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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LEONORE STUBBS ***

LEONORE STUBBS

BY L. B. WALFORD

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CHAPTER I.

"SHE HAS NO SETTLEMENT, DAMN IT."

"She can't come."

"But, father——"

"She shan't come, then—if you like that better."

"But, father——"

"Aye, of course, it's 'But father'—I might have known it would be that. However, you may 'But father' me to the end of my time, you don't move me. I tell you, Sukey, you're a fool. You know no more than an unhatched chicken—and if you think I'm going to give in to their imposition—for it's nothing else—you are mistaken."

"I was only going to say——"

"Say what you will, say what you will; my mind's made up; and the sooner you understand that, and Leonore understands that, the better. You can write and tell her so."

"What am I to tell her?"

"What I say. That she has made her own bed and must lie upon it."

"But you gave your consent to her marriage, and never till now——"

"I tell you, girl, you're a fool. Consent? Of course I gave my consent. I was cheated—swindled. I married my daughter to a rich man, and he dies and leaves her a pauper! Never knew such a trick in my life. And you to stand up for it!"

General Boldero and his eldest daughter were alone, as may have been gathered, and the latter held in her hand, a black-edged letter at which she glanced from time to time, it being obviously the apple of discord between them.

It had come by the afternoon post; and the general, having met the postman in the avenue, and himself relieved him of the old-fashioned leathern postbag with which he was hastening on, and having further, according to established precedent, unlocked the same and distributed the contents, there had been no chance of putting off the present evil hour.

Instead there had been an instant demand: "What says Leonore? What's the figure, eh? She must know by this time. Eh, what? A hundred and fifty? Two hundred? What? Two hundred thousand would be nothing out of the way in these days. Poor Goff wasn't a millionaire, but money sticks to money and he had no expensive tastes. He must have been quietly rolling up,—all the better for his widow, poor child. Little Leonore will scarcely know what to do with a princely income, and we must see to it that she doesn't get into the hands of sharpers and fortune-hunters——" and so on, and so on.

Then the bolt fell. The "princely income" vanished into the air. The problematic two hundred thousand was neither here nor there, nor anywhere. As for "Poor Goff," General Boldero was never heard to speak of his defunct son-in-law in those terms again.

In his rage and disappointment at finding himself, as he chose to consider it, outwitted by a man upon whom he had always secretly looked down, the true feelings wherewith he had regarded an alliance welcomed by his cupidity, but resented by his pride, escaped without let or hindrance.

"What did we want with a person called Stubbs? What the deuce could we want with him or any of his kind but their money?" demanded he, pacing the room, black with wrath. "I never should have let the fellow set foot within these doors if I had dreamed of this happening. I took him for an honest man. What? What d'ye say? Humph! Don't believe a word of it; he *must* have known; and as for his expecting to pull things round, that's all very fine. It's a swindle, the whole thing." Then suddenly the speaker stopped short and his large lips shot out as he faced his daughter: "Does Leonore say she hasn't a penny?"

"She says she will have to give up everything to the creditors. I suppose," said Susan, hesitating, "everything may not mean—I thought marriage settlements could not be touched by creditors?"

"No more they can, that's the deuce of it."

"Then——?" She looked inquiringly, and strange to say, the fierce countenance before her coloured beneath the look.

If he could have evaded it, General Boldero would have let the question remain unanswered, although it was only Sue, Sue who knew her parent as no one else knew him—before whom he made no pretences, assumed no disguises—who had now to learn an ugly truth;—as it was, he shot it at her with as good an air as he could assume.

"She has no settlement, damn it."

"No settlement?" In her amazement the open letter fell from the listener's hands. She recollected, she could never forget, the glee with which her father had rubbed his hands over the "clinking settlement" he had anticipated from Leonore's wealthy suitor, nor the manner in which it had insinuated itself into every announcement of the match. No settlement? She simply stared in silence.

"If you will have it, it was my doing," owned General Boldero reluctantly; "and I could bite my tongue off now to think of it! But what with four of you on my hands, and the rents going down and everything else going up, I had nothing to settle—that is, I had nothing I could *conveniently* settle, and it might have been awkward, uncommonly awkward. I could hardly have got out of it if Godfrey had expected a *quid pro quo*. And he might—he very well might. A man of his class can't be expected to understand how a man of ours has to live decently and keep up appearances while

yet he hasn't a brass farthing to spare. I'll say that for Godfrey Stubbs, he seemed sensible on the point when I tried to explain; and—and somehow I was taken in and thought: 'You may be a bounder, but you are a very worthy fellow'."

He paused, and continued. "Then he suggested—it was his own idea, I give you my word for it—that we should have no greedy lawyers lining their pockets out of either of our purses. What he said was—I've as clear a recollection of it as though it were yesterday—'Oh, bother the settlement, I'll make a will leaving everything I possess to Leonore,'—and I, like a numskull, jumped at the notion. It never occurred to me that the will of a business man may be so much waste paper. His creditors can snap their fingers at any will. That's what Leonore means. She's found it out, and flies post haste to her desk to write that she must come back here."

"So she must."

"So she must *not*. I won't have it. The whole neighbourhood would ring with it."

"By your own showing," said Sue quietly, "in order to free yourself from the necessity of making any provision on your part when the marriage took place, you precluded——" but she got no further.

"Provision on my part?" burst forth her father, who was now himself again, and ready to browbeat anybody; "what need had the girl of any provision on my part? She was marrying a fellow with tenfold my income. The little I could have contrived to spare would have been a mere drop in the bucket to him, and I should have been ashamed to mention it. I can tell you I felt monstrous uncomfortable having to approach the subject at all; and never was more thankful than when the young man, like the decent fellow I took him then to be, pitchforked the whole business overboard."

"All the same, it is quite plain," persevered she, "that it was with your consent and approbation that Leonore had no money settled on her, so that it could not be taken from her now;—and that being the case, you have no choice but to provide for her in the future."

"You mean to say that it's due to me your sister's left a pauper on our hands?"

"That's exactly what I do mean. And you must either give her enough to enable her to live properly elsewhere, or receive her back among us, as she herself suggests. Besides which, you must make her the same allowance you make the rest of us," and the speaker rose, closing the controversy.

Only she could have carried it on to such a close, indeed only General Boldero's eldest daughter—and only daughter by his first marriage—would have engaged in it at all. The younger girls, of whom there were still two unmarried and living at home, never, in common parlance, stood up to their father—though, if he had not been as blind as such an autocrat is wont to be, he would have easily detected that they had their own ways of rendering his tyrannical rule tolerable, and that while he fancied himself the sole dictator of his house, he had in fact neither part nor lot in its real existence.

What is more easily satisfied than the vanity of stupid importance always upon its perch? The general's habits and hours were known, also the few points upon which he was really adamant. He was proud, and he was mean. He liked to live pompously, and fare luxuriously,—he made it his business to cut off every expense that did not affect his own comfort, or dignity. But that done, other matters could go on as they chose for him.

So that while it was not to be thought of that Boldero Abbey should exist without a full staff of retainers without and within, it was all that his eldest daughter—the family manager—could do to get her own and her sisters' allowances paid with any regularity—and whereas the stables were well supplied with horses, and a new carriage was no uncommon purchase, it was as much as any one's place was worth to hire a fly from the station on an unexpectedly wet day.

When, exactly three years before the date on which our story opens, there had appeared on the scene a suitor for the hand of the youngest Miss Boldero, in the shape of a rich young Liverpool gentleman—General Boldero always talked of young Stubbs as "a Liverpool gentleman," and his hearers knew what he meant—he was accorded a free hand in reality, though demur was strewn on the surface like cream on a pudding.

"I have had to give in," quoth the general with a rueful countenance—but he spread the news right and left, and Leonore was kissed and bidden make the "Liverpool gentleman" a good wife.

Whereupon Leonore laughed and promised. Godfrey Stubbs was her very first admirer, and she thought him as nice as he could be. At first the Boldero girls had been somewhat surprised at the encouragement shown a stranger to come freely among them, but when it became clear that Mr. Godfrey Stubbs was a privileged person, they found it wonderfully pleasant to have a man about the place, where a pair of trousers was a rare sight—and the inevitable happened.

The engagement concluded, Leonore trod on air. She who had never been anywhere, who was never supposed to have a wish or thought of her own, was all at once a queen. Godfrey assented to everything, and of himself drew up the plan—oh, glorious! of a prolonged wedding tour. His little bride was to go wherever she chose, see the sights she selected, and—shop in Paris. She was actually to stay a whole fortnight in Paris to buy clothes.

"Very right, very proper;" nodded her father to this.

He was so smiling and genial over everything at this juncture that Leonore's tongue wagged freely in his presence, and on hearing the above she turned to him with a saucy air, which under the circumstances he found quite pretty and pleasant:—

"So you see, there will be no need to dive deep into *your* pocket, father, and my things will be ever so much smarter and more up-to-date besides."

"Ha, ha, ha!"—laughed the general.

It all came back to him now—all that rainbow period, which had just dissolved into the grim blackness of night. He could see the merry little chit—(as he called her then)—rustling in her new-found state like a puffed-out Jenny Wren; he could hear her calling to Godfrey over the stairs, and after him across the lawn; most distinctly of all, there rose before his mind's eye the wedding day, and the round baby face solemnised for the occasion, with its large eyes and pursed-up lips, whence emanated the bold "I will" which startled him by its loudness and clearness,—and yet again his own sigh of satisfaction as the well-known march pealed out, and the pair walked down the aisle, and the thing was done.

The thing was done, and could not be undone—he was in spirits to play his part gloriously.

"Terrible business this, Lady St. Emerald. Poor little girl, to have to be called 'Mrs. Stubbs,' eh, what? Oh, bless you, yes; it's her own doing, entirely her own doing—quite a love match,—but, well—" and there was a shrug of the shoulders, which, however, neither took in Lady St. Emerald nor any one else.

"The horrid old wretch is simply gloating, and all the other girls may follow Leonore's example with his blessing;" was her ladyship's comment. "Stubbs—Tubbs—or Ubbs—if there is money enough, come one, come all to the Abbey." But the speaker turned with a more kindly air to the white-robed figure of the youthful bride, and wished her well with a kiss—and even that kiss added to the sting of General Boldero's present ruminations.

He had woven it into his remarks on many subsequent occasions. He called Leonore "Lady St. Emerald's pet". And he would put himself in her ladyship's way when he had news of her "Pet," and tell the news with an air of its being of special interest. "Hang it all, her ladyship ought to have been the child's godmother, if we had had our wits about us;" he had exclaimed within the home circle.

What would Lady St. Emerald say now? She was a woman of the world, and although she might choose to take up a girl after a fashion—(even he could not magnify the passing notice bestowed into more, since it never led to anything further)—she certainly would not care to—"I wish we could keep this fiasco from her knowledge," he muttered.

Had it been possible, he would have dropped the hapless young widow out of sight and ken, like a pebble in a pond. Her name should never have been mentioned by him or his,—and if by others, he would have replied curtly and conclusively that she had gone to live with her husband's people.

Confound it all, there must be *some* people to hang on to? It had of course been a great point at the beginning of the connection that young Stubbs stood alone in the world, and his not having a soul belonging to him had been emphasised as one of the assets of the match,—but with the new change of affairs, surely some vulgar old uncle or cousin could be unearthed to be made use of?

His auditor, however, had steadily shaken her head. She did not repudiate the suggestion on any ground other than that of its impossibility—but on this she took her stand with that accurate knowledge of her father which provided her influence over him.

He had just yielded the point, and she had mooted the idea of receiving her sister back to the home of her childhood, when we are admitted to hear the explosive "She *can't* come," with which our chapter opens.

We know how the battle went, and to what was due the victory, if such it could be called, on the part of Miss Boldero. She had discovered a secret—a shabby secret which the general had hitherto been careful to lock tight within his own breast—and armed with this she could do as she chose about Leonore—but her triumph cost her dear.

No one would have believed how dear. No one would have supposed that the person who of all others knew the ill-conditioned old soldier best, who knew him in and out and through and through, could retain for so poor a creature a spark of feeling other than that engendered by the tie of blood. To Maud and Sybil their father was simply "He,"—and to catch him out, or catch him tripping on any occasion, the best fun imaginable—but their half-sister suffered from every exposure, and when possible hid the offence out of that charity which is love.

She was not a clever woman, she was in some respects a fool. People would exclaim, "Oh, *that* Miss Boldero!" on finding which of the three it was who had been met and talked with. There was nothing worth hearing to be got out of poor old Sue. No gossip, no chatter—not even sly details of the general's "latest" wherewith her sisters were willing to regale their friends. Sue was dull as ditch-water and silent as the grave where family affairs were concerned.

She was not ill-looking, nay, she was handsome, as were all the Bolderos; and, curiously, she was

better turned-out than the younger ones, for she had the knack of suiting herself in her clothes, which they had not,—but with it all, with her good appearance and respectable air, she belonged to the ranks of the uninteresting, and the weight she carried with her father was voted unaccountable.

No one, however, disputed it; and when the two withdrew together no one followed.

"Well, what does Leo say?" demanded Maud, who with Sybil had been lying in wait for their half-sister while the conversation above narrated was going on in the library. "What a time you have been! You might have known Syb and I were on thorns to hear what was in that great fat letter? Where is she going to live? Or is she going to travel? And is she going to invite one of us to go with her? If she does——"

"It ought to be me," struck in Sybil eagerly. "I am nearest her age, and Leo and I were always pals. I shouldn't at all mind going with her."

"Which of us would? It would be splendid. Can't you speak?" to Sue. "You are such a slow coach,—and surely you might have broken loose before, when you knew we were waiting."

"You have been nearly an hour;" Sybil glanced at the clock.

"We thought you might have called us in," added Maud.

"Anyhow, do for heaven's sake let us have it out now," continued Sybil impetuously. She had been giving little tweaks at the letter in her sister's hand, and a faint apprehension crept into her accents as she found it firmly withheld; "and don't look so owl-like. There is nothing to be owl-like about, I suppose?"

Hitherto neither had noted Sue's expression; now for the first time they simultaneously paused long enough to enable her to open her lips.

"I am afraid you will be disappointed," she said slowly. "I am so sorry to tell you, but—but things are not as you suppose. Poor Godfrey——" she paused.

"Poor Godfrey, well, poor Godfrey?"

Both exclaimed at once, and each alike made a movement of impatience.

"He had been very unfortunate of late. He had—speculated. He——"

"We don't care twopence about *him*, get on."

"He has been unable to leave Leonore——"

"Never mind what he has been *unable* to do—what has he been able?"

"He was ruined," said Sue at last, in a dull, matter-of-fact tone. "It appears he did not himself know it, for which Leonore is very thankful—but though he died in the belief that he was going to be richer than ever, when his affairs came to be looked into——"

"Oh, how long you are in telling it. You do love to harangue;" with a sudden petulance Sybil shook her sister's shoulder and seized the letter, whose perusal was the work of a minute.

"So that's how the cat jumps!" quoth she, suddenly as cool as she had been warm before. "Poor brat! Well, it will be nice to have her here."

"Here?" ejaculated Maud. "Is she coming here? To live?"

"Even so. Isn't she, Sue? Of course she is. She can't help it. Though, I say—no wonder you were ages in the library—how does *he* take it? Oh, you need not pretend, my dear, we can imagine the scene. Our revered parent is not given to mincing matters, and to have Godfrey Stubbs, his dear bloated son-in-law, collapse like a pricked balloon is rough on him. He was so pleased—that's to say he took poor Goff's death so very philosophically, that one knew perfectly how he felt. The money and not the man—it was an ideal consummation. He would have condoled with his poor little Leo, and petted and pampered her—and grinned whenever he was alone. She might have come to live with us *then*——"

"A nice jumble you are making of it." It was Maud who interposed, with a vexed face. "It is nothing but a huge joke to you—but upon my word, I don't see a pleasant time ahead for any of us. The bare sight of Leo will be a perpetual grievance, and we shall all reap the benefit."

By the evening's post, however, Leo was bidden to come.

CHAPTER II.

ON THE STATION PLATFORM.

"Is that the widow?"

A couple of common-looking men with their hats and greatcoats on, were standing, notebooks in

hand, in the centre of a handsomely appointed room, and the eye of experience would have seen at once what they were doing there. They were taking an inventory of the furniture.

Their task had been momentarily suspended by the opening of the door, and both heads had turned to behold a slight, black-robed figure step forward, then, at the sight of themselves, stop short, turn and vanish—whereupon the one put the above question and the other nodded for reply.

"Lor', she ain't but a girl!" muttered the speaker; then paused to rub his chin, and add sententiously: "that's the way with these rich young cock-a-doodles. They marries and lives in lugsury—gives their wives di'monds, and motor-cars, and nothin' ain't too good for them,—then pop! off they goes, and *we* comes in! Sich is life!"

"Godfrey Stubbs was a very decent feller;" protested the other, biting the top of his pencil with a meditative air. "He was misfort'nate, that's all."

"Humph? Misfort'nate? Yes, I've heard it called that before. Stubbs ain't the first by a long chalk whose sticks I've had to make a list of because of his dying—or living—misfort'nate. Who's the missus?"

"Can't say. There she goes!"—suddenly; and with one accord both stepped to the large French window which stood open, and stared across the lawn. "Just a mere slip of a thing," murmured Joe Mills, under his breath, "'bout my Milly's age, poor lass!"

"Lucky there's no kids," quoth his companion, bluntly; "and, 'Poor lass' or no, we've got our work to do. Where had we got to now? Look sharp, and let's clear out of this before she comes back,"—and spurred to activity by the suggestion, the interlude came to an end forthwith.

They need not have hurried; Leonore was not going to interrupt again. She had come to take a last look round, as she was not now dwelling there; but the sight just witnessed was enough to preclude any desire for further investigation, and she almost ran across the threshold which she was never more to enter.

It may be wondered at that none of her own people were with the hapless girl at such a moment—but a few words will explain this. A very few days before Godfrey Stubbs' sudden death, an outbreak of influenza, which was rife in the neighbourhood, had taken place at Boldero Abbey; and to the intense vexation of the general, he found himself laid by the heels, when it was above all things necessary and desirable that he should appear, clad in the full panoply of woe, at the funeral of his son-in-law.

He would go, he was sure he could go,—and he rose from his bed and tried, only to totter, trembling, back into it again.

Then he ordered up Sue, and sent messages to the younger ones. When it appeared that all were either sick or sickening, and that the doctor's orders were peremptory, he was made so much worse himself by wrathful impotence, that thereafter all was easy, and by the time the epidemic had abated, Leonore was no longer in her own house.

She was still, however, to her father's view a personage, and as such to be treated. Messages of affectionate condolence and sympathetic inquiry were despatched daily. Though he did not actually write with his own hand, he composed and dictated, and every epistle had to be submitted to him before it was sent—while each and all conveyed the emphatic declaration that, the very moment he was fit to travel, General Boldero would fly to his dear girl's side, to give her the benefit of his counsel and experience.

He had been for his first walk on the day Leonore's letter arrived which changed the face of everything.

Thereafter his influenza and all the other influenzas assumed astonishing proportions, and the trip to Liverpool which he had formerly assured Sue would do him all the good in the world, was not to be thought of. The weather was milder, but what of that? She had been against his going all along; and now when he had given in to her, she must needs wheel about face, and try to drive him to do what would send him back to bed again as sure as fate.

Sue had next suggested that she herself, or Maud should go. Sybil, the last to be attacked, was still in the doctor's hands.

The second proposition, however, met with no better fate than the first. It was madness to think of it; sheer madness to take a long, expensive—the speaker caught himself up and substituted "exhaustive"—journey, when there was no end to be attained thereby. Had he not said that Leo could come to them? Since she was coming, and since it appeared there was nothing to prevent her coming immediately, that settled the matter.

"You can put it civilly," conceded he; but on this occasion he sent no message, and did not ask to see the letter.

We perceive therefore how it chanced that the solitary, pitiful little figure came to be haunting the precincts of her former home as narrated above; she had been housed by friends who, struck by her desolation, were not wanting in pity and sympathy,—but confused, dazed, bewildered, she moved about as in a dream, her one conscious desire to be alone—and no one, she thought, would follow her on the present occasion.

No one did, but we know the sight that met her eyes on opening the drawing-room door, and she knew in a moment who and what the two men were, and what they were doing. And she fled down the garden path and passed from their view; but ere she reappears, we will present our readers with a brief glimpse of our heroine up to the present crisis in her life.

In appearance she was small, soft, and inclined to be round-about—while her face, what shall we say? It was a face transmitted through generations of easy, healthy, wealthy ancestors, who have occasionally married beauties,—and yet it had a note of its own. Her sisters were handsome, but it was reserved for her, the youngest, to strike out a new line in the family looks and one which did not ripen quickly. So that whereas the three elder Miss Bolderos had high noses and high foreheads, and long, pale, aristocratic faces, varying but little from each other—for somehow Sue, by resembling her father, had no separate traits)—the funny little Leonore, with her rogue's eyes, and thick bunch of swinging curls, her chubby cheeks and dimpled chin, was for a time entirely overlooked. It was certain she would never be distinguished nor imposing—consequently would never contract the great alliance General Boldero steadily kept in view for Maud or Sybil. [*N.B.*—He never contemplated a husband for Sue—never had, though she was the handsomest of the three. Briefly, he could not do without her.]

But although he was presently obliged to confess to himself that the little snub-nosed schoolgirl was developing some sort of impudent looks of her own, he held them to be of such small account that it was as much a source of wonder as of congratulation when it fell out that they had fixed the affections of a suitor with ten thousand a year. It was luck—it was extraordinary luck—that Mr. Godfrey Stubbs could be content with Leo, when really if he had demanded the hand of any one of the three it would have been folly to hold back.

We need not, however, dwell on this period. Suffice it to say that on each recurring occasion when the general welcomed his married daughter beneath his roof, he was secretly surprised and even faintly annoyed to behold her prettier than before. She glowed with life and colour. She radiated vitality. She had a knack of throwing her sisters, with their far superior outlines, into the shade.

Even Sybil, who had something of Leo's vivacity, had none of Leo's charm. Even Maud, rated highest in the paternal valuation, had a heavy look. What if he had been over-hasty after all? What if the little witch could have done better? Once or twice he had to reason with himself very seriously before equanimity was restored.

In mind Leonore was apt, with the intelligence, and it must be added with much of the ignorance, of a child. She was ready to learn when learning was easy—she would give it up when effort was needed.

As Godfrey was no reader, she only read such books as pleased her fancy or whiled away a dull hour.

Godfrey told her what was in the newspapers, she said. It did not occur to either that Godfrey's cursory perusal merely skimmed the surface of events.

Again, Leonore protested that she had no accomplishments, but that her husband could both sing and draw—and she would hasten to place his music on the piano, and exhibit his sketches. She thought his big bass tones the finest imaginable; she framed the sketches as presents for her father and sisters;—and so on, and so on.

In short the poor little tendril had wound itself round a sturdy pole, and with this support had waved and danced in the sunshine for three years,—and now, all in a moment, with cruel suddenness and finality, the pole had snapped, and the tender young creature must either make shift thenceforth to stand alone, or fall to the earth also. Which will Leonore do?

The present, in so far as she was concerned, was a grey, colourless vacuum.

She had of course to give audiences to her solicitor, an elderly, grizzled man, whose coat, she noted, was shockingly ill-made, and who had a heavy cold in the head, which brought his red bandana handkerchief much into play,—but though she dreaded his visits, and kept as far away from him as possible, with a fastidious dislike of his husky utterances, and heavy breathing, he relieved her of all responsibility, and in fact earned a gratitude he did not get.

His was a thankless task. Leonore only wondered miserably what it was all about? Of course she would do whatever was right; she would give up anything and everything—so what need of details?

Indeed she offered to surrender cherished possessions which Mr. Jonas assured her were not demanded and might lawfully be kept,—but this point clear, she had no interest in the rest, and his broad back turned, nothing else presented itself to fill up the dreary days which had to elapse before her presence could be spared and her departure arranged for.

"Your father will provide for you, I understand, Mrs. Stubbs?" ("And a good job too," mentally commented the lawyer, shutting his bag with a snap. "There's many a poor thing has no father, close-fisted or no, to fall back upon.")

"Yes—yes," said Leonore, hurriedly. She looked so young, and vague, and helpless, that as he held out his hand, and mumbled conventionally, his voice was a shade more husky than before.

"Oh, yes, thank you; thank you, yes."

"Now what is she thanking me for?"—queried Jonas of himself. For very pity he felt aggrieved and sardonic, and Leo perceiving the frown, and unable to divine its cause, was thankful anew that release was at hand. Every interview had been worse than the previous one. She had had to go in to the terrible old man all by herself, and be asked this and that, and begged to remember about things which had made no impression at the time, and been entirely wiped from memory thereafter.

Could she tell—oh, how she came to hate that ominous "Can you tell?" seeing that she never could, and that the confession invariably elicited the same dry little cough of dissatisfaction, followed by a pause.

What did it—what could it all mean? "Then I think I need not trouble you further, Mrs. Stubbs," said Mr. Jonas slowly,—and Mrs. Stubbs almost jumped from her seat.

Nothing could ever be as bad as this again. In her own old home no one would disparage poor Godfrey by inference and solemn silences as this grim old Jonas did. Every statement wrung out of her, even though the same simply amounted to a non-statement, a confession of utter ignorance and trustfulness, had somehow damned her husband in the eyes of the man of business—but her own people would feel differently.

Godfrey had always been treated well, indeed made rather a fuss about at Boldero Abbey. Her father would run down the steps to meet the carriage which brought the young couple from the station on a visit. His hearty, "Well, here you are!" would accompany the opening of the door by his own hand. Then there would be an embrace for herself, and the further greeting of a pleased and affectionate host for her husband.

The pleasant bustle of welcome outside would be amply followed up within doors, where her sisters would cluster round, making as much of Godfrey as of herself—perhaps even a little more—remembering his tastes, his proclivities, his love of much sugar and plenty of cream in his tea, his partiality for warmth and the blaze of a roaring fire. "Ah, you Liverpool gentlemen, you know what comfort is!"—the general would jocularly exclaim, the while both hands pressed his son-in-law down into his own armchair. "I like to stand;" he would protest,—but Leonore had a suspicion that he did not like to stand for most people.

Godfrey was a favourite; for Godfrey there would be horses and dogcarts at command, keepers and beaters in the shooting season, (when such visits annually took place), and elaborate luncheons and dinners. "We don't do much in the way of entertaining, you know," the general would explain casually, having delivered himself on the subject to Sue, beforehand—"Hang it all, he can't expect *that*—but he shall have everything else, everything that we can do for him ourselves")—"We don't go in for that sort of thing, except now and again,—but after all, a family gathering is more agreeable to us all, I take it, eh, Godfrey? *That's* what you and Leo come for, not to be bothered by a parcel of strangers you know nothing about?"

But if strangers, *i.e.*, old neighbours whom Leo remembered from her youth up, and whom she would have liked very well to meet again, if these did accidentally cross the path of the Bolderos and their guests, nothing could be handsomer than the way in which Godfrey Stubbs was presented by his father-in-law. Godfrey would tell his wife about his meeting with Lord Merivale or Sir Thomas Butts with an air of elation. "Nice fellows; so chatty and affable." Once he let fall the latter word in public, and nobody winced openly,—so that Leo, who had often heard it in her married home, and never dreamed of thinking it odd, listened and smiled in all innocence.

It must be remembered that she had barely emerged from the schoolroom when Godfrey Stubbs carried her off as his bride, and that when the last blow fell, and there was a sudden demand on the forlorn little creature for qualities she either did not possess or was not conscious of possessing, she only felt with a kind of numb misery that it was all strange and terrible, and that if Godfrey had been there to help her—and a burst of tears would follow.

But at least she was going home; she had never yet got quite over the feeling that Boldero Abbey was "home," and always spoke of it as such, even in the days when her stay there was limited to visits. How much more then now—now, when she had no foothold anywhere else, and when the past three years took in the retrospect the shadowy outlines of a dream.

It was odd how distinctly behind the dream stood out the days of childhood. As the train bore her swiftly through the open country she knew so well, on the mellow, misty October afternoon, which came at last, Leonore's throbbing bosom was a jumble of emotions, partly, though of this she was unaware, pleasurable. Until now she had been dwelling in the past—the near past—the past which was all loss and sadness,—but as one familiar scene after another unfolded itself, involuntarily they awakened interest and a faint anticipation. Of a nature to be happy anywhere, and to cull blossoms off the most arid soil, the necessity for living in a villa among other villas on the outskirts of a great manufacturing town, had never called for lament and depreciation: no one had ever heard Boldero Abbey descanted upon,—indeed Leonore had sharply criticised the taste of a new arrival on the scene, a girl transplanted like herself by marriage, who was for ever telling her new associates what was done in B—shire.

All this young lady's endeavours could not win an adherent in Mrs. Stubbs, who simply put on a wooden face, and said, "Indeed?" when the other threw out: "It's all so different here from what I am accustomed to. I have never lived in any place like this before."

Leo moreover had her triumph which she kept for Godfrey's ear. "You know how that girl brags, and what an amount of side she puts on? Would you believe it, Godfrey, she's only a sort of stable-keeper's daughter! Well, I don't know what else you call it; her father is a trainer of race-horses, and that's how she knows about them; and the big people she quotes, of course they are all about such places—and—oh, I think it's sickening, even if it were no sham—that running down of nice James Bilson, who never sets up to be anything, and is a hundred thousand times too good for his wife."

"You don't buck, anyway," said he.

"I'd be ashamed," said Leonore proudly.

Her father and sisters thought the villa with its luxurious, well-kept surroundings, met her every aspiration; they liked it very well themselves as a *pied-à-terre*,—and though of course the grounds might have been more extensive, and the smoke of tall chimneys farther off, the general was remarkably sensible on the point. "Land is valuable hereabouts, and a man must live where he can keep an eye on his business."

"And our horses can go almost any distance;" Leonore was always anxious to impress this point. "We have lovely drives round by the Dee; you would almost think you were in the real country there."

"Quite so, my dear," her father would respond urbanely.

In his heart he spurned the idea. Country? Up went his chin, God bless his soul, the whole locality stank of docks and offices. The array of dogcarts daily drawn up outside the little station, in punctual awaiting of the five o'clock train, betrayed the business atmosphere. As Leonore did not see it, well, well. Nay, all the better—

"Don't, for Heaven's sake, any of you unsettle her," ordered he, aside. "She's in precious snug quarters, and has the wit to know it."

But now a strange and hitherto stifled sensation was stealing dimly into Leo's breast. How blue the mists were, how noble that range of forest in the distance—how broad and lonely and inviting that straight road with only a solitary cart upon it! There was the old red-roofed homestead she remembered so well at this point. There were the huge ricks and ample outbuildings. There were the smoking teams being unharnessed from the plough.

It seemed to her that she had seen them there often and often before, doing the same—and as the thought arose, another followed; of course they were; it was at this hour, by the self-same train, that she and Godfrey had always passed that way.

And she had always selected the same corner seat in the train, and gazed from the window—Godfrey being immersed in his paper, and indifferent to the view. At the thought of Godfrey she caught her breath and sighed,—but after a while the past drifted again into the present.

Who would come to meet her? She had half expected an escort all the way, and been relieved when none was proposed, for to talk would have been an effort,—but of course one or perhaps two sisters would be on the platform when she stepped out? Or perhaps her father—she shrank with a sudden qualm.

Not that she was precisely afraid of the general; he was too uniformly urbane and approving towards herself for that,—but was it possible that he was never quite natural? Had she not invariably the feeling of being treated by him as *company*? As some one towards whom he was bound to be agreeable and jocular? The quick, terse reply, and the occasional frowning undertone—the family undertone—were not for her, any more than for Godfrey; and whereas every one else in the house was liable to be snapped up and made to understand that an opinion was of no account, she, Leo, the youngest and presumably most insignificant of General Boldero's offspring, might say what she chose, unchecked.

It had all been pleasant enough, only—only now—now she would as soon not see a certain grey wide-awake upon the platform; she would hardly know what to say; and—and there it was!

There it was, but luckily not alone, indeed surrounded by quite a crowd of familiar faces, and the awkward moment—for the moment was awkward, far, far more so than Leonore suspected—was tided over by its publicity.

Every one had been told beforehand what took the general to the station on the occasion.

In the interval which had elapsed between the present moment and his reluctant tender of the shelter of his hearth towards his unfortunate daughter, he had had time to think. Since he must have her and there was no help for it, he would brave out the situation. His neighbours were not in the least likely to have heard anything of Godfrey Stubbs' affairs, which had never got into the papers and which he himself only knew of by personal communication. They could still be made to believe in the wealth of his late son-in-law; and by his continued deference towards Godfrey's memory and Godfrey's widow, he would still be envied and applauded for the match whose advantages he had so assiduously vaunted. It would be intolerable to have the truth known, wherefore the truth should not be known.

"She must understand to hold her tongue, and do you all of you hold yours," he ordered. "No whining, and whispering; no being wheedled out of confidences by impertinent people who make

a show of sympathy, while in reality there isn't one among 'em who wouldn't lick his lips over our discomfiture if it were known. What? *That's* easy enough. She comes to live with us because she can't live alone; too young and—and helpless. It wouldn't be a bad tip—that's to say, if people choose to think that Leonore hasn't the head to manage her money-matters, and that big investments require a lot of looking after, let 'em. *We* needn't enlighten them. Let the poor child have any prestige she can get that way. After all, what she has or what she hasn't is nobody's business but her own—and ours; so mind you what I say, I'll have no talk set agoing, and if I find any of you——" and it was all about to begin again when Sue interposed:—

"Of course we shall say nothing to vex you, father".

"*You* won't, I daresay, but," and he threw a glance at the other two, "those feather-brained creatures——"

"Oh, we're all right." Sybil nodded gaily. "We don't want to give the show away any more than you do. And it will be rather fun to mystify the neighbourhood, and have the men coming fortune-hunting after a bit——"

"What?" thundered the general, aghast.

"They will, oh, yes, they will. Leo will look uncommonly pretty and pathetic as the rich young widow, and I don't suppose she will be inconsolable——"

"And you mean—God bless my soul!" But though General Boldero rolled his eyes, and kept up his high tone of indignant amazement, the speaker did not feel snubbed as she might have done.

"We shall have all the impecunious youths——"

"That we shan't." A relapse to fierceness.

Sybil laughed. "'Trying it on,' was all I was going to say, sir. Any one who knows *you* wouldn't back them for a brass farthing." There was a touch of bitterness in the last words which called forth a "Pshaw!" from the general's lips. He knew, as they all did, to what the sneer referred, and Sue, as usual, made haste to avert an explosion.

"I don't think we need fear that Leo will be in any hurry to marry again; she was very fond of poor Godfrey——"

"Then she must keep up appearances for his sake," struck in her father eagerly. "Tell her it's for *his* sake, mind; and see that she does it. As for that nonsense of Sybil's——" and he enlarged till he had worn out the subject.

When he left the room, the girls looked at each other. "He doesn't know Leo," said Maud at last. She was always the last to speak, it was the easiest way; Syb could rattle, and sometimes rattle did well enough with a parent who as has been said could be managed when not openly contradicted, but she preferred silence and apparent submission. She could, however, emit a sentiment when alone with her sisters. "He won't find it as easy as he thinks to get Leo to pretend. She was always a truthful little thing."

"At the same time, it is her duty to obey our father's wishes," quoth Miss Boldero gently. "And one cannot wonder that he should dislike to have her unfortunate circumstances known."

"Meaning that she is as poor as a rat, Madam Grandiloquence. Ah, well, *I* don't mind. Didn't I say it would be fun to take in everybody?—and as *I* am not particularly truthful," laughed Sybil, "I'll play any part the old gentleman chooses, with all the pleasure in life. Maud, if I catch you tripping, I'll tread on your toes till you squeak. It is understood that our poor dear bereaved one—eh, Sue? that's the style, isn't it?—that she only comes to us because she needs the paternal advice for her oceans of money, and the paternal arm to prevent its being grabbed by needy adventurers. Again I say, what fun!"

But she had not grasped, nor had any of them, what was in General Boldero's mind.

He rather overdid his part presently on the station platform. He had elected to go alone, and have out the big carriage. He had given orders loudly for it and the luggage cart,—and so entirely was he engrossed in his own view of the subject, that the sight of a pale little face, with heavy eyes, and quivering lips, irritated him. "They'll see through her like a shot," he muttered to himself. "Why on earth need she—by George! I had forgotten though——" for he had actually forgotten that only a bare three weeks had elapsed since Godfrey's death.

Instantly his countenance changed. A mournful air was *de rigueur*, he must be tenderly and sympathetically sad, while yet respectful. He was aware of having been a little too talkative before, and of having given brisk and cheerful greetings to acquaintances whom he had informed of his errand. Hang it all, he wished he had thought of that sooner; and he now bent over the little black-gloved hand with his best air, hoping that he was watched. If he had been accused of any lack of feeling—he patted the hand, and tucked it within his arm.

And he noted with satisfaction the splendid furs, and handsome travelling bag, and all the paraphernalia which still clung to poor Leo and gave her the appearance of a princess.

Mr. Jonas had smiled grimly when asked about this,—but he had given such a decided opinion, and that in so kind a tone, for he was pleased and touched—that the little girl had thankfully received his word as law, and her personal possessions were intact.

In consequence, she had to apologise for the amount of her luggage.

"The more the better, my dear," said the general, graciously,—and everyone within hearing distance was edified by his directions freely delivered anent portmanteaux and dress-baskets. If there were too many for the cart, some of the smaller things could be put on the carriage box. William could walk. They could take a few light articles inside. Leo felt again the old feeling of being treated as *company*, but it took off the edge of a trying moment, and she was glad of anything that did that.

"Ahem, my dear!" The carriage door was shut, and the general opened his lips.

"Yes, father?"

"There were several kind friends looking on just now, whom I daresay you did not see. You did very well; there was no occasion for you to notice them. And in your place, I may add, I should not bother about seeing people—quite so, quite so—you were not thinking of such a thing, of course not,—you will just keep quiet, and let us say what has to be said. What I mean is," as he caught a bewildered look, "money matters are not in your line, and at such a time as this less than ever. Don't mention them. Don't know anything about them. *I* will tell people all they need to know—"

"But—but do they need to know at all?"

"Certainly not," said General Boldero, promptly. No answer could have pleased him better. "They see you return, very properly, to the home of your childhood, where in future I shall provide for you," he gulped in his throat, and drew the rug further over his knees, but continued; "so that it is nobody's business how you are left by—by your husband."

"Godfrey never knew," murmured she.

"Ahem!" escaped the general.

"Mr. Jonas is afraid he had some anxiety," continued Leonore, bravely; "but he had told some one only the day before—before he died, that he hoped things were going to pull round all right."

"They all think that. But," proceeded her father, curbing the momentary snap, "we need not distress ourselves by entering into details about which I am as ignorant as you. I never thought a business man *could*—however, leave it. What we have to do is to bolster up his memory, to prevent nasty things being said of him—in short, to keep our neighbours in the dark as to the real state of affairs, for if they knew, they would certainly think it disgraceful."

The word was out and he felt the better for it.

Leonore started, and held her breath.

"Aye, disgraceful," resumed her father with increasing emphasis. "I fear I must say it, and there's not a person who if he knew all that I know, would not join me in saying it. But Godfrey Stubbs was your husband, and—"

"And they shan't dare to speak a word against him—oh, they shan't—they shall not,"—with a face of fire she turned towards him, "and, father, you can't and you mustn't, either; Godfrey—" but she could speak no more for sobbing.

"You shall protect his memory, Leonore."

And when the carriage drew up beneath the Abbey portico, General Boldero felt that he had accomplished the object for which he had met his daughter, and met her alone.

CHAPTER III.

SPECULATIONS.

"I saw old Brown-boots Boldero at the station to-day," quoth Dr. Humphrey Craig, the doctor of the neighbourhood, as he shook himself out of his greatcoat and wiped the October mist from his beard, within the hall of his comfortable house. "Spick and span as usual, and boots as glossy as if there were no such things as muddy lanes in the world. To be sure he had his carriage to-day, though."

"His carriage?" The doctor's cheerful little wife was at once all interest; something in her husband's tone awakened interest.

"He was bringing home that poor girl of his."

"Leonore? Did you speak to them?"

"To him—not to her. We had to stand together on the platform, but I sheered off directly the train came in. He had told me what he was there for."

"But you saw Leonore arrive?"

"I saw her, yes,—poor black little thing. There seemed nothing of her at all beneath her widow's trappings. Handsome trappings they were too; the furs of a millionairess."

"Did she look——?"

"Rather miserable and frightened. Scared at seeing her father, I daresay. Bland and civil as the old ruffian is, every one knows how the girls quake before him. There he was, doing the polite, footman in attendance, big carriage outside—all to be taken note of as evidence that Mrs. Godfrey Stubbs was worth it."

"You are always down on that poor old man."

"Can't help it. I hate him."

"I do think you might give him credit for some fatherly feeling."

"I don't—not a ha'porth. Fatherly feeling? Bless my soul, I can never forget his face at the time of the marriage; it was simply bursting with greedy exultation, and at what? At getting rid of the poor child to such a high bidder. Stubbs wasn't a bad fellow, but it would have been all the same if he had been. Leonore was chucked at his head——"

"Hush—hush!"—Mrs. Craig, with a look of alarm, pointed to the green baize door which shut off the back regions. "You really should be more careful, dear; you can be heard in the kitchen, when you speak so loud."

"Don't care if I am. They know all about it;" but as the doctor had by this time divested himself of his outer garments, and extracted the contents of their various pockets, he suffered himself to be drawn into a side room, his own sanctum, still talking. "Marriages like that are the very deuce, and the law should forbid them."

"Plenty of girls do marry at eighteen," demurred she.

"Plenty of follies are committed,"—but the gruff voice got no further.

"Come, come, old bear, *I* am not the person to be growled at; *I* wasn't eighteen when I married you; that's to say, ha—ha—ha!—that's funny,—" and the brisk little woman, who had a sense of humour, laughed heartily. "You don't see? It sounded as if I were younger still,—well, never mind. You have had a horrid day, I know; comfort your poor soul,"—and with the words the wearied man was gently pushed down into his own armchair, that roomy bed of luxury into which he nightly sank when the labours of the day were over. When late like this, he had dined elsewhere, where and when he could.

And next the mistress of the house cast around her eagle eye. She was a born housewife, and particular about all her domain, but woe betide the servant who scamped her work in this room. Mary Craig had what might be called a convincing demeanour when she chose.

And she had not had a moment to run in and see that all was right on the present occasion; and the night was dark and chill, and her husband later than usual, having been far afield on his rounds,—it was just like Eliza to be careless—but Eliza had not been careless.

All was as it should be; a pleasant warmth was diffused throughout the whole snug apartment by a fire which had been lit in time, and was now a mass of glowing coals; the hearth glittered, the curtains were properly drawn, the lamp properly trimmed, and books and papers neatly piled upon the various tables. She had not even to fetch the favourite pipe of the moment, as it and a couple of matchboxes lay handy at the doctor's elbow.

"Eliza's conception of her part," nodded Eliza's mistress, pleasantly familiar with current quotations. "As she forgot a matchbox yesterday, she puts two to-day."

"And that with a fire big enough to roast an ox!" grunted the doctor, scornfully ignoring the extra contribution, and tearing off a strip from the envelope in his hand. "Wasteful hussy—like all the rest of you;" but when he had lit up, and thrown the burning end of paper into the fender, where it was suffered to expire without a motion on his wife's part, he leaned back and his hand stole along the arm of the chair till it found quite naturally another hand, and a round, warm cheek, a dear little cheek, lay presently upon both. For a few minutes neither spoke again.

Then Mary looked up. "Very tired to-night, Humpty?"

Oh, if the patients who thought such worlds of their grim, overbearing Scotch doctor, and the nurses who trembled before him at the county infirmary, could have heard him called "Humpty"!—but to do so they must also have beheld the softening brow, the relaxing of the stern lips, the gradual light which crept into the piercing eyes—and only one person was ever suffered to behold these. Her tender accents unveiled what was hidden from the world.

"Tired, darling?"

"Well, may-be." Humpty made an effort and roused himself. "Perhaps I am, a bit. Those idiots at the infirmary let me in for a lot more trouble than I need have had,—but I daresay it will work out all right. I'm worried about a new case, too,—however, no shop. Let's gossip.—What have you been about?"

To meet this invariable question was part of her daily business, and however trifling the

happenings of morning and afternoon might be, they were taxed to yield something whereby Humpty might be beguiled from his own thoughts.

To-night, however, was an unlucky night, she had only such very small beer to chronicle that he soon fell back upon them, and they comprised the return of General Boldero's widowed daughter, and her probable future under his roof.

"She won't have a gay time of it—at least she would not, if she had come empty-handed,—perhaps as things are, it may be different."

"You forget, Humpty, that he always made a fuss about Leonore."

"I don't forget;" the doctor shook his head; "but I remember other things as well. It's all very well to try to whitewash that old sinner, but you don't know human nature as I do, my bairn. For that matter, I am not the only one to say nasty things of old Brown-boots. It is common talk that for all his posing as the genial squire and jolly paterfamilias, Brown-boots is as mean a skunk as breathes."

"I know he is rather a martinet at home, but——"

"But what?" He protruded his head eagerly, scenting something in her hesitation.

"The fault is not all on his side. Sue is straight: she is perfectly straight——"

"Oh, aye; we know old Sue, dull as ditch-water, but honest. Well?"

"The other two are just a little—sly."

"Sly? You don't say so? I hadn't thought of that. I daresay they are, I quite believe they are. Sly? And from *you*? Bless my life, they must be sly indeed for *you* to say so!" And he chuckled with keen enjoyment.

"What I mean is that they have no sense of duty. They simply pretend to give in to their father—and of course they are afraid of him—but behind his back it is a very different story. I don't like to say so, but it's true."

"Serves him right, the old tom-cat. I only wish they snapped their fingers in his face."

"No, no, Humpty——"

"But I do. However, I daresay they prefer a quiet life; and as for Leonore, I do wonder how Leonore will get on?"—and he puffed a long breath of smoke and looked down at his wife's upturned face. "If you should ever have a chance of doing Leonore Stubbs a good turn, do it. She'll need it," he prophesied.

The return of Leonore was the event of the neighbourhood. Others besides Dr. Craig had seen General Boldero's carriage, with its glittering harness and champing horses, in waiting at the station; and it was noticed that not merely its presence but that of the general himself on the occasion, was designed to give the young widow importance in the public eye. The Reverend Eustace Custance, the rector, and very much the rector, had both seen and understood.

Eustace was one of the excellent of the earth. His spare frame, long neck, and hanging head were to be seen year in year out entering familiarly every door in his parish,—entering with a friend's step, and departing with a note-book, well-worn and blessed by not a few, in his hand.

There were some among his richer parishioners who voted their clergyman a bore, but he was never so thought of by the poor. Their wants, their cares, their welfare was the burden of his thoughts—and we know that such a burden is not always a welcome guest in the seats of the mighty. General Boldero, for instance, would raise a curt hand to his hat, and mutter something about being in haste, if he chanced upon the rector on the road,—if possible, he would scuffle out of the way. "I never see that man but he has a subscription list in his hand," he would fretfully exclaim,—and though it did not suit his dignity to ignore the list, he would have disliked the person whose fingers thus found their way into his pocket, if it had been possible. Since it was not possible, he yielded a cold esteem, and secretly wondered why so worthy a recipient for promotion did not obtain it.

On the present occasion, however, Mr. Custance did not cross his neighbour's path; voluntarily he never did so, and he had, as it happened, no very pressing case demanding assistance on hand at the moment.

Wherefore, he only blinked his mild blue eyes as the handsome turn-out, designed to edify all beholders, thundered past him on the station road, and recalled what his sister had told him about the Bolderos that morning at breakfast. Emily was his purveyor of news, and his fondness for her made him often affect an interest in it which he did not feel. It might be an effort to say "Ah! Indeed?" and follow on with a proper question or comment when his thoughts were wandering; but he never failed to try, and from trying faithfully for many years, he had finally attained some measure of success.

Occasionally, also, Emily's chit-chat bore fruit; the good man had the scent of a sleuth-hound for any event which bore, however remotely, on his life's object; and though he might now have been secretly amused by his sister's excitement over what to him was a very ordinary circumstance, a single remark in connection with it arrested his coffee-cup on its way to his lips.

"To be sure I had forgotten that," he murmured.

"Forgotten that Leonore made a wealthy marriage, my dear Eustace? Why, it is only three years ago, and we were all full of it."

"Then I suppose she——" he paused and mused.

"You may be sure she brings back her money with her," nodded Emily cheerfully. "Poor dear child, it's all she has left. So sad to be widowed so young, is it not? I don't think you seem quite to take in how sad it is, Eustace," and she cast a gentle look of reproach.

The rector put down his cup and stirred its contents thoughtfully, debating the question within himself. He was so accustomed to sad cases that perhaps—well, perhaps it was as she said: certainly it had not occurred to him to bestow the same pity on a young girl, bereaved indeed, but with a good home to come back to, as he did on Peggy, the ploughman's wife, for instance—that valiant Peggy who, with her ten children, was suddenly reduced from comparative affluence to naked poverty, by the death of the bread-winner of the family.

Peggy was getting on in years, and her strength was not what it had been. She had toiled and moiled, and brought up her boys and girls in a way that won her pastor's heart. His smile would be its kindest, his shake of the hand its heartiest when he entered the ploughman's hut; and there were others;—there was the case of Widow Barnaby whose only son had just returned upon her hands, maimed for life, after starting out into the world a fine, strapping youngster, the best lad in the village, only a year before! No, he had not classed the calamity which had befallen pretty little Leonore Boldero as on a plane with these.

But perhaps he was wrong, he was growing hard-hearted? Contact with the very poor, and with material misery, was apt to blunt sympathy with sorrows of another nature. "I daresay you are right, Emily," he said candidly; for once convicted, no one was swifter to acknowledge a fault. "I had not looked upon it in that light. Yes, it is certainly very sad about Leonore, poor thing."

"People say it is a blessing she does not come back poor and dependent;" thus encouraged, Emily proceeded with gusto, "for we all know the general."

"Aye, that we do. So Leonore is rich?" and he obviously pondered on the idea.

"My dear brother," Emily laughed, but the laugh was full of affection, "now what is to come first? The Christmas coals, or the Old Folks' Dinner, or——?"

"Peggy Farmiloe," said he, succinctly. "Her needs at the present time are paramount. The rest can wait."

"So you will call on Leonore?"

"I shall make a point of doing so—presently."

"You will have to get at her when she is alone, you know. It would be no good making it a topic of general conversation."

"I shall be as wise as the serpent, Emily," the good man permitted himself an appreciative sally. "Perhaps I shall not even introduce the subject at all on a first call, eh? It might not be in good taste—not that one should heed that. But if my clumsiness were to prejudice the cause—oh, I must certainly beware of clumsiness. Let me see, to-day is Thursday," and out came the note-book; and after due consideration Monday was fixed upon, whereupon Mr. Custance rose briskly.

"You may depend upon it, I shall go to the Abbey on Monday. And if this poor little widow's heart is in the right place——" a glance shot from his eye.

He foresaw sacks of coal and piles of blankets. He fed and he clothed. He distributed the older Farmiloe orphans hither and thither, and gathered the little ones together under his wing, which, weak before, would now be strong to shelter and support. The Barnaby lad should have better nursing and an easier couch. There was the old couple at the disused toll-gate too. It was a blissful dream; and it is sad to think—but we will not anticipate.

At Claymount Hall, the theme was treated from another point of view. Here dwelt a very fine old lady with a youthful grandson, of whom it may be briefly said that the neighbourhood thought Valentine Purcell a fool, and that Val himself was very much of its opinion.

"*She's* clever enough for two though, ain't she?" opined he,—and on this point it was the neighbourhood who endorsed his opinion.

The pair were an unfailing source of interest and amusement. Mrs. Purcell's latest word and Val's latest deed invariably went the round, and to their house as a centre every fresh topic made its way.

It was there, we may observe, that the doctor's wife had met the Boldero girls and heard about Leonore, and it might be added that it was there also the Reverend Eustace Custance gained the like intelligence. Let us hear how it was taken by the Purcells themselves.

Val, as usual, grinned from ear to ear, and had nothing to say—but his grandmother had plenty, and directly her guests had departed she summoned the young man to her side.

"What is this I hear about the Bolderos?"

This was Mrs. Purcell's little way of finding out what others had heard. It is true that she was slightly deaf as she was partially blind,—but she heard a great deal more and saw a vast deal further than most of her neighbours, and Val was never in the least taken in by a parade of infirmities. On the present occasion he simply waited for the speaker to proceed.

"Did those girls say their sister was coming back to live with them? I thought they did—but you know how badly I hear, especially if there is a hubbub going on. Were they expecting her to-day? And had their father gone to meet her, and was that why they had to hurry off, so as to be back at home before the carriage returned? I thought so, but those girls gabble like ducks. Eh? I was right then? And this is the end of poor little Leonore's great marriage? At twenty-one she is left a widow, with too much money to know what to do with—what? What did you say?"

"Didn't say anything, ma'am."

"But it *is* so, is it not? I am sure I heard Maud telling you——?" and Mrs. Purcell paused and peered sharply.

"I didn't, then. But I knew you would tell me afterwards if there was anything to tell."

"Humph!" The old lady paused again, and twisted her cap strings. Val was gazing stupidly out of the window, but whatever the expression of his face might be no one could deny that the face itself was worthy of notice. It was an almost perfect outline which was now cut sharp against the light, the unusually bright light of an autumn sun, setting in a cloudless sky.

Val was looking at the sun, and wondering if a slight haze surrounding it portended rain. He was learned in weather lore and most of his life was passed out of doors,—so that it was important to him to ascertain if he could, the forecast of each day. It meant whether he might expect a hunting, or a shooting, or a fishing day. This was infinitely more interesting than the conversation, though he was always ready for conversation if nothing better offered.

"Humph!" muttered his grandmother a second time, and stole a glance, a long, furtive, appraising glance—not at the sunset, but at the profile which it threw into such bold relief.

Apparently it satisfied her, for her own features relaxed, and her eyes sought the floor in meditation.

("She might be caught by his looks, why not? The other two are always glad to talk to Val, and Heaven knows it is not for anything he says. He contrives to make them laugh—he has a kind of oddity that goes down—but if he were an ugly fellow they would not trouble their heads about that. Now, if Leonore—she is but a child still, and as she could marry a man called Stubbs to begin with, she can't be particular. Anyhow it is worth trying for.")

"Val?"—suddenly the peremptory old voice rang out.

Val yawned and turned round.

"I am so sorry for dear little Leonore, I can't get her out of my head."

"Well, I'm sorry too." With an effort Val recalled what he had to be sorry for, but that done, he assumed a solemn air that did him credit—and indeed we are wrong in using the word "assumed," since directly he remembered or reflected upon the woes of others, Valentine Purcell's kind heart was touched.

"I'm awfully sorry," he reiterated now, shaking his head.

"It is so sad for her, is it not?"

"Awfully sad; I say, do you think she'd join the hunt?" Suddenly his eyes lit up, and he started to attention. "We do want some more subscribers jolly badly. If Leonore——"

"Not just at present, my dear,—but, yes, certainly, by-and-by, when she has settled down here, and left off her weeds."

"Her what?" he stared.

"Her widow's weeds, dear boy. The poor child must wear them, you know. White collars and cuffs, and that kind of thing. Happily she need not disfigure her sweet face by a frightful cap as I had to do."

"Oh, Lor! Do you mean Leo will have to turn out in a thing like that?"

"My dear, I just said she would *not*."

"But she might, he-he-he!" he chuckled, but the next moment was again preternaturally grave. "I had no idea. Poor Leo!"

This was better. The old lady sighed sympathetically. "Yes, indeed. Poor Leo! You always liked Leo, Val?"

"Rather. I can't imagine her in a beastly widow's cap, he-he-he! It's a beastly shame, but I can't help laughing."

"It does seem incongruous. I don't wonder that you can hardly picture that bright little sunbeam of a face with those golden curls hanging round it——"

"She's not as good-looking as Maud, you know."

"Indeed I think she is a great deal better looking," said Mrs. Purcell, shortly.

But she knew better than to argue the point, and resorted to one more likely to yield a favourable result.

"You were talking about Leonore's joining the hunt; and I fancy if you are content to wait a little and approach the matter delicately, she is quite likely to be persuaded. Every one knows that it is only stinginess on General Boldero's part which stands in the way of his daughters' hunting. *That* need not affect Leonore, who will now be quite independent, and can keep as many horses as she chooses."

"You don't say so? Yoicks! I'll be at her like a shot."

"And you can offer to pilot her, you know. She will be nervous at first."

"Oh, I'll pilot her. But she can ride all right, for we used to have great larks when they were out on their ponies, and Leo was always the best of the bunch. It will be fun if I can get her to follow hounds, and the hunt will be awfully obliged to me."

"Don't let any one else—it is your idea, and you ought to have the benefit of it."

"Trust me for that, ma'am," looking very wise. "I've never brought them a subscriber yet, and it would be jolly mean of any one to try to cut me out."

"If it is suggested, you must pooh-pooh the notion."

"How can I though, when I'm thinking of it all the time myself?"

"Leonore might be prevailed upon by *you*, by an old friend for whom she has a kindly feeling, and on whose judgment she could rely," replied Mrs. Purcell, softly; "while at the same time she would not think nor dream of such a thing if left to herself. And certainly she would resent being approached on the subject by strangers. Therefore it would be quite correct, absolutely correct, to say that no such approach would have a chance of success. You see that, my dear boy?"

He was further instructed that, in order to prepare the ground for his future mission, he was to take an early opportunity of calling at the Abbey, and of being especially respectful and sympathetic in his manner towards poor dear little Leo.

He was to show that as an old friend and playmate he felt for her; and he might, if he saw his way to it, intimate delicately that though he might grieve on her account at her return to dwell among them, he could not do so on his own.

"Well, I can say that, you know," Val brightened up. He did not much like being on the respectful and sympathetic lay, he told himself; he was pretty sure to make a mess of it there;—but if it came to saying he was glad—

"You can't *say* such a thing, my dear, you can only infer it. You can look it; look kind and—and tender."

"And jolly well show old Maud she needn't book me too sure as her man, eh?"

At last he seemed to have caught up what she was struggling against heavy odds to inculcate. It was up-hill work teaching Val anything, especially anything requiring *finesse*—but occasionally he would startle his mentor. He would emit a flash of intelligence when such was least expected, and there was now such a humorous light in his grey eyes that the old lady laughed in her heart. Dear, dear—how naughty he was! So he had the vanity to suppose that Maud Boldero reckoned him an admirer?

Whereat Val complacently knew she did.

By degrees he was led to reveal all his artless thoughts upon the subject, and somehow found it more engrossing than he had ever done before.

In truth, his grandmother had never encouraged mention of it before. She had ignored the Boldero girls when she could, and bracketed them together in faint, damning praise when to ignore was impossible. She knew exactly how to treat Val. An incipient flame could be warmed, cooled, or blown out by her breath—and as hitherto she had had no intention of receiving a daughter-in-law out of Boldero Abbey, she had simply never permitted a spark to be lit.

Here, in justice to the old lady, a solitary fact must be stated. Her grandson was not her heir, and the Claymount estate, of which she had a life rent, was strictly entailed; wherefore Val must be provided for otherwise.

A woman of another sort would have attained this end by saving out of her income, or by insuring her life—but Mrs. Purcell argued that she had so much to keep up, and Valentine's requirements were so manifold and costly that she could neither put by anything worth having, nor afford the heavy premiums an Insurance Office would demand at her age. She had not taken the matter into consideration till too late.

And the boy had been bred to no profession—indeed his grandmother secretly doubted his ability to pursue one—and she had been only too glad of the excuse to have him as her companion at

Claymount. He had a pittance of his own, derived from his parents who were both dead,—but he had nothing further to look to, as his uncle, who in the course of time would succeed to the estate, openly flouted him for a "loafer," and made no secret of his opinion that the money spent on his hunters and keepers would have been better bestowed upon almost anything else.

What then was to become of Val—Val, who was the apple of her eye, whose very childishness and helplessness were dear to her, whose beauty of face and form—stop, she had it, she laughed as she told herself she had it. And how often she strained those dim old eyes of hers to see more clearly when her darling's step was heard, and how fondly they rested on the approaching figure and strove to appraise at its exact value the curiously beautiful face, no one but herself knew.

It was a face without a soul—and she was pathetically aware of this, but what then? Val would make a good husband—he would certainly make a good husband. Husbands were not required to be clever; and it was quite on the cards that even an intelligent girl might fall in love with a man who had only a kind heart and an amiable disposition to recommend him, provided his exterior were to her fancy.

But of course the girl must be rich; and now we come to the crux of the whole little scene above narrated—Leonore Stubbs, the wealthy young widow, with no ties, no drawbacks, and not too much discrimination (or she could not have married as she did in the first instance), was the very first person to solve the problem. In her own mind Mrs. Purcell decided that her grandson should call at Boldero Abbey the very first moment that decency permitted.

There is no need to multiply instances, it will now be perceived that in no quarter was the real secret of the unfortunate Leonore's return to the home of her childhood so much as suspected.

She was a pauper—but she was received as a princess. She had hardly a penny of her own—but she was marked down as a benefactress. She was bereft, denuded, bewildered, humiliated—but she was hailed with acclaim by the shrewdest woman in the neighbourhood on the look-out for an heiress.

CHAPTER IV.

A DULL BREAKFAST-TABLE.

To her surprise, Leonore slept soon and soundly on her first night in the vast, gloomy bedchamber wherein it was her father's pleasure that she should be installed.

She had not expected to do so.

The room was known as the "Blue Room"; but years had faded the blue, which now only stood out with any clearness in creases of the curtains, or remote patches of carpet on which the light never fell. Otherwise a dull grey prevailed.

Nevertheless Leo had been fond of the "Blue Room" in early days; revelling in its mysterious depths, hiding in its capacious hiding-holes, and, finest fun of all, making hay in its huge four-poster with some little friend of her own age. It was an apartment so seldom used, and its furniture was so shabby and out-of-date, that Sue would readily accede to the little girls' petition to be despatched thither—only exacting a promise that there should be no climbing of window-sills, which promise had been broken, and confessed honourably—whereupon Sue, who was herself a woman of honour, never once mentioned window-sills again. The windows, deepset and high up in the wall, with broad sills inviting to perch upon, only existed as roofs for the cupboards beneath, once Leo had succumbed to temptation and gone unpunished. "No, dear, there is no need for any more punishment," Sue had said in her kindest accents,—and when Sue spoke like that, the little saucy upstart Leonore, whom usually nothing could repress, would be good for days.

Consequently the apartment had its associations; and under other circumstances its new occupant would have found it pleasant enough to look upon it as her own. But weary and dejected, with all the world in shadow around her, it is scarcely to be wondered at that she should shrink into herself, and look piteously up into Sue's face, as Sue turned the handle of the door.

"Am I—am I to be here, Sue?"

"Father says so, dear."

"But, Sue, couldn't I—some little room—?"

"Oh, I think you will be very comfortable here, Leo; you will have plenty of space for your belongings," she glanced at the array of trunks,—and you can always remain in undisturbed possession," summed up Sue cheerfully. "The other spare rooms——"

"I never thought of *them*. My own little old room——" faltered Leo.

She had settled this with herself beforehand. Although it was on the top storey, and in a somewhat despised quarter, she had loved her small domain because it was hers and she might

pull it about as she chose,—most girls feel the same, and Leo was a very girl, and youthful instincts were warm within her.

Sue, however, had received her orders on the point, and though they were distasteful, she recognised in them an element of reasonableness.

"I am sorry, dear, but that would never do. You know what father's wishes are. That you should be given a dignified position in the family; and—and I think he explained why. He had thought the matter carefully out before he fixed on this room for you. He does not like to be argued with, Leo."

Leo resigned herself. She knew the tone of old, it conveyed, "I am sorry, but I shall be firm"—it was the formal, precise, elder sister, the general's mouthpiece, not the good, old, motherly Sue, who spoke. Further resistance would be useless.

And now, alone, sitting on the great square sofa, with great square chairs and massive receptacles on every side, the forlorn little figure gazed about her with a heart that sank lower and lower. She was to occupy a "dignified position in the family"? Did that mean that she was still to be treated ceremoniously as in Godfrey's life-time? That she was still to have that uneasy sense of being *company* which had then haunted her? Sue alone had led the way to her new abode—Maud and Sybil having vanished elsewhere—and this in itself forboded ill. She sat motionless, pondering.

In childhood the gap between herself and her elders had always been too wide to be bridged even at its nearest point, which was Sybil—but she had looked to her marriage hopefully. Then somehow, she could never quite tell how, but although she could manage to play the hostess to her sisters on apparently equal terms at Deeside, the old position remained intact at Boldero Abbey. For all her gay outward bearing, Leo was of a sensitive nature, and the girls—to herself she always called them "the girls"—had only to take a matter for granted, for her to follow their lead.

So that while it would have been joy untold to perceive the barriers withdrawn, and to have been allowed to run in and out of Maud's room and Sybil's room—she did not covet Sue's—in dressing-gown and slippers, to have brushed her hair of nights along with them and talked the talk that goes with that time-honoured procedure, Mrs. Godfrey Stubbs had no more been accorded this privilege, for which she had hungered ever since she could remember, than the little out-cast Leonore had been. Indeed, she was kept even more steadily at bay—and we will for a moment lift the veil for our readers and disclose why.

"It *isn't* unkind," quoth Maud, on one occasion. "I wouldn't be unkind for worlds, but it simply can't be done. Leo is no longer one of us; she belongs to the Stubby people among whom she lives,—and if we were to begin talking about them, we couldn't help letting out what we think—at least, perhaps I could, but you couldn't." It was to Syb she spoke, and Syb lifted her eyebrows.

"I daresay; I can't see any harm if I did. I should rather like to hear about the Stubby people and their queerities."

"Not from Leo's point of view. She would not see what you call their 'queerities'. She takes them all *au serieux*."

"Are you sure she does? She must see they are different from the people here, at all events; and —"

"How is she to see?" interrupted Maud quickly. "She never went anywhere before her marriage. She had only been to one ball, and a few cricket matches. Actually she had never once dined at a house in the neighbourhood."

"If she had, she might not have been so ready to take Godfrey. I couldn't have stood Godfrey as a husband myself, though I really don't mind him as a brother-in-law; and I think it a little hard that Leo should be tabooed."

"I tell you she isn't tabooed. It is for her own sake that it would be a pity her eyes should be opened. She has got to mix in inferior society, and why make her discontented with it?"

"All right, you needn't be excited. I am only rather sorry sometimes when the child looks disappointed.—I say, I do think father ought not to have been in such a hurry to marry her off," cried Sybil, with sudden energy. "I *do* think it. What good did it do? She's rich, and that's all—for I don't count Godfrey. I don't believe she cares for him more than she would for any other tolerably nice man who went for her as he did. I don't believe——"

"Bother what you believe!" Maud arrested the flow; "the thing is that we can't talk familiarly with Leo, as Leo now is. We can't let ourselves go. You must see this for yourself? Why, only to-night when she and Godfrey were so elated over the civility of their new 'Chairman,' and seemed to expect us all to be astonished and impressed, because he is such a bigwig and it was such a terrific condescension, I didn't dare to look at father. I knew the unutterable contempt that filled his soul. Condescension from an absolute nobody to one of us!"

"That's it. When you are at Deeside you are breathing a weird atmosphere, and Leo thrives in it. She knows all her neighbours, and expects you to know them. She took me once to an enormous reception at the opening of some building or other and it was beyond words—the most appalling

women in the most appalling clothes—I told you about them—don't you remember the apple-green satin hat with six feathers? Well, I could hardly contain myself, but Leo saw nothing to laugh at. She ran about all over the place, chattering to everybody, and could hardly be got away, she was enjoying herself so much."

"I don't blame her," said Maud indulgently. "I really don't blame her. How should she know any better, poor child?"

At the close of the discussion Leo's doom was sealed.

True, it was now reopened, and Maud conceded that by-and-by, perhaps, when by degrees the recalcitrant had been weaned from her ways, and taught to tread the paths of righteousness according to Boldero ideas, her case might be reconsidered,—but as, for decency's sake, the teaching could not be begun just yet, it was agreed that Leo should receive her lighted candle and good-night kiss in the hall, as before.

It was due to accident, however, not to design, that the sisters for whose fellowship our poor little heroine yearned, permitted her to be escorted by Sue only to take possession of her new domain. A milliner's box had arrived from London, and been brought up with Mrs. Stubbs' luggage. Leo could not compete with that box. It was all important that the new assortment of hats despatched by the Maison du Cram should be smarter and more becoming than the first batch which had been uncompromisingly rejected; and Maud, slipping out by one door, was quickly followed by Sybil through the other—whereupon Sue also rose, and said, "Come, Leo".

Here then was Leo, small, white-faced, black-robed, the most pitiable little object, almost a parody on the name of widow, dumped down in the "Blue Room" to rattle like a pea in a pod in its capacious depths.

She was indeed accustomed to a luxurious bedchamber, but then it was a different kind of bedchamber. At Deeside the morning sun poured in through large, single-paned windows, lightly curtained; and its rays were reflected by white woodwork clamped by shining brass, and wallpaper that glistened.

Into her new abode neither sun could enter, nor would have met with any response had it done so. She looked dolorously round and round, and tears stood in her eyes. Poor little girl, tears were never very far off in those days.

And she must have thus sat for some time, and perhaps dozed off for a minute or two, for a brisk tap at the door, and the bustling entrance of a housemaid, admitted also the sound of the dressing gong, and both seemed to follow close upon Sue's departing heels.

Dressing was an easy matter when there was no choice of attire and adornments, and Leo's curly hair only needed to be combed through to look as though it had been freshly arranged—so that though she had to open her trunks, and had a moment's flurry before she could be certain into which of these her solitary evening robe had been packed, she was ready and downstairs before any one else.

The evening was got through somehow, and then there was the return march through the long dim corridor to the antiquated apartment, and the conviction that she should never be able to sleep in it, and then—? No sooner had the weary little figure sunk down among the pillows and drawn up the coverlid, than the sound, sweet slumber of youth and innocence prevailed; and the mists were off the land and melting in the blue October sky, long before Leo unclosed her eyes. Eventually she was roused by the stable-clock striking eight beneath her window, and woke to find the night was gone.

Have we said that Leo had a happy disposition? She had not merely that, but a buoyant, recuperative, physical nature, which threw off every adverse circumstance as a foreign element.

Even an ailment could not make her ill, even misfortune could not make her miserable.

Experiencing either the one or the other she bent before it, but there was a fount of bubbling vitality within, which it was impossible wholly to repress.

So that when the little girl sat up in bed, and blinked her drowsy eyes—still drowsy for all the long hours of dreamless, healthy slumber—and when next she yawned and caught back a yawn in sudden recognition of a familiar object unobserved before—and when again she shook across her shoulders the thick plaits of hair on either side, and pulled out the crumpled lace upon her nightgown cuffs, and finally jumped up and ran to look what the day was like, it was perhaps as well that nobody was there to spy upon the newly-made widow.

She actually laughed the next moment. Yes, she laughed as she sprang upon the erst forbidden window-sill, and out of pure daring sat there. Albeit a little creature, she was tall enough to have seen out without even rising on tip-toe,—it was the sheer pleasure of doing what no one could now stop her doing which prompted the action.

And then again she sighed. The immediate past rose before her, frowning, though the old past tittered. She hung her head, ashamed of her levity—and next her reflection in an opposite mirror kindled it afresh. How comical she looked perched aloft with bare feet hanging down, like a small white bird upon a rail! What a nice roost she had found—and it would be nicer still if she sat sideways, with her back to the shutters,—so, and her feet against the opposite shutters—so! The

broad, smooth seat would be an ideal reading place for summer evenings, when the sun crept round to that side of the house, and began to descend, as she could remember it did, over the ridge of beech trees which belted the park below.

She could lock her door, of course. The room was her own, and even Sue could not expect to dominate over what went on within her own room. Besides—besides, she had almost forgotten that she was no longer under Sue's thrall, and that yesterday Sue had observed a gentle deference towards her.

That might pass—she hoped it would. If only she could be on the old terms,—and yet not on the old terms! If only she might be Leo, and yet not Leo! She tried to puzzle out the situation.

She knew indeed what she did not want, but could not define with any exactitude what she did. Three years of affluence and independence had to a certain extent left their mark, and she could not but own that it would be unpalatable to find herself again in leading-strings. At Deeside when a matter came under discussion, as often as not, Godfrey would say, "Please yourself, little wife,"—or, if not, the little wife was sure to be charmed with his decision. He was so much older and wiser, that whatever he decreed was safe to be satisfactory in the long run.

But her father and sisters would most certainly not make her pleasure their chief aim and object; consequently it was as well perhaps—a sigh of relief—that she could not be ordered about and have the law laid down to her as of yore.

And yet, even this would be better, infinitely better, than to be kept at arm's-length, and made to feel that she had neither part nor lot in the home life she had returned to share. For instance, if she were late for breakfast—What? What was that? The clock below was striking the half-hour, and precisely at nine the breakfast gong would sound—what had she been thinking of?

"I hope, Leonore, you will be more punctual in future," said General Boldero, as his youngest daughter took her seat at the table, and having thus delivered himself, he did not again address her throughout the remainder of the meal.

It might have been that he was taken up with his letters, of which he always made the most—handling the envelope even of an advertisement as though it were of importance—but Leo, sitting silent beside him, wished her place were a little farther off. She was conscious of a chill, and she had forgotten what a chill was like.

Her sisters talked among themselves, obviously indifferent to anything but their own concerns; and since it was apparent that the present social atmosphere was its normal one, she tried to think it had no reference to herself, and not to draw comparisons between it and that she had been of late accustomed to.

She and Godfrey had always enjoyed their breakfast-hour. It had often had to be hurried through, and the good things set before them unceremoniously bolted—but cheerfulness and good-humour made even that drawback endurable,—and after seeing her husband drive away from the door, Leo would return to fill her cup afresh, with a smile on her lips. She peeped round the table now, to see if there were a smile anywhere.

Sue looked worried and prim—the worst Sue. Miss Boldero never gave way to temper, indeed she had a creditably equable temper—but when things were not well with her she stiffened; she remained upon an altitude; she addressed her sisters by their full Christian names. Leo, who had been "Leo" on the previous evening, was now "Leonore".

"The girls" also had merely nodded as the small creature, looking almost irritatingly young and childish in her widow's garb, took her seat among them. Neither Maud nor Sybil looked young for their years, and perhaps unconsciously resented Leo's doing so, as accentuating a gap already wide enough.

Further, Leo looked her best in the clear morning light, while her sisters' complexions suffered. They would not have slept as profoundly as she, nor risen with such a spring of elasticity in their veins. They would not have the appetite for breakfast that made everything taste good. They were inclined to be "Chippy" with each other.

For Leo a new-born day was a day full of pleasant possibilities, and the less she knew about it the better. She rather preferred to have nothing arranged for; it left so much the more margin for something nice to happen. As for dullness, she did not know what the word meant.

For though our heroine's abilities were not of a high order, there were plenty of things she could do, and do well; and being by nature industrious and creative, she took much delight in small achievements. "Busy little woman!" Godfrey would exclaim, when one of these was submitted for his approval; and if his praise were at times lacking in discrimination, he was humble enough to satisfy any one's vanity when this was pointed out.

Now, though there was no longer the untrammelled freedom to fill her days as she chose, no longer the allurements of adorning a home according to her own unfettered fancies, no longer, alas! Godfrey to surprise and delight—there was yet, on this first morning of her new life, a little new pulsation throbbing within poor Leo's breast.

She had been unhappy for three whole weeks, and sorrow was unnatural to her; so that although, as we have said, tears still lay near the surface, and there would be the quick sigh and swell of

the heart at a chance recollection, there was also a tiny troublesome spark beginning to flicker afresh within, of which the poor little thing, a widow, and a pauper, and all that ought to have been crushed to earth, was desperately ashamed.

She looked around at the long solemn faces, and strove to bring hers into line with them. She fixed her eyes upon her plate, and was shocked to find it empty. How fast she must have eaten! How greedy and unfeeling she must have appeared! Her cheeks burned; and thereafter it was "No, thank you" to everything, though she could very well have done with another slice of toast and something sweet.

Jam and marmalade were both on the well-laden, old-fashioned board, but though Maud was helping herself to the latter, Leo resolutely declined. She was sure she was being watched; perhaps it was thought surprising that she could swallow food at all? Her hand trembled, and the spoon fell from the saucer of her cup. General Boldero looked up quickly, and the look was like a missile flung at her.

CHAPTER V.

OLD PLAYMATES MEET.

"No, I haven't seen her yet."

Obedient to command, Valentine Purcell had called three times at Boldero Abbey during the month succeeding Leonore's arrival. Val had quite entered into the spirit of the thing. He was fond of making calls at all times, and only needed the slightest hint to betake himself to any house in the neighbourhood.

It is true that the veriest trifle would also throw him off the track; a fieldmouse in the path was a lion,—but given no fieldmouse, he might be trusted to reach his destination, and when reached, the only difficulty was to get him away from it. Wherever he was, there would he take root; and having no claims elsewhere, it did not occur to him that other people's time was more precious than his own.

Accordingly he had spent, satisfactorily to himself, the best part of three afternoons with the Boldero girls, and though Mrs. Stubbs had been invisible on each occasion, he had got on quite well without her—indeed rather chuckled at the reflection that it would in consequence be necessary for him to turn up again ere long at the Abbey.

Mrs. Purcell was not so complacent, however. "Dear me, how extraordinary, Val."

"Very extraordinary, ma'am." Val shook his head wisely, and looked for more. His grandmother was so clever she would be sure to think of something more to say, some explanation of the strangeness.

"They spoke of her, of course?"—she threw out, after a meditative pause. "You gathered that she was there, and——"

"Oh, aye, they spoke of her. That's to say I heard old Sue say something about 'Leonore,' and when Maud came in—she wasn't there at first—the others asked where she had been, and she said, 'We went somewhere or other'. 'We' couldn't have been any one else, you know; they never go out with the general. Besides—stop a bit—why, of course, the footman took away her tea on a tray."

"Three distinct and indisputable testimonies," observed Mrs. Purcell drily.

She was vexed, and had it been any other narrator who pieced his materials together in such a fashion, would have let loose a more palpable sarcasm.

Why could he not have asked directly after Leonore, upon the mention of her name? Why did he even wait for that? It would have been so simple, so natural, to have hoped she was well or hoped she was not ill—hoped something, anything, when the tea was openly sent her elsewhere. The opportunity was obvious; and as obviously the tiresome boy had missed it. She contented herself, however, with a grim smile.

"I expect Leo was somewhere out of sight." After a minute's reflection, Val advanced the above as its result. "They couldn't take her her tea if she wasn't there, you know."

"It seems improbable, certainly." Mrs. Purcell's lips twitched again.

"Improbable, ma'am?" He was flustered on the instant. "Why, ma'am, where would have been the sense of it? Unless there was some one to take tea to—bless me, grandmother—why should Sue have sent the poor footy off on a fool's errand? She rang for him, too," he summed up conclusively.

"Listen, Val; if you are not going to see Leonore when you call at her father's house, if she is to be kept in the background there, you must meet her elsewhere."

"But I don't think she goes elsewhere. Nobody's seen her, for I've asked."

"Oh, you have asked?" She looked pleased; she had not expected so much of him.

"Asked?—I've asked wherever I go, and not a soul has set eyes on her. I'll tell you how I do it. I say in an easy kind of way, not as if I cared, you know, but just like this, 'Any one seen Mrs. Stubbs yet?'—I call her 'Mrs. Stubbs' not to seem too familiar—and, what do you think? they laughed—Jimmy Tod and Merivale laughed—and Jimmy poked me with his whip, and said: 'If *you* haven't, old fellow, no one has'. Of course they know I'm intimate with the Bolderos,"—and he drew up his collar with an air.

"Why did you not mention this before, Val?"

Val looked foolish. For the life of him he could not think why, the truth being that he had forgotten, but never supposed he could forget.

"Well, never mind," pursued his grandmother; "what I mean is that you must meet your old playfellow out-of-doors, on her walks, or in the woods, or wherever she goes. She must go out: she must take the air somewhere,—and if you had had your wits about you, my dear boy, you could have found out where to-day."

"You ought to have told me if you meant me to do that."

"Then you must stop her—don't let her pass without speaking—and ask leave to join her—or them, if there are two,—but it would be better if you could catch Leonore alone. Somehow I feel sure the poor little thing is being kept away from us all," murmured the old lady pensively. "They are masterful people, the Bolderos. And Leo is so sweet and gentle——"

"She's a Boldero though," struck in he. "And though she's sweet enough, hang me if Leo can't stand up for herself! I used to die of laughing when she tackled old Sue. Sue was afraid of her. You bet she hasn't forgotten the time they all thought Leo lost, and she was found hiding in a ditch."

"Leonore? Hiding in a ditch?"

"With her face blacked, and prepared to run away to the gipsies—ha—ha—ha!"

"I never heard a word of it, Val."

"Not likely, ma'am; we were all sworn to secrecy. I believe it was even kept dark from the general, for Sue's a good sort really, and Leo was such a little thing. Though she tried to brave it out she couldn't; and when she blubbed, the tears and the muck—you never saw such a little goblin face in your life."

"And you were in her confidence? Talk about old days to her now."

"Trust me. I always wanted to talk about them, but—I say, why were we never invited to meet the Stubbses when they came to the Abbey? We never were. Never once."

"General Boldero was not proud of his son-in-law. No one was ever invited to meet him."

"They say it was he who made the match, though."

It certainly was difficult to keep Val to the point. The marriage now dissolved was nothing to him nor to any one, but since it kept Leonore as a topic of conversation, and since by means of the past the old lady could gradually work her way back to the present, she did not cut short her grandson's curiosity, and upon subsequent reflection was not displeased that he had evinced it.

A fine day coming soon after this, Val prepared for action.

First of all he prepared his mind; had he anything else he wished to do? Was there anything tempting in the way of sport to be had? He considered and shook his head. His grandmother's shooting was limited, and he had strained its capacity rather fully of late. The river was too full for fishing. The hounds were not running that day. Accordingly, hey! for the Abbey, and for what might come of it.

Thus much decided, what should he wear? No girl in her teens, no dandy in his first London season was more serious over the great affair of his clothes than this country fellow when occasion warranted. Worn and frayed and weather-stained his daily homespun might be, but he had a bill at the best tailor's in Bond Street which he never thought of paying, and which his grandmother never thought of grudging. She quietly annexed the bill, and Val heard no more of it.

He was thus well provided for emergencies like the present. He had thick and thin suits, dark and light, loose and slightly shaped—he had just received one of the last, of a delightful tawny brown colour, which he had not yet worn. It had arrived a few hours after his last call on the Bolderos, and the moment his eye fell upon it now, his mind was made up.

But though so prompt and decided on this, the most important point, there remained the question of the tie,—and how many ties were selected, tried, and found wanting before the first, which had been contemptuously discarded as lacking in dash and originality, was reconsidered, and eventually decided upon, it boots not to say.

Val had taste; and left to himself was nearly sure to come forth triumphant from an ordeal in which taste and a desire to be in the first fashion struggled for the mastery. Crimson and green

and blue were famous colours, but a quiet beech-brown of a darker shade than the suit finished it off so harmoniously that he sighed consent, and stuck in a fox-head pin without further ado. Gloves, hat, and stick were below, and equipped with these he presented himself before his grandmother.

"Any commands, ma'am?"

"Commands?" said Mrs. Purcell, absently. "Commands, my dear?"

She would not make the mistake of appearing to understand too soon; if bothered, poor Val was so apt to tire of a subject, and turn rusty on its reiteration.

"I thought I might as well see what turns up," rejoined he, vaguely, "take the dogs for a run, you know; and as it's a nice morning, perhaps, I may meet people. I have made myself decent"—and he looked down complacently, and advanced within her line of vision.

"A new suit, Val? Turn round, and let me see you. Hum—quite nice. Are you going to the post-office? I have run out of stamps."

"I *was* going the other way, but—oh, I'll get them;" Val brightened. "I'll get them at Sutley" (Sutley was the Bolderos' village)—"and if any of those girls are about, I'll—I'll see what turns up."

"I shall know where you are if you don't come back for luncheon, then."

Now, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, an expedition planned on such hazy outlines would have come to grief, but strange as it may seem, no sooner did Mr. Valentine Purcell, swinging along at a high rate of speed—for he always walked as though furies were at his heels—enter the main street of Sutley village, than he espied a solitary, small, black figure advancing from the other end, and almost ere he could believe his eyes, Leonore herself was smiling into them. "Why, Val?" exclaimed she, "I am so glad to see you, Val."

"Well, you might have seen me before now." Suddenly Val felt aggrieved; it was a way he had; "I'm sure I've called often enough!"—and he shook hands rather coldly; not to be won over too soon.

"I am not supposed to be at home to people at present," said Leo, simply. "They think I ought not, —but I was sorry when I heard it was you the other day."

"Were you in the house?"—demanded he.

"Oh, yes; in the old schoolroom. I have my tea there when we are not by ourselves. I—I don't dislike it." But her face told another tale. Val, who had quite a brute instinct of sympathy, knew that she did dislike it very much.

Tea was the only really pleasant meal at the Abbey; it was relieved of the general's presence, and often of Sue's also—and during the last month Leo had learnt to look forward to it.

A little quiver of the lips accompanied the above assertion, for of late callers had been rather rife, and she had been banished so often that she had come to dread the sound of the door-bell.

"I do think I needn't be classed as 'people';" pursued her old playmate, but without the asperity of his former accents. "I've known you ever since you were so high,"—indicating—"and—and I'm awfully sorry about it all, you know."

It was only Val, Val whom nobody minded, but Leo, taken aback, flushed to her brow.

"Oh, I say, ought I not to have said that? I'm such a rotter, I blurt out with whatever comes first," stammered he, discomfited in his turn. "Leo, you know I didn't mean it. There now, I suppose I oughtn't to call you 'Leo'——" floundering afresh.

"Indeed you may, Val; and I know you meant nothing but what was kind; only I—I am so unaccustomed to hearing—they never talk about me, and I wish they would, oh, I *wish* they would," her voice broke, but she continued nevertheless: "Val, you don't know how hard it is—oh, what am I saying?"—she stopped confused and panting, terrified at what she had been led into.

"Look here," said Val, slowly, "you don't mind me, do you? You don't need to care what you say before me?—I shan't tell, of course I shan't. They always used to be down upon you at home, and I suppose they go on the same? Just you get it out to me, Leo," and he nodded encouragingly.

By the end of half-an-hour, during which the two had wandered away from the village street and the eyes of spectators, Leo had "got it out," and if the truth were told, pretty thoroughly. Recollect how young, and naturally frank, and in a sense absolutely friendless she was. And then it was only Val—she felt almost as though she were speaking to a dog.

Certainly there was, as we said before, an element of canine sympathy in the silent, solemn, appreciative air with which her companion listened. He never interrupted. When he spoke, it was to utter a brief ejaculation or to put a question, a leading question, one which gently turned the lock a little more on the opening side. Sometimes he merely said, "Well?"—but how comforting was that "Well"!

"You see Godfrey was so very good to me, and I do miss him so," sighed the speaker at last.

It was perhaps hardly the way in which a devoted wife would have spoken of a husband only six weeks dead, but it exactly expressed the truth. Godfrey Stubbs had never been idealised, but he had been readily accepted as a lover by a barely emancipated schoolgirl who did not know what love was; and three serene, unimaginative years had been contentedly passed under his fostering care.

Had he lived, and had children been born to the pair, it is easy to conjecture the sort of woman Leonore would have developed into; as it was, she had grown more mentally and spiritually in the past six weeks than in the whole course of her previous existence.

And then came the passionate desire for expression, the helpless sense of an inner burden too heavy to be borne alone. It was lucky it was Valentine Purcell who came in Leo's way: the dam must have burst somewhere.

"You won't tell any one, Val?"

"Rather not. I should think not. I should just say not, Leo." Fervour gathered with each assurance.

"They wouldn't understand, would they?" faltered she.

"Of course they wouldn't. People never do," asseverated he.

"And you mustn't be vexed if I am still shut up when you come to see us, because I know Sue means this to go on for ever so long. Sue thinks it only proper, you know. She is not in the least unkind, she believes she is doing just what I would wish, and she would be awfully ashamed of me if I wished anything else," continued Leo, jumping across a puddle with a freer and lighter step than she had come out with, or indeed trod with, since coming back to the Abbey. "Up the bank, Val. Go first, and I'll follow. Oh, no, we won't turn back; it is only here that the water lies; I often come along this path, and it is quite dry directly you are round the corner."

"You often come here? When? Do you come in the mornings, or afternoons?"—he threw over his shoulder, still leading the way.

"I don't know. Whenever it's fine. Stop a moment; I'm caught;" and she disengaged a sprawling bramble. "It's a pity I put on this skirt," continued Leo ruefully, examining an ugly cross-tear. "It's too good. I only meant to go to the village."

"Well, but if I don't know when you come, how can I meet you here?" persevered he, pursuing his own line of thought. "I can't hang about all the time."

"Meet me? Oh!" She pondered, for it was a new idea. "I wonder, I suppose you might meet me; but if they knew we had agreed beforehand——"

"Of course they're not to know. Sue would put a stopper on it at once."

Leo was silent.

"That needn't prevent us," continued her companion, holding out a hand for her to spring into the path again. "If I'm not to see you anywhere else, it's only fair——I say, you're a married woman, you can do as you please."

"If I did it, I should *do* it—but I shouldn't *hide* it. I'll never do anything I don't mean to tell about." It was a once familiar voice which rang the words out, and the speaker shook back a flying curl and tucked it in with a gesture of determination so absolutely that of the old Leo that Val burst out laughing.

"Oh, you funny little girl!"

Leo however was upon her dignity at this.

"I don't think you ought to speak to me like that," said she, "although you are to be my friend,"—for this had been agreed upon—"you must not call me a 'little girl,' and, Val, only the minute before, you reminded me that I was a married woman."

"You are such a queer mixture, Leo."

"I know. I can't help it." She was off her pedestal as fast as she had hopped on. "I do try to remember, and at Deeside it was quite easy; nobody thought of me as 'funny' or a 'girl' there—but here I seem to be back again just as I was when I left! All the places are the same, the places where we had our accidents and our happenings, and I *can't* feel different. Only, Val——" she hesitated.

"Well?" said he.

"There's Godfrey. I would not for worlds, not for *worlds*—it would be horrible to seem to forget Godfrey. I don't forget him, you know; I don't really. It is just that my spirits get up on a morning like this, what with meeting you, and talking, and all,"—she stumbled on incoherently,—"and you are so kind, and seem just to know what it is like. Only you mustn't take advantage, Val,"—and she shook her head at him with an air of gentle exhortation, "you mustn't encroach. And I don't think I can meet you out-of-doors—no I can't"—(as he emitted an expostulatory "Oh, I say!") "I have made up my mind. You always called me your tyrant, don't you remember? Well, it's no use fighting against your tyrant now."

"All right." A happy idea occurred, and Val made shift to acquiesce indifferently. "Very glad to have had the pleasure of meeting you to-day, and so forth; and now I must go back to grandmother, and I daresay we shan't see each other again for months."

"Not—for—months?"

"Perhaps not this winter. I may be going away from home. I daresay I shall. It's beastly dull at our place, and there's nothing going on anywhere hereabouts."

"But, Val?"—the shot had told; she was plainly disconcerted. "Going away?"—she faltered.

"Very likely I shall. I haven't made up my mind where, but——"

"But you never do go. What should you go for now?"

"A fellow must have change. Many fellows go abroad regularly. I know a fellow who is going to hunt in Spain."

"What on earth should you do hunting in Spain, Val?"

She could not help it, she laughed outright at the idea. Val in Spain? Val, who knew no country, no sport, no language but his own? A glimmering of the truth dawned on Leo.

"I should think Spain was a very nice place to go to," observed she, regaining her composure, "a very nice place indeed."

But their eyes met, and the farce could be kept up no longer.

"You want to make me feel that I should miss you, and I *should* miss you," cried Leo, finding her tongue first. "I should be very, very sorry, now that we've met and met as old friends, and understand each other so well, to think that all through the long winter months you were to be far away,—so don't think of it, Val; you can't, you simply mustn't. And though I can't and won't do anything secret, I shall tell them at home straight out that I met you to-day—accidentally, for it was accidentally—and that we had a talk—they can't be angry with me for that,—and then, whether any one looks at me or not, I'll say boldly: 'So in future there will be no need for me to get out of Val Purcell's way'. There, that's settled. Here's your short cut, and I'll run home across these fields. Good-bye, and—and thank you, Val."

She was off, and though for a moment he thought of running after her, a glance at his watch stopped him.

It was already past one o'clock and though for himself he had nothing to fear if late for luncheon, since his grandmother was accustomed to unpunctuality, and would be only too ready to pardon it on the present occasion, with Leo it was different.

Luckily she was nearer home than he was. Flying along as she was doing, she might get in by a side door before the general stalked into the dining-room, and he sincerely hoped she would. He watched till she was out of sight. There was no one on earth whom Val disliked and feared as much as Leo's father.

The latter could not indeed snub him and snap at him, as when he was a boy—but it was almost worse to be looked at as though he were an offensive object, and to be heard in sneering silence if he ventured upon a remark. For all his witlessness Val, poor fellow, knew when he was happy and comfortable and when he was not, and he did not need his grandmother to tell him that he was no favourite with General Boldero.

"I only hope the old beast doesn't bully Leo," he muttered, as at last he turned into the short cut, and all the way home he was sunk in thought.

But he burst into Mrs. Purcell's presence hilariously. "I've had a jolly good time, ma'am. Sorry to be late, but I was walking with Leonore."

"With Leonore? You really did?—how odd that you should happen to meet!" The old lady, who had begun excitedly, checked herself, and assumed a cheerful, every-day air. "You fell in with the sisters on the road, I suppose?"

"Not the sisters. Only Leo. I ran into her in the middle of the village, and she was awfully nice and friendly; so then we went off for a walk together."

"How nice! Just the morning for a pleasant walk."

"Beastly wet and dirty underfoot though. Look at my boots"—and he looked himself. "We got into a regular bog once."

"You left the high road? You should not have done that." (Delighted that he had.)

"Went along the lane to Prickett's Green, and got into the woods there," said he, helping himself to cold pheasant, and looking about for adjuncts. "I knew you wanted me to do the civil, so I told her I had nothing else on hand, and we might as well have a good tramp. But we didn't really get very far, though we pottered on and on, and she had to skurry at the last to be home in time."

"Did you—did she—does Leo seem changed? Or did you find your old playmate what she always was?"

"Should never have known she had been away. She doesn't look a day older."

"But altered otherwise, perhaps? Marriage does sometimes—" and she paused suggestively.

"Oh, hang it, yes; Leo's quite the married woman," supplied he, decidedly. He knew it was a lie, but told himself he meant to say it. "I suppose they're always a bit pompous, aren't they?"

"Pompous? Do you mean that that dear little innocent-faced thing has grown pompous? Impossible, Val."

"It's the correct thing, I suppose, ma'am. Once when she thought I was rather presuming—I'm sure I meant no harm—she regularly jumped upon me!"

"Be careful, my dear, if Leo is like that. Being left rich and independent while yet so young, may have turned her head a little. Did she—ahem! talk about her affairs at all?"

"Affairs?" ("Now, what the deuce does she mean by 'affairs'?" thought he.)

"Did she speak of what she meant to do? Is she thinking of remaining in these parts? Or has she any other plans?"

"If she has, she didn't tell them me." Val considered and shook his head. "No, I don't believe she said a word of the kind. Besides what plans could she have, poor little——"

"Not 'poor'". Mrs. Purcell smiled significantly. "You don't seem to understand, my dear. Leonore Stubbs is a very rich widow, and will be immensely sought after. It would be a great pity if she could not settle in the neighbourhood, and—and join the hunt, as you said yourself."

"Aye, to be sure. I forgot about that; but you told me not to spring it upon her too soon."

"True. But you might have discovered if she was—however, apparently she has no immediate intention of flying away."

Reassured on the point, Mrs. Purcell let well alone. She had no conception that anything could be hid from her, and thought she divined that while all had gone well, even beyond her hopes so far, the two whom she would fain have seen made one, had restricted their *tête-à-tête* to the discussion of conventional and superficial topics. Val had even called Leonore "pompous". That meant the young lady was aware of her own value, and if so——?

There remained however this comfort; in her present situation the youthful widow could not go into society, and Val, being first in the field, might, to borrow his own phraseology, catch the hare before the other hounds were on the scent.

Val on his part chuckled likewise. Secretive as the grave could Val be when he chose; and one thing was clear to him: Leonore was trying to play the part required of her by her family and the world, and he alone knew that it was a part.

He would not betray her. Not all his grandmother's wiles should draw from him a picture of that confiding little face—sorrowful enough at times certainly, and yet not sorrowful in the approved fashion, not hopeless, not utterly cast down. "Just looking as if she needed some one to be kind to her," ruminated he; "and when she laughed—" he paused and wagged his head, "Lord, it was a good thing nobody but me heard Leo laugh!"

CHAPTER VI.

A REVELATION.

"I think—" said Miss Boldero one day about a fortnight after this—"it appears to me that Leonore might now be permitted to see the rector?"—and she looked round to take the opinion of her sisters. Their father was not present.

Perhaps the speaker had awaited such an opportunity, possibly what appeared to be a very simple suggestion cost her an effort,—at any rate, something of constraint in her air and accents arrested the attention of the person most concerned, and Leo, wondering what so formal a preamble portended, was so taken aback by the climax that she did what she alone of the Bolderos ever did, she giggled.

"I can't help it, Sue; I really can't. Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

Permitted to see the rector? Had she not been almost daily seeing—and dodging—the worthy Custance for weeks past? It had seemed to her that she could not set foot outside the Abbey domain without catching a glimpse of his long, thin figure somewhere or other on the road outside,—and she had actually taken to spying out the land through a chink of the park palings in order to let the figure, if there, vanish, before venturing forth. Again she quavered apologetically, "Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

But naturally no one joined in the mirth; Maud looked contemptuous, Sybil indifferent—while a more than ordinary indignation suffused the whole countenance of their half-sister. "Really, Leo!"

Sue drew herself up to her full height, and could enunciate no more.

"I mean no harm," protested Leo, stoutly. "You needn't look at me like that, all of you,"—for now she too was vexed and bit her lip. "Why mayn't I laugh when a thing is funny? And it is funny, Sue's saying that."

"Indeed? We don't happen to see it so." Maud was seldom in sympathy with jesting, and it must be owned that to a person with no sense of humour Leo's childishness was at times incomprehensible. Leo, however, had learned not to heed this.

"Well, I'll tell you," cried she, recovering. "Then you'll understand. Poor dear Euty, with his long back and hanging head—what? Oh, Sue, he *has*. He has the very longest back and thinnest neck—and his head regularly wiggle-waggles over his shoulder,—it will drop off some fine day,—well, I won't then, I'll to the point, as the books say. If Sue will only look a little, little bit relenting?"

"You are wounding Sue in her tenderest point," said Sybil, at length aroused to take part in the conversation. "Don't you know that, by now? Sue is a pillar of the church——"

"It is absurd to make game of Mr. Custance, at any rate," interposed Maud authoritatively. "He is a very good parish clergyman, and much more of a *gentleman* than any of those you were accustomed to at Deeside," and she threw an immeasurable contempt into her tone. "I never saw one with either decent manners or appearance at your table."

"That's a nasty one," muttered Sybil. Then aloud: "Now we've all had our whack at each other, and Leo has next innings; what is it you want to say, Leo? Never mind Maud; you tell Sue and me your little joke, and let us pronounce upon it."

"No, I think we have had enough;" Sue rose from her seat in offended dignity. "Leo has got to learn that a friend's name should not be bandied about, a mark for insults——"

"But I wasn't—but I didn't;" the momentary mortification Leo had undergone was forgotten in an instant, and all haste and incoherence she sprang after her sister's retreating figure, and caught it. "Sue, dear Sue, you know I never thought of such a thing. Insults? Oh, Sue!"

"They sounded like insults, Leo."

"Then they had no business to. I never would insult anybody, least of all a nice good creature like Euty—there now, you are vexed again. But do let me just say why I laughed about being 'permitted' to see him. It is because he regularly haunts my steps when I'm alone. He does, indeed he does, the dear good man. No doubt he has his reasons, but when you spoke with bated breath——"

"I don't know what you can possibly mean, Leo."

"Oh, yes, you do. You think it a blessed privilege——"

"It *is* a privilege."

"Not to me. I am hard put to it sometimes to scuttle out of his way."

"To scuttle out of his way!"—for sheer amazement Sue paused to listen.

"It's true, it's perfectly true." Leo nodded at her with mischievous pertinacity. "I am forever running across old Euty—Mr. Custance, then,—because, of course, he does tramp round his parish like a gallant old soul, and I'm sure I honour him for it,—but I have nowhere else to go either. It has been so awfully wet of late, the woods are sopping, so I must take to the roads, and on the roads there is Euty—Mr. Custance. And Euty—Mr. Custance—hankers after me; and you know you said I wasn't to hanker after him, not until you gave me leave——"

"I never said such a word."

"You said I was to have no dealings with anybody—except Val; and Val doesn't count. But of course Euty doesn't know that, and he thinks I'm a poor little soul, and might be glad to pass the time of day with anybody. Whereas I—I like the dear good man very well in church; but outside it, I don't pine and crave for his society. I can exist without it. You needn't stretch a point to grant it me——"

"Is that child going on forever?" struck in Maud, impatiently. "Why do you let her pour out this flood of nonsense, Sue? She simply wants to hear her own tongue, and give no one else a chance."

Apparently, however, Sue thought otherwise. Disregarding the interruption, she maintained a serious and puzzled air.

"Am I to understand that you suppose yourself an object of interest to Mr. Custance, Leo?"

"If not, why does he hunt me about the roads? Why does he come galloping after me——"

"Leo!"

"He does—he did yesterday. I was on ahead near Betty Farmiloe's cottage, and out he popped and saw me. I walked on as fast as ever I could, but his long legs took him over the ground like a racer, and he would have caught me up as sure as fate——"

"You misinterpret a very ordinary civility,——" but the speaker was not allowed to proceed.

"For goodness sake let her 'misinterpret' then," cried Sybil, diverted by the recital, "go on, Leo. Did he catch you, or did he not?"

"A cow came along, so I pretended it was a bull, and dashed into a field. Luckily there was a gate handy."

"'Pretended it was a bull'? How?" rejoined Sybil, still enjoying herself. "You really are a joke, Leo."

"I threw up my arms madly—like this. Then I made furious passes with my umbrella at the cow supposed to be bull. Finally I leaped at the gate and clambered over, unable to see in my desperation that it would have opened if I had only drawn back the bolt. Tableau. The baffled Euty sadly pursues his way, while the trembling and agitated Leo flies over the fields home."

"And never says a word about it?"—from Sybil.

"Not I. Catch me. Sue would have been cross, as she is now," with a roguish glance; "she would have thought I wanted to rob her of her beloved rector—oh, we know how she adores her Euty —"

"*What?*" It was a new voice that spoke. "What?" repeated General Boldero, stepping forward into their midst. "Do my ears deceive me? Leonore," he paused and gasped. "Wretched child!"—but pomposity prevailed. "May I inquire in all politeness what is the meaning of that most extraordinary, most preposterous accusation? You are silent. You may well be. Your most disgraceful language—again I demand what is the meaning of it?"

He seized her arm, as though she were not already nailed to the spot. "The meaning, girl—the meaning?"

"The—the meaning?"

"I repeat, the meaning. I am coming along the passage, and I hear you shouting at the pitch of your voice——"

"At the pitch of my voice?" echoed Leo, mechanically. Her eye was not upon her father, and she only half heard his thunderous charge,—it was something else which petrified her senses and made her head swim.

Sue? What had come to Sue?

White as death Sue had fallen into a chair, every feature distorted by such a mute agony of terror that—oh, there was no mistaking it, no concealing it, and yet,—Leo looked round.

She was between her unfortunate sister and the rest of the party, Sue having cowered down behind her where she stood,—while Maud and Sybil, to avoid being implicated, had precipitately retreated to a window-recess, the former with a shrug of her shoulders, the latter with the intention of slipping off as soon as might be.

But Sue? Was it possible?—yet nothing else was possible. Nothing else could account for a collapse so sudden and complete. Oh, poor Sue—poor, prim, stately Sue. At another moment,—but Leo must not stop to think what she would have done at another moment; her one aim now must be to shield the defenceless creature, exposed through her. So far, the parent who made poor Sue's life a burden, and yet whom she believed in, loved, and served to the best of her humble power, had concentrated his attention on herself as chief delinquent, but at any moment his infuriated eyes might turn to that shrinking, trembling form, and then?

With the air of a combatant delighted to welcome an unexpected ally, "I *am* so glad you came in, father," said she.

Glad? The general stepped back as though she had hit him. Glad?

"They are all so down upon me about that stupid old parson of ours," continued Leonore, glibly. "They won't listen to anything I say against him, but I know *you* will believe me. He really does follow me about the roads, you know; and of course any one might guess what for. He's a money-grabber, that's what he is. Not a 'money-grubber'! I know that kind; we had it in plenty at Deeside, but a 'grabber,' and a 'grabber' of the worst type. He thinks of nothing else but getting money out of you for his poor people. Well, I daresay they *are* poor, but then so am I, and as I can't tell him so—for you know you forbade me yourself—all I can do is to flee. Yet they laugh me to scorn when I say I flee, and he pursues."

She paused for breath, and moved a little more in front of Sue.

"Humph!" said the general, twirling his moustache. He was arrested, but by no means appeased. She set to work again.

"I know you would not wish me to be mulcted, father, and it *is* so difficult to say 'no' when a good sort like Mr. Culance——"

"You didn't call him that just now," burst forth the general.

"Oh, I always call him 'Euty' to myself," said Leo, serenely. "Girls do, you know. We always give

people nicknames,—and though he is a parson, there's no harm in it, is there? Sue thinks it dreadful, and that there ought to be a sort of halo round the clerical head; and that's why I was teasing her just now——"

"You used most ridiculous, I may say most offensive terms;" he bristled up again.

"Just to have a little rise out of Sue. For Sue was so very positive that the saintly Euty never chased me on the road, supposing me to be rich and generous and likely to give him oceans of money for his poor people, that I had to go at her back. But *you* know it's true, don't you, father?"

"True enough." He rose to the fly at once. "Why, aye, if this is the case, it certainly—hum, ha—certainly it alters the case. You are a tolerably sharp little piece of goods, Leo, and have discovered what your numskulls of sisters never could. That man would have us all in the workhouse, if he had his way. Directly he crosses this threshold out comes a subscription list, or note-book, or something. It's sheer robbery, that's what it is. Often and often I have to skulk down a back lane, or go into a door I never meant to enter, because I see him coming. I know if once he buttonholes me, I'm done for."

"And as I simply can't be 'done for' in that way, I flee for my life. Now do say a good word for me, father,"—and, to the general's unspeakable amazement, the next moment a little friendly figure was nestling against him, holding on to his coat, and looking up into his face.

The sensation this gave General Boldero was more than novel, it was extraordinary. He was a tolerably old man, he had been twice married, and had always lived surrounded by the gentler sex, but it is safe to say he had never been nestled against in his life. He looked down, he looked up, and then he looked down again.

"Deuced pretty little rogue!" he muttered.

"They think Mr. Custance doesn't know one of us from another, and that it is the most presumptuous cheek on my part to imagine he has ever given me a thought," proceeded Leonore, still intent upon her task; "they think he is far, far above all sublunary affairs——"

"Rubbish. He is no more above them than I am. I don't say Custance isn't well enough, and I have a—a sort of regard for him. But you have the sense to see what your sisters have not——"

"That one simply can't be mulcted at every turn." She had heard "mulcted" on his own lips on more than one occasion; it should serve as a weapon to shield Sue now. Sue, still mute and motionless, cringed behind, but Leo had an intuition that she breathed relief.

"That's it; that's it exactly," cried the general, delighted, and again he appended a mental comment: "Deuced clever little rat!" "Well, I'm glad to find there is some explanation of what really sounded a most outrageous statement;" he turned to depart, now in excellent humour. "I must say, however, that you would do well to see that the dining-room door is shut when next you are amusing yourself with that kind of tomfoolery. Any of the servants coming along had only to step inside and listen behind the screen, and there would have been a fine tittle-tattle among them—aye, and it wouldn't have stopped there. It would have been all through the village that Miss Boldero——"

"Oh, dear, how funny!" laughed Leo. She had felt Sue's fingers clutch her dress behind. She stepped with her father's step, as he moved to pass, and made a face at him.

"There—there—you absurd monkey!" but the monkey was pushed aside with a gentle hand, and marching off with all the honours of the field in his own esteem, the general never once looked at Sue.

CHAPTER VII.

"I HAVE LOST SOMETHING THAT I NEVER HAD."

Throughout the foregoing scene Leonore had evinced a quickness of perception and a delicacy beyond what might have been expected from one so young and volatile,—but directly she was alone a revulsion of feeling took place.

Sue had tottered from the dining-room without so much as a glance towards herself. That was nothing. She understood, and did not in the least resent it—since any recognition of her protecting agency would have openly acknowledged what the hapless spinster might still hope was only vaguely guessed at; but it was the thing itself, the incredible, incomprehensible thing which staggered, and, it must be owned, in a sense revolted her.

She flew out of doors. There only, out of sight and hearing, could her bewildered senses realise what had passed, and grasp its full significance. There only dared she give way to the spasms of passionate amazement and incredulity which found vent in reiterated ejaculations of Sue's name.

Sue? *Sue?* SUE? She found herself crying it over and over again, and each time with a fresh intonation.

Sue? It was impossible—it was unnatural—it was horrible. Sue? She stamped her foot, and sent a pebble flying down the path.

Sue—poor old Sue—dear old Sue—"Old" Sue, whichever way you took it, how could she, how *could* she?

In Leo's eyes, Sue, verging on middle age, had never been young; earliest reminiscences pictured her the same composed and tranquil creature, with the same detachment from life as regarded herself, the same contented absorption in the concerns of others, that was present now to the eyes of all.

No one ever thought of Sue in connection with love or matrimony; not even in years gone by; not even when Leo was a child.

True, she had her own niche in the family and household, and it was by no means an unimportant one—but it was high upon a shelf as regarded affairs of the heart.

Her dress, her habits, her punctilio in small matters—all that she did or said marked her the typical old maid, and had done so for years out of mind—so that the present revelation was worse than shocking, it was cruel.

For the best part of an hour the storm raged. She found herself repeating her father's words "preposterous!"—"outrageous!"—and endorsing them with throbs of scorn and anger. The sister she loved, the woman she venerated was lowered in her eyes. She was pained, as well as shocked....

But presently there ensued a change. After all, what had poor Sue done? Certainly she had at no time given the faintest outward indication of her folly, till powerless to help herself; she had endured what must have been a painful ordeal beforehand with fortitude, and there must have been many similar occasions when calmness and self-restraint were needed, and had never failed.

Was it not rather wonderful of Sue? The weakness was there, but she had had strength to hide it. Maud and Sybil knew nothing of it; no one knew; least of all the man himself.

And apparently Sue was content to have it so,—here was another marvel; she loved and asked for nothing in return. She could go quietly on week after week, month after month, hugging her secret,—yet its power was such that Leo himself trembled to recall the hour that so nearly laid it bare. It was terrible to see Sue blanch and blench; to watch the fluttering of her lace jabot as her bosom heaved beneath. She trembled as she had never trembled at any emotions of her own.

She perceived that love was a strange, unknown force of which she, happily wooed, happily wedded, and sorrowfully widowed, nevertheless knew nothing. She had loved her husband—indeed she had loved him; he had been uniformly kind and pleasant and indulgent towards her, and she had honestly reciprocated his attachment,—but sometimes, sometimes she had wondered? She had heard, she had read of—more: she had never felt it.

And vague fancies had been put aside as disloyal; reasoned away as disturbing elements of a very real if sober felicity. She was married; and it was wrong and wicked to imagine how things might have been if she had never seen Godfrey, and was going about free and unfettered like other girls?

She did not, of course she did not, wish to be free, and was ashamed to find the thought obtruding itself; but there had been moments—and these recurred to her now.

How strange it must be to feel as—as Sue did, for instance? To start at the sound of a footstep, to thrill at a voice; to be wrapt in a golden haze—oh, she knew all that could be told about that curious, fantastic, elusive mystery, which was yet a sealed book as regarded herself.

And was it not a little hard that it should be so? Had something been missed out of her nature? Was she really formed without warmth, ardour, sensibility? A smile played upon her lips.

Was she then not inviting? Was there nothing desirable, attractive, alluring—nothing to create in another the feeling which might have awakened her own slumbering soul?

It might be so, and yet—

Again her thoughts reverted to Sue; to the staid, gaunt elderly Sue,—and with a new and sharp sensation. Sue had not waited to be sought; Sue could give without asking to receive—she envied Sue from the bottom of her soul.

To her own small public Leo, before her widowhood, had always appeared the gayest of the gay. It was her *rôle* to be jocund and amusing, and no one took her seriously. But there was another side to her character which she had always been at pains to conceal, partly because it would have met with but scant sympathy from others, partly because she was afraid of it herself,—and of late she had been more and more conscious of the existence of this undercurrent of thought and feeling.

Even had there been no cause for sadness, she would frequently have felt sad. The influences of Nature moved her. Certain sights and sounds oppressed her. From her dreams she often woke in tears.

And now that the first fury as regarded Sue had spent itself, this causeless dejection of spirit took its place. She was no longer bitter against Sue; she would have liked to take her sister to her heart and comfort her. She would have liked—oh, how she would have liked—to confide to her, to some one, to any one the dim confused tumult of half-formed regrets and yearnings—"Oh, I have lost something that I never had!"—she cried aloud.

But who so bold and merry as this elfin Leo an hour afterwards?

"I have brought Mr. Custance in to tea, father. Oh, father, I want you; I have heaps of things to ask you about. I'm always forgetting them, because you are so seldom in at tea. I met Mr. Custance marching off in another direction," continued Leo, looking round, "but I just marched him up here instead,"—and she awaited applause.

It was a masterstroke, and so Sybil pronounced it afterwards. "No one but you would have dared, you audacious imp," she shook the strategist by the shoulder. "After that rumpus!"

"It was rather a shame dragging the poor innocent man into the rumpus, and Sue was really hurt," quoth Leo, with a guileless air. "There was nothing for it but to make use of her *permission*, and not only 'see the rector' but haul him along."

She had told herself that nothing would so effectually do away with any fear of self-betrayal on Sue's part, as this easy introduction of a guest never less expected and perhaps never more welcome. She had waylaid the well-known figure from whom she had formerly fled, and her end was attained.

But the general was not to be allowed to interfere with it, and he heard himself forthwith accosted. "Father, I wish you'd tell me; I was out in the woods just now, and a bird was singing —"

"Very wonderful, I'm sure. A bird usually sings in a garret, or a cellar, of course."

"Don't you laugh at me, father; you know about birds, and I don't; and I really do want you to tell me why one should sing, and the others not, at this time of year?"

"Tell you that? *I* can't. They're made so." But the general did not speak as gruffly as usual, and emboldened, she proceeded.

"Well, but what bird is it that sings—sings just as if it were summer?"

"A robin, of course, you ignorant little thing. Given a bit of sunshine, a robin will sing all the year round."

"Oh," said Leo, profoundly attentive, "all the year round, will he? Why, I wonder?"

"If you come to 'whys' you may 'why' for ever. Why does a swallow build on a housetop and a lark in a meadow? Why does a stork stand on one leg——"

"Oh, and I saw a heron to-day," cried she vivaciously. "Now where did that heron come from?"

"From Lord St. Emeraud's heronry. They often fly over here in the winter."

"What for, father?"

"Bless my soul, Leo, how can I tell you what for? What's all this sudden interest in natural history about? Get a book and read it up,"—and he was turning away, but this was just what he was not to do.

"Can't you sit down and talk to me a little?" quoth Leo, plaintively; "I don't care for those kind of books much. And you could tell me a lot I want to know; about seabirds, for instance. I never can understand how some can swim and some can't. And then there are the birds that go away in the autumn——"

"Stop—stop!"

"And there are the other kinds of birds——"

"Of course there are. What's all this hullabaloo about birds for?" He was half disposed to be pugnacious, but even a fighting-cock could hardly have quarrelled with Leonore in this vein. She was so unconscious of giving offence, so friendly and sociable, had such a little smiling way of her own, that even General Boldero was won upon, and, indeed, had never looked so little disagreeable in his life.

Here was a chatterbox certainly, and he had all the dislike of a suspicious, stupid man for chatterboxes. He despised them—with an inkling that they despised him. When he did talk, he wished to lead the talk,—and such was the feeling he inspired in the neighbourhood, that he was gladly allowed to do so. No one cared to put him into ill-humour, since he was only tolerable when bland; furthermore, he was not worth argument and opposition.

Hence it was a new thing to be appealed to for information, and though not qualified to give it, he was the last to suppose as much. About the subject in question he knew just what he could not

help knowing, and what Leo herself knew a great deal better,—but her object was attained, and the "hullabaloo" protested against, chained him to her side.

The tea-table was now spread, and he glanced towards it, but quick as lightning she struck in.

"Do let us bring our tea here, father. Just you and me. The others can amuse Mr. Custance, he can't need us too."

"Eh?" said the astonished general. Some one wanted to talk to him, and to him alone? He hardly knew what to do with so flattering an invitation.

But as he was obviously expected to respond to it, he followed to the tea-table, and for a minute awaited his turn in patience. Then, as Leo, having helped herself, returned to the sofa and he was still unattended to, he began to frown.

"Pray, Miss Boldero, am I to have no tea? Take care, what you are about." For, strange to say, he had been unperceived, and Sue, flurried by the sudden demand, and in haste to meet it, contrived to catch the handle of the cream jug in her wide lace sleeve, with the result that her father's caution came too late; the jug overturned, and cream flowed apace.

Had it been milk it would have spread faster and farther, but even as it was, there was a mess displeasing to the eye, and the offender in her endeavours to remedy it, made matters worse. The wet lace swished hither and thither.

"Ugh!" cried the general, retreating with a glance at his trousers. "Ring the bell—no, here"—and he produced a clean pocket-handkerchief, and unfolded it.

"Well done, father!" piped a clear voice at his side, and a small hand whipped the handkerchief from him, and deftly used it.

"It's you, is it?" quoth the general, actually laughing.

Do what he would, he could not escape from Leo that day. Here she was back at his elbow, and he was not even allowed to hector Sue for her awkwardness and abuse her sleeves, he was withdrawn so swiftly from the scene of action.

"We'll have this little table between us," quoth Leo, planting it handy for him, "and we'll enjoy ourselves, and they can talk to their rector,"—with gleeful assumption of having secured a superior attraction.

"He is just their sort, but he isn't mine,"—and she peeped slyly from under her eyelashes.

"You mischievous puss!" But as she patted the sofa, and he finally sat down, General Boldero felt in a curious way young, and attracted against his will.

Could it really be his own daughter who was thus exerting herself for his entertainment, and his alone? Hitherto, he had never given Leo a thought in the way of desiring her company, and certainly would not have done so now, if let alone,—but since he was not let alone, but was plied with a perfect cross-fire of questions, comments, and what not, while all the time the speaker gave him the whole of her attention, and the full play of her saucy eyes, he was bound to own himself amused.

He was so well amused that he never once glanced towards the rest of the party, nor would Leo do so, lest he should follow suit.

She was, however, nimble-witted, and could contrive for her own purposes. She could stoop to pick up a fallen glove: she could search the carpet for something else which was not there. By these means she learnt that there was no longer a quartet assembled in a central part of the room; that Maud and Sybil had resumed occupations in distant corners, leaving the visitor to Sue; and that Sue—she longed to look at Sue, but refrained.

Sue sat on in her large armchair, with her back to the light. Her companion's hand rested on the back of the chair.

Seen from Leo's standpoint, the bent shoulders and thin neck were aggressively apparent against the light—for a pale winter sunset lit up the sky without, and the two figures were silhouetted sharply—but Sue? what did Sue see?

Apparently what satisfied her, what transformed the world around her.

For Leo, rising at last, as all rose, and drawing near with a curiosity which had also in it a great and passionate envy, beheld upon her sister's face the look which she sought, the look which she was never to forget. Again her heart cried out, and would not be silenced: "I have lost something that I never had!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A CAT AND MOUSE GAME.

We will now pass over a period of deadly dulness and unvarying monotony at Boldero Abbey.

Such periods were normal there to all but Leonore. Her sisters frittered away the hours in small pursuits which led to nothing, (if we except a certain kindly care of the poor on the estate, whose interests Sue at least found of importance)—otherwise they existed, and that is all that could be said for them.

But Leonore? Well, of course she had no alternative but to tread the path prescribed for her; and the bright spring days were followed by the longer ones of summer, and again by the crisp, dewy mornings and melting twilights of early autumn, without any incident or event taking place to mark one week from another.

Such a life was foreign to all the instincts of our little girl's nature. She was quick, alert, impetuous. She was keenly alive in every fibre of her being. She effervesced with vitality. Added to which there was a strange sense of growth pulsing through every vein.

And of this all outward token had to be repressed beneath the iron hand of convention. To the outward eye there was only a forlorn little black figure stealing meekly out of view, to seek, it might be supposed, the shades of solitude for pensive, retrospective meditation, or discharging with docility such offices of charity as were presumed to be proper and becoming to her widowhood,—but for the rest, no one really knew or cared what Leo did with herself.

She was much alone—they supposed she liked to be alone. On that one day to which she grew to look back upon as *the* day—the day on which Sue's heart stood revealed—it had indeed for a moment appeared as if the bonds which held her in their grip must break, and give birth to a new era—but the episode ended disappointingly. It was not an upheaval, it was a mere crack on the surface—and the crack gradually closed again.

"I told you that father would not always be so amenable," said Sybil one day, not perhaps altogether ill-pleased to see her sister's face fall, and her cheek flush beneath a chilling response. "It is no use taking it to heart, child. You do better with him than any of the rest of us do, and that ought to content you."

And again it was: "Sue? What should I know about Sue? She goes her own way, and we go ours,"—the tone conveying, "and you must go yours," as plainly as though the words had been spoken.

But Leo had no "way" to go. She had no object on which to bend her eyes. She had no end in view when she rose in the morning, no food for reflection at night. She drifted. Her poor little face took a wan, comfortless look,—and to herself she would wonder how, when she first returned to the home of her childhood, she could have felt so different, so foolishly hopeful and cheerful? All sorts of possibilities had seemed to lie before her then, how could they? She often sat for hours in the woods staring vacantly around, and thinking, thinking.

Had there been any human being in the big, dreary house to whom she could have poured out all the workings of a young, imprisoned soul beating against its bars, any one at this crisis to feel for and sympathise with the hapless child, any kind arm thrown around her, or hand in hers, things might have been different,—but as it was, alone she had to battle with all the subtle imaginings, the dim, confused perceptions, the fancies, the visions which haunted her.

Incredible as it may appear, she looked back upon her married life much as an emancipated schoolgirl regards the busy, merry past, all-sufficing at the time, but outgrown and left behind.

Leo never doubted that she had been happy,—but the thought that were it possible for her one day to wake up and find that all she had gone through of late was but a bad dream, brought no sense of longing, no passionate thrill of desire. Instead, she shrank—yes, she shrank and hung her head, wondering if any one else so placed ever felt the same? How was it?—why was it?

And anon she knew. It was the look on Sue's face.

In lighter vein, Leonore took to beautifying her person. As Mrs. Stubbs she had contented herself and annoyed her maid, a conscientious creature, by fulfilling its bare requirements. She had hurried through dressing-time, and been impatient of details. Anne's slow method of handling her hair was a constant worry; and now that Anne no longer existed for her, it must be owned that there was, or, to be correct, there had been up to the present, a *curly pow* presented to the family on many occasions, which was hardly consistent with the dignity General Boldero sought to preserve.

But it chanced one day that a girl came to the house whose hair, of colour and texture similar to Leonore's own, was beautifully arranged and generally admired. It literally shone in the sun.

And as luck would have it, our heroine was caught at her worst that same afternoon; and conscious of frowsy locks tumbling about her ears, her vanity was mortified. She appeared at dinner with a fairly correct imitation of the visitor's coiffure, and every single member of the family had something to say about it: Sue's gentle, "You have such pretty hair, dear Leo," being the finishing touch.

Thenceforth the pretty hair was brushed and brushed; and finding it still continued somewhat dry, Leo made almost her first purchase in the neighbouring town. She procured a wash—only a simple, vegetable concoction, but it answered the purpose—and there were great results.

Next, a manicure box which was among her possessions, but had lain about unused after it ceased to be a novelty, was brought into play. To confess the truth, Leo's hands were not her strong point, but hands and fingers can look better or worse according to the care bestowed on them, and there was now at least nothing to be ashamed of when she put on her rings. She began to wear her rings regularly.

And searching about for something else to do, she unearthed some weird implements, the sight of which made her laugh. With what zest she had once thrown herself into the new game of physical culture which all her friends were playing, and what fun she had thought it—for a time! Her supple joints had enabled her to accomplish feats beyond the reach of most, and she had attended drilling-classes and fencing-classes, and gained glory at both. She now fixed up a hook or two in her room, and found she could still do this and that, though she had lost the knack of the more difficult. To regain these, ropes and pulleys were worked vigorously,—and being once started, invention was called to aid, and there were all sorts of varied performances. Finally she volunteered to become a teacher; but though Maud and Sybil condescended so far as to look on, and even make a few half-hearted efforts, they were soon discouraged. They were not clumsy, but they were stiff; their bones were set; beside them Leo seemed to be made of elastic.

These trifles were, as we have said, the solace of our little girl's happier moods—at least they did something towards whiling away the uneventful days,—but perhaps they might almost have been better left undone, since the more healthful and beautiful she became, the more the leaven of rebellious discontent worked within.

It seemed a shame that she should be so strong and well and winsome, and there be nothing and no one to win. It was an injustice, a waste. And was it to go on for ever? Was she to go on through a long, long life—life stretches very far ahead at twenty-one—crawling on her hands and knees, when she could have stepped out so boldly, head in air?

That was the question which chiefly presented itself to Leonore's mind, as the first long year of her widowhood drew towards its close. She had never once stirred from Boldero Abbey,—for it was by no means a part of the general's programme to send her where she might meet with either friends or strangers to whom the true state of the case might leak out—and he sharply negatived a suggestion on Sue's part.

"Nonsense. Leo was never better in her life. You have only to look at her. And it would not be decent for her to be going about as the rest of you do."

Money had been wrung from him for annual trips to London and the sea, but he had never grudged it more than now, and he had not himself moved a foot.

"I am certainly not going to pay for what I disapprove;" he set his lips grimly. "And I not only disapprove, but I forbid Leo to go prancing out into the world."

Wherefore Leo saw her sisters come and go, and remained stationary. But she could not be what she was, and not throw out a hint of what was for ever in her mind when at long last the year was over. It was only a little anxious word, and no one guessed how often it had hung upon the speaker's lips before it was out, nor how she wished it back directly it *was* out. For it was met by a silence that stilled the very beating of her heart.

Then, "I do not quite understand," said Sue, gently as ever, "what is that you wish, Leo?" But Leo, who had hoped to be met half-way, perceived the coldness underneath.

"I only wanted to know how long this was to go on, Sue. I mean—I mean, how long I am to—to be unlike other people, and—and——" the rest faded away.

Half an hour afterwards the young widow went out by herself very quietly, and using a side entrance. She did not wish to meet anybody.

All along she had suspected the worst, but now that the bolt had actually fallen, she felt numb; there was a kind of weakness in her limbs; she trembled as she stole along the walk. For things had been made very plain, and the vague shadows of the future had taken form and shape. The future? There was to be no future for her. She ought not to be thinking about a future—the present and the past only were hers. And though of course her outward appearance could be suitably altered, and there might be, as time passed, some relaxations and abrogations of rigid etiquette, no actual, positive change in her lot was to be looked for.

As a matter of fact, General Boldero had impressed thus much upon Sue, having perceived on this occasion more than she did. He saw that Leo was restive, he also saw that she was developing. He was not going to have her throw herself away a second time, but he was content to wait, and he was vaguely afraid that she would not be so. Wherefore she must be kept under lock and key.

The situation is now perhaps plain before our readers.

"Hollo?" said a voice on one side of a woodland stile.

"Hollo?" responded another opposite. "It's you?" continued Leo, stepping across, and giving Valentine Purcell her hand. "So you've come back, Val? What ages you have been away! I have missed you dreadfully."

"Not you. I don't believe it." Val beamed all over. "I say, have you though? You look uncommonly

fit;" and he eyed her with a certain dubious admiration. If she were laughing at him, he was not going to be taken in, as he had been on several previous occasions.

"To be sure I'm fit, why shouldn't I be fit? I lead, oh, such a healthy life," retorted she, with mocking emphasis. "I eat, and I sleep, and I'm out all day. I do nothing but health from morning to night. Well?"

"Did you really miss me, Leo?"

"Humph!" said Leo, beginning to walk on.

"Did you know I had come back?" pursued he. "Did you think I should be here about this time? Did you——"

"Think you'd bother me with a lot of silly questions?" Leo whose first greeting had been simple and natural, assumed a pettish, artificial air. "Can't you think of anything more amusing to say than, 'Did you, did you, did you?'"

"Ha—ha—ha!"

"And then to laugh idiotically!"

"I don't believe you missed me a bit, Leo."

"Neither do I, now I come to think of it. I forget when you went."

"Two months ago to-day. Don't you remember? Don't you——"

"And now it will be, 'Don't you—don't you—don't you?' Why should I remember? What is it to me that I should remember?"

"Anyhow you said you had missed me."

She had said it, and he had heard it, and stuck to the point like a leech. It mattered not that he had come very near to quarrelling with Leo before going off on his annual round of shooting visits; that she had been capricious and disdainful, and had once gone so far as to tell him that he bored her—(which no one had ever openly told Val before)—he had forgotten all that; and though during his absence he had also forgotten a good deal besides, and found other girls pretty and attractive, no sooner was he back at home than the needle of his mental compass flew round to its old point. He must needs hurry over to the Abbey, and take the field-path in which he had so often walked and talked with Leonore.

He had never made love to her; his grandmother had told him not. Delighted as the old lady was with the turn events were taking, she had the wit to see that undue haste might ruin all, and enjoined caution with fervour. "Be friends, but no more—at present, Val."

Furthermore, it was at Mrs. Purcell's instigation that the shooting visits were prolonged beyond their usual limits on the present occasion.

She got painters into the house, and made them an excuse for bidding Valentine keep away if he could;—and her manner of placing the position before him piqued his vanity, as she knew it would. "If you have no more invitations, return, and I will make a shift to house you somewhere," she wrote;—but of course a popular young man is never short of invitations; and the autumn so wearily dragged through by Leonore, was full of gaiety and variety for her friend.

He had a great time, a glorious time,—and was longing to tell the tale of it to sympathetic ears, when he set forth from his own doorstep on the present mild October afternoon; he heard himself dilating and explaining, introducing names which would lead to inquiries, carelessly referring to charming girls—oh, he foresaw a delightful hour, whether it were in the Abbey drawing-room, or better still with his favourite auditor in a woodland solitude—and now?

Now somehow, he did not care to begin. Was Leo in one of her moods? If so it was no use thinking of anything else; he knew by experience what those moods were. Could he bring her round? Sometimes he could, sometimes not.

Was she really pleased to see him back, or—? He could not endure that "or?"

In short, the whole magnificent house of cards wherewith our young man had so pleased himself an hour before, showed now a flimsy shanty not worth a moment's preservation; and stripped of all importance, reduced to insignificance, afraid of his own voice, he slunk along by Leonore's side.

"Why don't you speak?"—she flung at him at last.

"You—you are so strange!" He faltered, then tried to rally. "What's the matter, Leo? Something is, I'm sure. You might tell me. You know I'm always sorry when you are, and——"

"What makes you think I am?" But she spoke more gently, and emboldened, he proceeded:—

"You did look pleased at first, but directly I spoke, you seemed to fly off at a tangent. I suppose I said something rotten, I often do—but you might have known I didn't mean it."

"It was not what you *said*." She paused.

"What was it then?"

"You look—every one looks—so happy and content—so bursting with prosperity, so supremely filled with—oh, can't you see, can't you see, that I'm alone and miserable, and different? When you pretended to admire me just now——"

"Pretended? I didn't pretend!" indignantly.

"You said I looked 'uncommonly fit'."

"So you did,—so you do."

"And who cares? What's the good of it? If it signified a jot to any single human being how I looked ——"

"Leo! *you know I care!*"

She had done it, she had provoked it. If she had taken a chisel in her hand and dug out the admission by bodily force, she could not have been more directly responsible than she now was—and yet she stopped short startled.

It was but for a moment however. "You?" she cried, "you could hardly say less than that, considering it was such a direct fish for a compliment,—no,—no, Val; do be quiet and let me speak,—what I mean is that really, *really*, you know, I am most awfully down in my luck, and I don't see the slightest prospect of anything better. I had hoped that somehow a way would open ——"

"It would, if you would marry me."

"Marry you? Nonsense!"

"Good gracious, Leo! *Nonsense?*"

"Of course. Can't you see I'm in earnest, and talk rationally for once?"

"Hang it all, am I not talking rationally, as rationally as ever I did in my life?"

"That's not saying much. You needn't be affronted, it's an honour for you to have me talk to you like this."

"Is it though? I don't see it—I think you are beastly unfair. I do think that." And he pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose by way of protest. "Just now you were whimpering because you had no one to care for you,—and I believe you said it just to get me to say *I did*." Suddenly—"It was a shabby trick, Leo; and then to shut me up like that, when I only meant to do my best for you!"

"Be quiet, be quiet." Despite a twinge of conscience, Leo held her own stoutly. "No one but you would ever have thought of such a thing."

"That's all you know about it. My grandmother did. There!"

"You spoke to her, I suppose?"

"Not I. *She put me up to it*. Honour bright, she did. I daresay I should have thought of it for myself," continued Val, quickly, "but I hadn't, till she did. She was always praising you, and saying how pretty you were, and what a bad business your marriage was. I mean—I mean——"

"Don't get flustered, Val. You know we have agreed always to be straight with each other. I can quite understand Mrs. Purcell's not approving my marriage."

"But she was awfully sorry for you, you know when;" he nodded significantly; "and she told me to make friends and try and cheer you up, and then——"

"Then?"

"A fellow couldn't help seeing what she was thinking of. She had it in her mind all the time. You trust me. I'm just about as cute as you make 'em when it comes to my gran. I know what she's driving at. All about your being so sweet, and that. She never used to call you sweet; now, did she? And I remember how she used to be down on you for being so untidy and having your hair all about your ears; and she called it red then—but it's auburn now." He chuckled self-appreciatively, and she laughed outright; but this sobered him.

"Don't you go and laugh at me, Leo."

"I'm not laughing at you—now. Go on; tell me more; what else did your gran say?"

"She said—but you won't let it out?"

"No—no."

"She said it would be an awfully good thing for me if I could hitch up with—no, she didn't say that. At least," he reflected, "I don't think it was about *you* she said that."

"There's some one else, then?"

"Oh, bless you, yes. There are heaps of girls,—but *I don't care for any of them*," said Val, loftily.

"Some of those I met at houses when I was away were awfully nice, though; they were, really."

"I daresay. What do you want with me, then?"

"Why, I've always been fond of you, Leo. You know I have. And I don't think you should call it 'nonsense'." Suddenly he reverted to his grievance: "It makes a fool of a fellow to—to treat a proposal in that sort of way."

"It wasn't a real proposal, Val. You just said it for something to say."

"I didn't. What an idea! I told gran this morning—she was asking who I'd met and all that—and I just told her straight, that none of them could hold a candle to you." He paused and continued: "Though there were some dashers among them too; and I daresay some men would have said Nelly Brackenbury was better looking—"

"So Nelly Brackenbury was the one?"

"Rather. Simply splendid. She would have made two of you, Leo."

"Maud's style, perhaps?"

"Aye, Maud's style; that's what I said. I told them I knew a girl who could give her points, at my own place."

"But to Maud you would say you had met a girl who could give *her* points!"

"Say that to Maud? No, thank you; I'm never rude to Maud."

"Only to me?"

"Well, of course. You told me to be; and if it comes to that, you were dashed rude to me yourself just now. And I was doing my level best for you; I was feeling most awfully sorry for you; I never supposed you were only trying it on with me." He paused and swung his stick. "It was all gammon then, about your being lonely and that?" He stood still and looked at her.

Leo was silent.

"It wasn't very nice of you to take me in, and lead me on, if you meant all the time to round on me in the end," said Val, in a voice that made her still more uncomfortable. "I didn't think you were that sort, Leo."

An inaudible murmur, Leo's head turned the other way.

"You can't say you didn't," persisted Val. "You were almost crying; and so then I thought, 'Hang it all, I may as well now as any time,' meaning to—to be kind and cheer you up."

She could not help it; after one violent effort, Leo fell upon the bank, and rocked to and fro with merriment:—"Oh, Val!—oh, Val!"

But presently she put out her hand, and caught and held his; and she sat up and looked into his face with such brimming, dancing, and withal affectionate eyes, that albeit somewhat puzzled and astonished, he smiled back. "I suppose it was rather funny, but I supposed that was the way to do."

"But you see I wasn't prepared, Val!"

"Well, I tell you I hadn't thought of it myself."

"Wait a minute, till I can speak," Leo wiped her eyes, and patted the moss beside her. "Sit down—it's dry on this stone—and we'll have it out. You think it was all a sham, a mere bid for pity, what I said just now? It wasn't. But, Val, I can't exactly tell you what it was. It just had to come out, it had been kept in so long. I'm better now. You *have* cheered me up, only—" again laughter stirred within—"only you might have done it cheaper. You needn't have—"

"Gone such a mucker over it?" suggested he.

Yes, that was what she meant. His sympathy, his indulgent understanding of her troubles, above all, his renewal of good-fellowship was enough; she did not require his heart and hand, and with tact insinuated that he might retain them.

"You know you don't want to marry, Val."

"I've got to, though," said he.

"Why have you got to? Can't you go on as you are?"

"Gran says not. When she dies—"

"I see, you would be alone. But then, she may live long enough."

"That's what I say. There's no hurry. I've often said that, but gran gets nervous, and she always does like to boss, you know."

"It's a good thing it was me you spoke to," said Leo, jumping up, after a time. "You might have got caught, whereas now no one need ever know. Come along"—and she stepped forward.

"I'm not to tell gran, then?" Already he was under a new thumb.

"Certainly not," promptly. "Old people are old, and we are young—and if we don't want to marry, they shan't make us. Just wait a moment,"—and with a sudden change of tone Leo sprang aside, as though the subject were disposed of and another in its place.

A barberry tree laden with berries had come to view, and while he stood still upon the path, she began snapping off the bending branches. On her return, however, he was regarding her shyly with something of a new interest.

"I never said I did not want to marry you, Leo."

Leo's lips twitched. "There's no need to say things, Val. You don't."

"You bustle a fellow so, he doesn't know what he's about. I think you might give a fellow a chance."

"That's just what I'm doing. Giving you a chance to know your own mind—not your grandmother's."

"I like you awfully, you know."

"So do I like you. That's where we stand. We are not going to bother about marrying. Why, Val—take care, don't push me into that puddle. What ever should you and I do if we were solemnly tied up to each other, and had no one to meet, and talk with, and quarrel with? As it is, you are my only relief from the deadly life I lead at home. And if it comes out that we have been talking like this, there will be an end of it all—yes, there will,—so you are warned, and it would be very cruel of you—"

"Cruel?"

"It would be cruel to take from me my only comfort."

"I wouldn't be cruel to you for the world, Leo."

It was all pleasant enough; it was even exciting in its way; and Leo, at her wits' end for any variety, thirsting for emotions, sensations, pleasure, pain, comedy, tragedy—found the passing hour all too short.

This was not the real thing, but it was something. There were moments when even as a lover Val was not absurd, and one beautiful moment in particular when he made her ashamed. He accused her of leading him on, and her conscience echoed the reproach.

But all too soon he was pacified; betraying how ephemeral was the mortification, and how easily healed the wound—and thereafter she played with him at will.

Cat and mouse play, perhaps, and the mouse had no chance from the first, but—Leo did not sigh when once more alone, and her wild spirits all that evening rather displeased everybody.

CHAPTER IX.

"I'D LIKE TO HAVE THINGS ON A SOUNDER BASIS."

In coquetry as in other matters, the old saying about the natural and the acquired taste holds good. Leonore, having once tasted blood, was not to be kept from it; exasperation and despair were thrown to the winds in the triumph of her first victory, and the ease with which she had brought Valentine Purcell to book turned her head. Its consequence was immediate.

"That's the jolliest little widow I have seen for ages," pronounced Mr. George Augustus Butts, after seeing the Boldero ladies to their carriage at the close of a prolonged call at his uncle's house. "It's all right, Aunt Laura. If she's on, I am. Mrs. Stubbs may become Mrs. Butts—why the very names seem to melt into each other, ha—ha—ha!"

"Really, George!" But George's aunt, who was very little older than himself, laughed sympathetically. It was she who had summoned him to the spot; she who had instructed him in the why and wherefore of the visit; and had the two been alone, she would not even have exclaimed, "Really, George!"

But Lady Butts had a daughter, and Gwendoline was listening with the curious ears of thirteen.

"Gweny will think you mean that," continued her ladyship, with a warning intonation. "She takes your little jokes *au sérieux*, you know."

"Jokes?" But he perceived his mentor was in earnest, and mentally confounded Gweny for a nuisance. What business had that long-legged, staring, pigtailed brat in her mother's drawing-room?

She had as a fact been brought in to make a third to match the three visitors; but having fulfilled her end, and escorted Sybil Boldero in one direction while Leonore was piloted by her cousin in

another, round the gardens—(Sue and her hostess meanwhile sitting in state within)—Gwen's mission was over, and the point was to get rid of her.

It is not so easy, however, to get rid of a spoilt child. Gwen admired George Butts very much indeed. She hung about him whenever he came to the house, believed in him whenever he spoke, and had secret ideas of marrying him as soon as she should be grown up. She was now bursting with jealousy and curiosity, and meant to hold her ground by hook or by crook.

"Hadn't you ever met Leonore before, Cousin George?"

The elders exchanged glances.

"No," said Cousin George, bluntly. (Damn it all, was he to be cross-questioned next?)

"You seemed to like her. How you and she did talk! And you got away from us altogether," proceeded Gwenny, stabbing her own wound as a greenhorn will. "I suppose you think her very pretty?"

"If I do, do you think I should tell you, Tailywags?" He tossed the thick plait of her hair up and down in returning good-humour. After all, he might as well hear if she had anything amusing to say.

"I believe it is only because she wears black," continued Gwenny, watching to see how this was taken. "Black, with a little white stuff about the throat, *is* so becoming, and Leo doesn't look a bit like a widow now."

"So you noticed that, you observant imp? I say, Aunt Laura, when did this young person of yours become such a prodigy? Perhaps she will tell me what the—the lady under discussion does look like, eh?"—lighting a cigarette,—for free and easy manners prevailed in the Butt mansion, and every one did as they chose there.

"Just like any other girl," responded Gwen, readily. "And—and I don't think she ought, either."

"Oh, just like any other girl. And, pray, why don't you think she ought?"

"Because she's not; she's a married woman. She was married ever so long ago, when I was little."

"Of course you're awfully big now. And so Mrs. Stubbs—Heavens, what a name!—even though she has lost her husband, is to go on for ever being 'a married woman' in your eyes, is she?"

But here Gwen's mother interposed, having had enough, and burning for more confidential intercourse.

"Of course Gwenny is right, George. But—but you don't quite understand, darling," to her. "And Cousin George is only teasing. Suppose you run away to Miss Whitmore now, and see what she has been about all this time? She will wonder what has become of you."

"Oh, she won't, she's writing letters. She always writes letters when you send for me, and she had —"

"Tell her, love, that the post goes out at——"

"She knows when the post goes out. She knows better than any one else in the house, for she has told me lots of times."

"Go, now, Gwenny. Go, my dear, when I tell you."

"You'll have a handful to deal with when that young lady comes out," observed George, bringing his eyes back from the door as it slowly closed upon the reluctant figure. "Gwen's too clever by half for you, Aunt Laura; and, I say, we must both keep our eyes skinned if we are to carry through this affair. She's half suspicious as it is."

"It was your own fault, George. How could you be so foolish as to blurt out what you did before her?"

"Good Lord, I never gave her a thought. However, I'll be more careful in future. Well, now, now she's gone, what do you say? How did it go off? How did I do? Do you think—eh?"

"I did not exaggerate, did I, George?"

"Exaggerate? You did not come up to the mark. She's a ripper. And I suppose the tin's all right? There's no mistake about *that*? Because—well, I needn't tell you how things are with me."

"I know—of course. And of course I'd never have asked you to come and meet Leonore Stubbs unless I knew she had been left well off."

"'Well off,' only? I thought you said——"

"Very well off, then. All the neighbourhood rang with the Bolderos' big marriage, and it was big in no other sense. The poor little thing was barely grown up and had been nowhere and seen nobody,—and when the husband died she was received back at the Abbey with open arms."

"It's a wonder she hasn't been snapped up before."

"The Bolderos have taken care of that. They have immured her like a nun. This is positively the

first call she has made here."

"She's awfully pretty." He sighed contentedly.

"And she seemed to get on with you?"

"Famously. Flirty little thing."

"Of course there will be others after her, George. You must lose no time."

"I haven't time to lose, my good aunt. Poor devils in Stock Exchange offices can't call their souls their own. I must get back next week. Luckily I only had a week in August, or I should not have been here now."

"You poor, ill-used individual! Do you mean that you must actually and positively return to your slavery at the risk of losing what would emancipate you from it forever? It can't be, George. It simply must not be. Your uncle must make up some excuse——"

"My uncle Thomas is a great man on his native heath, no doubt, Aunt Laura—but he hardly carries the same weight on the Stock Exchange. No, I must go when the day comes. When Duty calls Love must obey. And it's no use casting away the substance for the shadow. And—and I could think of a dozen other wise sayings *à propos*, but it all comes to this, I've got eight days clear—I'm wound up now like an eight-day clock—and can make my running steadily till these are out. Then, if——"

"You could come down again?"

"If it were worth it, yes."

He smoked thoughtfully and proceeded. "It does seem a chance, and I'm awfully grateful to you and all that for providing it. But supposing the widow is not to be caught, and who's to tell? She knows her own value, you bet—I should be up a tree if I had had a row with the Koellners. I don't want to fall between two stools, you know."

It ended in this, that he was to present himself at Boldero Abbey on the following day, armed with an excuse; and that, as things developed, further counsel as to further progression should be taken.

It was left to Sir Thomas to cast a damper over their hopes. He was not told about them, but he would have been a simpleton indeed if he had not seen for himself—neither his wife nor nephew being wary conspirators,—and directly he was alone with the former, he spoke out with conjugal frankness.

"You think yourself mighty clever? Look out. You have old Boldero to deal with."

"But, my dear, Leonore is quite independent of her father."

"A child like that is never independent. The more money she has, the sharper he will look after it."

"If she chooses to marry again——"

"Now look here, Laura, if Godfrey Stubbs' widow chooses to marry again, she may marry anybody. *Anybody*, d'ye take me? Is it likely she'd take George? Who's George? What's George? An eighth son, and nothing at that. Not even clever or good-looking."

"Oh, he *is* good-looking."

"Hanged if he is. Anyhow he's not a half nor a quarter as good-looking as Valentine Purcell. And what's more, though he is my nephew, he is not so much of a gentleman as poor Val is."

Lady Butts, however, stood to her guns.

"What girl in her senses would marry that creature?"

"Creature? Humph! Val isn't over sensible, and he has no backing,—but in his own way he's quite a nice fellow, and has a wonderful appearance when he's dressed. I don't want to see any one look better than Val Purcell turned out for a meet."

"He's just a big boy, and no one thinks of him as anything else."

"One person does—or at any rate, pretends she does. You may take your oath old granny yonder has an eye on your pretty widow; and the Purcells are too close to the Bolderos not to have a dozen opportunities of meeting, for one that you and your precious George have. I wouldn't mind laying odds upon the rival candidate."

Of this conversation we may be sure no echo ever reached other ears, and indeed Lady Butts soon forgot its tenor herself, in her exuberation over George's report of his next step. He returned from the Abbey treading on air. Even the general had been civil—though it transpired at the last moment that the young man had been mistaken for his eldest brother—"but he couldn't go back on me then," chuckled the narrator, "though I'm bound to say he looked a bit blank. He doesn't yet know there are eight of us, and Heaven forfend his looking us up in Debrett!"

"Did you get any invitation?"

"Rather. To luncheon to-morrow. Beastly things, luncheons,—but I couldn't cadge for anything else. What I did was to say I should be walking past, and ask if I could do anything for anybody in the town?"

"My dear George! You don't propose walking all the way to——"

"Of course I don't; but I propose being prevented by the superior attractions of Boldero Abbey."

"Oh, I see." She laughed and considered. There were many things she wanted to ask, but to ask was to suggest, and suggestions were horribly dangerous.

For instance, about the Purcells? Sir Thomas had made her uneasy by his praise of Val Purcell's looks, praise which her own heart endorsed—and George, whose knowledge of the world was extensive, had all along been slow to believe in his own chances of success. He knew what it meant in London to be an eighth son. It was only her repeated assurances of the Boldero's problematic ignorance on this head and her encouragement on every other, which had brought him up to the scratch at all. Thus hints which might have spurred on another man, would quite possibly daunt one alive to his disadvantages and inclined to magnify them. She reverted to Leonore, and he was willing to talk about Leonore to any extent.

But on thinking it over afterwards, she could not see that he had in reality very much to say. The little widow had looked as charming as before, but she had not been so talkative. He thought she was shy before her family; once only, when out of their sight for a few minutes, she had brisked up and chattered as at their first meeting; and she certainly did look pleased when on saying "Good-bye," he had added, "till morrow"; but otherwise—the fact was there had been no opportunity for anything else.

The luncheon party however proved more productive. Let us see how this came about.

"I really can't see what that man is coming for again to-day," observed Leonore, plaintively, the next morning. "People at luncheon are a bother, *I* think."

"You're not often bothered by them," drily returned Maud; "it is months and months since such a thing happened. If we lived in a more habitable neighbourhood we should think nothing of it."

"Glad we don't then;" Leo pouted like a sullen child. "It means changing one's frock, and——"

"There's no need of that—for *you*. *You* are all right. One black thing is the same as another."

This was what Leo wanted to find out. She had a pretty new coat and skirt, eminently satisfactory to herself, but about which there had been some demur when it first arrived. It was devoid of crape, and had a neat, coquettish air. Sue thought it hardly decent.

"But what am I to do?" queried her sister. "I did so want something to wear in wet weather. Even when it is only damp and misty—and you know it nearly always is damp and misty about here in the autumn—crape gets limp and wretched looking. However, I'll send this back if you wish, Sue?"

Upon which Sue had relented—as Leo knew she would. "Of course if you keep it for walking about in the woods, and do not go where you are seen, there might be no harm. Or perhaps it might be trimmed——"

"No, no; it could *not* be trimmed," said Leo, hastily. Trimmed? Disgusting! The very thought of a plain tailor-made coat which was so simple and workmanlike, yet so unspeakably chic in its simplicity, being mauled by a village dress-maker was terrible.

"I must either wear it as it is, or not at all," she exclaimed with decision; "but I would not wear it to vex you, dear," and the sharpness softened; "only I can't afford to buy another," murmured Leo,—and of course she was allowed to wear it.

Accordingly just as the door bell rang, down stepped a very smart little figure indeed, yet wearing a demure, unconscious air that would have deceived a Solon.

"Why, Leo! My dear!"

"Men never know," said Leo, calmly, "and that other old rag wasn't fit to be seen. It's torn at the back, and I gave it Bessie to mend."

"But, dear, you promised,—and supposing Lady Butts——"

"She's not there. I looked from my window."

"I understood this was to be kept for out-of-doors," murmured Sue, uneasily, "and somehow, Leo, you look altogether,"—but the door opened, and no more could be said.

Feeling that she had got off cheap on the whole, Leo did nothing further to merit reprobation, and beyond placing herself well within Mr. George Butts' line of vision, took no pains to attract his notice.

But she was aware that he *felt* her, that more than once a general observation was designed chiefly if not entirely for her, and that she had but to open her lips for him to be silent. Girls always know when this is the case.

And scarcely had the party risen from the table, and the sisters retired, ere an astonishing thing happened.

We all know there are days of happenings; days charged with vitality and eventfulness; when nothing surprises and nothing seems out of the way,—it seemed quite a commonplace occurrence on the present occasion, when a motor car, full to the brim, whirled to the Abbey door.

At another time such a sight would have sent a thrill of excitement through the whole house; as it was, Sue moved quietly forward to greet a bevy of ladies, and Leo inwardly blessed her coat and skirt.

"We are on tour, and ought to have been here an hour ago, my dear people," cried a gay voice, belonging to General Boldero's only sister, who though several years older than he, seemed, and to all intents and purposes was, at least as much younger. She then presented her friends, and continued: "We took a wrong turning, or should have hit off your luncheon hour, Sue; but you will still have pity on our famished state, I'm sure,——" and the speaker put up her glasses, and inspected the circle.

"Only yourselves, I see; and only you girls. Is your father not at home to-day?"

"He is still in the dining-room, but——"

"In the dining-room? How lucky! We are not as late as we thought. Pray, dear Sue, take us there at once. You know I told you I should drop in unbeknownst some day," proceeded the voluble lady, slipping her hand within her niece's arm, and gently urging her towards the door, "so you probably were on the look out? No? Oh, but I said I should come."

"In the summer, Aunt Charlotte."

"Summer? But it is far pleasanter now. No dust, and the inns not half so crowded. Well, William, here we are,"—and the amazed William, who was peacefully sipping his coffee and smoking his cigar, and thinking that after all even an eighth son who was nephew of a rich and powerful neighbour was worth a luncheon and not bad company after it, found himself startled out of his chair by an invasion as unexpected as it was inopportune.

But he was somewhat afraid of his sister, of her fashion and smartness—above all of her *sang froid*. There was no saying what she might say or do.

Moreover he had a sneaking desire to show off before her. He was really pleased to be found entertaining, if so be he must be found at all. Altogether, after the first shock, he rose to the occasion creditably.

And now there rose on the horizon George Butts' lucky star. He had vacated his place at table in favour of the newcomers, and was hesitating as to whether after all he must not affect to pursue the walk which had been given out as the *raison-d'être* of his being where he was, when he caught Leonore's eye. Leonore, little minx, had all her wits about her. In five minutes the pair were stealing forth from a side door, and were quickly out of sight of the house.

"I put him on his way," she remarked, subsequently; "you were all so taken up with Aunt Charlotte's people that poor Mr. Butts was utterly neglected, and could not get any one even to say 'Good-bye' to him. So I killed two birds with one stone. Turned him civilly out of doors, and kept myself in my objectionable get-up out of the reach of Aunt Charlotte's scathing tongue. Do you know, I really believe she hardly saw me. I am sure she did not take me in at all."

"She inquired where you had gone, Leo?"

"Did she? The old cat—I beg her pardon. But what business was it of hers where I had gone? Father," continued Leo, reverting to a trick whose value was tried and true, "you looked so dumfounded, poor father, and were so completely taken possession of by—by an octopus,"—she paused to see how this was taken, and at his smile proceeded,—"that said I to myself: 'You're not wanted here, neither is friend George; you are both *de trop*: be off with you, and it will clear the field'. That was all right, wasn't it?"

"Hum—I suppose so. I never saw you go."

"The octopus had you fast. She adores her William—when she does not forget all about him."

The general grinned appreciatively. "She certainly does not favour us with much of her company; we're not fine enough for her. It was at your marriage, I believe, she was here last. Sue," turning to her, "wasn't it at Leo's marriage your Aunt Charlotte was here last?"

Sue believed so—gravely. Leo experienced a qualm, despite herself, and threw out a little flag of conciliation.

"What did you say when she asked about me, Sue?"

"What could I say? You ought not to have gone, Leonore."

"And you might have known that for yourself," appended Maud. "You really ought not to need so much looking after. Walking about alone with a young man!"

"I did not—we did not—walk far. I took him through the park to the side gate——"

A general exclamation.

"Do wait," continued Leo, quickly. "At the gate we fell in with Mr. Custance,—involuntarily her eye rested on Sue, and Sue was silenced on the instant,—so then I knew we were all right. We headed him off coming here, for which I knew you would be grateful. He would not have assimilated with Aunt Charlotte's lot." She paused for assent, and perceiving the shot told, proceeded with confidence: "So we took the dear rector along with us—we could do nothing else,—and when I came back, they went on together. I thought it was rather masterly, myself."

"Why, aye, Custance would have been a fish out of water," allowed the general, nodding approval; "though to be sure the clergyman of the parish is always a respectable visitor. But what of young Butts? I hope he did not think it rather cavalier being shipped off in that fashion?"

"You see I was quite civil to him, father. I saw him looking at his watch as if in a hurry to be off; so I suggested making his apologies to you; and we were standing near the door, so it made no disturbance; and my hat was in the hall, and I was so glad to get out into the open air—there was no harm in it, was there, Sue?"

No wonder the recipient of so much diplomacy went home radiant. He really—really he,—dashed if he didn't think he had a chance. If he could only work it up—he hummed and hawed and considered. At length: "I'll tell you what, Aunt Laura, it's no use shilly-shallying when there's so little time. If you can bring about one other meeting——"

"I have thought of that, George, and have secured the Merivale girls for golf-croquet on Thursday."

"Bravo! you don't let the grass grow under your feet. Thursday? That's the last day I have here, but I suppose—no, you could not have done anything sooner."

"And I thought you might ride over to-morrow, with my note?"

"I say! That would look a bit pointed, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps. But since Leonore was so nice to you to-day——"

"Oh, she was. Still——" he hesitated.

"What is it, George?—" a trifle impatiently.

"It's so beastly hard to tell. She's a dear little thing, and if she had been any one else, I should say she was—was——" and he laughed foolishly.

"*Épris?*"

"Look here, Aunt Laura, I'm not a fool, and it seems almost uncanny, don't you know?"

"Your being in such luck?"

"A girl like that! If she were ugly and poor——"

"There's no accounting for tastes," quoth Lady Butts, gaily. "Mr. Stubbs—Leonore's first husband—was nothing in particular."

"So you think she might take a 'nothing in particular' for her second? But remember she's in a different position now. She has only to lift up her little finger——"

"Apparently she has lifted it," Lady Butts laughed and patted his arm. "Do try and infuse some spirit into your faint heart, George. You have had the most wonderful encouragement——"

"It's just *that* which frightens me. I—I don't like the look of it. When a prospectus looks too rosy, we shy at it at Koellners. There's a screw loose somewhere."

"But just now you were all up in the air about Leonore?"

He was silent.

"Could she have done more than she did, George?"

"Less would have put things upon a sounder basis." He shook his head gloomily.

"A sounder basis? I don't know what you mean, I don't understand those business phrases," cried his aunt, with very natural vexation; "what in the world has 'a sounder basis' to do with Leonore Stubbs?"

"I'll tell you;" he roused himself, "I go about the world a good deal, and I know girls—a little. I know this, that it isn't usual for them to make the running so freely on their own account when they are—are—in earnest. When they are in search of scalps, it's different."

"Scalps? Oh, I see; I know. But surely Leonore——"

"She went for me—yes; but she was as cool as a cucumber. Do you know, once or twice to-day I felt not exactly nervous, but that way—but she? Not a bit of her. She was all froth and foam,——"

"You are quite poetic, but you don't explain the 'sounder basis'?"

"Hang it all, aunt, I can't think that girl means anything."

"And yet when you came in just now, you told me she was so delightful and responsive."

"I said 'delightful'—I didn't say responsive'. The truth was, it was *I* who had to be responsive. *She* made the advances—if they could be called advances. And that isn't what I call having things upon a sound basis."

With which piece of wisdom the two separated, for though Lady Butts told herself that her *protégé* was simply suffering from reaction, and that the reaction would pass, she felt that no more was to be gained by pursuing the subject at present.

When, however, the Bolderos declined her invitation for Thursday, and were not at home to the bearer of her note—(although George vowed he saw faces peeping from a window, and placed himself within view for a good many minutes thereafter)—her ladyship understood the meaning of the "business phrase," and owned that it had been correctly applied.

She made no further effort, and the whole trivial episode came to an end—but it had had its effect upon Leonore.

CHAPTER X.

THE THIRD CASE.

"Hollo there! Where are you off to?"—Dr. Craig hailed his young assistant who was just setting forth from the surgery door; "I want you, Tommy."

Tommy stood still. He had thought the doctor out for the day, and had not heard the wheels of the returning gig. Otherwise—well, perhaps otherwise, he would have been busy within doors, not starting out into the sunshine of a brilliant June morning.

"Where are you off to?"—repeated his interrogator, and this time an answer to the question was necessary.

"I was going to the Abbey, sir." An observant person might have noted that the young man would have preferred not to say it, and a very observant person might also have seen that he shifted the parcel in his hand, and moved his feet uneasily.

Dr. Craig however either saw nothing or affected to do so. "To the Abbey? Who's ill there?" he said, quickly. "Anything sudden?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Stubbs——"

"Mrs. Stubbs? What's wrong with her? I saw her on the road yesterday."

"She called here, but you were out. There's nothing much the matter, but she wanted a tonic. I—I forgot to mention it."

"And you forgot something else, mister. No tonics go out from here that I don't prescribe. Here, give me that bottle. What's this? Trash. If Mrs. Stubbs wants a tonic——"

"She merely mentioned that she was not feeling quite the thing, sir; and I—it was my suggestion ——"

"A damned impudent suggestion. Now look here, young man, there must be no more of such suggestions, or you and I must part. You taking it upon yourself to prescribe for my patients! Bless my soul!"—but the delinquent was a favourite, and suddenly a humorous twinkle appeared beneath the frowning eyebrows. "You poor devil, what mischief is this? Hey? You blush like a girl? Come in here," pushing him gently back through the open door—"come in, and I'll prescribe for *you*, Mr. Thomas Andrews. I had an inkling something of this sort was going on, and—and I'm not blaming you, my boy. But it's *you* that needs the tonic, not that little widow-witch up yonder. Aye, you may turn red and white and glower at me—I know what I'm talking about. I've seen what she's after, the artful hussy,—and please God, I'll circumvent her."

"Sir—sir!"

"Haud your wheesht, Tommy. Ye're but a bairn and an ignorant fule-bairn at that:"—the broad Scotch accent lent itself readily to a wonderful mingling of compassion and contempt; "hark to me,—what? You're trembling?"—for the youth's lanky frame quivered beneath the weight of his hand. "Lord, has it gone as far as that?" muttered the speaker, under his breath.

Then he let go the young man's shoulder, and turned and shut the door carefully. "Sit ye down: sit, I tell ye. You are going to hear the truth, and you'll *have* to hear it. What? You think I've no eyes nor ears nor sense, because *you* have none—except for her? Tommy,—" he paused and drew a breath, a long, deep breath—"Tommy, my man, I've that to say to you to-day I've never said to mortal man, nor woman before. Will ye listen—but listen ye must, only—only I would as soon ye heard it kindly, for your own sake. Tommy, I *know what it's like*."

Tommy started, lifted his eyes, and let them fall again.

"Aye, I know;"—the big, shaggy head nodded slowly, and the words dropped one by one from the full, protruding lips. "The world's a dream while it lasts.... You walk among shadows, without *she's* there.... There's no sleep at night,—there's only thinking, and tossing, and sweating—and heugh! the next hour strikes!... And one day it's heaven, and the next hell.... And it ends—"

There was a long silence.

"It was twenty years ago," said the doctor, simply. "Tommy lad, would you—would you care to hear about it? You shall." He covered his eyes with his hand and had begun to speak ere he removed it. "I was about your age, but I was still at college; I left late. It was a custom in Edinburgh for the professors to ask us students once a year to an evening party; and although some of us did not care over much for that kind of entertainment, we could not have refused if we would. I remember I was annoyed at having to buy a dress suit, when my invitation came; I thought it waste of money, and money was scarce in those days. Tommy, I've got that suit now....

"You know that I am as happily married as a man can be;" the speaker started afresh. "No husband ever had a better, a dearer, or a fonder wife—but she has never thought of inquiring into the secret of that locked drawer upstairs,—and though I shall tell it her some day, I haven't yet. It sticks in my throat, and I have put off and put off—but, anyhow, you shall hear.... I went to the party I was telling you about, and—and *she* was there. A colonel's daughter, and no great lady—as I was at the pains to find out afterwards. Her family was not much better than my own, and upon that I built my hopes—for we think much of family in Scotland. But hopes? I don't know that they could be called 'hopes'. I was stunned, bewildered. She was the loveliest creature I had ever seen, and Tommy"—he leaned forward, his hands clasping the chair arms on either side—"many women as I've seen since, I have never yet seen her like.... Such eyes, such a brow, such a dazzling fair skin—the curved oval of her cheek—huts! I maunder.... She was amused by my adoration, Tommy; I don't know that it even flattered her, she was so accustomed to it—and I fear, I fear she felt no pity.... At any rate I was permitted to come to the house—for I fought and struggled till I obtained an entrance,—and even what I saw there did not open my eyes. I was doing well at college, you see; oh, I had better speak out, I did a deal better than ever *you* did, my lad, and carried off honours which at that time seemed high enough to promise anything. I saw myself at the head of my profession, with money, position, perhaps a title—and thought if she would only wait? Had she shown, were it ever so cruelly, her real sentiments, I might have groaned beneath the knife, but the wound would have healed swiftly, as wounds do at that age—but she kept me dangling on through long months of torture, worn to skin and bone,"—he broke off abruptly, paced the room, and stood for a moment at the window with his back turned, then resumed:—

"When my sick jealousy became too apparent, she applied an opiate. A few kind words or looks, an enchanting smile, and the poor, infatuated fool was as mad as ever. We used to walk in Princes Street Gardens—I can smell the spring flowers there now."

Another pause.

"You can guess the rest, I suppose?" With an effort the speaker heaved himself upright, and a grimmer expression overcast his features. "It was all a delusion—all. There never had been anything on her side—never. Oh, she was sorry, *so* sorry, but really she could not blame herself. My boy, I was made to feel I was the dirt of the earth beneath her feet.... Heigho! I got over it, Tommy—in time. Not for a long, long time; not till years had come and gone." Another pause. "Those years are what I would fain save you from," said Dr. Craig, slowly.

He had been encouraged to proceed by the respectful attention of the motionless form beside him. A deep sigh, or an inarticulate murmur on the young man's part alone showed that he was following what was said, and that it struck home,—but he remained rigid, and there might even have been something of stubbornness in the set of his shoulders. What if after all he refused to learn the lesson thus sternly and withal tenderly taught? "Maybe I've wasted my breath," mentally queried the other, frowning and biting his lip. Already he was repenting himself of the confidence wrung out of him, when all in a moment the scene changed.

"My lad—my lad," he cried, for Tommy had flung himself across the table, sobbing as though his heart would break.

"So, so? I should have spoken before," muttered the doctor, half-aloud. "It's the old story of shutting the door on the empty stable.—Tommy?"

But Tommy only quivered and shrank, as again a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder. "Be a man," exhorted a gruff voice overhead. ("To be soft now would be damnation. It's the hammer he needs.") "Take it like a man—not like a whimpering bairn,"—and the speaker's grip tightened. "What? What d'ye say? Let you be? What for then did I bare my soul to you just now—do you think *that* cost me nothing? Up! Fight with it. Master it." Then more gently: "Would you have me ashamed of you, Tommy?"

"I—I—I'm ashamed of nothing," gasped the unfortunate youth, suddenly assuming a bravado he was far from feeling. "What have I to be ashamed of? I have never done anything, nor said anything—"

"Nor—*thought*—anything?"

Tommy's head fell upon his breast.

"Where were you going when I stopped you?" proceeded his mentor, sternly. "You know the road, I'm thinking. And it can't be *all* on one side. She may have led you on, but——"

"Not a word against her." Tommy started up, inflamed. "Say what you will of me; strike at me as you will; sneer and scoff——"

"Hoots!" said the doctor, shortly. This melodramatic attitude annoyed him.

"Aye, it's just 'hoots!'" he repeated, bringing his big, red face close to the pale and frenzied one before him, "and lucky for you it is. I'm not going to take offence, my man—and that's the long and the short of it. I know you've been bamboozled—I *know* it,"—bearing down interruption; "and you're still—all I've said goes for nothing, I suppose?" he broke off sharply.

Tommy, who had tried to speak, also stopped, and the two glared at each other.

But it was the younger who gave way first. "It does not go for nothing, Dr. Craig, and perhaps I ought to feel grateful to you, sir, and all that, for taking such a—a kind interest——"

"Go on," said the doctor sardonically. "'A kind interest'—aweel?"

"But you don't, you can't know. You judge every case by your own. Because you were hardly treated, you think every woman deceitful. And yet, Leonore——"

"Leonore?"

"I do not call her that to her face, sir; I do not indeed."

"For which the Lord be praised—though it is but a small mercy. Did not I say it was in *thought*, my lad—but have it out, Tommy—such thoughts are best let out, like ill birds. Keeping them pent, they breed. Loose, they may fly away. How long has this been going on?" Suddenly the speaker's tone changed, becoming peremptory and commonplace.

Tommy murmured inaudibly.

"Speak out," thundered Dr. Craig, losing patience, "speak out, sir, and be damned to you. How long?"

"We met first on the last day of March."

"How? When? Where?"

"Accidentally. In the village. In the post-office. Till that day I had never——"

"No matter about that. What happened at this precious meeting? Answer me truly, Tommy, for ——" he paused, and once more the angry tone softened. "You have neither father nor mother, and I've got to see you through this brash. The truth I *must have*, so out with it."

"She spoke to me," owned Tommy, reluctantly. "She knew who I was, and asked if I would take a message to Mrs. Craig?"

"Well?"

"Afterwards she was not sure that she had got the message correctly—it was from Miss Boldero, I believe,—and—and——"

"And you had to walk back with her to the Abbey and get it?"

Now this was precisely what had happened, but the dry tone with its covert mockery, stung.

"Certainly I had. I don't know why you should speak to me so, Dr. Craig? I did what every man in my case would have done. And Mrs. Stubbs——"

"That's better. 'Mrs. Stubbs.' Never let me hear 'Leonore' again."

"Dash it, I can manage my own affairs, sir. I—I don't need either your advice or interference. You take advantage of your position, and of—of a moment's weakness on my part. Please to let me alone in future." White, infuriated, and shaking like a reed, the wretched lad struggled desperately for manhood, and his companion was secretly relieved by the outburst.

Here was something to lay hold of at last; some good, honest, fighting blood roused; real anger melted as he assumed its mask.

"Very well—very well. Neither advice nor interference shall you have, if it comes to that, young sir; but there is such a thing as authority. You are in my house, and in my employment, and I'll be hanged if I stand by and see you ruined. Unless you give me your word that you will hold no more communication with this woman, I shall go straight to Boldero Abbey, and speak to her—mark you—to *her*, myself."

"You?—To her?—You?"

"And if she will not hearken to me, I shall address myself to her father."

"To her father?"—in a soundless whisper.

"That's what I shall do. You can take your choice. Hollo!" For he saw what was going to happen, and pushed a chair beneath the nerveless limbs just in time. "Here! take a taste of this"—the

doctor hurriedly poured from a small phial of brandy in his pocket, "take it,—or I'll pour it down your throat, silly loon. We'll not quarrel yet, you and I. And we'll talk no more at present; when we are both *reasonable* again, and can discuss this business doucely and decently, as between man and man, we will. Meantime just bide here a bit, and think it over. And, Tommy, ahem——?"

Tommy's moist hand stole out feebly, tremulously.

"You'll never let on to anybody about—about yon wee story of mine?"

"Poor lad—poor lad," said the doctor, going out presently wiping his eyes. "He's safe now. But, Lord, what a time I've had of it! And one false step—one straining of the line and it would have snapped like silk. Aye, aye; I played my fish on a single gut, and," triumphantly, "landed him! Landed him, by Jupiter!"

It was strictly true that chance had discovered to Leonore the existence of her village admirer, who otherwise most certainly would never have come within the sphere of her observation. But each was waiting to despatch a telegram, and something had gone wrong with the wires. It was nothing too serious to be remedied and that speedily, they were assured, and if they could wait a few minutes, all would be well. But the few minutes expanded into a quarter-of-an-hour, and then—perhaps it was she or perhaps it was he, or perhaps it was both at once who were electrified by the all-potent touch of opportunity.

On Leonore's part, here was a comely youth,—and she had seen the comely youth in Dr. Craig's gig, and guessed at once who he might be. Three months had passed since the collapse of Lady Butts' well-meant little scheme, and no one had stepped into the cast-off shoes of her philosophical nephew—and Leonore had been bored, sadly bored. True, Val was there, but since his perfunctory declaration, Val had lost his savour. Up till then, Leo had not been sufficiently certain of his real sentiments to make his company uninteresting, and had decided to probe them by way of experiment—but the excitement of the interview had fizzled out, and his honesty did him no service in the eyes of his charmer. She would now bring him straight in to where her sisters were assembled, if met outside—and as he was always happy and at home among them, he had not the wit to perceive that things had changed.

Consequently the coast was clear for George Butts, and he had his ephemeral hour; and then?—then there rose above the dull, tame level of the horizon a new object.

What! He was beneath her? She would never have looked at him, still less spoken to him? Oh, my dear incredulous sir, or madam, how much or how little do you who pronounce thus know of human nature? Have you ever felt what it is to have an eye, blue or grey or what not, a mute, appealing, impassioned eye, flashing into yours its secret?—and have you cared to reckon coldly its owner's claims to your notice? You bearded widower, with your family of big girls and boys, what about that little lodging-house keeper at the sea-side, who welcomes your most trivial order reverentially, who hardly ever speaks, but gives you one long look as she leaves the room? The humble soul has no idea of betraying herself, and as for you—you are resolved that if you marry again, it shall be well and prudently—but you can't forget that look.

And you, great lady of the manor, what takes you so often to the hot, stuffy, little village school-house, where the master, with awe upon his brow, in silence hands you copy-books and samplers? He hardly emits a syllable, but his soul flames beneath those weary eyelids—poor wretch, poor wretch!

Leonore having uttered a few commonplaces to a companion delayed like herself, chanced to glance directly at him. To her he was virtually a stranger, and, to do her justice, she would have talked to any stranger, obeying the sociable instincts which she alone of her family possessed—but to find a pair of fine, dark, luminous orbs fastened eagerly, almost ravenously, upon hers was?—her first emotion was one of great surprise.

It was weeks since young Andrews had secretly elected her to be the lady of his dreams—(when and where he had first beheld her, it boots not here to say)—but he had been content to adore from afar, and had never thrust himself upon her notice,—so that all the concentrated fire of brooding, hopeless passion was not only visible, but almost offensive—and yet it was not quite offensive.

The *lady* within her stiffened, but the *woman*? At least she need not be uncivil; to be haughty and supercilious, as Maud would have been under like circumstances, went against the grain; she could keep the young man at a distance without hurting his feelings; she—essayed a remark.

Afterwards she laughed to think how that remark was leaped at; how it was turned and twisted and stammered over. For very pity of his hopeless confusion she had to rejoin kindly, and again the words were caught out of her lips, and so on, and so on—and still the postmistress was invisible behind the scenes.

Eventually, as we know, Leonore accepted an escort back to the Abbey when the two errands were accomplished, and a message extracted from her sister threw a properly respectable air over the whole proceeding.

Had things ended there, Dr. Humphrey Craig would not have returned home unexpectedly on the present occasion. But he had heard whispers and caught glimpses—he saw a gossip nudge her neighbour and look up a bye-street; and looking himself, recognised two figures whose backs were turned. Not a word said he; but he watched young Andrews narrowly that evening, and the

next, and on the third day he spoke.

He spoke, and the bubble burst.

Ignorant of any cause for the non-delivery of her prescribed tonic which she had arranged to receive herself at one of the park lodges—since General Boldero was not to be annoyed by the suspicion of ill-health, and would infallibly make a fuss if medicines were handed in at the front door—Leonore, after waiting some time in vain, returned home and said nothing about the matter;—but she started a little when she heard a voice in the doorway a few hours later, and found that it proceeded from Dr. Humphrey Craig.

He had not yet rung the bell; and took the liberty of a privileged old friend to hail her instead of doing so.

"Mrs. Stubbs? It was you I wanted to see. If no one's about, I'll step inside for a minute. Eh? It's all right, is it? I've something here for you; but I might have a word first, perhaps?"

She drew him into an empty room.

"This is not a professional visit," nodded he; "you haven't called me in, and there will be no note of it in my tablets,—but I understand from my young man that you are feeling a wee bit run down,—don't be frightened, we'll soon put you to rights—and I thought I'd look in. How's the appetite?"

Presently it was the sleep—then the spirits, the walking powers;—she was completely put through her facings, her tongue looked at, her pulse felt,—and at length the doctor sat back in his chair. "I have known you from a child, Miss Leonore, ahem—Mrs. Stubbs. Your family has honoured me with its friendship for fifteen years now, and as a friend," with emphasis, "I'm going to lay down the law on this matter. If you'd prefer me to speak to Miss Sue, I will."

"Oh, no—no."

"I thought not," said the doctor, smiling a little grimly. "But if it should become necessary, I shall do it all the same. You must get away from this place. Your father must be made to let you go. Only for a bit, of course,—but that bit I do insist upon. You've been shut up here, fretting, and brooding, for a matter of nearly two years—"

"Indeed, indeed I am quite well."

"You tell Tommy Andrews you're not. Trust me, my dear young lady, you wouldn't have told Tommy anything if you had been. It was, ahem—a foolish thing to do, to consult a raw young apprentice."

"I—I didn't like to trouble you."

"Trouble me? Bless my soul, what am I for? If you hadn't been a wee thing off colour you would never have had such a ridiculous notion. However, I take it, your father—aye, I see—and you thought if you could quietly get a few bottles of physic, and no questions asked, it would set all to rights. Well, now," proceeded he, on receiving a mute assent, "I've got a tonic here worth a score of that rubbish Andrews was for giving you. But you need something more than that. I've forbidden that lad of mine, forbidden him *absolutely* to have you for a patient in future; he's a good lad, but he had mistaken his place, Miss Leonore—Mrs. Stubbs. You understand me? Yes, I thought you would. He will not trouble you any more. While for you, it's not physic you want most, it's a thorough change of life and scene. You must get away—I say, you *must*. Now," rising, "will you manage this, or shall I? It must be done soon, mind."

Voices were heard outside at the moment, and Leonore swiftly turned and opened the door.

"Come in, Sue, come in and find me out. I've been trying to get doctored,"—and she ran on glibly—but directly the conference was over, shamefaced and crestfallen she flew to be alone.

"He saw; oh, how horrible, how detestable! How could I stoop to it?" For hours she rang the changes on this theme.

And the very next day, Sue, alarmed and repentant, herself conveyed her young sister up to London.

CHAPTER XI.

DR. CRAIG'S WISDOM.

A friend who did not obtrude himself upon the departing travellers, but spied from the background, rubbed his hands as the train moved off.

Then as the big Boldero omnibus turned empty homewards, Dr. Craig stood still for a moment in thought, consulted his watch, and finally walked briskly up the street to his own door.

"What is it?" demanded a voice from an upper window; "forgotten anything, Humpty?"—and the attentive wife prepared to fly down.

"No, no; stay where you are." Humpty waved her back. "I have some work to do at home this morning," and he stepped into the surgery, where on this occasion his young assistant was dutifully busy.

"Hey, I'm going to send you for a run, Tommy; you can finish here when you come in. Take your bicycle, and go to Mrs. Brooks—you know the house? You don't? Well, you know Ashford Mill? It's near by. Any one will tell you the road. Call, and say I'm not coming till to-morrow if all's going on well. Of course, if I'm wanted, I can look in—let's see—some time this evening. But I don't expect I shall be wanted. And Tommy—"

"Yes, sir?"

"You needn't hurry back. Take your time, and get a breath of good air over the downs."

"Thank you, sir,"—but the dejected countenance did not brighten, and the rejoinder was mechanical. A few days before what a prospect would have opened at the above words, now it mattered not to Tommy Andrews what he did nor where he went. He continued to pound away with his back turned.

"Come, be off!" said Dr. Craig, good-naturely. "I came back on purpose to set you free. By the way—ahem!—you need not be afraid of meeting any one; you won't be tempted to break your word—not that you would, of course,—but, well, I thought I'd just mention it—the ladies are off to London."

"The—the ladies, sir?"

"The Boldero ladies. Two of them, at least,—Miss Sue and Mrs. Stubbs. I was at the station just now, and saw them go, with a pile of luggage that meant a longish stay. My boy, this ought not to be ill news to you," continued the speaker, changing his tone of assumed indifference for one of quiet sincerity; "it's only the natural ending of what ought never to have begun; and you will live to be glad it came so soon, and so conclusively. Take your time upon the road, Tommy. There's nothing to bring you in before dinner."

And at dinner Humpty was in his most genial mood. He was not as a rule genial at the midday repast, to which as often as not he hurried in late, only to hurry out again as soon as he had consumed abstractedly the portion set aside for him; but on the present occasion he subsided into his armchair at the foot of the table with a leisurely, tranquil air that spoke of a mind at ease for the time being.

He enjoyed his roast chicken and green peas. He had himself cut the asparagus and cut it bountifully. Mary was bidden to observe how asparagus ought to be cut—a couple of inches, not more, below the surface of the earth; and it should never be allowed to grow too high; the flavour was lost when it had been long above ground; furthermore, it should be carried straight from the bed to the pot—but here Mary laughed outright.

"What are you laughing at?" demanded he.

"You, who never give your food a chance! Tommy knows,"—and the careful housewife continued to laugh, looking at Tommy, "he has to put down your plate to the fire five days out of six."

"No, no, Mary."

"And often you could not tell me what's on it if I asked! And if we did not look after your digestion —"

"Well, well; I know what's good, when I have time to think about it. And since you are so keen on my digestion, have you a mind to give Tommy and me a treat?" nodding at her—"make us some coffee!"

"And we'll take it out-of-doors," continued the doctor, rising and throwing his napkin aside. "Under the trees yonder. Bring your pipe, Tommy; you and I don't often enjoy a lazy hour, but a man must break his rule sometimes. Come along,"—and he led the way.

Of course Tommy saw, and at first Tommy was inclined to resent. So he was to be treated like a child, a child who has had his toy taken from him and is to be comforted with other things? He had been allowed to go out in the sunshine—(on a bogus errand, he suspected; certainly Mrs. Brooks had not expected a medical visit that morning)—and now his inner man was being consoled and pampered, and the raw wound which still bled from the knife so unsparingly applied the day before, was to be blandly ignored. He felt both hurt and angry.

But the roast chicken was very good, and so was the currant tart with cream—and he had covered many miles on an empty stomach, and was young, and as a rule, ravenous. For the life of him he could not help clearing his plate.

And next he found himself responding with alacrity to the suggestion of coffee in the cool shade without, for the atmosphere of the little dining-room had grown somewhat warm and odorous, pervaded by hot dishes—while even a prospective *tête-à-tête* with his host was not altogether distasteful, since he was to be permitted to smoke.

And though he told himself he would not for worlds have Leonore's name enter into the conversation, in reality he was listening for it, waiting for it.

He had to wait however.

"It's a queer life, that of a country doctor;" the elder man laid down his pipe musingly. "A queer life—but it has its compensations. There's much to be given up, much to be done without,—there's struggle and hardship to begin with—strain and anxiety always,—but taken as a whole, it yields a satisfaction—Tommy, I often think there's no life on earth meets with such clear recompense for the outlay, be the outlay what it may."

"Yes, sir; I suppose so, sir;" absently.

"Human nature craves appreciation," the speaker slackened his big-limbed frame afresh, and puffed luxuriously, "to be watched for and welcomed and—and appreciated—there is no other word for it—wherever one goes, *is* something, who can deny it? One may never rise to eminence, one may be humble and obscure, as the world has it, all one's days, and yet—" again he paused.

"Yes, sir?" But at the second "Yes, sir," Dr. Craig roused himself.

"You aren't following me, Tommy. You think you knew all this before, and it sounds like a dull droning in your ears. Isn't it so, my boy?"

"I'm afraid I'm very poor company, sir. But you—you know what makes me so."

"And you would like to talk about it, and find every other subject uninteresting? Maybe you're right. What is it then? *Her*, I suppose?" And a faint smile, not unkindly, accompanied the last words.

"I do want you to believe that she is not to blame. I can't get over it, your saying what you did. You seemed to infer that I had been befooled and—"

"If you had, you are not the first—but let that pass. I own I cannot understand how otherwise you could have presumed to think at all about a lady so high above your head."

"I did presume, sir."

"And—?"

"And I think I showed it, sir."

"Wilfully?"

"No, unconsciously. But it was *my* fault—not hers."

"And you acquit her, absolutely?"

Tommy was silent, colouring.

"You would like to acquit her, and you hoped I should do so, without the need of more? You have a chivalrous soul, and you may thank God for it, young man; it is a great possession. Respecting Leonore Stubbs, I may be too hard upon her—"

"Indeed, sir, indeed—"

"I *may* be, but time alone will show. When she first came back here, a poor bit widow-creature, more child than woman, it would have touched a heart of stone to see her and what's more, I saw they were not going the right way to work with her. She was put into a sort of strait-jacket. She was made to appear just what the Bolderos thought she ought to appear. They made no account of the sort of lassie she really was. I saw, for I was often at the house that winter. And I think Leonore was glad to be ill sometimes—(she caught colds and chills that year)—just for the sake of having something to think about, and even old me to talk to. But of late—I don't know—I seem to fancy she's altered. She breaks loose. Her face has a kind of reckless look. And it struck me she'd been angered and fretted till she was ripe for mischief. Did she—did she let you make love to her, Tommy?"

"Never, sir. There was never a word of the kind between us. I told you so before."

"Aye; words aren't always needed. You and she were walking in a maze, and a maze neither of you had the wit to look beyond. Heaven knows where you would have found yourselves—or, rather, where *you* would have found yourself—if I had not brought you up sharp. But don't imagine I think the worse of you for it, Tommy; and don't you go and fret and gloom by yourself. The thing's done and can't be undone, and I'll not deny I'm sorry it is so. Still—" he rubbed his chin thoughtfully,—“perhaps you have learnt something you would have learnt no other way, and for the rest, my advice is—forget. Forget as fast as you can, for," a grim smile, "of one thing you may take your oath, Tommy Andrews, however quick you may be, the little lady who's gone to London to-day will be quicker still."

And of course Leonore was. There is no need to indicate the precise moment at which the figure of her humble village admirer faded clean out of sight after having hovered reproachfully over a few brief penitential musings, but certain it is that it vanished, to return no more.

London in the season was a revelation to our heroine. Hitherto her sole experience of it was

confined to passing through, and that mainly at other periods of the year,—since it was an article of faith with her husband that one big town was as good as another, and he had all he wanted of town life at home.

So that all was new, strange, wonderful, glorious—and at first she was utterly dazzled. True, a modern girl would have laughed in her sleeve could she have heard Leo's idea of the gay world. She would have said this unsophisticated creature went nowhere and knew nothing. She would have marvelled—perhaps as much as Leo would have marvelled at her.

Leo did more than marvel, she was secretly shocked and disgusted on several occasions, but with the fidelity of the young to the young she said nothing to Sue. Sue thought the houses she took her young sister to all that was prudent and respectable. Some of them were rather great houses—the Bolderos, when they did seek society, moved on a high plane, and the very fact that they seldom sought it, told in their favour.

The sisters were not overwhelmed with invitations, but they had enough to gratify the elder and delight the younger. Leo did not dance; indeed, she did not know how, so the one ball to which she was bidden was declined, but the two went to a fair amount of dinner-parties, not of the most lively order, but pictorial and majestic. They were invited to opera boxes—generally on the grand tier. Leo was on the box seat of a coach occasionally. As for teas, they overran every afternoon, and concerts, bazaars, charity entertainments, Hurlingham and Ranelagh filled up the interstices.

It was in short a giddy round, and perhaps as good a cure for the sort of complaint from which our poor little girl was suffering as could have been devised.

It swept her off her feet—and in another sense swept her on to her feet.

She learned in curious ways a good deal.

Her shell was broken, and albeit the outer air was none of the purest, it served its purpose of blowing away the cobwebs that had so long encircled her outlook.

July, however, was passing, and soon, all too soon, fairy-land would vanish in a myriad of shattered sparklets, and then?

"I suppose we could not go to Cowes, Sue?" A very tempting invitation for the Cowes week had come, and there had been hints of further house-parties, and shooting-parties,—but of these latter Leo knew at once that she must not think. For Cowes, however, she would make a push. "It is so near, and we could go home as easily from there as from here,"—she murmured, wistfully. "And the Beverleys are very nice people, Sue."

"Oh, very; but—I don't know. I am afraid it would hardly do to suggest it. You see father has already been asked twice to let us stay on, and, dear Leo, he has been *very* good about it. Even Aunt Charlotte was surprised."

"It was Aunt Charlotte who did the trick though;" Leo wagged her head wisely. "Her sending him a card for her reception was a masterpiece. I almost wonder he didn't come up for it. Well, what about Cowes?"

"We will think it over, dear."

"I could go by myself, you know."

"No," said Sue, decidedly.

Her orders were that Leo was to go nowhere by herself, and she had more than once eaten humble pie in consequence—for her sister's sake hanging on to her skirts, a neglected and undesired appendage by the rest of the party.

Leo alone would be mindful of her, pleasant towards her. Leo was certainly growing more affectionate and considerate than of old—but Leo must not go to Cowes alone.

"I will try what I can do," said Sue, after a pause, during which she absently broke open another envelope in her hand. "I will read what Maud says of how they are getting on at home. I see she has returned from her visit to the Fosters, so perhaps—" An exclamation, quite a violent exclamation for the prim Miss Boldero, followed. Then she looked up, her face, we should like to say scarlet, or crimson, but truth compels the statement that Sue's flushes were of a deeper tint, not quite purple, but that way. Even her brow was now suffused by this tint. "Oh, Leo!"

But Leo was absorbed in a letter of her own.

"This is really—Leo—listen, Leo!"

"Well?" said Leo, absently. "Here's another idea for Cowes. However, your news first."

"Yes, indeed. You will say so when you hear it. Maud—"

"She's not coming here, is she?"—quickly.

"Maud writes to announce that she is engaged to be married."

"Good gracious!" The effect was electrical. Leo bounded from her seat and almost tore the sheet from her sister's hands. "Let me see—let me see," then reading aloud: "Major Foster—Mr.

Foster's younger brother—home from India—left the army—father pleased (that's a good thing!)—and coming here next week!—Oh, Sue!—“Stop, there's more,” cried Leo, recovering, for the “Oh, Sue!” had been emitted with dolorous mental reference to the Cowes scheme, now obviously knocked on the head. “What's this over the page?” and she turned it in Sue's fingers; “only the man's name—Paul. She doesn't say very much, does she? I thought people usually put in something about—”

“What?” said Sue, smiling.

“About being happy, and that. Or at least about the man himself—not merely who he is, and who his people are.”

“She will tell us all when we meet. Maud is not much of a writer, and she is the last person to—to speak of her feelings; but I do not doubt she is happy,” quoth Sue, radiantly. “Dear Maud! To think that she on her quiet visit—and at the Fosters, the last people one would have expected—and father pleased—”

“Oh, it's fine,” cried Leo, kissing her, “it really is fine. If she had only waited till after the Cowes week it would have been perfect. Anyhow, we'll hie back, you and I, with something to look forward to. We shan't leave all the sweets behind, now that Maud has done the civil by us with her ‘Paul’. I did hate the thought of going home before,” she was running on, when something stopped her, something that sent a little cold shiver down her back. It was—yes, it was—*the look*. The look on Sue's face.

For quite a long while now she had lost sight of the goal once set before her eyes by this. Imagination had ceased to be fired by its memory. The three impulsive dashes made in its direction had been so utterly futile that she could only recall the first with mirth, the second with contempt, the last with shame. Val Purcell was now happily restored to his former position of friend and playmate; George Butts?—she had come across Mr. Butts in London and found him in hot pursuit of another lady; and though the thought of poor Tommy Andrews with his weak, imploring mouth and burning eyes could still evoke a twinge, it was but a passing twinge.

Tommy had certainly been found out, and Tommy's master was not a person to find out in vain. Dr. Craig had effected what no one else dared attempt, namely, her own escape from thralldom—and she did not see her co-delinquent let off, albeit after another fashion.

No, she had nothing more to fear from that quarter; and in the rush and novelty of the past few weeks, bygone follies, big and little, active and passive, dwindled to the vanishing point. If only Sue, dear, good, unconscious Sue, would not recall them!

CHAPTER XII.

THE PHOTOGRAPH AND THE ORIGINAL.

Families in which the daughters marry early and in due succession, can have but little idea of the huge, volcanic shock an engagement means in a house like Boldero Abbey.

True, it had once before gone through a like experience, but the present happy occasion was intensified by a variety of causes.

It was satisfactory, altogether satisfactory. Like good wine it needed not the bush which General Boldero had strewed so plentifully over Godfrey Stubbs's antecedents and surroundings. His future son-in-law was well-born and well-bred, and his having lately succeeded to a considerable fortune was also well known. Accordingly—we are obliged to add “accordingly”—it was in good taste to say nothing about it.

But he could show, and he did show, enough to raise a smile wherever he went. However demure his air when receiving congratulations, he could insert here and there a phrase, adroitly conceived beforehand, the point of which could not be missed—and he was rampant at home.

There he might freely puff and blow, and turn his little world upside down. Nothing, not the veriest trifles of every-day life escaped his touch; and had it not been that the sympathies of all were with him, that there was not an antagonistic member of the family or household, he would have been found unbearable.

But the change, the stir, the commotion, the heavy posts, and constant ringing of the door-bell were delightful to everybody. There was occupation for everybody. They ran against each other with busy, pre-occupied faces. They hurried, when formerly time was of no account. The writing-tables were bargained for, and Maud, all-important, retained one solely for her own use,—while the two who had fancied they would have so much to tell of their London escapade, found it so completely superseded by the new excitement, that they dismissed it from their own minds.

In short the whole atmosphere quivered with the sensation: “Who would have thought it?—who would have believed it?” to which there was but one response: “We cannot make enough of it”.

The man himself, however, had yet to be seen.

"Yes, it is very unfortunate," observed Miss Boldero, in answer to neighbourly inquiries; "Major Foster has been obliged to put off coming again. He has had another touch of fever—his long residence in hot climates has left him subject to these, and though it is nothing to be anxious about, he has to be careful. We expect him next week."

A photograph was presented in lieu of the original, and no one had anything to say against the photograph. It represented an unmistakable soldier, even if he had not been in uniform. The face was clear-cut and clean-shaven, and some might have thought it had rather a melancholy expression—but such expressions in photographs are common, and not always truthful. Leo, for one, openly admired her sister's lover.

"I do detest a smirk," she cried, gaily; "I am so glad Paul's man did not make him smirk. Were you with him when this was taken, Maud?"

No, it had been taken in London on Paul's way through; he had promised copies to his regiment, and Maud had assisted him to send these out.

Was he sorry to leave the service? She thought he was, a little.

"So you had to—to cheer him up?" rejoined Leo, inwardly laughing over the remembrance of poor Val and his perfunctory proposal. "I daresay it does cheer up people to marry them. Your knight of the lugubrious countenance—ahem!"

"I don't know what you mean," said Maud, coldly.

"Heigho! I came near a cropper that time," muttered Leo, to herself.

When she was alone she took up the photograph again and looked at it. She could have wished for Maud's sake that she was to be united to a more lively-looking individual. The eyes, she could almost swear, were sad eyes. The mouth had a droop about it.

"It would not matter if it were Sybil or me," reflected she, within herself; "but no one can ever get a word out of Maud unless she pleases, and how is she going to bucket along a solemn spouse?... She seems content with him, and awfully proud of the whole affair—but I always fancied she would end with a jolly, jovial sort of creature, who would not care two straws whether she sulked or not. Now, something in this face,"—she scanned it thoughtfully—"leads me to think that Paul *would* care. He has a tired look—as if there were a weight upon him. Good heavens!" quickly, "Maud isn't the person to remove a weight; she's a regular old featherbed herself, when there's nothing to stir her up. She was all right at the Fosters, no doubt, with this going on, and everybody tootling round her; but if they only knew—if *he* only knew what she can be like at home!...

"I don't mean to be nasty;" repentance presently made itself felt; "and it may only be that Maud and I don't hit it off; that when I'm in a merry mood, she isn't, and *vice versa*—still," she shook her head sagaciously, "I'm not sure—not quite sure. It is more noticeable than it used to be. Even father gets snubbed and has to put up with it. Both Sue and Syb utterly succumb.... To think that Maud should be the one—though of course it is her looks—and besides, she herself let slip that the Fosters had got her there on purpose. Paul had come home at a loose end, desperately in need of a wife, and a home, and all the rest of it. The whole thing is clear—the only mystery,—pooh! there's no mystery....

"But it was luck for Maud," she mused on, "and I must say she appreciates her luck, and means to get the uttermost farthing out of it. How she revels in the idea of a grand wedding! And of course she will be a lovely bride—but I wonder—I hope—" once more her hand strayed towards the photograph, and she gazed at it long and searchingly, "I do hope she will make this poor man happy."

Leo, however, had the wit to keep such speculations to herself. She was only too conscious that she had not managed her own affairs so well as to give her any claim to pry into those of others, and told herself she was a little fool to keep on looking into Paul Foster's face and thinking of him as a poor man.

Directly she saw the real face, it would certainly tell a different tale. Maud breathed satisfaction over her lover's letters; obviously she had no doubts of her empire over him, and even while graciously accepting the encomiums passed by her belongings on her choice, let it be seen that she by no means considered all the good fortune to be on her side.

"Paul is deeply religious;" she announced once.

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated the general;—indeed there was a universal start, for even Sue, the good, kind Sue, could hardly be regarded as deeply religious. Every eye was bent on Maud.

"Indeed he is," proceeded she, calmly. "He made quite a mark in his regiment, and received no end of testimonials, the Fosters told me. They did not speak of it before him, but Caroline warned me—I mean told me—privately."

"Took an interest in the schools and that sort of thing, eh? Quite right, very proper;" General Boldero made an effort to recover himself. "In my day it was quite the thing for the commanding officer to back up the chaplain; but—hum, ha—*that's* what you mean, I suppose? You are not going to foist a parsonical gentleman upon us, young lady?" Despite the jocular tone, there was a gleam of anxiety.

"I am merely stating a fact," said Maud, stolidly.

"And I am sure we ought to be very glad," murmured Sue in her humble, peacemaking accents—but even she looked disconcerted.

"We can have Custance to meet Paul at dinner, if that will satisfy him," was the general's next; he had had a few minutes for reflection, and after rapidly weighing the pros and cons of the new development, decided to swallow it with a good grace. "Will that satisfy him, or will he want the curates too?"

"You may laugh if you choose, but it is as well you should know;" Maud drew up her neck, and retorted stiffly. "Paul has been about the world, and doesn't expect to find people all cut to the same pattern,—only I imagine *I* shall have to conform to his ideas after we are married, and he has set his heart on getting a house with a private chapel attached."

This was better; the general breathed again. A house with a private chapel? That meant a big house, a stately house, a house he would be proud to go to and refer to. "Oh well, a man must have his fads," quoth he, cheerfully; "and though we have got along well enough at Boldero Abbey without a private chapel, still if one had been here before my day, I don't know, 'pon my word, I don't know that I should have done away with it."

But the above conversation sent Leonore to look again at the photograph.

She was nervous, curiously nervous on behalf of this unknown Paul, of whom every day produced fresh impressions.

As time passed, he assumed a form she had not been prepared for,—and the first joyous flurry having worn off, she felt or fancied that he had in reality been no more fathomed by her sister than she by him.

It will be seen by this that Leonore had herself rapidly altered of late. She had taken to looking below the surface of things. She pondered and prophesied within herself. She perceived the drift of casual observations, and following in thought the byways of life, divined to what they might lead. In fine, her own blunders and mishaps had implanted seeds for reflection, and while less unhappy, she was infinitely more serious than before.

And for Paul Foster's appearance on the scene she grew every day more impatient.

Perhaps she was altogether mistaken about him, and the being of her imagination would prove so unlike the reality that doubts and misgivings would fly to the winds, made ridiculous by a very ordinary individual, devoid of all the mystery, all the glamour cast over him in day-dreams?

If so, of course she would be glad; it would be the best possible thing to happen; and yet? "I shall have to get rid of this Paul from my thoughts somehow," she decided. "He worries me. If he would only come and be done with it!"

It was evident that Maud attached a certain *éclat* to her lover's piety; she recurred to the subject more than once.

"It is all very well for father to make light of it, but I do hope he understands that it is no joke with Paul. Paul is very sensible, and never thrusts his opinions on other people, but no one ever thinks of laughing at them to him."

"It is only father's way," began Sue, distressed; but her sister continued, unheeding. When Maud had a thing to say she was not to be defrauded of saying it, and she had now got the ear of the house in the shape of two other attentive listeners.

"What I mean is that father always seems to think that it is only clergymen who really care about religion. He looks upon it as their trade,—oh, he does, Sue—and he would be the first to be down on them if they neglected their trade,—but as for other people, particularly other men's caring—and Paul *does* care, that's the unfortunate part of it."

"Why unfortunate, dear Maud?" said Sue, gently.

"Oh, I only mean lest he and father should clash," explained Maud with perfect coolness. "I am not speaking of my own feelings. *I* don't mind." After a pause she subjoined: "You might give father a hint, Sue."

"And what about asking Mr. Custance to dinner?" struck in Sybil, who had hearkened to the above uneasily, yet with a different sort of uneasiness from that which made poor Sue breathe an unconscious sigh. "It might create a good impression. Well?"

"It wouldn't take Paul in for a moment," said Maud. "Still," she hesitated and looked over her shoulder as she was leaving the room, "a third person might be of use on the first evening after dinner. Just as you like about that," and she passed out with the air of a queen. She felt every inch a queen in those days.

"So it wouldn't take Paul in for a moment?" The words raised a new question in Leonore's mind. If Paul where his deeper feelings were concerned were thus acute and clear-sighted, how came it that he was so blind otherwise? Ah, there she was at it again! Back to her old dilemma—to the bogie which had just been torn in tatters during a merry feminine conclave, in which wedding preparations and wedding clothes had formed the chief objects of discussion.

It was so obvious that no one else had any *arrière pensée* as regarded the bridegroom elect, that she had suppressed her own successfully for the time being, and entered eagerly into all the details which even Maud condescended to be sociable over.

Maud had been quite sociable and pleasant over everything that morning. She had read bits of Paul's letter aloud; she had permitted herself to be bantered, even rather mischievously bantered, by Leo; and altogether was so approachable and communicative, that the reference to her lover's religious views and her desire that these should be respected, fell out naturally. Why then should Leo be perplexed anew?

By the time Paul actually arrived, she told herself she was sick to death of him, and everything about him....

And before the first interview was over she was jeering at herself for her fussiness. The man was well enough, but he fell from his pedestal the moment he approached. No, he was not like his presentment. Maud had declared it did not do him justice—Leo thought differently. She ran him up and down with her eye, and though she conceded his stature and general outline to be correctly rendered, there was a disappointing lack of effect; he had not the air of a hero; he had not the lofty, melancholy bearing and inscrutable countenance which was to set him apart from his fellows, a mark for furtive looks and whispers. His brow was not worn and furrowed. His smile was not forced and fleeting.

Obviously he was a bashful man, unused to finding himself the centre of attraction, and almost painfully desirous of acquitting himself well when needs must. When spoken to by a fresh voice, he jerked himself in the speaker's direction with an almost perceptible start, and flushed beneath his tan like a boy.

The position, it must be owned, was trying; Leonore had protested against it beforehand. But her father and Maud were against her, ruling that all should be assembled and the arrival made an affair of state—in fact neither would have missed it for the world.

"But Paul?" Leo had ventured doubtfully.

"You may leave Paul to me," said Maud.

It appeared that Paul had brought a dog, and to Leo it was excruciatingly funny to see General Boldero with this dog. He would have Lion brought in—he from whose path all the animals belonging to the lower stratum of household society fled by instinct—and his efforts to coax the big, gentle creature from beneath his master's chair were continuous. Whenever conversation flagged, Lion was admired and petted. Finally he made a joke. Leo and Lion? Ha, ha, ha! Upon which Paul raised his eyes which were mainly bent upon the ground, and Leo saw them fully for the first time. They were dark grey and very soft. They had an infinite amount of expression, and although she certainly could not call them sad at the moment, she felt that they might once have been so and might be so again.

But she was not anxious to speak to Paul, and every one else was. By Maud, as was natural, he was chiefly appropriated, but he listened to every remark that was made, and without opening his lips took as it were a leading part in the conversation.

General Boldero was eager to describe his shooting; he had planned how to put its best side forward, and, while deprecating its merits as superlative, to leave no doubt as to its being superior to that of his neighbours.

He hoped Paul would not expect too much; on the other hand, such as it was, and it was not—hum, ha—to be exactly despised, it had been carefully saved up for him.

"You are very good, sir," said Paul, gratefully.

"I was coming home from church last Sunday morning," continued the general—and stopped, apparently to pick up his stick which slipped, but in reality to let the words sink in—"we walk across the fields from church, it cuts off a mile—and I marked a covey of sixteen. That's not a bad covey, is it?"

"It is so long since I shot in England, sir, that I am afraid I hardly know a large covey from a small one."

"You have been tracking bigger game. I envy you that. But we poor stay-at-homes must be content with what we can get. Valentine Purcell—that's a young neighbour of ours—walked home from church with me on Sunday, and he was astonished at the size of our coveys. We are to shoot his, later on in the week."

Having thus twice brought in that he had been at church, though the tenor of his speech was partridge-shooting, the general felt that he had acquitted himself to admiration, and cast a glance of triumph at Maud. Maud had been apprehensive of his manners forsooth? He hoped he knew better than to tread on any one's toes; and a man who could afford to give his daughter a handsome establishment and was on the look-out for a house with a private chapel attached, had every right to his consideration.

He had decreed that no official mention should be made of the family party having been augmented at dinner.

"It's the custom in French houses for the abbé to appear without invitation when he pleases. A very good custom; I wish it prevailed in England," he alleged unblushingly. "As it doesn't, it is not our fault if Custance only comes when he's asked; and I should certainly—Paul would certainly, eh, Maud?—You needn't look stupid, my dear," with a sudden touch of irritation. "You know very well what I mean."

And as she did and the rest did likewise, it was left to himself to say easily as the party broke up: "We have only our good rector to meet you to-night; he is quite *l'ami intime* here, as I am sure you will agree with me the clergyman of the parish ought to be. Squire and parson hand in hand, eh?"

"And now I think I have settled that," quoth General Boldero to himself.

He had shot both his bolts; and though for a moment dismayed by the reflection that he had no more in reserve, there was consolation in the hope that no more would be required of him. Paul was evidently a gentlemanly fellow who would avoid unpleasant subjects.

The general opinion of Paul, though it took a different form, was equally favourable.

No sooner had the lovers disappeared in orthodox fashion, than encomiums broke out all round. They compared him with people they knew; he was like one man but taller—he reminded them of another but he was handsomer. Perhaps he was not strictly handsome, but certainly he was distinguished looking. If his nose were not a little on one side, it would be a good nose. Sue had not noticed that it was on one side; she thought it a very good nose as it was. Sue was even more enthusiastic than Sybil. Sybil lamented the absence of a moustache. Let a mouth be ever so good, a moustache was an improvement,—whereat her father stroked his own and agreed with her.

In the midst of it all, Leonore slipped aside, and passed into the next room where the photograph was. She was going to convince herself of its being unlike, absolutely unlike, the original. She was going to discover, point by point, wherein lay the contrast, and abandon for ever the old Paul, thus replaced by the new.

The old Paul looked at her, and she started.

For the new Paul had looked, just once, for a single passing minute, the same.

CHAPTER XIII.

"I AM TO GIVE YOU A WIDE BERTH, ALWAYS."

A formal dinner-party was of course necessary to introduce Major Foster to the neighbourhood, and it took place a week after his arrival.

"You will wear your best white silk, I suppose, Leo," said Sue, beforehand.

"No," said Leo, sharply.

"Won't you, dear? But we are all going to dress up a little, and you look so well in white."

"I—never mind, I am not going to wear it."

"What shall you wear?"

"Something—anything."

"But, Leo—"

"What *does* it matter? Why should you care? You never used to worry about my clothes;" perceiving however that Sue looked hurt, Leo laughed—not quite naturally. "Don't you see, stupid old darling, that white silk—well, it makes a bride, and *I* am not the bride."

"But you wore it in London."

"One wears in London what one never wears out of it." There was finality in the tone, but Sue persevered; she had not the art of letting well alone.

"Your only other is the grey voile."

"Well, it would do well enough," impatiently. "It's in rags, but it will do. You ought to be flattered, as it was your present."

"But it really is rather the worse for wear, Leo; and the white silk—"

Leo ran out of the room, and presently she was seen tearing down the avenue at breakneck speed, and did not look round, though hailed loudly from the terrace, as she swept out of sight.

"So tiresome!" exclaimed Maud, joining her eldest sister within; "I had been hunting everywhere

for Leo; she promised to show Harrison the new way of doing the hair, and Harrison is ready now. It was Leo herself who said it would suit me."

"She must have forgotten," said Sue; "but I daresay she has only gone for a little run, and will be back directly. You know she often does run out in the twilight."

"It was very inconsiderate, I think. She had the whole afternoon to go out in, and then to take the only time when she could have been of use!"

Sue was silent, feeling both for the offender and the offended. Maud certainly had a grievance, for Leo's good offices had been volunteered not besought, and further Leo was aware that Harrison, good soul, was a despot of the worst type.

All the Boldero servants were despots—all the heads of departments at least; they had the strength of long-continued, undisputed rule—and Harrison, who had begun by being a little schoolroom maid, taken on the recommendation of the late vicar, while yet Sue was young and her sisters children, now governed them with a rod of iron. It was only in consideration of Maud's present attitude that the present concession regarding her hair had been made, and it was felt to be so magnanimous that she was positively aghast at Leo's delinquency.

"It is only six o'clock now," adventured Sue, soothingly. "Could you not—?"

"How can I? If you mean send after her? No one knows where she is by this time. I called and called, but she never looked round. You might have reminded her, Sue."

"I should, if I had thought of it myself. But though she was here just now, we were talking of other things."

"What other things? Everything else is settled. The dinner-table really looks very nice," in mollified accents; "Watts has done the flowers beautifully, and Grier has condescended to have out all the plate. Well, I must go and break it to Harrison, I suppose—but if she is in a temper, she won't wait, even if I suggest it."

"I don't think I should suggest it," said Sue. She had an instinct that waiting would be of no use, and it proved to be a correct instinct.

The lower rooms were deserted when Leo hurried in; and lamps were being lit, while a faint pale moon became momentarily more clear in the dusk without. Servants were drawing down blinds and shutting shutters. Leo half expected to find the garden-door bolted, but it was not so,—and she scurried along the corridor, and prepared to mount the staircase, when her heart gave a sudden jump. There was some one in her path. Paul was on the next landing, looking from the great staircase window, with his back turned.

He was contemplating the scene without, which was certainly beautiful enough to command admiration—but Leo fancied that he was also sunk in thought. The pose of his motionless form suggested that he had not merely stopped to look out in passing, but had come to a halt at that spot and withdrawn into himself.

She put her foot on the next step and hesitated—but he did not look round. Obviously the slight noise of her entrance had fallen on deaf ears, or been held of no consequence, as were the other openings and shutting of doors in the distance,—and that being the case, there was no absolute need to intrude.

She stole back into the shadows beneath.

Finally by a circuitous route she reached her own room unseen.

"I say, Maud does look splendid, doesn't she?"

It was Val Purcell who voiced the general sentiment, and as he did so he turned from Leonore to whom he had addressed himself, to gaze down the table afresh at her resplendent sister.

Despite the contretemps of the hair, Maud was looking her best—suited by her dress, her ornaments, and the unusual animation which coloured her cheeks, and sparkled in her eyes. Hitherto her looks, though universally admitted, had failed to elicit warmth on the part of any present—since, truth to tell, she was not a favourite. She was too cold and too grand. She never forgot that she was a Boldero, and took care that no one else should. Even honest Val, as we know, did not choose to be booked too surely as her admirer.

But that point being now settled, and the party having been assembled in the lady's honour, he was free to add his mite.

"Splendid!" he repeated, settling down again with unction. "I always did say Maud was a ripper when she chose. I hope her johnnie appreciates his luck. Between you and me, Leo," sinking his voice for her private ear, "I wonder how he dared? I wonder how he ever got it out? Maud can be so awfully nasty—Oh, I say! I don't mean that, you know."

"Then you shouldn't say it," said Leo, shortly. Maud's star was high in the heavens, while her own—where was it? nowhere. She had no star; her little glowworm light was out, and all was

darkness—yet she was loyal, even with Val. "Every one is not such a craven as you, Val; and apparently Major Foster—" she paused.

"He appears to have tackled her right enough. I only wonder how he screwed himself up to the point? Bet you he had a good pint of champagne first."

"I daresay," said Leo, absently.

"Now don't you round on me for that, Leo. I know you when you speak like that. You mean to nab me the next minute."

"I shan't nab you this time. I know nothing about Major Foster's proclivities, and can't be answerable for them."

"He never drinks anything but water when he's out shooting, but he wasn't likely to face Maud upon water, was he?"

"I tell you I don't know. Ask him yourself."

"Ask him myself? That's a good one. Ask him myself? Ha—ha—ha. Well, whatever he took, it did the trick, and she looks as proud as a cat with a tin tail,—but between you and me, Leo——"

"Oh, don't have any more 'between you and me's,' Val——" But the next moment Leo demanded inconsequently: "What is it you want to say? Say it."

"He's an uncommonly nice fellow, and all that,—but——"

"But—well, but——?" impatiently.

"I should have thought he was more your sort than Maud's, that's all."

"My sort!" She was white to the lips, and there was a sudden heaving of her bosom. "My—my sort?"

"I'll tell you what I mean. We had a long day together yesterday—no, it was the day before. There wasn't much doing, the birds were shy and scattered, and I took Foster into our church, as he seemed to want to see it. I told him I generally went to yours for the sake of the walk, but—anyhow he seemed to hanker after going inside, and it is an awfully nice, rum, little old place, you know; lots of people come to see it. Oh, they come from long distances. Foster was delighted; I couldn't tear him away. He poked and poked about, and at last he said to me: 'This is the sort of thing I've dreamed about. An English village church, with its old worn pillars and arches——' and he raved on a bit. I said I liked it too; of course I did; I had known it all my life, and he said 'Ah?' and was quite interested. And then—I don't know how it was—it just seemed as if we were in the thick of it all of a sudden—he was talking about his ideas of marriage and that. You never heard anything so queer! But it was very nice, you know. I didn't mind it a bit, only I thought to myself, 'Do you jolly well imagine you are going to catch old Maud going in with those highflown ideas? Because if *you* do, *I* don't.'"

"What ideas?" said Leo, in a strangled voice. She had a choking sensation in her throat.

"Eh? Well——" he considered; "they weren't exactly what you would have expected from a fellow who's knocked about as Foster has. Sort of romantic, you know."

As she made no reply, he continued: "I expect he had to let them out to some one, and perhaps Maud—what do you think? Do you see Maud playing the pious and charitable?—but I daresay she will, you know. Woa there! I have it, I knew there was something," his tone quickened, "he called her, that's to say he didn't call *her*, but of course he meant her, he said he hoped his wife would be an 'Angel in the House,' or something of that kind. He said a lot more, but I can't remember it."

"You are remembering very well. Go on."

"So then I thought of you."

"Of me? Oh, no."

"But I did, Leo. I can't help it. Anyhow I did." After a minute he continued briskly. "Whatever made him think of Maud? She must have been jolly different to him from what she is to us. You know what I mean, Leo. If he thinks he is going to marry a saint——"

"Oh, Val, don't. You mustn't. You haven't said anything about this to other people?" said Leo, in great agitation, "you haven't, have you?"

"Rather not. Give you my word. I have been bursting with it ever since—and if my gran had known she'd have got it out of me sure as fate—but she doesn't care twopence about Foster, and is only glad it isn't you."

"Do leave me out of the question. I—I—why should you think of me at all?"

"Gran keeps me up to it. She goes on praising you. You see I never told her about *that*, Leo, and she still thinks—you know what," and he nodded significantly. "This marriage has set her going again."

After a pause it was: "You aren't making much of a dinner, Leo. You say 'no' to everything. What's

put you off your feed?"

"Too much afternoon-tea probably. No, it's not that," said Leo, correcting the fib. "I'm not hungry, that's all."

"This venison is awfully good. Where did it come from? You generally do have venison about this time, I know. I have eaten it here before in October."

"Have you?"

"Where does it come from?"—reiterated he.

"From an old cousin, Anthony Boldero. We have no one else who sends us venison."

"Respects to him. His venison is A1. Leo?"

"Well?" said Leo, in a hard, dry tone. She recognised what was coming.

"It isn't me, it isn't anything I've been saying that bothers you?"

But at the same moment Leo's neighbour on her other hand spoke to her.

She was partly glad and partly sorry for this—glad because it relieved her from embarrassment, but sorry because it might be difficult, and indeed it proved impossible, to lead the erratic Val back to the same point thereafter.

He had delivered himself of all he had to say on the matter, and he had a talkative damsel on the other side who having been already somewhat affronted by his neglect, was resolved to endure it no longer. The two were soon in full tide of conversation; and though Leo had her turn once and again when Miss Merivale was attacked by her other neighbour, she could not all in a brief moment resume a dialogue of such import as the above. She thought Val was approaching it once, however.

"That's a fine dog of his—of Foster's."

"Lion? Yes, a delightful dog."

"It's awfully funny to see your father with him. When he can't make anything of Foster—he makes no end of a fuss with Foster—but it doesn't always exactly come off—then he panders to the dog. And, you know, they take it exactly in the same way! Lion gives him a bored look, and shakes himself. I think—he—he! his master would like to do the same."

Leo could not but smile; she had noticed the bored look, and once or twice it was even a disgusted one—on Paul's face. She would willingly have caught at the opening, but a moment's hesitation proved fatal. Miss Merivale struck in again and the opportunity was lost.

On the assembling of the ladies after dinner, Lady Butts fell to Leo's share. There was a greater lady present, Lady St. Emerald, once before mentioned in these pages,—but this august personage, who had, as we know, kissed Leo on her marriage day, took no notice of Mrs. Stubbs on the present occasion. It was only at long intervals that she favoured Boldero Abbey with the light of her countenance, and being a connection of the Fosters, she had now come to see Maud and do the civil in view of the forthcoming alliance.

Accordingly her ladyship spread herself upon the principal sofa, with Sue on one side and Maud on the other,—while the lesser ladyship subsided upon Leo, and Sybil, in the distance, gathered round her the rest of the party, and chattered about wedding arrangements and bridesmaids' dresses.

Leo rather liked Lady Butts, who was uniformly amiable and safely unintelligent. She could be trusted not to say anything awkward. She never went below the surface of things; and she had not had Val Purcell's opportunities of seeing Paul Foster at close quarters. Her "Your sister's *fiancé* is charming. And how radiant she looks! How pleased you must all be about it!"—with a few other appropriate platitudes, dismissed the subject.

Then it was: "You saw my nephew in Town, he told me. Sir Thomas and I only went up for a few weeks, and had left before you and your sister arrived. You had a pleasant time, I hope?"

Leo thanked her, and had had a very pleasant time. She had seen Mr. Butts about, but only to speak to on one occasion.

He had not called?

No, he had not called.

"So rushed he hardly knows what he is doing;" the fond aunt concealed her disappointment, for her hopes had been renewed by the London visit, and she knew nothing of a certain affair which was being conducted independently of her leadership, (and we may add was brought to a successful issue in consequence). "George is simply done to death in the season. We saw next to nothing of him ourselves."

"You will soon *hear* something of him or I'm mistaken, however," mentally commented Leo—and the whole conversation which ensued left but one impression on her mind: How could she ever have chosen the long path whereby to conduct Mr. George Butts across the park?

As for poor Tommy Andrews, her feelings about Tommy had undergone a strange revulsion of late. Self-disgust had given way to such a sense of pity and sorrow as made her long to do something, anything, to heal his wound; and instead of wincing when she saw his figure in the distance, she cried out in her heart, "Oh, I am so sorry, so sorry,"—and could have wept for very tenderness of—fellow-feeling.

In the course of the evening Leo found Paul at her elbow; he had returned from seeing some departing guests to their carriage, and paused near the door where she was standing.

"It is a fine fresh night," he remarked, cheerfully.

"Has the moon come out?" said she. "It was raining a little while ago."

"The rain has stopped, and the moonlight is glorious. I saw you flitting about in the dusk this afternoon," continued Paul, smiling. "I was coming your way, but I turned off. I didn't feel sure that my company would be welcome. One likes to be alone sometimes."

"Yes. I—I do. I do like it;" emphatically.

"That's flat." This time he laughed outright, seeming so much amused by her brusquerie, that she perceived how it must have struck him.

No matter, it was as well he should be thus struck. He would know for the future.

"Your grounds are so extensive that you have a pretty wide range for your rambles," resumed Paul, in the same easy, friendly accents; "you can walk all the way to Claymount without touching the road, young Purcell tells me; and as for the paths, they seem to be legion; I should get lost if I attempted to wander about by myself."

"Don't wander then; I advise you not. You really might get lost."

"And then if I fell in with you I should be obliged to throw myself on your mercy, which would be a terrible catastrophe."

"Oh, I should soon get rid of you," she made an effort to retort in the same light tone; "I should say—" she paused, "I should say, 'Maud is there,' and you would fly."

"Is Maud then a woodland nymph also?"

Was it her own fancy or was there an almost imperceptible pause before he spoke? And did the gay tone of the minute before undergo ever so slight a modification? Leo made answer with rather forced jocularly.

"It would be my ruse for throwing you off, don't you see? I should not be positive absolutely that Maud was there, or anywhere—but you could look. You *might* find her—or you might not. But anyhow you would not find me if you came back."

"I am to give you a wide berth then, always?"

"Always."

CHAPTER XIV.

PAUL GOES—AND RETURNS.

"Is Paul going to stay here *all* the time?" abruptly demanded Leonore one day.

"That's what I want to know." Her father's voice made answer from the depths of an easy-chair; and it was a disconcerting answer, for he had been unobserved, indeed unseen. Had his head appeared above the back of the chair, Leo would have left the library as suddenly as she had entered it. She had thought Sue was alone.

"Of course if he wishes to stay, he can," proceeded the general, laying down his paper; "but it's a monstrous long time—that's to say, hum—ha—there are still three weeks till the twenty-fifth, and he has been here three weeks already."

"I am sure he is the best of guests," said Sue, gently.

"Oh, the best of guests, no doubt. Bothers nobody. Still——"

"Has anything been said?"—interposed Leo. She was drawing quick, impatient breaths, and had an air of giving battle, if not replied to as desired.

No, nothing had been said, but Sue believed——

"If you only *believe*, that's no good. Can't you tell him to go? Can't you say it isn't the thing for him to stay on and on?"——

"My dear Leo!"

"Highly-tighty!"— simultaneously ejaculated the general, "here's fierceness!" But he looked

amused. "If Paul were your sweetheart, young lady, you wouldn't be in such a hurry to have him sent to the right-about. However, there's something in it, Sue."

Sue looked distressed. "Remember what you said when he first came, father. How repeatedly you told him to make this his headquarters,—and there is another thing. The engagement took place so soon after he and Maud met, that they could not have known very much of each other. Hardly enough, perhaps. Don't you think it is as well——"

"What is there to know?" struck in Leo, vehemently. "If they are in love, as we presume they are——" she stopped short.

"Certainly," murmured Sue.

"Why, aye, that's all that's needed, no doubt," assented the general, with a bland expression. "Leo has hit the nail upon the head. Those two are in love with each other——"

"I said '*if*,'" said Leo, loudly.

"If—well 'if,' Madam Sceptic,—but I suppose you will allow they have taken the only means in their power of showing it? Well, what more do they want but to get married as fast as they can?"

"We could not have had the wedding sooner, father," said Sue.

"I suppose not; but another three weeks of Paul—though I'm not saying a word against Paul, mind you;—only, the truth is, I have to be so confoundedly careful before him, that it's—it's a strain."

He had indeed been milder and more amicable in every-day life of late, than any one could ever remember him before.

"I like the fellow;" he now mused aloud; "he treats me as I ought to be treated—not as that young ass Purcell does. Val licks my boots and hates me: but Paul has a nice, cheerful, respectful way——"

"Oh, he has all the virtues, no doubt,"—but Leo's mocking interpolation was overborne by her father's steady tones—"We talk, and he doesn't browbeat me. You may look at each other, but I know how a gentleman should behave among gentlemen. When people are polite to me, I am polite to them. And as I know that Paul has his foibles, religious foibles, I am on my guard; while as for him, he never thrusts them on my notice. There was that day that I saw him coming across the park before breakfast, and guessed where he had been—at the early service, of course,—well, all I said when we met in the hall was, 'You must have had a nice walk?' There's tact for you. From that day to this, neither of us has ever remarked upon it."

"It was such a sneaking, shocking thing to do," said Leo, ironically.

"Eh? What? 'Pon my soul, child, that was more like Maud than you. Sneaking? Shocking? It was the sort of thing a gentleman does *quietly*, that's all; and it would have been in the worst possible taste to have taken any notice of what was not meant to be known."

He resumed his paper, and his daughters left the room together.

"I am sorry, Leo, that you don't like Paul," said Sue, as the door closed. She had felt for some time that she must say it, and if possible fathom to what was due a sense of tension in the air. "It is strange," continued she, "for to me and to the rest of us he appears so very lovable. Have you—what is it you find—you feel—you dislike in him, dear?"

"I find—I feel—I dislike in him—nothing. He is nothing to me. Why should my opinion be of any consequence about him?"

"You speak in such a hard voice, Leo. And you look so hard and unsympathetic whenever Paul is mentioned. Can't you tell me—you might surely tell *me*——?"

"I wish *you* would tell *me* when he departs? One gets tired of people in the state Paul is in, that's all."

"Are you a little—envious, dear Leo? Such happiness——"

"Yes, that's it. Such happiness—Maud is welcome to it," cried Leo, with a laugh. "Very welcome, most welcome; but it's all the parade, the flutter—however, it will soon be over, thank Heaven!"—she subjoined under her breath.

No more was to be got out of her, and Sue, baffled and repelled, went her way.

She was conscious, however, of a sense of relief when the very same afternoon Paul's departure for a season was announced. He had arranged for this without consulting any one; but Maud was satisfied that business demanded his presence in London, and that there were also a few old friends to whom as a bachelor he wished to bid farewell.

It did not appear very clearly where these friends lived, and indeed an exacting *fiancée* might have found the brief announcement vague and unsatisfactory, but Maud's feelings were thus conveyed to her own people in private: "Paul has so much sense of what is proper and correct, that it really amounts to an intuition. I daresay he has an idea that when there is so much for me to attend to, it is better that I should be free to give myself up to it. Certainly it is a little

distracting to have to remember he is waiting for a walk or ride, when one's head is in a whirl with other things."

Once she had asked Leo to take the walk instead of her—she did not do it again. Leo, with blazing eyes, declined point-blank.

"Take your man off your hands? Not I. If you're tired of him——"

"Good gracious, child, what do you mean? What things you do say? I *am* tired, as it happens—but not of Paul. I have been standing for hours trying on dresses, and I am not such a walker as you at any time. You are forever going out. One would have thought you would be glad of a companion."

"I might be glad of a companion—but not of Paul," retorted Leo, mimicking. "He is your Paul, not mine, and I—and we——" her lips trembled and framed no more.

"You might oblige me, I think,"—but Sue touched the speaker's arm, and Leo vanished.

"What is it?" demanded Maud, irritably. "That child is quite spoilt of late. It's since her London visit, I think. She never was like that before."

"Sometimes I think, I fancy she is not quite well." Sue gathered up some papers on the table, and proceeded. "You know what Dr. Craig said? That she was in a morbid state, artificially excited or depressed, her mind preying upon itself. He said she must be taken where her natural impulses would have freer vent——"

"Well, well; we all know what he said; you told us at the time."

"I thought she was cured, but it seems not," said Sue, in a low voice. "And your engagement has somehow——"

"If it's *that*, of course—but do you think it really is that?" said Maud, not without a touch of complacency. "If it is that, of course I am sorry. But at first she seemed as pleased as anybody. It was only after she saw Paul—and one would have thought that Paul—I can't understand why any one should dislike Paul."

Sue was silent.

"Paul has not offended her, has he? Has she ever said so?"

"Never. Oh, never. One can't fancy Paul offending anybody," said Sue, with a smile.

"I told him all about Leo before he came here—but he made me repeat it after he had seen her, and I know—I am sure he felt for her. Well, I shan't ask Leo to walk with him again, that's certain;"—and only half appeased she went to make ready herself.

Leo, however, had not always escaped a *tête-à-tête* with the person she was thus bent on avoiding. She had seen him one evening in the lower garden, and hoping she was herself unseen, had escaped into the vineries, which, however, had afforded but a poor shelter, the branches being nearly bare of leaf. Paul had seen some one within as he passed the window, and entered also.

It was not till he had done so, and shut the door after him, that he discovered whose solitude it was he had invaded, and then it was too late to retreat. He could only offer his assistance in what she was doing—gathering the crimson vine leaves which fluttered here and there—and with his stick hook down those out of reach. Then all of a sudden a heavy autumn shower rattled upon the glass roof overhead, and there was nothing for it, for the two thus caught and trapped, but to wait till it was over.

They sat down on the low staging, and at first they hardly spoke.

But presently Leo grew frightened; the long, intimate silences startled her. Suppose Paul—? No, of course not that,—but he might think her odd and rude, and even seek some sort of explanation? She started talking hurriedly, and it was nearly an hour before the sky cleared.

Thereafter Leo knew what she had to expect should she and Paul be thrown together. She had gradually felt her defences giving way, her voice had grown low and sweet, and much that was hidden in the depths of her inner being, had welled up and overflowed into his listening ear. All along she had known this would happen once the barriers were down between her and Paul Foster; even when she sought to belittle him to herself at the outset, she had a terrible underlying consciousness of it,—and looking back upon the hour, feeling over again the fragrant warmth of the atmosphere, hearing the splashing of the rain, and smelling the bitter scent of the vines, she laid her head upon her arms and cried as if her heart would break.

But we know how Maud's request was met, and how one person at Boldero Abbey would fain with her own voice have bidden Maud's lover begone from it for ever.

Other voices, real voices, however, with one accord bewailed his departure when it came.

Even the general, secretly relieved, was punctiliously regretful on the surface.

"We shall soon see our gentleman back again," he observed in his best manner, "and I hope we shall often have nice long visits from you both in time to come, my dear;" addressing his bereaved daughter in accents of gracious consolation. "For myself I can never see Paul too often. But, hum—ha, no doubt at present he has done the right thing in attending to business before pleasure. Has he got any more houses in view?"

This was a subject on which he would always dilate, and it was discussed at all points as the meal proceeded. The general was unusually cheerful, as all remembered afterwards, and it was not till dessert was on the table that his spirits suddenly flagged. No, he did not want any wine; he was pettish when it was remarked that his glass was empty. Were they going to sit on forever? Well, then, why did no one rise? He would lead the way himself.

"I don't care to stay behind when I have no one to talk to," he pushed back his chair, but not far enough. "Give me an arm, one of you. Steady there—you needn't haul me along. Stop, I tell you." It was Leo's arm he held—she was the nearest to him—and he leaned upon it heavily.

He also breathed heavily. When she tried to draw him forward he tottered. His daughters looked at one another.

"Let me get you something, father?" said Sue, moving towards the sideboard;—"a little brandy?"—and with a tremulous hand she poured it out, and held it to his lips.

At the same time she gently withdrew Leo's arm, substituting her own, and Leo made no resistance. Their father looked them dazed—but the brandy momentarily revived him.

"I—suppose I go to bed, eh? I'm tired—that's what's the matter with me. Isn't that what's the matter with me, Sue? I'm tired—tired,"—his head sank upon his breast. "Tired—tired!" he muttered.

"Do not lose a moment, Maud;" said Sue, aside.

"Let me go;" said Leo, darting forward.

She was nimbler of foot than Maud—but Maud went also.

"Hey, what? Where are they all off to?" With an effort General Boldero straightened himself and made a pitiful effort to compose a face already distorted. "Where—are they going?"—the next minute he fell in a heap upon the floor.

And by the time Dr. Craig, imperatively summoned, dashed through the doorway which stood open awaiting him, all need of his presence was at an end.

"It could not have been averted, my dear Miss Sue;" in moments such as this the doctor invariably said "Miss Sue". "I have had my eye on your—your poor father for a while back. I kind of opined he was breaking. But it must have been a terrible shock for you all;"—and he shook a sympathetic head to and fro.

"Oh, Dr. Craig!"

"Aye, aye!" He patted her shoulder. "Aye, aye!"

"We were so unprepared."

"Prepared or unprepared, my dear lady, it's all the same when it comes. And it was a peaceful end—not a long, tormenting illness. Now then, who have you got to come and look after you all?"

The practical accents smote almost brutally upon her ear, and she lifted her tear-stained face to his in helpless appeal.

"You must have someone, some man, to look after things. You can't wrestle with them alone. There's that cousin of yours, the—" it was on the tip of his tongue to say, "tha heir"; for he was acquainted with all the Boldero family circumstances—but he caught himself up in time. He recalled that he had never seen the heir at the Abbey.

"Not for worlds, if you mean our cousin Anthony," said Sue, with a decision that confirmed his prudence. "He has never—we have never been on any but the most formal terms with him." (An exchange of venison and pheasants once a year had indeed been their limit, and the doctor guessed as much.)

"But he will have to come, my dear lady; and for the sake of appearances——"

"Not yet. Oh, not yet."

("Aye, it will be a bitter pill to you, poor thing, and to all of you, to have to bundle out neck and crop," inwardly cogitated the doctor)—and as he hesitated what further counsel to offer, she made her own suggestion.

"Paul would come to us, I know. He only left this morning. Oh, how little we thought when he left—but Maud knows where he is."

"Let him be sent for, then. The telegraph-office will be shut, but I daresay I could get them to open it if I went myself. Is Major Foster in London? If he is in the country, we shall have to wait till morning, I doubt."

Maud however testified that Paul was in London, and the telegram was sent.

And next day ensued a scene familiar, alas! to many. Scared looks, noiseless footsteps, muffled whispers—strangeness, dreariness, everywhere. And there were questions that could not be asked, and anxious thoughts that must not appear,—and with the future knocking at the door, the present must be all-in-all.

The present, however, with its multifarious demands, brought the relief of occupation to every member of the family except Leonore.

She was indeed willing, more than willing to do her part; but the elder three had been so long habituated to thinking of her as a childish, inconsequent creature, not yet out of leading strings, that each severally rejected her overtures, and she could only wander aimlessly from room to room, and gaze from the windows—from one window in particular.

"You will catch cold, Leo, if you stand in that draught," said Maud, passing along the corridor, where a chill current of air made itself felt. "Go into the library, child; a good fire is wasting itself upon nobody there."

But Leo did not go into the library. The library was snug and comfortable—the most comfortable room in the house,—but it commanded no view. The high trees of the shrubbery shut out the park beyond; and the short, straight road to the village, the road by which every one was coming and going now, was also entirely hidden.

When Maud reappeared, the watcher was still at her post,—but as she was in the act of putting down the open window—(perhaps she had heard an approaching step?)—remonstrance was not renewed. Instead, Maud came and looked herself.

"It is very strange of Paul;" she mused aloud.

No word from Paul had yet come, and now we can guess why Leo stood where she did.

"He mayn't have got the telegram;" she adventured.

"It would have been returned if he had not. Besides, Dr. Craig said it would be delivered last night, and Paul was not likely to be out at night."

Still the hours passed, and no answer came.

Nor did any come the next day, and the next.

"You are sure about the address, I suppose?" queried Sue, at last. She had not liked to make the suggestion before, since Maud, correct to a degree, was apt to resent any suspicion of carelessness or inaccuracy,—but the outlook was growing serious. A fresh telegram had been despatched, and Paul had also been written to,—it was inexplicable that he should remain silent, unless a mistake had been made somewhere.

"I am quite sure;" replied Maud briefly, and no more was said.

It was the evening of the third day, and darkness was falling outside. Leo, who had been waiting for this, had stolen outside, permitted, even urged thereto, by Sue, touched and consoled by what she took for a reflex of her own grief upon her young sister's face—and she had got some way from the house, when, in the deepening shadows beyond, she saw Paul coming.

Her first impulse was as usual to fly, but a second brought her swiftly to his side. She must see, must hear, must know at once—a maddening curiosity prevailed over every other feeling.

And it was immediately, if superficially met. He was eager to explain—while looking back on it she could not see that he had explained anything. He had received no communication, he had heard no tidings till the same day at noon, and had started by the first train, which he had barely had time to catch.

So far all was clear, but the how or the why was left untouched,—and he was hurriedly asking *her* to speak, begging for information, ejaculating expressions of sympathy, and reiterating regrets all the way back to the house, as if he found it impossible to take in all the sad details, for she was asked the same questions over and over again.

It was not till Leo was alone that she had a moment wherein to ask herself—Was she glad—was she sorry—was she relieved or bitterly disappointed that there was no trace of that mystery secretly conjured up during the past dreadful days? She had pondered, and fancied—oh, how cruel she had been, forever dwelling on the possibility that she might never need to see Paul Foster again;—yet now the joy of it—the pain of it—the bliss of it—the misery of it,—every throb of her veins was at once ecstasy and torture.

Paul was here—to be avoided; he must be met—and shunned; his voice would soothe—and stab; his touch would heal—and burn.

How had she ever borne the blank without him? The dreary vacuum which nothing could fill? The hopelessness, the emptiness of it all?

He was here, but looking ill—thinner than before—with a drawn, haggard countenance, and restless eyes. She could not but say to herself that even a kind heart, suffering for the sufferings of others, hardly accounted for such manifestations of grief. It was not to be supposed that

General Boldero had during a few weeks' acquaintance so endeared himself to his future son-in-law that his death, however sudden and unexpected, was more than a shock. Leonore was tolerably sure that if her father had not been also Maud's father, he would not even have been acceptable to Paul as a friend. He could not be; the two were dissimilar throughout,—even Valentine Purcell, less intelligent than other people, had discovered as much.

Yet in four days—for it was but four days since the departing traveller had been gaily ushered forth from the doorstep on which he now stood, he had changed so visibly that—Where had he been during those four days? she found herself asking of herself anew.

CHAPTER XV.

"YOU'VE BROKEN MY HEART, I THINK."

The funeral was over, and it was now decent to talk about the marriage. When and where could the marriage take place?

Boldero Abbey, with all the landed estate, was virtually in other hands already, and it did not need the opening of the will to announce to the bereaved family that with the loss of a father there followed that of a home.

All their lives they had known that this must be so, but the subject was so grievous that it was hardly ever alluded to, and in a manner was lost sight of.

For his years General Boldero was a young man; he was hale, hearty, and selfish. He took good care of his health, and prognosticated for himself a green old age—anyhow *his* tenure of the good things of life was secure; and though unable to alter the law of entail, which permitted no female heirs in the Boldero line of descent, he foresaw in his mind's eye all his daughters married and settled, with the exception of Sue, who had her mother's fortune, and was of course to stick to him to the last.

Consequently the provision he had made for the rest was slight, and there was no doubt that the sooner they now quitted the stately mansion and broke up its large establishment, the better.

But the wedding, Maud's wedding, that was to have been so gay and splendid, what was to be done about that? The invitations were already out, and everything in such readiness that even Sue inwardly sighed. If only it could have been all happily over!

It was terrible to her that an event so momentous should take place anywhere but in the halls of her forefathers—or to speak more strictly, in the village church where Eustace Custance officiated. To him had been confided the great satisfaction afforded by the match; and when consenting to tie the knot, he had spoken warmly of Paul Foster. Paul had often sought him out, and had—but he must not say more. The general, overhearing, had warranted Paul "mulcted".

To other sources of distress, therefore, it was added in the breast of poor Sue that Maud must seek her nuptial benediction elsewhere,—since Mr. Anthony Boldero, through his lawyer, had intimated that he would be glad to have matters arranged as soon as might be.

To each sister privately Sue had addressed herself on the point of remaining in the neighbourhood, and each had protested against the idea. No one of them could endure it.

But they had still a month's grace, and if Maud would consent to be married very, very privately, with absolutely no one present but their five selves—"Ridiculous! what are you thinking of?" cried Maud, angrily.

Her sluggish nature was roused to positive wrath by such an insulting proposition, but reading reproach in the colour which mounted to her sister's cheek, she made haste to subjoin:—

"Don't you see how very undignified it would appear to be in such a frantic hurry to secure a husband? It would almost seem as if I were afraid of losing Paul! Of course I shall wait till things can be done properly. I would not show any disrespect—I wonder that you should suggest it, Sue."

But the speaker was not perhaps as truthful as she might have been. In communing with herself, she had decided that the next best thing to being married in state from Boldero Abbey, would be a wedding in a fashionable London church. She had been a bridesmaid once at such, and to it her thoughts now reverted favourably. There need be but a short delay, and she was willing to wait. To wait would be infinitely preferable to a hole-and-corner business, with no prestige, no spectators, no one even to see her bridal array and Paul's necklace. Sue had even hinted at her not wearing the dress: "You could just go down in your travelling things, and no one need know anything about it till it was over".

"I should not degrade myself by doing anything of the kind;" said Maud, throwing up her head.

No, she would not consult Paul, Paul would of course let her decide for him,—and she did beg that no one would interfere with what after all was *her* affair.

Presently it was, "Paul will stay on here with us at present. He has no real claims upon him elsewhere, for as we are not to be married just yet, he can postpone making his arrangements. Perhaps we shall now be able to get a house first."

To this end she ordered down agents' lists, and illustrated magazines; also Leo came upon her in odd places posing meditatively before various articles of furniture with a paper and pencil in her hand. Leo guessed what she was doing.

She took no notice; but she wondered if any one could help noticing that, whereas Paul when he first appeared on the scene had been eager and animated over the home he hoped to form, and the life he meant to lead, he was listless and indifferent now. He assented to everything, initiated nothing. Sometimes he barely glanced at the attractive domain whose allurements were so cunningly set forth—sometimes he hung over the page so long that Leo could not help suspecting it was but a screen to hide his face.

He had lost altogether his pleasant habit of following each speaker with his eyes as the talk went round. The eyes would be glued to the floor, or fixed vacantly on some object. He would start when called to order for inattention, and thereafter be abjectly attentive.

But whatever Maud said was right, and her wishes were law. She could not make a suggestion which he was not ready to carry out; when she withdrew from it herself he as readily withdrew. To Leo, watching from the background, there was something unnatural, incomprehensible about it all—something which baffled her closest scrutiny—and yet at times made her feel as though the scrutiny itself were but foolishness, emanating from her own disordered imagination.

She would think so for a whole day, and school herself to believe that it was a happy day—and then something, some trifle, would occur which made her heart leap and her hands tremble, and she found herself talking for dear life in a meaningless jumble of words.

She would not, must not, dared not hope that Paul repented of his choice, unless it might be that repentance were mutual, in which case?

But after a night of fitful sleep and miserable awakenings, Leo would come down heavy-eyed and feverish, to find a prosaic, business-like dialogue being carried on by the very individuals who had figured so differently in the phantasms of the small hours, and her entrance would hardly be noticed by either, so engrossed were they by each other.

Once indeed she wondered whether Paul were not a trifle too ostentatiously engrossed? Whether it were the case that he really did not see her slip into the vacant chair, the only vacant chair at the table? His head was steadily turned the other way, but her sisters addressed her and still he perceived, or affected to perceive, no addition to the party. Was he, could he be afraid of her penetration? Did he suspect that it went further than was convenient?

Maud was unusually animated that morning. "It really fits in wonderfully, this plan of Aunt Charlotte's; and I must say I little expected her to be the one to come to the rescue."

"What is the plan?" inquired Leo aside of Sybil.

"Aunt Charlotte offers us her house for the winter." Sybil also looked excited and jubilant. "She is going abroad, and says she will leave us everything as it stands."

"But a house in Eaton Place, and it is one of the larger houses too," demurred Sue, "would it not be rather expensive—?"

"Not in the least, seeing that we are to have Aunt Charlotte's servants. It is really *most* kind," averred Maud, with the warmest approval; "I should not think of refusing, not for a moment. And St. Peter's close by—" with a meaning smile to Paul—"what could be better?"

"Hi, Lion, Lion?" said he, looking under the table.

"You will close with the offer at once, Sue?" proceeded Maud, too much elated and gratified to observe the lack of response; "don't lose a post, in case the good lady changes her mind. How soon can we go, do you think?"

But even the gentle Sue kindled a little beneath a note which jarred on all, and she looked a mute reproach.

"Well? How soon?" impatiently reiterated her sister.

How soon? To leave for evermore the old familiar scenes, the peaceful glades—every spot hallowed by memories and associations? To take a last farewell of the only life she had ever known, to fling it aside like a worn-out garment? Was it possible that any one, even with a bright new existence opening before her, could be so eager to turn the page that all she could say or think of was "How soon?"

It wounded Sue to her heart's core to hear the peremptory tone and meet the unabashed gaze. She could not speak,—and the next minute she felt an arm steal round her waist, and a cheek was laid on hers. It was only Leo, but Sue never said "only Leo" from that moment. She took the little hand and fondled it; she used it to wipe her own tears away.

"Hi, Lion, Lion?" said Paul, looking under the table again.

"Is it settled? Is it decided?" Later on in the day Leo, finding Sybil by herself, returned to the mooted point.

"About London? Why, of course. When our sovereign lady gives the word of command, don't you know there is nothing for it but to obey? Sue wrote by the first post."

"And when are we to go? When?"

"You are as keen as Maud, I declare. Well, *I* am rather sorry to leave the old place——"

"When? I only ask, when?"—cried Leo shrilly.

"Do you really not care at all, Leo? I thought at breakfast you and Sue——"

"What's the use of caring? Will caring alter things? If it would——" but Leo caught her breath, and her hands gripped each other; "I think you might answer a plain question without rambling on about other things;" she subjoined as steadily as she could. "Is the time of our departure fixed?"

"For this day week, if we can be ready in time. Sue says we can't, but Maud says we can. Ten to one on Maud."

"This day week!"

"After all, there's nothing more to be done here;" Sybil recovered herself, for in reality she was like Maud, bitten with the idea of change; "and it's doleful enough, Heaven knows. Day after day the same howling wind and rain, and nothing to talk about but Maud's houses. Maud doesn't care two straws what becomes of the rest of us, as long as she gets a fine place for herself. She won't even listen if a word's said about our affairs. Paul is too good for her, I think,"—abruptly.

Leo, who had begun to turn away, stopped short, startled.

"Oh, you don't care for him, I know," ran on Sybil at random; "but you are the only one of us who doesn't. I often think," she lowered her voice to caution, "I tell you what, Leo, if Paul had not fluked upon Maud as he did, and the other Fosters had not puffed her up and prodded him on, he never would have thought of her. She's not his style at all, with her grandiose notions, and fondness of big people, and all that. Just what Paul hates. Did you not see him wince when she made that remark about Lady St. Emerald? Maud is awfully obtuse," continued Sybil, glad of a listener; "she never saw. But you know, Leo, even father used to laugh at her love of swagger—though she got it from him."

"You never said this before;" muttered Leo, surprised. She had no inclination to go away now.

"Because Maud and I—of course we have held by each other always, and I should have gone on holding, if she had. But I am nothing to her now;" said poor Sybil bitterly. She had a weak, shallow nature, but it was capable of affection—and Maud's selfish withdrawal of affection, her complete indifference to all that did not concern her own individual interests at a time when in the natural course of things the sisters would have been drawn together by an especially close tie, was felt as keenly as Sybil could feel anything.

"And you think Paul——?" hesitated Leo.

"It's Paul's own look out. He may make her mend her ways. She thinks a lot of him, of course."

"Does she—is she—is she in love with him, Syb?"

"In love with him? I suppose so—after a fashion. She's in love with being married, and having a country house of her own, and a husband to domineer over. And if he should come in for a title——"

"But that is not *Paul*;" said Leo, in a low voice. She had herself well in hand, but deep down there were strange emotions at work, stirred by the above. "Do you mean—I wish you would say what you really mean?—I—I sometimes wonder myself——," she stopped.

"Oh, you mustn't take all this too seriously, Leo. Don't look at me as if we were a couple of conspirators. It's no use being cross with Maud because she is what she is. She hasn't fine feelings—no one ever thought she had. But Paul has found that out by this time, I dare say; and when his chance comes he can inoculate her with his. At the worst, he has enough for both;"—and having thus summed up the situation and relieved her feelings at the same time, Sybil turned to other matters.

"Yet even *she* sees," cried Leo, inwardly, "she sees something, though she does not know, does not guess what it is. And I who do, oh, how shall I bear it,—how shall I bear it? And this is only the beginning—they haven't yet actually begun the real thing,—they are only looking at it, and he——?" She heard Sue's voice calling her, and thrust aside the "he".

Sue wanted a parcel taken to the cottage of an under-gardener, who was ill; and thought that both Henry and his wife would appreciate the attention more if conveyed by one of themselves, than by a servant. Would Leo go?

"And ask if Dr. Craig has been, and what he says?" further directed Miss Boldero with a little

sigh. She was thinking that perhaps this was the last she would ever have to do with either doctor or patient, and Sue had loved much the gentle routine of her daily life, with its easy benefactions and ministrations,—and now all her world, all the world of which she knew anything, lay in ruins around her.

"I'll go," said Leo, taking the parcel.

She was ready to go anywhere, and Henry's cottage was only a short way off, one of a cluster at the edge of the lower garden,—so that even if the rain which threatened did come on, she could find shelter—and on this occasion safe shelter. Paul had gone for a ride, and his rides were long; Maud explained that the exercise was good for him.

But though thus secure, there was another danger to which no thought had been given, and Leo, whose path at this time seemed beset with pitfalls, on emerging from one cottage room, found herself face to face with a visitor issuing from the other. Dr. Craig had not been able to come himself, but had sent his assistant.

The doctor had paused to rub his chin before doing so, but the summons which stayed his own steps was imperative, and it was a hundred chances to one against Tommy's meeting anybody. The Boldero ladies had been very little about of late, and one of them had already visited the sick man that day. He took the risk.

But he would not have taken it if he had guessed how great the risk was; nor perhaps would young Andrews have gone, had he fore-seen the effect upon himself of that beautiful, mournful, childish face, whose expression?—A cry escaped him. A mad interpretation of it possessed him. His promise? He threw his promise to the winds. No man could keep a promise when confronted with—even to himself he did not say with what,—but before Leonore could escape, or prevent it, the pent-up torrent was loosed.

At first she was petrified,—then flared up. What was the meaning of this? What was she to think? Was Mr. Andrews beside himself? Did he know what he was saying?

Still he poured forth, deaf and blind. Oh, how he had longed for this moment!—the thought of it, the hope of it, had kept him alive through all the wretched, wretched months of separation,—and she, how had she endured—?

"I can endure no more," cried Leonore, with almost a scream. "Be quiet—be quiet—they will hear you,—don't you know that they will hear you?"

"What if they do?" He was past that. "You are here. We are together. That is enough." He seized her hand, but she fought and struggled, and eventually wrenched herself free. "You—you *dare*?" she panted.

"Oh, I dare—now. I dare anything now."

"You dare to forget who you are? And who I am?"

"Yes, even that. It is nothing when we love each other"—and again he laid hold of her.

"Let me go—let me go."

"But—?"

"If you have not altogether lost your senses, Mr. Andrews, you will leave me this moment—this moment;" she stamped her foot,—and never, never cross my path again."

"But, Leonore—?"

"Leonore? Oh, this is too insulting—" a burst of tears. "What have I done to be thus degraded?—" and she shook the hand torn from his grasp as though it had been poisoned.

"What have you done? You do not understand—"

"I understand enough—too much." With an effort she changed her tone to one of infinite disdain. "You are under some strange hallucination, Mr. Andrews, which alone can account for this extraordinary, intolerable behaviour. If my father had been alive—but I am still his daughter, and you, what are *you*?"

The words in themselves might still have failed to arrest him, but the look, the gesture, the withering emphasis on the "*you*?"—he stood still, and after a moment, staggered a step across the pathway like a drunken man.

"If you confess it was all a delusion," resumed Leonore, in slightly modified accents, for she was now only eager to put an end to the scene, and a twinge of pity made itself felt, "if you allow that you have utterly misinterpreted a little ordinary civility—well, perhaps it was more than civility, call it kindness if you will—I will try to forget,—but you also must forget, and never breath a word of this again."

"But—but—" he faltered. Then staggered afresh, unrestrainedly, it might almost have been thought ostentatiously. It was not a pretty spectacle.

"For Heaven's sake, pull yourself together," cried Leonore, with a sense of repulsion. "Be ashamed of this. Own that you are ashamed of it. Own that I never gave you cause to think—that

you have been dreaming——"

"Hush. I am awake now," said the young man, slowly. And he turned his burning eyes upon her till she shrank, but this time neither from fear nor loathing; it was a new sensation which made itself disagreeably felt. Was she indeed as innocent as she said? Was there not a faint horrible suspicion of bluster in her fury of contempt and repudiation? She was silent, struggling with herself.

"You have broken my heart, I think," said Tommy, in the same slow, dull tone. "You have done what I was told you would do. You have played with me, as others of your kind have played with others of mine. God forgive you for your cruelty, but I—I am awake now,——" and again he muttered to himself like a man in a dream.

"Mr. Andrews, can you say?—stop, I suppose you can. Wait a moment; let me speak. I was lonely, unhappy, absorbed in myself and the empty weariness of my life when—when I met you. I read in your face that you—well, say it was my fault, say it was," suddenly impetuous—"at most it was but a passing folly, and it was over almost before it had begun. If it is any satisfaction to you now, I will say that I am—sorry. I can do no more."

"No, you can do no more. It is much for a great lady to go so far. It is the usual thing, I suppose;—" and again his mentor's words, "She was sorry, *so* sorry," echoed in the speaker's ears—"and the—the episode is at an end. Again I say God forgive you, Mrs. Stubbs, for I never can."

He was gone, and she rushed homewards, stumbling over every pebble in her path.

CHAPTER XVI.

TEMPTATION.

"Is anything the matter with Leo?" said Maud, the next day. "She is in such an odd mood; and she has scarcely left her room since morning."

"She feels the going away, I think," replied Sybil, not ill-pleased to say it, for she was smarting beneath a fresh instance of her other sister's callousness. "We had a talk yesterday, and I saw she was taking it dreadfully to heart."

"Rather absurd of Leo. She was ready enough to go once; and she can't be as much attached to the place as we are, who have never been away from it;" and Maud looked aggrieved, as people do when others are accredited with finer feelings than they themselves can boast of. "Paul is low to-day, too, but I believe it is lumbago. I only hope it is, and not another attack of fever coming on."

"That would be very inconvenient, certainly," rejoined Sybil, gravely. It struck her that there was not much sympathy for the sufferer in either case. "What makes you think it is lumbago?"

"He has been sitting over the fire for hours, doing nothing. When I asked him to come and look at these plans, he said another time would do. And you know how he is always ready to look at plans, or do anything I wish."

"He didn't say he was unwell?"

"No, I only supposed so."

She passed on, and at the same moment Leonore appeared.

"There you are!" cried Sybil gaily. "Come along, and be sociable. You have been a most unsociable little creature all day. Now then, aren't you coming?"

But Leo was not coming. Obviously she was disconcerted at sight of her sister, and shook her head as though vexed at being accosted.

"Nonsense! Don't go hiding yourself again," resumed Sybil. "What's the use of moping? And it doesn't make it any pleasanter for the rest of us that Paul is in the dumps in one room, and you in another. We are none too cheerful without that."

"Where is Paul?"

"In the library. Over the fire. So Maud says, and declares he has lumbago. I don't believe it. He simply doesn't want to be bothered with her and her eternal 'plans'."

"You are sure he is there?"

"Go and look for yourself if you doubt Maud's word. Why? Do you want him?"

But Leo threw her a strange look, a look of such bitter, ironical meaning, that she appended hastily; "You are not such a little fool as to be worrying yourself over those two and their affairs? Maud won't thank you if you do. She is rather put out as it is, because I hinted that you took to heart our going more than she did. I didn't *say* so, you know—but I should, if she had gone on much longer. However, she went off to Paul."

"And Paul is safe, in there?"

"Paul is safe—in there. Let sleeping dogs lie. Well? Oh, Leo, you really are too bad,—" for Leo had turned at the words, and was remounting the staircase.

"One can't say a word to her that she doesn't vanish on the instant," muttered Sybil; "how I do dislike that way she has got into! And when Maud goes, of course I shall have to take up with Leo. Hullo! Sue?"

"I was looking for Leo," said Sue.

"Did you look in the only place you were likely to find her? She has hardly been out of her room all day."

"Has she not been out-of-doors at all? Poor child!"

"I tried to get her to come for a walk this morning, but she wouldn't."

"She seems——" said Sue, and stopped short.

"Yes, we all know what she seems, and is: in an uncommonly bad temper, for some reason or other. There is nothing for it but to let her alone."

"I am rather anxious about her somehow, Syb."

"And now we shall have you in the blues too! For sheer pity bear up, and don't let me be the only one—and I suppose I have feelings too. It really is disgusting, every one giving way but me."

"I think I *must* go and see what Leo is doing?"

"I think you *must* do nothing of the kind. You will make nothing of her. I've tried. She was here just now."

"And did you not notice anything? It is not only her face; but her voice, her manner——"

"I told her she looked woebegone, and that it was no good. She frets about things that are no business of hers, if you must know," owned Sybil, reluctantly. "She has taken it into her head that Maud—that she and Paul aren't suited to each other, and has let the idea run away with her. I suppose I was stupid myself, not to put a veto upon it flat,—but the truth is I do think they are an ill-assorted couple, and can't make out how they ever came to take to each other."

"I once thought it was something else on Leo's part," said Sue, in rather a low voice. "If it is only that, I think, I hope, we are all mistaken."

"We?" cried Sybil, struck by the word.

"Because I think as you do," said Sue, quietly.

The short light of a November day was beginning to fade when Leonore, after a minute's cautious listening and watching from above, stole downstairs equipped to go out, and safely reached the garden-door without encountering any one. She was in the act of unlocking it, when Paul appeared.

"You are going out?" said he, mechanically.

"No, I am not," said she—and passed out before his eyes.

For a few minutes she ran aimlessly hither and thither, crossing and recrossing her steps, while from time to time casting furtive glances at the windows of the house, as though to see if she were being watched or not—but satisfied apparently upon this point, she made a sudden dart for the woods beyond, and was almost immediately lost to view.

Yet here again she hesitated, for the paths were numerous.

There was the one she had first trodden on her return to the Abbey three years before. She recalled the beauty, the wild freshness of that twilight hour. It had so exhilarated her that while desirous of walking soberly as befitted the occasion, she had longed to run! Her first very real but transient sorrow had worn off, and there was no one to see her—yet something restrained her. It was not kind to Godfrey's memory; he had been so good to her, so uniformly affectionate and indulgent towards her, that she would not seem to slight him even in solitude. As for the dancing blood in her veins, she told herself it was purely physical. She was so well and strong that she could not help feeling just a little happy.

And though she had often traversed the same narrow little winding path since, she had never perhaps felt quite the same again.

On the other hand, there lay the short cut to Claymount—that was Val's way. She would not take Val's way, although of late Val had ceased to frequent it. He had no object in doing so, since Leonore was never to be met with now.

Once or twice he had adverted to this, but she had replied evasively. Val did not interest her, did

not amuse her any longer. He grew tiresome since he had taken to making remarks upon her altered appearance, and putting direct, awkward questions.

Things might have been worse, of course; but on the whole she would even have preferred an open rupture and well-founded resentment, to this persistent determination to know how things were with her,—and others?

Val had no liking for Paul Foster now, though at first he had professed such. He had no reason to give, and an obstinate look would come over his face if pressed. Once he had murmured something of which Leo only caught the words, "jolly deceitful,"—and the next minute he denied having spoken them.

To herself Leo owned that she had not behaved well to poor Val, having made use of him for selfish ends; but the experiment had harmed neither, and no remorse need be wasted upon it.

With George Butts it was the same; he was fair game, having come in search of her supposititious fortune, without even the excuse of an honest, jog-trot fidelity such as Val's. She had been scolded on George's account, but had not scolded herself, and had archly and triumphantly pointed out the recusant to Sue in a sly corner of a London balcony.

But young Andrews? Ah, *that* stung. The home truths forced from those quivering lips, the agony of those imploring eyes—she quailed before them. They pierced her already shame-embittered soul, they were her dying wounds. For she had made another suffer what she herself was suffering, and had done it wantonly. There was no excuse for her,—none. There should be no pity, no sorrow—if it were possible, no knowledge when—when all was over.

She crashed into the undergrowth.

But she could not go far; the mould was too soft, and the rotting leaves too thick and plentiful. She was forced to retrace her steps.

There was the dry track of a streamlet, along which a faint trickle oozed to the surface here and there. She tried it, but the sharp stones hurt her feet, and again she sprang into the path.

Then the sprawling arms of a bramble caught and ripped a bad tear in her skirt. Her new, black skirt—and just where a darn would show! How tiresome—how vexatious! And Bessie could not darn decently. She frowned and examined, condemning already Bessie's incapable hand, and slipshod work.

Till—remembrance came, and the torn edge flapped unheeded.

From below, where a frequented road came near at the point, there broke upon her ear sounds and voices,—children returning late from school, lingering and playing by the way—laughing and singing over their game. She crouched till they were past—then hurried forward.

At length she came to an opening in the woods; a spot whose view of the surrounding country often attracted her thither—and from habit she paused and gazed.

It was such an afternoon as she loved; a red sky, a misty landscape, the near trees still ablaze with autumn tints. In the distance a flying train threaded its way whistling; the white steam appearing and disappearing behind wooded heights and promontories.

How often had she stood thus; how familiar was the scene!—but she could not linger now.

There was something she was searching for which she did not find. She had only seen it once, and then by chance,—in the present confused whirl of her brain she could not remember landmarks, nor identify localities.

But it was there, somewhere,—and she must look, look till she found it.

A branch snapped behind, and she spun round, terrified. Who—what was that?

The woods were almost silent, birds had ceased to sing, and rabbits were in their holes. After a minute's breathless suspense, she crept on a pace or two, and listened again,—but there was not a rustle, not a sound. She fled onwards.

A pile of logs and a rough saw-pit,—yes, yes,—she knew the saw-pit, she had passed the saw-pit that other day, and Val and she had sat upon the logs. Val had kicked about the splinters at his feet, and formed them into heaps. And it was close, close by, that—oh, it was so close that she shivered and trembled, and clung to the edge of the pit as a support, and at last sank upon her knees.

But she was not praying—she was not even thinking;—there was nothing more to think about,—she rose and crept down the slope, to where lay a deep, black pool.

And out of the pool crawled a toad. Its head came first; the ugly, flat head that, but for its movement, might have been mistaken for a lump of slime,—then one long-jointed, sluggish leg, and then the other, followed by a sudden leap, and a leap, ah! the loathsome thing!—in her direction. Involuntarily she also leaped—backwards.

Not there—not just there; she shuddered as the reptile startled in its turn, turned and plunged again into the water, where, no doubt, were others of its kind, many and vile....

The stem of a bulrush shook, suggestive of hideous gambols at its roots....

The whole place looked so foul and evil that a wild desire to flee from it did actually, and as it were involuntarily, drag Leonore's nerveless feet a few yards from the edge—but there she halted, muttering to herself in broken, meaningless utterances. She thought she was goading herself back—back—back;—and she began to go back.

"Caught you up at last, Leo. What a walker you are! I followed you out, and guessed I should overtake you if I held on," continued the cheerful voice, as Paul tumbled down the bank, slipping and sliding, and steadying himself with his stick till he reached Leo's side. "A bit damp here though, isn't it?"

"Go away—go away, Paul." She tried to push him aside, he was between her and the pool.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to intrude; but, I say this is just the sort of thing to be very pleasant at the time, but—"

"Go—go!"

"But it will find out the weak spot afterwards, and then the aches and pains!"

"I shall have no aches and pains, and you—you needn't stay. I don't want you, I won't have you;" cried Leo, wildly. "Why did you come? Why did you follow me? Who gave you leave to spy upon me?"

"I took my own leave," said Paul, and dropped his cheery note, fixing his eyes steadily on hers. "You will come away—from here—with me;"—and she felt his hand close upon her arm.

She looked at it, and at him stupidly. She made no outcry.

"Come," repeated Paul.

She shook her head.

"You are going to come. That was what brought me here. Do you understand me, Leo?"

"No—no." She made a faint, weak effort to release herself.

"You must obey me."

"I shall not."

"You must obey a Higher Power than mine. In God's name I command you to leave this baleful spot."

"Paul!" But she obeyed, cowering.

In silence they moved on, neither knowing which way they trod, then suddenly: "It was you who broke that branch I heard—you who tracked me all the way—I heard something—it was *you* I heard? How could you?—how could you?—" cried Leo, sobbing aloud. "Oh, to think that it was *you*!"

"It was I, dear Leo, sent to save you in your hour of need. You are ill—you are not yourself—you know not what you are doing;—but there is One who watches over His children, and in the hour of danger and temptation—"

"But why did he send *you*? Paul, do you believe you were really sent by Him?" she was awed, but scarcely subdued—"because *I* don't. I cannot think even God would be so cruel as to choose *you* ——" she broke off panting.

"He chooses His own instruments, Leo. Do not let this distress you, dear little sister—I may call you 'sister,' mayn't I?—You can trust me, can you not? Lean on me," he drew her hand within his arm, "and tell me you forgive—"

"Forgive—forgive?" she sobbed afresh. "Is it I to forgive—I who have done it all? Paul, don't you *know*? Don't you *see*?"

"I only see a poor little lamb that has lost its fold."

"But the little lamb has been straying in other folds, and it was so dark there, Paul—so dark and cold,—oh, Paul, why did you stop me? Why—why did you save me? You know. *You know*;"—her sobs were heartrending.

He was silent.

"You were happy till you came here," said Leo, brokenly. "You loved Maud—at least you thought you did, and she, she still thinks she loves you. She—"

"Hush—no more. You must not say such things, Leo." He was calm no longer; the sweat broke out upon his brow.

"But it is the truth. Oh, it is—it is the truth."

"There are truths that must not be spoken. You must not, you shall not say what you would repent of all your life."

"Who is to speak if I do not? I am the only one——"

"Am I fallen so low that I would let *you* proclaim the secrets of my coward heart? If *my* lips are sealed, so shall *yours* be," he cried, in great agitation. "If I have made a terrible mistake, it is my own mistake, and I shall abide by it."

"Paul—Paul,—" she clung more closely to him. "Say you forgive me, Paul."

"There is nothing to forgive. Take care. You nearly fell, Leo. Try to look where you are going in this dim light." The accents of forced composure fell like cold lead upon her heart. She had touched him for a moment, and a nerve had vibrated to her touch—but he was slipping from her again. He continued:—

"Since your penetration has discovered——"

"Say since I found out the truth, Paul."

"That, if you will." He bent his head. "I cannot, I dare not deny it. It *is* the truth, God help me—God help us both."

"You and me?" she whispered, faintly.

"Maud and me. I have done her a great wrong, but it shall be the aim of my life to repair it. She shall find me a true and faithful husband——"

"You won't—you can't marry her?"

"What?" said Paul, stopping short.

"You do not love her."

"I loved her once—I shall learn to love her again."

"You will be wretched, miserable—and so will she, now that you know the truth. I would have spared you. I meant to give my life to spare you—oh, Paul, you know I did," she wept passionately—"but now, now when you yourself would not let me do it——"

"Leo?"

She wept on.

"Try to hear me. Try to understand me. Leo, there is a greater thing than Love."

"No, no, there is not—there is not."

"There is." He drew a breath, a long, deep breath. "There is Honour."

She was silent. The tears hung on her cheeks.

"I have lost all besides," said he, simply, "but I have kept that, and will keep it." He paused, and continued: "If Maud were different, other things might also be different, but you know your sister; to break faith with her would be—she could not endure it. I have taught her to believe that I am wholly hers, and she has never seen nor guessed that—that a change has come. And however acutely Maud would feel that, if she knew—which, so help me God, she never shall—she would be infinitely more distressed, more humiliated—her pride—her self-respect—no, it is not to be thought of." He was now walking on alone, and so fast that she could scarcely keep pace with him. She could catch only broken utterances—some perhaps not meant for her. It appeared as though he had forgotten her presence.

"Love? Honour?"

"Love lost, much lost.
Honour lost, all lost."

Honour is not lost—not yet. Happiness? That's nothing. Life is short, and there's another life to look to. A coward turns his back on the fight. A deserter falls out of the ranks. The strong should hold up the weak"—suddenly he looked round for her—"Leo?"

Leo meekly raised her eyes, overmastered, dumb. It was the hardest moment of Paul's life. One look, one word between them, and she would have been dragged down into the whirlpool from which it was his part to save her. A great convulsion shook his frame, and he set his teeth and swore, then drew her gently to his side.

"My little sister must forget all this. It is a bad dream and it is over and past. She must promise me——"

"What—Paul?"

"She must promise me—solemnly—before God, in Whose Presence we are"—he looked up, the sky was clear and shining overhead—"that she will never—mark me, Leo, *never*—as long as life lasts, allow herself to think of cutting it short again. Before God, Leo!"

He lifted her hand, still fast in his, as though invoking the Unseen Presence, and almost inaudibly she repeated after him the words of the promise.

"We must hasten home now," said Paul, with a rapid transition to another tone. "The short cut from Claymount is somewhere hereabouts," looking round—"and we shall get back," he took out his watch, "before the house is shut up, if we walk briskly. You can walk, can't you? I mean, of course you will have to walk, but can you step out? If you would care to have an arm——"

"I can walk quite well, thank you—but, oh, Paul, just this—mayn't I say it——?"

"Better not, dear." The word slipped out; he was unconscious of it, but she heard. They hurried home.

CHAPTER XVII.

A KNIGHT TO THE RESCUE.

"No, you don't—and don't you think it."

Somebody, and that a formidable personage, had been a witness of the scene just narrated.

We would not for a moment call poor Val Purcell an eavesdropper *au naturel*, but he certainly had a talent for picking up by the wayside things which did not exactly belong to him.

Val, as we know, was not quite like other people.

It was only now and then that he showed this; in the ordinary give and take of society he passed muster well enough, and no one would more readily have spurned the notion of doing what others did not do—that being the poor boy's code of conduct,—yet he is not to be hardly judged if occasionally it failed him at a pinch. Wherefore if when passing through the Abbey woods on the afternoon in question, he heard voices and crept near to peep and listen, let it be believed that the feeling which arrested his footsteps was in its way innocent. His curiosity was roused, and he had a hearty sympathy with sylvan lovers; so if Jack and Jill were courting, there was no reason why he should not see which Jack and Jill it was? He would not tell tales, not he.

But when, instead of the expected rustic figures, his starting eyes beheld Paul Foster and—not Paul's betrothed—not the girl with whom alone he had a right to wander in that dim solitude at that mystic hour—but Leonore, Leonore who was nothing, or should have been nothing to her sister's lover, curiosity gave place to another feeling.

So how? He would spy if he chose.

He would jolly well discover what the devil those two were about? They were up to no good hiding away by themselves in the woods, and, damnation! holding each other's hands.

That beast Paul—he had always thought him a beast—no, he hadn't, but he did now—so he was playing a double game, was he? Engaged to Maud, and flirting with Leo under the rose?

Leo could flirt, of course; she had made a fool of himself once,—but he had got it into his head that she rather disliked Paul;—she had never cracked him up as the rest did,—oh, she was a cunning, crafty little jade, and he would put a spoke in her wheel, be hanged if he didn't!

The undergrowth was so thick at the point to which Paul had half led, half dragged his trembling companion at this juncture, that it was easy for a third person to draw very near unperceived,—and though much that now passed was unintelligible to one not possessed of the key of the mystery, Val heard enough.

He did not indeed hear any love-making,—but instinct guided him straight to the mark which another by reasoning might have failed to reach. He was as fully convinced that Maud had been supplanted as if he had heard the fact avowed a hundred times; and though he stole off, afraid to linger, before Paul's final adjuration which might have puzzled and mystified him, he had got as much as his brain could carry, and got it in very good order.

The next day he presented himself at Boldero Abbey. His plan of campaign, conned over and over with ever-increasing wrath and valour, was not confided to gran. Gran had never liked Maud, and in old days he would often affect a hopeless passion for the latter for the sake of getting amusement out of the old lady. Then an argument would ensue, and he very nearly felt the passion. He could not see that one Boldero was not as good as another; and as he could not be bluntly told that Leonore had money while her sister had not, he held to it that gran was prejudiced to the point of injustice. Accordingly he kept his own counsel now, and plumed himself thereon mightily.

And Fortune favoured him; for though all the ladies were at home, the one he sought was by herself in the drawing-room, when he was ushered in.

"I say, it's you I want," said Val, immediately. "Look here, Maud, I want to see you alone, and without any one's knowing. Where are the others?"

"Sue and Sybil are out——"

"But I was told they were in!"

"That's Grier's laziness. He has grown intolerably lazy of late. As he is under notice to go, he won't put himself out of his way for any one of us, and says 'At Home' or 'Not at Home,' just as it suits him, without taking the trouble of finding out."

"Where are they gone?" demanded Val, as usual diverted from his course by any chance observation. Despite the purpose with which he was big, he could not help feeling inquisitive as to which house in the neighbourhood was being honoured.

"Only to the rectory," said Maud, indifferently; "but they are there, and there they will stay for ages. It is a sort of farewell visit. What do you want to see me about?"

"Stop a bit. There's Leo. Is she—where is she?"

"In bed. She caught a chill yesterday going out in the damp."

"You are sure she is not out in the damp again, to-day?" said Val, significantly, and gave his companion what he considered a meaning look. "Hey? Are you sure of that, Maud?"

"As I was with her five minutes ago, I think I may be," retorted Maud, and convinced by this preamble that Leo, not herself, was the real object of the visit, she was less gracious than before. "I thought you said it was me you wanted?"—she threw out, however.

"So it is. I don't want Leo—not a bit. I don't want her ever again, that's more. You'd say the same if you'd seen what I saw. Give me time, and I'll tell you all about it. That's what I came for."

"Really, Val, I—it's not the thing, you know, to come to one of us with complaints of the other. If you have any fault to find with Leo, you must say so to herself."

"You wait till you hear. You won't be so keen for me to go to Leo——"

"But I really can't," said Maud, rising. Her pride revolted at the idea of being the confidant of some silly quarrel, which did not concern her in the slightest. "I don't know anything about it, and I don't want to know. Do talk of other things."

"What? When I came here on purpose——?"

"Hush,—you needn't be excited. Of course if you are determined to speak, you had better speak and be done with it; but I warn you I shan't take your part, or any one's part——"

"As long as you don't take Paul's part," cried he, with a flash of inspiration, "the rest doesn't matter."

"Paul's part?" For very amazement Maud fell into her chair again, and stared at the speaker as though he had struck her a blow. "What—what did you say? Did you say 'Paul's part'?"

"Yes, I did—I did say just that. I told you you'd jolly well better hear me out instead of being so infernally supercilious. Oh, I say, I'm sorry I said that, Maud; I'm—I'm sorry for you altogether."

"You speak in enigmas, Val,"—but her laugh was a little forced; his earnestness and persistency told; and then there was "Paul's part"?

"He is—but look here, you needn't mind what he is. Don't you take it to heart——"

"I know what Paul is, thank you," haughtily.

"That's just what you don't——"

"Excuse me, Val——"

"Excuse me, Maud——"

"You are impertinent now, I shall listen no longer."

"Listen no longer? You haven't even *begun* to listen. Confound it, you shouldn't treat a fellow like this, when a fellow is doing all he can for you, and feels for you as—as I do. You know I've always been fond of you, Maud," softening, "and I've come to say that if you'll marry me instead——"

"Have you gone crazy, Val?" But vanity whispered a flattering solution of the problem, and his ear detected an opening. To the same suggestion Leo had cried "Nonsense!" and although affronted at first, he had ultimately accepted the "Nonsense!" with philosophy,—but he had weapons in reserve now, and would soon show that he was not "crazy". No, damn it, he was not "crazy". The idea!

With the rush of a torrent he told his tale.

"And you saw this—and you heard this?" said Maud, at last. "You did not dream it? You—you are sure you did not dream it?"

"I'll take my solemn Davy I saw it all, and heard it all. Leo is a little cat; and as for Paul, to think that he should dare—but I say, Maud, you will checkmate him, won't you?"

"Hush;" she waved him back, for he had pressed forward. "Let me think—let me think. If this is

true—but it isn't, it can't be true,—" and she pressed her hands upon her forehead. A thousand trifles, insignificant in themselves, which had secretly perplexed and chafed her spirit of late, rushed back upon her memory. Paul had lost the air of a happy lover. He had become moody, silent, solitary in his habits. He had, it is true, obeyed to the strictest extent the dictates of custom, but there were moments which in the retrospect maddeningly bore out Val's accusation. He had played—he was still playing her false? She was, or would be, a laughing-stock? She quailed and faltered.

"Take me," urged Val. "It's not—not only for your own sake, though of course that's what I'm thinking of most, but—"

"I must know first. I must make sure of the truth first."

"If you do, you'll give the show away. You ought never to let out that you know anything, and throw him over before he throws you. Then—there you are!"

"You mean that I must not unveil Paul's treachery? That he is to go unpunished?"

"You can't cut off your nose to spite your face, you know. Once you have a row with Paul the fat is in the fire, and it will be all over the place that he's jilted you."

"And for my own sister;" said she, bitterly.

She longed to rush to Leo, to Paul, to both severally or together, and denounce them. She could scarce restrain herself from proclaiming her wrongs upon the housetops, but—she paused and looked thoughtfully at Val. There was no doubt about Val's integrity. Up to his lights he was universally accounted "straight," and she need never fear being tricked and cheated a second time. He had acted well by her at this crisis, and to reward him? The idea grew in favour.

On the other hand, how terrible would be her position if she refused—and Position was a god she worshipped. She would be talked about, pointed at, and worst of all, pitied. Her ignominy—she could not face it.

"I say, Maud, you know I am fond of you?"

Yes, poor boy, he was fond of her; she had always felt complacently secure of his fondness, though occasionally nettled of late by misgivings as to his having transferred his first allegiance elsewhere. Leo had been bidden to Claymount oftener than she; and gran had made much of the younger sister, whereas she had always been cool and distant to the elder.

Maud, in her slow way, had resented this, and given herself considerable airs towards the old lady after her engagement. To triumph over her—over everybody—vindicate her own charms, and prove to the world the unswerving devotion of her old admirer would be something, would at any rate be better than nothing.

She sighed gently, and emboldened, he pressed his suit. A long interview closed with this decision. If satisfied as to the truth of his statements—but satisfied she must be—she would send for him next day, and—and do whatever he asked her.

"That's right, that's all I want;" his face shone with satisfaction. "Of course you wouldn't have wanted me if you had had Paul—not that Paul is any shakes now, (and whatever he is, he's not for you," in parenthesis.) "and—and I'm your man. I'll see you through, Maud; trust me."

"You will make all the arrangements?—that is, if I send for you?"

"Won't I? I had the whole thing in my head when I came here, and I'll work it out again going home. I'm a bit flustered just now, but you'll see if I don't do the square thing. We'll be off by the first train for London town and a registry office—but don't I just wish it was Gretna Green, and a gallop through the night! I have often thought what a jolly skidaddle one might have behind four horses to Gretna Green."

"Go, now;" said Maud, authoritatively. "But if I send word to come, Come."

And the message went, "Come".

Mr. Anthony Boldero and Mr. John Purcell were putting their heads together in the window of a Pall Mall club. The two gentlemen had a subject in common to discuss; and as old acquaintances, who had recently become new neighbours, they had a great deal to say and said it freely.

"A most disgraceful business;" the one bald head wagged, and the other responded. "'Pon my soul," asserted Mr. Purcell, vivaciously, "it is no wonder it killed the old lady. She might have hung on long enough, but for that. Although she was seventy-seven. Seventy-seven. A ripe age, Boldero."

He was only a little over sixty himself, and had often wondered how long his step-mother was going to keep him out of the property? It had for years been a secret grievance that a second wife should have had its tenancy for life, and made her descendant, a poor creature like Val, its master in appearance if not in fact. He could not therefore affect to be inconsolable.

Was it possible that the "disgraceful business" had had anything to do with General Boldero's demise?—he queried next. Could he have known, or suspected anything?

Mr. Anthony Boldero thought not. The general had been as cock-a-hoop as possible over his daughter's engagement; as insufferably patronising and condescending as over the first affair.

"And *it* turned out a fiasco, of course," observed his friend. "While he lived, Boldero contrived to keep going his own version, I'm told; and they sealed up the girl as tight as wax to prevent her telling tales—but every one knows now. So you think he was crowing over Maud's marriage too? Well, well, what would he have said to this?"

They then talked of Major Foster. Major Foster had behaved like a gentleman, taken himself quietly out of the way, and made no fuss. Mr. Anthony Boldero thought he was probably well out of the connection; the Boldero girls were too big for their boots, and Maud was the worst of them. All the same, no man likes to be jilted.

"Is it the case that your nephew has had nothing left him by his grandmother?—" he suddenly demanded, having disposed of Paul.

"He's not my full nephew, you know; he's only my half-brother's son. And, fact is, the old lady had nothing, or next to nothing to leave. Her money was all jointure, and reverts to the estate."

"And you have come in for Claymount free and unencumbered, as I have for the Boldero property? Ah!" said his companion, thoughtfully.

Presently he looked up. "Suppose between us we do something for those two lunatics, Purcell? We can't let them starve, eh? Suppose we make a bit of a purse, and ship them off to the colonies? British Columbia, eh? That's the only place for them and their sort; and if they can be put on a decent footing there, they won't be in a hurry to come back again. Eh? What d'ye say? I'm willing, if you are. I have no great affection for these relatives of mine, but after all, they *are* relatives, and blood is thicker than water."

"Well—yes;" said Mr. Purcell, dubiously. He had been mentally putting off this evil day, uneasily conscious that it was bound to come.

"The general was the worst of the lot," proceeded his companion; "the most arrogant, conceited, humbugging, old swelled-head I ever came across. But he's gone, and the poor girls—well, I'm sorry for them. Sue is a good creature. I hardly know the younger ones,—but none of them have given me any trouble since I had to deal with them. Except for this scandal of Maud's of course—and anyhow that doesn't affect *me*. Well, what about her and her precious husband? You are bound to do something for him, I suppose?"

And it ended in Mr. Purcell's doing it.

Before Maud sailed, it was necessary for her to take leave of her sisters, and this was Leonore's worst time. Till then she had been shielded from the outer world by the illness which was impending when Maud described it as a chill contracted by going out in the damp, and the event which followed was generally accredited with developing the chill into something more serious,—but although Sue was obliged to ask a month's grace from Mr. Anthony Boldero, in order that her sister might be sufficiently recovered to run no risk from moving—(a request which he had sufficient goodness of heart to ignore when alleging that he had had no trouble about family arrangements)—Leo was now well enough to have no excuse for evading a farewell scene.

In respect to Maud she knew not what to think. Had any hint or rumour of the truth ever reached her, or could it have been mere coincidence that caused her flight to follow Paul's confession almost on the instant?

Had Paul's vaunted inflexibility broken down? Had he reconsidered his resolution?

Yet, if so, this must have become known; it was impossible that it should have been kept secret; and he, not Maud would have been accounted guilty.

"Where is Paul? What is Paul doing?" The faint bleat of a weak and wounded creature came incessantly from Leonore's pillow, all through the first long day that followed the *esclandre*. They hid it from her that Paul had gone.

Sue and Sybil would fain have kept him, yearning to breathe forth contrition and sympathy every hour, every moment—but he could not be prevailed upon. They thought he was too deeply hurt, too cruelly affronted,—and they thought they would not tell Leo.

It was all so inexplicable that even the very servants who know us, their masters and mistresses, better than we know each other, could draw no conclusions, and the prevailing amazement downstairs found vent in ejaculations of "Miss Maud! Miss Maud of all people! Now if it had been Leonore"—but the speaker, a pert young thing, was sharply called to order for impudence—"Mrs. Stubbs' then,—the name ain't so pretty she need have it always tagged on to her"—with a giggle—"she's got it in her to run away with any number of 'em, *she* has. And Val was her one, Mary and me thought. But, Lor, it's looks that tells: and pretty as she is, Leonore—Mrs. Stubbs," giggling again, "can't stand up to her that's Mrs. Val now. See her in her weddin' dress—my! We little thought she wasn't never to put it on in earnest, when we was let to have a sight of her that day it come home. A real treat it was!"

Maud's first letter was a triumph of equivocal diplomacy. She did not utter a single verbal falsehood, and without such contrived to blindfold every one. Her feelings towards her affianced husband had changed of late—"of late" is an elastic term—she had "learnt to value the lifelong devotion of her dear Val,"—(when learned was again left to the imagination)—and "seeing no course left but to break with Paul before it was too late," she had fled to avoid a scene which would have only given him pain, and not altered her resolution.

"Had you any sort of premonition of this, Paul?" Sue inquired in tremulous accents, an hour having elapsed since the letter came.

"She put one or two rather strange questions to me yesterday," hesitated he.

"Might I ask—could you tell me what they were?"

"I think I would rather not. It can do no good now." He spoke gently, but she could not press the point.

"She knows;" said Paul, to himself. "How she knows I cannot fathom; but all this about the change in her feelings is only a blind. *She knows*; and though she has given me my release, I can never avail myself of it."

He left the Abbey within the hour.

And this was now a story three months old, and Maud was coming to say "Good-bye" before beginning a new life in another land.

Heretofore she had obstinately rejected the olive branch held out by Sue. Sue, acting as mouthpiece for the three, had written time and again, begging that for all their sakes no estrangement should take place; entreating the delinquents to believe that they would only meet with kindness and affection in Eaton Place, where the sisters were established, and where room was plentiful. Would not Val and Maud come and make their home also there for the present?

But though the offer, delicately worded, might have been presumed tempting enough to two almost penniless people, it was coldly declined.

"And she seems as if *she* were angry with *us*!" cried Sybil, "she who dragged the whole family through the mud, and left us to bear the brunt!"

"Certainly she does write as if she bore us a grudge," owned Sue, "and yet, how can she? What have we done? What has any one of us done that Maud should refuse to be one with us again? I am sorry, but of course if that is the spirit in which poor Maud receives overtures of peace, I really—really I do not think I can go on thrusting them upon her." For Sue also had her pride, though it was a poor, weak, back-boneless pride, which would have melted at the first soft word from her sister.

The emigration concocted in the club window, however, effected what all besides had failed to do. By the time the final arrangements were complete and the tickets taken, Maud, on the eve of departure, was won upon to come to Eaton Place, though she still declined to take up her abode there.

Nor would she come alone.

"Val's with her," announced Sybil, having peeped from the balcony; "she might have left him behind, I think. I did want to find out if I could, what Maud really means by all this? Why *we* are in disgrace, because *she* has behaved like an idiot?"

"We shall never discover that now;" said Sue,—and the event proved her right.

Maud had taken the best and surest precaution against conversation of an intimate nature. She had put on one of the smartest dresses of her elaborate trousseau—having left it unpacked on purpose,—and her step as she entered was that of a stranger on a foreign soil. She was studiously polite; she inquired with a becoming air of solicitude after their healths, and she looked kindly at Sue:—but a jest of Sybil's fell flat, and Leo was conscious that her sister's lips never actually touched her cheek.

Leo herself was trembling from head to foot.

"We have been rather anxious about dear Leo," said Sue, with a tender glance towards the shrinking figure in the background.

"Indeed? There is a good deal of influenza about;" replied Maud carelessly. Before anyone could rejoin she changed the subject. "They tell us the weather look-out is favourable, and we ought to have a good passage." She never once looked at Leo, nor spoke to her.

And she rose to go as soon as decency permitted. But though a good deal was said about future home-comings, and Val declared that he for one would never rest till he was back in Old England again, there was a general feeling that the impending separation would prove if not absolutely final, at least of long duration. Maud was evidently longing to be off. Her voice as she hurried to the door was sharp and impatient. She could scarcely wait for Val to make his adieux properly,

and sprang into the hansom while he was still in the hall.

Then she leaned forward and beckoned, and Leo ran out. Leo was yearning for one little word, one kind look to prove her dreadful fears unfounded, but, "It was not you I wanted," said Maud, rearing her chin; "send my husband to me."

She turned her face aside, and Leonore, like Paul, cried within herself, "*She knows*".

CHAPTER XVIII.

"A TURN OF THE WHEEL."

"Hoots, it's in the blood," said Dr. Craig, briefly.

An old friend had come to visit him, and started the topic which had ceased to be a nine days' wonder in the neighbourhood.

"There's a wild strain in the Bolderos somewhere," continued the doctor, crossing his legs, and settling down for a chat. "Those lassies have had a gay lady among their forebears at some time or other, for they didn't get their pranks from old Brown-boots. To do Brown-boots justice, he was respectable—I'm thinking it was his one virtue. Proud as Lucifer, and vain as a peacock—they say you can't be both, but he *was*—and so was Maud—and it was just her vanity that got the whip hand of her pride at the last. It must have been," musing; "nothing else could account for her throwing over a nice fellow like Foster, and a good match too, for poor loony Val without a sixpence. She didn't know he hadn't a sixpence, mind you; she meant to come back and queen it at Claymount,—where I doubt not she would soon have ruled the roost, if she hadn't had the ill-luck to kill the old lady instead. She wanted to show she had two strings to her bow, d'ye see?" He smoked and nodded, then started afresh:—

"Aye, aye, and there was Leonore—Leonore Stubbs—the widow. Her that played the mischief with that poor lad of mine, Tommy Andrews, and lost me the best assistant I ever had. I tried to get Tommy back after the Bolderos left, but no; he scunnered the place; she had just eaten the heart out of him, Leonore had. My word, she was a jaunty bit creature. I fair weakened to her myself, when she would stand by the road-side looking up at me in the gig, with those big, laughing eyes of hers—and her wee bit moothie, it was the prettiest bit thing—though mind you, I ran her down to Tommy. Poor Tommy!"

"He wouldn't take a telling," resumed the speaker, after a pause. "They never will, you know—those dour, close, machine-like lads; they'll make no resistance; they'll let you talk and talk and think you've convinced them—and it just rolls like water off a duck's back. Tommy garred me believe it was all over and done with. He went about his work, and kept out of little pussycat's way, and then, phew! all at once the murder was out! It was simply bottled up; and one fine day—I don't know what happened, for cart-ropes wouldn't drag it out of him—but *something* did, and he came in, looking battle and murder and sudden death. He was off at crack of dawn,—and that was just a few days before Maud's fine elopement took place. We had never had such an excitement before in these humdrum parts, and we never shall again."

To all of this the friend, also a Scot, hearkened without emitting a syllable.

When, however, his ear detected the accents of finality, he shook the ashes from his pipe and opened his lips: "I fell in with the rejected gentleman the other day".

"Foster? No? Did you? Did you really? How was that?" In an instant the doctor was on the alert.

"I was on my holiday, doing a bit of fishing in an out-of-the-way part of Sutherland, and there were only two or three of us in the hotel. Foster was one."

"A tall, thin man, with a lantern-jawed face?"

"That's him. One of the others had got wind of this tale, and told me. We were talking of you, I fancy; and he had been down here a while ago, when the affair was fresh."

"What was Foster doing there?"

"Fishing like the rest of us—but always by himself. He wasn't uncivil, only unsociable. I had a walk with him one day, and he talked about India. A good part of his life had been spent in India, and he could tell a lot about it, but when the talk came round home, he shut up like a knife, and I kind of jaloused there was something wrong. That was before I knew what it was."

"He looked—how did he look?"

"How? I can't tell you how. He just *looked*. That was enough for me."

"Well, you saw the sort of chap he was, just the one to take a woman's fancy,—and to think that Maud Boldero could be so blind daft as to throw him over for that poor Val, whom she could have picked up at any time!"

"What has become of the others? Do you ever hear anything of them?"

"Sybil has married. She married pretty quickly after they left. A London man; a barrister, I think. Sybil is good-looking enough, they are all good-looking; though Maud's the pick of the bunch. Stop a bit, I'm not sure that the little rascal Leonore—but no, no; she hadn't the air, the style; it was just a way she had,—eh, she was a bit beguiling thing. There's that new boy of mine, he has twice the go that poor Tommy had, though nothing like the brains—but he's all over the place among the lasses, and when I hear him whistling here and whistling there, with his nose in at every open door, thinks I to myself, 'Thank the Lord, Leonore Stubbs is out of Jock's way'."

Leonore was out of everybody's way, it seemed,—or it might have been that she had ceased to be beguiling. People who met her during the next year of her life, found a quiet young girl—she still looked very young—with rather an interesting countenance; but if drawn thereby to prosecute her acquaintance, they tried to engage her in their pursuits and pleasures, they were disappointed. She did not respond to buoyant propositions; games and pastimes did not attract her; they thought she did not know how to flirt.

In short she was dull, and rather tiresomely devoted to her half-sister, whom no one thought of inviting to join in youthful escapades—so after a time Leo was not invited either.

This was a trouble to Sue, and one day she made a suggestion. Was there any use in remaining in London, if the life there was not in accordance with either of their tastes? If Leo no longer cared for society—though she owned she thought that a pity at her age—and here the speaker paused.

"I don't—at present," owned Leo, frankly. "I may again—some time,"—but to herself she wondered, would that some time ever come?

Then news came from America, sad news, which put all other thoughts aside for the moment. A child had been born, but its birth had cost the mother her life, and the next cable announced that poor Val had lost his little son also. He was begged to return home, and assured of welcome and maintenance there,—but to the surprise of all replied evasively. He would see how matters were by-and-by; he could not bring himself to move just yet.

The next letter expatiated on the wonderful beauty and climate of California, and the kindness and hospitality of friends, who had carried him off for a trip, to distract his thoughts.

Again another letter was full of nothing but these friends. Poor simple Val had not the art of concealment, and long before he knew himself, the sisters knew what to expect. He had been "most awfully sad and lonely," and he "would never forget Maud,"—but he had found a dear girl who reminded him of her, and (here the pen had raced) by the time dear Sue and Leo received the letter, he would be married to the richest heiress in California. A newspaper followed, announcing that the ceremony had actually taken place.

"So we need not go out to Val," said Leo, with a smile.

She and Sue were wandering hither and thither with no particular reason for being anywhere, and it had been in contemplation to cross the Atlantic. Sue's investments had prospered of late, and there would have been no difficulty about funds—yet each sister was conscious of a sense of relief when the expedition was abandoned. Sue was timorous and a bad traveller,—while Leo, from whom the suggestion had emanated, no sooner found it taking shape than she repented. What was she going for? What could the new country yield that the old could not? Could it heal her sore heart? Could it banish remembrance? Could it give her news of Paul? Paul, who had vanished from the face of the earth?

Rather she would be turning her back upon any possibility of either hearing of or seeing him again; and though, of course, she could not wish that they should meet, and in the natural sequence of events, they were most unlikely to meet, it would be something only to—oh, anything would be better than that bitter blank, that desolation of ignorance which was so impenetrable, so insurmountable.

Sue knew now about Paul. When Maud died there was no further reason for concealment, and albeit the shock was great, it was a consolation to both sisters to drop the veil between them.

"But you do understand, don't you, that he never—never even when I almost forced it from him, said that it was *I*?" murmured Leo. "I knew it; I felt it; but he did not, he would not say it. Oh, I did so long for him to say it just once—but he never did. Sue, you know that little old jug I have upstairs?" suddenly she broke off, as it appeared inconsequently.

"Little old jug?" Sue reflected, but could not remember. And she wondered somewhat. What could "a little old jug" have to do with the present conversation?

"The one with the French soldier's motto. It used to be on the anteroom mantelpiece at Boldero. Oh, you must remember it, Sue."

"We had so much china, dear—"

"But this was the one I asked you to give me for my own—however, listen. The motto was:—"

"Mon âme à Dieu,
Ma vie au Roi,
Mon coeur aux Dames,
L'honneur pour moi."

"Paul noticed it one day, and turned round and said, 'That's splendid,'—and read it again. That was when he first came. And afterwards, when things were getting very bad, I came upon him standing in front of the mantelpiece, staring at the jug. I rather liked it myself, but I didn't see it as he did, for on that dreadful day," she looked down, even when it was only Sue, she looked down—"when Paul saved me from myself—"

"When you were too ill to know what you were doing, darling."

"He looked at me and said with a sort of smile, '*L'honneur pour moi.*' Sue?"

Sue looked attention.

"You know how poor Maud bored us—I mean how she insisted on Paul's religion as if it were something which gave him a sort of *cachet*—something quite over *our* heads?—and how father—oh, Sue, I must say it—do you remember how father once shut her up by declaring that Paul was too much of a gentleman to introduce unpleasant subjects? It was only father's way, you know. He didn't mean any harm, and I do think, don't you, that father was changed a little, that he was different those last few weeks? He said to me once: 'There's more in it than you think'. Anyway, Sue, he did like and admire Paul."

"Yes—yes, he did."

"Now I want to say something," Leo changed the subject, which each felt to be a sad one. "Sue, what really—what I shall never forget, is, that when the worst moment of all came, when Paul and I were together, all alone, and I was ready—oh, I *was* ready to fall into his arms if he had held out his little finger—he didn't hold it. He stood there like a statue. And I know, I *know* what held him back. If all the world had called Paul a good man, and he had preached goodness from morning to night, it wouldn't have had the least effect, but when he said '*L'honneur pour moi*'—her tears overflowed, and Sue wept likewise...."

They often wondered how much and how little had been suspected by Maud, inducing her own line of action. In the light of her subsequent attitude it seemed more than probable that she had either learnt or divined that all was not as it appeared, but so cleverly had she kept up a show of being in good spirits up to the close of the day which was to Leo like the day of judgment, that nothing could be certain.

Sue could recall that after Leo had been seen to bed, obviously ill, on her return to the house before dinner, Maud had expressed a sort of satisfaction, pointing out that this accounted for the peculiarities of her sister's behaviour throughout the day. "Really one is glad to know it was *that*," she had exclaimed more than once.

She had also rallied Paul for his indifference on the subject. It appeared he had been out with Leo, and on such a raw evening he might have seen that it was rash and foolish of her not to keep within doors. "But I suppose you thought as it wasn't *me*—?" she had wound up; and Sue, conscious that Sybil was watching also, owned that the triumphant smile by which the words were accompanied, made her strangely uncomfortable.

"And the next morning she pored over a new set of illustrated papers," continued she; "it is odd that I should remember it all so clearly, but I do. What happened afterwards stamped it on my memory, no doubt. I racked my brains to think if Paul could have offended her in any way, and if a sudden angry impulse—you know poor Maud was apt to get angry, and to be very implacable too—but they seemed quite as friendly as usual. We had grown to think, Sybil and I, that Paul had not—not perhaps found Maud *all* that he expected, and that sometimes he looked a little grave after they had been together. Sybil spoke to me about it, but we kept it to ourselves, as we fancied you saw nothing."

"Well?" said Leo, slowly. "Well?" She was drinking in every word.

"The next evening—the evening you were in bed—stop, let me consider: no, I don't think there was any palpable difference; nothing to attract attention, of *that* I am sure. Maud had great command over herself. She told us as if it were an ordinary piece of news, that she had had a long visit from Val—but whether she intended Paul to take any notice of that, or not, I cannot tell. I cannot tell anything about that evening, because my own thoughts were rather taken up with you, and I was up in your room a good deal, you may remember?"

Yes, Leo remembered. Remembered also how she tried every means to get rid of the kindly, patient intruder, who tortured her by her presence and anxiety. "I never thought I should be able to tell you the truth, Sue. And oh, I was so miserable, I was in hell—"

"Darling Leo, don't; don't say that. It is not quite right, you know."

"Yet we talk of being in heaven, why is the other place worse?"

Sue however could not tell why, and only shook her head gently.

"Well, then, I was, you know where," resumed Leo, with a nod; "and what's more, I had been there for ages. I was wicked for quite a long time before that, you know;" and she leaned her elbows on Sue's lap, and looked up into her face. "It began soon after I came home. I did so hate being a widow—oh, poor Godfrey! Sue, it had nothing to do with Godfrey; it was the awful clothes, and the being shut up in dark corners—"

"Dark corners, Leo?"

"That was what it seemed like to me. I was hustled out of the way when people came, and whatever happened, it didn't happen for *me*. Sometimes I could hardly believe it *was* me; I used to pinch myself and say 'You horrid little black thing, who are you? Are you "Leonore," or "Leonore Stubbs"?—because they are two quite different people. Leonore is a harmless little tom-fool—but Leonore Stubbs is an odious, artificial creature, a sham all round.' And then, Sue, something, never mind what, started a new idea, I felt that I had never really been *in love*, nor had any one really been *in love* with me. Godfrey and I had just been fond of each other, and I couldn't help—yes, I could have helped, but I didn't—trying to get up the real thing. I longed for it, I craved for it—and I made several shots for it. Oh, I am ashamed,"—and she hid her face.

"My poor little Leo!"

"Your poor little Leo is a mighty bad lot. However, it wasn't till Paul came that she was—no, I don't think that she really was to blame, I don't *indeed*;" said Leo, earnestly. "Because directly she suspected—I mean directly she began to feel—*it*, she was frightened to death. She was in a vile temper all the time, but she kept her secret, and Paul does not know it yet. Oh, Sue, do you think, do you think he does?" she broke off suddenly.

"No, dear, how should he?"

"I hoped perhaps he might. Of course I don't want him to, but still if he did——"

"You yourself said he never gave you to understand he had any feeling for you."

"But I didn't say he might not have—understood that I had any feeling for him."

"Would you wish it, Leo?"

"No."

But after a long pause the face was turned up again. "Yes."

Still nothing was heard of Paul, and the sisters grew to talk of him less and less. They laid plans for their future irrespective of his existence, they visited Sybil, who had now a home on the south coast, her husband having become a County Court judge; and they flitted quietly up and down the various highways and byeways of rural England.

One April they found themselves in a land of hills, and lakes, and green, leafy foregrounds.

"Let us stay here for a while," said Sue.

Beautiful scenery always appealed to Sue, and a good hotel was not to be despised. The lapping of the waters of the lake beneath her window was pleasant, even when the wind sent tiny wavelets running along the shore in a sort of mock animosity—and when the surface was calm as a mirror, she thought it was Paradise.

"It really is very nice," said Leo. "I have been out exploring. There is a lovely glen about a mile off, with woods and a stream—a little splashing stream—and the banks are simply covered with blue-bells. I should have picked some, but the path looked suspiciously well cared for, and there were little gates, as if it belonged to some big place; to tell the truth, I had an inkling I was trespassing, though there were no boards up. It would have been awkward to have been met by the owner, with my hands full of blue-bells. However, I mean to go again to-morrow, and spy out the land. If it's safe, you shall come."

"Could I walk so far?"

"You can have a little carriage, and leave it at the gate. You could not get it up the valley, as there is only a footpath, but I think you could walk that part. I can't tell you how delightful it was,—the sunlight speckling through the trees, and the cuckoos answering each other across the brook;—I could have stayed forever, but I remembered you and flew home."

She flew back, however, the following evening. It was an equally calm, bright evening, after a day of heat and growth,—and buds that had been fast closed at dawn, had burst on every side. Tassels hung from the larches, giving forth their resinous fragrance; and the pink buds of young oaks, and sprays of waving yellow broom mingled with the many shades of green above and beneath.

"What a heavenly spot!" sighed Leonore, enraptured. She could not resist wandering on and on; the woods at Boldero were nothing to this fairy dell, and at every tinkling waterfall, she was down the thymy bank overhanging it.

But she noted anew that she was neither preceded nor followed by other invaders. She also experienced a little thrill of dismay at seeing through a vista—a long vista, it is true—a country house towards which a byepath led direct. Oh, well, she must risk it; if met—? She started and the courage of a moment before began to ebb, for something certainly moved behind the trees, and now she distinctly saw a figure on the path in front.

To put a bold face upon it when no one challenged the face was easy, but it was another matter to—her pulses beat a little faster.

Conning an apology, and prepared to offer it with the best grace she could muster, she walked slowly forward, with downcast eyes,—then, oh, what?—oh, who was this? She stood face to face with—Paul.

Often and often afterwards she wondered how she felt, how she looked and what she did at that supreme moment? In the retrospect it was all a mist—a blurred canvas—a confused phantasm.

"Paul!"

"Leonore!"

An outcry—then a terrible silence; agitation on his part, trepidation on hers—each alike stupefied, breathless.

And Leonore's heart sank, and her eyelids fell.

Was this *all*? Was this the end? Oh, misery, misery.

Was it amazement alone which had first forced her name from his lips, and then shut them fast? Was he shocked, perhaps sore that a thing had happened which he had resolved should never happen? Was it pain, disgust, horror, she heard in that single involuntary utterance?

Ah, then, she knew what she must do.

Sick disappointment sent a shiver through her frame, and all at once she felt her limbs totter.

But to fall? To betray emotions which were not *his* emotions? To be weak where he was bold and strong? No, a thousand times, no; she drew herself upright and made a passionate effort.

"Paul, I am—so sorry. I did not know, I never dreamt—of this. Indeed, indeed I never did. Believe me, oh, do believe me, Paul."

"Believe you, Leo? I do not understand?" He gazed at her, bewildered, then took a step forward, and she felt him trying to take her hand. She drew it back hurriedly.

"Wait. Wait a moment. Let me speak. We did not know you were here, we did not indeed. We have not known anything of you, for a long, long time. It was only yesterday we, Sue and I, came to this place; and we can go away again to-morrow—or to-night. We would not trouble you, Paul."

"Trouble me?" He laughed, a curious laugh, bitter and sweet, scornful and surpassingly tender. It might have enlightened her, but she was past listening.

"You will believe, Paul, that we—that to annoy you, to distress you,—oh, not for worlds, not for worlds. We will go to-night." And she turned as though to fly on the spot, but he caught her arm.

"Leo?"

She was faintly trying to free herself. The arm went further and held her fast.

"Can you think," said a voice in her ear, "can you suppose that the sight of *you*, you who have been with me night and day in dreams, and thoughts, and hopes, and fears, that this could—what did you call it?—'annoy' me? Leo, my own, my beloved, don't you, can't you see—*now*?"

"Paul!"

"You whom I might not love, and yet could not but love? Listen. You say you had lost sight of me—that was because I dared not come to you. I dared not trust myself—perhaps, may I say it?—I could not trust either of us. We had once—and that must never happen again. You are listening? My darling, how you tremble, why do you tremble so, Leo? There is nothing to fear now. Let me go on, and you will see. It was only the other day I learned the tidings that set me free. You see I had no means of knowing; and then when I did hear, I could not—it would have been horrible to be in haste to take advantage of it. So, though life opened anew, I meant to wait quietly till the time came when perhaps I might hope to prevail—but, oh, to think of *this*!"

And then at last she ventured to raise her eyes, and what did those eyes behold? It was the look—*the look*—on the face of Paul!

And now her head was on his breast, and his kisses on her cheek. "Cruel doubts tortured me often," he whispered, "for how could I tell what changes time might not have wrought? It had left *my* love untouched, but what right had I to expect that you might not have lost the feeling you had—yes, I did know you once had for me? Leo, darling, can you think how terrible it was to know that, and have to affect ignorance? To have every beat of my heart go out towards you, and to feign indifference? To meet your poor, piteous eyes, and keep the answer to their appeal out of mine? Not that you meant to show, dear; oh, no, you never dreamed your secret was revealed—and it was *not*, to others,—but to me—"

"Oh, Paul! Oh, Paul!"

"Hush, you were not to blame. It was no fault of yours, you poor, brave, little thing. You played your part nobly——"

"Oh, no—oh, no."

"You may think not, but I know you did. I know, for I shared the struggle. There was once," he paused and considered, "there was that day when we were together in the green-house. You were cold and careful at first, but gradually the mask wore off and—and mine too slipped. We were happy, too happy. I think we both knew it. We did not look at each other as we came away, but I gave you a red vine leaf, and I saw that you did not put it with the others, even with those I had picked for you before."

"I have it now, Paul."

"After that, I began to suspect myself. I had hardly done so before, for there was only a vague sense of disappointment, and dissatisfaction with things as they were. Your sister was not—but no matter. I reasoned myself out of this over and over again. I argued that I was not well, was not fully recovered from my late attack of fever—in short, that I was hipped, and would certainly take a more cheerful view of things as my strength came back. I really had been rather bad, you know—and was low and easily depressed. But what might have opened my eyes to the truth was that all depression vanished, and all inertia ceased, directly *you* appeared,—and *that* was after I had ceased to hear your gay little laugh and merry voice. For though you soon grew grave as myself, my heart would jump when you came into the room, or when I came upon you in some distant corner, not knowing you were there."

"Paul, Paul, my heart jumped too."

He drew her closer—ah, she was very close now. "I scarcely ever spoke to you, do you remember? We avoided each other; and I cannot even now imagine how I came to know you so well,"—and so on, and so on....

Presently Leo had a question to ask. Where had he been during those three blank days when no communications from Boldero Abbey reached him? He had disposed of them in a fashion that satisfied others, but not her.

"No, you were too clear-sighted. I knew that," said he. "But what could I do? I could not tell the truth, which was that I never went near the place whose address I gave Maud! My one desire was to be out of range of her letters; for Leonore—I had—I cannot tell how, a sort of dreadful certainty that she would recall me. For those three days I wandered about,—I went down to a wild, little, sea place, and fought the demon within. Then because I simply felt weaker, I fancied soul as well as body brought into subjection. You all told me I looked bad when I returned—now you know why."

But though they thus skirted round and round one dread remembrance which was—how could it help being?—in both their minds, each shrank from approaching a subject avoided by the other; until at length Leonore, tremulous but resolute, realised that it was for her, not him, to speak.

"Paul, dear Paul, I don't want to leave *anything* unsaid. Paul, on that worst day of all," she hesitated, and his hand pressed the little hand within it. "Dear Paul," she whispered, "I did not know what I was doing; indeed, indeed I did not. Something in my head seemed to have snapped, and I felt so strange—I never felt like it before. And it was not only about you that I was so unutterably wretched, there was—there was—something else."

"Something else?"

"A man told me the day before that I had broken his heart,—oh, Paul, don't start. He was not a man I could ever have given a thought to. He was not one I should ever have spoken to—in that way. Only our village doctor's assistant, and the rest of us hardly knew that he existed,—but I, I was so unhappy, even before you came to Boldero, that I let myself go,—that is, I let the poor silly creature run up a kind of friendship with me. That was all, Paul; truthfully it was—on my part. I amused myself with him—a little; and then—and then——"

"What was fun to you was death to him?"

"It had no right to be," said Leo, with dignity. "It never went any length; we only just met each other once or twice, and——"

"Flirted?"

"Not even that. I let him adore," she laughed, but shamefacedly—"and he mistook."

"I see."

"Paul, dear, I am not excusing myself; only I do not think, I do not think that wretched Tommy Andrews ought ever to have presumed—it was frightful, it was untrue what he said. I did *not* break his disgusting heart——"

"Oh, Leo!" Paul tried not to laugh.

"But he made me think I had. He accused me of it, and I was in such a state at the time that I believed him, and it drove me wild. It was the last straw, the finishing touch. I seemed not only to have made a mess of my own poor life, but of another's—and while I was very angry and

contemptuous, I was enraged with myself for being so. I stormed and raved when I was alone, and vowed to end it all,—but I know now that I—Sue says I was not accountable, Paul,—wistfully.

"Sue is right, dearest. Your nerves were altogether unstrung. You were overstrained and off your balance for the time being."

"Had—had you noticed anything, Paul?"

"Everything. It was that which made me fear—and follow you."

"At night I hardly slept at all. And, I couldn't eat; I loathed food. I may tell you all this, mayn't I? It just kills me to keep things to myself; doing *that* was what, I think, began it all."

"You shall tell me everything," said he.

"Well, but Paul," after an interlude, "there is still a mystery; what are you doing here? And was it not the strangest thing our meeting here?"

He smiled. "Not so very strange, seeing that this is my usual walk about this hour."

"Your—what did you say?—your 'usual' walk?"

"Look, Leo." He drew her along to the opening of the vista she had passed before, and pointed to the mansion beyond, now glistening in the setting sun. "That is my home—and yours."

"Oh, Paul!"

"I bought it a year ago, but have been busy with alterations and improvements, so only came to live here within the last few weeks. I was so tired of a wandering life, Leo; and though I had only the vaguest hope that you—but somehow hope never quite deserted me."

"Then the strangeness is on our part. That *we* should come to where *you* were!"

"You had really no suspicion, Leo?" He looked at her with laughter in his eyes. "Sue kept her own counsel well;" added Paul demurely.

He and Sue had been in communication from—from precisely the date at which he took up his residence at Mere Hall. He had left for Mere Hall the day after he last saw Sue in London.

"You saw Sue in London?" She could scarcely speak for astonishment.

"Several times. The Fosters, my brother and his wife, put me up to it. Your sister is good and kind and sensible—mine is both the first, but not exactly the last, bless her for it! Her very lack of what is commonly admired, proved my salvation. She first extracted the truth from me, and then went straight for Sue, and hammered it into her that there was no earthly reason why we two should not be made happy now. She could not endure to see my long face, she said;—and though I gathered that Sue was somewhat startled by her abruptness—for Charlotte is not famed for tact—eventually the two understood each other, and I was brought on to the stage."

"Was that," cried Leo, with a sudden flash of memory, "was that one day, oh, it must have been that day!—Sue was so odd and unlike herself. I wondered what could have excited her in a private view of rather stupid water-colours, and why she began all at once to say she longed for the country? Were you in the water-colour gallery?"

He was, and all was explained.

"Coo-coo," came the plaintive note of a dove from the leafy shades close by—but it cooed unheard. The streamlet splashed on unheeded. The sun went slowly down behind the mountain-tops unseen. And still they sat on....

CHAPTER XIX.

EPILOGUE.

About a year after Paul and Leonore were married, they received a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Valentine Purcell, travelling in all the state that money could buy and ingenuity devise.

Val was glorious: even prouder of his new wife's cleverness than he had been of her predecessor's beauty. Marietta was superb: there never was such a woman; managed everything—ran the entire show. He was allowed a tailor's bill though,—and he looked down at a new suit with all his old complacency.

He was perfectly easy, happy, and friendly. He had not an awkward remembrance, nor an uncomfortable sensation.

It was splendid to be among his dear old friends again, and to find them all so fit; Mere Hall was

a delightful place, and he was awfully glad that it was Sue's home too.

He did wish that he could get them all out to California. Sue ought really to see California. If she would hop across the pond, he would meet her himself in New York, and take her across the Rockies in his own car. He and his wife always travelled in their own car.

As for Paul and Leo, of course *they* were coming, but Sue—he had a sly whisper for Leo's ear anent Sue. "What about Salt Lake City? That would be Sue's chance: those Mormons are awful jossers for wives. I never let Marietta within a hundred miles of 'em. You send old Sue out to me, Leo."

Paul he speedily pronounced the best fellow in the world—taking him as an entirely new personage. Paul's alterations in the house were a triumph of architecture, and the steeple he was adding to the church a masterpiece.

"Quite right to look after the church," said Val, seriously. "I always take care that Marietta goes to church, and she's come rather to like it. Now that she has been here, she says she's going to be more religious, and I daresay I shall too. It's so awfully jolly to live as you and Paul do, you know."

Another day he was alone with his old playmate, and raised his head after a reverie.

"So you and Paul got each other after all, Leo?"

Leo, who was dressing a bowl with roses, dropped one, and looked attentively at the speaker.

"Got each other after all, Val?"

"Oh, don't you come the innocent over me, Mrs. Stubbs—Mrs. Foster, I mean. I know you and your tricks. You are just the same little wag you always were—but I know you. And I know about you and Paul too."

"Know about us? What about us?"—quickly.

"Tell you if you like. I was in the woods that day. I was going home from shooting and heard a row,—so then I crept along to see what was up, and hid behind some big hollies; and there you were, you and Paul, holding each other's hands, and shouting into each other's faces!"

"Did you—did you hear what we said, Val?"

"Lord, no—though I tried all I could. And what the dickens made you speak so loud—you, especially—I could not imagine. If I hadn't had to keep dark behind the beastly bushes, I could have heard every word. Anyhow I heard enough—and saw enough—to know what you were up to."

He paused.

"And I was mad with you both, Leo. Because, you see, it wasn't Queensberry—however it's all right now."

"And it was you who told Maud?"

"Why, of course," said Val, simply.

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