief.

“And Mrs. Trimmings wants to order a dress, does she?” And Phillis bravely kept down the sudden sinking of heart at the news.

Mrs. Trimmings was the butcher’s wife,—the sister of that very Mrs. Squails of whom Dulce once made mention,—well known to be the dressiest woman in Hadleigh, who was much given to imitate her betters. The newest fashions, the best materials, were always to be found on Mrs. Trimmings’s portly figure.

“What could I do?” observed Miss Milner, apologetically: “the papers were about the shop, and what does the woman do but take one up? ‘I wonder what sort of dressmakers these are?’ she said, careless-like; ‘there is my new blue silk that Andrew brought himself from London and paid five-and-sixpence a yard for in St. Paul’s Churchyard; and I daren’t let Miss Slasher have it, for she made such a mess of that French merino. She had to let it out at every seam before I could get into it, and it is so tight for me now that I shall be obliged to cut it up for Mary Anne. I wonder if I dare try these new people?”

“And what did you say, Miss Milner?”

“What could I do then, my dear young lady, but speak up and say the best I could for you? for though Mrs. Trimmings is not high,—not one of the gentry, I mean,—and has a rough tongue sometimes, still she knows what good stuff and good cutting-out means, and a word from her might do you a power of good among the townfolks, for her gowns are always after the best patterns.”

“All right!” returned Phillis, cheerfully: “one must creep before one runs, and, until the gentry employ us, we ought to think ourselves fortunate to work for the townpeople. I am not a bit above making a dress for Mrs. Trimmings, though I would rather make one for you, Miss Milner, because you have been so kind to us.”

“There, now! didn’t I say there never were such young ladies!” exclaimed Miss Milner, quite affected at this. “Well, if you are sure you don’t mind, Miss Challoner dear, will you please go to Mrs. Trimmings’s this morning? for though I told her my dress was to be finished first, still Trimmings’s isn’t a stone’s-throw from here; and you may as well settle a thing when you are about it.”

“And I will take the silk, Miss Milner, if you will kindly let me have a nice piece of brown paper.”

“Indeed and you will do no such thing, Miss Challoner; and there is Joseph going down with the papers to Mr. Drummond’s, and will leave it at the Friary as he passes.”

“Oh, thank you,” observed Phillis, gratefully. “Then I will pencil a word to my sister, to let her know why I am detained.” And she scrawled a line to Nan:

“Trimmings, not Squails: here beginneth the first chapter. Expect me when you see me, and do nothing until I come.”

There was no side-door at Trimmings’s, and Mrs. Trimmings was at the desk, jotting down legs of mutton, and entries of gravy-beef and suet, with a rapidity that would have tried the brain of any other woman than a butcher’s wife.

When Phillis approached, she looked up at her suavely, expecting custom.

“Just half a moment, ma’am,” she said, civilly. “Yes, Joe, wing-rib and half of suet to Mrs. Penfold, and a loin of lamb and sweet-bread for No. 12, Albert Terrace. Now, ma’am, what can I do for you?”

“I have only come about your dress, Mrs. Trimmings,” returned Phillis, in a very small voice; and then she tried not to laugh, as Mrs. Trimmings regarded her with a broad stare of astonishment, which took her in comprehensively, hat, dress, and neat dogskin gloves.

“You might have taken up my pen and knocked me down with it,” was Mrs. Trimmings’s graphic description of her feelings afterwards, as she carved a remarkably fine loin of veal, with a knuckle of ham and some kidney-beans to go with it. “There was the colonel standing by the

desk, Andrew; and he turned right round and looked at us both. ‘I’ve come about your dress, Mrs. Trimmings,’ she said, as pertlike as possible. Law, I thought I should have dropped, I was that taken aback.”

Phillis’s feelings were none of the pleasantest when Colonel Middleton turned round and looked at her. There was an expression almost of sorrow in the old man’s eyes, as he so regarded her, which made her feel hot and uncomfortable. It was a relief when Mrs. Trimmings roused from her stupefaction and bustled out of the desk.

“This way, miss,” she said, with a jerk of her comely head. But her tone changed a little, and became at once sharp and familiar. “I hope you understand your business, for I never could abide waste; and the way Miss Slasher cut into that gray merino,—and it only just meets, so to say,—and the breadths are as scanty as possible; and it would go to my heart to have a beautiful piece of silk spoiled, flve-and-sixpence a yard, and not a flaw in it.”

“If I thought I should spoil your dress I would not undertake it,” returned Phillis, gently. She felt she must keep herself perfectly quiet with this sort of people. “My sister and I have just made up some very pretty silk and cashmere costumes, and they fitted as perfectly as possible.”

“Oh, indeed!” observed Mrs. Trimmings, in a patronizing tone. She had no idea that the costumes of which Phillis spoke had been worn by the young dressmakers at one of Lady Fitzroy’s afternoon parties. She was not quite at her ease with Phillis; she thought her a little high-and-mighty in her manner. “A uppish young person,” as she said afterwards; “but her grand airs made no sort of difference to me, I can assure you.”

There was no holding pins or picking up scissors in this case. On the contrary, Mrs. Trimmings watched with a vigilant eye, and was ready to pounce on Phillis at the least mistake or oversight, seeing which Phillis grew cooler and more off-hand every moment. There was a great deal of haggling over the cut of the sleeve and arrangement of the drapery. “If you will kindly leave it to me,” Phillis said once; but nothing was further from Mrs. Trimmings’s intention. She had not a silk dress every day. And she had always been accustomed to settle all these points herself, while Miss Slasher had stood by humbly turning over the pages of her fashion-books, and calling her, at every sentence, “Ma’am,” a word that Phillis’s lips had not yet uttered. Phillis’s patience was almost tired out, when she was at last allowed to depart with a large brown-paper parcel under her arm. Mrs. Trimmings would have wrapped it up in newspaper, but Phillis had so curtly refused to have anything but brown paper that her manner rather overawed the woman.

Poor Phillis! Yes, it had really come to pass, and here she was, actually walking through Hadleigh in the busiest time of the day, with a large, ugly-looking parcel and a little black bag! She had thought of sending Dorothy for the dress, but she knew what a trial it would have been to the old woman to see one of her young ladies reduced to this, and she preferred ladening herself to hurting the poor old creature’s feelings. So she walked out bravely in her best style. But nevertheless her shapely neck would turn itself now and then from side to side, as though in dread of some familiar face. And there were little pin-pricks all over her of irritation and mortified self-love. “A thing is all very well in theory, but it may be tough in practice,” she said to herself. And she felt an irresistible desire to return the offending dress to that odious Trimmings and tell her she would have nothing to do with her,—“a disagreeable old cat,” I am afraid Phillis called her, for one is not always charitable and civil-spoken in one’s thoughts.

“We are going the same way. May I carry that formidable-looking parcel for you?” asked a voice that was certainly becoming very familiar.

Poor Phillis started and blushed; but she looked more annoyed than pleased at the rencontre.

“Mr. Drummond, are you omnipresent?—one is forever encountering you!” she said, quite pettishly; but, when Archie only laughed, and tried to obtain possession of the parcel, she resisted, and would have none of his assistance.

“Oh, dear, no!” she said: “I could not think of such a thing! Fancy the vicar of Hadleigh condescending to carry home Mrs. Trimmings’s dress!”

“Mrs. Trimmings’s dress?” repeated Mr. Drummond, in a rapid crescendo. “Oh, Miss Challoner! I declare this beats everything!”

Phillis threw him a glance. She meant it to be cool, but she could not keep the sadness out of her eyes; they did so contradict the assumed lightness of her words:

“Miss Milner was far more considerate: she made Joseph carry hers to the Friary when he left your papers. Was he not a benevolent Joseph? Mrs. Trimmings wanted to wrap up her silk in newspaper; but I said to myself, ‘One must draw the line somewhere;’ and so I held out for brown paper. Do you think you could have offered to carry a parcel in newspaper, Mr. Drummond? Oh, by the bye, how can you condescend to walk with a dressmaker? But this is a quiet road, and no one will see you.”

“Pardon me if I contradict you, but there is Colonel Middleton looking over his garden palings this moment,” returned Mr. Drummond, who had just become painfully aware of the fact.

“Don’t you think you had better go and speak to him, then? for you see I am in no need of help,” retorted Phillis, who was sore all over, and wanted to get rid of him, and yet would have been offended if he had taken her at her word. But Mr. Drummond, who felt his position an uncomfortable one, and was dreadfully afraid of the colonel’s banter, was not mean enough to take advantage of her dismissal. He had joined himself to her company out of pure good nature,

for it was a hot day and the parcel was heavy, but she would have none of his assistance.

So he only waved his hand to his friend, who took off his old felt hat very solemnly in return, and watched them with a grieved expression until they were out of sight.

“Now I will bid you good-bye,” he said, when they had reached the vicarage.

Phillis said nothing; but she held out her hand, and there was a certain brightness in her eyes that showed she was pleased.

“He is a gentleman, every inch of him; and I won’t quarrel with him any more,” she thought, as she walked up to the Friary. “Oh, how nice it would have been if we were still at Glen Cottage and he could see us at our best, and we were able to entertain him in our old fashion! How Carrie and the other girls would have liked him! and how jealous Dick would have been! for he never liked our bringing strange young men to the house, and always found fault with them if he could,” and here Phillis sighed, and for the moment Mrs. Trimmings was forgotten.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“BRAVO, ATALANTA!”

Phillis received quite an ovation as soon as she crossed the threshold. Dulce, who was listening for her footsteps, rushed out into the little hall, and dragged her in, as though she were too weary to have any movement or volition of her own. And then Nan came up, in her calm elder-sisterly way, and put her arm round her, and hoped she was not so very tired, and there was so much to say, and so much to do, and she wanted her advice, and so on.

And on Nan’s forehead lay a thoughtful pucker; and on the centre-table were sundry breadths of green silk, crisp-looking and faintly bronzed, like withered leaves with the sun on them.

“Oh, dear! has Miss Drummond been here in my absence?” asked Phillis, with the overwhelmed feeling of a beginner, who has not yet learned to separate and classify, or the rich value of odd moments. “Three dresses to be done at once!”

“One at a time. But never mind Miss Drummond’s this moment. Mother is safe in the store-cupboard for the next half-hour, and we want to know what you mean by your ridiculous message, ‘Trimmings, not Squails.’ Dulce is dying of curiosity, and so am I.”

“Yes; but she looks so hot and tired that she must refresh herself first.” And Dulce placed on her sister’s lap a plate of yellow plums, perfectly bedded in moss, which had come from the vicarage garden. And as Phillis enjoyed the dainty repast and poured out her morning’s experiences in the ears of her astonished auditors, lo, the humiliation and the sting were forgotten, and only an intense sense of the humor of the situation remained.

It was Dulce whose pink cheeks were burning now.

“Oh, Phillis! how could you? It is too dreadful even to think about! That fat old thing, too! Why, she is twice as big as Mrs. Squails!”

“Beggars cannot be choosers, my dear,” replied Phillis, airily; for rest was pleasant, and the fruit was good, and it was so delicious to feel all that was over and she was safe in her nest again; and then the pleasure of talking it all over! “Do you know—?” she began, in a disconnected manner, and then sat and stared at her sisters with luminous gray eyes, until they begged to know what the new idea was.

“Oh, nothing,” she replied, and colored a little. And then she blurted out, in an oddly-ashamed way, “it was talking to you two dears that put it in my head. But I could not help thinking that moment that if one is ever good enough to get to heaven, one of the greatest pleasures will be to talk about all our past miseries and difficulties, and how the angels helped us! and, though you may laugh at me,”—they were doing nothing of the kind, only admiring her with all their might,—“I have a kind of fancy that even my ‘Trimmings, not Squails’ episode may have a different look up there!”

“My dear,” returned Nan, gently, for she loved all speeches of this sort, being a devout little soul and truly pious, “nothing was further from my thoughts than to laugh at you, for the more we think in this way the grander our work will appear to us. Mrs. Trimmings may be fat and vulgar, but when you were measuring her and answering her so prettily—and I know how nicely you would speak, Phil—I think you were as brave as one of those old knights—I cannot remember their names—who set out on some lofty quest or other!”

“I suppose the child means Sir Galahad,” observed Phillis, with a groan at Nan’s ignorance. “Oh, Nannie, I wish I could say,—

> “‘My strength is as the strength of ten,
> Because my heart is pure;’”

and then she softly chanted,—for quotation never came amiss to her, and her head was

crammed with choice selections from the poets,—

"'All armed I ride, whate'er betide,
Until I find the Holy Grail.'"

"Yes, the Sangreal, or the Quest. It does not matter what, for it was only an allegory," returned Nan, who had plenty of ideas, only she confused them sometimes, and was not as clever in her definitions as Phillis. "It only meant that those grand old knights had some holy purpose and aim in their lives, for which they trained and toiled and fought. Don't you see?—the meaning is quite clear. We can have our Quest too."

"Bless her dear heart, if she is not travelling thousands of years and miles from Mrs. Trimmings!" exclaimed Phillis, who never could be serious long. "Well, Nannie, I understand you, though you are a trifle vague. We will have our Quest and our unattainable standard; and I will be your maiden knight—yours and Dulce's.

"'How sweet are looks that ladies bend
On whom their favors fall!
For them I'll battle till the end,
To save from shame and thrall.'"

And when she had repeated this she rose, laughing, and said they were all a little demented; and what did they mean by wasting their time when there were three dresses to be cut out? and Dulce must have the work fixed for the sewing-machine.

For the next hour there was little talk, only the snipping sound of scissors and the rustling of silken breadths, and sometimes the swish and the tearing of sundry materials, and then the whirring and burning and tappings of Dulce's sewing machine, like a dozen or two of woodpeckers at work on an iron tree. And no one quoted any more poetry, for prose was heaped up everywhere about them, and their heads were full of business.

But in the afternoon, when things were in progress and looked promising, and Mrs. Challoner had had her nap, and was busy over some sleeves that they had given her to keep her quiet and satisfy her maternal conscience that she was helping her girls, Phillis did hear a little about Miss Drummond's visit. The sewing machine, which they worked by turns, had stopped for a time, and they were all three round the table, sewing and fixing as busily as possible: and Phillis, remembering Sir Galahad, dared not say she was tired, only she looked out on the lengthening shadows with delight, and thought about tea and an evening walk just to stretch her cramped muscles. And if one day seemed so long, how would a week of days appear before the blessed Sunday gave them a few hours of freedom?

It was at this moment that Nan, with fine tact, broke the silence that was good for work, but was apt to wax drowsy in time:

"Miss Milner's dress is getting on well. How fast you two girls work! and mammie is doing the sleeves beautifully. Another afternoon you must let the work rest, mammie, and read to us, or Phillis will get restive. By the bye, Dulce, we have not told her a word about Miss Drummond's visit."

"No, indeed: was it not good of her to come so soon?" exclaimed Dulce. "She told us she wanted to be our first customer, and seemed quite disappointed when we said that we were bound in honor and mere gratitude to send Miss Milner's dress home first. 'Not that I am in a hurry for my dress, for nobody cares what I wear,' she said, quite cheerfully; 'but I wanted to be the first on your list.' I wish we could oblige her, for she is a nice, unaffected little thing, and I am beginning to like her, though she is a little fussy."

"But she was as meek as a lamb about her dress," added Nan, who was a first-rate needle-woman, and could work rapidly while she talked. "Just fancy, Phil! she wanted to have a jacket with tabs and loose sleeves, just for comfort and coolness."

"Loose sleeves and a jacket!" almost gasped Phillis, for the princess skirts were then worn, and jackets were consigned to oblivion for the time being. "I hope you told her, Nan, that we had never worked for Mrs. Noah, neither had Mrs. Shem ever honored us by her custom."

"Well, no, Phillis; I was not quite so impertinent, and clever speeches of that sort never occur to me until you say them. But I told Miss Drummond that I could not consent to spoil her lovely dress in that way; and then she laughed and gave in, and owned she knew nothing about fashions, and that her sister Grace always ordered her clothes for her, because she chose such ugly things. She sat and chatted such a long time with us; she had only just gone when you came home."

"And she told us such a lot about this wonderful Grace," went on Dulce: "she says Archie quite worships her.—Well, mammie," as Mrs. Challoner poised her needle in mid-air and regarded her youngest daughter with unfeigned astonishment, "I am only repeating Miss Drummond's words; she said 'Archie.'"

"But, my dear, there was no need to be so literal," returned Mrs. Challoner, reprovingly; for she was a gentlewoman of the old school, and nothing grieved her more than slipshod English or any idiom or idiotcy of modern parlance in the mouths of her bright young daughters: to speak of any young man except Dick without the ceremonious prefix was a heinous misdemeanor in her eyes. Dulce would occasionally trespass, and was always rebuked with much gravity. "You could have said 'her brother,' could you not?"

“Oh, mammie, I am sure Providence intended you for an old maid, and you have not fulfilled your destiny,” retorted Dulce, who was rarely awed by her mother’s solemnity. “All that fuss because I said ‘Archie!’ Oh, I forgot, that name is sacred: the Rev. Archibald Drummond adores his sister Grace.”

“And she must be very nice,” returned Mrs. Challoner with an indulgent smile at her pet Dulce. “I am sure, from what Miss Drummond told us this morning, that she must be a most superior person. Why, Phillis, she teaches all her four younger sisters, and one of them is sixteen. Miss Drummond says she is never out of the school-room, except for an hour or two in the evening, when her father and brothers come home. There are two more brothers, I think she said. Dear what a large family! and Miss Drummond hinted that they were not well off.”

“I should like to know that Grace,” began Phillis; and then she shook her head reflectively. “No, depend upon it, we should be disappointed in her: family paragons are generally odious to other folk. Most likely she wears spectacles, and is a thin thread-papery sort of person.”

“On the contrary, she is a sweet-looking girl, with large melancholy eyes; for Miss Drummond showed us her photograph. So much for your imagination, Phil?” and Dulce looked triumphant. “And she is only twenty-two, and, though not pretty, just the sort of face one could love.”

“Some people’s swans turn out to be geese in the end,” remarked Phillis, provokingly; but she registered at the same time a mental resolve that she would cross-examine Mr. Drummond on the earliest opportunity about this wonderful sister of his. Oh, it was no marvel if he did look down on them when they had not got brains enough to earn their living except in this way! and Phillis stuck her needle into Miss Milner’s body-lining so viciously that it broke.

The sharp click roused Nan’s vigilance, and she looked up, and was at once full of pity for Phillis’s pale face.

“You are tired, Phil, and so are we all,” she said, brightly; “and, as it is our first day of work, we will not overdo ourselves. Mammie, if you will make the tea, we will just tidy up, and look out the patterns for you to match the trimmings and buttons to-morrow;” for this same business of matching was rather hailed by Mrs. Challoner as a relief and amusement.

Phillis grumbled a little over this additional labor, though, at the same time, no one worked harder than she; but she was careful to explain that it was her right, as a freeborn Britoness, to grumble, and that it was as much a relief to her peculiar constitution as a good long yawn is to some people.

“And it answers two purposes,” as she observed; “for it airs the lungs, and relieves the mind, and no one takes any more notice than if I set the wind blowing. And thankful I am, and every mother’s child of us, that Dorothy is approaching this room with her dust-pan and brush. Dorothy, I have a nice little sum for you to do. How many snippets of green and black silk go to a dust-pan? Count them, and subtract all the tacking-thread, and Dulce’s pins.”

“Phillis, you are just feverish from overfatigue and sitting so long in one place, for you are used to running about.” And Nan took her by the shoulders, and marched her playfully to the small parlor, where Mrs. Challoner was waiting for them.

“Come, girls!” she said, cheerfully. “Dorothy has baked your favorite little cakes, and there are new-laid eggs for those who are hungry; and I am sure you all earned your tea, darlings. And, oh, Phillis! how tired you look!” And Mrs. Challoner looked round on each face in turn, in the unwise but loving way of mothers.

This was too much for Phillis; and she interlaced her fingers and put them suddenly and sternly over her mother’s eyes.

“Now, mammie, promise.”

“Phillis, my dear, how can you be so absurd!” but Mrs. Challoner strove in vain to release herself. Phillis’s fingers had iron tenacity in them when she chose.

“A thing like this must be nipped in the bud,” pronounced Phillis, apostrophizing her laughing sisters. “You must not look at us in that fashion every evening, as though we were sheep in a pen, or rabbits for sale. You will be weighing us next; and my nerves will not stand it. No, mother; here I strike. I will not be looked at in that manner.”

“But, Phillis—Oh, you nonsensical child!”

“Personal remarks are to be tabooed from this moment. You must not say, ‘How tired you look!’ or ‘How pale you are!’ It is not manners at the Friary, and it is demoralizing. I am ten times more tired this minute than I was before you told me so.”

“Very well, Phillis; but you must let me pour out the tea.” And then Phillis subsided. But she had started the fun, and Dulce soon took it up and set the ball rolling. And Dorothy, working hard with her dust-pan and brushes, heard the merriment, and her old face lighted up.

“Bless their sweet faces!—pretending to be happy, just to cheer up the mistress, and make believe it is only a game they are having!” muttered the old woman, as she paused to listen. “But, if I am not mistaken, Miss Phillis, poor dear, is just ready to drop with fatigue. Only to hear her, one would think she was as perky as possible.”

When the evening meal was over, Mrs. Challoner leaned back in her chair and made a little speech to her daughters:

“Thank you, my dears. You have done me so much good. Now, if you want to please me, you will

all three put on your hats and take a nice long walk together."

The girls looked at each other, and every pair of eyes said, as plainly as possible, "What a delicious idea! But only two can go, and I intend to be the filial victim." But Mrs. Challoner was too quick for them. "I said all three," she remarked, very decidedly. "If one offers to stay with me, I shall just put myself to bed and lock the door; but if you will be good, and enjoy this lovely evening, I will take my book in the garden and be quite happy until you come back to me." And when they saw that she meant it, and would only be worried by a fuss, they went off as obediently as possible.

They walked very sedately down the Braidwood Road, and past the White House; but when they got into the town, Phillis hurried them on a little: "I don't want people. It is air and exercise and freedom for which I am pining." And she walked so fast that they had some trouble to keep up with her.

But when they had left every trace of human habitation behind them, and were strolling down the rough, uneven beach, towards a narrow strip of sand, that would soon be covered by the advancing tide, Phillis said, in an odd, breathless way, "Nan, just look round and see if there be any one in sight, before, behind, or around us;" and Nan, though in some little surprise, did at once as she was bidden, in the most thorough manner. For she looked up at the sky first, as though she were afraid of balloons or possible angels; and then at the sea, which she scanned narrowly, so that not even a fish could escape her; and after that she beat the boundaries of the land.

"No, there is not a creature in sight except ourselves and Laddie," she answered.

"Very well," answered Phillis promptly. "Then, if it be all safe, and the Hadleigh wits are away wool gathering, and you will not tell mother, I mean to have a race with Dulce, as far as we can run along the shore; and if I do not win––" And here she pursed up her lips and left her sentence unfinished, as though determined to be provoking.

"We shall see about that," returned Dulce, accepting the challenge in a moment; for she was always ready to follow a good lead.

"Oh, you foolish children?" observed Nan, in her staid fashion. But she did not offer the slightest remonstrance, knowing of old that unless Phillis found some safety-valve she would probably wax dangerous. So she called Laddie to her, and held him whining and struggling, for he wanted to stretch his little legs too; thinking a race was good for dogs as well as for girls. But Nan would not hear of it for a moment: he might trip them up and cause another sprained ankle.

"Now, Nan, you must be umpire, and say, One, two, three!" And Nan again obeys, and then watches them with interest. Oh, how pretty it was, if only any one could have seen it, except the crabs and the star-fish, and they never take much notice: the foreground of the summer sea coming up with little purple rushes and a fringe of foam; the yellow sand, jagged, uneven, with salt-water pools here and there; the two girls in their light dresses skimming over the ground with swift feet, skirting the pools, jumping lightly over stones, even climbing a breakwater, then running along another level piece of sand,—Dulce a little behind, but Phillis as erect and sure-footed as Atalanta.

Now Nan has lost them, and puts Laddie down and prepares to follow. In spite of her staidness, she would have dearly loved a run too; only she thinks of Dick, and forbears.

Dulce, who is out of breath, fears she must give up the race, and begins to pant and drop behind in earnest, and to wish salt water were fresh, and then to dread the next breakwater as a hopeless obstacle; but Phillis, who is still as fresh as possible, squares her elbows as she has seen athletes do, and runs lightly up to it, unmindful and blissfully ignorant of human eyes behind a central hole.

Some one who is of a classical turn has been thinking of the daughter of Iasus and Clymene, and cries out, "Bravo, Atalanta! but where is Milanion, that he has forgotten the golden apples?" And Phillis, stricken dumb by the question and the sudden apparition of a bearded face behind the breakwater, remains standing as though she were carved in stone.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MOTHERS ARE MOTHERS.

"Mr. Drummond! Oh dear! is one never to be free from pastoral supervision?" muttered Phillis, half sulkily, when she roused from her stupefaction and had breath to take the offensive. And what would he think of her? But that was a question to be deferred until later, when nightmares and darkness and troublesome thoughts harass the unwary soul. "Like a dog, he hunts in dreams," she might have said to herself, quoting from "Locksley Hall." But she did nothing of the kind,—only looked at the offending human being with such an outraged dignity in her bearing that Mr. Drummond nearly committed himself by bursting out laughing.

He refrained with difficulty, and said rather dryly,—

“That was a good race; but I saw you would win from the first; and you jumped that stone splendidly. I suppose you know the story of Atalanta?”

“Oh, yes,” responded Phillis, gloomily; but she could not help showing off her knowledge all the same; and she had always been so fond of heathen mythology, and had even read translations of Homer and Virgil. “She had a she-bear for a nurse, and was eventually turned into a lion; and I always thought her very stupid for being such a baby and stopping to pick up the golden apple.”

“Nevertheless, the subject is a charming one for a picture,” returned Archie, with admirable readiness, for he saw Phillis was greatly hurt by this untoward accident, and he liked the girl all the better for her spirit. He would not have discovered himself at all, only in another moment she must have seen him; and if she would only have believed how fully he entered into the fun, and how graceful and harmless he thought it, there would have been no pang of wounded self-esteem left. But girls, especially if they be worthy of the name, are so sensitive and prickly on such matters.

Dulce had basely deserted her sister, and, at the sight of the clerical felt hat, had fled to Nan’s side for protection.

“Oh, never mind,” Nan had said, consoling her: “it is only Mr. Drummond. And he will know how it was, and that we thought there was not a creature in sight.” Nevertheless, she felt a little sorry in her heart that such a thing had happened. It would spoil Phillis’s mirth, for she was very proud; and it might shock their mother.

“Oh, he will think us such tomboys for grown-up young ladies!” sighed Dulce, who was only just grown up.

“Never mind what he thinks,” returned Nan, walking fast, for she was anxious to come to Phillis’s relief. She joined them very quietly, and held out her hand to Archie as though nothing had happened.

“Is this a favorite walk of yours, Mr. Drummond? We thought we had it all to ourselves, and so the girls had a race. They will be dreadfully troubled at having a spectator; but it might be worse, for you already know us well enough not to misconstrue a little bit of fun.”

“I am glad you judge me so truly,” returned Archie, with a gleam of pleasure in his eyes. Phillis certainly looked uncommonly handsome, as she stood there, flushed and angry. But how sweet and cool Nan looked!—not a hair ruffled nor a fold of her dress out of order; whereas Dulce’s brown locks were all loose about her shoulders, shaken down by the exercise. Nevertheless, at that moment Phillis looked the most striking.

“I am afraid my sudden appearance has put your sister out dreadfully. I assure you I would have made myself into thin air if I could,” went on Archie, penitently; “but all the same it was impossible not to applaud the winner. I felt inclined to wave my hat in the air, and cry, ‘Bravo, Atalanta!’ half a dozen times. You made such pretty running, Miss Challoner; and I wish Grace could have seen it.”

The last word acted like magic on Phillis’s cloudy brow. She had passed over two delicately-implied compliments with a little scorn. Did he think her, like other girls, to be mollified by sugar-plums and sweet speeches? He might keep all that for the typical young lady of Hadleigh. At Oldfield the young men knew her better.

It must be owned that the youth of that place had been slightly in awe of Phillis. One or two had even hinted that they thought her strong-minded. “She has stand-off ways, and rather laughs at a fellow, and makes one feel sometimes like a fool,” they said; which did not prove much, except that Phillis showed herself above nonsense, and had a knowledge of shams, and would not be deceived, and, being the better horse of the two, showed it; and no man likes to be taken down in his class.

As Phillis would not flirt,—not understanding the art, but Dulce proved herself to be a pretty apt pupil,—they left off trying to make her, and talked sensibly to her instead, which she liked better. But, though more than one had admired her, no one had ventured to persuade himself or her that he was in love; but for that there was plenty of time, Phillis not being the sort of girl to remain long without a lover.

So when she heard Grace’s name she pricked up her ears, and the proud look left her face; and she said, a little archly, but in a way that pleased Mr. Drummond,—

“All the same, I am glad your sister was not here, for she would think Dulce and me such tomboys!” using Dulce’s very expression.

Archie shook his head very decidedly at this.

“Ah! you do not know Grace, and how she loves a bit of fun; only she never gets it, poor girl!” sighing in a marked manner, for he saw how interested Phillis looked. “If you could only hear her laugh; but please sit down a moment and rest yourselves,” continued the artful young man, who had not dared to purpose such a thing before.

Nan hesitated; but a glance at Phillis’s hot face decided her.

“Just for five minutes,” she said, “and then we must go back to mother;” for she had already determined that they must cut their walk short for the purpose of getting rid of Mr. Drummond.

And then they sat down on the beach, and Dulce retired behind the breakwater to take off her

hat and tuck up her hair; while Archie, taking no notice, leaned against the other side, and felt well contented with his position,—three such pretty girls, and all the world well away!

“Is Grace your favorite sister?” asked Phillis, suddenly, as she menaced Laddie with a small pebble.

This was a lucky opening for Archie. He was never seen to more advantage than when he was talking about Grace. There was no constraint or consciousness about him at such times, but he would speak with a simple earnestness that made people say, “What a good fellow he is!”

“Oh, she has always been that, you know,” he said, brightly, “ever since she was a little thing, and I used to carry her about in my arms, and string horse-chestnuts for her, when she was the funniest, merriest little creature, and so clever. I suppose when a man has seven sisters he may be allowed to have a favorite among them? and there is not one of them to compare with Grace.”

“Seven sisters!” repeated Nan, with a smile; and then she added “you are very lucky, Mr. Drummond.”

Archie shrugged his shoulders at this: he had never quite recognized his blessings in this respect. Isabel and Dottie might be tolerated, but he could easily have dispensed with Susie and Laura and Clara; he had a knack of forgetting their existence when he was absent from them, and when he was at home he did not always care to be reminded of their presence. He was one of those men who are very exacting to their women-kind, who resent it as a personal injury if they fail in good looks or are not pleasant to the eye. He did not go so far as to say to himself that he could dispense with poor Mattie too, but he certainly acted on most occasions as though he thought so.

“Are you not fond of all your sisters?” asked Phillis, rather maliciously, for she had remarked the shrug.

“Oh, as to that,” replied the young man, coloring a little, “one cannot expect to be interested in a lot of school-girls. I am afraid I know very little about the four youngest, except that they are working Grace to death. Just fancy, Miss Challoner!” he continued, addressing Nan, and quite disregarding Phillis’s sympathetic looks. “Grace has actually no life of her own at all; she teaches those girls, sits with them, walks with them, helps them mend their clothes, just like a daily or rather a nursery governess, except that she is not paid, and has no holidays. I cannot think how my mother can find it in her heart to work her so hard!” finished Archie, excited to wrath at the remembrance of Grace’s wrongs.

“Well, do you know,” returned Nan, thoughtfully, as he seemed to expect an answer to this, and Phillis for a wonder was silent, “I cannot think your sister an object of pity. Think what a good and useful life she is leading! She must be a perfect treasure to her mother; and I dare say they all love her dearly.”

“The girls do,” was the somewhat grudging response: “they follow her about like four shadows, and even Isabel can do nothing without her advice. When I am at home I can scarcely get her for a moment to myself; it is ‘Grace, come here,’ and ‘Grace, please do this for me,’ until I wonder she is not worn out.”

“Oh, how happy she must be!” responded Nan, softly, for to her no lot seemed sweeter than this. To be the centre and support of a large family circle,—the friend and trusted confidante of each! What a wonderful creature this Grace must be! and how could he speak of her in that pitying tone? “No life of her own!” Well, what life could she want better than this? To be the guide and teacher of her younger sisters, and to be loved by them so dearly! “Oh, I think she is to be envied! her life must be so full of interest,” she said, addressing the astonished Archie, who had certainly never taken this view of it. And when she had said this, she gave a slight signal to her sisters, which they understood at once; and then they paced slowly down the beach, with their faces towards the town, talking as they went.

They did not walk four abreast, as they used to do in the Oldfield lanes; but Nan led the way with Mr. Drummond, and Phillis and Dulce dropped behind.

Archie was a little silent; but presently he said, quite frankly, as though he had known her for years,—but from the first moment he had felt strangely at home with these girls,—

“Do you know, you have thrown a fresh light on a vexed subject? I have been worrying myself dreadfully about Grace. I wanted her to live with me because there was more sympathy between us than there ever will be between my sister Mattie and myself. We have more in common, and think the same on so many subjects; and I knew how happy I could have made her.”

“Yes, I see,” returned Nan; and she looked up at him in such an interested way that he found no difficulty in going on:

“We had planned for years to live together; but when I accepted the living, and the question was mooted in the family council, my mother would not hear of it for a moment. She said Grace could not possibly be spared.”

“Well, I suppose not, after what you have told me. But it must have been a great disappointment to you both,” was Nan’s judicious reply.

“I have never ceased to regret my mother’s decision,” he returned, warmly; “and as for Grace, I fear she has taken the disappointment grievously to heart.”

“Oh, I hope not!”

“Isabel writes to my sister Mattie that Grace is looking thin and pale and has lost her appetite, and she thinks the mother is getting uneasy about her; and I cannot help worrying myself about it, and thinking how all this might have been averted.”

“I think you are wrong in that,” was the unexpected answer. “When one has acted rightly to the very best of one’s power, it is of no use worrying about consequences.”

“How do you mean?” asked Archie, very much surprised at the decided tone in which Nan spoke. He had thought her too soft in manners to possess much energy and determination of character; but he was mistaken.

“It would be far worse if your sister had not recognized her duty and refused to remain at home. One cannot find happiness if one moves out of one’s allotted niche; but of course you know all this better than I, being a clergyman. And, oh! how beautifully you spoke to us last Sunday!” finished Nan, remembering all at once that she was usurping his place and preaching a little sermon of her own.

“Never mind that,” he replied, impatiently: “tell me what you mean. There is something behind your speech: you think I am wrong in pitying poor Grace so much?”

“If you ask me so plainly, I must say yes, though perhaps I am not competent to judge; but, from what you tell me, I think you ought not to pity her at all. She is fulfilling her destiny. Is she not doing the work given her to do? and what can any girl want more? You should trust your mother, I think, Mr. Drummond; for she would not willingly overwork her. Mothers are mothers: you need not be afraid,” said Nan, looking up in her clear honest way.

“Thank you; you have taken a weight off my mind,” returned Archie, more moved by this than he cared to own. That last speech had gone home: he must trust his mother. In a moment scales seemed to fall from the young man’s eyes as he walked along gravely, and silently by Nan. “Why, what manner of girls could these be?” he thought; “frolicsome as kittens, and yet possessing the wisdom of mature womanhood?” And those few simple words of Nan abided long with him.

What if he and Grace were making a mistake, and there was no hardship in her case at all, but only clear duty, and a most high privilege, as Nan hinted? What if his mother were right, and only they were wrong?

The idea was salutary, but hardly pleasant; for he had certainly aided and abetted Grace in her discontent, and had doubtless increased her repinings at her dull surroundings. Surely Grace’s talents had been given her for a purpose; else why was she so much cleverer than the others,—so gifted with womanly accomplishments? And that clear head of hers,—she had a genius for teaching, he had never denied that. Was his mother, a sensible large-sighted woman in her way, to be secretly condemned as a tyrant, and wanting in maternal tenderness for Grace, because she had made use of this gifted daughter for the good of her other children, and had refused to part with her at Archie’s request?

Archie began to feel uncomfortable, for conscience was waxing warm within him; and there had been a grieved hurt tone in his mother’s letters of late, as though she had felt herself neglected by him.

“Mothers are mothers: you need not be afraid,” Nan had said, with simple wholesome faith in the instincts of motherhood; and the words had come home to him with the strongest power.

His poor harassed mother,—what a hard life hers had been! Archie began to feel his heart quite tender towards her; perhaps she was a little severe and exacting with the girls, but they none of them understood her in the least, “for her bark was always worse than her bite,” thought Archie; and girls, at least the generality of them, are sometimes aggravating.

He thought of the weary times she must have had with his father,—for Mr. Drummond could make himself disagreeable to his wife when things went wrong with him, and the sullen fortitude with which he bore his reversal of fortune gave small opening to her tenderness; the very way in which he shirked all domestic responsibilities, leaving on her shoulders the whole weight of the domestic machinery and all the home-management, had hardened and embittered her.

A large family and small means, little support from her husband,—who interfered less and less with domestic matters,—all this had no doubt fostered the arbitrary will that governed the Drummond household. If her husband had only kept her in check,—if he had supported her authority, and not left her to stand alone,—she would have been, not a better woman, for Archie knew his mother was good, but she would have been softer and more lovable, and her children would have seen deeper into her heart.

Some such thoughts as these passed through Archie’s mind as he walked beside Nan; but he worked them out more carefully when he was alone that night. Just before they reached the Friary, he had started another subject; for, turning to Phillis and Dulce, whom he had hitherto ignored, he asked them whether he might enroll one or all of them among his Sunday-school teachers.

Phillis’s eyes sparkled at this.

“Oh, Nan, how delightful! it will remind us of Oldfield.”

“Yes, indeed:” chimed in Dulce, who had left her infant-class with regret; but, to their surprise, Nan demurred.

“At Oldfield things were very different,” she said, decidedly: “we played all the week, and it was no hardship to teach the dear children on Sunday; but now we shall have to work so hard that we shall be glad of one day’s rest.”

“But surely you might spare us one hour or two in the afternoon?” returned Archie, putting on what Grace called “his clerical face.”

“In the afternoons mother will be glad of our company, and sometimes we shall indulge in a walk. No, Mr. Drummond, our week-days are too full of work, and we shall need all the rest we can get on Sunday.” And, with a smile, Nan dismissed the subject.

Phillis spoke regretfully of it when he had left them.

“It would have been so nice,” she pleaded; but Nan was inexorable.

“You can go if you like, Phil; but I think mother is entitled to that one afternoon in the week, and I will not consent to any parish work on that account; and then I am sure we shall often be so tired.” And Nan’s good sense, as usual, carried the day.

After that they all grouped round the window in the little parlor, and repeated to their mother every word of their conversation with Mr. Drummond.

Mrs. Challoner grew alarmed and tearful in a moment.

“Oh, my darlings, promise me to be more careful for the future!” she pleaded. “Of course it was only fun, Phillis and he will not think anything of it. Still, in a strange place, where no one knows you––”

“Dulce and I will never run a race again, I think I can promise you that,” replied Phillis, very grimly, who felt that “Bravo, Atalanta!” would haunt her in her dreams.

“And—and I would not walk about with Mr. Drummond, though he is our clergyman and a very gentlemanly person. People might talk: and in your position, my poor dears”—Mrs. Challoner hesitated, for she was very nice in her scruples, and not for worlds would she have hinted to her daughters that Mr. Drummond was young and unmarried, and a very handsome man in the bargain: “You see, I cannot always be with you, and, as you have to work for your living, and cannot be guarded like other girls, you have all the more need to be circumspect. You don’t think me over strict, do you, darlings?”

“No, dear mother, you are perfectly right,” returned Nan, kissing her. “I knew how you would feel, and so we came home directly to get rid of him: it would never do for the vicar of the parish to be seen walking about with dressmakers.”

“Don’t, Nan!” exclaimed Phillis, with a shudder. Nevertheless, as she turned away she remembered how she had enjoyed that walk down the Braidwood Road that very morning, when he offered to carry home Mrs. Trimmings’s dress and she would not let him.

CHAPTER XXV.

MATTIE’S NEW DRESS.

The remainder of the week passed harmlessly and without any special event to mark it, and, thanks to Nan’s skilful management and Phillis’s pride, there were no further *contretemps* to shock Mrs. Challoner’s sense of propriety. The work progressed with astonishing rapidity: in the mornings the young dressmakers were sufficiently brisk and full of zeal, and in the afternoons, when their energies flagged and their fingers grew weary, Dulce would sing over her task, or Mrs. Challoner would read to them for the hour together; but, notwithstanding the interest of the tale, there was always great alacrity manifested when the tea-bell gave them the excuse for putting away their work.

On one or two evenings they gardened, and Mrs. Challoner sat under the mulberry-tree and watched them; on another occasion they took a long country walk, and lost themselves, and came back merry and tired, and laden with primrose-roots and ferns: they had met no one, except a stray laborer,—had seen glow-worms, picked wild flowers, and declared themselves mightily refreshed. One evening Phillis, who was not to be repressed, contrived a new amusement.

“Life is either a mill-pond or a whirlpool,” she said, rather sententiously: “we have been stagnant for three days, and I begin to feel flat. Races are tabooed: besides, we cannot always leave mother alone. I propose we go out in the garden and have a game of battledore and shuttlecock;” for this had been a winter pastime with them at the cottage.

Nan, who was always rather sober-minded now, demurred to this. She would have preferred gardening a little, or sitting quietly with her mother under the mulberry-tree; but Phillis, who was in a wild mood, overruled all her objections, and by and by the battle began, and the shuttlecocks flew through the air.

The week's work was finished, and the three dresses lay in their wrappers, waiting for Dorothy to convey them to their several owners. Nan who was really an *artiste* at heart, had called her mother proudly into the room to admire the result of their labors. Mrs. Challoner was far too accustomed to her daughter's skilfulness to testify any surprise, but she at once pronounced Miss Drummond's dress the *chef-d'œuvre*. Nan's taste was faultless; and the trimmings she had selected harmonized so well with the soft tints of the silk.

"They are all very nice; and Mrs. Trimmings will be charmed with her blue silk," observed Mrs. Challoner, trying to throw a little interest into her voice, and to suppress a sigh; and then she helped Nan to adjust the wrappers, and to pin the neatly-written bills inside each.

"I am sure that is business-like," said Nan, with a satisfied nod, for she never could do anything by halves; and she was so interested in her work that she would have been heart-broken if she thought one of the dresses would be a misfit; and then it was that Phillis, who had been watching her very closely, brightened up and proposed a game.

It was a very pretty sight, the mother thought, as she followed her girls' movements; the young figures swayed so gracefully as they skimmed hither and thither over the lawn with light butterfly movements, the three eager faces upturned in the evening light, their heads held well back.

"Two hundred, two hundred and one, two hundred and two—don't let it drop, Dulce!" panted Phillis, breathlessly.

"Oh, my darlings, don't tire yourselves!" exclaimed Mrs. Challoner, as her eyes followed the white flutter of the shuttlecocks.

This was the picture that Mr. Drummond surveyed. Dorothy, who was just starting on her round, and was in no mood for her errand, had admitted him somewhat churlishly.

"Yes, the mistress and the young ladies were in; and would he step into the parlor, as her hands were full?"

"Oh, yes, I know the way," Mr. Drummond had returned, quite undaunted by the old woman's sour looks.

But the parlor was empty, save for Laddie, who had been shut up there not to spoil sport, and who was whining most piteously to be let out. He saluted Archie with a joyous bark, and commenced licking his boots and wagging his tail with mute petition to be released from this durance vile.

Archie patted and fondled him, for he was good to all dumb creatures.

"Poor little fellow! I wonder why they have shut you up here?" he said; and then he took him up in his arms, and stepped to the window to reconnoitre.

And then he stood and looked, perfectly fascinated by the novel sight. His sisters played battledore and shuttlecock in the school-room sometimes, or out in the passages on a winter's afternoon. He had once caught Susie and Clara at it, and had laughed at them in no measured terms for indulging in such a babyish game. "I should have thought Dottie might have played at that," he had said, rather contemptuously. "I suppose you indulge in skipping-ropes sometimes." And the poor girls had paused in their game, feeling ashamed of themselves. Archie would think them such hoydens.

He remembered his reprimand with a strange feeling of compunction, as he stood by the window trying vainly to elude Laddie's caresses. What a shame of him to have spoiled those poor children's game with his sneer, when they had so little fun in their lives! and yet, as he recalled Clara's clumsy gestures and Susie's short-sighted attempts, he was obliged to confess that battledore and shuttlecock wore a different aspect now. Could anything surpass Phillis's swift-handed movements, brisk, graceful, alert, or Nan's attitude, as she sustained the duel? Dulce, who seemed dodging in between them in a most eccentric way, had her hair loose as usual, curling in brown lengths about her shoulders. She held it with one hand, as she poised her battledore with the other. This time Archie thought of Nausicaa and her maidens tossing the ball beside the river, after washing the wedding-garments. Was it in this way the young dressmakers disported themselves during the evenings?

It was Phillis who first discovered the intruder. The shuttlecocks had become entangled, and fallen to the ground. As she stooped to pick them up, her quick eyes detected a coat-sleeve at the window; and an indefinable instinct, for she could not see his face, made her call out,—

"Mother, Mr. Drummond is in the parlor. Do go to him, while Dulce puts up her hair." And then she said, severely, "I always tell you not to wear your hair like that, Dulce. Look at Nan and me; we are quite unruffled; but yours is always coming down. If you have pretty hair, you need not call people's attention to it in this way." At which speech Dulce tossed her head and ran away, too much offended to answer.

When Archie saw Mrs. Challoner crossing the lawn with the gait of a queen, he knew he was discovered: so he opened the window, and stepped out in the coolest possible way.

"I seem always spoiling sport," he said, with a mischievous glance at Phillis, which she received with outward coolness and an inward twinge. "Bravo, Atalanta!" sounded in her ears again. "Your maid invited me in; but I did not care to disturb you."

"I am glad you did not open the window before," returned Nan, speaking with that directness and fine simplicity that always put things to rights at once: "it would have startled us before we

got to the five hundred, and then Phillis would have been disappointed. Mother, shall we bring out some more chairs instead of going into the parlor? It is so much pleasanter out here." And as Mrs. Challoner assented, they were soon comfortably established on the tiny lawn; and Archie, very much at his ease, and feeling himself unaccountably happy, proceeded to deliver some trifling message from his sister, that was his ostensible reason for his intrusion.

"Why does she not deliver her messages herself?" thought Phillis; but she kept this remark to herself. Only, that evening she watched the young clergyman a little closely, as though he puzzled her. Phillis was the man of the family; and it was she who always stood upon guard if Nan or Dulce needed a sentinel. She was beginning to think Mr. Drummond came very often to see them, considering their short acquaintance. If it were Miss Mattie, now, who ran in and out with little offerings of flowers and fruit in a nice neighborly fashion! But for this very dignified young man to burden himself with these slight feminine messages,—a question about new-laid eggs, which even Nan had forgotten.

Phillis was quite glad when her mother said,—

"You ought to have brought your sister, Mr. Drummond: she must be so dull all alone,"—forgetting all about the dressmaking, poor soul! but Phillis remembered it a moment afterwards, with a rush of bitter feeling.

Perhaps, after all, that was why he came in so often, because he was so sorry for them, and wished to help them, as he said. A clergyman has more privileges than other men: perhaps she was wrong to suspect him. He might not wish his sister to visit them, except in a purely business-like way; but with him it was different. Most likely he had tea with Mrs. Trimmings sometimes, just to show he was not proud; he might even sit and chat with Mrs. Squails, and not feel compromised in the least. Oh, yes! how stupid she was to think he admired Nan, because she had intercepted a certain glance! That was her mania, thinking every one must be after Nan. Things were different now.

Of course he would be their only link with civilized society,—the only cultivated mind with which they could hold converse; and here Phillis ceased to curl her lip, and her gray eyes took a sombre shade, and she sighed so audibly that Archie broke off an interesting discussion on last Commemoration, and looked at her in unfeigned surprise.

"Oh, yes! we were there," returned Nan, innocently, who loved to talk of those dear old times; "and we were at the *fête* at Oriel, and at the concert at Magdalen also. Ah! do you remember, Dulce?" And then she faltered a little, and flushed,—not because Mr. Drummond was looking at her so intently but at certain thoughts that began to intrude themselves, which entwined themselves with the moonlighted cloisters.

"I was to have been there too, only at the last moment I was prevented," replied Archie; but his tone was inexplicable to the girl, it was at once so regretful and awe-struck. Good heavens! if he had met them, and been introduced to them in proper form! They had mentioned a Mr. Hamilton: well, Hamilton had been a pupil of his; he had coached him during a term. "You know Hamilton?" he had said, staring at her; and then he wondered what Hamilton would say if he came down to stay with him next vacation.

These reflections made him rather absent; and even when he took his leave, which was not until the falling dews and the glimmer of a late dusk drove Mrs. Challoner into the house, these thoughts still pursued him. Nothing else seemed to have taken so strong a hold on him as this.

"Good heavens!" he kept repeating to himself, "to think that the merest chance—just the incidental business of a friend—prevented me from occupying my old rooms during Commemoration! to think I might have met them in company with Hamilton and the other fellows!"

The sudden sense of disappointment, of something lost and irremediable in his life, of wasted opportunities, of denied pleasure, came over the young man's mind. He could not have danced with Nan at the University ball, it is true: clergymen, according to his creed, must not dance. But there was the *fête* at Oriel, and the Magdalen concert, and the Long Walk in the Christchurch meadows, and doubtless other opportunities.

He never asked himself if these girls would have interested him so much if he had met them first in ordinary society: from the very first moment they had attracted him strangely. Had he only known them a fortnight? Good heavens! it seemed months, years, a lifetime! These revolutions of mind are not to be measured by time. It had come to this that the late fellow of Oriel, so aristocratic in his tastes, so temperate in his likings, had entered certain devious paths, where hidden pitfalls and thorny enclosures warn the unwary traveller of unknown dangers, and in which he was walking, not blindfold, but by strongest will and intent, led by impulse like a mere boy, and not daring to raise his eyes to the future. "And what Grace would have said!" And for the first time in his life Archie felt that in this case he could not ask Grace's advice. He was loath to turn in at his own gate; but Mattie was standing there watching for him. She ran out into the road to meet him, and then he could see there were letters in her hand.

"Oh, dear, Archie, I thought you were never coming home!" she exclaimed. "And I have such news to tell you! There is a letter for you from Grace, and mother has written to me; and there is a note from Isabel inside, and she is engaged—really and truly engaged—to Mr. Ellis Burton; and the wedding is to be in six weeks, and you and I are to go down to it, and—oh, dear––" Here Mattie broke down, and began to sob with excitement and pleasure and the longing for sympathy.

“Well, well, there is nothing to cry about!” returned Archie, roughly; and then his manner changed and softened in spite of himself; for after all, Isabel was his sister, and this was the first wedding in the family, and he could not hear such a piece of news unmoved. “Let me hear all about it,” he said, by and by; and then he took poor hysterical little Mattie into the house, and gave her some wine, and was very kind to her, and listened to his mother’s letter and Isabel’s gushing effusion without a single sneer. “Poor little Belle; she does seem very happy!” he said, quite affectionately, as he turned up the lamp still more, and began Grace’s letter.

Mattie sat and gazed at him in a sort of ecstasy; but she did not venture to ask him to read it to her. How nice he was to-night, and how handsome he looked! there never was such a brother as Archie. But suddenly, as though he was conscious of being watched, he sat down by the table, and shaded his face with his hand.

No, Mattie, was right in her surmise: he would not have cared to show that letter to any one.

The first sheet was all about Isabel. “Dear little Isabel has just left me,” wrote Grace. “The child looks so pretty in her new happiness, you would hardly know her. She has just been showing me the magnificent hoop of diamonds Ellis has given her. She says we must all call him Ellis now. ‘Chacun a son gout:’ Poor Ellis is not very brilliant, certainly: I remember we used to call him clownish and uncultivated. But he has a good heart, and he is really very fond of Isabel; and as she is satisfied, I suppose we need not doubt the wisdom of her choice. Mother is radiant, and makes so much of the little bride-elect that she declares her head is quite turned. The house is quite topsy-turvy with the excitement of this first wedding in the family. Isabel is very young to be married, and I tell mother six weeks is far too short for an engagement; but it seems Ellis will not listen to reason, and he has talked mother over. Perhaps I am rather fastidious, but, if I were Isabel, I should hate to receive my trousseau from my lover; and yet Ellis wants his mother to get everything for his *fiancee*. I believe there is to be a sort of compromise, and Mrs. Burton is to select heaps of pretty things,—dresses and mantles and Paris bonnets. They are rolling in riches. Ellis has taken a large house in Sloane Square, and his father has bought him a landau and a splendid pair of horses; everything—furniture, plate and ornaments—is to be as massive and expensive as possible. If I were Isabel I should feel smothered by all these grand things but the little lady takes it all quite coolly.

“When I get a moment to myself I sit down and say, ‘In six weeks I shall see Archie!’ Oh, my darling! this is almost too good news to be true! Only six weeks, and then I shall really see you! Now do you know, I am longing for a good clearing-up talk? for your letters lately have not satisfied me at all. Perhaps I am growing fanciful, but I cannot help feeling as though something has come between us. The current of sympathy seems turned aside, somehow. No, do not laugh, or put me off with a jest, for I am really in earnest; and but for fear of your scolding me I should own to being just a little unhappy. Forgive me, Archie, if I vex you; but there is something, I am thoroughly convinced of that. You have some new interest or worry that you are keeping from me. Is this quite in accordance with our old compact, dear? Who are these Challoners Mattie mentions in her letters? She told me a strange rigmarole about them the other day,—that they were young ladies who had turned dressmakers. What an eccentric idea! They must be very odd young ladies, I should think, to emancipate themselves so completely from all conventionalities. I wish they had not established themselves at Hadleigh and so near the vicarage. Mattie says you are so kind to them. Oh, Archie! dear brother! do be careful! I do not half like the idea of these girls; they sound rash and designing, and you are so chivalrous in your notions. Why not let Mattie be kind to them instead of you? In a parish like Hadleigh you need to be careful. Mother is calling me, so I will just close this with my fondest love.

“Grace.”

Archie threw down the letter with a frown. For the first time he was annoyed with Grace.

Nan and her sisters rash and designing! “Odd young ladies”! She was sorry they had established themselves at Hadleigh! It was really too bad of Grace to condemn them in this fashion. But of course it must be Mattie’s fault: she had written a pack of nonsense, exaggerating things as much as possible.

Poor Mattie would have had to bear the brunt of his wrath as usual, only, as he turned to her with the frown black on his forehead, his eyes caught sight of her dress. Hitherto the room had been very dimly lighted; but now, as he looked at her in the soft lamplight, his anger vanished in amazement.

“Why, Mattie, what have you done to yourself? We are not expecting company this evening: it is nearly ten o’clock.”

Mattie blushed and laughed, and then she actually bridled with pleasure:

“Oh, no, Archie; of course not. I only put on my new dress just to see how it would fit; and then I thought you might like to see it. It is the one uncle gave me; and is it not beautifully made? I am sure Mrs. Cheyne’s dresses never fit better. You and Grace may say what you like about the Challoners, but if they can make dresses like this, it would be tempting Providence not to use such a talent, and just because they were too fine ladies to work.”

“I do believe you are right, Mattie,” returned Archie, in a low voice. “Turn round and let me look at you, girl. Do you mean—that she—that they made that?”

Mattie nodded as she slowly pivoted on one foot, and then revolved like the figures one used to see on old-fashioned barrel-organs; then, as she stood still, she panted out the words,—

“Is it not just lovely, Archie?” for in all the thirty years of her unassuming life Mattie had never

had such a dress, so no wonder her head was a little turned.

“Yes, indeed; I like it excessively,” was Archie’s comment; and then he added, with the delicious frankness common to brothers, “It makes you look quite a different person, Mattie: you are almost nice-looking to-night.”

“Oh, thank you, dear!” cried poor Mattie, quite moved by this compliment; for if Archie thought her almost nice-looking he must be pleased with her. Indeed, she even ventured to raise herself on tiptoe and kiss him in gratitude, which was taking a great liberty; only Archie bore it for once.

“She really looked very well, poor little woman!” thought Archie, when Mattie had at last exhausted her raptures and bidden him good-night. “She would not be half so bad-looking if some one would take her in hand and dress her properly. The women must be right, after all, and there is a power in dress. Those girls do nothing by halves,” he continued, walking up and down the room. “I would not have believed they had made it, if Mattie had not told me. ‘Rash and designing,’ indeed! just because they are not like other girls,—because they are more natural, more industrious, more courageous, more religious in fact.” And then the young clergyman softly quoted to himself the words of the wise old king, words that Nan and her sisters had ever loved and sought to practise:

“Whatsoever thy hands findeth to do, do it with thy might.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

“OH, YOU ARE PROUD!”

On the following Monday morning, Nan said in rather a curious voice to Phillis,—

“If no customers call to-day, our work-room will be empty. I wonder what we shall do with ourselves?”

To which Phillis replied, without a moment’s hesitation,—

“We will go down and bathe, and Dulce and I will have a swimming-match; and after that we will sit on the beach and quiz the people. Most likely there will be a troupe of colored minstrels on the Parade, and that will be fun.”

“Oh, I hope no one will come!” observed Dulce, overjoyed at the idea of a holiday; but, seeing Nan’s face was full of rebuke at this outburst of frivolity, she said no more.

It was decided at last that they should wait for an hour to see if any orders arrived, and after that they would consider themselves at liberty to amuse themselves for the remainder of the day. But, alas for Dulce’s hopes! long before the appointed hour had expired, the gate-bell rang, and Miss Drummond made her appearance with a large paper parcel, which she deposited on the table with a radiant face.

The story was soon told. Her silk dress was such a success, and dear Archie was so charmed with it—here Mattie, with a blush, deposited a neatly-sealed little packet in Nan’s hand—that he had actually proposed that she should have another gown made after the same pattern for every-day wear. And he had taken her himself directly after breakfast down to Mordant’s, and had chosen her this dress. He had never done such a thing before, even for Grace: so no wonder Mattie was in the seventh heaven of delight.

“It is very pretty,” observed Nan, critically: “your brother has good taste.” Which speech was of course retailed to Archie.

Mattie had only just left the cottage, when another customer appeared in the person of Miss Middleton.

Nan, who had just begun her cutting-out, met her with a pleased glance of recognition, and then, remembering her errand, bowed rather gravely. But Miss Middleton, after a moment’s hesitation, held out her hand.

She had not been able to make up her mind about these girls. Her father’s shocked sense of decorum, and her own old-fashioned gentlewoman’s idea, had raised certain difficulties in her mind, which she had found it hard to overcome. “Recollect, Elizabeth, I will not have those girls brought here,” the colonel had said to her that very morning. “They may be all very well in their way, but I have changed my opinion of them. There’s poor Drummond: now mark my words, there will be trouble by and by in that quarter.” For Colonel Middleton had groaned in spirit ever since the morning he had seen the young vicar walking with Phillis down the Braidwood Road, when she was carrying Mrs. Trimmings’s dress. Elizabeth answered this gentle protest by one of her gentle smiles. “Very well, dear father: I will ask no one to Brooklyn against your wish, you may be sure of that; but I suppose they may make my new dress? Mattie’s has been such a success; they certainly understand their business.”

“You have a right to select your own dressmaker, Elizabeth,” returned the colonel, with a frigid wave of his hand, for he had not got over his disappointment about the girls. “I only warn you because you are very quixotic in your notions; but we must take the world as we find it, and make the best of it; and there is your brother coming home by and by. We must be careful, for Hammond’s sake.” And, as Elizabeth’s good sense owned the justice of her father’s remark, there was nothing more said on the subject.

But it was not without a feeling of embarrassment that Miss Middleton entered the cottage: her great heart was yearning over these girls, whom she was compelled to keep at a distance. True, her father was right, Hammond was coming home, and a young officer of seven-and-twenty was not to be trusted where three pretty girls were concerned: it would never do to invite them to Brooklyn or to make too much of them. Miss Middleton had ranged herself completely on her father’s side, but at the sight of Nan’s sweet face and her grave little bow she forgot all her prudent resolutions, and her hand was held out as though to an equal.

“I have come to ask you if you will be good enough to make me a dress,” she said, with a charming smile. “You have succeeded so well with Miss Drummond that I cannot help wishing to have one too.” And when she had said this she looked quietly round her, and surveyed the pretty work-room, and Dulce sitting at the sewing-machine, and lastly Phillis’s bright, intelligent face, as she stood by the table turning over some fashion-books.

At that moment Mrs. Challoner entered the room with her little work-basket, and placed herself at the other window. Miss Middleton began talking to her at once, while Nan measured and pinned.

“I don’t think I ever spent a pleasanter half-hour,” she told her father afterwards. “Mattie was right in what she said: they have made the work-room perfectly lovely with pictures and old china: and nothing could be nicer than their manners,—so simple and unassuming, yet with a touch of independence too.”

“And the old lady?” inquired the colonel, maliciously, for he had seen Mrs. Challoner in church, and knew better than to speak of her so disrespectfully.

“Old lady, father! why, she is not old at all. She is an exceedingly pleasing person, only a little stately in her manner; one would not venture to take a liberty with her. We had such a nice talk while the eldest daughter was fitting me. Is it not strange, father dear, that they know the Paines? and Mrs. Sartoris is an old acquaintance of theirs. I think they were a little sorry when they heard we knew them too, for the second girl colored up so when I said Adelaide was your goddaughter.”

“Humph? we will have Adelaide down here, and hear all about them,” responded her father, briskly.

“Well, I don’t know; I am afraid that would be painful to them, under their changed circumstances. Just as we were talking about Adelaide, Miss Mewlstone came in; and then they were so busy that I did not like to stay any longer. Ah, there is Mr. Drummond coming to interrupt us, as usual.”

And then the colonel retailed all this for Archie’s benefit. He had come in to glean a crumb or two of intelligence, if he could, about the Challoners’ movements, and the colonel’s garrulity furnished him with a rich harvest.

Phillis had taken Miss Mewlstone in hand at once in the intervals of business: she had inquired casually after Mrs. Cheyne’s injured ankle.

“It is going on well: she can stand now,” returned Miss Mewlstone. “The confinement has been very trying for her, poor thing, and she looks sadly the worse for it. Don’t take out those pins, my dear: what is the good of taking so much pains with a fat old thing like me and pricking your pretty fingers? Well, she is always asking me if I have seen any of you when I come home.”

“Mrs. Cheyne asks after us!” exclaimed Phillis, in a tone of astonishment.

“Ah, just so. She has not forgotten you. Magdalene never forgets any one in whom she takes interest; not that she likes many people, poor dear! but then so few understand her. They will not believe that it is all on the surface, and that there is a good heart underneath.”

“You call her Magdalene,” observed Phillis, rather curiously, looking up into Miss Mewlstone’s placid face.

“Ah, just so; I forgot. You see, I knew her as a child,—oh, such a wee toddling mite! younger than dear little Janie. I remember her just as though it were yesterday; the loveliest little creature,—prettier even than Janie!”

“Was Janie the child who died?”

“Yes, the darling! She was just three years old; a perfect angel of a child! and Bertie was a year older. Poor Magdalene! it is no wonder she is as she is,—no husband and children! When she sent for me I came at once, though I knew how it would be.”

“You knew how it would be?” repeated Phillis, in a questioning voice, for Miss Mewlstone had come to a full stop here. She looked a little confused at this repetition of her words.

“Oh, just so—just so. Thank you, my dear. You have done that beautifully, I am sure. Never mind what an old woman says. When people are in trouble like that, they are often ill to live with. Magdalene has her moods; so have we all, my dear, though you are too young to know that; but no one understands her better than her old Bathsheba; that is my name, and a funny old name

too, is it not?" continued Miss Mewlstone, blinking at Phillis with her little blue eyes. "The worst of having such a name is that no one will use it; even father and mother called me Barby, as Magdalene does sometimes still."

Bathsheba Mewlstone! Phillis's lip curled with suppressed amusement. What a droll old thing she was! and yet she liked her, somehow.

"If she takes it into her head to come and see you, you will try and put up with her sharp speeches?" continued Miss Mewlstone, a little anxiously, as she tied on her bonnet. "Mr. Drummond does not understand her at all: and I will not deny that she is hard on the poor young man, and makes fun of him a bit; but, bless you, it is only her way! She torments herself and other people, just because time will not pass quickly enough and let her forget. If we had children ourselves we should understand it better, and how in Ramah there must be lamentation," finished Miss Mewlstone, with a vague and peculiar reference to the martyred innocents which was rather inexplicable to Phillis, as in this case there was certainly no Herod, but an ordinary visitation of Providence; but then she did not know that Miss Mewlstone was often a little vague.

After this hint, Phillis was not greatly surprised when, one morning, a pair of gray ponies stopped before the Friary, and Mrs. Cheyne's tall figure came slowly up the flagged path.

It must be owned that Phillis's first feelings were not wholly pleasurable. Nan had gone out: an invalid lady staying at Seaview Cottage had sent for a dressmaker rather hurriedly, and Miss Milner had of course recommended them. Nan had gone at once, and, as Dulce looked pale, she had taken her with her for a walk. They might not be back for another hour; and a *tete-a-tete* with Mrs. Cheyne after their last interview was rather formidable.

Dorothy preceded her with a parcel, which she deposited rather gingerly on the table. As Mrs. Cheyne entered the room she looked at Phillis in a cool, off-hand manner.

"I am come on business," she said with a little nod. "How do you do, Miss Challoner? You are looking rather pale, I think." And then her keen glance travelled round the room.

The girl flushed a little over this abruptness, but she did not lose her courage.

"Is this the dress?" she asked, opening the parcel; but her fingers would tremble a little, in spite of her will. And then, as the rich folds of the black brocade came into view, she asked, in a business-like tone, in what style Mrs. Cheyne would wish it made, and how soon she required it. To all of which Mrs. Cheyne responded in the same dry, curt manner; and then the usual process of fitting began.

Never had her task seemed so tedious and distasteful to Phillis. Even Mrs. Trimmings was preferable to this: she hardly ventured to raise her eyes, for fear of meeting Mrs. Cheyne's cold, satirical glance; and yet all the time she knew she was being watched. Mrs. Cheyne's vigilant silence meant something.

If only her mother would come in! but she was shelling peas for Dorothy. To think Nan should have failed her on such an occasion! even Dulce would have been a comfort, though she was so easily frightened. She started almost nervously when Mrs. Cheyne at last broke the silence:

"Yes, you are decidedly paler,—a little thinner, I think, and that after only a fortnight's work."

Phillis looked up a little indignantly at this; but she found Mrs. Cheyne was regarding her not unkindly.

"I am well enough," she returned, rather ungraciously; "but we are not used to so much confinement and the weather is hot. We shall grow accustomed to it in time."

"You think restlessness is so easily subdued?" with a sneer.

"No; but I believe it can be controlled," replied poor Phillis, who suffered more than any one guessed from this restraint on her sweet freedom.

Mrs. Cheyne was right: even in this short time she was certainly paler and thinner.

"You mean to persevere, then, in your moral suicide?"

"We mean to persevere in our duty," corrected Phillis, as she pinned up a sleeve.

"Rather a high moral tone for a dressmaker to take: don't you think so?" returned Mrs. Cheyne, in the voice Archie hated. The woman certainly had a double nature: there was a twist in her somewhere.

This was too much for Phillis: she fired up in a moment.

"Why should not dressmakers take a high moral tone? You make me feel glad I am one when you talk like that. This is our ambition,—Nan's and mine, for Dulce is too young to think much about it,—to show by our example that there is no degradation in work. Oh, it is hard! First Mr. Drummond comes, and talks to us as though we were doing wrong; and, then you, to cry down our honest labor, and call it suicide! Is it suicide to work with these hands, that God has made clever, for my mother?" cried Phillis; and her great gray eyes filled up with sudden tears.

Mrs. Cheyne did not look displeased at the girl's outburst. If she had led up to this point, she could not have received it more calmly.

"There, there! you need not excite yourself, child!" she said, more gently. "I only wanted to know what you would say. So Miss Mewlstone has been to you, I hear?—and Miss Middleton, too? but that's her benevolence. Of course Miss Mattie comes out of curiosity. How I do detest a

fussy woman, with a tongue that chatters faster than a purling brook! What do you say? No harm in her?" for Phillis had muttered something to this effect. "Oh, that is negative praise! I like people to have a little harm in them: it is so much more amusing."

"I cannot say I am of your opinion," returned Phillis, coldly: she was rather ashamed of her fit of enthusiasm, and cross in consequence.

"My dear, I always thought Lucifer must have been rather an interesting person." Then, as Phillis looked scandalized, and drew herself up, she said, in a funny voice, "Now, don't tell your mother what I said, or she will think me an improper character; and I want to be introduced to her."

"You want to be introduced to my mother!" Phillis could hardly believe her ears. Certainly Mrs. Cheyne was a most inexplicable person.

"Dressmakers don't often have mothers, do they?" returned Mrs. Cheyne, with a laugh; "at least, they are never on view. I suppose they are in the back premises doing something?"

"Shelling peas, for example," replied Phillis, roused to mischief by this: "that is mother's work this morning. Dorothy is old and single-handed, and needs all the help we can give her. Oh, yes! I will take you to her at once."

"Indeed you must not, if it will inconvenience her!" returned Mrs. Cheyne, drawing back a little at this. She was full of curiosity to see the mother of these singular girls, but she did not wish to have her illusion too roughly dispelled; and the notion of Mrs. Challoner's homely employment grated a little on the feelings of the fine lady who had never done anything useful in her life.

"Oh, nothing puts mother out!" returned Phillis, in an indifferent tone. The old spirit of fun was waking up in her, and she led the way promptly to the parlor.

"Mother, Mrs. Cheyne wishes to see you," she announced, in a most matter-of-fact voice, as though that lady were a daily visitor.

Mrs. Challoner looked up in a little surprise. One of Dorothy's rough aprons was tied over her nice black gown, and the yellow earthenware bowl was on her lap. Phillis took up some of the green pods, and began playing with them.

"Will you excuse my rising?—you see my employment," observed Mrs. Challoner, with a smile that was almost as charming as Nan's; and she held out a white soft hand to her visitor.

The perfect ease of her manner, the absence of all flurry, produced an instant effect on Mrs. Cheyne. For a moment she stood as though at a loss to explain her intrusion; but the next minute one of her rare sunshiny smiles crossed her face:

"I must seem impertinent; but your daughters have interested me so much that I was anxious to see their mother. But I ought to apologize for disturbing you so early."

"Not at all; all hours are the same to me. We are always glad to see our friends: are we not, Phillis? My dear, I wish you would carry these away to Dorothy and ask her to finish them."

"Oh, no! pray do nothing of the kind," returned Mrs. Cheyne, eagerly. "You must not punish me in this way. Let me help you. Indeed, I am sure I can, if I only tried." And, to Phillis's intense amusement, Mrs. Cheyne drew off her delicate French gloves, and in another moment both ladies were seated close together, shelling peas into the same pan, and talking as though they had known each other for years.

"Oh, it was too delicious!" exclaimed Phillis, when she had retailed this interview for Nan's and Dulce's benefit. "I knew mother would behave beautifully. If I had taken the Princess of Wales in to see her, she would not have had a word of apology for her apron, though it was a horrid coarse thing of Dorothy's. She would just have smiled at her, as she did at Mrs. Cheyne. Mother's behavior is always lovely."

"Darling old mammie!" put in Dulce, rapturously, at this point.

"I made some excuse and left them together, because I could see Mrs. Cheyne was dying to get rid of me; and I'm always amiable, and like to please people. Oh, it was the funniest sight, I assure you!—Mrs. Cheyne with her long fingers blazing with diamond rings, and the peas rolling down her silk dress; and mother just going on with her business in her quiet way. Oh, I had such a laugh when I was back in the work-room!"

It cost Phillis some trouble to be properly demure when Mrs. Cheyne came into the work-room some time afterwards in search of her. Perhaps her mischievous eyes betrayed her, for Mrs. Cheyne shook her head at her in pretended rebuke:

"Ah, I see; you will persist in treating things like a comedy. Well, that is better than putting on tragedy airs and making yourselves miserable. Now I have seen your mother, I am not quite so puzzled."

"Indeed!" and Phillis fixed her eyes innocently on Mrs. Cheyne's face.

"No; but I am not going to make you vain by telling you what I think of her: indiscriminate praise is not wholesome. Now, when are you coming to see me?—that is the point in question."

"Dorothy will bring home your dress on Saturday," replied Phillis, a little dryly. "If it requires alteration, perhaps you will let me know, and of course I will come up to the White House at any time."

"But I do not mean to wait for that. You are misunderstanding me purposely, Miss Challoner. I

want you to come and talk to me one evening,—any evening. No one but Miss Mewlstone will be there."

"Oh, no!" responded Phillis, suddenly turning very red:

"I do not think that would do at all, Mrs. Cheyne. I do not mean to be rude or ungrateful for your kindness, but—but––" Here the girl stammered and broke down.

"You wish, then, to confine our intercourse to a purely business relation?" asked Mrs. Cheyne, and her voice had a tone of the old bitterness.

"Would it not be better under the circumstances? Forgive me if I am too proud, but––"

"Oh, you are proud, terribly proud!" returned Mrs. Cheyne, taking up her words before she could complete her sentence. "You owe me a grudge for what I said that night, and now you are making me pay the penalty. Well, I am not meek: there is not a human being living to whom I would sue for friendship. If I were starving for a kind word, I would sooner die than ask for one. You see, I am proud too, Miss Challoner."

"Oh, I did not mean to hurt you," returned Phillis, distressed at this, but determined not to yield an inch or bend to the sudden caprice of this extraordinary woman, who had made her suffer so once.

"To be hurt, one must have feelings," returned this singular person. "Do not be afraid, I shall not attempt to shake your resolution: if you come to me now it must be of your own free will."

"And if I come, what then?" asked Phillis, standing very straight and stiff, for she would not be patronized.

"If you come you will be welcome," returned Mrs. Cheyne; and then, with a grave inclination of the head, she swept out of the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DARK HOUR.

"I should go one evening, if I were you: it is easy to see that Mrs. Cheyne has taken a fancy to you," said Nan, who was much interested by this recital; but to this Phillis replied, with a very decided shake of the head,—

"I shall do nothing of the kind; I was not made to be a fine lady's *protegee*. If she patronized me, I should grow savage and show my teeth; and, as I have no desire to break the peace, we had better remain strangers. Dear Magdalene certainly has a temper!" finished Phillis, with a wicked little sneer.

Nan tried to combat this resolution, and used a great many arguments: she was anxious that Phillis should avail herself of this sudden fancy on the part of Mrs. Cheyne to lift herself and perhaps all of them into society with their equals. Nan's good sense told her that though at present the novelty and excitement of their position prevented them from realizing the full extent of their isolation, in time it must weigh on them very heavily, and especially on Phillis, who was bright and clever and liked society; but all her words were powerless against Phillis's stubbornness: to the White House she could not and would not go.

But one evening she changed her mind very suddenly, when a note from Miss Mewlstone reached her. A gardener's boy brought it: "it was very particular, and was to be delivered immediate to the young lady," he observed, holding the missive between a very grimy finger and thumb.

"My dear young lady,—

"Pride is all very well, but charity is often best in the long run, and a little kindness to a suffering human being is never out of place in a young creature like you.

"Poor Magdalene has been very sadly for days, and I have got it into my stupid old head—that is always fancying things—that she has been watching for folks who have been too proud to come, though she would die sooner than tell me so; but that is her way, poor dear!

"It is ill to wake at nights with nothing but sad thoughts for company, and it is ill wearing out the long days with only a silly old body to cheer one up; and when there is nothing fresh to say, and nothing to expect, and not a footstep or a voice to break the silence, then it seems to me that a young voice—that is, a kind voice—would be welcome. Take this hint, my dear, and keep my counsel, for I am only a silly old woman, as she often says.

"Yours,
Bathsheba Mewlstone."

"Oh, I must go now!" observed Phillis, in an embarrassed voice, as she laid this singular note before Nan.

“Yes, dear; and you had better put on your hat at once, and Dulce and I will walk with you as far as the gate. It is sad for you to miss the scramble on the shore; but, when other people really want us, I feel as though it were a direct call,” finished Nan, solemnly.

“I am afraid there is a storm coming up,” replied Phillis, who had been oppressed all day by the heavy thundery atmosphere: she had looked so heated and weary that Nan had proposed a walk by the shore. Work was pouring upon them from all sides: the townspeople, envious of Mrs. Trimmings’s stylish new dress, were besieging the Friary with orders, and the young dressmakers would have been literally overwhelmed with their labors, only that Nan, with admirable foresight, insisted on taking in no more work than they felt themselves able to complete.

“No,” she would say to some disappointed customer, “our hands are full just now, and we cannot undertake any more orders at present: we will not promise more than we can perform. Come to me again in a fortnight’s time, and we will willingly make your dress, but now it is impossible.” And in most cases the dress was brought punctually at the time appointed.

Phillis used to grumble a little at this.

“You ought not to refuse orders, Nan,” she said, rather fretfully, once. “Any other dressmaker would sit up half the night rather than disappoint a customer.”

“My dear,” Nan returned, in her elder-sisterly voice, which had always a great effect on Phillis, “I wonder what use Dulce and you would be if you sat up sewing half the night, and drinking strong tea to keep yourselves awake? No, there shall be no burning the candles at both ends in this fashion; please God we will keep our health, and our customers; and no one in their senses could call us idle. Why, we are quite the fashion! Mrs. Squails told me yesterday that every one in Hadleigh was wild to have a gown made by the ‘lady dressmakers.’”

“Oh, I daresay!” replied Phillis, crossly, for the poor thing was so hot and tired that she could have cried from pure weariness and vexation of spirit: “but we shall not be the fashion long when the novelty wears off; people will call us independent, and get tired of us; and no wonder, if they are to wait for their dresses in this way.”

Nan’s only answer was to look at Phillis’s pale face in a pitying way; and then she took her hand, and led her to the corner, where her mother’s Bible always lay, and then with ready fingers turned to the well known-passage, “Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labor unto the evening.”

“Well, Nan, what then?”

“Evening is for rest,—for refreshment of mind and body: I will not have it turned into a time of toil. I know you, Phillis; you would work till your poor fingers got thin, and your spirits were all flattened out, and every nerve was jarring and set on edge; and you would call that duty! No, darling,—never! Dulce shall keep her roses, and we will have battledore and shuttlecock every evening; but, if I have to keep the key of the work-room in my pocket, you and Dulce shall never enter it after tea.” And Nan’s good sense, as usual, carried the day.

Phillis would much rather have joined her sisters in their walk than have turned in at the gloomy lodge-gates.

“‘All ye who enter here, leave hope behind,’”

she quoted, softly, as she waved her hand to Nan.

The servant who admitted her looked a little dubious over his errand.

“His mistress was in her room,” he believed, “and was far too unwell to see visitors. He would tell Miss Mewlstone, if the young lady liked to wait; but he was sure it was no use,”—all very civilly said. And as Phillis persisted in her intention of seeing Mrs. Cheyne, if possible, he ushered her into the library, a gloomy-looking room, with closed blinds, one of which he drew up, and then went in search of Miss Mewlstone.

Phillis did not find her surroundings particularly cheerful. The air was darkened by the approaching storm. A sullen cloud hung over the sky. The library windows opened upon the shrubberies. Here the trees were planted so thickly that their shade obscured much of the light. The room was so dark that she could only dimly discern the handsome bindings of the books in the carved oak book-cases. The whole of the furniture seemed sombre and massive. The chair that the footman had placed for her was covered with violet velvet, and was in harmony with the rest of the furniture.

Dreary as the room looked, it was nothing to the shrubbery walk. A narrow winding path seemed to vanish into utter darkness. In some places the trees met overhead, so closely had they grown.

“If I were the mistress of the White House,” Phillis said to herself, “I would cut every one of those trees down. They must make this part of the house quite unhealthy. It really looks like a ‘ghost walk’ that one reads about.” But scarcely had these thoughts passed through her mind when she uttered a faint cry of alarm. The dark room, the impending storm, and her own overwrought feelings were making her nervous; but actually, through the gloom, she could see a figure in white approaching.

In another moment she would have sought refuge in the hall, but contempt at her own cowardice kept her rooted to the spot.

“She was an utter goose to be so startled! It was—yes, of course it was Mrs. Cheyne. She could see her more plainly now. She would step through the window and meet her.”

Phillis’s feelings of uneasiness had not quite vanished. The obscurity was confusing, and invested everything with an unnatural effect. Even Mrs. Cheyne’s figure, coming out from the dark background, seemed strange and unfamiliar. Phillis had always before seen her in black; but now she wore a white gown, fashioned loosely, like a wrapper, and her hair, which at other times had been most carefully arranged, was now strained tightly and unbecomingly from her face, which looked pallid and drawn. She started violently when she saw Phillis coming towards her, and seemed inclined to draw back and retrace her steps. It evidently cost her a strong effort to recover herself. She seemed to conquer her reluctance with difficulty.

“So you have come at last, Miss Challoner,” she said, fixing her eyes, which looked unnaturally bright, on Phillis. Her voice was cold, almost harsh, and her countenance expressed no pleasure. The hand she held out was so limp and cold that Phillis relinquished it hastily.

“You said that I should be welcome,” she faltered, and trying not to appear alarmed. She was too young and healthy to understand the meaning of the word hysteria, or to guess at the existence of nervous maladies that make some people’s lives a long torment to them. Nevertheless, Mrs. Cheyne’s singular aspect filled her with vague fear. It did not enter into her mind to connect the coming storm with Mrs. Cheyne’s condition, until she hinted at it herself.

“Oh, yes, you are welcome,” she responded, wearily. “I have looked for you evening after evening, but you chose to come with the storm. It is a pity, perhaps; but then you did not know!”

“What would you have me know?” asked Phillis, timidly.

Mrs. Cheyne shrugged her shoulders a little flightily.

“Oh, you are young!” she returned; “you do not understand what nerves mean; you sleep sweetly of a night, and have no bad dreams: it does not matter to you happy people if the air is full of sunshine or surcharged with electricity. For me, when the sun ceases to shine I am in despair. Fogs find me brooding. An impending storm suffocates me, and yet tears me to pieces with restlessness: it drives me hither and thither like a fallen leaf. I tire myself that I may sleep, and yet I stare open-eyed for hours together into the darkness. I wonder sometimes I do not go mad. But there! let us walk—let us walk.” And she made a movement to retrace her steps; but Phillis, with a courage for which she commended herself afterwards, pulled her back by her hanging sleeves.

“Oh, not there! it is not good for any one who is sad to walk in that dark place. No wonder your thoughts are sombre. Look! the heavy rain-drops are pattering among the leaves. I do not care to get wet: let us go back to the house.”

“Pshaw! what does it matter getting wet?” she returned, with a little scorn; but nevertheless she suffered Phillis to take her arm and draw her gently towards the house. Only as they came near the library window, she pointed to it indignantly. “Who has dared to enter that room, or open the window! Have I not forbidden over and over again that that room should be used? Do you think,” she continued, in the same excited way, “that I would enter that room to-night of all nights! Why, I should hear his angry voice pealing in every corner! It was a good room for echoes; and he could speak loudly if he chose. Come away! there is a door I always use that leads to my private apartments. I am no recluse; but in these moods I do not care to show myself to people. If you are not afraid, you may come with me, unless you prefer Miss Mewlstone’s company.”

“I would rather go with you,” returned Phillis, gently. She could not in truth say she was not afraid; but all the same she must try and soothe the poor creature who was evidently enduring such torments of mind: so she followed in silence up the broad oak staircase.

A green-baize door admitted them into a long and somewhat narrow corridor, lighted up by a row of high narrow windows set prettily with flower-boxes. Here there were several doors. Mrs. Cheyne paused before one a moment.

“Look here! you shall see the mysteries of the west wing. This is my world; downstairs I am a different creature—taciturn, harsh, and prone to sarcasm. Ask Mr. Drummond what he thinks of me; but I never could endure a good young man—especially that delicious compound of the worldling and the saint—like the Reverend Archibald. See here, my dear: here I am never captious or say naughty things!”

She threw open the door, and softly beckoned to Phillis to enter. It was a large empty room,—evidently a nursery. Some canaries were twittering faintly in a gilded cage. There were flowers in the two windows, and in the vases on the table: evidently some loving hands had arranged them that very morning. A large rocking-horse occupied the centre of the floor: a doll lay with its face downwards on the crimson carpet; a pile of wooden soldiers strutted on their zigzag platform,—one or two had fallen off; a torn picture-book had been flung beside them.

“That was my Janie’s picture-book,” said Mrs. Cheyne, mournfully: “she was teaching her doll out of it just before she was taken ill. Nothing was touched; by a sort of inspiration,—a foreboding,—I do not know what,—I bade nurse leave the toys as they were. ‘It is only an interrupted game: let the darlings find their toys as they put them,’ I said to her that morning. Look at the soldiers, Bertie was always for soldiers,—bless him!”

Her manner had grown calmer; and she spoke with such touching tenderness that tears came to Phillis’s eyes. But Mrs. Cheyne never once looked at the girl; she lingered by the table a

moment, adjusting a leaf here and a bud there in the bouquets, and then she opened an inner door leading to the night-nursery. Here the associations were still more harrowing. The cots stood side by side under a muslin canopy, with an alabaster angel between them; the little night-dresses lay folded on the pillows; on each quilt were the scarlet dressing-gown and the pair of tiny slippers; the clothes were piled neatly on two chairs,—a boy's velvet tunic on one, a girl's white frock, a little limp and discolored, hung over the rails of the other.

"Everything just the same," murmured the poor mother. "Look here, my dear,"—with a faint smile—"these are Bertie's slippers: there is the hole he kicked in them when he was in his tempers, for my boy had the Cheyne temper. He was Herbert's image,—his very image." She sighed, paused, and went on: "Every night I come and sit beside their beds, and then the darlings come to me. I can see their faces—oh, so plainly!—and hear their voices. 'Good-night, dear mamma!' they seem to say to me, only Bertie's voice is always the louder."

Her manner was becoming a little excited again; only Phillis took her hand and pressed it gently, and the touch seemed to soothe her like magic.

"I am so glad you come here every night," she said, in her sweet, serious voice, from which every trace of fear had gone. "I think that a beautiful idea, to come and say your prayers beside one of these little beds."

"To say my prayers!—I pray beside my darlings' beds!" exclaimed Mrs. Cheyne, in a startled voice. "Oh no! I never do that. God would not hear such prayers as mine,—never—never!"

"Dear Mrs. Cheyne, why not?" She moved restlessly away at the question, and tried to disengage herself from Phillis's firm grasp. "The Divine Father hears all prayers," whispered the girl.

"All?—but not mine,—not mine, or I should not be sitting here alone. Do you know my husband left me in anger,—that his last words to me were the bitterest he ever spoke? 'Good-by, Magdalene: you have made my life so wretched that I do not care if I never live to set foot in this house again!' And that to me,—his wedded wife, and the mother of his children,—who loved him so. Oh, Herbert! Herbert!" and, covering her face, the unhappy woman suddenly burst into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

Phillis kept a sad silence: not for worlds would she have checked the flow of tears that must have been so healing to the tortured brain. Besides, what was there that she, so young and inexperienced, could say in the presence of a grief so terrible, so overpowering? The whole thing was inexplicable to Phillis. Why were the outworks of conventionality so suddenly thrown down? Why was she, a stranger, permitted to be a witness of such a revelation? As she sat there speechless and sympathizing, a faint sound reached her ear,—the rustle of a dress in the adjoining room,—footsteps that approached warily, and then paused; a moment afterwards the door closed softly behind them. Phillis looked round quickly, but could see nothing; and the same instant a peal of thunder rolled over their heads.

Mrs. Cheyne started up with an hysterical scream, and caught hold of Phillis. "Come," she said, almost wildly, "we will not stay here. The children will not come to-night, for who could hear their voices in such a storm? My little angels!—but they shall not see me like this. Come, come!" And, taking the girl by the arm, she almost dragged her from the room, and led the way with rapid and disordered footsteps to a large luxurious chamber, furnished evidently as a dressing-room, and only divided from the sleeping-room by a curtained archway.

As Mrs. Cheyne threw herself down in an arm-chair and hid her face in her hands, the curtain was drawn back, and Miss Mewlstone came in with an anxious, almost frightened expression on her good-natured countenance. She hurried up to Mrs. Cheyne and took her in her arms as though she were a child.

"Now, Magdalene, now, my dear," she said, coaxingly, "you will try to be good and command yourself before this young lady. Look at her: she is not a bit afraid of the storm:—are you, Miss Challoner? No, just so; you are far too sensible."

"Oh, that is what you always tell me," returned Mrs. Cheyne, wrenching herself free with some violence. "Be sensible,—be good,—when I am nearly mad with the oppression and suffocation, here, and here," pointing to her head and breast. "Commonplaces, commonplaces; as well stop a deluge with a teacup. Oh, you are an old fool, Barby: you will never learn wisdom."

"My poor lamb! Barby never minds one word you say when you are like this."

"Oh, I will beg your pardon to-morrow, or when the thunder stops. Hark! there it is again," cowering down in her chair. "Can't you pray for it to cease, Barby? Oh, it is too horrible! Don't you recollect the night he rode away,—right into the storm, into the very teeth of the storm?

‘Good-bye, Magdalene; who knows when we may meet again?’ and I never looked at him, never kissed him, never broke the silence by one word; and the thunder came, and he was gone,” beating the air with her hands.

“Oh, hush, my dear, hush! Let me read to you a little, and the fever will soon pass. You are frightening the poor young lady with your wild talk, and no wonder!”

“Pshaw! who minds the girl? Let her go or stop; what do I care? What is the whole world to me, when I am tormented like this? Three years, four years—more than a thousand days—of this misery! Oh, Barby! do you think I have been punished enough? do you think where he is, up in heaven with the children, that he forgives and pities me, who was such a bad wife to him?”

As Miss Mewlstone paused a moment to wipe the tears that were flowing over her old cheeks, Phillis’s voice came to her relief.

“Oh, can you doubt it?” she said, in much agitation. “Dear Mrs. Cheyne, can you have an instant’s doubt? Do you think the dead carry all these paltry earthly feelings into the bright place yonder? Forgive you—oh, there is no need of forgiveness there; he will only be loving you,—he and the children too.”

“God bless you!” whispered Miss Mewlstone. “Hush, that is enough! Go, my dear, go, and I will come to you presently. Magdalene, put your poor head down here: I have thought of something that will do you good.” She waved Phillis away almost impatiently, and laid the poor sufferer’s head on her bosom, shielding it from the flashes that darted through the room. Phillis could see her bending over her, and her voice was as tender as though she were soothing a sick infant.

Phillis was trembling with agitation as she stole down the dark corridor. Never in her happy young life had she witnessed or imagined such a scene. The wild words, the half-maddened gestures, the look of agony stamped on the pale, almost distorted features, would haunt her for many a day. Oh, how the poor soul must have suffered before she lost self-control and balance like this!

It was not the death of her children that had so utterly unnerved her. It must have been that bitter parting with her husband, and the remembrance of angry words never to be atoned for in this life, that was cankering the root of her peace, and that brought about these moods of despair.

Phillis thought of Coleridge’s lines,—

> “And to be wroth with one we love
> Doth work like madness on the brain,”—

as she took refuge in the dim drawing-room. Here, at least, there were signs of human life and occupation. A little tea-table had been set in one window, though the tea was cold. The greyhounds came and laid their slender noses on her gown, and one small Italian one coiled himself up on her lap. Miss Mewlstone’s work-basket stood open, and a tortoise shell kitten had helped itself to a ball of wool and was busily unwinding it. The dogs were evidently frightened at the storm, for they all gathered round Phillis, shivering and whining, as though missing their mistress; and she had much ado to comfort them, though she loved animals and understood their dumb language better than most people.

It was not so very long, and yet it seemed hours before Miss Mewlstone came down to her.

“Are you here, my dear?” she asked, in a loud whisper, for the room was dark. “Ah, just so. We must have lights, and I must give you a glass of wine or a nice hot cup of coffee.” And, notwithstanding Phillis’s protest that she never took wine and was not in need of anything, Miss Mewlstone rang the bell, and desired the footman to bring in the lamp. “And tell Bishop to send up some nice hot coffee and sandwiches as soon as possible. For young people never know what they want, and you are just worried and tired to death with all you have gone through,—not being an old woman and seasoned to it like me,” went on the good creature, and she patted Phillis’s cheek encouragingly as she spoke.

“But how is she? Oh, thank God, the storm has lulled at last!” exclaimed the girl, breathlessly.

“Oh, yes; the storm is over. We have reason to dread storms in this house,” returned Miss Mewlstone, gravely. “She was quite exhausted, and let Charlotte and me help her to bed. Now she has had her composing-draught, and Charlotte will sit by her till I go up. I always watch by her all night after one of these attacks.”

“Is it a nervous attack?” asked Phillis, timidly, for she felt she was treading on delicate ground.

“I believe Dr. Parkes calls it hysteria,” replied Miss Mewlstone, hesitating a little. “Ah, we have sad times with her. You heard what she said, poor dear: she has been sorely tried.”

“Was not her husband good to her, then?”

“I am sure he meant to be kind,” returned Miss Mewlstone, sorrowfully, “for he loved her dearly; but he was passionate and masterful, and was one that would have his way. As long as it was only courtship, he worshipped the ground she walked upon, as the saying is. But poor Magdalene was not a good wife. She was cold when she ought to have been caressing, stubborn when she might have yielded; and sarcasm never yet healed a wound. Ah, here comes your coffee! Thank you, Evans. Now, my dear, you must just eat and drink, and put some color into those pale cheeks. Scenes like these are not good for young creatures like you. But when Magdalene is in these moods, she would not care if the whole world listened to her. To-morrow she will be herself, and remember and be ashamed; and then you must not mind if she be harder

and colder than ever. She will say bitter things all the more, because she is angered at her own want of self-control."

"I can understand that: that is just as I should feel," returned Phillis, shuddering a little at the idea of encountering Mrs. Cheyne's keen-edged sarcasms. "She will not like to see me any more; she will think I had no right to witness such a scene."

"It is certainly a pity that I wrote that note," returned Mrs. Mewlstone, reflectively. "I hoped that you would turn her thoughts, and that we might avert the usual nervous paroxysm. When I opened the door and saw you sitting together so peacefully beside the children's beds, I expected a milder mood; but it was the thunder. Poor Magdalene! She has never been able to control herself in a storm since the evening Herbert left her, and we went in and found her lying insensible in the library, in the midst of one of the worst storms I have ever witnessed."

"That was when he said those cruel words to her!" ejaculated Phillis.

"Yes. Did she repeat them? How often I have begged her to forget them, and to believe that he repented of them before an hour was over! Ah, well! the sting of death lies in this: if she had had one word, one little word, she would be a different woman, in spite of the children's death. God's strokes are less cruel than men's strokes: the reed may be bruised by them, but is not broken. She had a long illness after the children were gone; it was too much,—too much for any woman's heart to bear. You see, she wanted her husband to comfort her. Dr. Parkes feared for her brain, but we pulled her through. Ah, just so, my dear; we pulled her through!" finished Miss Mewlstone, with a sigh.

"Oh, how good you are to her! she is happy to have such a friend!" observed Phillis, enthusiastically.

Miss Mewlstone shook her head, and a tear rolled down her face.

"Oh, my dear, I am only an old fool, as she said just now. And, after all, the company of a stupid old woman is not much to a proud bonnie creature like that. Sometimes for days together she hardly opens her lips to me; we sit together, eat together, drive together, and not a word for Barby. But sometimes, poor dear! she will cling to me and cry, and say her heart is breaking. And Solomon was right: but it was not only a brother that is good for adversity. When she wants me, I am here, and there is nothing I will not do for her, and she knows it;—and that is about the long and short of it," finished Miss Mewlstone, dismissing the subject with another sigh. And then she bade Phillis finish her coffee and put on her hat. "For your mother will be expecting you, and wondering what has become of you; and Phillips or Evans must walk with you, for it is past nine o'clock, and such a pretty young lady must not go unattended," concluded the simple woman.

Phillis laughed and kissed her at this; but, though she said nothing of her intentions, she determined to dismiss the servant as soon as possible, and run on alone to the Friary. She had not forgotten her encounter with Mr. Drummond on her last visit to the White House; but to-night the storm would keep him in-doors.

Evans, the new footman, was desired to escort her; but in the middle of the avenue Phillis civilly dismissed him.

"There is no need for two of us to get wet; and the rain is coming on very heavily," she said.

The young man hesitated; but he was slow-witted and new to his duty, and the young lady had a peremptory way with her, so he touched his hat, and went back to the house.

"Such nonsense, having a liveried servant at my heels, when I am only a dressmaker!" thought Phillis, scurrying down the avenue like a chased rabbit.

Hitherto, the trees had sheltered her; but a glance at the open road and the driving rain made her resolve to take refuge in the porch of the cottage that stood opposite the gate. It was the place where Nan and her mother had once lodged; and, though all the lights were extinguished, and the people had retired to bed, she felt a comfortable sense of safety as she unlatched the little gate. Not even Mr. Drummond would discover her there.

But Phillis's satisfaction was of short duration: the foolish girl was soon to repent of her foolhardiness in dismissing her escort. She little knew that her words to Evans had been overheard, and that behind the dripping shrubbery she had been watched and followed. Scarcely had she taken refuge under the green porch, and placed her wet umbrella to dry, before she heard the latch of the little gate unclosed, and a tall dark figure came up the gravel-walk. It was not Isaac Williams's portly form,—she could discern that in the darkness,—and, for the moment, a thrill of deadly terror came upon the incautious girl; but the next minute her natural courage returned to her aid. The porch was just underneath the room where Isaac slept; a call of 'help' would reach him at once; there was no reason for this alarm at all. Nevertheless, she shrunk back a little as the stranger came directly towards her, then paused as though in some embarrassment:

"Pardon me, but you have poor shelter here. I am Mrs. Williams's lodger. I could easily let you into the cottage. I am afraid the rain comes through the trellis-work."

Phillis's heart gave a great thump of relief. In the first place, Mrs. Williams's lodger must be a respectable person, and no dangerous loafer or pickpocket; in the second place the refined cultured tones of the stranger pleased her ear. Phillis had a craze on this point. "You may be deceived in a face, but in a voice, never!" she would say; and, as she told Nan afterwards, the moment that voice greeted her in the darkness she felt no further fear.

“I have a dry corner here,” she returned, quietly; “it is only a thunder-shower, and I am close to home,—only down the road, and just round the corner, past the vicarage.”

“Past the vicarage!” in a tone of surprise: “why, there are no houses there!”

“There is a very small one called the Friary,” returned Phillis, feeling herself color in the darkness, as she mentioned their humble abode. There was no answer for a moment, and then her mysterious neighbor continued:

“My good landlord seems to retire early; the whole place looks deserted. They are very early risers, and perhaps that is the reason. If you will allow me to pass, I will open the door and light a lamp in my little parlor. Even if you prefer to remain in the porch, it will look more cheerful.” And, without waiting for her reply, he took a key from his pocket, and let himself into the house.

Their voices had disturbed the owners of the cottage, and Phillis overheard the following colloquy:

“Dear sakes alive! what a frightful storm! Is there anything you want, Mr. Dancy?” in Mrs. Williams’s shrill tones.

“Not for myself, Mrs. Williams; but there is a young lady sheltering in the porch. I should be glad if you could come down and make her a little comfortable. The floodgates of heaven seem open to-night.”

“Dear, dear!” in a still more perplexed voice; “a young lady at this time of night,—why, it must be half-after nine. Very well, Mr. Dancy; beg her to come in and sit in your parlor a moment, and I will be down.”

But Phillis absolutely refused to comply with the invitation.

“I am not tired, and I am not a bit wet, and I like watching the rain. This is a nice little porch, and I have taken refuge here before. We all know Mrs. Williams very well.”

“She is a good creature, if she were not always in a bustle,” returned Mr. Dancy. “There, the lamp is lighted: that looks more comfortable.” And as he spoke he came out into the little hall.

Phillis stole a curious glance at him.

He was a tall man, and was dressed somewhat strangely. A long foreign-looking cloak and a broad-brimmed felt hat, which he had not yet removed, gave him the look of an artist; but, except that he had a beard and moustache, and wore blue spectacles, she could not gain the slightest clue to his features. But his voice,—it pleased Phillis’s sensitive ear more every moment; it was pleasant,—rather foreign, too,—and had a sad ring in it.

He leaned against the wall opposite to her, and looked out thoughtfully at the driving rain.

“I think I saw you coming out from the White House,” he observed presently. “Are you a friend of Mrs. Cheyne? I hope,” hesitating a little, “that she is very well.”

“Do you know her?” asked Phillis, in surprise.

“That is a very Irish way of answering my question; but you shall have your turn first. Yes; I used to know her many years ago, and Herbert Cheyne, too.”

“Her poor husband! Oh! and did you like him?” rather breathlessly.

“Pretty fairly,” was the indifferent reply. “People used to call him a pleasant fellow, but I never thought much of him myself,—not but what he was more sinned against than sinning, poor devil. Anyhow, he paid dearly enough for his faults.”

“Yes, indeed; and one must always speak leniently of the dead.”

“Ah, that is what they say,—that he is dead. I suppose his widow put on mourning, and made lamentation. She is well, you say, and cheerful?”

“Oh, no! neither the one nor the other. I am not her friend; I only know her just little; but she strikes me as very sad. She has lost her children, and––”

“Ah!” Phillis thought she heard a strange sound, almost like a groan; but of course it was fancy; and just then good Mrs. Williams came bustling downstairs.

“Dear heart! why, if it is not Miss Challoner! To think of you, my dear miss, being out so late, and alone! Oh, what ever will your ma say?”

“My mother will scold me, of course,” returned Phillis, laughing; “but you must not scold me too, Mrs. Williams, though I deserve all I get. Mrs. Mewlstone sent Evans with me, but I made him go back. Country girls are fearless and it is only just a step to the Friary.”

“The rain is stopping now, if you will permit me to escort you. Mrs. Williams will be the voucher for my respectability,” observed Mr. Dancy, very gravely and without a smile; and, as Phillis seemed inclined to put him off with an excuse, he continued, more seriously: “Pardon me, but it is far too late, and the road far too lonely, for a young lady to go unattended. If you prefer it, I will go to the White House, and bring out the recreant Evans by force.”

“Oh, no; there is no need for that,” observed Phillis, hastily; and Mrs. Williams interposed volubly:

“Goodness’ sakes, Miss Challoner, you have no call to be afraid of Mr. Dancy! Why, Mr. Frank Blunt, that nice young gentleman who lodged with me ever so many years, recommended him to me as one of his best and oldest friends. Your ma knew Mr. Blunt, for he was here with her, and

a nicer-spoken young gentleman she said she never saw."

"That will do, Mrs. Williams," returned Mr. Dancy, in rather a peremptory tone; and then, turning to Phillis, he said, more civilly, but still a little abruptly, as though he were displeased,—

"Well, Miss Challoner, do you feel inclined to trust yourself with me for the few hundred yards, or shall I fetch Evans?" And Phillis, feeling herself rebuked, unfurled her umbrella at once, and bade Mrs. Williams good-night by way of answer.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. WILLIAMS'S LODGER.

Phillis felt rather shy and uncomfortable as she picked her way warily among the rain-pools in the semi-darkness. Her companion was inclined to be silent; most likely he considered her churlish in repelling his civil offers of help: so, to make amends, and set herself at her ease, she began to talk to him with an attempt at her old sprightliness.

"Do you know this neighborhood well, Mr. Dancy? Have you been long at Ivy Cottage?"

"Only a few days; but I know the place well enough," he responded, quietly. "It depends upon circumstances how long I remain here."

"Hadleigh is very quiet," returned Phillis, quickly. "It does not offer many attractions to strangers, unless they have very moderate views of enjoyment. It is select, and the bathing is good, and the country tolerable; but when you have said that, you have said all in its favor."

"I have always liked the place," with a checked sigh. "Quiet,—that is what I want, and rest also. I have been rather a wanderer over the face of the earth, and one wants a little breathing-time occasionally, to recruit one's exhausted energies. I like Ivy Cottage, and I like Mrs. Williams: both suit me for the present. Are you a visitor to Hadleigh,—a mere bird of passage like myself, Miss Challoner?"

"Oh, dear, no: we have come here to live."

"And—and you are intimate with Mrs. Cheyne?" coming a little closer to her side in the darkness.

"Nothing of the kind," retorted Phillis: "we are mere acquaintances. I do not feel to know her at all; she is not a person with whom one could get intimate all at once; she is a little difficult. Besides in our position––" And here she pulled herself up suddenly.

"Pardon me," returned Mr. Dancy, in an interested voice, "perhaps I have no right to inquire, but your words are a little mysterious. Why should you not be intimate with Mrs. Cheyne?"

Phillis grew hot in the darkness. What right had he, a perfect stranger, to question her so closely? And yet, if he were interested in his old friends, perhaps he meant to call at the White House, and then he would hear all about them; and after all, perfect frankness always answered best in the long run. Phillis hesitated so long over her rejoinder that Mr. Dancy said, rather apologetically,—

"I see, I have been incautious; but you must not attribute my question to impertinent curiosity. I am anxious to learn all I can about a very old friend, of whom I have long lost sight, and I hoped that you might have been able to satisfy me."

"Miss Middleton would tell you far more than I."

"What! Elizabeth Middleton? Oh, no: she is far too much of a saint for me."

"You know her, too!" exclaimed Phillis, in surprise. "No, I do not think you are curious, Mr. Dancy; it was only a little awkward for me to tell you about our acquaintance with Mrs. Cheyne. My sister and I rendered her a trifling service, and she took a fancy to us, and wished to be friends; but in our present position any close intimacy would be impossible, as we are only dressmakers."

"Dressmakers!" It is impossible to describe the genuine astonishment, almost dismay, in Mr. Dancy's voice. "Dressmakers! Pardon me, Miss Challoner, but when one has seen and spoken to a lady like yourself, it is almost incredible."

This put Phillis on her mettle at once, and in a moment she laid by all her reserve:

"You have been a traveller, Mr. Dancy, and must have seen strange things by this time: it surely cannot be such a matter of surprise that when gentle-people are poor they must work for their bread. When one has ten clever fingers, it is better to use them than to starve. I am not ashamed of my position; my sisters and I are very independent; but, as we do not like to cause other people embarrassment, we prefer to lead hermit lives."

Phillis's silvery tones were rather fierce, but it was well that she did not see her companion's expression of suppressed amusement; there was a little smothered laugh, too, that was turned

into a cough.

“Are your sisters young like yourself?” he asked, rather abruptly.

“Oh, yes, we are all much of an age.”

“And you have parents?”

“Only one parent,” she corrected,—“a mother. Ah, here we are at the Friary! Many thanks for your escort, Mr. Dancy.”

“Many thanks for allowing me to escort you,” he returned, pointedly: “after what you have told me, I esteem it an honor, Miss Challoner. No, you have no need to be ashamed of your position; I wish more English ladies would follow such a noble example. Good-night. I trust we shall meet again.” And, lifting his felt hat, he withdrew, just as Nan appeared on the threshold, holding a lamp in her hand.

“You naughty girl, what has kept you so late?” she asked, as Phillis came slowly and meditatively up the flagged path.

“Hush, Nannie! Have they all gone to bed? Let me come into your room and talk to you. Oh, I have had such an evening!” And thereupon she poured into her sister’s astonished ears the recital of her adventure,—the storm, the figure in the shubbery, the scene in the west corridor, the porch at Ivy Cottage, and the arrival of Mrs. Williams’s mysterious lodger.

“Oh, Phillis, I shall never trust you out of my sight again! How can you be so reckless,—so incautious? Mother would be dreadfully shocked if she knew it.”

“Mother must not know a single word: promise, Nan. You know how nervous she is. I will tell her, if you like, that I took refuge from the rain in Mrs. Williams’s porch, and that her lodger walked home with me; but I think it would be better to suppress the scene at the White House.”

Nan thought over this a moment, and then she agreed.

“It would make mother feel uneasy and timid in Mrs. Cheyne’s presence,” she observed. “She never likes that sort of hysterical attacks. We could not make her understand. Poor thing! I hope she is asleep by this time. Shall you go to-morrow, Phil, and ask after her?”

Phillis made a wry face at this, and owned she had had enough adventures to last her for a long time. But she admitted, too, that she would be anxious to know how Mrs. Cheyne would be.

“Yes, I suppose I must go and just ask after her,” she said, as she rose rather wearily and lighted her candle. “There is not the least chance of my seeing her. Good-night, Nannie! Don’t let all this keep you awake; but I do not expect to sleep a wink myself.”

Which dismal prophecy was not fulfilled, as Phillis dropped into a heavy slumber the moment her head touched the pillow.

But her dreams were hardly pleasant. She thought she was walking down the “ghost’s walk,” between the yews and cypresses, with Mr. Dancy, and that in the darkest part he threw off his cloak and felt hat, and showed the grinning skull of a skeleton, while a bony arm tried to seize her. She woke moaning with fright, to find Dulce’s long hair streaming over her face, and the birds singing in the sweet breezy dawn; after which she fell into a dreamless, refreshing sleep.

Phillis had to submit to rather a severe reproof from her mother, in return for her frankness. Mrs. Challoner’s prudery was up in arms the moment she heard of Mrs. Williams’s lodger.

“Mrs. Williams ought to have come with you herself; but a strange man at that time of night!—what would Mr. Drummond have said to you?”

“Whatever Mr. Drummond liked to say!” returned Phillis, pettishly, for this was stroking her already ruffled feelings decidedly the wrong way.

Phillis always turned captious whenever Mr. Drummond was mentioned; but she subsided into meekness again when her mother fell to crying and bemoaning her hard fate and her darlings’ unprotected position.

“Oh, what would your dear father have said?” she cried, in such utter misery of tone that Phillis began kissing her, and promising that she would never, never be out so late again, and that on no account would she walk up the Braidwood Road in the evening with a strange man who wore an outlandish cloak and a felt hat that only wanted a feather to remind her of Guy Fawkes, only Guy Fawkes did not wear blue spectacles.

When Phillis had at last soothed her mother,—always a lengthy process, for Mrs. Challoner, like other sensitive and feeble natures, could only be quieted by much talk,—she fell to her work in vigorous silence; but by a stroke of ill luck, Mr. Drummond chose to make another pastoral visitation; and, to her secret chagrin, her mother at once repeated the whole story.

“Mrs. Williams’s lodger saw Miss Phillis home! Why, I did not know Mrs. Williams had a lodger!” returned Mr. Drummond, in a perplexed voice.

This made matters worse.

“I suppose Mrs. Williams is not bound to let the vicarage know directly she lets her rooms?” observed Phillis, rather impatiently; for she was vexed with her mother for repeating all this.

“No, of course not; but I was at Ivy Cottage myself yesterday, and Mrs. Williams knows I always call on her lodgers, and she never mentioned the fellow’s existence to me.”

“Fellow, indeed!” observed Phillis, *sotto voce*; for she had a vivid remembrance of the stranger’s

commanding presence and pleasant voice.

“When did he come?” inquired the young vicar, curiously, “He must keep himself pretty close by daylight; for I have passed and repassed Ivy Cottage at least half a dozen times a day, and have never caught a glimpse of any one;” to which Phillis replied reluctantly that he had not been there long,—that he wanted rest and quiet, and was most likely an invalid.

“And his name is Dancy, you say?”

Phillis bowed. She was far too much taken up in her work to volunteer unnecessary words; and all this maternal fuss and fidget was odious to her.

“Then I will go and call upon him this very afternoon,” returned Archie, with cheerful alacrity. He had no idea that his curiosity on the subject was disagreeable to the girl: so he and Mrs. Challoner discussed the matter fully, and at some length. “I don’t like the description of your mysterious stranger, Miss Challoner,” he said, laughing, as he stood up to take his leave. “When novelists want to paint a villain, they generally bring in a long cloak and beard, and sometimes a disguising pair of blue spectacles. Well, I will catch him by daylight, and see what I can make of him.”

“You may disguise a face, but you cannot disguise a voice,” returned Phillis, bluntly. “I do not want to see Mr. Dancy to know he is a gentleman and a true man.” And this speech, that piqued Archie, though he did not know why, made him all the more bent on calling on Mrs. Williams’s lodger.

But Mr. Drummond’s curiosity was destined to be baffled. Mrs. Williams turned very red when she heard the vicar’s inquiries.

“You never told me you had let your rooms,” he said, reproachfully; “and yet you know I always make a practice of calling on your lodgers.”

“’Deed and it is very kind and thoughtful of you, too,” returned the good woman, dropping an old-fashioned courtesy; “and me that prizes my clergyman’s visits and thinks no end of them! But Mr. Dancy he says to me, ‘Now, my good Mrs. Williams, I have come here for quiet,—for absolute quiet; and I do not want to see or hear of any one. Tell no tales about me, and leave me in peace; and then we shall get on together.’ And it was more than I ventured to give you the hint, hearing him speak so positive; for he is a bit masterful, and no mistake.”

“Well, never mind; a clergyman never intrudes, and I will thank you to take Mr. Dancy my card,” returned Archie, impatiently; but his look of assurance soon faded when Mrs. Williams returned with her lodger’s compliments, and he was very much obliged to Mr. Drummond for his civility, but he did not wish to receive visitors.

Phillis was a little contrary all the remainder of the day: she was not exactly cross,—all the Challoners were sweet-tempered,—but nothing quite suited her. Mrs. Challoner had proposed going that evening into the town with her youngest daughter to execute some commissions.

Just before they started Phillis observed rather shortly that she should call at the White House to make inquiries after Mrs. Cheyne, and that she would came back to the Friary to fetch Nan for a country walk. “If I do not appear in half an hour, you must come in search of me,” finished Phillis, with a naughty curl of her lip, to which Nan with admirable tact returned no answer, but all the same she fully intended to carry out the injunction; for Nan had imbibed her mother’s simple old-fashioned notions, and a lurking dislike of Mrs. Williams’s lodger had already entered her mind.

As Phillis did not enjoy her errand, she put on the best face she could, and hurried down the Braidwood Road as though her feet were winged like a female Mercury; and Mr. Dancy, who happened to be looking over the wire blind in the little parlor, much admired the girl’s free swift gait as she sped down the avenue. Evans, the young footman, admitted her, and conducted her at once to the drawing-room; and great was Phillis’s surprise and discomposure when she saw Mrs. Cheyne sitting alone reading by one of the windows, with her greyhounds grouped around her.

She started slightly at the announcement of Phillis’s name, and, as she came forward to greet her, a dark flush crossed her face for a moment; then her features settled into their usual impassive calm, only there was marked coldness in her voice.

“Good-evening. Miss Challoner: you have chosen a fine evening for your visit. Let me beg of you never again to venture to the White House in such a storm.”

Phillis stammered out something about hoping that she was better, but she interrupted her almost abruptly:

“Much better, thank you. I am afraid you found me decidedly strange yesterday. I had what people call a nervous attack: electricity in the air, a brooding storm, brings it on. It is a pity one should be so childish as to dread thunder; but we are oddly constituted, some of us.” She shrugged her shoulders, as though to dismiss the subject, and stroked the head of the greyhound that lay at her feet.

Poor Phillis found her position decidedly embarrassing. To be sure, Miss Mewlstone had warned her of the reception that she might expect; but all the same she found it very unpleasant. She must not abridge her visit so much as to excite suspicion; and yet it seemed impossible to carry on a comfortable conversation with Mrs. Cheyne in this freezing mood, and, as Phillis could think of nothing to say, she asked after Miss Mewlstone.

“Oh, she is very well,” Mrs. Cheyne answered, indifferently. “Nothing ever ails Barby: she is one of those easy-going people who take life as they find it, without fuss and grumbling.”

“I think she is very nice and sympathetic,” hazarded Phillis.

“Oh, yes Miss Mewlstone has a feeling heart,” returned Mrs. Cheyne; but she said it in a sarcastic voice. “We have all our special endowments. Miss Mewlstone is made by nature to be a moral feather bed to break other people’s awkward tumbles. She hinders broken bones, and interposes a soft surface of sympathy between unlucky folks. There is not much in common between us, but all the same old Barby is a sort of necessity to me. We are a droll household at the White House, Miss Challoner, are we not,—Barby and the greyhounds and I?—oh, quite a happy family!” And she gave a short laugh, very much the reverse of merriment.

Phillis began to feel that it was time to go.

“Well, how does the dressmaking progress?” asked her hostess, suddenly. “Miss Middleton tells me the Challoner fit is quite the rage in Hadleigh.”

“We have more orders than we can execute,” returned Phillis, curtly.

“Humph! that sounds promising. I hope your mother is careful of you, and forbids any expenditure of midnight oil, or you will be reduced to a thread-paper. As I have told you you are not the same girl that you were when you came to the relief of my injured ankle.”

“I feel tolerably substantial, thank you,” returned Phillis, ungraciously, for, in common with other girls, she hated to be pitied for her looks, and she had a notion that Mrs. Cheyne only said this to plague her. “Nan is our head and task mistress. We lead regular lives, have stated hours for work, take plenty of exercise and on the whole, are doing as well as possible.”

“There speaks the Challoner spirit.”

“Oh, yes; that never fails us. But now Nan will be waiting for me, and I only called just to inquire after you.”

“And you did not expect to see me. Well, come again when I am in a better humor for conversation. If you stay longer now I might not be sparing of my sarcasms. By the by, what has become of our young vicar? Tell him he has not converted me yet, and I quite miss his pastoral visits. Do you know,” looking so keenly at Phillis that she blushed with annoyance, “a little bird tells me that our pastor has undertaken the supervision of the Friary. Which is it, my dear, that he is trying to convert?”

The tone and manner were intolerable to Phillis.

“I don’t understand you, Mrs. Cheyne,” she returned, with superb youthful haughtiness. “Mr. Drummond is a kind neighbor, and so is Miss Mattie. You may keep these insinuations for him, if you will.” Then she would have escaped without another glance at her tormentor, but Mrs. Cheyne detained her:

“There, never mind. I will take back my naughty speech. It was rude and impertinent of me, I know that. But I like you all the better for your spirit; and, my dear, take care of yourself and your pretty sisters, for he is not worthy of one of you.”

“Oh, Mrs. Cheyne! for shame!” And Phillis’s gray eyes sparkled with lively indignation.

“He is a very ordinary good young man; and you and your sisters are real metal, and worth your weight in gold. There! go away, child; and come and see me again, for it does me good to torment you!” And the singular woman drew the girl into her arms suddenly and kissed her forehead, and then pushed her away. “To-morrow, or the next day, but not to-night,” she said, hurriedly. “I should make you cross fifty times if you stay longer to-night.” And Phillis was too thankful to be released to linger any longer; but her cheeks were burning as she walked down the avenue.

“Why do people always put these things into girls’ heads?” she said to herself. “A young man cannot come into the house, cannot say pleasant words, or do kind neighborly actions, but one must at once attribute motives of this kind. I have not been free from blame myself in this matter, for I have feared more than once that Nan’s sweet face attracted him,—poor Mr. Drummond! I hope not, for he would not have a chance against Dick. I wonder if I ought to say a word?—if it would be premature or unnecessary? But I should hate him to be unhappy,”—here Phillis sighed, and then threw up her head proudly: “I might say just a word, mentioning Dick,—for he does not know of his existence. I wonder if he would take the hint. I could do it very cleverly, I know. I hate to see people burning their fingers for nothing: I always want to go to their rescue. He is tiresome, but he is very nice. And, heigh-ho! what a crooked world we live in! —nothing goes quite straight in it.” And Phillis sighed again.

“Miss Challoner!” The voice sounded so near her that Phillis gave a great start. She had nearly reached the gate, and there was Mr. Dancy walking beside her, just as though he had emerged from the ground; and yet Phillis had not heard a sound. “Have I startled you?” he continued, gravely. “You were in such a brown study that I had to call you by your name to rouse you. There is nothing wrong at the White House, I hope?”

“Oh, no! Mrs. Cheyne is better: her nervous attack has quite passed off.”

“Magdalene suffering from a nervous attack?” and then Mr. Dancy stopped, and bit his lip. “Excuse me, I knew her before she was married, when she was Magdalene Davenport—before she and poor Herbert Cheyne unfortunately came together. I doubt whether things have not happened for the best; there!—I mean,” as Phillis looked at him in some perplexity, “that there

is little fear of her being an inconsolable widow."

"How can you say such a thing!" returned Phillis, indignantly. "That is the way with you men, you judge so harshly of women. Mrs. Cheyne is singular in her ways. She wears no mourning, and yet a more unhappy creature never existed on this earth. Not inconsolable!—and yet no one dares to speak a word of comfort to her, so great is her misery."

"Excuse me one moment: I have been ill, and am still subject to fits of giddiness. A mere vertigo; nothing more." But he said the words gasping for breath, and looked so deadly pale that Phillis felt quite frightened as she stood beside him.

They had been walking a few steps down the Braidwood Road, and Phillis had looked out anxiously for Nan, who had not yet appeared in sight. But now Mr. Dancy had come to an abrupt pause, and was leaning for support against the low wall that shut in the grounds of the White House. Phillis looked at him a little curiously, in spite of her sympathy. He still wore his loose cloak, though the evening was warm; but he had loosened it, and taken off his felt hat for air.

In figure he was a tall, powerful-looking man, only thin and almost emaciated, as though from recent illness. His features were handsome, but singularly bronzed and weather-beaten, as though from constant exposure to sun and wind; and even the blue spectacles could not hide a pair of keen blue eyes. By daylight Phillis could see that his brown beard and moustache were tinged with gray, and the hair on the temples was almost white; and yet he seemed still in the prime of life. It was a far handsomer face than Archie Drummond's; but the deep lines and gray hair spoke of trouble more than age, and one thing especially impressed Phillis,—the face was as refined as the voice.

If Mr. Dancy were aware of her close scrutiny, he took no notice of it. He leaned his arm against the wall and rested his head against it; and the thin brown hand was plainly visible, with a deep-red scar just above the wrist.

As Phillis had regarded it with sudden horror, wondering what had inflicted it, he suddenly aroused himself with an apology:

"There! it has passed: it never lasts long. Shall we walk on? I am so ashamed of detaining you in this way; but when a man has had a sunstroke––"

"Oh, that is sad!" returned Phillis, in a sympathizing voice. "Is that why you keep in-doors so much in the daylight? at least"—correcting herself in haste, for she had spoken without thought—"one never sees you about," which was a foolish speech, and showed she took notice of his movements; but she could not betray Mr. Drummond.

"Some one else only comes out in the evening," he rejoined, rather pointedly. "Who told you I kept in-doors in the daylight? Oh, I know!" the frown passing from his face, for he had spoken quickly and in annoyed fashion. "This sounds like a parson's prating: I know the language of old. By the bye, did you set the clergy on my track?" turning the blue spectacles full on the embarrassed Phillis.

"I?—no indeed!" and then she went on frankly: "Mr. Drummond was at our house, and he told us that he always called on Mrs. Williams's lodgers."

"True, Miss Challoner; but how did his reverence know Mrs. Williams had a lodger?"

This was awkward, but Phillis steered her way through the difficulty with her usual dexterity.

"I mentioned to my mother that you were kind enough to see me home, and she repeated the fact to Mr. Drummond."

"Thank you, Miss Challanor; now I understand. I wonder if your mother would be very shocked if a stranger intruded upon her? but you and I must have some more conversation together, and I do not see how it is to be managed in accordance with what you ladies call *les convenances*."

"My mother––" began Phillis, demurely; and then she paused, and looked up at him in astonishment, "What, Mr. Dancy! you purpose to call on my mother, and yet you refused Mr. Drummond's visit?" for the news of Archie's defeat had already reached the Friary through Miss Mattie.

Mr. Dancy seemed rather nonplussed at this, and then he laughed:

"Ah, you are shrewd, Miss Challoner; there is no deceiving you! I have seen Mr. Drummond pass and repass often enough; and—pardon me, if he be a friend—I thought from the cut of his coat that he was prig, and I have a horror of clerical prigs."

"He is not priggish in the least," was Phillis's annoyed rejoinder.

"No? Well, appearances are sometimes deceptive: perhaps I was too hasty in my dread of being bored. But here comes your sister, I think,—at least, I have seen you together: so I am leaving you in good hands." And, before Phillis could reply, he had lifted his hat and turned away, just as Nan, whose vigilant eyes were upon him, was hurrying to join her sister.

"Oh, Phillis, was that Mr. Dancy?" she asked, in a reproachful voice, as she hurried up to her.

"Yes, Nannie, it was Mr. Dancy," returned Phillis, composedly; "and I wish I could have introduced him to you, for I believe he is coming to call on mother." And, when she had related this astounding piece of intelligence, she looked in Nan's face and laughed, and, in high good humor, proceeded to relate their conversation.

CHAPTER XXX.

“NOW WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER.”

One fine morning in September, Mr. Drummond was standing at the back of Milner’s Library, turning over the last new assortment of books from Mudie, when two gentlemen entered the shop.

Strangers were always interesting to Archie, and he criticised them under a twofold aspect—pastoral and social. In this way curiosity becomes a virtue, and a man with a mission is not without his interests in life. Hadleigh was Mr. Drummond’s sheep-walk, where he shepherded his lambs, and looked after his black sheep and tried to wash them white, or, in default of that, at least to make out that their fleece was not so sable after all: so he now considered it his duty to leave off turning over the pages of a seductive-looking novel, and to inspect the strangers.

They were both dressed in tweed travelling costumes, and looked sunburnt, as though they had just returned from a walking-tour. The elder was a short wiry man, with a shrewd face and quizzical eyes; and he asked in sharp clipping voice that was not free from accent, for the last number of the local paper, containing lists of inhabitants, visitors, etc.

Meanwhile, the younger man walked about the shop, whistling softly to himself, as though he had a fund of cheerfulness on hand which must find vent somewhere. When he came opposite Archie, he took a brief survey of him in a careless, good-humored fashion, and then turned on his heel, bestowing a very cursory glance on Miss Masham, who stood shaking her black ringlets after the fashion of shopwomen, and waiting to know the gentleman’s pleasure.

No one would have called this young man very good-looking, unless such a one had a secret predilection for decidedly reddish hair and a sandy moustache; but there was an air of *bonhommie*, of frank kindness, of boyish fun and pleasantry, that attracted even strangers, and Archie looked after him with considerable interest.

“Oxford cut, father and son: father looks rather a queer customer,” thought Archie to himself.

“Dick, come here!—why, where is that fellow?” suddenly exclaimed the elder man, beginning to put on his eye-glasses very nervously.

“Coming, father. All right: what is it?” returned the imperturbable Dick. He was still whistling “Twickenham Ferry” under his breath, as he came to the counter and leaned with both elbows upon it.

“Good gracious, boy, what does this mean?” went on the other, in an irritable perturbed voice; and he read a short advertisement, written in a neat lady-like hand: “Dressmaking undertaken. Terms moderate, and all orders promptly executed. Apply to—the Misses Challoner, the Friary, Braidwood Road. Ladies waited upon at their own residences’. What the”—he was about to add a stronger term, but, in deference to Miss Milner, substituted—“dickens does this mean, Dick?”

The young man’s reply was to snatch the paper out of his father’s hand, and study it intently, with his elbows still on the counter, and the last bar of “Twickenham Ferry” died away uncompleted on his lips; and if any one could have seen his face, they would have remarked a curious redness spreading to his forehead.

“Nan’s handwriting, by Jove!” he muttered, but still inaudibly; and then he stared at the paper, and his face grew redder.

“Well, Dick, can’t you answer? What does this piece of tomfoolery mean—‘dressmaking undertaken—ladies waited upon at their own residences’? Can there be two families of Challoner and two Friaries? and why don’t you speak and say something?”

“Because I know as little as yourself, father,” returned the young man, without lifting his head; and he surreptitiously conveyed the paper to his pocket. “Perhaps this lady,” indicating Miss Milner, “could inform us?”

“I beg your pardon,” observed a gentlemanly voice near them; and, looking up, Dick found himself confronted by the young clergyman. “I overheard your inquiries, and, as I am acquainted with the ladies in question, I may be able to satisfy you.”

“I should be extremely obliged to you if you would do so, sir,” returned the elder man, with alacrity; but Dick turned away rather ungraciously, and his cheerful face grew sullen.

“Confound him! what does he mean by his interference? Knows them, indeed! such a handsome beggar, too,—a prig, one can see that from the cut of his clothes and beard!” And again he planted his elbows on the counter, and began pulling his rough little stubbly moustache.

“If you are referring to a mother and three daughters who live in the Friary and eke out a scanty income by taking in dressmaking, I am happy to say I know them well,” went on Archie. “My sister and I visit at the cottage, and they attend my church; and, as Miss Milner can tell you, they work hard enough all the six days of the week.”

“Indeed, Mr. Drummond, there are few that work harder!” broke in Miss Milner, volubly. “Such pretty creatures, too, to earn their own living; and yet they have a bright word and a smile for

everybody! Ever since Miss Phillis," (here Dick groaned) "made that blue dress for Mrs. Trimmings—she is the butcher's wife, and a dressy woman, though not flashy, like Mrs. Squails—they have been quite the rage in Hadleigh. All the townspeople, and the resident gentry, and even the visitors, want their gowns made by the Miss Challoners. Their fit is perfect; and they have such taste. And––" But here the luckless Dick could bear no more.

"If you will excuse me, sir," he said, addressing his bewildered father, "I have left something particular at the hotel: I must just run and fetch it."

Dick did not specify whether it was his handkerchief, or his cigar-case, or his purse, of which he stood so urgently in need; but before Mr. Mayne could remonstrate, he had gone out of the shop. He went as far as the door of the hotel, and there he seized on a passing waiter and questioned him in a breathless manner. Having obtained his information, he set off at a walk that was almost a run through the town, and down the Braidwood Road. The few foot-passengers that he met shrank out of the way of this young man; for he walked, looking neither to the right nor to left, as though he saw nothing before him. And his eyes were gloomy, and, he did not whistle; and the only words he said to himself were, "Oh, Nan, never to have told me of this!" over and over again.

The gate of the Friary stood open; for a small boy had been washing the flags, and had left his pail, and had gone off to play marbles in the road with a younger brother. Dick,—who understood the bearings of the case at once, shook his fist at the truant behind his back, and then turned in at the gate.

He peeped in at the hall door first; but Dorothy was peeling potatoes in the kitchen, and would see him as he passed, so he skirted the little path under the yews. And if Dulce had been at her sewing-machine as usual, she would have seen him at once; but this morning the machine was silent.

A few steps farther he came to a full stop, and his eyes began to glisten, and he pricked up his ears after the manner of lovers; for through an open window just behind him, he could hear Nan's voice, sweet and musical, reading aloud to her sisters.

"Oh, the darling!" he murmured, and composed himself for a few moments' ecstasy, for no doubt she was reading Tennyson, or Barrett-Browning, or one of the poetry-books he had given her; but he was a little disappointed when he found it was prose.

"'With regard to washing-dresses,'" read Nan, in her clear tones, "'cottons, as a general thing, have another material made up with them; the under-skirt may be of foulard or satin––?'"

"Oh, I dare say! What nonsensical extravagance!" observed Phillis.

"'Or the bodice of surah, satin, cashmere, or llama, and the skirt of cotton.... The skirts are nearly always made with single box-pleats, with a flat surface in the centre, and a flat band of trimming is often stitched on at about five inches from the edge of the flounce.' I should say that would be sweetly pretty, dear: we might try it for Mrs. Penlip's dress. And just listen to a little more."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," blurted out Dick. "Oh, Nan, Nan! how could you be such a traitor?—washing-dresses indeed, and me left in ignorance!" And there was Dick, his face glowing and indignant, standing in the window, with Laddie barking furiously at him, and his outstretched hand nearly touching Nan.

Phillis and Dulce screamed with surprise, being young and easily excited; but Nan only said, "Oh, Dick!" very faintly; and her sweet face grew red and pale by turns, and her fingers fluttered a little in his grasp, but only for joy and the sheer delight of seeing him.

As for Dick, his eyes shone, but his manner was masterful.

"Look here!" he said, drawing Nan's advertisement from his pocket; "we had come down here to surprise you girls, and to have a little fun and tennis; and I meant to have treated you to the public ground at the hotel, as I knew you had only a scrubby little bit of lawn; and this is what has met my eyes this morning! You have deceived mother and me; you have let us enjoy our holiday, which I didn't a bit, for I had a sort of nasty presentiment and a heap of uncomfortable thoughts; and all the while you were slaving away at this hideous dressmaking,—I wish I could burn the whole rag, tag, and bobtail,—and never let us know you wanted anything. And you call that being friends!"

"Yes, and the best of friends, too," responded Phillis, cheerfully, for Nan was too much crushed by all this eloquence to answer. "Come along, Dulce! don't listen any more to this nonsense, when you know mother is wanting us. Dick is all very well when he is in a good humor, but time and dressmaking wait for no man." And the young hypocrite dragged the unwilling Dulce away. "Can't you leave them alone to come to an understanding?" whispered Phillis in her ear, when they got outside the door. "I can see it in his eyes; and Nan is on the verge of crying, she is so upset with the surprise. And, you goose, where are you going now?"

"To mother. Did you not say she wanted us?"

"Oh, you silly child!" returned Phillis, calmly: "does not mother always want us? One must say what comes uppermost in one's mind in emergencies of this sort. But for me, you would have stood there for an hour staring at them. Mother is out, as it happens: if you like we will go and meet her. Oh, no, I forgot: Dick is a young man, and it would not be proper. Let us go into the kitchen and help Dorothy." And away they went.

“Phillis is a trump!” thought Dick, as he shut the door. “I love that girl.” And then he marched up to Nan, and took her hands boldly.

“Now, Nan you owe me amends for this; at least you will say you are sorry.”

“No, Dick,” hanging her head, for she could not face his look, he was so masterful and determined with her, and so unlike the easy Dick of old. “I am not a bit sorry: I would not have spoiled your holiday for worlds.”

“My holiday!—a precious holiday it was without you! A lot of stupid climbing, with grinning idiots for company. Well, never mind that,” his wrathful tone changing in a moment. “So you kept me in the dark just for my own good?”

“Yes, of course, Dick. What an unnecessary question!”

“And you wanted me, Nan?”

“Yes,” very faintly, and there was a little tear-drop on one of Nan’s lashes.

She had been so miserable,—how miserable he would never know; but he need not have asked her that.

“Oh, very well: then I won’t bother you with any more questions. Now we understand each other, and can just go to business.”

Nan looked up in his face in alarm. She anticipated another lecture, but nothing of the sort came. Dick cleared his throat, got a little red, and went on.

“I say settle our business, because we have been as good as engaged all these years. You know you belong to me, Nan?”

“Yes, Dick,” she returned, obediently; for she was too much taken by surprise to know what she ought to say, and the two words escaped from her almost unconsciously.

“There never was a time we were not fond of each other,—ever since you were so high,” pointing to what would represent the height of an extremely dwarfish infant of seven or eight months.

“Oh, not so long ago as that,” returned Nan, laughing a little.

“Quite as long,” repeated Dick, solemnly. “I declare, I have been so fond of you all my life, Nan, that I have been the happiest fellow in the world. Now, look here; just say after me, ‘Dick, I promise on my word and honor to marry you.’”

Nan repeated the words, and then she paused in affright.

“But your father!” she gasped,—“and the dressmaking! Oh, Dick! what have you made me say? You have startled me into forgetting everything. Oh, dear! oh, dear! what shall I do?” continued Nan, in the most innocent way. “We shall be engaged all our lives, for he will never allow you to marry me. Dick, dear Dick, please let me off! I never meant to give in like this.”

“Never mind what you meant to do,” returned Dick, with the utmost gravity: “the thing is, you have done it. On your word and honor, Nan, remember. Now we are engaged.”

“Oh, but Dick, please don’t take such advantage of me, just because I said—or, at least, you said—I was fond of you. What will mother say? She will be so dreadfully shocked; and it is so cruel to your father. I will be engaged to you in a way. I will promise—I will vow, if you will—never to marry any one else.”

“I should think not,” interrupted Dick, fiercely. “I would murder the fellow, whoever he was!” and in spite of himself his thought reverted to the fair beard and handsome face of the young clergyman.

Nan saw from his obstinate face that her eloquence was all wasted; but she made one more attempt, blushing like a rose:

“I will even promise to marry you, if your father gives his consent. You know, Dick, I would never go against him.”

“Nor I. You ought to know me better, Nan, than to think I should act shabbily and leave the dear old fellow in the dark.”

“Then you will set me free,” marvelling a little over her lover’s good sense and filial submission.

“As free as an engagement permits. Why, what do you mean, Nan? Have I not just told you we are engaged for good and all? Do you suppose I do not mean to tell my father so on the first opportunity? There he comes! bless the man, I knew he would follow me! Now you shall see how I can stick up for the girl I love.” But Dick thought it better to release the hand he had been holding all this time.

There are certain moments in life when one is in too exalted a mood to feel the usual sensations that circumstances might warrant. At another time Nan would have been shocked at the condition of her work-room, being a tidy little soul, and thrifty as to pins and other odds and ends; and the thought of Mr. Mayne coming upon them unexpectedly would have frightened her out of her senses.

The room was certainly not in its usual order. There had been much business transacted there that morning. The table was strewn with breadths of gay *broche* silk; an unfinished gauzy-looking dress hung over a chair; the door of the wardrobe was open, and a row of dark-looking shapes—like Bluebeard’s decapitated wives—were dimly revealed to view. A sort of lay figure,

draped in calico, was in one corner. As Nan observed to Phillis afterwards, “There was not a tidy corner in the whole room.”

Nevertheless, the presence of Dick so glorified the place that Nan looked around at the chaos quite calmly, as she heard Mr. Mayne’s sharp voice first inquiring for her mother and then for herself. Dorothy, with her usual tact, would have shown him into the little parlor; but Nan, who wished for no disguise, stepped forward and threw open the door.

“I am here, Dorothy. Come in, Mr. Mayne. Dick is here too, and I am so sorry mother is out.”

“I might have known that scapegrace would have given me the slip!” muttered Mr. Mayne, as he shook hands ungraciously with Nan, and then followed her into the work-room.

Dick, who was examining the wardrobe, turned round and saluted his father with a condescending nod:

“You were too long with the parson: I could not wait, you see. Did you make all these dresses, Nan? You are awfully clever, you girls! They look first-rate,—this greeny-browny-yellowish one, for example,” pulling out a much furbelowed garment destined for Mrs. Squails.

“Oh, Dick, do please leave them alone!” and Nan authoritatively waved him away, and closed the wardrobe.

“I was only admiring your handiwork,” returned Dick, imperturbably. “Does she not look a charming little dressmaker, father?” regarding Nan with undisguised pleasure, as she stood in her pretty bib-apron before them.

But Mr. Mayne only drew his heavy eyebrows together, and said,—

“Pshaw, Dick! don’t chatter such folly. I want to have some talk with Miss Nancy myself.”

“All right: I have had my innings,” returned naughty Dick; but he shot a look at Nan that made her blush to her finger ends, and that was not lost on Mr. Mayne.

“Well, now, Miss Nancy, what does all this mean?” he asked, harshly. “Here we have run down just in a friendly way,—Dick and I,—leaving the mother rather knocked up after her travels at Longmead, to look you up and see how you are getting on. And now we find you have been deceiving us all along, and keeping us in the dark, and that you are making yourselves the talk of the place, sewing a parcel of gowns for all the townspeople.”

Mr. Mayne did not add that his son had so bothered him for the last three weeks to run down to Hadleigh that he had acceded at last to his request, in the hope of enjoying a little peace.

“Draw it mild!” muttered Dick, who did not much admire this opening tirade; but Nan answered, with much dignity,—

“If people talk about us it is because of the novelty. They have never heard of gentle-people doing this sort of work before––”

“I should think not!” wrathfully from Mr. Mayne.

“Things were so bad with us that we should have all had to separate if Phillis had not planned this scheme; and then mother would have broken her heart; but now we are getting on famously. Our work gives satisfaction, we have plenty of orders; we do not forfeit people’s good opinions, for we have nothing but respect shown us, and––”

But here Mr. Mayne interrupted her flow of quiet eloquence somewhat rudely.

“Pack of nonsense!” he exclaimed, angrily. “I wonder at your mother,—I do indeed. I thought she had more sense. You have no right to outrage your friends in this way! it is treating us badly. What will your mother say, Dick? She will be dreadfully shocked. I am sorry for you, my boy,—I am indeed: but, under the circumstances––”

But what he was about to add was checked by a very singular proceeding on the part of his son; for Dick suddenly took Nan’s hand, and drew her forward.

“Don’t be sorry for me, father: I am the happiest fellow alive. Nan and I have come to an understanding at last, after all these years. Allow me to present to you the future Mrs. Richard Mayne.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

DICK THINKS OF THE CITY.

When Dick had uttered this audacious speech, Mr. Mayne started back, and his expression of mingled wrath and dismay was so ludicrous that under any other circumstances his son would have found it difficult to keep his countenance.

“What! what!” he almost shouted, losing all sense of politeness, and even of Nan’s presence; “you young fool, what do you mean by trumping up this nonsense and presuming to talk to me in

this way?”

Dick thought it prudent to drop Nan’s hand,—and, indeed, the girl shrank away from them both in alarm at this outburst: nevertheless, his countenance and bearing maintained the same admirable *sang-froid*, as he confronted his angry parent:

“Now, father, what is the use of calling me names? When a fellow is of age, and knows his own mind, he does not care a pin for being called a fool. ‘Hard words break no bones,’ as our copy-leaves used to tell us,—no, I have not got that quite right; but that is about my meaning. Look here, father,” he continued, in a coaxing, boyish voice; “I have cared for Nan ever since she was a little creature so high,” again reverting to the infantile measurement. “I have always meant to marry her,—that is, if she would have me,” correcting himself, as Nan drew herself up a little proudly. “Money or no money, there is not another girl in England that I would have for a wife. I would wait for her if I had to wait half my life, just the same as she would wait for me; and so, as I said before, when a fellow has made up his mind, there is nothing more to say.” And here Dick pursed up his lips for a whistle, but thought better of it, and fell to twisting and untwisting the ends of his sandy moustache.

Nan’s downcast eyes revealed nothing. But if Dick could only have seen the happy look in them! What eloquence could ever have been so dear to her as that clear rough-and-ready statement of her lover’s feelings for her? “There is not another girl in England that I would have for a wife.” Could anything surpass the beauty of that sentence? Oh, how manly, how true he was, this Dick of hers!

“Oh, indeed! I am to say nothing, am I?” returned Mr. Mayne, with exquisite irony. “My son is to dictate to me; and I am to be silent! Oh, you young fool!” he muttered under his breath; but then for the moment words seemed to fail him.

In spite of the wrath that was boiling within him, and to which he did not dare give vent in Nan’s presence, in spite of the grief and disappointment that his son’s defiance had caused him, Dick’s bearing filled him with admiration and amazement.

This boy of his was worth something, he thought. He had a clear head of his own, and could speak to some purpose. Was a likely young fellow like this to be thrown away on that Challoner girl? Poor Nan! Pretty and blooming as she looked, Mr. Mayne felt almost as though he hated her. Why had she come between his boy and him? Had he a dozen sons, that he could spare one of them? Was not Dick his only one,—the son of his right hand, his sole hope and ambition? Mr. Mayne could have wept as these thoughts passed through his mind.

It was at this moment that Nan thought it right to speak. Dick had had his say, but it was not for her to be silent.

“Mr. Mayne, please listen to me a moment,” she said, pleadingly. “No; I must speak to your father,” as Dick, much alarmed, tried to silence her. “He must not think hard things of us, and misunderstand us.”

“No, dear; indeed you had better be silent!” implored Dick, anxiously; but Nan for once turned a deaf ear to him.

“I must speak,” she persisted. “Mr. Mayne, it is quite true what Dick says: we have been together all our lives, and have grown to care for each other. I cannot remember the time,”—the tears coming into her bright eyes—“when Dick was not more to me than a brother; it is all of such long standing, it is far, far too late to stop it now.”

“We shall see about that, Miss Nancy,” muttered Mr. Mayne, between his teeth; but the girl did not seem to hear him.

“Dick took me by surprise just now. I ought to have been more on my guard, and not have given him that promise.”

“What promise?” demanded Mr. Mayne, harshly; and Nan hung her head, and returned, shyly,—

“That I would marry him some time; but indeed—indeed he made me say it, and I was so taken by surprise. No, Dick; you must let me finish,” for Dick was looking at her with piteous entreaty in his eyes. “I know we were wrong to say so much without your leave; but indeed I will do your son no harm. I cannot marry any one else, because I am engaged to him; but as far as he is concerned he is free. I will never marry him without your permission; he shall not come here if you do not wish; but do not be so angry with us;” and here her lip quivered. “If you did not mean this to happen, you should have kept us apart all these years.”

“Oh, hush, dear!” whispered Dick in her ear; but Mr Mayne almost thrust him aside, and laid a rough grasp on the girl’s wrist. “Never mind him: answer me one question. Are you serious in what you say, that you will never marry him without my permission?”

“Of course I will not,” answered Nan, quite shocked. “Dick would not ask me to do such a thing; he is far too honorable, and—and—no one would think of such a thing.”

“Very well; that is all I wanted to know;” and he released her, not over-gently: “the rest I can settle with Master Dick himself. Good-morning, Miss Nancy: under the circumstances I do not think I will wait to see your mother. I am not quite in the mood for ladies; perhaps, later on, I may have something to say to her.”

“Don’t you mean to shake hands with me, Mr. Mayne?” asked poor Nan, much distressed at the evil temper of Dick’s father; but there was no sign of softening.

“Yes; I will shake hands with you, and gladly, if you will promise to be sensible and send this boy

of mine about his business. Come now, Nan; own for my comfort that it is only a bit of boy-and-girl nonsense, that means nothing. I am not over-particular, and do not object to a bit of flirting with young folk."

"You had better go with your father, Dick," returned Nan, with much dignity, and quite ignoring this speech.

Dick seized the little hand that had been so rudely rejected, and kissed it under his father's eyes.

"I will see you again somehow," he whispered, and Nan was quite content with this promise. Dick would keep his word, she knew: he would not leave Hadleigh without seeing her.

A very unpleasant hour ensued for poor Dick. Mr. Mayne in one of his worst tempers; he had conducted himself to Nan in an ungentlemanly manner, and he knew it; as Dick said to himself, —

"It is very hard on a fellow when one's father acts like a cad."

Mr. Mayne had shown himself a cad. No gentleman by birth or breeding would have conducted himself in that offensive way. Bad temper had broken down the trammels of conventionality: never before in his life had Dick felt so utterly ashamed of his father. Mr. Mayne was conscious of his son's criticism, and it made things worse.

It spoke well for Dick's prudence and self-command that he let the storm of his father's anger break over his head, and said no word. Mr. Mayne ranted and raved; I am afraid he even swore once or twice,—at least his language was undesirably strong,—and Dick walked beside him and held his peace. "Poor old boy, he is terribly cut up about this!" he thought once.

Mr. Drummond saw them coming along, and wondered at the energy of the older man. Was it the visit to the Friary that had put him out? and then he fell anew into cogitation. Who were these people who were so curious about the Challoners? At least that sulky young fellow had taken no apparent interest, for he had made an excuse to leave them; but the other one had persisted in very close investigation. Perhaps he was some relation,—an uncle, or a distant cousin; evidently he had some right or claim to be displeased. Archie determined to solve the mystery as soon as possible.

"Well, sir, have you nothing to say for yourself?" demanded Mr. Mayne, when he had fairly exhausted himself. He had disinherited Dick half a dozen times; he had deprived him of his liberal allowance; he had spoken of a projected voyage to New Zealand: and Dick had only walked on steadily, and thought of the cold trembling little hand he had kissed. "Have you nothing to say for yourself?" he vociferated.

Dick woke up at this.

"Oh, yes, I have plenty to say," he returned cheerfully; "but two cannot talk at once, you know. It was right for you to have the first innings, and all that; and I say, father,"—his filial feelings coming to the surface,—"I am awfully sorry, and so is Nan, to see you so vexed."

"Speak for yourself," was the wrathful answer. "Don't mention that girl's name in my hearing for the present."

"Whose name?—Nan's?" returned Dick, innocently. "I don't see how we are to keep it out of the conversation, when the row is all about her. Look here, father: I say again I am awfully sorry you are vexed; but as N—she says, it is too late to mend matters now. I have made my choice, for better for worse, and I am sorry it does not please you."

"Please me!" retorted Mr. Mayne; and then he added, venomously: "The girl said you would not marry without my permission; but I will never give it. Come, Dick, it is no use thwarting me in this: you are our only child and we have other plans for you. Pshaw! you are only a boy! You have not seen the world yet. There are dozens of girls far prettier than this Nan. Give this nonsense up, and there is nothing I will not do for you; you shall travel, have your liberty, do as you like for the next two or three years, and I will not worry you about marrying. Why, you are only one-and-twenty; and you have two more years of University life! What an idea,—a fine young fellow like you talking of tying yourself down to matrimony!"

"There is no use in my going back to Oxford, father," returned Dick, steadily; "thank you kindly all the same, but, it would be sheer waste of money. I have made up my mind to go into the City; it is the fashionable thing nowadays. And one does not need Greek and Latin for that, though, of course, it is an advantage to a fellow, and gives him a standing; but, as I have to get my own living, I cannot afford the two years. Your old chums Stanfield & Stanfield would give me a berth at once."

"Is the boy mad? What on earth do you mean by all this tomfoolery?" demanded Mr. Mayne, unable to believe his ears. His small gray eyes opened widely and irately on his son; but Dick took no notice. He walked on, with his shoulders looking rather square and determined; the corners of his mouth were working rebelliously: evidently he did not dare to look at his father for fear of breaking into incontrollable laughter. Really the dear old boy was getting too absurd; he—Dick—could not stand it much longer. "What in the name of all that is foolish do you mean, sir?" thundered Mr. Mayne.

Dick executed a low whistle, and then he said, in an aggrieved voice,—

"Well, father, I don't call you very consistent. I suppose I know what being disinherited means? In plain language, you have told me about half a dozen times that if I stick to Nan I am not to

expect a shilling of your money. Now, in my own mind, of course I call that precious hard on a fellow, considering I have not been such a bad sort of son after all. But I am not going to quarrel with you about that: a man has a right to do as he likes with his own money."

"Yes; but, Dick, you are going to be sensible, you know, and drop the girl?" in a wheedling sort of tone.

"Excuse me, father; I am going to do nothing of the kind," returned Dick, with sudden firmness. "I am going to stick to her, as you did to my mother; and for just as long, if it must be so. I am not a bit afraid that you will not give your permission, if we only wait long enough to prove that we are in earnest. The only thing I am anxious about is how I am to get my living; and that is why I will not consent to waste any more time at the University. The bar is too uphill work; money is made quickest in the City: so, if you will be good enough to give me an introduction to Stanfield & Stanfield,—I know they are a rattling good sort of people,—that is all I will trouble you about at present." And Dick drew in a long breath of relief after this weighty speech.

"Do you mean this, Dick?" asked Mr. Mayne, rather feebly.

They had reached the hotel now, and, as they entered the private room where their luncheon was awaiting them, he sat down as though he had grown suddenly old and tired, and rested his head on his hand, perhaps to hide the moisture that had gathered under his shaggy eyebrows.

"Yes, father, I do," returned Dick; but he spoke very gently, and his hand touched his father's shoulder caressingly. "Let me give you some wine: all this business has taken it out of you."

"Yes, I have had a blow, Dick,—my only boy has given me a blow," returned Mr. Mayne, pathetically; but as he took the wine his hand trembled.

"I am awfully sorry," answered Dick, penitently: "if there were anything else you had asked me but this—but I cannot give up Nan." And, as he pronounced the name, Dick's eyes shone with pride and tenderness. He was a soft-hearted, affectionate young fellow, and this quarrel with his father was costing him a great deal of pain. In everything else he would have been submissive to his parents; but now he had a purpose and responsibility in his life: he had to be faithful to the girl whom he had won; he must think for her now as well as for himself. How sweet was this sense of dual existence, this unity of heart and aim!

Mr. Mayne fairly groaned as he read the expression on his son's face. Dick's youthful countenance was stamped with honest resolution. "I am going to stick to her, as you did to my mother."—that was what he had said. If this were true, it was all over with Dick's chances with the pretty little heiress; he would never look at her or her thirty thousand pounds; "but all the same he, Richard Mayne, would never consent to his son marrying a dressmaker. If she had only not disgraced herself, if she had not brought this humiliation on them, he might have been brought to listen to their pleading in good time and at his own pleasure; but now, never!—never!" he muttered, and set his teeth hard.

"Dick," he said, suddenly, for there had been utter silence for a space.

"Yes, father."

"You have upset me very much, and made me very unhappy; but I wish you to say nothing to your mother, and we will talk about this again. Promise me one thing,—that you will go back to Oxford at least until Christmas."

"What is the good of that, sir?" asked his son, dubiously.

"What is the good of anything? for you have taken every bit of pleasure out of my life; but at least you can do as much as this for me."

"Oh, yes, father, if you wish it," returned Dick, more cheerfully; "but all the same I have fixed upon a City life."

"We will talk of that again," replied his father; "and, Dick, we go home to-morrow, and, unless you promise me not to come down to Hadleigh between this and Christmas, I shall be obliged to speak to Mrs. Challoner."

"Oh, there is no need for that," returned Dick, sulkily.

"You give me your word?"

"Oh, yes," pushing aside his chair with a kick. "It would be no use coming down to Hadleigh, for Nan would not speak to me. I know her too well for that. She has got such a conscience, you know. I shall write to her, but I do not know if she will answer my letters; but it does not matter: we shall both be true as steel. If you don't want me any more, I think I will have a cigar on the beach, for this room is confoundedly hot." And, without waiting for permission, Dick strode off, still sulky and fully aware that his father meant to follow him, for fear of his footsteps straying again down the Braidwood Road.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Never was a father more devoted to his son’s company than Mr. Mayne was that day. Dick’s cigar was hardly alight before his father had joined him. When Dick grew weary of throwing stones aimlessly at imaginary objects, and voted the beach slow, Mr. Mayne proposed a walk with alacrity. They dined together,—not talking much, it is true, for Dick was still sulky, and his father tired and inclined to headache, but keeping up a show of conversation for the waiter’s benefit. But when that functionary had retired, and the wine was on the table, Dick made no further effort to be agreeable, but placed himself in the window-seat and stared moodily at the sea, while his father watched him and drank his wine in silence.

Mr. Mayne was fighting against drowsiness valiantly.

Dick knew this, and was waiting for an opportunity to make his escape.

“Had we not better ring for lights and coffee?” asked his father, as he felt the first ominous sensations stealing over him.

“Not just yet. I feel rather disposed for a nap myself; and it is a shame to shut out the moonlight,” returned that wicked Dick, calling up a fib to his aid, and closing his eyes as he spoke.

The bait took. In another five minutes Mr. Mayne was nodding in earnest, and Dick on tiptoe had just softly closed the door behind him, and was taking his straw hat from its peg.

Nan was walking up and down the little dark lawn, feeling restless and out of sorts after the agitation of the morning, when she heard a low whistle at the other side of the wall, and her heart felt suddenly as light as a feather.

Dick saw her white gown as she came down the flagged path to the gate to let him in. The moonlight seemed to light it up with a sort of glory.

“You are a darling not to keep me waiting, for we have not a moment to lose,” he whispered, as she came up close to him. “He is asleep now, but he will wake up as soon as he misses me. Have you expected me before, Nan? But indeed I have not been left to myself a moment.”

“Oh, I knew all about it, my poor Dick,” she answered, looking at him so softly. “Phillis is reading to mother in the parlor, and Dulce is in the work-room. I have nowhere to ask you unless you come in and talk to them. But mother is too upset to see you, I am afraid.”

“Let us wait here,” returned Dick, boldly. “No one can hear what we say, and I must speak to you alone. No; I had better not see your mother to-night, and the girls would be in the way. Shall you be tired, dear, if you stand out here a moment talking to me? for I dare not wait long.”

“Oh, no, I shall not be tired,” answered Nan gently. Tired, when she had her own Dick near her! —when she could speak to him,—look at him!

“All right; but it is my duty to look after you, now you belong to me,” returned Dick, proudly. “Whatever happens,—however long we may be separated,—you must remember that—that you belong to me,—that you will have to account to me if you do not take care of yourself.”

Nan smiled happily at this, and then she said,—

“I have told mother all about it, and she is dreadfully distressed about your father’s anger. She cried so, and took his part, and said she did not wonder that he would not listen to us; he would feel it such a disgrace, his son wanting to marry a dressmaker. She made me unhappy, too, when she put it all before me in that way,” and here Nan’s face paled perceptibly in the moonlight, “for she made me see how hard it is on him, and on your mother, too! Oh, Dick don’t you think you ought to listen to them, and not have anything more to do with me?”

“Nan, I am shocked at you!”

“But, Dick!”

“I tell you I am utterly shocked! You to say such a thing to my face, when we have been as good as engaged to each other all our lives! Who cares for the trumpery dressmaking? Not I!”

“But your father!” persisted Nan, but very faintly, for Dick’s eyes were blazing with anger.

“Not another word! Nan, how dare you—after what you have promised this morning! Have I not been worried and badgered enough, without your turning on me in this way? If you won’t marry me, you won’t; but I shall be a bachelor all my life for your sake!” and Dick, who was so sore, poor fellow, that he was ready to quarrel with her out of the very fulness of his love, actually made a movement as though to leave her, only Nan caught him by the arm in quite a frightened way.

“Dick! dear Dick!”

“Well?” rather sullenly.

“Oh, don’t leave me like this! It would break my heart! I did not mean to make you angry. I was only pleading with you for your own good. Of course I will keep my promise. Have I not been true to you all my life? Oh, Dick! how can you turn from me like this?” And Nan actually began to sob in earnest, only Dick’s sweet temper returned in a moment at the sight of her distress, and he fell to comforting her with all his might; and after this things went on more smoothly.

He told her about his conversation with his father, and how he had planned a city life for himself; but here Nan timidly interposed:

“Would that not be a pity, when you had always meant to study for the bar?”

“Not a bit of it,” was the confident answer. “That was my father’s wish, not mine. I don’t mind telling you in confidence that I am not at all a shining light. I am afraid I am rather a duffer, and shall not make my mark in the world. I have always thought desk-work must be rather a bore; but, after all, with a good introduction and a tolerable berth, one is pretty sure of getting on in the City. What I want is to make a little nest cosey for somebody, and as quick as possible,—eh, Nan?”

“I do not mind waiting,” faltered Nan. But she felt at this moment that no lover could have been so absolutely perfect as her Dick.

“Oh, that is what girls always say,” returned Dick, rather loftily. “They are never in a hurry. They would wait seven—ten years,—half a lifetime. But with us men it is different. I am not a bit afraid of you. I know you will stick to me like a brick, and all that; and father will come round when he sees we are in earnest. But all the same I want to have you to myself as soon as possible. A fellow likes the feeling of working for his wife. I hate to think of these pretty fingers stitching away for other people. I want them to work for me: do you understand, Nan?’” And Nan, of course, understood.

Dick, poor fellow, had not much time for his love-making, he and Nan had too much business to settle. Nan had to explain to him that her mother was of opinion that under the present circumstances, nothing ought to be done to excite Mr. Mayne’s wrath. Dick might write to her mother sometimes, just to let them know how he was getting on; but between the young people themselves there must be no correspondence.

“Mother says it will not be honorable, and that we are not properly engaged.” And, though Dick combated this rather stoutly, he gave in at last, and agreed that, until the new year, he would not claim his rights, or infringe the sacred privacy of the Friary.

“And now I must go,” said Dick, with a great sigh; “and it is good-bye for months. Now, I do not mean to ask your leave,—for you are such a girl for scruples, and all that, and you might take it into your head to refuse me: so there!”

Dick’s words were mysterious; but he very soon made his meaning plain.

Nan said, “Oh, Dick!” but made no further protest. After all, whatever Mr. Mayne and her mother said, they were engaged.

As Dick closed the little gate behind him, he was aware of a tall figure looming in the darkness.

“Confound that parson! What does he mean by loafing about here?” he thought, feeling something like a pugnacious bull-dog at the prospect of a possible rival. “I forgot to ask Nan about him; but I dare say he is after one of the other girls.” But these reflections were nipped in the bud, as the short, sturdy form of Mr. Mayne was dimly visible in the road.

Dick chuckled softly: he could not help it.

“All right, dear old boy,” he said to himself; and then he stepped up briskly, and took his father’s arm.

“Do you call this honorable, sir?” began Mr. Mayne, in a most irascible voice.

“I call it very neat,” returned Dick, cheerfully. “My dear pater, everything is fair in love and war; and if you will nap at unseasonable times—but that comes of early rising, as I have often told you.”

“Hold your tongue, sir!” was the violent rejoinder. “It is a mean trick you have served me, and you know it. We will go back to-night; nothing will induce me to sleep in this place. You are not to be trusted. You told me a downright lie. You were humbugging me, sir, with your naps.”

“I will plead guilty to a fib, if you like,” was Dick’s careless answer. “What a fuss you are making, father! Did you never tell one in your life? Now, what is the use of putting yourself out?—it is not good at your age, sir. What would my mother say? It might bring on apoplexy, after that port-wine.”

“Confound your impertinence!” rejoined Mr. Mayne, angrily; but Dick patted his coat-sleeve pleasantly:

“There, that will do. I think you have relieved your feelings sufficiently. Now we will go to business. I have seen Nan, and told her all about it; and she has had it out with her mother. Mrs. Challoner will not hear of our writing to each other; and I am not to show my face at the Friary without your permission. There is no fibbing or want of honor there: Nan is not the girl to encourage a fellow to take liberties.”

“Oh, indeed!” sneered Mr. Mayne; but he listened attentively for all that. And his gloomy eyebrows relaxed in the darkness. The girl was not behaving so badly, after all.

“So we said good-bye,” continued Dick, keeping the latter part of the interview to himself; “and in October I shall go back for the term, as I promised. We can settle about the other things after Christmas.”

“Oh, yes, we can talk about that by and by,” replied his father, hastily; and then he waxed cheerful all at once, and called his son’s attention to some new houses they were building.

“After all, Hadleigh is not such a bad little place,” he observed; “and they gave us a very good dinner at the hotel. It is not every one who can cook fish like that.” And then Dick knew that the storm had blown over for the present, and that his father intended to make himself pleasant and ignore all troublesome topics.

Dick was a little tired when he went to bed; but, on the whole, he was not unhappy. It was quite true that the idea of a City life was repugnant to him, but the thought of Nan sweetened even that. Nothing else remained to him if his father chose to be disagreeable and withdraw his allowance, or threaten to cut him off with a shilling, as other fellows’ fathers did in novels.

“It is uncommonly unpleasant, having to wage war with one’s own father,” thought Dick, as he laid his sandy head on the pillow. “He is such an old trump, too, that it goes against the grain. But when it comes to his wanting to choose a wife for me, it is too much of a good thing: it is tyranny fit for the Middle Ages. Let him threaten if he likes. He will find I shall take his threats in earnest. After Christmas I will have it out with him again; and if he will not listen to reason, I will go up to Mr. James Stanfield myself, and then he will see that I mean what I say. Heigho! I am not such a lucky fellow as Hamilton always thinks me.” And at this juncture of his sad cogitations Dick forgot all about it, and fell asleep.

Yes, Dick slept the sleep of the just. It was Mr. Drummond who was wakeful and uneasy that night. A vague sense of something wrong tormented him waking and sleeping.

Who was that sandy-headed young fellow who had been twice to the Friary that day. What business had he to be shutting the gate after him in that free-and-easy way at ten o’clock at night? He must find it out somehow; he must make an excuse for calling there, and put the question as indifferently as he could; but even when he made up his mind to pursue this course, Archie felt just as restless as ever.

He made his way to the cottage as early as possible. Phillis, who was alone in the work-room, colored a little as she saw him coming in at the gate. He came so often, he was so kind, so attentive to them all, and yet she had a dim doubt in her mind that troubled her at times. Was it for Nan’s sake that he came? Could she speak and undeceive him before things went too far with him? Yes, when the opportunity offered, she thought she could speak, even though the speaking would be painful to her.

Mr. Drummond looked round the room with a disappointed air as he entered, and then he came up to Phillis.

“You are alone?” he said, with a regretful accent in his voice; at least Phillis fancied she detected it. “How is that? Are your sisters out, or busy?”

“Oh, we are always busy,” returned Phillis, lightly; but, curiously enough, she felt a little sore at his tone. “Nan has gone down to Albert Terrace to take a fresh order, and Dulce is in the town somewhere with mother. Don’t you mean to sit down, Mr. Drummond? or is your business with mother? She will not be back just yet, but I could give her any message.” Phillis said this as she stitched away with energy; but one quick glance had shown her that Mr. Drummond was looking irresolute and ill at ease as he stood beside her.

“Thank you, but I must not stay and hinder you. Yes, my business was with your mother; but it is of no consequence, and I can call again.” Nevertheless, he sat down and deposited his felt hat awkwardly enough on the table. He liked Phillis, but he was a little afraid of her; she was shrewd, and seemed to have the knack of reading one’s thoughts. He was wondering how he should bring his question on the *tapis*; but Phillis, by some marvellous intuition that really surprised her, had already come to the conclusion that this visit meant something. He had seen Dick; perhaps he wanted to find out all about him. Certainly he was not quite himself to-day. Yes, that must be what he wanted. Phillis’s kind heart and mother-wit were always ready for an emergency.

“How full Hadleigh is getting!” she remarked, pleasantly, as she adjusted the trimming of a sleeve. “Do you know some old neighbors of ours from Oldfield turned up unexpectedly yesterday? They are going away to-day, though,” she added, with a little regret in her voice.

Archie brightened up visibly at this.

“Oh, indeed!” he observed, with alacrity. “Not a very long visit. Perhaps they came down purposely to see you?”

“Yes, of course,” returned Phillis, confusedly. “They had intended staying some days at the hotel, but Mr. Mayne suddenly changed his mind, much to our and Dick’s disappointment; but it could not be helped.”

“Dick,” echoed Archie, a little surprised at this familiarity and then he added, somewhat awkwardly, “I think I saw the young man and his father at the Library yesterday; and last night as I was coming from the station I encountered him again at your gate.”

“Yes, that was Dick,” answered Phillis, stooping a little over her work. “He is not handsome, poor fellow! but he is as nice as possible. They live at Longmead; that is next door to our dear old Glen Cottage, and the gardens adjoin. We call him Dick because we have known him all our lives, and he has been a sort of brother to us.”

“Oh, yes, I see,” drawled Archie, slowly. “That sort of thing is very nice when you have not a man belonging to you. It is a little awkward sometimes, for people do not always see this sort of relationship. He seemed a nice sort of fellow, I should say,” he continued, in his patronizing way, stroking his beard complacently. After all, the sandy-headed youth was no possible rival.

“Oh, Dick is ever so nice,” answered Phillis, enthusiastically; “not good enough for—” and then she stopped and broke her thread. “I am glad we are so fond of him,” she continued, rather hurriedly, “because Dick is to be our real brother some day. He and Nan have cared for each other all their lives, and, though Mr. Mayne is dreadfully angry about it, they consider themselves as good as engaged, and mean to live down his opposition. They came to an understanding yesterday,” finished Phillis, who was determined to bring it all out.

“Oh, indeed!” returned Archie: “that must be a great relief, I am sure. There is your little dog whining at the door; may I let him in?” And, without waiting for an answer, Archie had darted out in pursuit of Laddie, but not before Phillis’s swift upward glance had shown her a face that had grown perceptibly paler in the last few minutes.

“Oh, poor fellow! I was right!” thought Phillis, and the tears rushed to her eyes. “It was best to speak. I see that now; and he will get over it if he thinks no one knows it. How I wish I could help him! but it will never do to show the least sympathy: I have no right.” And here Phillis sighed, and her gray eyes grew dark with pain for a moment. Archie was rather a long time absent; and then he came back with Laddie in his arms, and stood by the window.

“Your news has interested me very much,” he said, and his voice was quite steady. “I suppose, as this—this engagement is not public, I had better not wish your sister joy, unless you do it for me.”

“Oh, no; there is no need of that,” returned Phillis, in a low voice. “Mother might not like my mentioning it; but I thought you might wonder about Dick, and––” here Phillis got confused.

“Thank you,” replied Archie, quietly; but now he looked at her. “You are very kind. Yes, it was best for me to know.” And then, as Phillis rose and gave him her hand, for he had taken up his hat as he spoke, she read at once that her caution had been in vain,—that he had full understanding why the news had been told to him, and to him only, and that he was grateful to her for so telling him.

Poor Phillis! she had accomplished her task; and yet as the door closed behind the young clergyman, two or three tears fell on her work. He was not angry with her; on the contrary, he had thanked her, and the grasp of his hand had been as cordial as ever. But, in spite of the steadiness of his voice and look, the arrow had pierced between the joints of his armor. He might not be fatally wounded,—that was not in the girl’s power to know; but that he was in some way hurt,—made miserable with a man’s misery,—of this she was acutely sensible; and the strangest longing to comfort him—to tell him how much she admired his fortitude—came over her, with a strong stinging pain that surprised her.

Archie had the longest walk that day that he had ever had in his life. He came in quite fagged and foot-sore to his dinner, and far too tired to eat. Mattie told him he looked ill and worn out; but, though he generally resented any such personal remarks, he merely told her very gently that he was tired, and that he would like a cup of coffee in his study, and not to be disturbed. And when she took in the coffee presently, she found him buried in the depths of his easy-chair, and evidently half asleep, and stole out of the room on tiptoe.

But his eyes opened very speedily as soon as the door closed upon her. It was not sleep he wanted, but some moral strength to bear a pain that threatened to be unendurable. How had that girl read his secret? Surely he had not betrayed himself! Nan had not discovered it, for her calmness and sweet unconsciousness had never varied in his presence. Never for an instant had her changing color testified to the faintest uneasiness. He understood the reason of her reserve now. Her thoughts had been with this Dick; and here Archie groaned and hid his face.

Not mortally hurt, perhaps; but still the pain and the sense of loss were very bitter to this young man, who had felt for weeks past that his life was permeated by the sweetness and graciousness of Nan’s presence. How lovely she had seemed to him,—the ideal girl of his dreams! It was love at first sight. He knew that now. His man’s heart had been set on the hope of winning her, and now she was lost to him.

Never for one moment had she belonged to him, or could belong to him. “He and Nan have cared for each other all their lives,”—that was what her sister had told him; and what remained but for him to stamp out this craze and fever before it mastered him and robbed him of his peace?

“I am not the only man who has had to suffer,” thought Archie, as hours after he stumbled up to bed in the darkness. “At least, it makes it easier to know that no one shares my pain. These things are better battled out alone. I could not bear even Grace’s sympathy in this.” And yet as Archie said this to himself, he recalled without any bitterness the half-tender, half pitying look in Phillis’s eyes. “She was sorry for me. She saw it all; and it was kind of her to tell me,” thought the young man.

He had no idea that Phillis was at that moment whispering little wistful prayers in the darkness that he might soon be comforted.

Who knows how many such prayers are flung out into the deep of God’s mercy,—comfort for such a one whom we would fain comfort ourselves; feeble utterances and cries of pity; the stretching out of helpless hands, which nevertheless may bring down blessings? But so it shall be while men and women struggle and fall, and weep the tears common to humanity, “until all eyes are dried in the clear light of eternity, and the sorest heart shall then own the wisdom of the cross that had been laid upon them.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“THIS IS LIFE AND DEATH TO ME.”

Phillis found it difficult during the next few days to reconcile divided sympathies; a nice adjustment of conflicting feelings seemed almost impossible. Nan was so simply, so transparently happy, that no sister worthy of the name could refuse to rejoice with her: a creature so brimming over with gladness, with contented love, was certain to reflect heart-sunshine. On the other hand, there was Mr. Drummond! To be glad and sorry in a breath was as provoking to a feeling woman as the traveller’s blowing hot and cold was to the satyr in the fable.

In trying to preserve an even balance Phillis became decidedly cross. She was one who liked a clear temperature,—neither torrid nor frigid. Too much susceptibility gave her an east-windy feeling; to be always at the fever-point of sympathy with one’s fellow-creatures would not have suited her at all.

Nan, who possessed more sweetness of temper than keenness of psychological insight, could not understand what had come to Phillis. She was absent, a trifle sad, and yet full of retort. At times she seemed to brim over with a wordy wisdom that made no sort of impression.

One evening, as they were retiring to bed, Nan beckoned her into her little room, and shut the door. Then she placed a seat invitingly by the open window, which was pleasantly framed by jasmine; and then she took hold of Phillis’s shoulders in a persuasive manner.

“Now, dear,” she said, coaxingly, “you shall just tell me all about it.”

Phillis looked up, a little startled. Then, as she met Nan’s gentle, penetrative glance, she presented a sudden blank of non-comprehension, most telling on such occasions, and yawned slightly.

“What do you mean, Nannie?” in a somewhat bored tone.

“Come, dear, tell me,” continued Nan, with cheerful pertinacity. “You are never dull or touchy without some good reason. What has been the matter the last few days? Are you vexed or disappointed about anything? Are you sure—quite sure you are pleased about Dick?”—the idea occurring to her suddenly that Phillis might not approve of their imprudent engagement.

“Oh, Nannie, how absurd you are!” returned Phillis, pettishly. “Have I not told you a dozen times since Wednesday how delighted I am that you have come to an understanding? Have I not sounded his praises until I was hoarse? Why, if I had been in love with Dick myself I could not have talked about him more.”

“Yes, I know you have been very good, dear; but still I felt there was something.”

“Oh, dear, no!” returned Phillis decidedly, and her voice was a little hard. “The fact is, you are in the seventh heaven yourself, and you expect us to be there too. Not that I wonder at you, Nannie, because Dick—dear old fellow—is ever so nice.”

She threw in this last clause not without intention, and of course the tempting bait took at once.

“I never knew any one half so good,” replied Nan, in a calmly satisfied tone. “You have hinted once or twice, Phil, that you thought him rather too young,—that our being the same age was a pity; but—do you know?—in Dick’s case it does not matter in the least. No man double his age could have made his meaning more plain, or have spoken better to the purpose. He is so strong and self-reliant and manly: and with all his fun, he is so unselfish.”

“He will make you a very good husband, Nan; I am sure of that.”

“I think he will,” returned Nan, with a far-away look in her eyes. She was recalling Dick’s speech about the nest that he wanted to make cosey for some one. “Phil, dear,” she went on, after this blissful pause, “I wish you had a Dick too.”

“Good Gracious, Nannie!”

“I mean—you know what I mean,—some one to whom you are first, and who has a right to care for you; it gives such a meaning to one’s life. Of course it will come in time; no one can look at you and not prophesy a happy future: it is only I who am impatient and want it to come soon.”

Phillis wrinkled her brows thoughtfully over this speech: she seemed inclined to digest and assimilate it.

“I dare say you are right,” she replied, after a pause. “Yes it would be nice, no doubt.”

“When the real *he* comes, you will find how nice it is,” rejoined Nan, with sympathetic readiness. “Do you know, Phil, the idea has once or twice occurred to me that Mr. Drummond comes rather often!” But here Phillis shook off her hand and started from her chair.

“There is a moth singing its wings. Poor wee beastie! let me save it, if it be not too late.” And she chased the insect most patiently until the blue-gray wings fluttered into her hand.

“There, I have saved him from utter destruction!” she cried triumphantly, leaning out into the darkness. “He has scorched himself, that is all;” then as she walked back to her sister, her head was erect, and there was a beautiful earnest look upon her face.

“Nannie, I don’t want to find fault with you, but don’t you remember how we used to pride ourselves, in the dear old days, in not being like other girls,—the Paines, for example, or even Adelaide Sartoris, who used to gossip so much about young men.”

Nan opened her eyes widely at this, but made no answer.

“We must not be different now, because our life is narrower and more monotonous. I know, talking so much over our work, we have terrible temptations to gossip; but I can’t bear to think that we should ever lower our standard, ever degenerate into the feeble girlishness we abhor. We never used to talk about young men, Nan, except Dick; and that did not matter. Of course we liked them in their places, and had plenty of fun, and tormented them a little; but you never made such a speech as that at Glen Cottage.”

“Oh, dear! oh, dear! What have I done?” exclaimed Nan, much distressed at this rebuke. “I do think you are right, Phil; and it was naughty of me to put such a thing into your head.”

“You have put no idea into my head,” replied Phillis, with crisp obstinacy. “There! I am only moralizing for my own good, as well as yours. Small beginnings make great endings. If we once began to gossip, we might end by flirting; and, Nan, if you knew how I hate that sort of thing!” And Phillis looked grand and scornful.

“Yes, dear; and I know you are right,” returned Nan, humbly. She was not quite sure what she had done to provoke this outburst of high moral feeling: but she felt that Phillis was dreadfully in earnest. They kissed each other rather solemnly after that, and Phillis was suffered to depart in silence.

That night there was no wistful little prayer that Mr. Drummond might be comforted: Phillis had too many petitions to offer up on her own account. She was accusing herself of pride, and Pharisaism, and hypocrisy, in no measured terms. “Not like other girls! I am worse,—worse,” she said to herself. And then, among other things, she asked for the gift of content,—for a quiet, satisfied spirit, not craving or embittered,—strength to bear her own and her friends’ troubles, and far-looking faith to discern “God’s perfectness round our uncompleteness,—round our restlessness His rest.”

The following evening, as Phillis was sorting out patterns in the work-room, a note was brought to her from the White House. It was in Mrs. Cheyne’s handwriting, and, like herself, strangely abrupt.

“Your visits are like angels’ visits,—extremely rare,” it began. “I am afraid I have frightened you away, as I have frightened the parson. I thought you had more wit than he to discern between mannerism and downright ill-humor. This evening the temperature is equable,—not the sign of a brooding cloud: so put on your hat, like a good girl, and come over. Miss Mewlstone and I will be prepared to welcome you.”

“You had better go,” observed Nan, who had read the note over her sister’s shoulder: “you have worked so dreadfully hard all day, and it will be a little change.”

“No one cares for east winds as a change,” replied Phillis, dryly; nevertheless, she made up her mind that she would go. She was beginning to dread being summoned to the White House: she felt that Mrs. Cheyne alternately fascinated and repelled her. She was growing fond of Miss Mewlstone; but then, on these occasions, she had so little intercourse with her. The charitable instinct that was always ready to be kindled in Phillis’s nature prompted her to pay these visits; and yet she always went reluctantly.

She had two encounters on the road, both of which she had foreseen with nice presentiment.

The first was with Mr. Drummond.

He was walking along slowly, with his eyes on the ground. A sort of flush came to his face when he saw Phillis; and then he stopped, and shook hands, and asked after them all comprehensively, yet with constraint in his voice. Phillis told him rather hurriedly that she was going to the White House: Mrs. Cheyne had sent for her.

Archie smiled:

“I am glad she does not send for me. I have not been there for a long time. Sarcasm is not an attractive form of welcome. It slams the door in a man’s face. I hope you will not get some hard hits, Miss Challoner.” And then he went on his way.

As she approached Mrs. Williams’s cottage, Mr. Dancy was, as usual, leaning against the little gate. He stepped out in the road, and accosted her.

“I have not called on your mother,” he began, rather abruptly. “After all, I thought it best not to trouble her just now. Can you spare me a few minutes? or are you going in there?” looking towards the White House.

“I am rather in a hurry,” returned Phillis, surprised at his manner, it seemed so agitated. “I am already late, and Mrs. Cheyne will be expecting me.”

“Very well: another time,” he replied, stepping back without further ceremony; but until Phillis’s figure disappeared in the trees he watched her, leaning still upon the little gate.

Mrs. Cheyne received her with a frosty smile; but, on the whole, her manner was more gracious

than usual, and by and by it thawed completely.

She was a little captious at first, it was true, and she snubbed poor Miss Mewlstone decidedly once or twice,—but then Miss Mewlstone was used to being snubbed,—but with Phillis she was sparing of sarcasms. After a time she began to look kindly at the girl; then she bade her talk, rather peremptorily, because she liked her voice and found it pleasant to listen to her; and by and by Phillis grew more at her ease, and her girlish talk rippled on as smoothly as possible.

Mrs. Cheyne's face softened and grew strangely handsome as she listened: she was drawing Phillis out,—leading her to speak of the old life, and of all their youthful sources of happiness. Then she fell into a retrospect of her own young days, when she was a spoiled madcap girl and had all sorts of daring adventures.

Phillis was quite fascinated; she was even disappointed when Miss Mewlstone pointed out the lateness of the hour.

"I have enjoyed myself so much," she said, as she put on her hat.

"I meant you to enjoy yourself," returned Mrs. Cheyne, quietly, as she drew the girl's face down to hers. "I have given you such a bad impression that you look on me as a sort of moral bugbear. I can be very different, when I like, and I have liked to be agreeable to-night." And then this strange woman took up a rich cashmere shawl from the couch where she was lying, and folded it around Phillis's shoulders. "The evenings are chilly. Jeffreys can bring this back with her;" for Mrs. Cheyne had already decided that this time her maid should accompany Phillis to the cottage.

Phillis laughed in an amused fashion as she saw the reflection of herself in one of the mirrors: her figure looked quite queenly enveloped in the regal drapery. "She has forgotten all about the dressmaking," she thought to herself, as she tripped downstairs.

It was a lovely moonlight evening; the avenue was white and glistening in the soft light; the trees cast weird shadows on the grass. Phillis was somewhat surprised to see in the distance Mr. Dancy's tall figure pacing to and fro before the lodge-gate. He was evidently waiting for her; for as she approached he threw away his cigar and joined her at once. Jeffreys, who thought he was some old acquaintance, dropped behind very discreetly, after the manner of waiting-women.

"How long you have stayed this evening! I have been walking up and down for more than an hour, watching for you," he began, with curious abruptness.

This and no more did Jeffreys hear before she lingered out of earshot. The lady's maid thought she perceived an interesting situation, and being of a susceptible and sympathetic temperament, with a blighted attachment of her own, there was no fear of her intruding. Phillis looked around once, but Jeffreys was absorbed in her contemplations of the clouds.

"I thought you were never coming," he continued; and then he stopped all at once, and caught hold of the fringe of the shawl. "This is not yours: I am sure I have seen Magdalene in it. Pshaw! what am I saying? the force of old habit. I knew her once as Magdalene."

"It is dreadfully heavy, and, after all, the evening is so warm," returned Phillis, taking no notice of this incoherent speech.

"Let me carry it," he rejoined, with singular eagerness; "it is absurd, a wrap like that on such a night." And, while Phillis hesitated, he drew the shawl from her shoulders and hung it over his arm, and all the way his disengaged right hand rested on the folds, touching it softly from time to time, as though the mere feeling of the texture pleased him.

"How was she to-night?" he asked, coming a little closer to Phillis, and dropping his voice as he spoke.

"Who?—Mrs. Cheyne? Oh, she was charming! just a little cold and captious at first, but that is her way. But this evening she was bent on fascinating me, and she quite succeeded; she looked ill, though, but very, very beautiful."

"She never goes out. I cannot catch a glimpse of her," he returned, hurriedly. "Miss Challoner, I am going to startle—shock you, perhaps; but I have thought about it all until my head is dizzy, and there is no other way. Please give me your attention a moment," for Phillis, with a vague sense of uneasiness, had looked around for Jeffreys. "I must see you alone: I must speak to you where we shall not be interrupted. To call on your mother will be no good; you and only you can help me. And you are so strong and merciful—I can read that in your eyes—that I am sure of your sympathy, if you will only give me a hearing."

"Mr. Dancy! oh, what can you mean?" exclaimed Phillis. She was dreadfully frightened at his earnestness, but her voice was dignified, and she drew herself away with a movement full of pride and *hauteur*. "You are a stranger to me; you have no right––"

"The good Samaritan was a stranger too. Have you forgotten that?" he returned, in a voice of grave rebuke. "Oh, you are a girl; you are thinking of your mother! I have shocked your sense of propriety, my child; for you seem a child to me, who have lived and suffered so much. Would you hesitate an instant if some poor famishing wretch were to ask you for food or water? Well, I am that poor wretch. What I have to tell you is a matter of life and death to me. Only a woman—only you—can help me; and you shrink because we have not had a proper introduction. My dear young lady, you have nothing to fear from me. I am unfortunate, but a gentleman,—a married man, if that will satisfy your scruples––"

“But my mother,” faltered Phillis, not knowing what to say to this unfortunate stranger, who terrified and yet attracted her by turns.

Never had she heard a human voice so persuasive, and yet so agonized in its intensity. A conviction of the truth of his words seized upon her as she listened,—that he was unhappy, that he needed her sympathy for some purpose of his own, and yet that she herself had nothing to do with his purpose. But what would Nan say if she consented—if she acceded to such an extraordinary proposition—to appoint a meeting with a stranger?

“It is life and death to me; remember that!” continued Mr. Dancy, in that low, suppressed voice of agitation. “If you refuse on the score of mere girlish propriety, you will regret it. I am sure of that. Trust to your own brave heart, and let it answer for you. Will you refuse this trifling act of mercy,—just to let me speak to you alone, and tell you my story? When you have heard that, you will take things into your own hands.”

Phillis hesitated, and grew pale with anxiety; but the instincts of her nature were stronger than her prudence. From the first she had believed in this man, and felt interested in him and his mysterious surroundings. “One may be deceived in a face, but never in a voice,” she had said, in her pretty dictatorial way; and now this voice was winning her over to his side.

“It is not right; but what can I do? You say I can help you.”—And then she paused. “To-morrow morning I have to take some work to Rock Building. I shall not be long. But I could go on the beach for half an hour. Nan would spare me. I might hear your story then.”

She spoke rapidly, and rather ungraciously, as though she were dispensing largess to a troublesome mendicant; but Mr. Dancy’s answer was humble in its intense gratitude.

“God bless you! I knew your kind heart was to be trusted There! I will not come any farther. Good-night; good-night, a thousand thanks!” And, before Phillis could reply, this strange being had left her side, and was laying the cashmere shawl in Jeffreys’s arms slowly and tenderly, as though it were a child.

Phillis was glad that Dulce opened the door to her that night, for she was afraid of Nan’s questioning glance. Nan was tired, and had retired early; and, as Dulce was sleepy too, Phillis was now left in peace. She passed the night restlessly, walking up at all sorts of untimely hours, her conscience pricking her into wakefulness. To her well-ordered nature there was something terrifying in the thought that she should be forced to take such a step.

“Oh, what would mother and Nan say?” was her one cry.

“I know I am dreadfully impulsive and imprudent, but Nan would think I am not to be trusted;” but she had passed her word, and nothing now would have induced her to swerve from it.

She ate her breakfast silently, and with a sense of oppression and guilt quite new to her. She grew inwardly hot whenever Nan looked at her, which she did continually and with the utmost affection. Before the meal was over, however, Miss Middleton and Mattie made their appearance, and in the slight bustle of entrance Phillis managed to effect her escape.

The hour that followed bore the unreality of a nightmare. Outwardly, Phillis was the grave, business-like dressmaker. The lady who had sent for her, and who was a stranger to Hadleigh, was much struck with her quiet self-possessed manners and lady-like demeanor.

“Her voice was quite refined,” she said afterwards to her daughter. “And she had such a nice face and beautiful figure. I am sure she is a reduced gentlewoman, for her accent was perfect. I am quite obliged to Miss Milner for recommending us such a person, for she evidently understands her business. One thing I noticed, Ada,—the way in which she quietly laid down the parcel, and said it should be fetched presently. Any ordinary dressmaker in a small town like this would have carried it home herself.”

Poor Phillis! she had laid down the parcel and drawn on her well-fitting gloves with a curious sinking at her heart: from the window of the house in Rock Building she could distinctly see Mr. Dancy walking up and down the narrow plat of grass before the houses, behind the tamarisk hedge, his foreign-looking cloak and slouch hat making him conspicuous.

“There is that queer-looking man again, mamma,” exclaimed one of the young ladies, who was seated in the window. “I am sure he is some distinguished foreigner, he has such an air with him.”

Phillis listened to no more, but hurried down the stairs and then prepared to cross the green with some degree of trepidation. She was half afraid that Mr. Dancy would join her at once, in the full view of curious eyes; but he knew better. He sauntered on slowly until she had reached the Parade and was going towards a part of the beach where there was only a knot of children wading knee-deep in the water, sailing a toy-boat. She stood and watched them dreamily, until the voice she expected sounded in her ear:

“True as steel! Ah, I was never deceived in a face yet. Where shall we sit, Miss Challoner? Yes, this is a quiet corner, and the children will not disturb us. Look at that urchin, with his bare brown legs and curly head: is he not a study? Ah, if he had lived—my–-” And then he sighed, and threw himself on the beach.

“Well,” observed Phillis, interrogatively. She was inclined to be short with him this morning. She had kept her word, and put herself into this annoying position; but there must be no hesitation, no beating about the bush, no loss of precious time. The story she had now to hear must be told, and with out delay.

Mr. Dancy raised his eyes as he heard the tone, and then he took off his spectacles as though he felt them an incumbrance. Phillis had a very good view of a pair of handsome eyes, with a lurking gleam of humor in them, which speedily died away into sadness.

“You are in a hurry; but I was thinking how I could best begin without startling you. But I may as well get it out without any prelude. Miss Challoner, to Mrs. Williams I am only Mr. Dancy; but my real name is Herbert Dancy Cheyne.”

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MISS MEWLSTONE HAS AN INTERRUPTION.

“Herbert Dancy Cheyne!”

As he pronounced the name slowly and with marked emphasis, a low cry of uncontrollable astonishment broke from Phillis: it was so unexpected. She began to shiver a little from the sudden shock.

“There! I have startled you,—and no wonder; and yet how could I help it? Yes,” he repeated, calmly, “I am that unfortunate Herbert Cheyne whom his own wife believes to be dead.”

“Whom every one believes to be dead,” corrected Phillis, in a panting breath.

“Is it any wonder?” he returned, vehemently; and his eyes darkened, and his whole features worked, as though with the recollection of some unbearable pain. “Have I not been snatched from the very jaws of death? Has not mine been a living death, a hideous grave, for these four years?” And then, hurriedly and almost disconnectedly, as though the mere recalling the past was torture to him, he poured into the girl’s shrinking ears fragments of a story so stern in its reality, so terrible in its details, that, regardless of the children that played on the margin of the water, Phillis hid her face in her hands and wept for sheer pity.

Wounded, bereft of all his friends, and left apparently dying in the hands of a hostile tribe, Herbert Cheyne had owed his life to the mercy of a woman, a poor, degraded ill-used creature, half-witted and ugly, but who had not lost all the instincts of her womanhood, and who fed and nursed the white stranger as tenderly as though he were her own son.

While the old negress lived, Herbert Cheyne had been left in peace to languish back to life, through days and nights of intolerable suffering, until he had regained a portion of his old strength; then a fever carried off his protectress, and he became virtually a slave.

Out of pity for the tender-hearted girl who listened to him, Mr. Cheyne hurried over this part of his sorrowful past. He spoke briefly of indignities, abuse, and at last of positive ill treatment. Again and again his life had been in danger from brute violence; again and again he had striven to escape, and had been recaptured with blows.

Phillis pointed mutely to his scarred wrists, and the tears flowed down her cheeks.

“Yes, yes; these are the marks of my slavery,” he replied, bitterly. “They were a set of hideous brutes; and the fetish they worshipped was cruelty. I carry about me other marks that must go with me to my grave; but there is no need to dwell on these horrors. He sent His angel to deliver me,” he continued, reverently; “and again my benefactor was a woman.”

And then he went on to tell Phillis that one of the wives of the chief in whose service he was took pity on him, and aided him to escape on the very night before some great festival, when it had been determined to kill him. This time he had succeeded; and, after a series of hair-breadth adventures, he had fallen in with some Dutch traders who had come far into the interior in search of ivory tusks. He was so burnt by the sun and disfigured by paint that he had great difficulty in proving his identity as an Englishman. But at last they had suffered him to join them, and after some more months of wandering he had worked his way to the coast.

There misfortune bad again overtaken him, in the form of a long and tedious illness. Fatigue, disaster, anguish of mind, and a slight sunstroke had taken dire effect upon him; but this time he had fallen into the hands of good Samaritans. The widowed sister of the consul, a very Dorcas of good works, had received the miserable stranger into her house; and she and her son, like Elijah’s widow of Zarephath, had shared with him their scanty all.

“They were very poor, but they pinched themselves for the sake of the stricken wretch that was thrown on their mercy. It was a woman again who succored me the third time,” continued Mr. Cheyne: “you may judge how sacred women are in my eyes now! Dear motherly Mrs. Van Hollick! when she at last suffered me to depart, she kissed and blessed me as though I were her own son. Never to my dying day shall I forget her goodness. My one thought, after seeing Magdalene, will be how I am to repay her goodness,—how I can make prosperity flow in on the little household, that the cruse and cake may never fail!”

“But,” interrupted Phillis at this point, “did you not write, or your friends write for you, to England?”

Mr. Cheyne smiled bitterly:

“It seems as though some strange fatality were over me. Yes, I wrote. I wrote to Magdalene, to my lawyer, and to another friend who had known me all my life, but the ship that carried these letters was burnt at sea. I only heard that when I at last worked my way to Portsmouth as a common sailor and in that guise presented myself at my lawyer’s chambers. Poor man! I thought he would have fainted when he saw me. He owned afterwards he was a believer in ghosts at that moment.”

“How long ago was that?” asked Phillis, gently.

“Two months; not longer. It was then I heard of my children’s death, of my wife’s long illness and her strange state. I was ill myself, and not fit to battle through any more scenes. Mr. Standish took me home until I had rested and recovered myself a little; and then I put on this disguise—not that much of that is necessary, for few people would recognize me, I believe—and came down here and took possession of Mrs. Williams’s lodgings.”

Phillis looked at him with mute questioning in her eyes. She did not venture to put it into words, but he understood her:

“Why have I waited so long, do you ask? and why am I living here within sight of my own house, a spy on my own threshold and wife? My dear Miss Challoner, there is a bitter reason for that!

“Four years ago I parted from my wife in anger. There were words said that day that few women could forgive. Has she forgiven them? That is what I am trying to find out. Will the husband who has been dead to her all these years be welcome to her living?” His voice dropped into low vehemence, and a pallor came over his face as he spoke.

Phillis laid her hand on his own. She looked strangely eager:

“This is why you want my help. Ah! I see now! Oh, it is all right—all that you can wish! It is she who is tormenting herself, who has no rest day or night! When the thunder came that evening—you remember—we sat beside the children’s empty beds, and she told me some of her thoughts. When the lighting flashed, her nerves gave way, and she cried out, in her pain, ‘Did he forgive?’ That was her one thought. Her husband,—who was up in heaven with the children,—did he think mercifully of her, and know how she loved him? It was your name that was on her lips when that good woman, Miss Mewlstone, hushed her in her arms like a child. Oh, be comforted!” faltered Phillis, “for she loves you, and mourns for you as though she were the most desolate creature living!” But here she paused, for something that sounded like a sob came to her ear, and looking round, she saw the bowed figure of her companion shaking with uncontrollable emotion,—those hard tearless sobs that are only wrung from a man’s strong agony.

“Oh, hush!” cried the girl, tenderly. “Be comforted: there is no room for doubt. There! I will leave you; you will be better by and by.” And then instinctively she turned away her face from a grief too sacred for a stranger to touch, and walked down to the water, where the children had ceased playing, and listened to the baby waves that lapped about her feet.

And by and by he joined her; and on his pale face there was a rapt, serious look, as of one who has despaired and has just listened to an angel’s tidings.

“Did I not say that you, and only you, could help me? This is what I have wanted to know: had Magdalene forgiven me? Now I need wait no longer. My wife and home are mine, and I must take possession of my treasures.”

He stopped, as though overcome by the prospect of such happiness; but Phillis timidly interposed:

“But, Mr. Cheyne, think a moment. How is it to be managed? If you are in too great a hurry, will not the shock be too much for her? She is nervous,—excitable. It would hardly be safe.”

“That is what troubles me,” he returned, anxiously. “It is too much for any woman to bear; and Magdalene—she was always excitable. Tell me, you have such good sense; and, though you are so young, one can always rely on a woman; you understand her so well—I see you do—and she is fond of you,—how shall we act that my poor darling, who has undergone so much, may not be harmed by me any more?”

“Wait one moment,” returned Phillis, earnestly. “I must consider.” And she set herself to revolve all manner of possibilities, and then rejected them one by one. “There seems no other way,” she observed, at last, fixing her serious glance on Mr. Cheyne. “I must seek for an opportunity to speak to Miss Mewlstone. It must be broken carefully to your poor wife; I am sure of that. Miss Mewlstone will help us. She will tell us what to do, and how to do it. Oh, she is so kind, so thoughtful and tender, just as though Mrs. Cheyne were a poor wayward child, who must be guided and helped and shielded. I like her so much: we must go to her for counsel.”

“You must indeed, and at once!” he returned, rather peremptorily; and Phillis had a notion now what manner of man he had been before misfortunes had tamed and subdued him. His eyes flashed with eagerness; he grew young, alert, full of life in a moment. “Forgive me if I am too impetuous; but I have waited so long, and now my patience seems exhausted all at once during the last hour. I have been at fever-point ever since you have proved to me that my wife—my Magdalene—has been true to me. Fool that I was! why have I doubted so long? Miss Challoner, you will not desert me?—you will be my good angel a little longer? You will go to Miss Mewlstone now,—this very moment,—and ask her to prepare my wife?”

“It is time for me to be going home: mother and Nan will think I am lost,” returned Phillis, in a

quiet, matter-of-fact tone. “Come Mr. Cheyne, we can talk as we go along.” For he was so wan and agitated that she felt uneasy for his sake. She took his arm gently, and guided him as though he were a child; and he obeyed her like one.

“Promise me that you will speak to her at once,” he said, as he walked beside her rather feebly; and his gait became all at once like that of an old man. But Phillis fenced this remark very discreetly.

“This afternoon or this evening, when I get the chance,” she said, very decidedly: “if I am to help you, it must be as I think best, and at my own time. Do not think me unkind, for I am doing this for your own good: it would not help you if your wife were to be brought to the brink of a nervous illness. Leave it to me. Miss Mewlstone will serve us best, and she will know.” And then she took her hand from his arm, and bade him drop behind a little, that she might not be seen in the town walking with him. “Good-bye! keep up your courage. I will help you all I can,” she said, with a kindly smile, as he reluctantly obeyed her behest. She was his good angel, but he must not walk any longer in her shadow: angels do their good deeds invisibly, as Phillis hoped to do hers. He thought of this as he watched her disappearing in the distance.

Phillis walked rapidly towards the cottage. Archie, who was letting himself in at his own door, saw the girl pass, carrying her head high, and stepping lightly as though she were treading on air. “Here comes Atalanta,” he said to himself; but, though a smile came over his tired face, he made no effort to arrest her. The less he saw of any of them the better, he thought, just now.

Nan looked up reproachfully as the truant entered the work-room, and Mrs. Challoner wore her gravest expression; evidently she had prepared a lecture for the occasion. Phillis looked at them both with sparkling eyes.

“Listen to me, Nan and mother. Oh, I am glad Dulce is not here, she is so young and giddy; and she might talk—No, not a word from either of you, until I have had my turn.” And then she began her story.

Nan listened with rapt speechless attention, but Mrs. Challoner gave vent to little pitying moans and exclamations of dismay.

“Oh, my child!” she kept saying, “to think of your being mixed up in such an adventure! How could you be so imprudent and daring? Mrs. Williams’s lodger—a strange man! in that outlandish cloak, too! and you walked home with him that dark night! Oh, Phillis, I shall never be at peace about you again!” and so on.

Phillis bore all this patiently, for she knew she had been incautious: and when her mother’s excitement had calmed down a little, she unfolded to them her plan.

“I must see Miss Mewlstone quite alone; and that unfinished French merino will be such a good excuse, Nan. I will take the body with me this afternoon, and beg her to let me try it on; the rest must come afterwards, but this will be the best way of getting her to myself.” And, as Nan approved of this scheme, and Mrs. Challoner did not dissent, Phillis had very soon made up her parcel, and was walking rapidly towards the White House.

As she turned in at the gates she could see a shadow on the blind in Mrs. Williams’s little parlor, and waved her hand towards it. He was watching her, she knew: she longed to go back and give him a word of encouragement and exhortation to patience; but some one, Mr. Drummond perhaps, might see her, and she dare not venture.

She sent her message by Jeffreys, and Miss Mewlstone soon came trotting into the room; but she wore a slightly-disturbed expression on her good-natured face.

She had been reading the third volume of a very interesting novel, and had most unwillingly laid down her book at the young dressmaker’s unseasonable request. Like many other stout people, Miss Mewlstone was more addicted to passivity than activity after her luncheon; and, being a creature of habit, this departure from her usual rules flurried her.

“Dear, dear! to think of your wanting to try on that French merino again!” she observed; “and the other dress fitted so beautifully, and no trouble at all. And there has Miss Middleton being calling just now, and saying they are expecting her brother Hammond home from India in November; and it is getting towards the end of September now. I was finishing my book, but I could not help listening to her,—she has such a sweet voice. Ah, just so—just so. But aren’t you going to open your parcel, my dear?”

“Never mind the dress,” returned Phillis, quickly. “Dear Miss Mewlstone, I was sorry to disturb you; but it could not be helped. Don’t look at the parcel: that is only an excuse. My business is far more important. I want you to put on your bonnet, and come with me just a little way across the road. There is some one’s identity that you must prove.”

Phillis was commencing her task in a somewhat lame fashion; but Miss Mewlstone was still too much engrossed with her novel to notice her visitor’s singular agitation.

“Ah, just so—just so,” she responded; “that is exactly what the last few chapters have been about. The real heir has turned up, and is trying to prove his own identity; only he is so changed that no one believes him. It is capitally worked out. A very clever author, my dear––”

But Phillis interrupted her a little eagerly:

“Is that your tale, dear Miss Mewlstone? How often people say truth is stranger than fiction! Do you know, I have heard a story in real life far more wonderful than that? Some one was telling me about it just now. There was a man whom every one, even his own wife, believed to be dead;

but after four years of incredible dangers and hardships—oh, such hardships!—he arrived safely in England, and took up his abode just within sight of his old house, where he could see his wife and find out all about her without being seen himself. He put on some sort of disguise, I think, so that people could not find him out."

"That must be a make-up story, I think," returned Miss Mewlstone, a little provokingly; but her head was still full of her book. Poor woman! she wanted to get back to it. She looked at Phillis and the parcel a little plaintively. "Ah, just so,—a very pretty story, but improbable,—very improbable, my dear."

"Nevertheless, it is true!" returned Phillis, so vehemently that Miss Mewlstone's little blue eyes opened more widely. "Never mind your book. I tell you I have business so important that nothing is of consequence beside it. Where is Mrs. Cheyne? She must not know we are going out."

"Going out!" repeated Miss Mewlstone, helplessly. "My dear, I never go out after luncheon, as Magdalene knows."

"But you are going out with me," replied Phillis, promptly. "Dear Miss Mewlstone, I know I am perplexing and worrying you; but what can I do? Think over what I have just said,—about—about that improbable story, as you called it; and then, you will not be so dreadfully startled. You must come with me now to Mrs. Williams's cottage: I want you to see her lodger."

"Her lodger!" Miss Mewlstone was fully roused now; and, indeed, Phillis's pale face and suppressed eager tones were not without their due effect. Had the girl taken leave of her senses? Why, the ladies at the White House led the lives of recluses. Why should she be asked to call upon any stranger, but especially a gentleman,—Mrs. Williams's lodger? "My dear," she faltered, "you are very strange this afternoon.—Magdalene and I seldom call on any one, and certainly not on gentlemen."

"You must come with me," replied Phillis, half crying with excitement. She found her task so difficult. Miss Mewlstone was as yielding as a feather bed in appearance, and yet it was impossible to move her. "He calls himself Mr. Dancy; but now he says that is not all his name: let me whisper it in your ear, if it will not startle you too much. Think of Mrs. Cheyne, and try and command yourself. Mrs. Williams's lodger says that he is Herbert Cheyne,—poor Mrs. Cheyne's husband!"

XXXV.

"BARBY, DON'T YOU RECOLLECT ME?"

"I do not believe it!—stuff and nonsense! You are crazy, child, to come to me with this trumped-up story! The man is an impostor. I will have the police to him. For heaven's sake don't let Magdalene hear this nonsense!"

Phillis recoiled a few steps, speechless with amazement. Miss Mewlstone's face was crimson; her small eyes were sparkling with angry excitement: all her softness and gentle inanity had vanished.

"Give me a bonnet,—shawl,—anything, and I will put this matter straight in a moment. Where is Jeffreys? Ring the bell, please, Miss Challoner! I must speak to her."

Phillis obeyed without a word.

"Ah, just so. Jeffreys," resuming her old purring manner as the maid appeared, "this young lady has a friend in trouble, and wants me to go down to the cottage with her. Keep it from your mistress if you can, for she hates hearing of anything sad; say we are busy,—I shall be in to tea,—anything. I know you will be discreet, Jeffreys."

"Yes, ma'am," returned Jeffreys, adjusting the shawl over Miss Mewlstone's shoulders; "but this is your garden-shawl, surely?"

"Oh, it does not matter; it will do very well. Now Miss Challoner, I am ready." And so noiseless and rapid were her movements that Phillis had much to do to keep up with her.

"Won't you listen to me?" she pleaded. "Dear Miss Mewlstone, it is no made-up story; it is all true;" but to her astonishment, Miss Mewlstone faced round upon her in a most indignant manner:

"Be silent, child! I cannot, and will not, hear any more. How should you know anything about it? Have you ever seen Herbert Cheyne? You are the tool of some impostor. But I will guard Magdalene; she shall not be driven mad. No, no, poor dear! she shall not, as long as she has old Bathsheba to watch over her." And Phillis, in despair, very wisely held her peace. After all she was a stranger: had she any proof but Mr. Dancy's word?

Just towards the last, Miss Mewlstone's pace slackened; and her hand shook so, as she tried to

unlatch the little gate, that Phillis was obliged to come to her assistance. The cottage door stood open as usual, but there was no tall figure lurking in the background,—no shadow on the blind.

“We had better go in there,” whispered Phillis, pointing to the closed door of the parlor; and Miss Mewlstone, without knocking, at once turned the handle and went in, while Phillis followed trembling.

“Well, sir,” said Miss Mewlstone, sternly, “I have come to know what you mean by imposing your story on this child.”

Mr. Dancy, who was standing with his back to them, leaning for support against the little mantle-shelf, did not answer for a moment; and then he turned slowly round, and looked at her.

“Oh, Barby!” he said; “don’t you recollect me?” And then he held out his thin hands to her imploringly, and added “Dear old Barby! but you are not a bit changed.”

“Herbert—why, good heavens! Ah, just so—just so,” gasped the poor lady, rather feebly, as she sat down, feeling her limbs were deserting her, and every scrap of color left her face. Indeed, she looked so flabby and lifeless that Phillis was alarmed and flew to her assistance; only Mr. Cheyne waved her aside rather impatiently.

“Let her be; she is all right. She knows me, you see: so I cannot be so much altered. Barby,” he went on, in a coaxing voice, as he knelt beside her and chafed her hands, “you thought I was an impostor, and were coming to threaten me: were you not? But now you see Miss Challoner was in the right. Have you not got a word for me? Won’t you talk to me about Magdalene? We have got to prepare her, you know.”

Then, as he spoke his wife’s name, and she remembered her sacred charge, the faithful creature suddenly fell on his neck in piteous weeping.

“Oh, the bonnie face,” she wept, “that has grown so old, with the sorrow and the gray hair! My dear, this will just kill her with joy, after all her years of bitter widowhood.” And then she cried again, and stroked his face as though he were a child, and then wrung her hands for pity at the changes she saw. “It is the same face, and yet not the same,” she said, by and by. “I knew the look of your eyes, my bonnie man, for all they were so piercing with sadness. But what have they done to you, Herbert?—for it might be your own ghost,—so thin; and yet you are brown, too; and your hair!” And she touched the gray locks over the temples with tender fluttering fingers.

“Magdalene never liked gray hairs,” he responded, with a sigh. “She is as beautiful as ever, I hear; but I have not caught a glimpse of her. Tell me, Barby,—for I have grown timorous with sorrow,—will she hate the sight of such a miserable scarecrow?”

“My dear! hate the sight of her own husband, who is given back to her from the dead? Ay, I have much to hear. Why did you never write to us, Herbert? But there! you have all that to explain to her by and by.”

“Yes; and you must tell me about the children,—my little Janie,” he returned, in a choked voice.

“Ah, the dear angels! But, Herbert, you must be careful. Nobody speaks of them to Magdalene, unless she does herself. You are impetuous, my dear; and Magdalene—well, she has not been herself since you left her. It is pining, grief, and the dead weight of loss that has ailed her being childless and widowed at once. There, there! just so. We must be tender of her, poor dear! and things will soon come right.”

“You need not fear me, Barby. I have learned my lesson at last. If I only get my wife back, you shall see—you shall see how I will make up to her for all I have ever made her suffer! My poor girl! my poor girl!” And then he shaded his face, and was silent.

Phillis had stolen out in the garden, and sat down on a little bench outside, where passers-by could not discern her from the road, and where only the sound of their voices reached her faintly. Now and then, chance words fell on her ear,—“Magdalene” over and over again; and “Janie” and “Bertie,”—always in the voice she had so admired. By and by she heard her own name, and rose at once, and found them looking for her.

“Here is my good angel, Barby,” observed Mr. Cheyne, as she came up smiling. “Not one girl in a thousand would have acted as bravely and simply as she has done. We are friends for life, Miss Challoner, are we not?” And he stretched out his hand to her, and Phillis laid her own in it.

“I was a bit harsh with you, dearie, was I not?” returned Miss Mewlstone, apologetically: “but there! you were such a child that I thought you had been deceived. But I ought to have known better, craving your pardon, my dear. Now we will just go back to Magdalene; and you must help my stupid old head, for I am fairly crazy at the thought of telling her. Go back into the parlor and lie down, Herbert, for you are terribly exhausted. You must have patience, my man, a wee bit longer, for we must be cautious,—cautious, you see.”

“Yes, I must have patience,” he responded, rather bitterly. But he went back into the room and watched them until they disappeared into the gates of his own rightful paradise.

Miss Mewlstone was leaning on Phillis’s arm. Her gait was still rather feeble, but the girl was talking energetically to her.

“What a spirit she has! just like Magdalene at her age,” he thought, “only Magdalene never possessed her even temper. My poor girl! From what Barby says, she has grown hard and bitter with trouble. But it shall be my aim in life to comfort her for all she has been through!” And then, as he thought of his dead children, and of the empty nursery, he groaned, and threw

himself face downward upon the couch. But a few minutes afterwards he had started up again, unable to rest, and began to pace the room; and then, as though the narrow space confined him, he continued his restless walk into the garden, and then into the shrubberies of the White House.

“My dear, I am not as young as I was. I feel as if all this were too much for me,” sighed Miss Mewlstone, as she pressed her companion’s arm. “One needs so much vitality to bear such scenes. I am terrified for Magdalene, she has so little self-control! and to have him given back to her from the dead! I thank God! but I am afraid, for all that.” And a few more quiet tears stole over her cheeks.

“Thinking of it only makes it worse,” returned Phillis, feverishly. She, too, dreaded the ordeal before them; but she was young, and not easily daunted. All the way through the shrubbery she talked on breathlessly, trying to rally her own courage. It was she who entered the drawing-room first, for poor Miss Mewlstone had to efface the signs of her agitation.

Mrs. Cheyne looked up, surprised to see her alone.

“Jeffreys told me you and Miss Mewlstone had gone out together on a little business. What have you done with poor old Barby?” And, as Phillis answered as composedly and demurely as she could, Mrs. Cheyne arched her eyebrows in her old satirical way:

“She is in her room, is she? Never mind answering, if you prefer your own counsel. Your little mysteries are no business of mine. I should have thought the world would have come to an end, though, before Barby had thrown down the third volume of a novel for anything short of a fire. But you and she know best.” And, as Phillis flushed and looked confused under her scrutiny, she gave a short laugh and turned away.

It was a relief when Miss Mewlstone came trotting into the room with her cap-strings awry.

“Dear, dear! have we kept you waiting for your tea, Magdalene?” she exclaimed, in a flurried tone, as she bustled up to the table. “Miss Challoner had a little business, and she thought I might help her. Yes; just so! I have brought her in, for she is tired, poor thing! and I knew she would be welcome.”

“It seems to me that you are both tired. You are as hot as though you had walked for miles, Barby. Oh, you have your secrets too. But it is not for me to meddle with mysteries.” And then she laughed again, and threw herself back on her couch, with a full understanding of the discomfort of the two people before her.

Phillis saw directly she was in a hard, cynical mood.

“You shall know our business by and by,” she said, very quietly. “Dear Miss Mewlstone, I am so thirsty, I must ask you for another cup of tea.” But, as Miss Mewlstone took the cup from her, the poor lady’s hand shook so with suppressed agitation that the saucer slipped from her grasp, and the next moment the costly china lay in fragments at her feet.

“Dear! dear!—how dreadfully careless of me!” fumed Miss Mewlstone.

But Mrs. Cheyne made no observation. She only rang the bell, and ordered another cup. But, when the servant had withdrawn, she said, coldly,—

“Your hand is not as steady as usual this evening, Barby;” and somehow the sharp incisive tone cut so keenly that, to Phillis’s alarm, Miss Mewlstone became very pale, and then suddenly burst into tears.

“This is too much!” observed Mrs. Cheyne, rising in serious displeasure. She had almost a masculine abhorrence to tears of late years; the very sight of them excited her strangely.

“Miss Challoner may keep her mysteries to herself if she likes, but I insist on knowing what has upset you like this.”

“Oh dear! oh, dear!” sobbed the simple woman, wringing her hands helplessly. “This is just too much for me! Poor soul, how am I to tell her?” And then she looked at Phillis in affright at her own words, which revealed so much and so little.

Mrs. Cheyne turned exceedingly pale, and a shadow passed over her face.

“‘Poor soul!’ does she mean me? Is it of me you are speaking, Barby? Is there something for me to know, that you dread to tell me? Poor soul, indeed!” And then her features contracted and grew pinched. “But you need not be afraid. Is it not the Psalmist who says, ‘All thy waves and thy billows have gone over me’? Drowned people have nothing to fear: there is no fresh trouble for them.” And her eyes took an awful stony look that terrified Phillis.

“Oh, it is no fresh trouble!” stammered the girl. “People are not tormented like that: they have not to suffer more than they can bear.”

But Mrs. Cheyne turned upon her fiercely:

“You are wrong, altogether wrong. I could not bear it, and it drove me mad,—at least as nearly mad as a sane woman could be. I felt my reason shaken; my brain was all aflame, and I cried out to heaven for mercy; and a blank answered me. Barby, if there be fresh trouble, tell me instantly, and at once. What do I care? What is left to me, but a body that will not die, and a brain that will not cease to think? If I could only stop the thoughts! if I could only go down into silence and nothingness! but then I should not find Herbert and the children. Where are they? I forget!” She stopped, pressed her hands to her brow with a strange bewildered expression; but Miss Mewlstone crept up to her, and touched her timidly.

“My bonnie Magdalene!” she exclaimed; “don’t let the ill thoughts come; drive them away, my poor dear. Look at me. Did old Barby ever deceive you? There is no fresh trouble, my pretty. In his own good time the All-Merciful has had mercy!”

Mrs. Cheyne’s hand dropped down to her sides, but her brilliant eyes showed no comprehension of her words.

“Why did you frighten me like that?” she repeated, rocking herself to and fro; and her voice had a high, strained tone in it. “There is no trouble, but your face is pale, and there are tears in your eyes; and look how your hand shakes! Miss Challoner—Phillis, what does she mean? Barby, you are a foolish old woman; your wits are gone.”

“If they are gone, it is with joy!” she sobbed. “Yes, my precious one! for sheer joy!” but then she broke down utterly. It was Phillis who came to the rescue.

“Dear Mrs. Cheyne, I think I could tell you best,” she began, in her sweet sensible voice, which somehow stilled Mrs. Cheyne’s frightful agitation. “There has been some news,—a letter that has been lost, which ought to have arrived months ago. We have heard about it this afternoon.” She stopped, for there seemed to be a faint sound of footsteps in the hall below. Could he have followed them? What would be the result of such imprudence? But, as she faltered and hesitated, Mrs. Cheyne gripped her arm with an iron force:

“A letter from Herbert! Did he write to me? oh, my darling! did he write to me before he died? Only one word—one word of forgiveness, and I will say heaven indeed is merciful! Give it to me, Barby! Why do you keep me waiting? Oh, this is blessed, blessed news!” But Miss Mewlstone only clasped her gently in her arms.

“One moment, my dearie! There is more than that. It is not a message from heaven. There is still one living on earth that loves you! Try and follow my meaning,” for the perplexed stare had returned again. “Say to yourself, ‘Perhaps, after all, Herbert is not dead. Nobody saw him die. He may be alive; he may have written to me––” She stopped, for Mrs. Cheyne had suddenly flung up her arms over her head with a hoarse cry, that rang through the house:

“Herbert! Herbert! Herbert!”

“I am here,—Magdalene! Magdalene!” A tall figure that had crept unperceived through the open hall door, and had lurked unseen in the shadow of the portiere, suddenly dashed into the room, and took his wife’s rigid form into his arms. “Magdalene!—love—wife! It is Herbert! Look up, my darling!—I am here! I am holding you!” But there was no response. Magdalene’s face was like the face of the dead.

They took her from him almost by force, for he refused to give her up. Over and over again they prayed him to leave her to their care, but he seemed like a deaf man that did not hear.

“She is dead! I have killed her; but there is no reason why I should give her up,” he had said, with terrible calm in his voice.

“She is not dead!” returned Miss Mewlstone, almost angrily. “She has been like this before; but Jeffreys and I know what to do. Ay, you were always wilful, Herbert; but when it comes to killing your own wife––” And after this he consented to lay her down on her couch.

He watched them with wistful eyes as they tried the usual remedies; but it was long before even the flicker of an eyelid spoke to them of life. At the first sign of returning animation Herbert crept just behind his wife’s pillow, where he could see the first unclosing of the drooping lids. When Magdalene opened her eyes at last, they fell full on her husband’s face.

Phillis, who was beside her, marvelled at the strange beauty of that rapt look, as she lay and gazed at him.

“Herbert’s face!” they heard her whisper, in an awe-struck voice. “Then I have died at last, and am in heaven. Oh, how merciful! but I have not deserved it,—a sinner such as I.”

“Magdalene, my darling, you are in our own home! It is I who was lost, and have come back to you. Look at me. It is only the children that are in heaven. You and I are spared to each other on earth.” But for a long time her scattered faculties failed to grasp the truth.

Phillis went home at last, and left them. There was nothing she could do, and she was utterly spent; but Miss Mewlstone kept watch beside her charge until late into the night.

Little by little the truth dawned slowly on the numbed brain; slowly and by degrees the meaning of her husband’s tears and kisses sank into the clouded mind. Now and again she wandered, but Herbert’s voice always recalled her.

“Then I am not dead?” she asked him, again and again. “They do not cry in heaven, and Barby was crying just now. Barby, am I dreaming! Who is this beside me? is it Herbert’s ghost? only his hands are warm, and mine are so terribly cold. Why you are crying too, love; but I am to tired to understand.” And then she crept wearily closer and closer into his arms, like a tired-out child who has reached home.

And when Herbert stooped over her gently, he saw that the long lashes lay on her cheek. Magdalene had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MOTES IN THE SUNSHINE.

That sleep was, humanly speaking, Magdalene's salvation.

At the greatest crisis of her life, when reason hung in the balance,—when the sudden influx of joy might have paralyzed the overwrought heart and brain,—at that moment physical exhaustion saved her by that merciful, overpowering sleep.

When she woke, it was to the resurrection of her life and love. Months afterwards she spoke of that waking to Phillis, when she lay in her bed weak as a new born babe, and the early morning light streamed full on the face of her slumbering husband.

They were alone; for Miss Mewlstone had just crept softly from the room. Her movement had roused Magdalene. Herbert, who was utterly worn out by his long watching, had just dropped asleep, with his head resting against the wood-work. He was still sitting in the arm-chair beside her, and only the thin profile was visible.

The previous night had been passed by Magdalene in a semi-conscious state: delirious imaginations had blended with realities. There were flashes and intervals of comparative consciousness, when the truth rushed into her mind; but she had been too weak to retain it long. That she was dreaming or dead was her fixed idea: that this was her husband's greeting to her in paradise seemed to be her one thought. "Strange that the children do not kiss me too," they heard her say once.

But now, as she opened her eyes, there was no blue misty haze through which she ever feebly sought to pierce. She was lying in her own room, where she had passed so many despairing days and nights. The window was open; the sweet crisp morning air fanned her temples; the birds were singing in the garden below; and there beside her was the face so like, yet so unlike, the face from which she had parted four years ago.

For a little while she lay and watched it in a sort of trance; and then in the stillness full realization came to her, and she knew that she was not mad or dreaming. This was no imagination: it was reality.

With incredible effort, for she felt strangely weak, she raised herself on her elbow to study that dear face more closely, for the change in it baffled her. Could this be her Herbert? How bronzed and thin he had grown! Those lines that furrowed his forehead, those hollows in the temples and under the eyes, were new to her. And, oh, the pity of those gray hairs in the place of the brown wavy locks she remembered! But it was when she laid her lips against the scarred wrist that Herbert woke, and met the full look of recognition in his wife's eyes, for which he had waited so long.

Now he could fall upon his knees beside her, and crave that forgiveness for words and acts that had seared his conscience all these years like red-hot iron. But at the first word she stopped him, and drew his head to her breast:

"Oh, Herbert, hush! What! ask forgiveness of me, when I have sinned against you doubly,—trebly,—when I was no true wife, as you know? Oh, do not let us ask it of each other, but of God, whom we have so deeply offended! He has punished us; but He has been merciful too. He has taken our children because we did not deserve them. Oh, Herbert! what will you do without them?—for you loved Janie so!" And then for a little while the childless parents could only hold each other's hands and weep, for to Herbert Cheyne the grief was new, and at the sight of her husband's sorrow Magdalene's old wounds seemed to open and bleed afresh; only now—now she did not weep alone.

When Miss Mewlstone entered the room, shortly afterwards, she found Magdalene lying spent and weary, holding her husband's hand.

Joy had indeed returned to the White House, but for a long time it was joy that was strangely tempered with sorrow. Upstairs no sound greeted Herbert from the empty nurseries; there were no little feet pattering to meet the returned wanderer, no little voices to cry a joyous "Father!" And for years the desolate mother had borne this sorrow alone.

As the days passed on, Magdalene regained her strength slowly, but neither wife nor husband could hide from each other the fact that their health was broken by all they had gone through. Herbert's constitution was sadly impaired for the remainder of his life: he knew well that he must carry with him the consequences of those years of suffering. Often he had to endure intense neuralgic agony in his limbs and head; an unhealed wound for a long time troubled him sorely. Magdalene strove hard to regain strength, that she might devote herself to nurse him, but, though her constitution was superb, she had much to bear from her disordered nerves. At times the old irritability was hard to vanquish; there were still dark moods of restlessness when her companionship was trying; but it was now that Herbert proved the nobleness and reality of his repentance.

For he was ever gentle with her, however much she might try him. Some talk he had had with her doctor had convinced him that she was not to blame for these morbid moods; that the nerves had become disorganized by those years of solitary misery. "We must bear all our

troubles together," as he often told her; and so he bore this, as he did the trial of his children's loss, with grave fortitude, and a patience that surprised all who knew him.

And he was not without his reward, for, the dark fit over, Magdalene's smile would greet him like sunshine after a storm, and she would thank him with tears and caresses for his forbearance.

"I can't think what makes me still so horrid, when I am so happy," she said once to him, when the first year of their reunion had passed. "I do my best to fight against these moods, but they seem stronger than myself and overcome me. Do not be so good to me next time, Herbert; scold me and be angry with me, as you used in the old days."

"I cannot," he answered, smiling. "I never loved you in the old days as I do now. I would not change my wife, in spite of all the trouble she gives me, for any other woman upon earth. You believe this, love, do you not?" looking at her beautiful face anxiously, for it had clouded a little at his last words.

"Yes, but I do not like to trouble you: it is that that frets me. I wanted to be a comfort to you, and never to give you a moment's uneasiness; but I cannot help myself, somehow. I love you, I don't believe you know yet how I love you, Herbert; but it seems as if I must grieve you sometimes."

"Never mind; I will hear your trouble and my own too," he answered, cheerily; and in this way he always comforted her. But to Magdalene her own self ever remained a mystery; the forces of her own nature were too strong for her, and yet she was not a weak woman. She had expected that in her case love and happiness would have worked a miracle, as though miracles were ever effected by mere human agencies,—that she would rise like a Phœnix from the ashes of her past, reborn, rejuvenated, with an inexhaustible fund of moral strength.

Now she had Herbert, all would go smoothly; she would no longer mourn for her little ones. Since her husband was there to comfort her, with his constant presence to sustain her, all must be well; never again would she be nervous, irritable, or sarcastic. Poor Magdalene! she was creating heaven for herself upon earth; she was borrowing angels' plumes before the time; she had forgotten the conditions of humanity, "the body of the flesh," which weighed down greater souls than hers.

There are Gethsemanes of the spirit to the weary ones of earth, hours of conflict that must be lived through and endured. Nature that groaneth and travaileth cannot find its abiding place of rest here. To the end of time it seems to be written in enduring characters that no human lot shall be free from suffering: sooner or later, more or less,—that is all! Magdalene had still to learn this lesson painfully: that she was slow in learning it, proved the strength and obduracy of her will. True, she was rarely sarcastic,—never in her husband's presence, for a word or a look from him checked her, and she grew humble and meek at once. It was her unruly nerves that baffled her; she was shocked to find that irritable words still rose to her lips; that the spirit of restlessness was not quelled forever; that thunder still affrighted her; and that now and then her mind seemed clouded with fancied gloom.

She once spoke of this to Miss Middleton, with tears in her eyes.

"It is so strange," she said. "Herbert is different, but I am still so unchanged."

"The conditions of your health are unchanged, you mean," answered Elizabeth, with that quiet sympathy that always rested people. "This is the mistake that folk make: they do not distinguish between an unhealthy mind and a diseased soul: the one is due to physical disorganization, the other to moral causes. In your case, dear Mrs. Cheyne, one may safely lay the blame on the first cause."

"Oh, do you think so?" she asked, earnestly. "I dare not cheat my conscience in that way: it is my bad temper, my undisciplined nature, that ought to bear the blame."

"No; believe me," answered Elizabeth, for they had grown great friends of late, "I have watched you narrowly, and I know how you try to conquer this irritability; there is no black spot of anger in your heart, whatever words come to your lips. You are like a fretful child sometimes, I grant you that, who is ailing and unconscious of its ailment. When you would be calm, you are strangely disturbed; you speak sharply, hoping to relieve something that oppresses you."

"Oh, yes!" sighed Magdalene; "and yet Herbert never speaks crossly to me."

"He never will, for he knows what you suffer. Well, dear friend, what of this? This is a cross that you must carry perhaps all your life. You are not the only one who has to bear the torment of disordered nerves: it must be borne with resignation, as we bear other troubles. Once you felt you could not love God; you ceased to pray to Him; now you love Him a little. Go on loving; thank him for your husband's patience, and pray that you may have patience with yourself. One is weary of always living with one's self, I know that well," finished Elizabeth, with a charming smile.

Mr. Drummond would have verified Miss Middleton's opinion that Magdalene was not so unchanged as she believed herself to be.

At his first interview with her after Herbert Cheyne's return, he could almost have sworn that she was a different woman.

Phillis, who spent all her spare time at the White House,—for they both made much of Herbert's "good angel," as he still called her jestingly,—was sitting alone with Mrs. Cheyne when Archie

was announced.

His old enemy greeted him with a frank smile.

“This is kind of you, Mr. Drummond,” she said, quite warmly. “How I wish my husband were not out, that I could introduce him to you! I have told him how good you have tried to be to me, but that I was ungrateful and repulsed you.”

Archie was shaking hands with Phillis, who seemed a little disturbed at his entrance. He turned around and regarded the beautiful woman with astonishment. Was this really Mrs. Cheyne? Where was the hard, proud droop of the lip, the glance of mingled coldness and *hauteur*, the polished sarcasm of voice and manner? Her face looked clear and open as a child’s; her eyes were brilliant with happiness.

Magdalene was in one of her brightest moods when she was most truly herself.

“I have met him just now. He stopped and introduced himself. We had quite a long talk outside of Mrs. Williams’s cottage. I called upon him there, you know, but he had good reasons for refusing my visits. Mrs. Cheyne, you must allow me to congratulate you most earnestly. You will own now that Providence has been good to you.”

“I will own that and everything,” returned Magdalene, joyously. “I will own, if you like, that I treated you shamefully, and took a pleasure in tormenting you; and you were so patient,—oh, so patient, Mr. Drummond! I could have called you back sometimes and apologized, but I would not. In my bitter moments I felt it was such a relief to mock at people.”

“Never mind all that. Let bygones be bygones. I wish I could have served you better.” And then, as he changed the subject, and spoke feelingly about the miracle of her husband’s restoration, Mrs. Cheyne looked at him rather wistfully.

“Oh, how good you are!” she said, softly. “Do you know, the world seems full of good people to me now; and yet once it appeared too bad a place for any one to live in. We create our own atmosphere,—at least so Herbert tells me. But you are looking thin, Mr. Drummond,—thin and pale. You must be working too hard.”

“Oh, as to that, hard work never hurts any one,” he replied, carelessly; but there was something forced in his tone.

Phillis, who had been sitting apart quite silently, raised her eyes involuntarily from her work. Was it her fancy, or had some undefinable change passed over him? They had seen him so little of late. Since all this had happened at the White House he had called once or twice; and once Nan had been there, and he had spoken to her much as usual. No one would have detected any difference in his manner, except that he was a little grave and preoccupied. Nan had not noticed anything; but then she was singularly blind in such matters. Had she not vaguely hinted that his visits were on Phillis’s account?—that mere hint conveying exquisite pain to Phillis.

Now, as she stole a glance at him, the conviction was strong within her that the arrow had gone deep. He certainly looked a little thin and care-worn, and something of a young man’s vigor and hopefulness seemed temporarily impaired. But, as it happened, that girlish scrutiny was not unperceived by Archie. In a moment he was on the alert. His eyes challenged hers boldly, and it was Phillis who flushed and looked conscious.

It was as though he said to her, “Ah! you think you know all about it. But you need not trouble yourself to be sorry for me; you do not know what a man’s strength can do. And I am determined to bear this by myself, and to myself; for in silence there is power.”

It certainly seemed as though a new strength had come to Archie. He had been a man who was prone to speak much of his feelings. Irritable and sensitive, he had demanded much sympathy from his womankind. His was a nature that craved support in his work; but now, not even to Grace, could he speak of this trouble that had befallen him.

Was it a trouble, after all, this vague shadow that lay about his path? No one but he himself knew the sweetness and graciousness of the dream that had come to him. It had only been a dream, after all; and now he was awake. The vision he had conjured up to himself had faded into unreality. She was not his second self: never by look or word had he wooed her; she was only the woman he could have loved. This was how he put it; and now he would bury this faint hope that was still-born,—that had never had breathed into it the breath of life. And if for a little while his future should be cloudy and bereft of its sunshine, was he the only one to whom “some days must be dark and dreary”?

Phillis’s unspoken sympathy drooped under this stern repression; and yet in her heart she reverenced him all the more for this moral strength,—for there is nothing a true woman abhors more than weakness in a man. After this silent rebuff, Archie took himself well in hand, and began to speak of other things: he told Mrs. Cheyne, being certain now of her interest, of his sister’s intended marriage, and how he and Mattie were going down to the wedding.

“He is a very good fellow, this intended brother-in-law of mine,—a sort of rough diamond; but hardly good enough for Isabel,” he said. “Oh, yes, he is very rich. My poor little sister will have her head turned by all her magnificence; for his parents are so generous: they quite load her with gifts.” And he smiled to himself at the notion of the little sister, just fresh from her narrow school-room life, rejoicing over her trousseau and her handsome house, and driving away from the church in her own carriage. No wonder his father and mother were pleased. As for the bridegroom-elect, Archie spoke of him with half-contemptuous amusement: “Oh, he was a good fellow,—no one wished to deny that;” but there was a want of culture and polish that grated

upon the susceptibilities of the Oxford fellow.

Phillis listened with undivided interest—especially when he mentioned Grace.

“Mattie and I are in hopes that we shall bring her back with us; but, at all events, my mother has promised to spare her at Christmas.” This time he addressed himself to Phillis.

“Oh, that will be nice for you!” she returned a little eagerly. “You have told us so much about her that I quite long to know her.”

“I should say you would suit each other perfectly,” he replied, as he rose to take his leave. “Sometimes you remind me of her, Miss Challoner; and yet you are not really alike. Good-bye, if I do not see you again before we go to Leeds.” And Phillis gave him her hand, and a cordial smile.

But when he had gone out of the room, his hostess accompanying him—for she had a word for his private ear,—Phillis sat down, and thought over those last words with a strange feeling of pleasure: “Sometimes you remind me of her, Miss Challoner.” Was it possible that he could trace any resemblance between her and this dearly-beloved sister, this Grace, whom he seemed to regard as absolute perfection?

“Oh, I hope she will come! I am sure we shall be such friends,” she said to herself: and from this time Phillis looked anxiously for Grace Drummond’s arrival.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

“A MAN HAS A RIGHT TO HIS OWN THOUGHTS.”

There were great rejoicings in the house in Lowder Street on the occasion of Isabel Drummond’s marriage.

There is always something pathetic in the first wedding in a family,—the first severing of the family circle,—the first break, the first ingathering of new interest. But when there are small means, and seven portionless daughters, very few of whom can be said to be gifted with good looks, a wealthy son-in-law must indeed be regarded as a direct blessing from Providence.

That Mr. Drummond did so regard it, was evident from the jovial good humor that had replaced his usual moody and irritable manner; while his wife’s beaming face, softened by maternal tenderness for the child who would no longer share the daily life with them, was a surprising spectacle to those acquainted with Mrs. Drummond’s ordinary reserve and somewhat severe bearing. But it is not too much to say that on this occasion Mrs. Drummond was a happy woman.

The tide of fortune, long so adverse to their interests, seemed turning in their favor at last. Archie had done great things for himself, and the mother’s eyes rested on him proudly as he performed the marriage ceremony for his young sister, the gravity of his priestly office setting him apart, as it were, for her reverence as well as love. That Isabel had done great things for herself also could not be denied. But there were other causes for content in the mother’s heart.

Both the boys were doing well. Clyde had been articled to a lawyer, an old friend of Mr. Drummond’s, and had won golden opinions from his chief, who pronounced him an intelligent, likely lad, and as sharp as a needle. Fred had lately obtained a clerkship in an old-established house in Leeds, and was also doing well, and his salary was a great boon to the straitened household. Grace, too, was doing her duty vigorously, and no longer vexed her mother’s soul by her drooping looks of uncomplaining discontent,—that silent protest of many, that is so irritating to the home-rule. True, it might be only the quiescence of despair, but at least she veiled it decently under a show of Spartan cheerfulness. The fox of bitterness might gnaw, but she drew the mantle of her pride closer round her. She might suffer and pine, like a caged lark in her narrow cage, but at least no one, not even Archie, and least of all her mother, should guess the extent of her sufferings. So there was peace in Lowder Street. A truce had silently proclaimed itself between the two strong wills of the household; and, touched by a submission that somehow appealed to her generosity, Mrs. Drummond was secretly revolving schemes for her daughter’s future happiness.

“Mothers are mothers,” as Nan had once sweetly said, and Mrs. Drummond was no exception to the rule. She could be hard to her own flesh and blood; she could exact obedience that was difficult to yield, and sacrifices that cost tears in plenty; but she was a just woman, and, when the right time came, she knew how to reward such obedience.

But there was still another drop that filled the maternal cup of content almost to overflowing, and of this she spoke to Grace, as they were together in the mother’s room, folding up the bridal finery. The little bride had just driven off, all tears and smiles. Archie and the boys had started off for a long walk. Mattie was with her sisters in the small ugly enclosure they called a garden; and Grace and her mother had gone up to shake out the satin dress and lay it between tissue-paper.

“I hope she will be happy, poor little dear!” observed Grace, touching tenderly the Brussels-lace veil; for Isabel had been her first pupil and charge. “I do think and believe Ellis is really very fond of her.”

“Without doubt he is. His manners were all your father and I could wish. What a magnificent present, and how thoughtful, his bringing those diamond ear-drops just the last moment! Isabel has such pretty little ears. He is as proud of her as he can be. And really she looked quite lovely. Take care how you fold that veil, Grace. It is a perfect beauty.”

“Yes, mother,” returned Grace, meekly.

She was ready to drop with fatigue, for she had been up since six, and had dressed all her sisters one after another in their pretty bridesmaids’ dresses, Mattie’s skill as a lady’s-maid being distrusted even by Dottie. But Mrs. Drummond was not satisfied, and took the lace out of her hand.

“And, Grace, did you ever see any one so improved as Mattie? Her visit to Hadleigh is doing wonders for her. Last evening I could hardly help looking at her. She holds herself so much better, and her dresses are so pretty and well made. I never knew before that her figure was so nice.”

“Yes, indeed; she is wonderfully improved,” returned Grace.

But she said the words mechanically. Her mother’s speech had touched a sore place in her memory. She knew who had transformed Mattie’s dowdiness into comeliness and neatness. She might be an ordinary little woman in the world’s opinion, but in the eyes of her family she was quite another Mattie. Those tasteful dresses had been made by those Challoners of whom Mattie spoke so much and Archie so little.

Mrs. Drummond, who had not noticed her daughter’s sudden abstraction, went on in the same satisfied tone:

“She is not pretty, of course,—no one could ever call Mattie that at the best of times,—but now she has left off making a fright of herself, and hunching her shoulders with every word, she is quite passable-looking. I am glad you talked her out of being a bridesmaid. She would have looked absurd among the girls. But that green surah just suited her. It was good of Archie to buy her such a pretty dress; and yours that came from Hadleigh was even prettier, and wonderfully well made, considering they had only a pattern gown.”

“Yes; it fitted admirably;” but Grace spoke without enthusiasm.

Archie, who knew her tastes, had chosen a soft, creamy stuff which he informed Mattie must be trimmed with no end of lace. Phillis had received and executed the order with such skill and discernment that a most ravishing costume had been produced. But Grace, who had her own ideas on the subject of those “Challoner girls,” had received the gift somewhat coldly, and had even seemed displeased when her father pinched her ear and told her that Archie’s gown had transformed her into a princess fit for a fairy-tale. “And there is always a prince in that, my dear,—eh, Gracie?” continued the lucky father, who could afford to laugh when one of the seven daughters had got a husband. But Grace would have nothing to do with the jest. She even got up a little frown, like her mother’s on similar occasions.

“Archie is so generous, dear old fellow!” continued Mrs. Drummond, breaking out afresh after a minute’s interval, as she skilfully manipulated the veil. “That is what I always say. There never was such a son or brother. Do you think he is overworking, Grace, or that Mattie really looks after him well? But he strikes me as a little thin,—and—yes—perhaps a little grave.”

Grace’s lips closed with an expression of pain. But her mother was looking at her and she must answer.

“Well, if you ask me, mother,” she returned, a little huskily, “I do not think Archie looks very well, or in his usual spirits; but I am sure Mattie takes good care of him,” she continued, with careful veracity.

“Humph! I am sorry to find you endorsing my opinion,” replied Mrs. Drummond, thoughtfully. “I hoped you would say it was my fancy. He has not said anything to you that makes you uneasy?” with a touch of her old sharpness, remembering that Grace, and not she, was Archie’s confidante; but Grace replied so quickly and decidedly, “Oh, no, mother; we have not exchanged a word together since he and Mattie arrived,” that her maternal jealousy was allayed.

But the next night, when she was alone with him for a few minutes, she was struck afresh by the gravity of his look as he sat by the window, pretending to read, but for the last half-hour he had not turned his page.

“A penny for your thoughts, my son!” she said, so archly and abruptly that Archie started, and his brow grew crimson at finding himself watched.

“Oh, they were nothing particular,” he stammered; and then he said something about the fineness of the evening, and the possibility of his father coming in in time for a long walk.

But Mrs. Drummond was not to be put off so easily. She left her seat, where she had been sewing as usual, and came and stood beside him a moment. He would have jumped up and given her his own chair, but she pressed his shoulder gently, as though to forbid the movement.

“I like to stand, Archie. Yes, it is a lovely evening; but I think you ought to ask Grace, and not your father, to accompany you. Grace was always your companion, you know, and you must not drop old habits too suddenly.” Then Archie saw that his avoidance of Grace had been marked.

“Very well, I will ask her,” he returned; but he showed none of his old alacrity and spirit in claiming his favorite.

Mrs. Drummond noticed this; and the shade of anxiety on her face grew deeper.

“Archie, you are not quite your old self with Grace; and I am sure she feels it. What has come between you, my dear?”

“Why, nothing, mother;” and here he attempted a laugh. “Grace and I never quarrel, as you know.”

“I was not speaking of quarrelling,” she returned, in a graver voice; “but you do not seek her out as you used. Before, when you arrived, you always disappointed me by shutting yourself up in the school-room, where no one could get at you; and now Grace tells me she has not had a word with you these four days.”

“Has Grace complained of me, then?”

“You know Grace never complains of you. It was not said in any fault-finding way. We agreed you were not quite yourself, or in your usual spirits; and I asked her the reason. Tell me, my son, is there anything troubling you?” Archie sat silent. Mrs. Drummond was so rarely demonstrative to her children that even this well-beloved son had never heard before such chords of tenderness in his mother’s voice; and, looking up, he saw that her keen gray eyes were softened and moist with tears. “You are not quite yourself, Archie,—not quite happy?” she went on.

Then he took counsel with himself; and after a moment he answered her:

“No, mother; you are right. I am not—not quite myself nor quite happy; but I mean to be both presently.” And then he looked up in her face pleadingly, with an expression of entreaty that went to her heart, and continued: “But my own mother will not pain me by unnecessary questions that I could not answer.” And then she knew that his will was that she should be silent.

“Very well,” she returned, with a sigh. “But you will tell me one thing, will you not, my dear! Is it —is it quite hopeless?” her mother’s instinct, like that of the Eastern Caliph, immediately suggesting a woman in the case.

“Quite—quite hopeless!—as dead as this!” bringing down his hand on a large defunct moth. “Talking will not bring to life, or help a man, to carry a real burden.”

Then, as she kissed him, she knew that his pain had been very great, but that he meant to bear it with all the strength he could bring.

Grace went up to prepare for her walk that evening with no very pleasurable anticipations. Her mother had given her Archie’s message in due form, as she sat somewhat sadly by the school-room window, mending a frock Dottie had just torn.

“Archie wants you to go out with him, Grace,” Mrs. Drummond said, as she came in, in her usual active bustling way. “The grass never grew under her feet,” as she was often pleased to observe. “Loitering and lagging make young bones grow prematurely old,” she would say, coining a new proverb for the benefit of lazy Susie. “Never measure your footsteps when you are about other people’s business,” she would say to Laura, who hated to be hunted up from her employment for any errand. “He thinks of going over to Blackthorn Farm, as it is so fine; and the walk will do you good,” continued Mrs. Drummond, with a keen look at her daughter’s pale face. “Give me Dottie’s frock: that little monkey is always getting into mischief.” But Grace yielded her task reluctantly.

“Are you sure he wishes me to go, mother?”

“Quite sure,” was the brief answer; but she added no more.

Silence was ever golden to this busy, hard-working mother. She was generally sparing of words. Grace, who saw that her mother was bent on her going, made no further demur; but, as she put on her walking-things, she told herself that Archie was only making a virtue of necessity. He was so little eager for her society that he had not sought her himself, but had sent her a message. Ever since his return, no light-springing footsteps had been heard on the uncarpeted stairs leading to the school-room. He had forsaken their old haunt, where they had once talked so happily, sitting hand in hand on the old window-seat.

Grace felt herself grievously wounded. For months a barrier had been between her and Archie. He had written seldom; and his letters, when they came, told her nothing. In manner he was kindness itself. That there was no change in his affection was evident; but the key to his confidence was mislaid. He had withdrawn himself into some inner citadel, where he seemed all at once inaccessible, and her sisterly soul was vexed within her.

He met her at the door with his usual smile of welcome.

“That is right, Grace; you have not kept me long waiting,” he said, pleasantly, as she came towards him; and then, as they walked down Lowder Street, he commenced talking at once. He had so much to tell her, he said; and here Grace’s pulses began to throb expectantly; but the eager light died out of her face when he went on to detail a long conversation he had had with his mother the previous night. Was that all? she thought. Was the longed-for confidence still to be withheld?

Archie did not seem to notice her silence: he rattled on volubly.

“I think we were hard on the mother, Gracie, you and I,” he said. “After all, I believe she was

right in not giving us our own way in the spring."

"I am glad you think so," replied Grace, coldly. Archie winced at her tone, but recovered himself, and went on gayly:

"It does one good sometimes to have one's wishes crossed; and, after all, it was only fair that poor Mattie, being the eldest, should have her turn. She does her best, poor little soul! and, though I find her terribly trying sometimes, I can hold out pretty patiently until Christmas; and then mother herself suggested that you should take her place at the vicarage."

"I! oh, no, Archie!" And here the color flushed over Gracie's face, and her eyes filled with tears. The news was so unexpected,—so overwhelming. Another time the sweetness of it would have filled her with rapture. But now! "Oh, no, no!" she cried, in so vehement a tone that her brother turned in surprise, and something of her meaning came home to him.

"Wait a moment," he said, deprecatingly. "I have not finished yet what I want to say. Mother said Mattie was greatly improved by her visit, and that she was infinitely obliged to me for yielding to her wish. She told me plainly that it was impossible to have spared you before,—that you were her right hand with the girls, and that even now your loss would be great."

"I do not mean to leave mother," returned Grace, in a choked voice.

"Not if I want you and ask you to come?" he replied, with reproachful tenderness, "Why, Grace, what has become of our old compact?"

"You do not need me now," she faltered, hardly able to speak without weeping.

"We will talk of that by and by," was the somewhat impatient answer. "Just at this minute I want to tell you all the mother said on the subject. Facts before feelings, please," with a touch of sarcasm; but he pointed it with a smile. "You see, Grace, Isabel's marriage makes a difference. There is one girl off my father's hands. And then the boys are doing so well. Mother thinks that in another three months Clara may leave the school-room; she will be seventeen then, and, as Ellis has promised her a course of music-lessons, to develop her one talent, you may consider her off your hands."

"Clara will never do me credit," returned his sister, mournfully: "she works steadily and takes pains, but she was never as clever as Isabel."

"No; she is no shining light, as mother owns; but she will play beautifully, if she be properly trained. Well, as to the other girls, it appears that my father has decided to accept my offer of sending Susie to a first-class boarding-school; and, as he has determined to do the same for Laura, there is only Dottie for Mattie to manage or mismanage. So you see, Gracie, your school-room drudgery is over. Mother herself, by her own will, has opened the prison-doors."

He spoke in a light jesting tone, but Grace answered, almost passionately,—

"I tell you no, Archie! I no longer wish it so; it is too late: things are now quite different."

"What do you mean?" he returned, with a long steady look that seemed to draw out her words in spite of her resolve not to speak them.

"I mean that things are changed—that you no longer need me, or wish me to live with you."

"I need you more," he returned, calmly; "perhaps I have never needed you so much. As for living with me, is it your desire to condemn me to an existence of perfect loneliness?—for after Christmas Mattie leaves me. You are mysterious, Grace; you are not your old self."

"Oh, it is you that are not yourself!" she retorted, in a tone of grief. "Why have you avoided me? why do you withhold your confidence? why do your letters tell me nothing? and then you come and are still silent."

"What is it that you would have me tell you?" he asked; but this time he did not look her in the face.

"I would know this thing that has come between us and robbed me of your confidence. You are ill at ease; you are unhappy, Archie! You have never kept a trouble from me before: it was always I who shared your hopes and fears."

"You may still share them. I am not changed, as you imagine Grace. All that I can tell you I will, even if you demand it in that 'money-or-your-life' style, as you are doing now," trying to turn it off with a jest.

"Oh, Archie!"

"Well, what of Archie, now?"

"That you should laugh away my words! you have never done that before."

"Very well, I will be serious; nay, more, I will be solemn. Grace, I forbid you ever to mention this thing again, on pain of my bitter displeasure!"

Then, as she looked at him, too much startled to answer, he went on:

"A man has a right to his own thoughts, if he choose to keep them to himself and his Maker. There are some things with which even you may not meddle, Grace. What if my life holds a grief which I would bury from all eyes but my own? would you tear up the clods with unhallowed fingers? To no living person but my Saviour"—and here Archie looked up with reverent eyes —"will I speak of this thing." Then she clung to his arm, and tears flowed over her cheeks.

"Oh, Archie! forgive me! forgive me! I never meant to hurt you like this; I will not say another

word!”

“You have not hurt me,” he returned, striving after his old manner, “except in refusing to live with me. I am lonely enough, God knows! and a sister who understands me, and with whom I could have sympathy, would be a great boon.”

“Then I will come,” she replied; drying her eyes. “If you want me, I will come, Archie.”

“I do want you; and I have never told you anything but the truth. But you must come and be happy, my dear. I want you, yourself, and not a grave, reticent creature who has gone about the house the last few days, looking at me askance, as though I had committed some deadly sin.”

Then the dimple showed itself in Grace’s cheek.

“Have I really been so naughty, Archie?”

“Yes, you have been a very shadowy sort of Grace; but I give you full absolution, only don’t go and do it any more.” And, as she looked at him with her eyes full of sorrowful yearning, he went on, hastily: “Oh, I am all right, and least said is soonest mended. I am like the dog in Æsop’s fable, who mistook the shadow for the substance. A poor sort of dog, that fellow. Well, is your poor little mind at rest, Grace?” And the tone in which she said “Yes” seemed to satisfy him, for he turned their talk into another channel.

When Mrs. Drummond saw her daughter’s face that evening, she knew the cloud had passed between the brother and sister.

Grace followed her to her room that night,—a thing she had not done for months.

“Mother, I must thank you for being so good to us,” she began, impulsively, as soon as she had crossed the threshold.

“How have I been good to you, Grace?” observed her mother, calmly, as she unfastened her brooch. “Of course, I have always tried to be good to my children, although they do not seem to think so.”

“Ah, but this is very special goodness: and I am more grateful than I can say. Are you sure you will be able to spare me, mother?”

“After Christmas?—oh, yes: things will be possible then. If I remember rightly, I had to endure some very bitter words from you on this very subject. I hope you will do justice to my judgment at that time.”

“Yes, mother,” with downcast eyes. “I am afraid Archie and I were very wilful.”

“You were wilful, Grace,”—for Mrs. Drummond never suffered any one to find fault with her son in her hearing,—“you who ought to have known better. And yet I do believe that, but for my determination to enforce the right thing, you would have left your post, and all your duties, because Archie wanted you.”

“I was wrong. I see that plainly.”

“Yes, you were wrong: for a long time you bore yourself towards me as no daughter ought to bear herself to her mother. You angered me sorely, Grace, because I saw you were hardening yourself against me, only because I insisted that no child of mine should neglect her duty.”

“Mother, surely I am humbling myself now?”

“True; but how long have I waited for this confession? Night after night I have said to myself, ‘Surely Grace will come and tell me that she feels herself in the wrong!’ But no such words came. At last I ceased to hope for them; and now at this eleventh hour you can hardly expect me to show much joy at hearing them spoken.”

Then Grace’s head drooped, and she was silent. She knew she deserved all these hard words, bitter as they were to bear; but Mrs. Drummond had said her say.

“Well, well, better late than never; and we will say no more about it. Next time you will understand me better, Grace.”

Then, as her mother kissed her, Grace knew that her sin was condoned. Nevertheless, as she left the room a few minutes later, her heart was not quite so light in her bosom; she felt that her mother had been just, but hardly generous.

“I thought mothers forgave more easily,” she said to herself, in somewhat aggrieved fashion. She had no idea that her mother was equally disappointed.

Mrs. Drummond was a hard, but not an unloving woman; and she would have liked more demonstration from her daughters. If Grace, for example, instead of all these words, had thrown herself into her arms and owned herself in the wrong, with a child-like pleading for forgiveness, Mrs. Drummond would have felt herself satisfied, and would have pressed her to her bosom with a loving word or two that Grace would have remembered when her mother was in her grave. But such outward forms of tenderness were not possible to Mrs. Drummond’s daughters: for in such matters we must reap as we sow; and Mrs. Drummond’s manner hardly merited softness. For there are mothers and mothers; and the world must produce its Drummonds and its Challoners until the end of time.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ABOUT NOTHING PARTICULAR.

It was as well that Grace had had this talk with her brother; for, during the two days that remained of his brief visit, they were not alone together until the last half-hour before his departure. The young vicar had to return for his Sunday duties; but Mattie remained behind for another week. Archie, indeed, had once sought her in his old fashion,—running up to the school-room for a chat; but Susie had been there all the time. In former days, Archie would have sent her away with blunt peremptoriness; but now he seemed well content to have her there. He had no secrets to discuss, as he sat in his old place in the window-seat; yet Grace was too happy to see him there to find fault with his discourse.

But on the morning of his departure she had come down early to pour out his coffee. He had bidden his mother good-bye in her room; but he knew that, in spite of the earliness of the hour, Grace would be in her place to minister to his wants.

“Well, Grace,” he said, entering with his travelling-plaid over his arm, “so it is to be good-bye until Christmas.”

“Yes,” she returned, looking at him with a sort of wistfulness; “but the time will pass quickly now. It is so nice to think that we shall begin our new year together.” And, as her brother checked an involuntary sigh, she went on eagerly: “If you knew how happy I am about it! It will be something to wake every morning and know you are not a hundred miles off,—that when I come down to breakfast I shall find you there,—that I shall be able to talk to you as much as I like; and as for work, why, it will be play to me to work for you, Archie!”

“Of course I know that,” rather mischievously.

“I would work for you like a servant: would I not, dear? I mean to be ever so good to you. Your friends shall be my friends; your likes and dislikes shall be mine too.”

“Why, Gracie,” he said, humoring her, “this is more than a wife would do for me!”

“Ah! but it is not too much to ask from a sister,” she returned, earnestly. “When you bring home your wife, Archie, I mean to be good to her too. I shall have to leave you then, and come back here; but if you are happy I shall not be miserable.” But he interrupted her a little impatiently.

“What put such nonsense into your head? I shall never marry. We shall be a pattern of old-bachelor brother and maiden sister.” And then he pushed away his plate, and went to the window. “Is it not Mrs. Carlyle who quotes that quaint old story about some one who always thanked God ‘for the blessings that passed over his or her head’? Is not that a curious idea, when one comes to think it out? Fancy thanking heaven really and seriously for all our disappointed hopes and plans,—for ‘the blessings that go over our heads’! It would be a new clause in our petitions,—eh, Gracie?”

“Why, yes,” she replied, as she came and stood near him. “I am afraid I could never say that from my heart.”

“It is not easy,” he returned, quietly; “but I do not know that we ought to give up trying, for all that.” And then his manner changed, and he put his arm round her in his old fashion. “Recollect, I want you very much, Grace: your coming will make me far happier. Mattie only touches the outside of things; I want some one near me who can go deeper than that,—who will help me with real work, and put up with my bad humors; for I am a man who is very liable to discouragement.” And when he had said this, he bade her good-bye.

It was a comfort to Archie to find himself hard at work again. These few days of idleness had been irksome to him. Now he could throw himself without stint or limit into his pastoral labors, walking miles of country road until he was weary, and planning new outlets for the feverish activity that seemed to stimulate him to fresh efforts.

People began to talk of the young vicar. His sermons were changed somehow. There was more in them,—“less of the husk, and more of the kernel,” as Miss Middleton once remarked rather pithily.

They were wonderfully brief discourses; but, whereas they had once been elegant and somewhat scholarly productions, they were now earnest and even pungent. If the sentences were less carefully compiled, more rough-hewn, and deficient in polish, there was matter in them that roused people and made them think.

“I never could remember Mr. Drummond’s sermons before,” Dulce once observed, “but now I can recollect whole sentences quite nicely.”

Phillis, to whom she spoke, assented by a nod. If she had chosen, she could have admitted the fact that she could remember not sentences, but the entire sermon itself. In secret she marvelled also at the change.

“He is more earnest,” she would say to herself. “He preaches now, not from the outside, but from the inside of things,—from his own experience, not from other people’s. That makes the difference.”

And to Nan, who was her other conscience, she said one day, when they were discussing this subject,—

“I have been thinking a great deal about sermons lately. I wish I could publish the result of my cogitation. I feel inclined to write a pamphlet and entitle it ‘Hints to the Clergy.’ I think it would take vastly.”

It was Sunday afternoon, and they were sitting together on their favorite boulder. Phillis had christened it her “thinking-stone.”

“I never think to more purpose than when I am sitting here,” she would say.

Nan, who was looking out to sea rather dreamily, intent on her usual vision, Dick, roused herself at this, and began to smile in a lofty way.

“You think yourself very clever, Phillis, and so do I; but sermons are hardly in your province, my dear.”

Phillis shook her head gravely. She dissented from this view of the case.

“Common sense is in every one’s province,” she persisted. “I am a practical woman, and some of my hints would be valuable. Sermons are failures, Nan. They go over people’s heads like a flight of badly-shot arrows. Does not Goulburn say that? Now and then one touches the mark. When they are all let fly hither and thither and anyhow, the preacher shuts up his book, and his hearers cease to yawn.”

“Oh, Phillis, how absurd you are! Suppose Mr. Drummond were to hear you?”

“I should have no objection. But, Nan, seriously, do you not notice how formal and cut-and-dried most sermons are? They come round regularly, like Sunday. People have to bear being preached at, and so the unfortunate parson must hammer it out of his head somehow. He picks out his text, writes out his composition, drags in his learning by the ear, and delivers it in his best fashion; and people listen to it politely, and the best behaved do not yawn.”

“Phillis, you are positively irreverent! I am shocked at you!”

“On the contrary, I am very reverent. Well, in my ‘Hints to the Clergy’ I would say, first, ‘Never preach what you do not feel yourself, or the current of electricity or sympathy, or whatever it is that communicates between preacher and people, will be checked or impeded. Do not preach out of the book: we can read that for ourselves. Preach out of your own head and your own experience, just as much as you can.’ Bless you,” continued Phillis, in a wise, half-sad tone, “half the pulpits would be empty: we should get sometimes no sermons at all!”

This was too much for Nan’s simplicity.

“But people would be so disappointed,” she observed, plaintively. “All the middle-aged people like sermons.”

“It would not hurt them to be disappointed sometimes. They would appreciate the real thing all the more when it came. It is as well to go without food altogether as to be fed on husks. After all, people forget that they come to church to say their prayers all together, and sing glorias.”

“That is very nicely said, dear,” was Nan’s admiring comment on this.

But Phillis waved aside the praise. She was quite in earnest.

“But if I were speaking to one of these real and not make-believe preachers, I would say to him, ‘Never be discouraged. Say what you have got to say: if you really feel it and mean it, some one will feel it too. You can’t see into people’s hearts: and a good thing, too, my friend. But “the arrow at the venture” may tell; some one may be “hit between the joints of the armor.”’ There, come along; you shall have more of my hints another time. I have said my say for the present.” And Phillis rose from the boulder, with her eyes bright and kindled by some moving thought, and went down to the edge of the water, and watched a sea-gull dipping towards the shore in the midst of the windy lights; while Nan, marvelling at her sister’s unusual earnestness, followed more slowly.

The Challoners were holding up their heads in the place now. There was no denying that. By the people at the vicarage and the White House they were owned and regarded as equals. Mrs. Cheyne made no secret of her affection for Phillis; and she was full of kindness also to Nan and Dulce. It was their own fault if they declined her frequent invitations. But there was one person who refused to hold out the hand of amity to the eccentric new-comers.

Colonel Middleton still shook his white head, and delivered his protest into his daughter’s ear. Elizabeth, declared, laughingly, “that the Challoner girls were to her father what a red rag is to a bull.” He never met one of them without coming home and relieving his mind, as he called it. “My father is dying to know them,” she would say to Mr. Drummond. “He has fallen in love with them all,—mother and daughters too; but he is denying himself an introduction for a certain reason.” But, though Archie looked curious and questioned her very closely, she chose to be provoking and say no more. It was Colonel Middleton who at last enlightened the young man.

They were walking from the town together. The colonel was carrying his stick musket-wise over his shoulder, and had the vicar by the arm, when Phillis and Dulce came out of the gateway of the White House. As the girls passed Archie, they smiled at him and nodded, and Phillis, in a pretty way she had, waved her hand; and then they went on rapidly towards the Friary. As they did so, Colonel Middleton groaned, and touched his companion’s arm impressively.

“There, now, Drummond, did you ever see girls with a better carriage?—heads up—light springy

step? Why, it is a pleasure even to an old fellow like myself to watch them. Fancy that taller one on horseback in the Row! Why, she would cut out half the girls. And think that one dare not notice them!" And he struck his stick into the ground almost angrily.

Archie smiled: he could not help it. The colonel was so whimsical in his wrath.

"They had plenty of notice from the folk at the White House," he returned, quietly.

"Ah, Cheyne was always a bit of a Radical, and madam is no better. They can do as they like, without being afraid of consequences. But that is not my case." And, as Archie looked at him rather mystified, he went on: "Bless me, you do not suppose I am afraid of knowing them for my own sake? Elizabeth tells me that she is intimate with them. But that is not my business, so long as she does not have them at Brooklyn. 'We must draw the line there, Elizabeth,' I said. 'If you choose to visit your dressmakers, it is not for me to prevent you; you are old enough to select your own friends, so you may be as eccentric as you like. But your brother is coming home. Young men are young men; and I do not choose to expose Hammond to such temptation.'"

"Oh, Hammond! That is your son, I suppose?" asked Archie, who was much amused at the colonel's earnestness.

"Yes; my boy Hammond! the finest fellow in the regiment, though I say it, who should not. Do you think that I, his father, would expose him to such danger as to throw him into the society of a set of fascinating young women who have chosen to emancipate themselves from all conventionality, and who call themselves—stuff and rubbish!—dressmakers?"

"Not call themselves, so: they are excellent dressmakers!" was Archie's somewhat malicious reply.

"All the more reason that my son should not know them!" thundered the old man. "What, sir! an officer in one of her Majesty's regiments—the son and grandson of officers,—is such a one to be mixed up with a family that has lost caste,—to flirt with or make love to girls who are not above making gowns for my butcher's wife? Before Hammond does such a thing as that––" And here the colonel paused from excess of emotion.

"You are perfectly right to defend your son from such danger," returned the young clergyman with covert sarcasm. "In your case I should probably feel the same. But, in my position, being intimate with those ladies of whom you speak, and having had good opportunity to form my opinions of them, I cannot help saying, in their defence, that even your son, excellent officer as he is,—and, I am sure, a most worthy young man,—would scarcely be dishonored by an alliance with the finest young gentlewomen I ever met!" And, as he said this, with all due gravity, Archie released his arm, and, with a farewell nod, went off, leaving the colonel, open-mouthed and gasping with astonishment, at his own gate.

Elizabeth met him on the threshold.

"Oh, father, why did you not bring Mr. Drummond in!" she said, reproachfully; "it is so long since he has paid us a visit."

"Poor Drummond!" replied the colonel, with a mournful shake of his head: "it is just as I thought. He has almost owned it, in fact. He is seriously smitten with one of those Challoner girls, and before long there will be a wedding in the place."

"Now, father, this is just one of your whimsies," replied Elizabeth, placidly. "Mr. Drummond is going to have his favorite sister, Grace, to live with him and keep his house. He told me so himself; and that does not look as though he expected to bring home a wife. So you may just put this idea out of your head." But, though Elizabeth was well aware of the truth of her words, that no new mistress was to come to the vicarage, still her fine sympathy and unerring woman's divination had read the meaning of the young vicar's clouded brow, and she knew that he, too, had to try and be grateful for "the blessings that went over his head."

Archie's grand and somewhat heroic speech failed in its effect, as far as the colonel was concerned. Elizabeth was right in saying her father was longing to know the Challoners. The old man's fancy had been mightily taken by the girls; but for Hammond, for his boy's sake, he was capable of any amount of self-denial. Once he was sorely tempted to give in. When turning the corner of the Braidwood Road, not far from his own house, he came suddenly upon his daughter, who was standing on the side-path, talking to Dulce.

Dulce, who always seemed a sort of reflection and shadow of her sisters, and who withdrew somewhat in the background, obscured a little by Nan's beauty and Phillis's sprightliness, was nevertheless in her way a most bewitching little maiden.

"There comes my father!" observed Elizabeth, tranquilly, never doubting that he would join them; and Dulce looked up a little shy and fluttered from under her broad-brimmed hat; for she had taken a fancy to the colonel, with his white moustache and kindly inquisitive eyes. He was a sort of hero in her fancy; and Dulce loved heroes,—especially when they wore a medal.

Colonel Middleton saw the little girl dimpling and blushing with pleasure, and his old heart thumped a little with excitement and the conflict of feeling: the innocent child-look appealed to his fatherly sympathies. There was a moment's wavering; then he lifted his white hat, with a muttered "Good-morning," and the next minute he was walking on with squared shoulders and tremendous energy.

Poor little Dulce's lip quivered with disappointment: she thought it hard, when other people were so kind to them. Elizabeth said nothing; but she bade the child good-bye with greater

tenderness than usual, and sent all sort of messages to her mother and Nan.

The colonel, meanwhile, had retreated into the house, and was opening his papers with more than his usual fuss.

“It is for Hammond,” he murmured to himself. “When one has boys, one must do one’s duty by them; but it was confoundedly hard, by Jove!” And all the remainder of the day a pair of appealing eyes seemed to reproach him with unkindness. But Elizabeth never said a word; it was not her place to find fault with her father.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

“HOW DO YOU DO, AUNT CATHERINE?”

One drizzling November morning, Mattie was standing at the hall door, looking out a little blankly through the open gateway at the prospect before her,—at the rotting leaves that lay heaped up in the road, and at the gray, humid sky,—when a very big man suddenly blocked up the entrance, and startled her dreadfully.

Mattie afterwards described the occurrence very graphically to her brother:

“He was the biggest man I ever saw in my life, Archie. He looked as strong as a navvy; and his shoulders reminded me of one of those men one sees in brewers’ drays. And his face was so red, and his hair, too,—that dreadfully red color, you know, that no one admires; and his hands, and even his voice, were big.”

“What a fascinating description!” laughed Archie. “Upon my word, Mattie, you are rather tremendous in your language. Well, and what did the navvy say to you?”

“Oh, he was not a navvy, really! Of course he was a gentleman. He could not help his big voice, and what he said was nice; but, I assure you, Archie, he nearly took my breath away;” and so on, and so on, to the end of her story.

But it was enough to surprise any one whose nerves were not of the strongest, when one lives in a lonely country road, and the master of the house is out, to see a gigantic specimen of manhood, not very carefully dressed, and with hair like a red glory, come suddenly striding through one’s open gate, without “by your leave,” or waiting for any possible permission.

Mattie dropped her umbrella,—for she was dressed in her waterproof, and her oldest hat, ready for her district-work; and the stranger picked it up, and handed it to her promptly, and then he removed his hat politely.

“How do you do, cousin?” he said; and a broad, genial smile revealed a set of white teeth.

Mattie retreated a step in genuine affright.

“For you know, Archie,” she explained afterwards, in her simple way, “we have no cousins worth mentioning, except Sophy Trinder, who is not our cousin at all, but mother’s; and so you see it sounded so very odd.”

“Very odd indeed,” muttered Archie.

“If you please, Mr. Drummond—that is my brother—is out, and I am going out too,” faltered Mattie, who was not a specially heroic little person, and who decidedly had not got her wits about her just then.

“I do not want Mr. Drummond, whoever he may be. I never heard of him in my life. I only want my aunt and cousins. Which of them are you, eh? Why, you must be Nan, I suppose?” And the big man looked down at her with a sort of supercilious good nature. The name gave Mattie instant enlightenment.

“Nan!—Oh, you must mean the Challoners!” she exclaimed, with a little gasp of surprise.

“Yes, of course; I am a Challoner myself. Well, which of them are you, eh? You are a long time telling me your name.” And the new-comer peered down at her still more curiously, as though he were surprised to find anything so small and ordinary-looking.

Mattie never looked to advantage in her waterproof. More than once her brother had threatened to burn the old rag of a thing.

“My name is Mattie Drummond,” replied the bewildered Mattie, trying to speak with dignity,—she never would call herself Matilda, she hated it so,—“and I live with my brother, who is the clergyman of the parish. This is the vicarage: if you want the Friary, it is a little lower down the road.”

“Where?” he asked, striding to the gate; and then he came back again, taking the few steps at a single bound,—so at least it appeared to Mattie. “Why—why—there is no house at all—only a miserable cottage, and––”

“That is the Friary,” repeated Mattie, decidedly; “but it is not miserable at all: it is very nice and pretty. The Challoners are very poor, you know; but their house looks beautiful for all that.”

“Oh, yes; I know all about it. I have been down to that place, Oldfield, where they lived; and what I heard has brought me here like an express train. I say, Miss Mattie Drummond, if you will excuse ceremony in a fellow who has never seen his father’s country before, and who has roughed it in the colonies, may I come in a moment and ask you a few questions about my cousins?”

“Oh, by all means,” returned Mattie, who was very good-natured and was now more at her ease. “You will be very welcome, Mr. Challoner.”

“Sir Henry Challoner, at your service,” responded that singular individual with a twinkle of his eye, as Mattie became confused all at once. “You see,” he continued, confidentially, as she led the way rather awkwardly to her brother’s study, hoping fervently that Archie would come in, “I have been making up my mind to come to England for years, but somehow I have never been able to get away; but after my father’s death—he was out in Australia with me—I was so lonely and cut up that I thought I would take a run over to the mother-country and hunt up my relations. He was not much of a father perhaps; but, as one cannot have a choice in such matters, I was obliged to put up with him;” which was perhaps the kindest speech Sir Francis’s son could make under the circumstances.

Mattie listened intelligently, but she was so slightly acquainted with the Challoners’ past history that she did not know they possessed any relations. But she had no need to ask any questions: the new-comer seemed determined to give a full account of himself.

“So do you see, Miss Drummond, having made my fortune by a stroke of good luck, and not knowing quite how to spend it—the father and mother both gone,—and having no wife or chick of my own, and being uncommon lonely under the circumstances, I thought I would just run over and have a look at my belongings. I have a sort of fancy for Aunt Catherine; she used to write me such pretty letters when I was a little chap in Calcutta, and tell me about Nan, and Phillis, and—what was the baby’s name?—Dulce. I believe she and the poor old governor never hit it off: the old man had been a sad sinner in his day. But I never forgot those letters: and when he was gone, poor old boy! I said to myself, Now I will go and see Aunt Catherine.”

“And you went down to Oldfield, Sir Henry?”

“Eh, what? meaning me, I suppose? but out there they called me Sir Harry, or Harry mostly, for what was the use of a title there? Oh, yes, I went down and found out all about them from a chatty little woman, rather like yourself, and she sent me on here.”

“Oh, dear, I am so glad!” exclaimed Mattie, who was now thoroughly herself: “they will be so pleased to see you, and you will think them all so charming. I am sure I never saw any one the least like them, except Grace, and she is not half so pretty as Nan; and as for Phillis, I admire her even more, she lights up so when she talks.”

“Aunt Catherine used to be beautiful,” observed Sir Harry, gravely; for then and afterwards he insisted on that form of address. He was not English enough or sufficiently stiff for Henry, he would say.

“Oh, dear, yes! she is quite lovely now,—at least Archie and I think so; and Dulce is the dearest little thing. I am ever so fond of them; if they were my own sisters I could not love them more,” continued Mattie, with a little gush; but, indeed the girls’ gentle high-bred ways had won her heart from the first.

Sir Harry’s eyes positively sparkled with delight; he had pleasant eyes which redeemed his other features, for it must be confessed he was decidedly plain.

“I must shake hands with you, Miss Drummond,” he said, stretching out a huge hand, with a diamond ring on it that greatly impressed Mattie. “We shall be good friends, I see that.” And though poor Mattie winced with pain under that cordial grasp, she hid it manfully.

“Did they tell you at Oldfield how poor they are?” she said, when this ceremony had been performed, and Sir Harry’s face looked more like a sunset than ever with that benevolent glow on it.

“Oh, yes,” he returned, indifferently; “but all that is over now.”

“You know they have to work for their living; the girls are dressmakers,” bringing out the news rather cautiously, for fear he should be shocked; a baronet must be sensitive on such points. But Sir Harry only laughed.

“Well, they are plucky girls,” he said, admiringly; “I like them for that.” And then he asked, a little anxiously, if his aunt sewed gowns too,—that was how he put it,—and seemed mightily relieved to hear that she did very little but read to the girls.

“I would not like to hear she was slaving herself at her age,” he remarked, seriously. “Work will not hurt the girls: it keeps them out of mischief. But now I have come, we must put a stop to all this.” And then he got up and threw back his shoulders, as though he were adjusting them to some burden; and Mattie, as she looked up at him, thought again of the brewer’s dray.

“I was afraid when he got off his chair he would touch the ceiling,” she said, afterwards. “He quite stooped of his own accord going through the study doorway.”

When Sir Henry had shaken himself into order, and pulled an end of his rough red moustache, he said, quite suddenly,—

“As you are a friend of the family, Miss Drummond, I think it would be as well if you would go with me to the Friary and introduce me in due form; for, though you would not believe it in a man of my size, I am painfully shy, and the notion of all these girls, unless I take them singly, is rather overwhelming.” And, though this request took Mattie a little by surprise, she saw no reason for refusing to do him this kindness. So she assented willingly, for in her heart Mattie was fond of a scene. It gave her such a hold on Archie’s attention afterwards; and, to do him justice, when the Challoners were on the *tapis*, he made a splendid listener.

Sir Henry walked very fast, as though he were in a tremendous hurry; but he was nervous, poor fellow, and, though he did not like to own as much to a woman, he would almost have liked to run away, in spite of his coming all those thousands of miles to see his relations. He had pressed Mattie into the service to cover his confusion, but the little woman herself hardly saw how she was needed, for, instead of waiting for her introduction, or sending in his name or card by Dorothy, he just put them both aside and stepped into the first room that stood handy, guided by the sound of voices.

“How do you do, Aunt Catherine?” he said, walking straight up to the terrified lady, who had never seen anything so big in her life. “I am Harry,—Harry Challoner, you know,—to whom you used to write when I was a little slip of a boy.”

A strange queen in a hive of bees could not have produced more confusion. Dulce stopped her sewing-machine so suddenly that her thread broke; Phillis, who was reading aloud, let her book fall with quite a crash; and Nan said, “Oh, dear!” and grew quite pale with surprise and disappointment: for a moment she thought it was Dick. As for Mrs. Challoner, who had a right to her nerves from years of injudicious spoiling and indulgence, and would not have been without her feelings for worlds, she just clasped her hands and murmured “Good heavens!” in the orthodox lady-like way.

“Why, yes, Aunt Catherine, I am Harry; and I hope you have not forgotten the existence of the poor little beggar to whom you were so kind in the old Calcutta days.” And his big voice softened involuntarily in the presence of this dignified aunt.

“Oh, no, my dear!—no!” touched by his manner, and remembering the boyish scrawls that used to come to her, signed “Your affectionate nephew, Harry.” “And are you indeed my nephew?—are you Harry?” And then she held out her slim hand, which he took awkwardly enough. “Girls, you must welcome your cousin. This is Nan, Harry, the one they always say is like me; and this is Phillis, our clever one; and this is my pet Dulce.” And with each one did their cousin solemnly shake hands, but without a smile; indeed, his aspect became almost ludicrous, until he caught sight of his homely little acquaintance, Mattie, who stood an amused spectator of this family tableau, and his red, embarrassed face brightened a little.

“Aunt Catherine was such an awfully grand creature, you know,” as he observed to her afterwards, in a confidential aside: “her manners make a fellow feel nowhere. And as for my cousins, a prettier lot of girls I never saw anywhere; and of course, they are as jolly and up to larks as other girls; but just at first, you know, I had a bull-in-a-china-shop sort of feeling among them all.”

Mrs. Challoner, in spite of her fine manners, was far too nervous herself to notice her nephew’s discomfort. She had to mention a name that was obnoxious to her, for of course she must ask after his father. She got him into a chair by her at length, where he stared into his hat to avoid the bright eyes that seemed to quiz him so unmercifully.

“And how is Sir Francis?” she asked, uttering the name with languid interest.

“My father! Oh, did you not know, Aunt Catherine?—he died out in Sydney a year ago. Poor old fellow! he had a terrible illness. There was no pulling him through it.”

Mrs. Challoner roused up at this:

“Your father dead! Then, Harry, you have come to the title?”

But her nephew burst into a boisterous laugh at this:

“Yes,—a title and an old ruin. A precious heritage, is it not? Not that I care what people call me. The most important part is that another fellow—Dalton they call him—and I made a grand hit out in Sydney. When I saw the money flowing in, I just sent for the poor old governor to join me; and we did not have a bad time of it, until the gout took him off. And then I got sick of it all, and thought I would have a look at England and hunt up my relations.”

Sir Harry had blurted out this long speech as he still attentively regarded the lining of his hat; but, happening to look up, he caught Phillis’s eyes, which were contemplating him. The mischievous look of fun in them was not to be resisted. Sir Harry first got redder, if possible; then his own eyes began to twinkle, and finally they both laughed. And after that the ice was broken, and they got on famously.

The girls chattered to him like magpies. They made Mattie take off her hat and hideous old waterproof and stay to luncheon. Nan smoothed her hair, which was sadly ruffled, and Phillis settled her brooch and collar.

There was only cold mutton in the larder; but what did that matter? Dulce ran out in the garden and picked dahlias for the table; and Nan took her mother’s keys and drew from the recesses of a dim sweet-smelling press some dainty napkins and a fine old cloth that might have suited a princess. There was a bottle of rare Madeira that remained from their stock of wine; and Dorothy had made a batch of fresh dinner-rolls. Dorothy was always full of resources in an

emergency.

“Don’t fash yourself, Miss Nan,” she said, when her young mistress came into the kitchen. “The cold mutton can’t be helped; but we have got angels in the larder, and I will just pop them into the oven.”

Sir Harry roared with laughter when Dorothy’s speech was repeated to him. The little puddings were declared by Mattie to be delicious; but Sir Harry could scarcely eat his for laughing.

“Who ever heard of baked angels, Aunt Catherine!” he exclaimed, after another explosion.

“My dear, it is only a name,” she returned, mildly. “Will you have another, Harry? And, Nan, you must pass your cousin the Madeira.”

They were all seated round the table in the small parlor. It was felt to be a triumph when Sir Harry contrived to seat himself without grazing himself seriously against the chiffonnier or knocking over a piece of the blue-and-gold china.

“What a cosey little cabin of a place!” he said with critical approval; “but it is rather small to hold you all,—eh, Aunt Catherine?”

“Yes: it is small after Glen Cottage,” she sighed. “We had such a pretty drawing-room there.”

“And such a lovely garden!” added Dulce.

“Oh, this crib in not fit for you? We will alter all that,” he returned, complacently. “I am the head of the family now, and I must take my uncle’s place. I am awfully rich, Aunt Catherine; so you have only got to tell me what you and the girls want, you know.” And then he rubbed his hands as though he were pleased about something.

But no one took any notice of this speech, hardly knowing how to treat it.

When luncheon—which was, indeed, the family dinner—was over, the girls carried him off to the work-room, and showed him specimens of their skill.

“Very nice; very well done,” he observed, approvingly.

“I am glad you showed such pluck; for why any woman should think it *infra dig.* to make a gown for another woman quite beats me. Why, bless you, in the colonies we fellows turned our hands to anything! Well, Aunt Catherine, they are plucky ones, these girls of yours. But we must put a stop to this sort of thing, you and I. I don’t think my uncle would have liked it. And as I am in his place––” And here he thrust aside some amber satin with his great hands, with a movement full of suggestive possibilities.

He took them all out to walk after that. Mrs. Challoner, indeed, begged to be excused,—the poor lady was already sadly fatigued, and longed for her nap,—but he would not dispense with Mattie’s company.

“We were acquaintances first,” he said to her; “and I look upon you as a sort of cousin too, Miss Mattie.” And poor little Mattie, who had never met with so much friendliness before, quite blushed and bridled with pleasure.

Mr. Drummond, who was coming out of his own gate, stood as though transfixed as the procession came towards him. The four girls were walking all abreast, Mattie in the middle; and beside them stalked a huge man, in rough, rather outlandish attire, looking like a son of the Anakin, or a red-headed Goliath.

Archie stood still in the middle of the road, and Mattie rushed up to him:

“We are going for a walk. Oh, Archie, I wish you would come too! It would be such fun!”

“Yes; do come!” cried unconscious Nan, seconding her out of pure good nature. “Mr. Drummond, this is our cousin, Sir Henry Challoner, who has just come from Australia; and we have never seen him before.” And then the young clergyman shook hands with him very stiffly, and spoke a few conventional words.

“They have not a man belonging to them,” he had said to himself, triumphantly, and then that odious Dick had turned up and now this extraordinary-looking being who called himself Sir Henry Challoner.

Archie took down the “Peerage” when he got home, for he could not be induced to join the merry party in their walk. He found the name there all right,—“Henry Fortescue Challoner, son of Sir Francis Challoner, son of Sir Henry Challoner,” and so on. It was an old baronetcy,—one of the oldest in England,—but the estates had dwindled down to a half-ruined residence and a few fields. “Challoner Place,” as it was called, was nothing but a heap of mouldering walls; but Mattie had whispered to him gleefully that he was “awfully rich, and the head of the family, and unmarried; and he did not mean to let his cousins make gowns anymore for other people, though they might do it for themselves.”

Mattie never forgot that walk. Never in her life had she enjoyed such fun. Archie, with his grave face and prim ways, would have spoiled the hilarity.

First Sir Henry took his cousins to the hotel, where they heard him order his apartments and dinner: he evidently considered he had not dined; and there was a good deal of discussion about some game that he ordered, and a certain brand of champagne that was to his liking.

“If they make me comfortable, I may stop on a goodish bit,” he informed them, “until we have settled where my aunt would like to live. I shall run up to London every few days, and can do all

your commissions. By the bye, I got some trinkets for you girls on my way down; we will haul them over when I come up for the cup of coffee Aunt Catherine promised me this evening."

"Now, Harry, we don't want presents," remarked Phillis, taking him to task as easily as though she had known him all her life long.

In spite of his bigness, his great burly figure and plain face, there was something very pleasant about him. He was rough and unpolished, his dress was careless and of colonial cut; and yet one could not fail to see he was a gentleman. His boyishness and fun would have delighted Dick, who was of the same calibre; only Dick was far cleverer, and had more in his little finger than this great lumbering Harry in his whole body.

He was slow and clumsy, but his heart and intentions were excellent; he was full of tenderness for women, and showed a touching sort of chivalry in his intercourse with them. In some way, his manners were far finer than those of a New Bond Street gentleman; for he could not sneer at a woman, he believed in the goodness of the sex, in spite of much knowledge to the contrary, he could not tell a lie, and he only cheated himself. This was saying a good deal for the son of that very black sheep Sir Francis; but, as Sir Harry once simply observed, "his mother was a good woman:" if this were the case, her husband's vices must have shortened her life, for she died young.

Phillis was glad when they turned their backs on the town: she found her cousin's long purse a difficulty: it seemed an impossibility to get him past the shops.

First, he was sure Aunt Catherine was fond of champagne,—all ladies liked sweet sparkling things; but he would see about that at the hotel presently. Then his attention was attracted by some grouse hanging up at the poulterer's: Aunt Catherine must have some grouse, as he remembered the cold mutton. Phillis made no objection to the grouse, for she knew her mother's fondness for game; but she waxed indignant when partridges and a hare were added, and still more when Sir Harry ransacked the fruiterers for a supply of the rarest fruit the town could afford. After this, he turned his attention to cakes and bonbons; but here Dulce took his part, for she loved bonbons. Phillis caught Nan by the arm, and compelled her to leave them; but Mattie deserted her friends, and remained to watch the fun.

Dulce grew frightened at last, and tried to coax her cousin away.

"Oh, no more—no more?" she pleaded. "Phillis and Nan will be so angry with us."

"I don't see anything more worth getting," returned her cousin, contemptuously. "What a place this is, to be sure! Never mind, Dulce; I am going up to London to-morrow, and I will bring you down as many bonbons as you like from the French place in Regent Street. I will bring Miss Mattie some too," he continued, as the girls hurried him along. "And, Dulce, just write out a list of what you girls want; and I will get them, as sure as my name is Harry."

CHAPTER XL.

ALCIDES.

There was quite a battle-royal on the sea-shore after that: Dulce and Phillis pelted Laddie with bonbons; while their mother enjoyed her nap in the snug parlor. And Dorothy, pleased, bewildered, and half frightened at what the mistress might say, stowed away game and fruit and confectionery in the tiny larder, and then turned her attention to such a tea as her young ladies had not seen since the Glen Cottage days.

Laddie raced and barked, and nearly made himself ill with the sweet things; and Nan laughed, and then grew serious as she remembered an afternoon in the Longmead Meadows, when Dick, in wild spirits, had pelted her and Phillis with roses until their laps were full of the delicious, fragrant leaves. "'Sweets to the sweet,'—so look out for yourself, Nan!" he had said, in his half-rough, boyish way. But that was in the days when both were very young and Dick had not learned to make love.

Mattie joined in the game a little awkwardly,—it was so long since the poor little woman had played at anything. Her younger sisters never chose Mattie in their games. "She makes such mistakes, and puts us out; and that spoils the fun," they said; and so Grace was their favorite playfellow.

For it is perfectly true that some grown-up people have forgotten how to play, while others are such children at heart that they can abandon themselves most joyously and gracefully to any game, however romping; but Mattie, who was sobered by frequent snubbing, was not one of these. She loved fun still, in her way, but not as Phillis and Dulce, who thought it the cream of life and would not be content with the sort of skimmed-milk existence of other young ladies.

Sir Harry watched them admiringly, and his enthusiasm grew every moment.

"I say, you are the right sort, and no mistake. I never met jollier girls in my life. A fellow would

not know which to choose: would he, Miss Mattie?”

Mattie took this seriously.

“Nan is chosen:—are you not, Nan?” she said, in her downright fashion. And then, as Sir Harry stared at this, and Nan blushed and looked even prettier, Phillis first scolded Mattie soundly for her bluntness, and then took upon herself to describe Dick’s perfections:

“The dearest fellow in the world, Harry, when you come to know him; but not handsome, and dreadfully young looking, some people think. But, as Nan will not look at any one else, we must make the best of him.”

“And when are they to be married?” asked her cousin, curiously. He was not quite pleased with this discovery.

“When?—Oh, Harry, there is an ‘if’ in the case,” returned Phillis, solemnly. “The dearest fellow in the world has an ogre of a father,—a man so benighted, so narrow in his prejudices, that he thinks it decidedly *infra dig.* for his intended daughter in-law to sew other people’s gowns. I do love that expression. Harry: it is so forcible. So he forbids the banns.”

“No, really!—Is she serious, Nan?” But Nan grew shy all at once, and would not answer.

“I am serious, Sir Henry Challoner,” replied Phillis, pompously. “The path of true love is impeded. Poor Dick is pining in his rooms at Oxford; and Nan—well, I am afraid her looks belie her; only you know appearances are sometimes deceitful.” And indeed Nan’s pink cheeks and air of placid contentment scarcely bore out her sister’s words.

The newly found cousin sat in silent perplexity staring at them both. Love-affairs were not much in his way; and until now he had never been thrown much with his equals in the other sex. His rough colonial life, full of excitement and money-getting, had engrossed his youth. He was now a man of thirty; but in disposition, in simplicity, and in a certain guilelessness of speech, he seemed hardly more than an overgrown boy.

“Well, now, is it not like a book?” he said, at last, breaking the silence quite abruptly. “It must be an awful bother for you, Nan; but we must put a stop to all that. I am the head of the family; and I shall have a word to say to that Mr.—what is his name?”

“Mr. Mayne,” returned Nan, softly.

It was at this moment that the name of Hercules came into Phillis’s head for her cousin. What feats of strength did he mean to undertake on their behalf? Would he strangle the hydra-headed monster of public opinion that pronounced “women who sewed other women’s gowns” were not to be received into society? Would he help Nan gather the golden apples of satisfied love and ambition? What was it that he meant to do by dint of sheer force and good nature?

Harry Challoner did not long leave them in ignorance of his intentions. In the coolest possible way he at once assumed the headship of the family,—adopting them at once, and giving them the benefit of his opinions on every point that could possibly be mooted.

“I had not a soul belonging to me until now,” he said, looking around on his cousins’ bright faces with a glow of honest satisfaction on his own. “It made a fellow feel precious lonely out there, I can tell you.”

“You ought to have married, Harry,” suggested Dulce.

“I never thought any one would care for such a great hulking fellow,” he returned, simply; “and then the girls over there were not to my taste. Besides, I never thought of it; I was too busy. I am going to take a holiday now, and look about me a little; and when you and Aunt Catherine are settled, I may have a try myself at some one,” he finished, with a big laugh.

This notion amused the girls immensely, then and afterwards. They began to talk of the future Lady Challoner. Nan proposed one of the Paines. Phillis thought if Grace Drummond were only as sweet-looking as her photograph he could hardly help falling in love with her. And Dulce was of opinion that Adelaide Sartoris, handsome and queenly as she was, would not consider a baronet beneath her. They confided all these thoughts to Sir Harry, who thanked them quite gravely for their interest and promised to consider the matter. He even wrote down the names in his pocket-book one after another.

“Adelaide Sartoris, did you say? Ah, we had an Adelaide at Sydney, a little, dark thing, with hair blown all over her temples, and such a pair of mischievous eyes: that girl was always laughing at me, somehow. And yet she seemed sorry to bid me good-bye.”

“Perhaps she was in love with you?” observed Dulce. But Phillis frowned at this. She thought they had gone too far in their jokes already with a cousin who was such a complete stranger. But he returned, quite gravely,—

“Well, now, you know, such a thing never came into my head. I talked to her because a fellow likes to be amused by a lively girl like Miss Addie. But as to thinking seriously of her—well, I could not stand that, you know to be laughed at all one’s life; eh, Miss Mattie?” And Mattie, at this appeal, looked up with round, innocent eyes, and said, “Certainly not,” in such an impressive tone that the other girls burst out laughing.

They all went home after that. Sir Harry escorted his cousins and Mattie to the Friary, and then returned to his hotel to dinner. But the girls, who were in a merry mood, would not part with Mattie. They sent her home to put on her green silk dress, with strict orders that she was to return as soon as possible.

“We are all going to make ourselves pretty,” announced Phillis. “A cousin does not turn up every day; and when he promises to be a good fellow, like Harry, we cannot do him too much honor.”

“Ah, I should like to come,” returned Mattie. “I have had such a nice day; and, if Archie will not mind––” And then she bustled into the vicarage, and into her brother’s study.

Archie roused himself a little wearily from his abstraction to listen to his sister’s story; but at the end of it he said good-naturedly, for he had taught himself to be tolerant of Mattie’s little gaucheries,—

“And the long and short of it is that you want to be gadding again. Well, run and get ready, or you will keep their tea waiting; and do put on your collar straight, Mattie.” But this slight thrust was lost on Mattie as she delightedly withdrew. Archie sighed as he tried to compose himself to his reading. He had not been asked to join Mattie. For the last few weeks he had become a stranger to the cottage. Did they notice his absence? he wondered. Did they miss the visits that had once been so frequent? By and by he would resume his old habits of intimacy, and go among them as he had done; but just now the effort was too painful. He dreaded the unspoken sympathy in Phillis’s eyes. He dreaded anything like an understanding between them. Nan’s perfect unconsciousness was helpful to him; but there was something in Phillis’s manner that stirred up an old pain. For the present he was safer and happier alone in his study, though Mattie did not think so, and told her friends that Archie looked terribly dull.

Mrs. Challoner proposed sending for him; but Phillis, greatly to her mother’s surprise, negatived the proposition:

“Oh, no, mother; pray do not! Mattie, you must excuse me. I do not mean to be rude, but we should all have to be so dreadfully well-behaved if Mr. Drummond came, and I just feel myself in a ‘nonsense mood,’ as Dulce used to say when she was a baby.” And then they all forgot Archie, and fell to discussing the new cousin.

“He is dreadfully ugly, mammie, is he not?” observed Dulce, who had a horror of red hair. But Mrs. Challoner demurred:

“Well, no, pet; I cannot agree with you. He is very plain, but so is Dick; but it struck me they were both rather alike.” An indignant “How can you, mother!” from Nan. “Well, my dear,” she continued, placidly, “I do not mean really alike, for they have not a feature in common; but they have both got the same honest, open look, only Dick’s face is more intelligent.” But this hardly appeased Nan, who was heard to say under her breath “that she thought Dick had the nicest face in the world.”

“And Sir Harry has a nice face too: has he not, Mrs. Challoner?” exclaimed Mattie, who never could be silent in a discussion. “It takes time to get used to such very red hair; and, of course, he is dreadfully big,—almost too big, I should say. But when he talks he has such a good-natured way with him; now, hasn’t he?” appealing to Nan, who looked just a little glum,—that is, glum for Nan, for she could not do the sulks properly; she could only look dignified.

Mrs. Challoner grew a little alarmed at her daughter’s demure face: “Nan, darling, you know I am as fond of Dick as possible; but I cannot help being pleased with my new nephew, can I? And I must say I think Harry is very nice, in spite of his roughness.” But here Phillis, who had been unaccountably silent, suddenly struck in:

“Mother, it was a mistake mentioning Dick: the name is sacred. Nan, if it will please you we will declare that he is beautiful as a young Apollo.”

“Don’t be a goose, Phil!” from her sister. But Nan was smiling.

“As for Harry, he is a perfect hero. I expect great things from the great man. To my imagination he is a perfect Hercules,—Heracles, son of Zeus and Alcmene. I wonder if Harry could tell us the name of Hercules’s mother?”

“Of course not, and no one else either,” retorted Dulce.

But Phillis did not heed this.

“To me he shall be the young Alcides. He has promised to fight the Nemæan lion, in the shape of Richard Mayne the elder. By and by we shall have him striking off the heads of the Lernean Hydra. You look mystified, Nan. And I perceive Mattie has a perplexed countenance. I am afraid you are deficient in heathen mythology; but I will spare your ignorance. You will see, though, I am right––”

“But, Phillis––” broke in Dulce, eagerly. But Phillis waved her hand majestically at the interruption:

“Mother, to be serious, I consider Harry in the light of a providential interposition. You are always mourning that there is not a man belonging to us. Well, now we have got one, large as life, and larger, and a very good fellow, as you say; and we are no longer ‘forlorn females.’”

“And indeed, Phillis, I am most thankful for that, my dear; for if Harry be only as good as a brother to you––”

“He means to be more,” returned Phillis, with a sage nod of her head. “He talks in the coolest way, as though he had adopted the whole family and meant to put a spoke into the domestic wheel. ‘I must put a stop to this,’ or, ‘That must be altered,’ has been a frequent remark of his. Mother, if he is dreadfully rich, as he says, does he mean to make us rich too?”

“My dear, we have no claim on him.”

“He thinks we have the strongest possible claim: does he not, Nan? You should have heard him talk this afternoon! According to him, we were never to sew gowns again; Nan and Dick were to be immediately united; the Friary was to be pulled down, and a glorified Glen Cottage to be erected in its stead. But mother,”—here Phillis’s lip grew plaintive,—“you won’t desert your own girls, and be talked over even by an Alcides? We do not mean to have our little deeds all put on the shelf in that off-hand fashion. I shall sew gowns as long as I like, in spite of a hundred Sir Harrys.”

And then they perceived that under Phillis’s fun there was a vein of serious humor, and that, in spite of her admiration of her hero, she was a little afraid that her notions of independence would be wounded.

They became divided on the question. Mrs. Challoner, who had never had a son of her own, and did not much like the idea of a son-in-law, was disposed to regard her nephew warmly, and to accord to him at once his privilege of being head of the family.

“In this case, a cousin is as good as a brother,” she averred; and Nan rather leaned to her opinion.

“You see,” she said, in her practical way, addressing no one in particular, but looking at Phillis, “it has been terribly against us, having no one belonging to us of the same name; and it will really give us a standing with some sort of people.”

“Fie, Nan! what a worldly speech! You are thinking of that tiresome Mayne *pere* again.”

“I have to think of him,” returned Nan, not at all put out by this. “Dick’s father must be a person of great importance to me. He has often hinted in my hearing that we have no relations, and that the Challoner name will die out. I expect he will be rather taken aback at Harry’s appearance.”

“Yes; and Dick will be jealous: he always is of other fellows, as he calls them. You must score that up against Dick, please. Well, I won’t deny that Harry may make himself useful there: all I protest against is the idea that he will bundle us out of this dear old Friary, and make us grand, in spite of ourselves.”

“Dear old Friary!—Oh, oh!” gasped Dulce; and even Nan looked mildly surprised.

“He will not make me give up my work until I choose,” continued Phillis, who was in an obstinate mood. “It is not make-believe play-work, I can tell him that;” but Mrs. Challoner grew tearful at this.

“Phillis, my dear, pray hush! Indeed—indeed I cannot have you talking as though you meant and wished to be a dressmaker all your life.”

And when Phillis asked, “Why not?” just for the sake of argument,—for in her heart she was growing heartily sick of her employment,—her mother threw up her hands in despair:

“Oh, my dear Miss Drummond, do not believe her: Phillis is a good girl; but she is always like that,—hard to be convinced. She does not really mean it. She has worked harder than any of them; but she has only done it for her mother’s sake.”

“Of course she does not mean it,” echoed Nan, affectionately, and much struck by a sudden yearning look on Phillis’s face,—an expression of smothered pain; but Phillis drew away from her sister’s gentle grasp.

“I do mean it!” she said, almost passionately. “I am dreadfully tired of the work sometimes, and hate it. Oh, how I hate it! But I think I have been happy, too. I liked the excitement of the fighting, and the novelty of the thing; it was such fun,—first shocking people, and then winning them over in spite of themselves. One felt ‘plucky,’ as Harry said. And then one’s friends were so real.” And her eyes fell unconsciously on Mattie.

“Oh, yes,” returned Mattie, with her usual gush: “Archie and I took to you from the first. I must say I was surprised, knowing how fastidious Archie was, and his notions about young ladies in general. But, dear, he never would hear a word against you: he was even angry with Colonel Middleton the other day because—but there! I ought not to have told you that.”

“Oh, we know all about it,” returned Phillis, carelessly; but Dulce’s bright face looked a little overcast. “Son Hammond is in the case; and we can all judge of a father’s feelings by a certain example that shall be nameless. Good gracious, mammie! there comes the Alcides himself, and Dorothy has not cleared the tea-things! I vote we meet him in the garden, to avert breakages.” And Phillis’s proposition was carried out.

But when they were all seated in the little parlor again, and the lamp was brought, sundry packages made their appearence, and were delightedly unpacked by the girls, Phillis assisting with great interest, in spite of her heroic speeches.

“One can accept gifts from a cousin,” she said, afterwards.

Sir Harry had shown good taste in his purchases. The ornaments and knick-knacks were all pretty and well chosen. The good-natured fellow had ransacked the shops in Paris for such things as he thought would please his unknown cousins. The bracelets, and fans, and gloves, and laces, made Dulce almost dance with glee. The lace was for Aunt Catherine, he said; and there were gloves for everybody,—dozens and dozens of them. But the fans and bracelets were for the girls; and to-morrow he would get the bonbons for Dulce. And then, as the girls laughingly apportioned the spoil, he whispered something to Nan, at which she nodded and smiled.

Mattie, who was carefully admiring the lace in her short-sighted way, felt something touch her elbow, and found Nan pushing a fan and a parcel of gloves towards her,—beautiful gloves, such as Isabel had in her trousseau.

“Yes; take them; we have so many; and, indeed, we have no use for more than a fan apiece. Oh, you extravagant Harry!”

Sir Harry laughed as he balanced the fan clumsily on his huge finger:

“Take it; you are very welcome, Miss Mattie. You know we are quite old acquaintances; and, indeed, I look on you as a sort of cousin.”

“Oh, dear!—thank you; you are very good, Sir Harry,” cried poor Mattie, blushing with pleasure.

Never had she spent such a day in her life,—a day wherein she had not been once snubbed, except in that remark of Archie’s about her collar, and that did not matter.

“Poor little woman, she looks very happy!” observed Mrs. Challoner, benevolently, as Mattie gathered up her spoils and went out of the room, accompanied by Dulce. “She is such a good little soul, and so amiable, that it is a pity Mr. Drummond is always finding fault with her. It spoils him, somehow; and I am sure she bears it very well.” She spoke to Nan, for her nephew seemed engrossed with tying up Laddie’s front paw with his handkerchief.

“I am afraid, from what she says, that they all snub her at home,” returned Nan. “It seems Grace is the favorite; but you know, mother, Mattie is just a little tiresome and awkward at times.”

“Yes; but she is very much improved. And I must say her temper is of the sweetest; for she never bears her brother any malice.” But at that moment Mattie re-entered the room: and Sir Harry, releasing Laddie, proceeded, as in duty bound, to escort her to the vicarage.

CHAPTER XLI.

SIR HARRY BIDES HIS TIME.

Phillis might have spared herself that little outburst to which she had given vent on the day of her cousin’s arrival. For, in spite of the lordly way in which he had claimed his prerogative as the only male Challoner, Sir Harry took no further steps to interfere with her liberty: indeed, as the days and even the weeks passed away, and nothing particular happened in them, she was even a little disappointed.

For it is one thing to foster heroic intentions, but quite another when one has no choice in the matter. The heroism seemed lost, somehow, when no one took the trouble to combat her resolution. Phillis began to tire of her work,—nay, more, to feel positive disgust at it. The merry evenings gave her a distaste for her morning labors, and the daylight seemed sometimes as though it would never fade into dark, so as to give her an excuse for folding up her work.

These fits of impatience were intermittent, and she spoke of them to no one: in other respects the new cousin brought a great deal of brightness and pleasure into their daily life.

They all grew very fond of him. Mrs. Challoner, indeed, was soon heard to say that she almost loved him like a son,—a speech that reached Dick’s ears by and by and made him excessively angry. “I should like to kick that fellow,” he growled, as he read the words. But then Dick never liked interlopers. He had conceived a hatred of Mr. Drummond on the spot. Sir Harry took up his quarters at the same hotel where Dick and his father had spent that one dreary evening. He gave lavish orders and excited a great deal of attention and talk by his careless munificence. Without being positively extravagant he had a free-handed way of spending his money: as he often said, “he liked to see things comfortable about him.” And, as his notions of comfort were somewhat expensive, his host soon conceived a great respect for him,—all the more that he gave himself no airs, never talked about his wealth except to his cousins, and treated his title as though it were not of the slightest consequence to himself or any one else; indeed, he was decidedly modest in all matters pertaining to himself.

But, being a generous soul, he loved to give. Every few days he went up to London, and he never returned without bringing gifts to the Friary. Dulce, who was from the first his chief favorite, revelled in French bonbons; hampers of wine, of choice game, or fruit from Covent Garden, filled the tiny larder to overflowing. Silks and ribbons, and odds and ends of female finery, were sent down from Marshall & Snelgrove’s, or Swan & Edgar’s. In vain Mrs. Challoner implored him not to spoil the girls, who had never had so many pretty things in their lives, and hardly knew what to do with them. Sir Harry would not deny himself this pleasure; and he came up evening after evening, overflowing with health and spirits, to join the family circle in the small parlor and enliven them with his stories of colonial life.

People began to talk about him. He was too big and too prominent a figure to pass unnoticed in Hadleigh. The Challoners and their odd ways, and their cousin the baronet who was a

millionaire and unmarried, were canvassed in many a drawing-room. “We always knew they were not just ‘nobodies,’” as one young lady observed; and another remarked, a little scornfully, “that she supposed Sir Henry Challoner would put a stop to all that ridiculous dressmaking now.” But when they found that Nan and Phillis went about as usual, taking orders and fitting on dresses, their astonishment knew no bounds.

Sir Harry watched them with a secret chuckle. “He must put a stop to all that presently,” he said; but just at first it amused him to see it all. “It was so pretty and plucky of them,” he thought.

He would saunter into the work-room in the morning, and watch them for an hour together as he sat and talked to them. After the first they never minded him, and his presence made no difference to them. Nan measured and cut out, and consulted Phillis in her difficulties, as usual. Dulce sang over her sewing-machine, and Phillis went from one to the other with a grave, intent face. Sometimes she would speak petulantly to him, and bid him not whistle or tease Laddie: but that was when one of her fits of impatience was on her. She was generally gracious to him, and made him welcome.

When he was tired of sitting quiet, he would take refuge with Aunt Catherine in her little parlor, or go into the vicarage for a chat with Mattie and her brother: he was becoming very intimate there. Sometimes, but not often, he would call at the White House; but, though the Cheynes liked him, and Magdalene was amused at his simplicity, there was not much in common between them.

He had taken a liking to Colonel Middleton and his daughter, and would have found his way to Brooklyn over and over again, only the colonel gave him no encouragement. They had met accidentally in the grounds of the White House, and Mr. Cheyne had introduced them to each other; but the colonel bore himself very stiffly on that occasion and ever after when they met on the Parade and in the reading-room. In his heart he was secretly attracted by Sir Harry’s blunt ways and honest face; but he was a cousin of those Challoners, and intimacy was not to be desired: so their intercourse was limited to a brief word or two.

“Your father does not want to know me,” he said once, in his outspoken way, to Miss Middleton, when they met at the very gate of Brooklyn, and she had asked him, with some little hesitation, if he were coming in. “It is a pity,” he added, regretfully, “for I have taken a fancy to him: he seems a downright good sort, and we agree in politics.”

Elizabeth blushed; for once her courtesy and love of truth were sadly at variance.

“He does like you very much, Sir Harry,” she said; and then she hesitated.

“Only my cousins sew gowns,” he returned, with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes, “so he must not encourage me,—eh, Miss Middleton?—as we are all in the same boat. Well, we must allow for prejudice. By and by we will alter all that.” And then he gave her a good-natured nod, and sauntered away to tell his old friend Mattie all about it; for he had a kindly feeling towards the little woman, and made her his confidante on these occasions.

Phillis still called him Alcides, to his endless mystification: but she privately wondered when his labors were to begin. After that first afternoon he did not speak much of his future intentions: indeed, he was a little reserved with the girls, considering their intimacy; but to his aunt he was less reticent.

“Do you know, Aunt Catherine,” he said one day to her, “that that old house of yours—Glen Cottage, is it not?—will soon be in the market? Ibbetson wants to get off the remainder of the lease.”

Mrs. Challoner leaned back in her chair and put down her knitting:

“Are you sure, Harry? Then Adelaide was right: she told me in her last letter that Mrs. Ibbetson’s health was so bad that they thought of wintering at Hyeres, and that there was some talk of giving up the house.”

“Oh, yes, it is true,” he returned, carelessly; “Ibbetson told me so himself. It is a pretty little place enough, and they have done a good deal to it, even in a few months: they want to get off the lease, and rid themselves of the furniture, which seems to be all new. It appears they have had some money left to them unexpectedly; and now Mrs. Ibbetson’s health is so bad, he wants to try travelling, and thinks it a great pity to be hampered with a house at present. I should say the poor little woman is in a bad way, myself.”

“Dear me, how sad! And they have been married so short a time,—not more than six months. She comes of a weakly stock, I fear. I always said she looked consumptive, poor thing! Dear little Glen Cottage! and to think it will change hands so soon again!”

“You seem fond of it, Aunt Catherine,” for her tone was full of regret.

“My dear,” she answered, seriously, “I always loved that cottage so! The drawing-room and the garden were just to my taste; and then the girls were so happy there.”

“Would you not like a grander house to live in?” he asked, in the same indifferent tone. “I do not think it is half good enough for you and the girls.”

Mrs. Challoner opened her eyes rather widely at this: but his voice gave her no clue to his real meaning, and she thought it was just his joking way with her.

“It would seem a palace after this!” she returned, with a sigh. “Somehow, I never cared for great big houses, they are so much expense to keep up; and when one has not a man in the

house––”

“Why, you have me, Aunt Catherine!” speaking up rather briskly.

“Yes, my dear; and you are a great comfort to us all. It is so nice to have some one to consult; and, though I would not say so to Nan for the world, Dick is so young that I never could consult him.”

“By the bye, that reminds me I must have a look at that young fellow,” returned her nephew. “Let me see, the Oxford term is over, and he will be home again. Suppose I run over to Oldfield —it is no distance from town—and leave my card on Mr. Mayne senior?”

“You, Harry!” And Mrs. Challoner looked quite taken aback at the proposition.

“Well,” he remarked, candidly, “I think it is about time something was done: Nan looks awfully serious sometimes. What is the good of being the head of one’s family, if one is not to settle an affair like that? I don’t feel inclined to put up with any more nonsense in that quarter, I can tell you that, Aunt Catherine.”

“But, Harry,”—growing visibly alarmed,—“you do not know Mr. Mayne: he can make himself so excessively disagreeable.”

“So can most men when they like.”

“Yes; but not exactly in that way. I believe he is really very fond of Dick; but he wants to order his life in his own way, and no young man will stand that.”

“No, by Jove! that is rather too strong for a fellow. I should say Master Dick could not put up with that.”

“It seems my poor Nan is not good enough for his son, just because she had no money and has been obliged to make herself useful. Does it not seem hard, Harry?—my beautiful Nan! And the Maynes are just nobodies: why, Mr. Mayne’s father was only a shopkeeper in a very small way, and his wife’s family was no better!”

“Well, you must not expect me to understand all that,” replied her nephew, in a puzzled tone. “In the colonies, we did not think much about that sort of thing: it would not have done there to inquire too narrowly into a man’s antecedents. I knew capital fellows whose fathers had been butchers, and bakers, and candlestick-makers; and, bless me! what does it matter if the fellow is all right himself?” he finished; for the last Challoner was a decided Radical.

But Mrs. Challoner, who was mildly obstinate in such matters, would not yield her point:

“You would think differently if you had been educated at Eton. In England, it is necessary to discriminate among one’s acquaintances. I find no fault with Dick: he is as nice and gentlemanly as possible; but his father has not got his good-breeding; possibly he had not his advantages. But it is they—the Maynes—who would be honored by an alliance with one of my daughters.” And Mrs. Challoner raised her head and drew herself up with such queenly dignity that Sir Harry dared not argue the point.

“Oh, yes; I see,” he returned, hastily. “Well, I shall let him know what you think. You need not be afraid I shall lower your dignity, Aunt Catherine. I meant to be rather high and mighty myself,—that is, if I could manage it.” And he broke into one of his huge laughs.

Mrs. Challoner was very fond of her nephew; but she was not a clever woman, and she did not always understand his hints. When they were alone together, he was perpetually making this sort of remarks to her in a half-serious, half-joking way, eliciting her opinions, consulting her tastes, with a view to his future plans.

With the girls he was provokingly reticent. Phillis and Dulce used to catechise him sometimes; but his replies were always evasive.

“Do you know, Harry,” Phillis said to him once, very gravely, “I think you are leading a dreadfully idle life? You do nothing absolutely all day but walk to and fro between the hotel and the Friary.”

“Come, now,” retorted her cousin, in an injured tone, “I call that confoundedly hard on a fellow who has come all these thousands of miles just to cultivate his relations and enjoy a little relaxation. Have I not worked hard enough all my life to earn a holiday now?”

“Oh, yes,” she returned, provokingly, “we all know how hard you have worked; but all the same it does not do to play at idleness too long. You are very much improved, Harry. Your tailor has done wonders for you; and I should not be ashamed to walk down Bond Street with you any afternoon, though the people do stare, because you are so big. But don’t you think it is time to settle down? You might take rooms somewhere. Lord Fitzroy knows of some capital ones in Sackville Street; Algie Burgoyne had them.”

“Well, no, thank you, Phillis: I don’t think I shall go in for rooms.”

“Well, then, a house: you know you are so excessively rich, Harry,” drawling out her words in imitation of his rather slow pronunciation.

“Oh, of course I shall take a house; but there is plenty of time for that.”

And when she pressed him somewhat eagerly to tell her in what neighborhood he meant to live, he only shrugged his shoulders, and remarked, carelessly, that he would have a look round at all sorts of places by and by.

“But do you mean to take a house and live all alone?” asked Dulce. “Won’t you find it rather dull?”

“What’s a fellow to do?” replied her cousin, enigmatically. “I suppose Aunt Catherine will not undertake the care of me?—I am too big, as you call it, for a houseful of women!”

“Well, yes; perhaps you are,” she replied, contemplating him thoughtfully. “We should not know quite what to do with you.”

“I wish I could get rid of a few of my superfluous inches,” he remarked, dolorously; “for people seem to find me sadly in the way sometimes.”

But Dulce said, kindly,—

“Oh, no, Harry; we never find you in the way: do we, mammie? We should be dreadfully dull without you now. I can hear you whistling a quarter of a mile off, and it sounds so cheerful. If there were only a house big enough for you next door, that would do nicely.”

“Oh. I dare say I shall not be far off: shall I, Aunt Catherine?” for, to his aunt’s utter bewilderment, he had established a sort of confidence between them, and expected her to understand all his vague hints. “You will not speak about this to the girls; this is just between you and me,” he would say to her, when sometimes she had not a notion what he meant.

“I don’t understand you, Harry,” she said, once. “Why did you stop me just now when I was going to tell Phillis about the Ibbetsons leaving Glen Cottage? She would have been so interested.”

“You must keep that to yourself a little while, Aunt Catherine: it will be such a surprise to the girls, you know. Did I tell you about the new conservatory Ibbetson has built? It leads out of the drawing-room, and improves the room wonderfully, they say.”

“My dear Harry! what an expense! That is just what Mr. Mayne was always wanting us to do; and Nan was so fond of flowers. It was just what the room needed to make it perfect.” And Mrs. Challoner folded her hands, with a sigh at the remembrance of the house she had loved so dearly.

“They say Gilsbank is for sale,” remarked her nephew, rather suddenly, after this.

“What! Gilsbank, where old Admiral Hawkins lived? Nan saw the announcement of his death the other day, and she said then the place would soon be put up for sale. Poor old man! He was a martyr to gout.”

“I had a look at it the other day,” he replied, coolly. “Why, it is not a hundred yards from your old cottage. There is a tidy bit of land, and the house is not so bad, only it wants doing up; but the furniture—that is for sale too—is very old-fashioned and shabby.”

“Are you thinking of it for yourself?” asked his aunt, in surprise. “Why, Gilsbank is a large place; it would never do for a single man. You would find the rooms Phillis proposed far handier.”

“Why, Aunt Catherine!” in a tone of strong remonstrance. “You don’t mean to condemn me to a life of single blessedness because of my size?”

“Oh, Harry, of course not! My dear boy, what an idea!”

“And some one may be found in time who could put up even with red hair.”

“Oh, yes; that need not be an obstacle.” But she looked at him with vague alarm. Of whom could he be thinking?

He caught her expression, and threw back his head with one of his merry laughs:

“Oh, no, Aunt Catherine; you need not be afraid. I am not going to make love to one of my cousins; I know your views on the subject, and that would not suit my book at all. I am quite on your side there.”

“Surely you will tell me, my dear, if you are serious?”

“Oh, yes, when I have anything to tell; but I think I will have a good look round first.” And then, of his own accord, he changed the subject. He was a little sparing of his hints after that, even to his aunt.

It was shortly after this that he came into the Friary one evening and electrified his cousins by two pieces of news. He had just called at the vicarage, he said; but he had not gone in, for Miss Mattie had run downstairs in a great bustle to tell him her sister Grace had just arrived. Her brother had been down to Leeds and brought her up with him. Phillis put down her work; her face had become suddenly rather pale.

“Grace has come,” she half whispered to herself. And then she added aloud, “Poor Mattie will be glad, and sorry too! She will like to have her sister with her for the New Year; but in a few weeks she will have to pack up her own things and go home. And she was only saying the other day that she has never been so happy in her life as she has been here.”

“Why can’t she stay, then?” asked Sir Harry, rather abruptly. “I don’t hold with people making themselves miserable for nothing: that does not belong to my creed.”

“Oh, poor Mattie has not a choice in the matter,” returned Nan, who had grown very fond of her little neighbor. “Though she is thirty, she must still do as other people bid her. They cannot both be spared from home,—at least, I believe not,—and so her mother has recalled her.”

“Oh, but that is nonsense!” replied Sir Harry, rather crossly for him. “Girls are spared well

enough when they are married. And I thought the Drummonds were not well off. Did not Phillis tell me so?”

“They are very badly off; but then, you see, Mr. Drummond does not want two sisters to take care of his house; and, though he tries to be good to Mattie, he is not so fond of her as he is of his sister Grace; and they have always planned to live together, and so poor Mattie has to go.”

“Yes, and I must say I am sorry for the poor little woman,” observed Mrs. Challoner. “There is a large family of girls and boys,—I think Mr. Drummond told us he had seven sisters,—and Mattie seems left out in the cold among them all: they laugh at her oddities, and quiz her most unmercifully; even Mr. Drummond does, and Nan scolds him for it; but he has not been so bad lately. It is rather hard that none of them seem to want her.”

“You forget Grace is very good to her, mother,” broke in Phillis, somewhat eagerly. “Mattie always says so.”

“By the by, I must have a look at this paragon. Is not her name among those in my pocket-book?” returned her cousin, wickedly. “I saw Miss Sartoris at Oldfield that day, and she was too grand for my taste. Why, a fellow would never dare to speak to her. I have scored that one off the list, Phillis.”

“My dears, what have you been saying to Harry?”

“Oh, nothing, mammie,” returned Dulce, hastily, fearing her mother would be shocked. “Phillis was only in her nonsense-mood; but Harry is such a goose, and will take things seriously. I wish you would let me have your pocket-book a moment, and I would tear out the page.” But Sir Harry returned it safely to his pocket.

“What was your other piece of news?” asked Nan, in her quiet voice, when all this chatter had subsided.

“Oh, I had almost forgotten it myself! only Miss Middleton charged me to tell you that ‘son Hammond’ has arrived by the P. and O. Steamer the ‘Cerberus,’ and that she and her father were just starting for Southampton to meet him.”

CHAPTER XLII.

“COME, NOW, I CALL THAT HARD.”

Phillis was unusually silent during the remainder of the evening; but, as she bade Nan good-night at the door of her little room, she lingered a moment, shading the flame of her candle with her hand.

“Do you think Mattie will bring her sister round to see us, to-morrow?” she asked, in a very low tone.

“Oh, yes,—I am sure I hope so,” returned Nan, sleepily, not noticing the restrained eagerness of Phillis’s manner. “We can hardly call first, under our present circumstances. Mr. Drummond knows that.” And Phillis withdrew, as though she were satisfied with the answer.

Nothing more was said on the subject; and they settled themselves to their work as usual on the following morning, Dulce chattering and singing snatches of songs,—for she was a most merry little soul,—Nan cheerful and ready for conversation with any one; but Phillis withdrew herself to the farthest window and stitched away in grave silence. And, seeing such was her mood, her sisters wisely forbore to disturb her.

At twelve o’clock the gate-bell sounded, and Dulce, who hailed any interruption as a joyful reprieve, announced delightedly that Mattie and a tall young lady were coming up the flagged walk; and in an instant Phillis’s work lay untouched on her lap.

“Are you all here? Oh, dear, I am so glad,” exclaimed Mattie, bustling into the room with a radiant face. “I have brought Grace to see you; she arrived last night.” And in a moment the young stranger was surrounded and welcomed most cordially.

Phillis looked at her curiously for a moment: indeed, during the whole visit her eyes rested upon Grace’s face from time to time, as though she were studying her. She had heard so much of this girl that she had almost feared to be disappointed in her; but every moment her interest increased.

Grace Drummond was not a pretty girl,—with the exception of Isabel and the boys, the Drummond family had not the slightest pretension to beauty,—but she was fair and tranquil-looking, and her expression was gentle and full of character. She had very soft clear eyes, with a trace of sadness in them; but her lips were thin—like her mother’s—and closed firmly, and the chin was a little massively cut for a woman.

In looking at the lower part of this girl’s face, a keen observer would read the tenacity of a strong will; but the eyes had the appealing softness that one sees in some dumb creatures.

They won Phillis at once. After the first moment, her reserved manner thawed and became gracious; and before half an hour had passed she and Grace were talking as though they had known each other all their lives.

Nan watched them smilingly as she chatted with Mattie: she knew her sister was fastidious in her likings, and that she did not take to people easily. Phillis was pleasant to all her friends and acquaintances: but she was rarely intimate with them, as Nan and Dulce were wont to be. She held her head a little high, as though she felt her own superiority.

“Phillis is very amusing and clever; but one does not know her as well as Nan and Dulce,” even Carrie Paine had been heard to say; and certainly Phillis had never talked to Carrie as she did to this stranger.

Grace was just as must charmed on her side. On her return, she delighted and yet pained her brother by her warm praises of his favorites.

“Oh, Archie!” she exclaimed, as they sat at luncheon in the old wainscoted dining-room at the vicarage, “you are quite right in saying the Challoners are not like any other girls. They are all three so nice and pretty; but the second one—Miss Phillis—is most to my taste.”

Archie checked an involuntary exclamation, but Mattie covered it.

“Dear me, Grace!” she observed, innocently; “I rather wonder at your saying that. Nan is by far the prettiest: is she not, Archie? Her complexion and coloring are perfect.”

“Oh, yes! If you are talking of mere looks, I cannot dispute that,” returned Grace, a little impatiently; “but, in my opinion, there is far more in her sister’s face: she has the beauty of expression, which is far higher than that of form or coloring. I should say she has far more character than either of them.”

“They are none of them wanting in that,” replied Archie, breaking up his bread absently.

“No; that’s just what I say: they are perfectly unlike other girls. They are so fresh, and simple, and unconscious, that it is quite a pleasure to be with them: but if I were to choose a friend from among them I should certainly select Miss Phillis.” And to this her brother made no reply.

“They are all so pleased about Tuesday,” interrupted Mattie, at this point,—“Nan was so interested and amused about my grand tea-party, as she called it. They have all promised to come, only Mrs. Challoner’s cold will not allow her to go out this severe weather. And then we met Sir Harry, and I introduced him to Grace, and he will be delighted to come too. I wish you would let me ask Miss Middleton and her brother, Archie; and then we should be such a nice little party.”

“How can you be so absurd, Mattie?” returned Archie, with a touch of his old irritability. “A nice confusion you would make, if you were left to arrange things! You know the colonel’s one object in life is to prevent his son from having any intercourse with the Challoners; and you would ask him to meet them the first evening after his arrival in the place.”

“Is the father so narrow in his prejudices as that?” asked Grace, who had quite forgotten her own shocked feelings when she first heard that Archie was visiting a family of dressmakers on equal terms.

“Oh, dear! I forgot,” sighed Mattie, taking her brother’s blame meekly, as usual. “How very stupid of me! But would you not like the Cheynes or the Leslies invited, Archie? Grace ought to be introduced to some of the best people.”

“You may leave Grace to me,” returned her brother, somewhat haughtily: “I will take care of her introductions. As for your tea-party, Mattie, I shall be much obliged if you will keep it within its first limits,—just the Challoners and Sir Harry. If any one be asked, it ought to be Noel Frere: he has rather a dull time of it, living alone in lodgings,”—the Rev. Noel Frere being a college chum of Archie’s, who had come down to Hadleigh to recruit himself by a month or two of idleness. “Perhaps we had better have him, as there will be so many ladies.”

“Oh, yes,—of course! He is so nice and clever,” observed Grace, not noticing the shade on Mattie’s face. “How pleased you must be to have him staying here so long, Archie!—you two were always such friends.”

“He comes nearly every evening,” returned Mattie, disconsolately. “He may suit you, Grace, because you are clever yourself; but I am dreadfully afraid of him, he is so dry and sarcastic. Must he really be asked for Tuesday, Archie?”

“Yes, indeed: you ought to have thought of him first. I am sorry for your bad taste, Mattie, if you do not like Frere: he is a splendid fellow, though terribly delicate, I fear. Now, Gracie, if we have finished luncheon, I should like you to put on your wraps, and I will show you some of my favorite haunts; and perhaps we shall meet Frere.”

Grace hesitated for a moment. She thought Archie would have included Mattie in his invitation; but he did nothing of the kind, and she knew him too well to suggest such a thing.

“Good-bye, Mattie dear. I hope you will have some tea ready for us when we come back,” she said, kissing her sister affectionately; but they neither of them noticed the pained wistfulness of Mattie’s look as the door closed upon them.

They were going out without her; and on Grace’s first day, too. Archie was going to show her the church, and the schools, and the model cottages where his favorite old women lived,—all those places that Mattie had visited and learned to love during the eight months she had lived

with her brother. In a few weeks she must say good-bye to them all, and go back to the dull old house at Leeds, to be scolded by her mother for her awkward ways, and to be laughed at and teased by her brothers and sisters. Archie was bad enough sometimes, but then he was Archie, and had a right to his bad humors; but with the boys and girls it was less endurable. It was, “Oh, you stupid old Matt! Of course it was all your fault;” or, “Mattie, you goose!” from Fred; or, “You silly child, Mattie” from her father, who found her a less amusing companion than Grace; and even Dottie would say, “Oh, it is only Mattie: I never care if she scolds me.”

The home atmosphere was a little depressing, Mattie thought, with a sigh, dearly as she loved her young torments. She knew she would find it somewhat trying after these eight months of comparative freedom. True, Archie had snubbed her and kept her in order; but one tyrant is preferable to many. At home the thirty-years-old Mattie was only one of the many daughters,—the old maid of the family,—the unattractive little wall-flower who was condemned to wither unnoticed on its stalk. Here, in her brother’s vicarage, she had been a person of consequence, whom only the master of the house presumed to snub.

The maids liked their good-natured mistress, who never found fault with them, and who was so bustling and clever a little housekeeper. The poor people and the school-children liked Mattie too. “Our Miss Drummond” they called her for a long time, rather to Grace’s discomfiture. “Ah, she is a rare one, when a body is low!” as old Goody Saunders once said.

And Archie’s friends respected the little woman, in spite of her crudities and decidedly odd ways. Miss Middleton and the Challoners were quite fond of her. So no wonder Mattie grew low at the thought of leaving her friends.

Grace had come to take her place. Nevertheless, she had welcomed her on the previous evening with the utmost cheerfulness and unselfishness. She had shown her the house; she had introduced her to the Challoners; she had overwhelmed her with a thousand little attentions; and Grace had not been ungrateful.

“I am afraid this is hard for you, Mattie,” Grace had said to her, as the sisters were unpacking late the previous night. “I ought not be so happy to come, when I know I am turning you out.” And Mattie had winked away a tear, and answered, quite cheerily,—

“Oh, no, Grace; you must not feel that. I have had a nice time, and enjoyed myself so much with dear Archie, and now it is your turn; and, you know, he has always wanted you from the first.”

“Poor dear fellow!” murmured Grace; “but he looks thin, Mattie. Perhaps I ought to be here, as he wants me; but I shall never keep his house as beautifully as you have done. Mother would be astonished if she saw it.” And this piece of well-deserved praise went far to console Mattie that night.

But she began to feel just a little sore at breakfast-time. Once or twice, Archie decidedly ignored her, and turned to Grace; he even brought her his gloves to mend, though Mattie had been his faithful mender all these months.

“Come into the study, and we will have a talk, Grace,” he had said, and as Grace had involuntarily waited for her sister to accompany them, he had-added, hastily: “Oh, Mattie is always busy at this time with butchers and bakers! Come along, Grace:” and, though Mattie had no such business on her hands, she dared not join them.

It was only when a parish meeting called the young vicar away that Mattie bethought herself of the Challoners.

Poor Mattie! Low spirits were not much in her line. She had never thought enough of herself to indulge in the luxury of wounded susceptibility,—the atmosphere that surrounded her had been too rough and bracing for that; but nevertheless this afternoon she longed to indulge in a good cry. Happily, however, before the first tear had begun to redden her eyelids—indeed, she hardly got her mouth into the proper pucker—a vigorous pull at the bell warned her of an impending visitor, and immediately afterwards Sir Harry marched into the room, looking ruddier than ever with the cold air and exercise, his warm coloring kindling a glow in the room.

His heavy footsteps shook the old flooring of the vicarage; but as he greeted Mattie he looked round him, as though somewhat surprised to find her alone.

“How do you do, Miss Mattie? Why, what have you done with your sister?” he asked, in rather a disappointed tone. “I came to have a chat with you both.”

Another little sting for Mattie: he had only come to see Grace.

“She has gone out with Archie,” she returned, in a subdued voice. “He is showing her the church and the schools.”

“I was up at the Friary just now,” he said, carelessly, “and they were all talking about your sister, praising her up to the skies. What an odd capacity women have for falling in love with each other at first sight! Phillis especially seemed very far gone. So I told them I would just come and have a good look at this paragon: one cannot judge of a person in a hat and veil.”

“I am sure you will like Grace,” replied Mattie, reviving a little at the idea of her sister’s perfections. “She is not pretty, exactly, though Archie and I think her so; but she is so nice and clever. Oh, you should hear those two talk! it is perfectly wonderful to listen to them!”

“It strikes me you are a little left out in the cold, aren’t you, Miss Mattie?” asked Sir Harry, with one of his shrewd good-humored looks. “Why did you not go out with them?”

“Oh, Archie never wants me when he has Grace,” answered Mattie, with a sudden pang at the

truthfulness of this speech. “They have always been so much to each other, those two.”

“He would want you fast enough if Miss Grace—is that not her name?—were to marry and leave him to shift for himself,” was the somewhat matter-of-fact answer.

But Mattie shook her head at this with a faint smile:

“Grace will never marry. She would not leave Archie.”

“Oh, but that is nonsense, do you know?—sheer nonsense! Many girls talk like that, but they change their mind in the end. Why, the parson may marry himself. You don’t suppose a good looking fellow like that intends to be an old bachelor? And then what will Miss Grace do?”

“I don’t know. I am afraid she will miss him dreadfully.”

“Oh, but she will get over it all right. It does not do to make a fuss over that sort of thing. Sentimentality between brothers and sisters is all very well in its way, but it won’t hold against a wife’s or husband’s claims. I never had any myself, so I don’t know; but I find it precious lonely without them. That is why I have adopted my cousins. A man must care for some one.”

“Yes, indeed,” echoed Mattie, with a sigh.

“I am afraid your people do not use you very well, Miss Mattie,” he went on, with cheerful sympathy that was quite a cordial in its way. “You look a bit down this afternoon; a fellow would call it in the blues, and he would be thinking of a cigar and brandy-and-soda. What a pity women don’t smoke! it is no end soothing to the spirits!”

“We have got afternoon tea,” returned Mattie, beginning to smile at this.

“Well, why don’t you ring and order some?” he replied, quite seriously. “Do, please, Miss Mattie, if it will put a little heart into you. Why, I should like a cup myself uncommonly. There never was such a fellow for afternoon tea.” And then Mattie did ring the bell, and, Sir Harry having stirred the fire into a cheerful blaze, and the little brass kettle beginning to sing cheerily on its trivet, things soon looked more comfortable.

“Now you are all right,” he remarked, presently. “You look quite a different sort of body now. When I first came in you reminded me of Cinderella in a brown dress, sitting all alone, by a very black fire. I do believe you were on the verge of crying. Now, weren’t you, Miss Mattie?” And Mattie, with much shame, owned to the impeachment.

“And what was it all about, eh?” he asked, with such a coaxing peremptoriness that Mattie confessed that she was rather dull at the thought that nobody wanted her, and that she must go home; and, on being further pressed and questioned, out it all came,—Mattie’s shortcomings, her stupid ways, and the provocation she offered to home criticism. Sir Harry listened and laughed, and every now and then threw in a jesting remark; but so encouraging was his manner and so evident his interest that Mattie found herself talking as she had never done to any one but Miss Middleton. Before she had finished, Sir Harry knew all about the household in Lowder Street, and had formed a tolerable estimate of every member of the family,—the depressed father; the care-worn and some what stern mother; the boys, clever and handsome and flippant; the girls in all stages of awkwardness; and the quiet, talented Grace, who was every one’s right hand, and who had come to the vicarage to dispossess Mattie.

“Come, now, I call that hard; I do, upon my word!” he repeated more than once at the end of Mattie’s little narrative. “Women have a lot put upon them. I dare say if I had had sisters I should have bullied them sometimes. Men are awful tyrants, aren’t they, Miss Mattie?”

Mattie took this literally.

“I do not think you would be a tyrant, Sir Harry,” she returned, simply, and then wondered why he suddenly colored up to the roots of his hair.

“Oh, there is no knowing,” he replied, in an embarrassed tone. “I have never had any one to bully. I think I shall try my hand on Dulce, only she is such a little spit-fire. Well, I must be going,” he went on, straightening himself. “By the bye, I shall not see you again until Tuesday; I have to run over to Oldfield about a lot of business I have in hand. Do you know Oldfield?”

“Oh, no; but Nan and Phillis have described it so often that I seem as though I have been there.”

“It is a niceish place, and I am half inclined to settle there myself; there is a house going that would just suit me.”

Mattie’s face lengthened: she did not like the idea of losing Sir Harry, he had been so good-natured and kind to her.

“One would never see you if you live at Oldfield,” she said, a little sorrowfully; and again Sir Harry looked embarrassed.

“Oh, but you will be at Leeds, so it won’t make much difference. But I do not want to be parted from Aunt Catherine and the girls: there is a great deal to arrange. Perhaps, before you go, I shall be able to tell you that things are settled. Anyhow, good-bye till Tuesday.” And then he nodded to her in a friendly way, and Mattie returned to her fireplace refreshed and comforted.

Archie and Grace came in presently, bringing another current of cold air with them. They both looked bright and happy, as though they had enjoyed their walk. Grace’s pale cheeks had the loveliest tinge in them.

“Have we left you too long alone, Mattie dear?” she asked, as she took the cup of tea offered her. “How cosy this dear old room looks! and what a beautiful fire!”

“Sir Harry has been emptying the coal-scuttle!” laughed Mattie. “What a pity you missed him, Grace! he has been so amusing.”

Grace smiled incredulously:

“Why, that great big Sir Harry Challoner whom you introduced this morning! my dear Mattie, I am sure he could never be amusing. I was not greatly prepossessed with him.”

“Mattie’s geese are all swans. I don’t think much of him myself,” broke in Archie, in a satirical voice. “I like quality better than quantity. He is so big, I am sure his brains must suffer by comparison. Now, there is Frere.”

“Oh, yes, we met Mr. Frere!” interrupted Grace, eagerly; “and Archie and he had such a talk: it was delightful only to listen to it. I liked his ideas on ecclesiastical architecture, Archie.” And then followed an animated discussion between the sister and brother, about a book of Ruskin’s that they had both been reading. Mattie tried to follow them; but she had not read Ruskin, and they soon left her miles behind; indeed, after the first few minutes they seemed to have forgotten her existence; but somehow Mattie did not feel so forlorn as usual.

“Come, now, I call that hard,” a sympathizing voice seemed to say in her ear. Sir Harry’s genial presence, his blunt, kindly speeches, had done Mattie good: he had called her Cinderella, and made the fire blaze for her, and had coaxed her in quite a brotherly manner to tell him her little troubles and Mattie felt very grateful to him.

So she stared into the fire wistful and happy, while the others talked over her head, and quite started when she heard her own name.

“We are forgetting Mattie; all this must be so dull for her,” Grace was saying, as she touched her shoulder caressingly. “Come upstairs with me, dear: we can have a chat while we get ready for dinner. You must not let your friends make themselves so much at home, you extravagant child, for your fire is far too large for comfort;” but Mattie turned away from it reluctantly as she followed her sister out of the room.

CHAPTER XLIII.

“I WILL WRITE NO SUCH LETTER.”

The new year had not opened very auspiciously at Longmead, neither had the Christmas festivities been great.

Dick on his first return home had put on a great appearance of cheerfulness, and had carried himself much as usual; but Mr. Mayne had been glum, decidedly glum, and Mrs. Mayne had found it difficult to adjust the balance of her sympathy between Dick’s voluble quicksilver on the one hand, and her husband’s dead weight of ill humor on the other.

The truth was, Mr. Mayne’s sharp eyes had discerned from the first moment of his son’s entrance into the house that there was no change in his purpose.

To an outsider, Dick’s behavior to his father was as nice as possible. He still kept up his old jokes, rallying him on his matutinal activity, and saying a word about the “early worm,” “so bad for the worm, poor beggar,” observed Dick. And he sauntered after him into the poultry-yard, and had a great deal to say about some Spanish fowls that had been lately imported into Longmead and that were great sources of pride to Mr. Mayne.

Dick paid a great deal of dutiful attention to his father’s hobbies: he put on his thickest boots every day after luncheon, that his father might enjoy the long walks in which he delighted. Dick used to sally forth whistling to his dogs when they went down Sandy Lane; he was careful to pause where the four roads met, that Mr. Mayne might enjoy his favorite view. In all these things Dick’s behavior was perfect. Nevertheless, on their return from one of these walks they each had a secret grievance to pour into Mrs. Mayne’s ear.

Dick’s turn would come first.

“Mother,” he would say, as he lounged into the room where she sat knitting by the firelight and thinking of her boy—for just now she was heart and soul on Dick’s side—and full of yearning for the sweet girl whom he wanted for his wife, “I don’t know how long this sort of thing is going on, but I don’t think I can put up with it much longer.”

“Have you not had a nice walk with your father?” she asked, anxiously.

“Oh, yes; the walk was well enough. We had some trouble with Vigo, though, for he startled a pheasant in Lord Fitzroy’s preserve, and then he bolted after a hare. I had quite a difficulty in getting him to heel.”

“These walks do your father so much good, Dick.”

“That is what you always say; but I do not think I can stand many more of them. He will talk of

everything but the one subject, and that he avoids like poison. I shall have to bring him to book directly, and then there will be no end of a row. It is not the row I mind," continued Dick, rather ruefully; "but I hate putting him out and seeing him cut up rough. If he would only be sensible and give me my way in this, there is nothing I would not do to please him. You must talk to him; you must indeed, mother." And then Mrs. Mayne, with a sinking heart, promised that she would do what she could.

And after that it would be her husband's turn.

"I tell you what Bessie; I am not satisfied about that boy," he remarked, once, as he came in to warm his hands before going upstairs to dress for dinner. "I don't know from whom he gets his obstinacy,—not from either of us, I am sure of that,—but his cheerfulness does not deceive me. He means mischief; I can see that plainly."

"Oh, Richard! And Dick has been so nice to you ever since he came home. Why, he has not once asked to have any of his friends down to stay. And before this he was never content unless we filled the house. He takes walks with you, and is as domesticated and quiet as possible, so different from other young fellows, who are always racketing about."

"That is just what bothers me," returned her husband, crossly. "You have no discernment, Bessie, or you would know what I mean. I should not care a straw if Dick were to cram the house with young fellows: that sort of larking is just natural at his age. Why, he quite pooh-poohed the idea of a dinner-party the other night, though I planned it for his pleasure. His mind is set on other things, and that is why I say he is up to mischief."

Mrs. Mayne sighed as she smoothed down her satin dress with her plump white hands; but she could not gainsay the truth of this speech: his father was right,—Dick's mind was set on other things.

"I wish you would let him talk to you," she began, timidly, remembering her promise. "Do, my dear; for I am sure Dick is very much in earnest."

"So am I very much in earnest," he returned, wrathfully; and his small eyes grew bright and irritable. "No, it is no use your looking at me in that way, Bessie. I am determined not to allow that boy to ruin his prospects for life. He will thank me one day for being firm; and so will you, though you do turn against your own husband."

This was too much for Mrs. Mayne's affectionate nature to bear.

"Oh, Richard, how can you talk so? and I have been a good wife to you all these years!" And here the poor woman began to sob. "You might make allowance for a mother's feelings; he is my boy as well as yours, and I would cut off my right hand to make him happy; and I do—I do think you are very hard upon him about Nan."

Mr. Mayne stared at her in speechless amazement. Bessie, his long-suffering Bessie,—the wife of his bosom, over whom he had a right to tyrannize,—even she had turned against him, and had taken his son's part. "Et tu, Brute!" he could have said, in his bitterness; but his wrath was too great.

"I tell you what," he said, rising from the seat that was no longer restful to him, and pointing his finger at her, "you and your boy together will be the death of me."

"Oh, Richard, how can you be so wicked?"

"Oh, I am wicked, am I? That is a nice wifely speech."

"Yes, you are, when you say such things to me!" she returned, plucking up spirit that amazed herself afterwards. "If you do not know when you have a good wife and son, I am sorry for you. I say again, I think you are making a grievous mistake, Richard. Dick's heart is set on the girl; and I don't wonder at it, a dear pretty creature like that. And if you cross him, and set him wrong, you will have to answer to both of us for the consequences." And then she, too, rose, trembling in every limb, and with her comely face very much flushed. Even a worm will turn, and Bessie Mayne had for once ventured to speak the truth to her husband.

She had the victory that night, for he was too much dumbfounded by her rebellion to indulge in his usual recriminations: he had never imagined before that Bessie owned a will of her own; but he felt now, with a pang of wounded self-love, that the younger Richard had proved a formidable rival.

His wife's heart relented when she saw his moody looks; but he would not be reconciled to her, in spite of her coaxing speeches.

"Come Richard,—come, my dear! you must not be so cross with me," she said to him later on that night. "We have been married three-and-twenty years, and have never had a serious quarrel; and I don't like your black looks at me."

"Then you should not anger me by taking that boy's part," was his only answer; and he could not be induced to say anything more conciliatory. And the poor woman went to bed weeping.

Things were in this uncomfortable state, when, one morning, Dick thrust his head into the study where his father was jotting down some household accounts; for he managed all such minor details himself, much to his wife's relief.

"Are you particularly busy, father?—I want to have a talk with you."

Mr. Mayne looked up quickly, and his bushy eyebrows drew together.

“Well, yes, I am, Dick,—most particularly busy just now;” for there was a look on his son’s face that made him feel disinclined for conversation.

“Oh, very well, then; I can leave it until after luncheon,” was the cheerful response; then Mr. Mayne knew that Dick was determined to take the bull by the horns.

They went out after luncheon, taking the dogs with them, and turning their steps in the direction of Sandy Lane. For the first mile, Dick said very little; he had his eye on Vigo, who seemed to be inclined to bolt. But when they had reached the second mile-stone, he cleared his throat; and then Mr. Mayne knew that his trouble was beginning.

“Well, father,” commenced Dick, “I think it is about time we had a little serious talk together about my future plans. Of course I want to know if I am to go down next term.”

“I don’t see that we need discuss that. You will read for your degree, of course.”

Mr. Mayne spoke fast and nervously; but Dick was quite cool,—at least, outwardly so.

“There is no ‘of course’ in the matter. I can only read for my degree on one condition.”

“And what is that, may I ask?” with rising choler in his voice.

“That you will have Nan down to Longmead, and that you and my mother sanction our engagement.”

“Never, sir! never!” in a vehement tone.

“Please don’t excite yourself, father. I think it is I who ought to be excited; but, you see, I am quite cool,—perfectly so. I am far too much in earnest to be otherwise. When a man’s future prospects are at stake, and his own father seems determined to thwart him, it is time to summon up all one’s energies. I hope you are not serious in what you say,—that you do absolutely refuse to sanction my engagement with Nan?”

“There is no engagement. If there were, I do absolutely refuse; nay, more, I am determined actively to oppose it.”

“I am sorry to find you have not changed your mind; for it makes all the difference to me, I assure you. Very well: then I must go in for a City life.”

“Do you threaten me, sir?”

“No, father, I would not be so undutiful; but it is a pity your throwing all that money away on my education if I am not to complete it. If I had taken a good degree, I might have turned out something; but never mind,—it can’t be helped now. Then you will be kind enough to write a letter of introduction to Stansfield & Stansfield?”

“No, sir; I will write no such letter!” thundered Mr. Mayne; and Dick put his hands in his pocket and whistled. He felt himself losing patience; but, as he said afterwards, his father was in such an awful rage that it was necessary for one of them to keep cool. So, as soon as he recovered, he said, quite pleasantly,—

“Well, if you will not, you will not. We may take a horse to the water, but we can’t make him drink. And the time has not come yet for a son to order his own father, though we are pretty well advanced now.”

“I think we are, Dick.”

“I confess I am rather disappointed at not getting that letter. Mr. Stansfield would have attached some importance to it; but I dare say I shall get on with the old boy without it. I may as well tell you that I shall accept anything he likes to offer me,—even if it be only a clerkship at eighty pounds a year. After all, I am not worse off than you were at my age. You began at the bottom of the ladder: so I need not grumble.”

“Do you mean to say,” demanded his father, in a tone of grief, “that you really intend to throw me over, and not only me, but all your advantages, your prospects in life, for the sake of this girl?”

“I think it is you who are throwing me over,” returned his son, candidly. “Put yourself in my place. When you were a young man, father, would you have given up my mother, if my grandfather had wished you to do so?”

“The cases are different,—altogether different,” was the angry response. “I never would have married a dressmaker.”

“There are dressmakers and dressmakers: but at least my *fiancee* is a gentlewoman,” returned his son, hotly.

Dick meant nothing by this speech more than his words implied: he was far too good-natured for an *arriere-pensee*. But his father chose to consider himself insulted.

“You insolent young fellow!” he exclaimed, fuming. “Do you mean your mother was not as good as Miss Nancy, any day? I never did believe in those Challoners,—never, in spite of the mother’s airs. I tell you what, Dick, you are treating me shamefully; after all the money I have wasted on you, to turn round on me in this way and talk about the City. I wash my hands of you, sir. I will have nothing to do with introductions: you may go your way, but you will never see a penny of my money.” And he walked on with a very black look indeed.

“All right,” returned Dick. But he was not quite so cool now. “Thank you for all you have done for me, and for letting me know your future intentions. I am thinking it is a good thing Nan has

learned her business, for, as we shall be tolerably poor, it will be handy for her to make her own gowns."

"Very well, Dick."

"I shall go up to Mr. Stansfield to-morrow; and the day after I suppose I had better write to the Dean. You may not believe me, father,"—and here Dick's lip quivered for the first time,—"but I am awfully sorry to cross you in this way; but my heart is so set on Nan that I could not possibly bring myself to live without her." But to this Mr. Mayne made no reply, and they walked the remainder of the way in silence.

Mrs. Mayne's heart grew sick with apprehension when she saw their faces at dinner.

Dick looked decidedly cross. To do him justice, the poor fellow was thoroughly miserable; but his aspect was cheerful compared to that of her husband.

Mr. Mayne would not speak; neither would he eat. And even the footman, who took away the untasted viands, looked at his master with fear and trembling, his countenance was so gloomy.

Dick did not seem to notice his father's failure of appetite; but Mrs. Mayne was one of those women who are given to fancy that if a man refuse his dinner there is something serious the matter with him. And as the meal proceeded she cast piteous looks at her son, but Dick totally ignored them.

As soon as the servants had handed round the fruit, and had left the room, Mr. Mayne rose from the table, leaving his claret untasted, and shut himself into the library, first banging the door behind him, a sound that made his wife's heart palpitate.

"Oh, Dick, what was happened to your father?" she asked, turning to her boy for comfort. But Dick was unusually sulky, and refused to answer.

"You had better ask him, mother, if you are anxious to know," he replied, in a voice he very seldom used to her. "As for me, I am so sick of the whole thing, and feel myself so badly used, that I would rather not open my lips on the subject."

Then Mrs. Mayne sighed, for she knew Dick had one of his obstinate fits on him, and that there would be no further word spoken by him that night.

Poor woman! She knew it was her duty to go into the library and speak a word of comfort to her husband. It might be that Dick had been contumacious, and had angered his father, and it might be her task to pour in the balm of sympathy. Even if he had been hard on her boy, she must not forget that he was her husband.

But as she opened the door she forgot her doubts in a moment. Mr. Mayne's face was so pale, despite its blackness, that she was moved to instant pity.

"Oh, Richard, what is it?" she said, hurrying to him, "My dear, you must not take it to heart in this way." And she took his forehead between her hands and kissed it with the old tenderness she had once felt for him, when they, too, had lived and worked for each other, and there was no Master Dick to plague them and rule over his mother's heart.

"Bessie, that boy will be the death of me," he groaned. But, notwithstanding the despondency of these words, the comfort of his wife's presence was visibly felt, and by and by he suffered her to coax the truth from him.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MR. MAYNE ORDERS A BASIN OF GRUEL.

On the following morning Mr. Mayne did open his lips to address a word to his son:

"I shall be obliged to you, Dick, if you will postpone your intended visit to town, for this day at least;" for Dick had an "ABC" beside him, and was picking out a fast train while he ate his breakfast.

"All right," replied Dick: "I can wait another four-and-twenty hours." But though he yielded the point graciously enough, he did not look at his father, or say anything more on the subject; and as soon as his appetite was satisfied, he took up the "Times," and lounged into his den. Shortly afterwards they heard him whistling to his dogs, and knew that he would not appear until luncheon.

Mrs. Mayne wished that her husband would follow his example; but he had put on his slippers, and showed no inclination to leave the fireside. He read his paper and dozed a good deal, and snapped up Bessie if she spoke to him: so, on the whole, Mrs. Mayne had rather a dull morning. When the luncheon-bell rang, he chose to put on invalid airs, and ordered a basin of gruel to be brought to him in the library. Mrs. Mayne who knew he was not ill, and that his indisposition was purely mental and imaginary, was yet wise enough to fall in with his whim.

“Your master would like his gruel nicely flavored, James,” she said to the footman. “Please ask Mrs. Simpkins to prepare it in the way he likes.” And then she placed his favorite little table beside him, and stirred the fire into a more cheerful blaze.

“Your father does not feel himself well enough to come in to luncheon, Dick,” she said to her son, probably for the benefit of the servant, who was waiting to remove the covers; and Dick, for the same reason, testified a proper amount of sympathy.

“He takes too long walks for a man of his age,” he said, applying himself vigorously to the dismemberment of a chicken. “Mother, I will trouble you for some of that game-pie.” And then he told her another anecdote about Vigo.

After luncheon Dick again disappeared, and Mrs. Mayne, who dreaded an afternoon’s *tete-a-tete* with her husband in his present mood, went up to her own room, for some feminine business, or to take a nap. Mr. Mayne, a little mollified by the gruel, which had been flavored exactly to his liking with a *soupcon* of rum, was just composing himself for another doze, when he was roused by the loud pealing of the hall bell, and the next moment the door was flung open by James, and Sir Henry Challoner was announced.

It was a dark wintry afternoon, and the library was somewhat sombre: the fire had died down, owing to Mr. Mayne’s drowsiness. In the dim light Sir Harry’s big burly figure looked almost gigantic. Mr. Mayne, with his little lean shoulders and sharp face, looked beside him much as a small gray-hound would beside a mastiff.

“How do you do?” began Sir Harry, in his loud voice. “I must apologize for my intrusion; but I think my name is well known to you, and needs no introduction. I have often heard of Mr. Mayne, I can assure you.”

“You do me too much honor,” returned that gentleman, stiffly; and he glanced at the card in his hand. There it was, “Sir Henry Challoner.” “But what the––” And here his favorite expletive rose to his lips.

“We can scarcely see each other’s faces,” observed Sir Harry, cheerfully. “Will you allow me to take the liberty, though I have not known you for seven years—and hardly for seven minutes!” And then he seized the poker, and broke up an obstinate piece of coal.

“Actually, in my own house, and before my own eyes,” as Mr. Mayne told his wife afterwards.

“There, now! I have made a glorious blaze. These are first-rate coals. Now we can have our talk comfortably together. You do not know me personally; but I dare say you have heard of my father,—Sir Francis Challoner? Poor old fellow! I am afraid too many people heard of him in his time.”

“Yes, sir: but, as it is hardly becoming of me to say to his son, I have never heard much good of him. If I remember rightly, he did poor Challoner a bad turn once.”

“Hush, my good friend!” And Sir Harry’s ruddy face looked a little disturbed. “I thought no one but myself and Aunt Catherine knew that story. It is rather hard on a man to have this sort of things brought up. And the poor old governor is dead now: so, if you will permit me to observe, bygones had better be bygones on that subject.”

“Oh, by all means, Sir Harry; but you introduced the matter yourself.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Mayne,” rather haughtily, “I introduced myself. I am the son of Sir Francis. Well, if you know so much, you will understand the sort of interest I take in my cousins and how I consider it my duty to make up to them for what they have lost.”

“Very proper, I am sure.”

“As to that, duty is a pleasure. They are such awfully jolly girls, and so uncommonly plucky, that I am as proud of them as though they were my own sisters. Nan is so confoundedly pretty, too. I don’t wonder at your son’s taste. He must be a lucky fellow who gets Nan.”

“Sir!” vociferated Mr. Mayne; and Sir Harry immediately changed his tactics:

“That is a tidy place opposite you,—Gilsbank, I mean. I have been over there settling about the purchase. I am afraid Crauford is rather a screw: he wanted to drive too close a bargain. But I said, ‘No; you shall have your money down, right and tight, but not a farthing over.’ And I insisted on my right to change the name if I like. I have half a mind to call it ‘Challoner Place.’”

Mr. Mayne was wide awake now; his astonishment knew no bounds.

“You are going to buy Gilsbank!”

“I have bought it,” was the cool response; “and I am now in treaty for Glen Cottage. My aunt has a fancy for her old home; and, though it is not much of a place, it is big enough for her and the girls; and Ibbetson has done a good deal to improve it. You look surprised, Mr. Mayne; but I suppose a man must live somewhere!”

“Of course it is none of my business; but I thought Sir Francis was as poor as a church mouse. Mrs. Challoner was my informant; and she always led me to suppose so.”

“She was perfectly right. The poor old man never could keep money in his pocket: it always seemed to slip through his fingers. But that is not my case. I have been a lucky fellow all my life. I roughed it a bit in the colonies at first; but it did me no harm. And then we made a splendid hit out in Sydney,—coined money, in fact. I would not like to tell you what I made in one year: it seems blowing one’s trumpet, somehow. But I soon got sick of making it; and here I am, with a

tidy fortune,—plenty for myself, and enough to set up my aunt and the girls comfortably without feeling the loss. And now, Mr. Mayne when they are back at Glen Cottage, I want to know what you will do about your son."

To do Mr Mayne justice, he was far too perplexed to answer off-hand; in fact, he was almost rendered dumb by excessive astonishment. To borrow his own forcible expression, used to his wife afterwards, "he hardly knew where he was, things were so topsy-turvy."

In the old days, before Dick had produced that wonderful moustache that was so long in growing, Mr. Mayne had been very partial to his neighbors at Glen Cottage. It is always pleasant to a man to patronize and befriend a pretty woman; and Mrs. Challoner was an exceedingly pretty woman. It was quite an occupation to a busy man like the master of Longmead to superintend their garden and give his advice on all subjects that belong to a man's province.

But for the last year, since Dick had so greatly developed in mental culture, his father had been growing very weary even of the name of Challoner; it had become a habit with him to decry them on every possible occasion. "What is in a name?" he would say, when some person would lament the dead-and-gone glories of Challoner Place. "There is not a soul belonging to them, except that disreputable Sir Francis; and he is as good as a beggar."

But since Glen Cottage had given way to the Friary, and the dressmaking scheme had been carried out, his opposition had become perfectly frantic: he could have sworn at Dick for his senselessness, his want of pride, his lamentable deficiency in ambition. "Never, as long as my name is Richard Mayne, will I give in to that boy," he had vowed inwardly.

And now there had suddenly started up, like a piece of gilded clap-trap, this amazing man of inches, calling himself their cousin, Sir Henry Challoner; a man who was absolutely tired of making money,—who called Gilsbank, a far finer house than Longmead, a tidy little place, and who could throw in Glen Cottage, that bijou residence, as a sort of dower-house for widowed Challoners; a man who would soon be talked about in Hadleigh, not because he was rich,—most of the Hadleigh families were rich,—but because he was restoring an ancient name to something of its old respectability.

Mr. Mayne was essentially a shrewd, far-sighted man. Like other self-made men, he attached great importance to good blood. In a moment he realized that Nan Challoner of the Friary was a very different person from Nan Challoner of Glen Cottage, the cousin of Sir Henry Challoner. Under the latter circumstances she would be received on equal terms at Fitzroy Lodge and at the other houses of the aristocracy. In marrying her, Dick would be at once on an intimate footing with those very people who only just tolerated his father.

"Well," observed Sir Harry, after a lengthy pause, "what do you say about the matter, eh? Though I have accumulated a pretty sum of money, I do not pretend to be a millionaire; and of course, as I may settle down some day and have a family of my own, I must not treat my cousins as though they were my sisters. I think of allowing my aunt a sufficient income during her lifetime to keep up Glen Cottage, and I do not mind paying the girls three thousand pounds down on their wedding-day just for pin-money; but more than that cannot be expected of me."

"Of course not," returned Mr. Mayne; and then he hesitated. Three thousand pounds was not much of a fortune. Why, the girl he wanted for Dick had fifteen thousand, at least; but then Dick would not look at her; and even three thousand was better than nothing. "I had hoped better things for my son," he went on, stiffly. "I always meant Dick to marry money."

"Oh, true, money is very good in its way; but then, you see, young fellows are not always to be coerced. I believe there is a very strong attachment between your son and my cousin Nan."

"It has cost me a great deal of vexation," replied Mr. Mayne very testily,—all the more that his resolution was wavering. "I do not wish to hurt your feelings, Sir Henry, but this confounded dressmaking of theirs––" But here Sir Harry stopped him by a most extraordinary facial contraction, which most certainly resembled a wink.

"Hush!" he exclaimed, in a very loud whisper. "It does not matter to me, of course; but if I were you, I would not mention this little fact to any one else. Girls are girls, and they will have their fling. A good steady husband, that is what they want, the best of them, to sober them when the right time comes. I mean to put a stop to this nonsense; but after all, a little bit of larking like that with a lot of high-spirited generous creatures, what does it matter in the long run? You just settle things with me off-hand, and I will come to terms with the young ladies. I am the head of the family, as they know." And Sir Harry threw out his big chest with a sudden movement of importance and pride. "I am the head of the family: they will be pleased to remember that," he repeated pompously.

It was just at this moment, when victory lay within his grasp, that Dick sauntered lazily into the room.

Dick was in an execrable humor: he was tired and worried, and his boots were muddy. And what was the use of being still contumacious, unless his obstinacy were to be a spectacle to men and gods,—unless he were to flaunt his ill humor in the face of his tyrant, and make his father's soul wretched within him? Such is youthful reasoning, that hates to veil its feelings unobserved.

Dick had not perceived Sir Harry's card, so he stared at the intruder a little coolly. Sir Harry returned his look with a glance of mingled surprise and amusement.

"Is this the young gentleman in question?" he asked, in a tone that roused Dick's ire. To tell the

truth, he was a little disappointed by Nan's choice. It was not so much Dick's want of good looks, but in Sir Harry eyes he appeared somewhat insignificant; and then a scowl is not always becoming to a face. Dick's bright genial expression was wanting; he looked a little too like his father at this moment for Sir Harry's taste.

"Do you mean me?" observed Dick, in a magnificent tone. "Is it I who am the young gentleman in question?—Father, will you have the goodness to introduce me to this gentleman with whom you have been talking me over?" And Dick twirled his moustache angrily.

Mr. Mayne looked at his son's moody face, and his feelings underwent a sudden revulsion; but before he could speak Sir Harry stepped in nimbly before him:

"Well now, I like spirit—no one cares to be talked about behind one's back. Supposing we shake hands, you and I, as we are to be so nearly related. I am Nan's guardian, her next of kin,—Sir Harry Challoner, at your service; and Nan sends her love and you are a lucky fellow, that is what you are!" exclaimed Sir Harry, genially, as he struck Dick a sounding blow on his shoulder. But Dick did not wince; and, though the diamond ring cut into his hand as they exchanged that grasp, no expression of pain crossed his face, which became all at once quite radiant.

Sir Harry hailed the metamorphosis with delight. Here was the real Dick emerging like a young sun-god from the clouds.

"Come, that is first-rate; I like the look of you better now," he said, with an appreciative nod.

"Father, what does this mean?" faltered Dick.

"It means," growled Mr. Mayne, for he could not get quite amiable all at once, though his heart was lightening in his bosom, "it means that I am an old fool, Dick, and that you are a young one."

"No, father,—not really,—does it?" And Dick beamed still more.

"And it means that you are not to plague me any more about the City. But there! though you have behaved so badly to me, Dick, I forgive you. Sir Harry and I have been talking over things, and if you will work hard for your degree your mother shall ask the girl down here, and we will see about it, and that is all I can say at present. And so we may as well shake hands upon it too."

But Dick did more than that; he threw his arm over his father's shoulder with a movement that was almost caressing.

"Thank you, pater; you are a brick and no mistake!" was all the undemonstrative Briton's tongue could say. But Mr. Mayne, as he looked in his boy's face and felt that pressure on his shoulder, thought them sufficiently eloquent.

"There! get along with you, and have it out with your mother," he growled. But, in spite of his surly tone, Mr. Mayne felt an amount of relief that astonished himself: to see Dick's face happy again, to have no cloud between them, to know that no domestic discord would harass his soul and render gruel necessary to his well-being, was restoring him to his old self again. Sir Harry longed to throw back his head and indulge in a good laugh as he witnessed this little scene of reconciliation.

Mrs. Mayne, who was sitting somewhat sadly by her own fireside, thinking over that day's discomfort, was quite taken aback by hearing Dick coming upstairs in his old way—three steps at a time—and then bursting into the room after a hasty knock at the door.

"Mother," he cried, breathlessly, "Sir Harry Challoner is in the library—and pater wants you to come down and give them some tea—and Sir Henry is going to stop to dinner—and the woodcock is to be cooked—and you are to get the best room ready. But first of all—like the dear, darling mother you are—you are to sit down and write a letter to Nan."

But the letter was not written then; for how could Bessie keep her husband and his guest waiting for their tea after such an urgent message? And had she not first of all to listen to Dick's incoherent story, which she heard better from Sir Harry afterwards, who took great pains to explain it to the poor bewildered woman?

Mr. Mayne thought he had never seen Bessie look so handsome since the days he courted her, as she sat smiling at the head of the table in her velvet gown. And Sir Harry, too, was quite charmed with the soft, comely creature.

Later on, while the two elder gentlemen were chatting confidentially over their cigars and whisky-and-water, she did manage to write a few lines to Nan. But it was not much of a letter; for how was she to construct a decent sentence with that torment Dick hanging over the back of her chair and interrupting her every moment? But Nan was not ill pleased by the missive when she received it.

"My own dear girl," it said,—"my dearest girl,—for no daughter could ever be so dear to me as you will be, Nan, for my boy's sake, and because he loves you so." ("You are right there, mother!" struck in Dick, in a tone of ecstasy.) "Everything has come right, through Sir Henry's intercession and my Richard's goodness." ("Humph!" coughed Dick. "Well, it is not for the like of me to contradict you.")

"You are to come to us—at once—at once,"—underlined,—"for Dick will be going back to Oxford, so there is no time to lose; and you have not got any good of your engagement yet." ("Only just at that last moment," muttered her son at this.)

"My precious boy looks so happy that I could cry with joy to see him." ("Oh, shut up, mother!

Nan knows all that.") "And his dear father looks as pleased as possible, and he sends his love." ("He did indeed, Dick," as an incredulous sound broke from his lips), "and he says bygones are bygones. And you are on no account to feel yourself awkward as regards him, for of course Dick's *fiancee*" ("Are you sure that is spelt right, Dick?") "will bring her own welcome. Is not that a sweet speech for my Richard to say? So you will come, my dear, will you not? And I remain, just what I always was, my Nan's loving friend,

"Bessie Mayne."

And then the letter was carefully consigned to Dick's pocket, and in due course of time was delivered into Nan's fair hands.

CHAPTER XLV.

AN UNINVITED GUEST.

During the next few days Grace and Phillis made great strides towards intimacy; and, as though some magnetic influence attracted each to each, they were to be found constantly together. Neither of them was a girl to indulge in gushing sentimentality; but Grace, whose refined intellectual nature had hitherto met with no response except from her brother, perceived at once Phillis's innate superiority and clear generous temperament. For the first time she felt feminine friendship a possibility, and hailed it as a new-found joy. Nan testified her pleasure on more than one occasion: jealousy never found a resting-place in a corner of her heart.

"I am so glad, Phillis," she observed, once, "that you and Grace Drummond like each other so much. You have never found any girl equal to you yet; and I was always too stupid to give you what you wanted."

"Oh, Nannie, as though I would change you for a dozen Grace Drummonds!" returned Phillis, stanch as ever to her domestic creed, that there never was and never could be such another as Nan.

"Oh, of course we shall always be the same to each other, you and I," returned Nan, seriously, "we are such old comrades, Phil; but then I have Dick, and it is only fair you should have some one too;" but she did not understand why Phillis suddenly sighed and turned away.

An amusing little incident happened to Phillis after this, which she greatly enjoyed. Colonel Middleton's avoidance of them had long been a sore point with her, as it was with Dulce.

"I feel almost like that wicked Haman," she said, once, in a serio-comic voice, "and as if he were my Mordecai. I shall never think we have achieved perfect success until I have forced him to shake hands with me." But Nan, who cared very little about such things, only laughed.

On Sunday morning Colonel Middleton marched up the aisle rather more pompously than usual, and there followed him a tall, very solemn-faced young man, with serious eyes that reminded them of Elizabeth.

"Son Hammond," whispered Phillis, who was not always as devout as she ought to be; and Dulce tried hard to compose her dimples.

Possibly the young officer was not as solemn as his looks, for he certainly paid more attention to the opposite pew than he did to his prayer-book; and as he walked home with his sister, Colonel Middleton being just then out of earshot, he questioned her rather closely on the subject:

"Who were those girls, Elizabeth? I mean the three who were just opposite us with their mother. Are they visitors or residents?" Then Elizabeth told him very briefly their name and occupation.

"Good gracious!" he returned, in a thunderstruck tone; and then all at once he burst out laughing, as though at a good joke:

"I call that a piece of splendid pluck. Do you know, I could see in a moment there was something out of the common about them? They are all very pretty,—at least good-looking,—and I liked their quiet style of dress. You must introduce me to-morrow."

"My dear Hammond, I can do nothing of the kind," returned Elizabeth, glancing round in an alarmed way. "Father has refused to have them at Brooklyn; and it will annoy him terribly if you were to take any notice of them." But to this Hammond turned a deaf ear, and, though he forbore to question her any further on that occasion, he had fully made up his mind that the introduction should take place as soon as possible.

As it fell out, accident favored him the very next day; for, as he was calling with his sister, at the White House, who should be announced the next minute but the Misses Challoner,—Phillis and Dulce, who had been bidden to afternoon tea!

Mrs. Cheyne kissed and welcomed them both. Then Captain Middleton was introduced; and they were soon chatting merrily together, to Elizabeth's secret amusement.

Captain Middleton made himself very agreeable to the two girls, as Dulce observed afterwards. She had never before been so deceived in a man's appearance,—for he was not solemn at all; and, though the serious brown eyes certainly inspected them rather critically from time to time, he proved himself a bright amusing companion, and fully bore out his father's and sister's encomiums.

The Middletons were easily induced to prolong their visit. Elizabeth felt herself a traitor to her father; but she could not refuse Hammond's imploring glance. And so they stayed, and all took their leave together.

Mr. Cheyne walked down to the gate with them. He had an errand in the town; and he and Elizabeth walked behind the young people, talking them over in a low voice.

Now, it so happened that Colonel Middleton was trudging down the Braidwood Road; and as he neared the White House he looked up, and there was his son walking contentedly with a Challoner girl on each side of him, and the three were laughing merrily.

It was Dulce who saw him first.

"There comes your father!" she said; and she began to blush as she had done on the day when he had left her at the gate of Brooklyn, talking to Elizabeth.

Hammond proved himself quite worthy of the occasion.

"Well met, father," he called out, cheerily, "We seem all going one way. I suppose no one needs any introduction? Of course you know my father, Miss Challoner?"

Then the colonel threw down his arms. He had fought very bravely on his son's behalf; but, after all his labors, his bristling defences and skilful retreats, Hammond had of his own free will delivered himself into the hands of the Philistines. What was the use of guarding an empty citadel?—his treasure was already in the enemy's grasp.

All this was written on the colonel's lugubrious face as he bowed stiffly and walked in sorrowful silence beside them, shaking his white head at intervals; but no one but Dulce took any notice of his sombre mood.

Dulce was very timid by nature. She was the least outspoken of the three, and always kept in the background, like a modest little flower that loved the shade; but she was very soft-hearted, and had great regard for people's feelings. And the old man's downcast looks pained her; for how was she to know that he was secretly pleased at this meeting?

"I hope—I wish—you did not mind knowing us so much. But it has not been our fault this afternoon," sighed Dulce, stammering and blushing over her words. "You will believe that, will you not, Colonel Middleton?"

If a cannon shot had been fired into the old warrior's ear, he could hardly have started more than he did at these childish words. He looked round. There was the little girl, looking up at him with the innocent eyes he remembered so well, and her mouth puckered a little as though she wanted to cry.

This was more than any man could bear, even if he had a harder heart than Colonel Middleton.

"My dear," he said, taking the little hand, "I have always wanted to know you; Elizabeth will tell you that. I lost my heart to your sisters the first day I saw them. I am sure we shall be good friends in time, if you will forgive an old man's pride." And then he patted her hand as though she had been an infant.

When Mr. Drummond sat down to dinner that evening, he astonished Mattie very much by saying,—

"You can ask the Middletons, after all, for your tea-party, if you like, Mattie. What wonderful sight do you think I saw just now? Why, the colonel himself coming out from the Friary, and all the three girls were round him, chattering as though they had known him all their life; and I am pretty sure that in spite of the dark, I saw 'son Hammond' behind him." And Mattie, glad of the permission, gave the invitation the next day.

Mattie grew a little alarmed as the evening approached. It was her first party and she knew Archie would be critical; but Grace proved herself a useful ally.

In spite of her efforts to keep in the background and leave Mattie in her position as mistress of her brother's house, she felt herself becoming insensibly its presiding spirit.

Archie was tolerably good-natured to Mattie; but the habits of a lifetime were too strong for him, and he still snubbed and repressed her at intervals. Mattie felt herself of no importance now that Grace had come: her duties were usurped before her eyes. Archie made a fresh demand on her forbearance every day.

"Why cannot you keep to the housekeeping, and let Grace do the schools and visitings?" he said, once. "It must come to her by and by, when you are gone; and I want her to begin as soon as possible. It will not do to let her think she has come too soon," implying that good taste should lead Mattie to resign of her own account.

Poor Mattie! she had many a good cry in secret before that Tuesday. She could hardly help feeling pained to see how all-in-all those two were to each other, and the glad eagerness Grace threw into her work, knowing the reward of commendation she would reap. "It must be so strange never to be snubbed or scolded,—to do everything right," Mattie thought.

Grace felt very sorry for her, and petted her a good deal. The dark little face had always a pained wistfulness on it now that touched her. She spoke kindly of Mattie to her brother on all possible occasions.

“I think Mattie is so generous in giving up to me as she does,” she observed, as Archie joined her in the drawing-room in expectation of their guests. Mattie had not yet made her appearance. She had been lighting the wax candles and trimming a refractory lamp that refused to burn, and had just run past her brother with blackened fingers and hot, tired face.

“Oh, yes, she is good enough,” he returned, indifferently, as he straightened a crooked candle; “but I wish she would not always be late. She has not begun to dress, and it is the time we appointed for the Challoners to come. Of all things I hate unpunctuality and fuss, and Mattie is always so fussy.”

Grace’s conscience pricked her. “I am afraid I left her too much to do,” she said, penitently. “Phillis asked me to go for a walk with them; but I ought not to have left her. I will go and help her now.”

But Archie objected:

“No, no; let her be. You must not leave me alone to receive them. How nice you look in that cream-colored dress, Grace! I thought it would suit you.” But, though his eyes rested on her as he spoke, he seemed rather absent. And when the door-bell rang a moment afterwards, a sudden flush came to his face.

It was very odd to feel that he was receiving Nan as his guest. He had dreaded the ordeal greatly, but after the first moment it was not so bad. Grace, who had her suspicions and watched them closely, had them verified without doubt during the moment that followed the Challoners’ entrance; but no other eyes but hers would have read anything amiss in the young vicar’s gravely composed face.

Nan, who was looking beautiful, met him with her usual unconsciousness: though neither of them knew it, it was this very unconsciousness that was fast healing the wound. One cannot mourn long after a lost dream, and there had never been any reality in it. Not one of Nan’s thoughts had ever belonged to him for a moment: his existence, his individuality had never grazed the outer edge of her susceptibilities. Dick had encased her from childhood in armor of proof against all manhood. Archie felt this even as he touched her hand, and his lips gave her welcome.

“I am so sorry your mother could not come,” he said, politely. And then he turned to Phillis, who was regarding him with an odd, dubious look.

Archie felt the look, and his spirit rose in instant opposition.

“Do you know the Middletons are to be here, after all?” he said, moving a little into the background, for this girl had keen vision, and, as of old, her sympathy moved him strangely.

“Oh, then we shall be quite a party,” she returned, brightly. “It seems ages since we have been at one, and I feel disposed to enjoy myself. The very sight of wax candles is exhilarating. I am half afraid to touch coffee, for fear it will get into my head. And how sweet Grace looks in that dress!”

“Your *chef-d’œuvre*!” he replied, rather wickedly.

“Oh, yes, I recognize my handiwork,” returned Phillis, nonchalantly. “I am quite as proud of it as an artist would be of a picture. Here comes Mattie; poor little thing! she seems tired, but she looks nice, too.”

Archie moved away after this, for the Middletons were announced; but he thought as he left her that he had never seen her look so handsome. Nan’s beauty had so blinded him that he had hardly been aware what a charming face Phillis really had: when she was pleased or excited she lighted up quite radiantly.

“Oh, dear!” exclaimed Mattie, fussily coming up at that moment. “I don’t know what has become of your cousin; but Captain Middleton says all the trains have been snowed up.”

“If the train he is in has been snowed up, of course we must not expect to see him this evening,” was Phillis’s laughing reply. “Never mind; I dare say we shall all survive it; though Harry is such a good fellow, and I am immensely fond of him.”

“Oh, but the tea and coffee will be spoiled. I must go and pour it out now. Look, Grace is making signs to me.”

“Shall I come and help you?” was the ready response. “What a pretty little tea-table, Mattie, and how charmingly snug it looks in the bay-window! The gentlemen will wait on us, of course. I like this way better than servants handing round lukewarm cups from the kitchen: it is not so grand, but it is cosier. Was it your arrangement, Mattie?”

“Oh, yes,” returned Mattie, in a disconsolate tone, as she took her place. “But, Phillis, are you really not anxious about your cousin? It is so dreadful to think of him snowed up all night, with nothing to eat and drink!”

Phillis laughed outright at this.

“My imagination will not conjure up such horrors. I believe Harry is at this moment sitting in the hotel discussing a good dinner before a blazing fire.” And, as Mattie looked injured at this, she continued, still more merrily: “My dear, are you such an ignoramus as to believe that any

amount of wax candles and charming women will induce an Englishman to forego his dinner? He will come by and by; and if he gets cold coffee, he will have his deserts." And then Mattie's anxious face grew more cheerful.

The tea-table became the nucleus of the whole room before long. Even Mr. Frere, a tall scholarly-looking man, with spectacles and a very bald head, though he was still young, seemed drawn magnetically into the circle that closed round Phillis. The girl was so natural and sprightly, there was such buoyancy and brightness in her manner; and yet no man could ever have taken a liberty with her, or mistaken the source of that pure rippling fun. The light jesting tone, the unembarrassed manner, were as free from consciousness as though there were gray-headed dons round her. And yet, alas for Phillis! there was not a word uttered in a certain voice that did not reach her ear somehow; not a movement that was lost upon her, even when she chatted and laughed with those who stood round her.

Colonel Middleton was stanch to his little favorite, and sat on the couch between her and Grace, while Nan and Miss Middleton talked apart. Nan watched the tea-table smilingly. She did so love to see Phillis happy; it never occurred to her to feel herself a little neglected, or to wonder why the grave young master of the house so seldom addressed her: thoughts of this sort never entered Nan's head.

But she grew a little silent by and by, and began to answer Elizabeth somewhat absently. She did not know what it meant, but a certain strong longing took possession of her,—a sort of craving to see Dick's face and hear his voice. It was foolish, of course; and then she roused herself with difficulty.

"How late Harry is! I wonder if the train be really snowed up! Oh, that must be he!" as the door-bell sounded. "Mattie will be glad; she was so afraid the coffee would be cold." For Mattie had poured this grievance into every one's ears.

Of course it was Sir Harry. Yes, as the door opened, there were the broad, genial face and the massive shoulders that could only belong to one person. And who was this young man following him,—a somewhat insignificant young man compared to this son of Anak,—a young man with sandy hair, with a trivial moustache, with a free, careless expression of good-nature that seemed somehow stamped on his features?

Nan did not speak or move in her corner; but she locked her hands together tightly, and a most wonderful blush came to her face; for the young man's eyes had moved quickly round the room, with an eager expression in them, and had just rested upon her.

Nan sat immovable while Sir Harry, gave the necessary introduction in his loud, jovial voice:

"I am sorry to be late,—I am, 'pon my honor, Miss Mattie! but it could not be helped: could it, Mayne? Mr. Drummond, I have taken the liberty to bring a friend with me; he is my guest at present,—Mr. Richard Mayne. He has come down to Hadleigh to see some old acquaintances of his."

"Dick! Oh, Dick!" the words would come out now. Miss Middleton had judiciously vacated the corner of the couch, and Dick had boldly placed himself there instead, after first touching Nan's trembling hand. "What does it mean? Why have you startled me so?" she whispered, for they were in a snug corner, and no one was near them.

"I suppose a man has a right to come and look after his own belongings?" returned Dick, in the coolest possible manner. But his eyes were more eloquent than his words, as usual. "How lovely you are looking, Nan! I do believe you grow prettier every day. And are you glad to see me?—half or a quarter as glad as I am to see you?"

"I was thinking of you," she returned, softly. "I was wondering what you were doing, and picturing you at Longmead; and then the door opened, and there you were, half hidden by Harry; and I thought I was dreaming."

"Well, that was transmission of thought, don't you see?—animal magnetism, and all that sort of thing. You thought of me because I was thinking of you; but you did not know that only the door divided us. Oh, Nan! isn't it awfully jolly to be together again?"

"Yes; but I don't understand it yet," she replied. "Have you come without your father's permission, Dick? Are you sure he will not be very angry?"

"Oh, no; the pater is all right. Sir Harry—what a brick that fellow is!—has talked him over, and he has given his consent to our engagement. Look here, Nan! what you have got to do is to pack up your things, and I am to take you down to-morrow. This is a note from mother, and you will see what she says." And Nan's gloved hand closed eagerly upon the precious missive.

The letter could not be read just then. Nan sent Dick away after that, though he would willingly have remained in his corner during the remainder of the evening. He went off grumbling, to be civil to his hostess, and Nan remained behind trying to calm herself. It was "all right," Dick had told her. She was to go down with him the next day to dear Longmead. Were their troubles really over? Well, she would hear all about it to-morrow. She must wait patiently until then.

Nan did not long remain alone. Archie, who had watched this little scene from the bay-window, suddenly took his opportunity and crossed the room.

Nan looked up at him with a happy smile.

"You have had a surprise this evening, have you not, Miss Challoner? Sir Harry has just been telling me all about it. You will permit me now to offer my congratulations?"

“Most certainly, Mr. Drummond.”

“I am so glad, for both your sakes, that things should be so comfortably settled,” he went on, placing himself beside her,—a movement that mightily displeased Dick, who had conceived a dislike to the handsome parson from the first. “A parent’s opposition is always a serious drawback in such cases; but Sir Harry tells me that Mr. Mayne has given his full consent.”

“I believe so,” returned Nan, blushing a little; “but I really hardly know any particulars. It is such a surprise to me altogether; but his mother has written to me, and I am expected down there.”

“You have my warmest wishes for your happiness,” continued Archie, gravely; and then Nan thanked him.

But here Dick interrupted them. He was still new to his *role*, and hardly had the assurance that belongs to the engaged man, who feels himself safely steering towards the desired haven of matrimony. It appeared to him that on this evening he ought not to lose sight of Nan for a moment. To see Mr. Drummond taking his place was too much for him, and he put down his untasted coffee.

“I am afraid it is rather cold,” observed Mattie, anxiously; but she spoke to deaf ears.

Dick was already half-way to the corner. Nan received him a little shyly; but Mr. Drummond at once took the hint.

“Oh, Dick, people will notice! you must take care,” remonstrated Nan.

She was preparing one of those gentle little lectures to which she sometimes treated him, and to which he was wont to listen with the utmost submission; but, to her intense surprise, he turned restive.

“That was all very well when things were not settled between us,” observed Dick, decidedly. “Now we are engaged, of course I shall assert my rights publicly. What does it matter if people notice? They will only think what a lucky fellow I am, and how they would like to be in my place. Do you think I was going to remain at the other end of the room while that parson was talking to you?” And then Nan all at once discovered that, in spite of Dick’s boyish looks and easy temper, she had found her master,—that, like other men, he was capable of jealousy and insisted on an entire and undivided allegiance.

Nan was weak enough to like him all the better for this little touch of tyranny; and, after all, though she felt it a little hard on Mr. Drummond, who was so harmless and good-natured, the sense of this monopoly was very sweet to her.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A NEW INVASION OF THE GOTHS.

It was the most successful evening—every one said so; but, somehow, Mattie had not enjoyed it. She supposed she was tired; that lamp had worried her; but, though every one had been very pleasant, and had said nice things to her,—even that formidable Mr. Frere,—Mattie felt something had been lacking. She had been very pleased to see Sir Harry, and he had come up to her at once and spoken to her in his usual genial manner; but after the first few minutes, during which he had drunk his coffee standing beside her, she did not remember that he had again addressed her. After that, he had made his way to Grace, and did not stir for a long time.

Mattie had Colonel Middleton on her hands then; but her eyes would stray to that part of the room. How pretty Grace looked in that soft creamy dress, with the dainty lace ruffles that Archie had sent her! Her face generally wanted color and animation, but to-night she was quite rosy by comparison. She seemed to find Sir Harry amusing, for she looked up at him very brightly. And then Archie joined them: he would not be *de trop* there, he knew. And the three talked as though they never meant to leave off.

When Sir Harry came to take his leave, he said, a little abruptly,—

“I like that sister of yours, Miss Mattie. She is sensible for a girl; and yet she knows how to laugh. Clever girls are generally a little priggish, do you know? But one need not be afraid of Miss Grace.” And Mattie knew that from Sir Harry this was high praise.

“Every one likes Grace,” she faltered.

“I am not surprised at that,” was the ready response; and then he shook hands and thanked her for the pleasant evening. He did not even look at her as he spoke, Mattie remembered afterwards: he was watching Nan, who was smiling on Dick’s arm.

The young vicar stood bare-headed on the snowy door-step, as his guests merrily trooped out together. Dick and Nan came first: Nan had a scarlet hood over her bright hair, and Dick was grumbling over the lightness of her cloak, and was wrapping his gray overcoat round her.

“Nonsense, Nan! I insist upon it! and you know nothing gives me cold!” Dick was saying, in his authoritative way; and then of course Nan yielded.

“‘Oh, wert thou in the cauld blast,’” sang Phillis, mockingly, who was following them under Captain Middleton’s escort. “Don’t you think engaged people are sometimes very masterful?” She spoke, of course, to her companion; but he had turned to warn his father and Dulce of an awkward step, and Archie intercepted the sentence:

“Most men are masterful, Miss Challoner. You will find that out some day for yourself.” He meant nothing by this little speech, and he was rather taken aback by the sudden hot blush that came to the girl’s face, and the almost angry light in her eyes, as she turned away from him and ran down the slippery steps, to Captain Middleton’s alarm.

“‘On yonder lea, on yonder lea,’” they heard her humming gayly; and Hammond caught the refrain, and finished it in a fine manly bass, while Archie stood still under the wintry sky. Why had she looked like that at him? What was there in his lightly-uttered speech to offend her?

Grace was standing alone when he re-entered the drawing-room. Most of the wax candles were extinguished, but the soft glow of the firelight irradiated the farthest corner of the room.

“What a glorious fire!” he said, warming his chilly hands at it, and then throwing himself into the easy-chair that Grace silently placed for him. “And where is Mattie? Really, she did very well to-night.”

“You must tell her to-morrow, she will be so pleased; she seems tired, and her head aches, so I advised her to go to bed.” And, though Archie did not say openly that he approved of this sensible advice, he implied it by the way he drew a low chair forward for Grace,—so close beside him that she could rest her arm upon the cushioned elbow of his.

They remained comfortably silent for along time: it was Grace who spoke first.

“Archie,” she said, rather nervously, but her eyes had a settled purpose in them, “shall you be angry if I disobey you, dear, and speak again on a certain subject?”

“What subject?” he asked, rather surprised by her manner. He had not a notion to what she was referring; he did not know how during that long silence their thoughts had been couching the same point, and that all this time she was seeking courage to speak to him.

“I know your secret, Archie; I discovered it to-night.”

“My secret!” he returned, in utter amazement. “I have no secret, Gracie.” And then, as he caught her meaning, a cloud came to his brow. “But this is nonsense!” he continued harshly, —“pure nonsense; put it out of your head.”

“I saw it to-night,” she went on, in a very low voice, undisturbed by his evident displeasure. “She is good and sweet, and quite lovely, Archie, and that young man is not half worthy of her; but she has no thought but for him.”

“Do you think I do not know that?” he returned, in an exasperated tone. “Grace, I will not have you talk in this way. I am cured,—quite cured: it was nothing but a passing folly.”

“A folly that made you very unhappy, my poor Archie; but—hush! you must not interrupt me—I am not going to talk about her.”

“Oh, that is well,” he returned, in a relieved tone.

“I was sorry—just a little sorry—at first, because I knew how much it had cost you; but this evening I could have found it in my heart to be angry with you,—yes, even with you. ‘Oh, the blindness of these men!’ I thought: ‘why will they trample on their own happiness?’”

“Are you speaking of me?” he asked, in a bewildered tone.

“Of whom should I be speaking?” she answered; and her voice had a peculiar meaning in it. “You are my dear brother,—my dearest brother; but you are no more sensible than other men.”

“I suppose not,” he returned, staring at her; “I suppose not.”

“Many men have done what you are doing,” she went on, quietly. “Many have wanted what belonged to another, and have turned their backs upon the blessing that might have been theirs. It is the game of cross-purposes. Do you remember that picture, Archie,—the lovely print you longed to buy—the two girls and the two men? There was the pretty demure maiden in front, and at the back a girl with a far sweeter face to my mind, watching the gloomy-looking fellow who is regarding his divinity from afar. There was a face here to-night that brought that second girl strongly to my mind; and I caught an expression on it once––” Here Archie violently started.

“Hush! hush! what are you implying? Grace, you are romancing; you do not mean this?”

“As there is a heaven above us, I do mean it, Archie.”

“Then, for God’s sake, not another word!” And then he rose from his seat, and stood on the rug.

“You are not really angry with me?” she urged, frightened at his vehemence.

“No; I am not angry. I never am angry with you, Grace, as you know; but all the same there are some things that never should be said.” And, when he had thus gravely rebuked her speech, he kissed her forehead, and muttering some excuse about the lateness of the hour, left the room.

Grace crept away to her chamber a little discomfited by this rebuff, gently as it had been given; but if she had only guessed the commotion those few hinted words had raised in her brother’s mind!

He had understood her; in one moment he had understood her. As though by a lightning-flash of intelligence, the truth had dawned upon him; and if an electric shock had passed through his frame and set all his nerves tingling he could not have been more deeply shaken.

Was that what she thought, too, when she had turned away from him with that quiet look of scorn on her face! Did she know of any possible blessing that might have been his, only that he had turned his back upon it, crying out childishly for a shadowy happiness? Did she mutter to herself also, “Oh, the blindness of these men!”?

There is an old saying, greatly credited by the generality of people, that hearts are often caught at the rebound,—that in their painful tossings from uneven heights and depths, and that sad swinging over uncertain abysses, some are suddenly attracted and held fast; and there is sufficient proof to warrant the truth of this adage.

The measurements of pain are unequal: different natures hold different capacities. A trouble that seems very real at the time, and full of stings, may be found later on to be largely alloyed by wounded self-love and frustrated vanity. Sound it with the plumb-line of experience, of time, of wakening hopefulness, and it may sink fathoms, and by and by end in nothingness, or perhaps more truly in just a sense of salt bitterness between the teeth, as when one plunges in a waning tide.

Not that Archie realized all this as he paced his room that night: no; he was very strangely moved and excited. Something, he knew not what, had again stirred the monotony of his life. He had been sick and sad for a long time; for men are like children, and fret sometimes after the unattainable, if their hearts be set upon it. And yet, though he forbore to question himself too closely that night, how much of his pain had been due to wounded vanity and crossed wilfulness!

It was long before he could sleep, for the sudden broadening of the prospective of his future kept him wide awake and restless. It was as though he had been straining his eyes to look down a long, gray vista, where he saw things dimly, and that suddenly there was a low light on the horizon,—not brilliant, not even clear; but it spoke of approaching daybreak. By and by the path would be more plainly visible.

There was great excitement at the Friary on the next day. They had found it hard to get rid of Dick the previous night; but Sir Harry, who read his aunt’s tired face rightly, had carried him off almost by sheer force, after a lengthy leave-taking with Nan in the passage.

It was only Mrs. Challoner who was tired. Poor woman! she was fairly worn out by the violence of her conflicting feeling,—by sympathy with Nan in her happiness, with pleasure in Dick’s demonstrative joy, and sorrow at the thought of losing her child. The girl herself was far too much excited for sleep.

She and Phillis did all the packing for the next day, and it was not until Dulce sleepily warned them of the lateness of the hour that they consented to separate; and then Nan sat by the parlor fire a long time alone, enjoying the luxury of undisturbed meditation.

But the next morning, just as they had gone into the work-room,—not to settle to any business,—that was impossible under the present exciting circumstances,—but just to fold up and despatch a gown that had been finished for Mrs. Squails, while Dulce put the finishing-touches to Mrs. Cheyne’s tweed dress, Nan announced in a glad voice that their cousin and Dick were at the gate; “and I am so thankful we packed last night,” she continued, “for Dick will not let me have a free moment until we start.”

“You should keep him in better order,” observed Phillis, tersely: “if you give him his own way so much, you will not have a will of your own when you are married: will she, mother?” Mrs. Challoner smiled a little feebly in answer to this: she could not remember the time when she had had a will of her own.

Nan went out shyly to meet them; but she could not understand her reception at all. Dick’s grasp of her hand was sufficiently eloquent, but he said nothing; and Nan thought he was trying not to laugh, for there was a gleam of fun in his eyes, though he endeavored to look solemn. Sir Harry’s face, too, wore an expression of portentous gravity.

“Are you all in the work-room, Nan?” he asked, in a tone as though they were assembled at a funeral.

“Yes; mother and all,” answered Nan, brightly. “What is the matter with you both? You look dreadfully solemn.”

“Because we have a little business before us,” returned Sir Harry, wrinkling his brows and frowning at Dick. “Come, Mayne, if you are ready.”

“Wait a minute, Nan. I will speak to you afterwards,” observed that young gentleman, divesting himself of his gray overcoat; and Nan, very much puzzled, preceded them into the room.

“How do you do, Aunt Catherine? Good-morning, girls,” nodded Sir Harry; and then he looked at Dick. And what were they both doing? Were they mad? They must have taken leave of their senses; for Dick had raised his foot gently,—very gently,—and Mrs. Squails’s red merino gown lay in the passage. At the same moment, Sir Harry’s huge hand had closed over the tweed, and, by a dexterous thrust, had flung it as far as the kitchen. And now Dick was bundling out the sewing-machine.

“Dick! oh, Dick!” in an alarmed voice from Dulce. And Phillis flew to the great carved wardrobe,

that Sir Harry was ransacking; while Nan vainly strove to rescue the fashion-books that Dick was now flinging into the fender.

“Oh, you great Goth! You stupid, ridiculous Harry!” observed Phillis, scornfully, while the rolls of silk and satin and yards of trimming were tossed lightly into a heap of *debris*.

Laddie was growling and choking over the buttons. Dorothy afterwards carried away a whole shovelful of pins and hooks and eyes.

Nan sat down by her mother and folded her hands on her lap. When men were masterful, it was time for maidens to sit still. Dulce really looked frightened; but Phillis presently broke into a laugh.

“This is a parable of nature,” she said. “Mammie, does your head ache? Would you like to go into the next room?”

“There, we have about done!” observed Sir Harry. “The place is pretty well clear: isn’t it, Mayne?” And, as Dick nodded a cheerful assent, he shut the door of the wardrobe, locked it, and, with much solemnity, put the key in his pocket. “Now for my parable,” he said. “Aunt Catherine, you will excuse a bit of a spree, but one must take the high hand with these girls. I have bundled out the whole lot of trumpery; but, as head of this family, I am not going to stand any more of this nonsense.”

“Oh, indeed!” put in Phillis. “I hope Mrs. Squails will take her creased gown! Dulce, the sewing-machine is right on the top of it,—a most improving process, certainly.”

“Now, Phillis, you will just shut up with your nonsense! As head of the family, I am not going to stand any more of this sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing?” asked Mrs. Challoner, timidly. “My dears, I thought it was only fun; but I do believe your cousin is in earnest.”

“I am quite in earnest, Aunt Catherine,” returned Sir Harry, sitting down beside her, and taking her hand. “I hope our bit of larking has not been too much for you; but that fellow vowed it would be a good joke.” Here Dick’s eyes twinkled. “If Mrs. Squails’s gown is spoiled, I will buy her another; but on your peril, girls, if you put a stitch in any but your own from this day forward!”

“Please your honor, kindly,” whined Phillis, dropping a courtesy, “and what will your honor have us do?”

“Do!” and then he broke into a laugh. “Oh, I will tell you that presently. All I know is, Nan is engaged to my friend Mayne here; and I have promised his father, on my word as a gentleman and head of this family, that this dressmaking humbug shall be given up.”

“You had no right to give such a promise,” returned Phillis, offended at this; but Nan’s hand stole into Dick’s. She understood now.

“But, Harry, my dear,” asked Mrs. Challoner, “what would you have them do?”

“Oh, play tennis,—dance,—flirt, if they like! How do young ladies generally occupy their time? Don’t let us talk about such petty details as this. I want to tell you about my new house. You all know Gilsbank? Well, it is ‘Challoner Place’ now.”

“You have bought it, Harry?”

“Yes; I have bought it,” he returned, coolly. “And what is more, I hope to settle down there in another month’s time. How soon do you think you will be ready to move, Aunt Catherine?”

“My dear!” in a voice of mild astonishment. But Dulce clapped her hands: she thought she guessed his meaning. “Are we to live with you, Harry? Do you really mean to take us with you?”

“Of course I shall take you with me; but not to Challoner Place. That would be rather close quarters; and—and—I may make different arrangements,” rather sheepishly. “Aunt Catherine, Glen Cottage will be all ready for you and the girls. I have settled about the furniture; and Mrs. Mayne will have fires lighted whenever you like to come down. Why, aunt,—dear Aunt Catherine,” as he felt her thin hand tremble in his, and the tears started to her eyes, “did you not tell me how much you loved your old home? And do you think, when you have no son to take care of you, that I should ever let you be far from me?”

“Confound you!” growled Dick. “Is not a son-in-law as good as a son any day.”

But no one heard this but Nan.

Mrs. Challoner was weeping for joy, and Dulce was keeping her company; but Phillis walked up to her cousin with a shamefaced look:

“I am sorry I called you a Goth, Harry. I ought to have remembered Alcides. You are as good as gold. You are a dear generous fellow. And I love you for it; and so do Nan and Dulce. And I was not a bit cross, really; but you did look such a great goose, turning out that wardrobe.” But, though she laughed at the remembrance, the tears were in Phillis’s eyes.

Dick was nobody after this: not that he minded that. How could they help crowding round this “big hero” of theirs who had performed such wonders?

Gilsbank turned into Challoner Place; Glen Cottage, with its conservatory and brand-new furniture, theirs again,—their own,—their very own (for Sir Harry intended to buy that too as soon as possible); Nan engaged to her dearest Dick, and all the neighborhood prepared to

welcome them back!

“If you please, Miss Phillis, Mrs. Squails desires her compliments, and she is waiting for her dress.”

We forbare to repeat Sir Harry’s answer. Nevertheless, with Dick’s help, the unfortunate gown was extricated, and privately ironed by Dorothy.

“That is a good morning’s work of yours,” observed Phillis, quietly looking down at the heap at her feet. “Dorothy, it seems Sir Harry is master here. If any more orders come for us, you may as well say, ‘The Misses Challoner have given up business.’”

CHAPTER XLVII.

“IT WAS SO GOOD OF YOU TO ASK ME HERE.”

Mrs. Challoner heaved a gentle little sigh when in the afternoon the fly carried off Nan and Dick to the station: it brought to her mind another day that would come far too soon. Phillis spoke out this thought boldly as she ran back to the cottage.

“I wanted to throw an old shoe for luck, mammie,” she said, laughing, “only I knew Nan would be so dreadfully shocked. How happy they looked! And Dick was making such a fuss over her, bringing out his plaid to wrap her in. Certainly he is much improved, and looks five years older.”

Perhaps Dick shared Mrs. Challoner’s thought too, for an expression of deep gravity crossed his face as he sat down by Nan,—a look that was tender, and yet wistful, as he took her hand.

“Oh, Nan! it does seem so nice to have you all to myself for a little,—just you and I, alone, and all the rest of the world outside somewhere! Do you know it is possible to be almost too happy!” And Dick sighed from the very fulness of content.

Nan gave a merry little laugh at this.

“Oh, no: to me it seems only natural to be happy. When things were at their worst I knew that they would come right some day; and I could not be quite miserable, even then. It was hard, of course; but when one is young, one ought not to mind a little waiting. And we have not waited long, have we, dear?” But to this Dick demurred.

“It was the longest term I ever passed,” he returned, seriously. “When a fellow is in that sort of unsettled state, one cannot measure time in the ordinary way. Well, the ordeal is over, thank heaven!” And then he paused, and continued, a little thoughtfully: “What I have to do now is to work hard and do my best to deserve you. I shall never be worthy of you, Nan; I know that.”

“I think you quite worthy of me,” she answered, softly, and now there were tears in her eyes.

“Oh, no; no fellow could be that,” he replied, decidedly. “I am well enough in my way, and compared with other men I am not so bad,” continued Dick, who had a sufficiently good opinion of his own merits, in spite of the humility of his speech; “but as to coming up to you, Nan, by a long way, why, the thing is impossible! But I tell you this, it helps a fellow to keep right and steady when he believes in the goodness of the girl belonging to him.”

“You must not make me vain,” she half whispered, and her lips trembled a little at his praise. But he disregarded this remonstrance, and went on:

“You have kept me right all my life. How could I ever do a mean or a shabby action to make you ashamed of me? When I was tempted once or twice,—for idle young fellows will be tempted,—I used to say to myself, No, Nan would not approve if she knew it. And I held tight to this thought, and I am glad now that I can look in your dear face and tell you this. It makes me feel so happy.” And indeed Dick’s face was radiant.

They were almost sorry when the journey was over; they had so much to say to each other. The wintry landscape was growing gray and indistinct as they reached their destination, and, though Nan peered anxiously into the darkness for a glimpse of each well-remembered spot, she could only just discern the dim outline of Glen Cottage before the carriage turned in at the gates of Longmead.

Mr. Mayne had determined to pay his intended daughter-in-law all becoming honors, and as soon as the carriage wheels were heard he had the hall door thrown back to show the bright, welcoming light, and he himself descended the flight of steps to the terrace. “Just as though I were a royal personage,” laughed Nan. But she was a little nattered by the compliment.

Most girls would have felt the awkwardness of the situation, but not Nan. The moment Dick assisted her out of the carriage she walked up to his father, and put up her face to be kissed in the most natural way. “It was so good of you to ask me here; and I am so glad to come,” she said, simply.

“There, there! run in out of the cold,” was all his answer; and he patted her hand a little

awkwardly. But, though his voice had its usual gruffness, his manner was otherwise kind. “How are you, Dick? I hope Roper did not keep you waiting at the station, for you are a quarter of an hour behind your time.” And then he took his son’s arm and walked up the steps again.

Nan, meanwhile, had run through the hall and into the warm, softly-lighted drawing-room, and there she soon found herself in Mrs. Mayne’s motherly arms. When the gentlemen came in they interrupted quite a little scene, for Mrs. Mayne was actually crying over the girl, and Nan was kissing her.

“Don’t you think you had better stop that sort of thing, Bessie,” observed her husband, drily, “and get Nan a cup of tea? You would like some tea, my dear, would you not?” in a more gracious voice.

Of course Nan said she would like some, just to show her appreciation of his thoughtfulness; and then Dick said he should like some too, and his father quizzed him a little as he rang the bell. And as Mrs. Mayne obediently dried her eyes at her husband’s behest, they were soon very happy and comfortable. When Nan’s cup was empty, Dick darted to take it, that it might be replenished; but his father was before him.

All that evening Mr. Mayne waited on Nan, quite ignoring his son’s claims. He had a special brand of champagne served that Nan had once said she liked; and he reminded her of this, and pressed her to partake of it.

“This is to your health, my dear,” he said, lifting his glass of port to his lips when the servants had withdrawn; “and to yours too, Dick.” And then Nan blushed very becomingly, and Dick thanked him a little gravely.

“I do think the old boy has fallen in love with you himself, for he has not let me come near you all the evening,” whispered Dick later on that night, pretending to grumble, but in reality looking very happy.

“He has been so good to me,” returned the girl; and she repeated this for Mrs. Mayne’s benefit, when at last the two women found themselves free to indulge in a little talk. Nan had coaxed her friend to sit beside her fire for a few minutes, and then she had knelt down beside her, wrapping her arms round her in the most affectionate way.

“Dear, dear Mrs. Mayne, how nice all this is! and how good Mr. Mayne has been to me all this evening!”

“My Richard never does things by halves,” returned Mrs. Mayne, proudly. “People cannot always understand him, because his manner is a little rough sometimes; but I know, and none better, his real goodness of heart. Why, he is so pleased with himself and you and Dick this evening that he hardly knows how to contain himself; but he is a little awkward in showing it.”

“Oh, no; I did not think him awkward at all.”

“I must say you behaved beautifully, Nan, never seeming as though you remembered that there had been anything amiss, but just taking everything as he meant it. Of course I knew how you would act: I was not afraid that I should be disappointed.”

“Of course I could not do otherwise.”

“And Dick, too, behaved so well, keeping in the background just to give his father full freedom. I must say I was pleased with him, too, for most young men are so thoughtless; but then his behavior to his father has been perfect throughout.”

“I knew it would be,” whispered Nan.

“I am sure it made my heart ache to see him. Sometimes he would come in whistling and pretending to be his old self, so light-hearted and cheerful; and all the time he was fretting himself to death, as I told Richard. Richard was terribly trying sometimes,—you know his way,—but the boy bore it so well. It was not till the last, when they had that walk, and Dick was goaded into positive anger, that he ever lost his temper in the least. I will say this, Nan, that though my Dick may not be much to look at, he has the sweetest temper and the kindest heart.” And so the simple woman ran on, and Nan listened, well pleased.

When Mr. Mayne came up to his dressing-room that evening, his wife stole in after him, and laid her hands on his shoulder as he stood thoughtfully contemplating the fire.

“Well, Richard, won’t you own she is lovely now?”

“Humph! yes; I suppose people would call her pretty,” he returned, in his grudging way. “But I tell you what, Bessie,” suddenly kindling into animation, “she is better than handsome; she is out and out good, and she will make a man of Dick.”

“God bless him, and her too!” whispered the mother, as she withdrew softly, but not before she caught the sound of an “Amen” uttered distinctly in her husband’s voice.

Nan made Dick take her to all their old haunts the next morning; but first of all they went to Glen Cottage. Nan ran through all the rooms with almost a child’s glee: nothing could exceed her delight when Dick showed her the drawing-room, with the new conservatory opening out of it.

“It always was a pretty room,” she said, glancing round her; “but the conservatory and the new furniture have quite transformed it. How charmed mother and the girls will be! The whole house looks better than when we were in it.”

“Nonsense!” returned Dick, stoutly. “There never was a house to compare with it. I always loved it; and so did you, Nan. What a summer we shall have here, when I am reading up for honors in the long vacation! I mean to work pretty hard; for when a fellow has such an object as that––” And then he looked at Nan meaningly; but she was not to be beguiled into that subject.

They were so happy, and so young, that they could afford to wait a little; and she did not wish Dick to speak yet of that day that was looming in the distance.

She could only be sure of one summer at Glen Cottage; but what a time they would have! She stood for a long while looking out on the lawn and calling up possible visions of summer afternoons. The tennis-ground was marked out already in her imagination; the tea-table in its old place under the trees; there was her mother knitting in her favorite wicker-chair; there were Dulce and Phillis, surrounded by their friends

“Come away, Nan. Are you moon-struck, or dreaming?” questioned Dick, drawing her arm through his. “Do you remember what we have to do before luncheon? And Vigo looks so impatient for his run.” But even Dick paused for a moment in the veranda to show Nan the rose she had picked for him just there, and which still lay in his pocket-book.

All her old friends crowded round Nan to welcome her back; and great were the rejoicings when they heard that Glen Cottage was to be in the Challoners’ possession again. Carrie Paine and Adelaide Sartoris called first. Carrie embraced Nan with tearful effusion: she was an honest, warm-hearted creature. But Adelaide looked at her a little curiously.

“Oh, my dear, the scandal that has been talked about you all!” she said, in a mysterious tone. “Carrie and I would not believe it: would we, Car? We told people to hold their tongues, and not talk such nonsense.”

“Never mind that now, Addie,” returned Nan, cheerfully. She felt she must be careful of what she said, for Dick’s sake. “We have had our worries, and have worked as better people have before us; but now it is all over.”

“But is it true that your cousin, Sir Henry Challoner, has bought Gilsbank?” broke in Carrie. “Tell us about him, dear. Addie thought she saw him once. Is he a tall man, with red hair?”

“Very red hair,” responded Nan, laughing.

“Then I did see him,” replied Miss Sartoris, decidedly. “He is quite a giant, Nan; but he looks very good-natured.”

Miss Sartoris was just engaged to a dapper little colonel in the Hussars, so she could afford to be quizzical on the subject of Sir Harry’s inches; but Carrie, who was at present unattached, was a little curious about the future master of Gilsbank.

After this, Nan called at Fitzroy Lodge, and Dick went with her. Lady Fitzroy, who was looking very pretty and delicate, welcomed Nan with the greatest kindness. When Lord Fitzroy came in with the rest of the gentlemen from hunting, he questioned Nan very closely about their new neighbor, Sir Henry Challoner, and made a great many kind inquiries after his favorite, Miss Phillis.

“So we are to have you all back, eh,” he queried, pleasantly. “Well, I call that good news. I am bound that Evelyn is as pleased to hear it as I am.”

“I am very much pleased,” returned Lady Fitzroy graciously. “And you must tell your mother so, with my love. Percival, will you ring for some more hot water, please? I shall not be long: but I am going to take Miss Challoner upstairs to see our boy.”

Nan knew that a great privilege was being conferred on her as she followed Lady Fitzroy into the grand nursery, where the tiny heir lay in his bassinette.

“Is he not just like Fitzroy?” exclaimed the proud young mother, as they stood looking down on the red crumpled features of the new-comer. “Nurse says she has never seen such a striking likeness.”

“He is a darling!” exclaimed Nan, who was, like other girls, a devout baby-worshipper; and then they discoursed very eloquently on his infantile beauties.

It was after this that Lady Fitzroy congratulated Nan on her engagement, and kissed her in quite a sisterly way.

“Fitzroy and I do not think him half good enough for you,” she said, very prettily. “But no one who knows Mr. Mayne can fail to like him, he is so thoroughly genuine and nice. Will the engagement be a long one, Miss Challoner?”

“Not so very long,” Nan returned, blushing. “Dick has to read for honors; but, when he has taken his degree, his father has promised to make things straight for us, while Dick reads for the bar.”

“He is to be a barrister, then?” asked Lady Fitzroy, in surprise. “You must not think me inquisitive, but I thought Mr. Mayne was so very well off.”

“So he is,” replied Nan, smiling,—“quite rich, I believe; but Dick would not like an idle life, and during his father’s lifetime he can only expect a moderate income.”

“You will live in London, then?”

“Oh, yes; I suppose so;” was Nan’s answer. “But we have not talked much about that yet. Dick must work hard for another year, and after that I believe things are to be settled.” And then

Lady Fitzroy kissed her again, and they went downstairs.

Nan wrote home that she was *fêted* like a queen, and that Dick grumbled sadly at having her so little to himself; but then Dick was much given to that sort of good-natured grumbling.

The visit was necessarily a very brief one, as term-time was approaching, and Dick had to go up to Oxford. On the last morning he took Nan for a walk down to Sandy Lane. Vigo and the other dogs were with them, and at the point where the four roads met, Dick stopped and leaned his arms over a gate.

“It will seem a long time to Easter, Nan,” he said, rather lugubriously.

“Oh, no,” she replied brightly to this; “you will have my letters,—such long ones, Dick,—and you know Mr. Mayne has promised to bring Phillis and me down for a couple of days. We are to stay at the Randolph, and of course we shall have afternoon tea in your rooms.”

“Yes; I will ask Hamilton and some of the other fellows to meet you. I want all my friends to see you, Nan.” And as Dick thought of the glory of this introduction, and of the envy of Hamilton and the other fellows, his brow cleared and his old spirits returned.

“I shall think of nothing but my work and those letters, Nan,” were his last words. “I am determined that next summer shall see you my wife.” His voice dropped over the last word almost shyly; but Nan saw a great brightness come into his eyes.

“You must not work too hard,” was all her answer to this, as she moved gently away from him. But her heart beat a little faster at his words. No; she would only have another summer at Glen Cottage. She knew that, and then the new life would lie before them, which she and Dick were to live together.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MRS. SPARSIT’S POODLE.

While Nan was being *fêted* and petted at Longmead, Mattie’s visit was dragging heavily to its close. Since the evening of the tea-party things had been more unsatisfactory than ever.

Archie and Grace were a good deal out. Grace was perpetually at the Friary, and Archie had resumed his old habit of dropping in there for a morning or evening chat. Sir Harry came almost daily, and often spent his disengaged hours with them; but Mattie never saw him for a moment alone. Grace was always in the room, and his conversation was chiefly addressed to her. When Mattie dropped sadly out of the talk, or sat silent in her corner, he did not in his old kind fashion try to include her in the conversation: indeed, he rarely noticed her, except in his brief leave-taking. It hurt Mattie inexpressibly to be thus ignored by her old friend, for from the first his cordiality had had a sunshiny influence over her,—he had been so good to her, so thoughtful for her comfort, before Grace came; but now he seemed to forget sometimes that such a person as Mattie even existed. Was it because Grace’s fair, serious face had bewitched him, or was there anything on his mind? for more than once Mattie thought he seemed absent and ill at ease.

Mattie could not understand it at all. She was not a very acute little person, neither was she over-sensitive by nature, but this sudden coldness on Sir Harry’s part was wounding and perplexing in the extreme. Had she done anything to offend him? Mattie wondered, or was he simply bored by her as most people were?

Once Archie had snubbed her very severely in his presence; something had put him out, and he had spoken to Mattie as though no one were present but their two selves. It was Grace who called him so gently to order, and made him feel ashamed of himself. Sir Harry did not even seem to notice it: he had a paper in his hand, and he went on reading it. But as Mattie left the room she heard him speaking to Grace in his usual way about some political question or other.

Mattie cried bitterly in her room that day. Somehow, she had never taken Archie’s snubbing so much to heart before. How could he speak to her like that, she thought? What would Sir Harry think of her, and of him too? Archie’s conscience pricked him when he saw the traces of tears on Mattie’s face that afternoon, and he was very kind to her all the remainder of the day; but he did not apologize for his words: no one ever did apologize to Mattie. But to his surprise, and Grace’s too, Mattie’s sad face did not clear.

It was her last afternoon but one at the vicarage, and Mattie was sitting alone. All the morning she and Grace had been packing together, for Grace, in her sensible way, had begged her sister not to leave things for the last day. It would tire her for her journey, she said; and the Challoners were coming to spend Mattie’s last evening with her at the vicarage; and there were the Middletons probably coming for an afternoon visit, and so Mattie had better keep herself free for her friends. Mattie had assented to this, and she had been very grateful to Grace for all the help she had given her. Her boxes were ready for cording, and her little parting gifts for the servants laid ready labelled in her drawers, and nothing remained for her busy hands to do.

It was a cold, cheerless afternoon; a cutting north wind and a gray cloudy sky made the fireside all the more tempting by comparison; but Mattie knew there was one duty unfulfilled that she ought to perform. She had promised to call and say good-bye to an old acquaintance of hers who lived at Rock Building.

Mrs. Chamberlain was not a favorite with most people: she was an invalid of somewhat uncertain temper, and most of her friends felt her society an infliction on their patience. Mattie, who was very good-natured, had often done kindly little offices for her, sitting with her for an hour or two at a time, and teaching her some new stitch, to beguile her tedious and often painful days.

Mrs. Chamberlain would feel herself aggrieved if Mattie disappointed her. And she never had stayed at home for the weather; only she was lazy,—tired, perhaps, from her packing,—and reluctant to move.

Sir Harry was in the study, she knew: she had heard his voice some time ago. He often turned in there of his own accord or perhaps Archie had waylaid him and brought him in, for they were excellent friends now; Grace was there, of course, but Mattie had hesitated to join them: none of them wanted her, she said bitterly to herself.

A dim hope that Grace might come in search of her, or that even Sir Henry might saunter in by and by and ask for a cup of tea in his old way, had kept Mattie in her place; but now it was getting a little late, and perhaps after all Grace would ring, and have the tea in there, as she had done once before: and it was no use waiting. And so, when Mattie reached this point, she hurried upstairs and put on her hat and thick jacket, and then, after a moment’s hesitation, opened the study door.

It was just the scene she pictured. Sir Harry was in the big chair in front of the blazing fire, and Grace in her low wicker seat, facing him, with a Chinese screen in her hand. Archie was standing on the rug, with his elbow against the narrow wooden mantelpiece, and all three were talking merrily. Sir Harry stopped in the middle of a laugh, as Mattie entered, and shook hands with her a little gravely.

“How comfortable you all look!” faltered Mattie. The words came in spite of her efforts not to say them.

“Then come and join us,” returned Archie, with unusual affability. “Grace was just wondering what you were doing.”

“I was in the drawing-room alone. No, I cannot sit down, Archie, thank you. I am just going to bid old Mrs. Chamberlain good-bye: she is expecting me, and I must not disappoint her.”

“Oh, but it is not fit for you,” remonstrated Grace. “Sir Harry says the wind is piercing. Do put off your visit until to-morrow, Mattie, and we will go together.”

“Fie, Miss Grace! never put off until to-morrow what can be done to-day,” observed Sir Harry, in his joking voice. “What is it the copy-books say?—is it procrastination or money that is the root of all evil?”

“Sir Harry is quite right, and I must go,” stammered Mattie, made quite desperate by this joke; he knew how the wind was sweeping over the gray sea, and yet he had not said a word about her remaining. Poor Mattie! a miserable choking feeling came into her throat, as she closed the door on another laugh and struggled along in the teeth of the wind. Another time she would not have minded it, for she was hardy by nature; but now the cold seemed to freeze her very heart; she looked quite blue and pinched when she entered Mrs. Chamberlain’s drawing-room. It seemed to Mattie as though hours had passed before she brought her visit to a close, and yet she had been sitting there only three quarters of an hour before she took her leave. The old lady was very gracious this afternoon; she pressed Mattie again and again to wait a little until Sallie brought up the tea and a nice hot cake she was baking. But Mattie steadily refused even these tempting delicacies: she was not cold any longer, she said; but it was growing late, or the afternoon was darker than usual. And then she wished her old friend good-bye,—oh, good-bye for such a long time, Mattie thought,—and sallied forth bravely into the wind gain.

It had lulled a little, but the scene before her was very desolate; just the gray expanse of sea, with the white line of surge breaking into the shore; and here and there a wave tossing up its foamy head in the distance. The air seemed full of that continuous low rolling and splashing of breakers on the beach: a sea-gull was flying inland; the Parade looked white and wind-bleached, —not a creature in sight but a coast-guard on duty, moving backwards and forwards in a rather forlorn manner, except––Here Mattie turned her head quickly: yes, a little beyond there was a man in a rough pilot’s coat, looking out seaward,—a nautical man, Mattie thought, by the way he stood, as though summer gales were blowing about his ears.

Mattie passed quite close to him, for the wind drifted her a little as she did so. He turned coolly round and confronted her.

“Sir Harry! Oh, I did not know you in the least,” faltered Mattie, standing still in her surprise.

“I dare say not,” he replied, quietly: “you have never seen me in this costume before, and I had my back turned towards you. I saw you coming, though, walking as unsteadily as a duck in a storm. What a time you have been, Miss Mattie! You ladies are so fond of a gossip.”

“Were you waiting for me?” she asked, rather breathlessly, and then colored painfully at her question. How absurd! Of course he was not waiting for her; his hotel was just opposite, and he was probably taking a constitutional before his dinner. “Mrs. Chamberlain pressed me to take

tea with her," she went on, by way of saying something, "but I told her I would rather go home."

"Miss Grace was just ringing for tea when I left," he returned. "No wonder you look cold or like a starved robin, Miss Mattie. Why are you walking so fast? there is no hurry, is there? I think you owe me some amends for keeping me standing for an hour in this bitter wind. There! why don't you take my arm and hold on, or you will be blown away?"

Mattie always did as she was bidden, and Sir Harry's tone was a little peremptory. He had been waiting for her, then; he had not quite forgotten her. Mattie began to feel a little less chilled and numb. If he would only say a kind word to her, she thought, she could go away more happily.

"I am thinking about that rejected cup of tea," he said, suddenly, when they had walked for a moment in silence: "it will be all cleared away at the vicarage, and you do look so cold, Miss Mattie."

"Oh, no, not very," she corrected.

"But I say that you do," he persisted, in quite a determined manner: "you are cold, and tired, and miserable,—there!"

"I—I am not particularly miserable," but there were tears in Mattie's voice, as she uttered this little fib. "I don't quite like going away and saying good-bye to people."

"Won't your people be kind to you?" Then changing his tone, "I tell you what, Miss Mattie, no one is in a hurry for you at home, and I don't see why we should not enjoy ourselves. You remember my old friend Mrs. Sparsit, who lives up at Rose Cottage,—you know I saved her poodle from drowning one rough day, when some boys got hold of it: well, Mrs. Sparsit and I are first-rate friends, and I will ask her to give us some tea."

"Oh, no," faltered Mattie, quite shocked at this; for what would Grace say? "I only know Mrs. Sparsit a very little."

"What does that matter?" returned Sir Harry, obstinately: "I am always dropping in myself for a chat. Now, it is no use your making any objection, Miss Mattie, for I have got a lot to say to you, and I don't mean to part with you yet. They will only think you are still at Rock Building, and I suppose you are old enough to act without Miss Grace's advice sometimes."

Mattie hung her head without replying to this. What a feeble, helpless sort of creature he must think her! his voice seemed to express a good-humored sort of contempt. Well, he was right; she was old enough to do as she pleased, and she would like very much to go with him to Mrs. Sparsit's. It was rather a reckless proceeding, perhaps; but Mattie was too down and miserable to argue it out, so she walked beside Sir Harry in a perfectly unresisting manner. Perhaps this was the last time she would enjoy his company for a long time: she must make the most of it.

"We need not walk quite so fast," he said, checking her, for she was hurrying again. "Look here, Miss Mattie, I want to ask you a queer sort of question, if only this confounded wind will let me make myself heard. Please don't laugh; I don't want to be laughed at, for I am quite in earnest. But have you any special objection to red hair?—I mean, do you particularly dislike it?"

Mattie opened her eyes rather widely at this. "No, I rather like it," she returned, without a moment's hesitation, and quite in the dark as to his possible meaning.

"Oh, that is all right," he returned, cheerfully. "You won't believe it, Miss Mattie, but, though I am such a great big fellow, I am as bashful as anything; and I have always had a fancy that no one would have me because of my red hair."

"What an idea!" observed Mattie, with a little laugh, for she thought this so droll, and had not the dimmest idea of his real purpose in asking her such a question.

"Don't laugh, please," he remonstrated, "for I am quite serious; I never was more serious in my life; for this sort of thing is so awkward for a fellow. Then, Miss Mattie, you won't say 'No' to me?"

Mattie stared; but Sir Harry's face, red and embarrassed as it was, gave her no clue to his meaning.

"I don't think you understand me," he said, a little impatiently; "and yet I am sure I am putting it very plainly. You don't object to me, do you, Miss Mattie? I am sure I will do my best to make you happy. Gilsbank is a pretty place, and we shall have Aunt Catherine and the girls near us. We shall all be as merry as larks, if you will only promise to marry me, for I have liked you from the first; I have indeed, Miss Mattie."

Sir Harry was a gentleman, in spite of his rough ways. He understood in a moment, when Mattie's answer to this was a very feeble clutch at his arm, as though her strength were deserting her. What with the sudden surprise of these words, and the force of the wind, the poor little woman felt herself reeling.

"Stand here for a moment, and I will shelter you from the wind. No, don't speak; just hold on, and keep quiet: there is no hurry. No one shall scold you, if I can help it. I am afraid"—speaking as gently as to a child—"that I have been a little rough and sudden with you. Do you feel faint? I never saw you look so pale. What a thoughtless brute I have been!"

"No,—oh, no," panted Mattie; "only I am so giddy, and—so happy." The last words were half whispered, but he caught them. "Are you sure you really mean this, Sir Harry?"

"As sure as that the wind blows," he returned, cheerfully. "Well, that's settled. You and I are to be in the same boat for good and all,—eh, Miss Mattie? Now let us walk on; and I won't say

another word until we reach Mrs. Sparsit's."

Perhaps he had taken this resolution because he saw that Mattie found speech impossible. Her very footsteps tottered as she struggled against the opposing wind. Only the arm on which she leaned seemed to give her strength; and yet Mattie no longer shivered in the cutting blast. She was no longer cold, and numb, and desolate. Something wonderful and incredible and altogether unreal had befallen her,—something that had turned her dizzy with happiness, and which she could not in the least believe. All she knew was that he had told her that no one should scold her now.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Sir Harry, stopping at a trim little cottage, with a side-view of the sea; "and, by Jove, there is the poodle himself at the window. How do you do, Mrs. Sparsit?" as a pleasant, wrinkled dame appeared on the threshold. "You know Miss Drummond, I believe? though not as well as you know me. How is Popples? Oh, there you are, old fellow,—ready to give me your paw, as usual! Look at him, Miss Mattie! Now, Mrs. Sparsit," in a coaxing voice, "this lady is dreadfully tired; and I know your kettle is boiling––" but here Mrs. Sparsit interrupted him:

"Oh, yes, indeed, Sir Harry; and you shall have some tea directly. Dear me, Miss Drummond, you do look poorly, to be sure! Let me stir the fire a little, and draw out the couch. Bettie has gone out to see her sick mother, Sir Harry; but if you don't mind my leaving you a minute, while I just brew the tea––" And without waiting for his answer, the worthy creature bustled off to her tiny kitchen, leaving Popples to entertain her guests.

Sir Harry closed the door, and then he helped Mattie to divest herself of her warm jacket, and placed her in a snug corner of the old-fashioned couch.

"You will be all right directly," he said, as he sat down beside her. "The wind was too strong; and I was a little sudden: wasn't I, Mattie?" And now the color began to come into Mattie's face.

Sir Harry found plenty to tell her as Mrs. Sparsit brewed the tea and prepared the hot buttered cakes.

Mattie shed tears of pure happiness when she heard from his own lips how good and unselfish and amiable he thought her, and how he had liked her from the first in a sort of way,—"not quite the right way, you know," explained Sir Harry, candidly; "but every one was so hard on you, and you bore it so well, and were such a good little woman, that I quite longed to stand your friend; and we were friends,—were we not, Mattie? And then somehow it came to me what a nice little wife you would make; and so––" but here Mattie timidly interrupted him:

"But Grace,—I thought you liked Grace best!"

Sir Harry laughed outright at this; but he had the grace to look ashamed of himself:

"So I did like her very much; but I was only trying you, Mattie. I was not sure how much you liked me; but you seemed such a miserable little Cinderella among them all that I could hardly keep it up. If they snub you now, they will have to answer to me." And at this moment Mrs. Sparsit entered with the tea-tray.

Dinner was nearly over at the vicarage when Mattie's step was heard in the hall. Archie, who was the soul of punctuality, frowned a little when the sound reached his ear.

"This is too bad of Mattie," he said, rather fretfully. "She has no right to put us to such inconvenience. I suppose we must have the fish up again?"

"Miss Drummond desires that you will go on with your dinner, sir," observed the maid, entering at that moment. "She has had a late tea, and will not require anything more."

"Very strange!" fumed Archie; but he was a little pacified by the message. But Grace slightly elevated her eyebrows with an expression of surprise. Such independence was new in Mattie.

The brother and sister had adjourned to the drawing-room, and Archie was about to ring for his coffee, before Mattie made her appearance.

Grace uttered a little exclamation when she saw her sister:

"My dear Mattie, we have no visitors coming in this evening! Why have you put on your best gown? You extravagant child!" for Mattie had come into the room rustling in her green silk dress, and her little dark face glowing from the wind. "She looked almost pretty," as Grace said afterwards; but at her sister's quizzical observation Mattie blushed and seemed confused.

"It is no use saving it," she began. "Sir Harry is coming in by and by. And, oh, Archie! he told me to say it, but I don't know how to do it." And then, to Archie's intense surprise,—for she had never done such a thing in her life,—she suddenly threw her arms round his neck. "Oh, Archie! he says you are never to scold me again,—any of you," she sobbed, "because I belong to him now. And he—Sir Harry, I mean—is so good to me; and I am so happy. And won't you wish me joy, both of you? And what—what will mother say?" finished Mattie, as though this were the climax of everything.

"Good heavens, Mattie!" gasped Archie; but he did not shake her off: on the contrary, he kissed her very kindly. "Do you mean you are going to marry Sir Harry Challoner?"

"He means to marry me," returned Mattie, smiling, in spite of her tears; and then Grace came forward, and took her in her arms.

"I am so glad, dear Mattie," she whispered, soothingly. "Of course we none of us expected it; and we are all very much surprised. Oh, dear! how happy mother will be!"

“I tell you what,” exclaimed Archie, in great excitement, “I will take you down myself to Lowder Street, and see what she says. They will all be out of their senses with joy; and, upon my word, Mattie, I never was so pleased about anything in my life. He is a right-down good fellow, I am sure of that; and you are not such a bad little thing yourself, Mattie. There!”

CHAPTER XLIX.

MATTIE IN A NEW CHARACTER.

The family at Lowder Street were all gathered together when the travellers made their appearance. There was a general shout of delight when Archie’s face peered in at them from the dusky hall over Mattie’s shoulder. Mrs. Drummond’s thin face flushed with the unexpected pleasure.

“Oh, Archie! my dear boy, I never thought you would surprise us in this way!” she said, throwing down her work with tremulous hands. She kissed Mattie affectionately; but that dark glow of tenderness in her eyes was for Archie. In spite of her ordinary undemonstrativeness, she seldom spoke to him without that involuntary softening of her voice. However much she loved her other children, her maternal passion was reserved for her first-born son.

“How naughty of you to steal a march on us in this manner!” she said, playfully. “We have only prepared a meat-tea for Mattie, because I knew she would not mind; but if you had telegraphed I would have had dinner ready for you, Archie.”

“Stuff! nonsense! why need he have telegraphed? I suppose what is good enough for Mattie and the rest of us is good enough for Archie!”

Mr. Drummond spoke testily as he put down the paper. These hints about the late dinners always nettled him. His renunciation of them years ago had been a heavy piece of self-denial, for he was a man rather fond of creature comforts; he had done it for his children’s sake; but it was more than flesh and blood could bear that this renounced luxury should be served for his son’s benefit. Was he not as good as Archie, though he had not been to a University and become fellow of his college?

“Father is quite right,” returned Archie, cheerfully. “I would not telegraph, because I wanted to surprise you; and I knew you were such a good manager, mother, that you would have plenty of aired sheets ready for my bed. Of course what is good enough for Mattie is right for me. As we are both as hungry as hunters, we shall do justice to anything you have prepared.”

“There is only some cold meat and some ham and eggs,” observed Mrs. Drummond, a little plaintively. She did not dare anger her husband further by proposing even a chop, for she knew how touchy he was about Archie’s fastidiousness; but if she could have had her own way she would have killed the fatted calf for this dearest son. Nothing was too good for him in her eyes; and yet for the sake of tranquillity she dared not even hazard the question of a chop.

“Cold meat,—that is just what I should like,” replied Archie, with excellent *sang-froid*. He detested that stock-dish of the Lowder Street larder, ham and eggs. The eggs were dubious, he considered,—not actually new-laid, but a little suggestive of lime. “But there! you must not give me all your attention, mother,” he continued. “I have brought Mattie home, you see, and you have never told her even how she looks.”

“She looks very well,” replied Mrs. Drummond. In spite of her anxiety about Archie, she had been looking at her daughter more than once with puzzled eyes. There was something different about her, she thought. It was hardly like Mattie to come in so quietly among them all and take her place beside her father. Mattie seldom did anything without a fuss: it was her ordinary way to stand among them chattering as fast as her tongue would go, until some one reminded her that it was time for her to take off her hat and jacket or she would be late for tea. But to-night Mattie had hardly opened her lips, except to answer her father’s questions about the journey. She had kissed her sisters very quietly, and had asked after Isabel, and had then proposed of her own accord to go upstairs.

“Clara, go up with your sister. No, not Laura; you will all get chattering, and then we shall be kept waiting. Isabel is upstairs, Archie: she has come in to sit with us this evening, as Ellis has to go to a business dinner. He will call for her on his way.”

“I am very glad she is here,” returned Archie, “for I have to go back by the early train to-morrow. Ah, there she is. Well, how are you, Belle?” greeting her affectionately as she came up to him rather shyly. Archie could hardly help smiling at the contrast between Isabel’s brilliant evening toilet and his other sister’s brown stuff dress. It was a little trying to his gravity to see her putting on such pretty little airs of matronly dignity. Mrs. Ellis Burton was an important person now; that was sufficiently obvious; the plump little figure was most lavishly adorned. But the round childish face was certainly very pretty; and, as every other sentence brought in “Ellis,” and as Ellis’s opinion appeared always right in her eyes, Archie deduced that his sister

was satisfied with her choice.

“Oh, dear, Mattie! how droll it is to see you home again!” exclaimed Susie, who was noted for making awkward speeches. “And how funny you look beside Isabel!”

“We are very glad to have her back,” returned Mrs. Drummond, in her repressive tones. She was just refilling her teapot from the urn, but she found opportunity to shake her head at Susie. “People do not generally look smart in their travelling-dress; but I think she looks very nice. Had you not a commoner gown, my dear? That looks almost too good for the purpose;” for Mrs. Drummond’s sense of economy was a little shocked by perceiving that Mattie’s gown was a new one.

“It is very well made,” observed Isabel, critically. “I am so glad, Mattie, that you have given up that hideous plaid: it never suited you.”

“If I had been you, I would have travelled in it,” persisted Mrs. Drummond, who never could remember that Mattie was over thirty and might possibly have opinions of her own.

Archie listened to all this with great amusement.

“Don’t you think it is about time I started a pleasanter subject, Mattie?” he asked, laughing. “Have you finished your tea, my dear? for I do not want to spoil your appetite; but time is getting on, and––” here he glanced at the clock.

Every one stared at this, for Archie had never spoken in exactly that way to Mattie before; and, as he did so, Mattie’s cheeks were burning. But what was their surprise when Archie suddenly rose from his seat and laid his hand kindly on Mattie’s shoulder!

“She is too shy to tell you herself; I have come all these miles to do it for her. Isabel, you need not look so consequential. Ellis is a good fellow, I dare say, but our little Mattie has done better for herself than even you. Mother, you have achieved a success in one of your seven daughters: let me introduce to you the future Lady Challoner!” And then, still keeping his hand upon her shoulder, he looked blandly round on them all.

“Well, I am sure!” from Isabel, half pouting; but no one else spoke except Mr. Drummond:

“What does this mean, Archie? Can’t you speak for yourself, my girl? Is this a joke? Does he mean something amusing?” asked the father; but his lip quivered a little: if it should be true,—if it were no joke!

“It is just as Archie says!” replied Mattie, timidly, not daring to raise her eyes. “Sir Harry asked me to marry him, and I said yes, because—because he was always so good to me.” And here Mattie laughed a little hysterically. “And I did not think you would object, father.”

“Me object!” replied Mr. Drummond, oblivious of grammar just then. “Why, my little Mattie, what news is this? Come here and kiss me, my girl. I am proud of you; I am delighted to think a daughter of mine is going to make such a splendid match. Why don’t you speak to her, my dear?” addressing his wife, with some excitement. “Bless my soul,—Lady Challoner, my plain little Mattie Lady Challoner! Is it possible? Why, you were telling us, Archie, what a Crœsus this Sir Henry was, and how he had just bought quite a fine place for himself.”

“Mattie, come here.” Her children could hardly recognize their mother’s voice, it was so broken, and the tears were running down her cheeks, though not one of them remembered seeing her cry before. Mattie never felt her triumph greater, never understood the magnificence of her own success, until she saw those tears, and felt the presence of her mother’s arms round her. Never since the child Mattie had had to make way for the new-born brother, and had toddled away with the never-forgotten words, “Mammy’s arms are full; no room for Mattie now,” had she laid her head upon that mother’s shoulder to indulge in the good cry that was needed to relieve her. Isabel looked almost affronted as she twirled her diamond rings round her plump fingers. When she and Ellis had been engaged, her mother had not made all this fuss. And Mattie was such an old thing; and it was so ridiculous; and her father seemed on the verge of crying too. “But then,” as Susie said afterwards, “Belle did not like her consequence to be set aside; and she and Ellis were just nobodies at all.”

No one enjoyed the scene so much as Archie: that was how his mother ought to be with her girls. Nevertheless, he interrupted them ruthlessly:

“Don’t make your eyes too red, Mattie: remember who will be in by and by.” And as she started up at this and began to smooth her rumpled hair, he explained to them generally that they had not travelled alone; Sir Harry had accompanied them to Leeds, and was at present dining, he believed at the Star Hotel, where he had bespoken a room. “He thought it best to make himself known personally to you; and, as Mattie raised no objection, he announced his intention of calling this evening––” but before Archie could finish his sentence, or the awe-struck domestic announce him properly, Sir Harry himself was among them all, shaking hands with everybody, down to Dottie.

And, really, for a shy man he did his part very well: he seemed to take his welcome for granted, and beamed on them all most genially.

“I suppose the parson has already introduced me,” he said, when Mr. Drummond senior held out his hand, “What a lot of you there are!” he continued, as he reached Dottie, who, dreadfully frightened at his size, tried to hide behind Susie. Dottie compared him in her own mind to one of their favorite giants. “He was so dreadfully like Fee-fo-fum in ‘Jack the Giant-Killer,’” she pouted, when Mattie afterwards took her to task, “when he kissed me I thought he was going to

eat me up."

Mattie's dark little face lit up with shy happiness when she saw him sit down beside her mother and talk to her in his frank pleasant way. In her eyes he was nothing less than an angel of light. True, the room had never looked so small and shabby as it looked to-night, but what did that matter to Mattie?—the poor little Cinderella in the brown gown had found her prince. By and by the pumpkin-coach would fetch her to a grand house, she would have jewels and fine clothes,—everything that the heart of woman could desire; but it may be doubted if such thoughts ever crossed Mattie's mind. That he had chosen her, this was the miracle; that she was never to be scolded, and laughed at, and teased; that he had stooped to her, this noble, great-hearted man, to raise her from her humbleness; that he could care for her, in spite of her plainness and her many faults. No wonder if such happiness almost beautified Mattie, as she sat a little apart, surrounded by her young sisters.

Mrs. Drummond's stern face glowed with pleasure when Sir Harry in a few simple words spoke to her of his pride in winning her daughter. Could it be her homely, old-fashioned little Mattie of whom he was speaking, whose unselfishness and goodness he praised so highly! "I have never known a more beautiful nature: she does not seem to me to have an unkind thought of any one. All my cousins love her. If you will trust her to me, I think I can promise, as far as a man can, that her life shall be a happy one." No wonder if the mother's eyes filled with joyous tears at such words as these.

"Mattie, dear," said Sir Harry to her the next day, when they found themselves alone,—a rather difficult thing to achieve in the crowded household, but Mrs. Drummond had just left the room,—"I have been talking to your mother. She is a sensible woman, and she thinks in six weeks everything can be ready. What do you say?"

"If mother thinks so, I suppose she is right," returned Mattie, very much confused by this sudden appeal to her opinion. Sir Harry had already importuned for a speedy marriage, and she had in much trepidation referred him to her mother, feeling herself unequal to the task of answering him.

"Yes, your mother is a sensible woman," continued Sir Harry, taking no notice of her confusion. "She knows that a great house full of servants is more than a man can manage alone; and so, as I told her that Gilsbank was ready, and its master waiting, she was quite of my opinion that there should be no delay. You see, Mattie," in a tone of great gentleness, "though I am very fond of you, I cannot help feeling stifled in a small house full of people. There is no getting you to myself, or being comfortable; and a man of my size feels out of place among a lot of girls. So if you are willing, as of course you are," very coaxingly, "and I am willing, we may as well get the thing over. It takes a good deal out of a fellow to go through this sort of thing properly, and I don't fancy I hit it off well: so we will say this day six weeks. And to-morrow you will be a good little woman, and let me go back to my comfortable quarters at Hadleigh, for one breathes only smoke here; and how you have always borne it all these years is a mystery to me."

So Mattie let him go cheerfully. She had never been selfish in her life, and of course she spoke no word to dissuade him; but, though she had but few letters from him, and those of the briefest possible kind,—for Sir Harry was not fond of penmanship,—those six weeks were far from being unhappy. How could they be, when they were all so good to her, Mattie thought?—when her opinion was deferred to even by her mother, and when her brothers and sisters treated her with such respect and affection?

Mattie had no sense of the ludicrous, or she would have laughed at the change in Clyde's tone, or at the way Fred boxed Dottie's ears for speaking rudely to Mattie: in their eyes the future Lady Challoner was a person of the utmost importance. The boys vied with each other in waiting on her; the girls were always ready with their little services. Mattie felt herself almost overwhelmed sometimes.

"Oh, mother, ask them not to do it!" she said, one day, with tears in her eyes. "I am only Mattie; I am not different; I never shall be different. I shall want to wait on you all my life,—on you and all of them!"

"It is for them to wait on you more!" returned her mother, gravely. "I am afraid they have not always been good to you, and they want to make up for it."

But not all the attentions she received could move Mattie from her own humble estimate of herself; and yet in some ways, if she could have seen herself, she would have owned there was a difference. Mattie no longer fussed and fidgeted: always sweet-natured, she grew placid in her new happiness.

"I consider myself a fortunate fellow, for I have the dearest little wife in the world," Sir Harry said to her a few days after they were married, when Mattie had, as usual, said something disparaging of herself. "Never mind what you think, so long as I am satisfied; and it is very rude of you to be always finding fault with my choice,—ay, Lady Challoner!"

CHAPTER L.

Archie had been persuaded to remain until the following evening, and to take the night mail up to London. “You know you always sleep so soundly in a railway-carriage,” his mother had said, with her eyes full of pleading.

“Perhaps so; but all the same it is dreary work to be shunted on to a platform in the middle of the night, and to have to find your way across London to catch a Sussex train.” But, in spite of his grumbling he had remained. For once it was difficult to tear himself away from that happy family party.

But all through that night he scarcely closed his eyes, but sat staring at the swinging-lamp and his drowsy fellow-passengers, or out into the blank wall of darkness, too wide awake and full of thought to lose himself in his usual placid slumbers. The fortunes of the Drummond family seemed rising a little, he thought, with pleasure. How alert and full of energy his father had seemed when he had parted from him at the station! he had lost that subdued despondent look that had grown on him of late. Even his shoulders were a little less bowed, as though the burden did not press quite so heavily.

“All this makes a great difference to me, Archie,” he had said, as they had walked to and fro on the platform. “Two such wealthy sons-in-law ought to satisfy any father’s ambition. I can hardly believe yet that my little Mattie—whom her sisters always called ‘the old maid’—should have secured such a prize. If it had been Grace, now, one need not have wondered so much.”

“You may leave Grace out of your reckoning,” returned Archie, smiling assent to this, “and consider you have three out of your seven daughters provided for, for Grace will always be my care. Whatever happens in the future, I think I can promise as much as that.”

“Ay, ay! I remember when she was a little thing she always called herself Archie’s wife. Well, well, the mother must bring on Clara now: it would be a shame to separate you two. Look, there is your train, my boy! Jump in, and God bless you! You will come down to the wedding of course, and bring Grace.”

“Archie’s wife.” It was these two words that were keeping him so wide awake in the rushing darkness. A dusky flush mounted to the young man’s forehead as he pondered over them.

He knew himself better now. Only a few weeks, scarcely more than a fortnight, had passed since Grace had given him that hint; but each day since then had done the work of years. Caught at the rebound indeed, and that so securely and strongly that the man’s heart could never waver from its fixed purpose again.

Now it was that he wondered at his blindness; that he began to question with a perfect anguish of doubt whether he should be too late; whether his vacillation and that useless dream of his would hinder the fulfilment of what was now his dearest hope.

Would he ever bring her to believe that he had never really loved before,—not, at least, as he could love now? Would he ever dare to tell her so, when she had known and understood that first stray fancy of his for Nan’s sweet face?

Now, as day after day he visited the cottage and talked apart with her mother, his eyes would follow Phillis wistfully. Once the girl had looked up from her work and caught that long, watchful glance; and then she had grown suddenly very pale, and a pained expression crossed her face, as though she had been troubled.

Since that night when the young vicar had stood bare-headed on the snowy steps, and had told Phillis laughingly that one day she would find out for herself that all men were masterful, and she had run down the steps flashing back that disdainful look at him, he had felt there was a change in her manner to him.

They had been such good friends of late; it had become a habit with him to turn to Phillis when he wanted sympathy. A silent, scarcely perceptible understanding had seemed to draw them together; but in one moment, at a word, a mere light jest of his that meant nothing, the girl had become all at once reserved, frozen up, impenetrable even to friendship.

In vain he strove to win her back to her old merry talk. Her frank recklessness of speech seemed over for the present. In his presence she was almost always silent,—not with any awkwardness of embarrassment, but with a certain maidenly reserve of bearing, as though she had marked out a particular line of conduct for herself.

When Grace was in the room, things were better: Phillis could not be otherwise than affectionate to her chosen friend. And when they were alone together, all Phillis’s bright playfulness seemed to return; but nothing would induce her to cross the threshold of the vicarage.

The evening after his return from Leeds, Archie, as usual, dropped in at the Friary; but this time he brought Grace with him. They were all gathered in the work-room, which had now become their favorite resort. On some pretext or other, the lamp had not been brought in; but they were all sitting round the fire, chatting in an idle desultory way.

Phillis was half hidden behind her mother’s chair: perhaps this was the reason why her voice had its old merry chord. She had welcomed Archie rather gravely,—hardly turning her face to him as she spoke; but as soon as she was in her corner again, she took up the thread of their

talk in her usual frank way. But it was Grace that she addressed.

“Poor dear Harry! We have all been laughing a little at the notion of Alcides being in love. Somehow, it seems so droll that Mattie should turn out his Deianeira; but, after all, I think he has shown very good sense in his choice. Mattie will wear well.”

“You seem to agree with the ‘Vicar of Wakefield,’ Miss Challoner,” observed Archie, rather amused at this temperate praise. “Did not that excellent man choose his wife for the same reason that she choose her wedding-dress, with a view to durability?”

“Oh, there is a vast amount of wisdom in all that,” returned Phillis, with mock solemnity; for she did not mind what nonsense she talked in the darkness. “If life had nothing but fair-weather days, it might be excusable for a man to choose his wife for mere beauty; but when one thinks of fogs and east-winds, and smoky chimneys, and all such minor evils, they may need something a little more sustaining than a pink complexion. At least,” catching herself up, and hurrying on as though the real meaning of her words only just occurred to her, “though Mattie may not be beautiful outwardly, she is just the right sort of person for a regular east-windy day. Not even a smoky chimney and a fog together will put her out of temper.”

“I will recollect your advice when the time comes,” replied Archie rather audaciously at this, as he laughed and stroked his beard.

It pleased him to see the old fun brimming over again, fresh and sparkling; but, as he answered her in the same vein of pleasantry, she colored up in her dark corner and shrank back into herself, and all the rest of the evening he could hardly win a smile from her.

“My dear, I think Mr. Drummond comes very often,” Mrs. Challoner said to her eldest daughter that night. “He is very gentlemanly, and a most excellent young man: but I begin to be afraid what these visits mean.” But Nan only laughed at this.

“Poor mother!” she said, stroking her face. “Don’t you wish you had us all safe at Glen Cottage again? There are so few young men at Oldfield.”

“I cannot bear young men,” was the somewhat irritable answer. “What is the use of having children, when just when they grow up to be a comfort to you, every one tries to deprive you of them? Dick has robbed me of you,”—and here Mrs. Challoner grew tearful,—“and Dulce is always with the Middletons; and I am not at all sure that Captain Middleton is not beginning to admire her.”

“Neither am I,” observed Nan, a little gravely; for, though they seldom talked of such things among themselves, “son Hammond’s” attentions were decidedly conspicuous, and Dulce was looking as shy and pretty as possible.

No; she could not give her mother any comfort there, for the solemn-faced young officer was clearly bent on mischief. Indeed, both father and son were making much of the little girl. But as regarded Mr. Drummond there could be no question of his intentions. The growing earnestness, the long wistful looks, were not lost on Nan who knew all such signs by experience. It was easy to understand the young vicar: it was Phillis who baffled her.

They had never had any secrets between them. From their very childhood, Nan had shared Phillis’s every thought. But once or twice when she had tried to approach the subject in the gentlest manner, Phillis had started away like a restive colt, and had answered her almost with sharpness:

“Nonsense, Nannie! What is it to me if Mr. Drummond comes a dozen times a day?” arching her long neck in the proudest way, but her throat contracting a little over the uttered falsehood; for she knew, none better, what these visits were to her. “Do you think I should take the trouble to investigate his motives? Don’t you know, Nan,” in her sweet whimsical voice, “that the masculine mind loves to conjugate the verb ‘to amuse’? Mr. Drummond is evidently bored by his own company; but there! the vagaries of men are innumerable. One might as well question the ebbing tide as inquire of these young divinities the reason of all their eccentric actions. He comes because we amuse him, and we like to see him because he amuses us: and when he bores us, we can tell him so, which is better than Canute and the waves, after all.” And of course, after this, Nan was compelled to drop the subject.

But she watched Phillis anxiously; for she saw that the girl was restless and ill at ease. The thoughtful gray eyes had a shadow in them. The bright spirits were quenched, and only kindled by a great effort; and, as the time for their leaving the Friary grew closer day by day, until the last week approached, she flagged more, and the shadow grew deeper.

“If he would only speak and end all this suspense!” thought Nan, who knew nothing of the real state of things, and imagined that Mr. Drummond had cared for Phillis from the first.

They had already commenced their packing. Sir Harry was back in his hotel, solacing himself with his cousin’s company, and writing brief letters to his homely little bride-elect, when one fine afternoon he met them and Grace just starting for the shore.

This was their programme on most afternoons, and of course they had not gone far before Captain Middleton and his father and sister joined them; and a little later on, just as they were entering the town, they overtook Mr. Drummond.

Phillis nodded to him in a friendly manner, and then walked on with Grace, taking no further notice; but when they were on the shore, admiring the fine sunset effect, Grace quietly dropped her arm and slipped away to join the others. Phillis stood motionless: her eyes were riveted on

the grand expanse of sky and ocean. “It is so like life,” she said at last, not seeing who stood beside her, while all the others were walking on in groups of twos and threes, Dulce close to the colonel, as usual. “Do you see those little boats, Grace? one is sailing so smoothly in the sunlight, and the other scarcely stirring in the shadow,—brightness to some, you see, and shade to others; and beyond, that clear line of light, like the promise of eternity.”

“Don’t you think it lies within most people’s power to make their own lives happier?” returned Archie so quietly to this that she scarcely started. “The sunshine and shade are more evenly balanced than we know. To be sure, there are some lives like that day that is neither clear nor dark,—gray, monotonous lives, with few breaks and pleasures in them. But perhaps even that question may be happily solved when one looks out a little farther to the light beyond.”

“Yes, if one does not grow tired of waiting for the answer,” she said, a little dreamily. “There is so much that cannot be clear here.” And then she roused with a little difficulty from her abstraction, and looked around her. The others had all gone on: they were standing alone on the shingly beach, just above a little strip of yellow sand,—only they two. Was it for this reason that her eyes grew wide and troubled, and she moved away rather hurriedly? But he still kept close to her, talking quietly as he did so.

“Do you remember this place?” he said: “it reminds me of a picture I once saw. I think it was ‘Atalanta’s Race,’ only there was no Paris. It was just such as scene as this: there was the dark breakwater, and the long line of surf breaking on the shore, and the sun was shining on the water; and there was a girl running with her head erect, and she scarcely seemed to touch the ground, and she stopped just here,” resting his hand on the black, shiny timber.

“Do not,” she answered, in a low voice, “do not recall that day: it stings me even now to remember it.” And as the words “Bravo Atalanta!” recurred to her memory, the hot blush of shame mounted to her face.

“I have no need to recall it,” he returned, still more quietly, for her discomposure was great, “for I have never forgotten it. Yes, this is the place, not where I first saw you, but where I first began to know you. Phillis, that knowledge is becoming everything to me now!”

“Do not,” she said, again, but she could hardly bring out the words. But how wonderful it was to hear her name pronounced like that! “The others have gone on: we must join them.”

“May I not tell you what I think about you first?” he asked, very gently.

“Not now,—not yet,” she almost whispered; and now he saw that she was very pale, and her eyes were full of tears. “I could not bear it yet.” And then, as she moved farther away from him, he could see how great was her agitation.

It was a proof of his love and earnestness that he suffered the girl to leave him in this way, that he did not again rejoin her until they were close to the others. In spite of his impatience and his many faults, he was generous enough to understand her without another word. She had not repelled him; she had not silenced him entirely; she had not listened to him and then answered him with scorn. On the contrary, her manner had been soft and subdued, more winning than he had ever known it; and yet she had refused to hearken to his suit. “Not now,—not yet,” she had said, and he could see that her lip quivered, and her beautiful eyes were full of tears. It was too soon, that was what she meant; too soon for him to speak and for her to listen. She owed it to her own dignity that his affection should be put to greater proof than that. She must not be so lightly won; she must not stoop down from her maidenly pride and nobleness at his first words because she had grown to care for him. “It must not be so, however much the denial may cost me,” Phillis had said to herself. But as she joined the others, and came to Nan’s side, she could scarcely steady her voice or raise her eyes, for fear their shy consciousness would betray her. “At last,” and “at last!”—that was the refrain that was ringing so joyously in her heart. Well, and one day he should tell her what he would.

She thought she had silenced him entirely, but she forgot that men were masterful and had cunning ways of their own to compass their ends. Archie had recovered his courage; he had still a word to say, and he meant to say it; and just before the close of the walk, as they were in the darkest part of the Braidwood Road, just where the trees meet overhead, before one reaches the vicarage, Phillis found him again at her side.

“When may I hope that you will listen?” he said. “I am not a patient man: you must remember that, and not make it too hard for me. I should wish to know how soon I may come.”

“Spring is very beautiful in the country,” she answered, almost too confused by this unexpected address to know what she was saying. “I think May is my favorite month, when the hawthorns are out.”

“Thank you, I will come in May.” And then Phillis woke up to the perception of what she had said. “Oh, no, I did not meant that,” she began, incoherently; but this time it was Archie who moved away, with a smile on his face and a certain vivid brightness in his eyes, and her stammered words were lost in the darkness.

The whole week was much occupied by paying farewell visits. On the last afternoon Phillis went down to the White House to say good-bye. It was one of Magdalene’s bad days; but the unquiet hour had passed, and left her, as usual, weak and subdued. Her husband was sitting beside her: as Phillis entered he rose with a smile on his lips. “That is right, Miss Challoner!” he said, heartily. “Magdalene always looks better the moment she hears your voice. Barby is unfortunately out, but I can leave her happily with you.”

“Is he not good?” exclaimed his wife, as soon as he had left them. “He has been sitting with me all the afternoon, my poor Herbert, trying to curb his restlessness, because he knows how much worse I am without him. Am I not a trying wife to him? and yet he says he could not do without me. There, it has passed: let us talk of something else. And so you are going to leave us?” drawing the fresh face down to hers, that she might kiss it again.

“Yes, to-morrow!” trying to stifle a sigh.

“There are some of us that will not know what to do without you. If I am not very much mistaken, there is one person who––” but here the girl laid her hand hurriedly on her lips. “What! I am not to say that? Well, I will try to be good. But all the same this is not good-bye. Tell your mother from me that she will not have her girls for long. Captain Middleton has lost his heart, and is bent on making that pretty little sister of yours lose hers to; and as for you, Phillis––” but here Phillis stooped, and silenced her this time by a kiss.

“Ah, well!” continued Magdalene, after a moment’s silence, as she looked tenderly into the fair face before her; “so you have finished your little bit of play-work, and are going back into your young-ladyhood again?”

“It was not play-work!” returned Phillis, indignantly: “you say that to provoke me. Do you know,” she went on, earnestly, “that if we should have had to work all our lives as dressmakers, Nan and I would have done it, and never given in. We were making quite a fine business of it. We had more orders then we could execute; and you call that play? Confess, now, that you repent of that phrase!”

“Oh, I was only teasing you,” returned Magdalene, smiling. “I know how brave you were, and how terribly in earnest. Yes, Phillis, you are right; nothing would have daunted you; you would have worked without complaint all your life long, but for that red-haired Alcides of yours.”

“Dear Harry! how much we owe to him!” exclaimed Phillis.

“No, dear, you will owe your happiness to yourself,—the happiness,” as the girl looked at her in surprise, “that is coming to you and Dulce. It was because you were not like other girls—because you were brave, self-reliant gentlewomen, afraid of nothing but dishonor; not fearful of small indignities, or of other people’s opinions, but just taking up the work that lay to your hands, and going through with it—that you have won his heart: and, seeing this, how could he help loving you as he does?” But to this Phillis made no answer.

The next day was rather trying to them all. Phillis’s cheerfulness was a little forced, and for some time after they had left the Friary—with Grace and Archie waving their farewells from the road—she was very silent.

But no sooner had they crossed the threshold of Glen Cottage than their girlhood asserted itself. The sight of the bright snug rooms, with their new furniture, the conservatory, with its floral treasures, and Sir Harry’s cheery welcome, as he stood in the porch with Mrs. Mayne, was too much even for Phillis’s equanimity. In a few minutes their laughing faces were peering out of every window and into every cupboard.

“Oh, the dear, beautiful home! Isn’t it lovely of Harry to bring us back!” cried Phillis, oblivious of everything at that moment but her mother’s satisfied face.

In a few days they had settled down into their old life. It was too early for tennis while snowdrops and crocuses were peeping out of the garden borders. But in the afternoon friends dropped in in the old way, and gathered round the Challoner tea-table; and very soon—for Easter fell early that year—Dick showed himself among them, and then, indeed, Nan’s cup of happiness was full.

But as April passed on Phillis began to grow a little silent again; and it became a habit with her to coax Laddie to take long walks with her, when Nan and Dulce were otherwise engaged. The exercise seemed to quiet her restlessness; and the spring sights and sounds, the budding hedgerows, and the twittering of the birds as they built their nests, and the fresh leafy green, unsoiled by summer heat and dust, seemed to refresh her flagging spirits.

It was the 1st of May, when one afternoon she called to Laddie, who was lying drowsily in the sunny porch. Nan, who was busily engaged in training the creeper round the pillars of the veranda, looked up in a little surprise:

“Are you going out again, Phil? And neither Dulce nor I can come with you. Mrs. Mayne has some friends coming to five-o’clock tea, and she wants us to go over for an hour. It is so dull for you, dear, always to walk alone.”

“Oh no; I shall not be dull, Nannie,” returned Phillis, with an unsteady smile, for her spirits were a little fluctuating that afternoon. “I am restless, and want a good walk: so I shall just go to Sandy Lane, and be back in time to make tea for mother.” And then she waved her hand, and whistled to Laddie as she unlatched the little gate. It was a long walk. But, as usual, the quiet and the sweet air refreshed her, and by the time she reached Sandy Lane her eyes were brilliant with exercise, and a pretty pink tinge of color was in her cheeks. It is May-day,—the 1st of May. I wonder how soon he will come, she thought, as she leaned on the little gate where poor Dick had leaned that day.

There were footsteps approaching, but they made no sound over the sandy ruts. A tall man, with a fair beard and a clerical felt hat, was walking quickly up the road that leads from Oldfield; and as he walked his eyes were scanning the path before him, as though he were looking for some one. At the sight of the girl leaning against the gate his face brightened, and he slackened his

steps a little, that he might not startle her. She was looking out across the country with a far-off, dreamy expression, and did not turn her head as he approached. It was Laddie who saw him first, and jumped up with a joyous bark to welcome him; and then she looked round, and for a moment her eyes grew wide and misty, for she thought it was a continuation of her dream.

“Laddie saw me first,” he said, stepping up quietly to her side,—for he still feared to startle her,—and his voice was very gentle. “Phillis, you must not look so surprised! Surely you expected me? It is the 1st of May!”

“Oh, I knew that,” she said; and then she turned away from him. But he had not dropped her hand, but was holding it very quietly and firmly. “But I could not tell the day; and––”

“Did you think I should wait an hour beyond the time you fixed?” he answered, very calmly. “May is your favorite month; and what could be more beautiful than May-day for the purpose I have in hand! Phillis, you will not go back from your promise now? You said you would listen to me in May.”

There was no answer to this; but, as Archie looked in her face, he read no repulse there. And so, in that quiet lane, with Laddie lying at their feet, he told all he had to tell.

“Are you sure you can trust me now, Phillis?” he asked, rather wistfully, when he had finished. “You know what I am, dear—a man with many faults.”

“Yes; now and forever,” she answered, without a moment’s hesitation. “I am not afraid—I never should have been afraid to trust you, I have faults of my own: so why should I wish you to be perfect? I care for you as you are; you will believe that?” for there was almost a sad humility in his face as he pleaded with her that went to her heart.

“Oh, yes; I believe what you tell me. You are truth itself, my darling,—the bravest and truest woman I have ever met. You do not know how happy you have made me, or how different my life will be when I have you by my side. Phillis, do you know how glad Grace will be about this?”

“Will she?” returned Phillis, shyly. They were walking homeward now, hand in hand toward the sunset,—so, at least, it seemed to the girl. No one was in sight, only the quiet country round them bathed in the evening light, and they two alone. “Archie!” she exclaimed, suddenly, and her beautiful eyes grew wistful all at once, “you will not let this make any difference to Grace? She loves you so; and you are all she has at present. You must never let me stand between you two. I am not so selfish as that.”

“You could not be selfish if you tried, dearest. How I wish Grace could have heard you! No; you are right. We must not let her suffer from our happiness. But, Phillis, you know who must come first now.” And then, as she smiled in full understanding, he put her hand upon his arm, and held it there. His promised wife,—Archie’s wife! Ah, the Drummond star was rising now in earnest! His life lay before him, like the road they were now entering, white and untrodden and bathed in the sunlight. What if some clouds should come, and some shadows fall, if they might tread it together to the end? And so, growing silent with happiness, they walked home through the sunset, till the spring dusk and the village lights saw them standing together on the threshold of Glen Cottage, and the dear faces and loving voices of home closed around them and bade them welcome.

THE END

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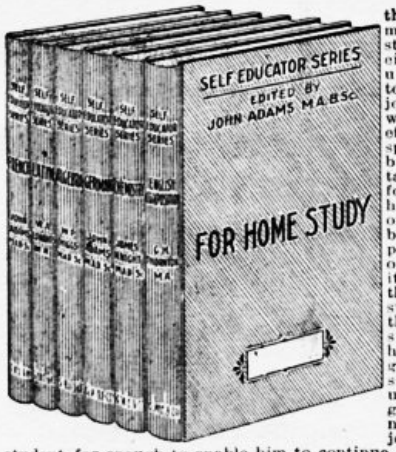

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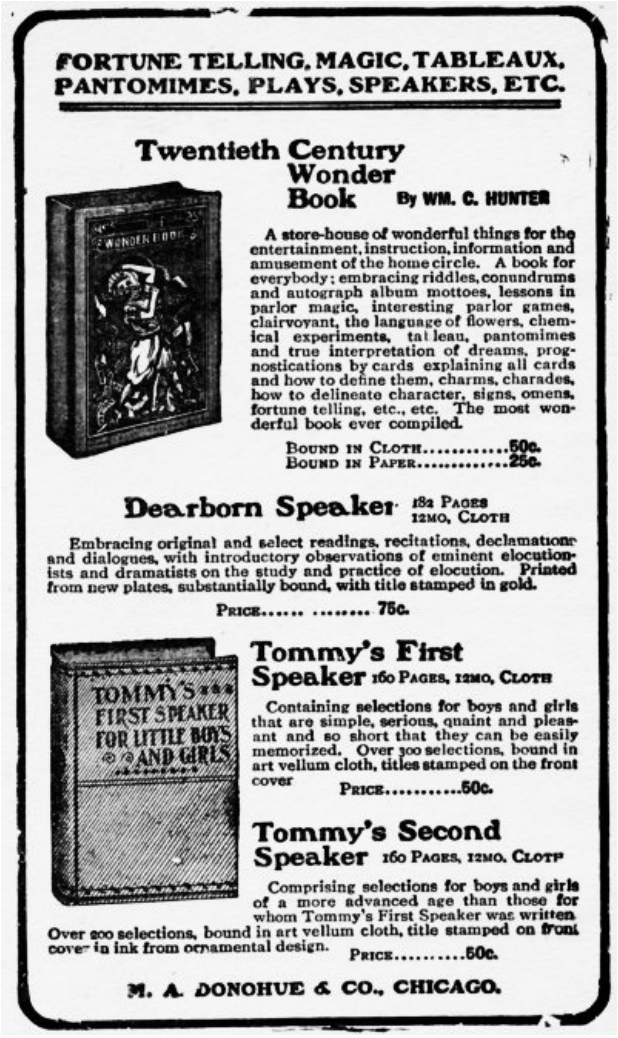

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