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A SEARCH FOR A SECRET.

A Novel.

BY G. A. HENTY.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

EARLY DAYS.

There are towns over which time seems to exercise but little power, but to have passed them by forgotten, in his swift course. Everywhere else, at his touch, all is changed. Great cities rise upon the site of fishing villages; huge factories, with their smoky chimneys grow up and metamorphose quiet towns into busy hives of industry; while other cities, once prosperous and flourishing, sink into insignificance; and the passer by, as he wanders through their deserted streets, wonders and laments over the ruin which has fallen upon them.

But the towns of which I am speaking—and of which there are but few now left in England, and these, with hardly an exception, cathedral towns—seem to suffer no such change. They neither progress nor fall back. If left behind, they are not beaten in the race, for they have never entered upon it; but are content to rest under the shelter of their tall spires and towers; to seek for no change and to meet with none; but to remain beloved, as no other towns are loved, by those who have long known them—assimilating, as it were, the very natures of those who dwell in them, to their own sober, neutral tints.

In these towns, a wanderer who has left them as a boy, returning as an old, old man, will see but little change—a house gone here, another nearly similar built in its place; a greyer tint upon the stone; a tree fallen in the old close; the ivy climbing a little higher upon the crumbling wall;—these are all, or nearly all, the changes which he will see. The trains rush past, bearing their countless passengers, who so rarely think of stopping there, that the rooks, as they hold their grave conversations in their nests in the old elm-trees, cease to break off, even for a moment, at the sound of the distant whistle. The very people seem, although this is but seeming, to have changed as little as the place: the same names are over the shop doors—the boy who was at school has taken his grand-sire's place, and stands at his door, looking down the quiet street as the old man used to do before him; the dogs are asleep in the sunny corners they formerly loved; and the same horses seem to be lazily drawing the carts, with familiar names upon them, into the old market-place. The wanderer may almost fancy that he has awoke from a long, troubled dream. It is true that if he enters the little churchyard, he will see, beneath the dark shadows of the yew-trees, more gravestones than there were of old; but the names are so similar, that it is only upon reading them over, that he will find that it is true after all, and that the friends and playfellows of his childhood, the strong, merry boys, and the fair girls with sunny ringlets, sleep peacefully there. But it is not full yet; and he may hope that, when his time shall come, there may be some quiet nook found, where, even as a child, he may have fancied that he would like some day to rest.

Among these cities pre-eminent, as a type of its class, is the town in which I now sit down to recount the past events of my life, and of the lives of those most dear to me—not egotistically, I hope, nor thrusting my own story, in which, indeed, there is little enough, into view; but telling of those I have known and lived with, as I have noted the events down in my journal, and at times, when the things I speak of are related merely on hearsay, dropping that dreadful personal pronoun which will get so prominent, and telling the story as it was told to me.

Although not born at Canterbury, I look upon it as my native town, my city of adoption. My earliest remembrances are of the place; my childhood and youth were spent there; and, although I was then for a few years absent, it was for that stormy, stirring time, when life is wrapped up in persons and not in places, when the mere scene in which the drama is played out leaves barely an impression upon the mind, so all-absorbing is the interest in the performers. That time over, I returned to Canterbury as to my home, and hope, beneath the shadow of its stately towers, to pass tranquilly down the hill of life, whose ascent I there made with such eager, strong young steps.

Dear old Canterbury! It is indeed a town to love with all one's heart, as it lies, sleeping, as it were, amidst its circle of smiling hop-covered hills, with its glorious cathedral looking so solemnly down upon it, with its quiet courts, its shady, secluded nooks and corners, its quaint, old-fashioned houses, with their many gables and projecting eaves, and its crumbling but still lofty walls, it gives me somehow the idea of a perfect haven of rest and peace. It, like me, has seen its stormy times: Briton, Dane, and Saxon have struggled fiercely before its walls. It, too, has had its proud dreams, its lofty aspirations; but they are all over now, and it is, like myself, contented to pass its days in quiet, resting upon its old associations, and with neither wish nor anticipation of change in the tranquil tenour of its way.

I was not, as I have said, born in the town, but went there very young—so young that I have no remembrance of any earlier time.

We lived in a large, rambling, old-fashioned house in a back lane. In a little court before it stood some lime-trees, which, if they helped to make the front darker and more dismal than it would otherwise have been, had the good effect of shutting it out from the bad company into which it had fallen.

It had at one time been a place of great pretension, and belonged, doubtless, to some country magnate, and before the little houses in the narrow lane had sprung up and hemmed it in, it may have had a cheerful appearance; but, at the time I speak of, the external aspect was undeniably gloomy. But behind it was very different. There was a lawn and large garden, at the end of which the Stour flowed quietly along, and we children were never tired of watching the long streamer-like green weeds at the bottom waving gently in the current, and the trout darting here and there among them, or lying immovable, apparently watching us, until at the slightest noise or motion they would dart away too quickly for the eye to follow them.

Inside, it was a glorious home for us, with its great old-fashioned hall with dark wainscoting and large stags' heads all round it, which seemed to be watching us children from their eyeless sockets; and its vast fireplace, with iron dogs, where, in the old days, a fire sufficient for the roasting of a whole bullock, might have been piled up; with its grand staircase, with heavy oak balustrades, lit by a great window large enough for an ordinary church; with its long passages and endless turnings and backstairs in unexpected places; with all its low, quaint rooms of every shape except square, and its closets nearly as large as rooms.

Oh, it was a delightful house! But very terrible at dusk. Then we would not have gone along alone those long, dark passages for worlds; for we knew that the bogies, and other strange things of which our old nurse told us, would be sure to be lurking and upon the watch.

It was a wonderful house for echoes, and at night we would steal from our beds and creep to the top of the grand staircase, and listen, with hushed breath, to the almost preternaturally loud tick of the old clock in the hall, which seemed to us to get louder and louder, till at last the terrors of the place would be almost too much for us, and, at the sound of some mouse running behind the wainscoting, we would scamper off to our beds, and bury our heads beneath the clothes, falling into a troubled sleep, from which we woke, with terrified starts, until the welcome approach of day, when, as the sun shone brightly in, we would pluck up courage and laugh at our night's fright.

Of my quite young days I have not much to say. My brother Harry, who was two years older than I, went to the King's School; and Polly—who was as much my junior—and I were supposed to learn lessons from our mother. Poor mamma! not much learning, I think, did we get from her. She was always weak and ailing, and had but little strength or spirits to give to teaching us. When I was twelve, and Polly consequently ten, we had a governess in of a day, to teach us and keep us in order; but I am afraid that she found it hard work, for we were sadly wild, noisy girls—at least, this was the opinion of our unmarried aunts, who came to stay periodically with us.

I have not yet spoken of my father, my dear, dear father. How we loved him, and how he loved us, I cannot even now trust myself to write. As I sit at my desk his portrait hangs on the wall before me, and he seems to be looking down with that bright genial eye, that winning smile which he wore in life. Not only by us was he loved, almost adored, but all who came in contact with him were attracted in a similar way. To rich or poor, ill or in health, to all with whom he was in any way associated, he was friend and adviser. A large man and somewhat portly, with iron-grey hair, cut short, and brushed upright off his forehead, a rather dark complexion, a heavy eyebrow, a light-blue eye, very clear and penetrating, and the whole face softened and brightened by his genial smile. Very kind and sympathetic to the poor, the sick, and the erring; pitilessly severe upon meanness, hypocrisy, and vice. He was a man of great scientific attainments, and his study was crowded with books and instruments which related to his favourite pursuits. Upon the shelves were placed models of steam-engines, electrical machines, galvanic batteries, air-pumps, microscopes, chemical apparatus, and numberless other models and machinery of which we could not even guess the uses. Thick volumes of botanical specimens jostled entomological boxes and cases, butterfly-nets leant in the corner with telescopes, retorts stood beneath the table, the drawers of which were filled with a miscellaneous collection indescribable.

With us children he was firm, yet very kind, ever ready to put aside his work to amuse us, especially of a winter's evening, when, dinner over, he always went into his study, to which we would creep, knock gently at the door, and when allowed to enter, would sit on stools by his side, looking into the fire, while he told us marvellous tales of enchanters and fairies. It was at these times, when we had been particularly good—or at least when he, who was as glad of an excuse to amuse us as we were to be amused, pretended that we had been so—that he would take down his chemicals, or electrical apparatus, and show us startling or pretty experiments, ending perhaps by entrapping one of us into getting an unexpected electric shock, and then sending us all laughing up to bed.

We always called papa Dr. Ashleigh in company. It was one of mamma's fancies: she called him so herself, and was very strict about our doing the same upon grand occasions. We did not like it, and I don't think papa did either, for he would often make a little funny grimace, as he generally did when anything rather put him out; but as mamma set her mind upon it so much, he never made any remark or objection. He was very, very kind to her, and attentive to her wishes, and likes and dislikes; but their tastes and characters were as dissimilar as it was possible for those of any two persons to be.

She was very fond of papa, and was in her way proud to see him so much looked up to and admired by other people; but I do not think that she appreciated him for himself as it were, and would have been far happier had he been a common humdrum country doctor. She could not understand his devotion to science, his eager inquiry into every novelty of the day, and his disregard for society in the ordinary sense of the word; still less could she understand his untiring zeal in his profession. Why he should be willing to be called up in the middle of a winter's night, get upon his horse, and ride ten miles into the country on a sudden summons to some patient, perhaps so poor that to ask payment for his visit never even entered into the Doctor's mind, was a thing she could not understand. Home, and home cares occupied all her thoughts, and it was to her inexpressibly annoying, when, after taking extreme care to have the nicest little dinner in readiness for his return from work, he would come in an hour late, be perfectly unconcerned at his favourite dish being spoilt, and, indeed, be so completely absorbed in the contemplation of some critical case in his day's practice, as not even to notice what there

was for dinner, but to eat mechanically whatsoever was put before him.

Mamma must have been a very pretty woman when she married Dr. Ashleigh. Pretty is exactly the word which suits her style of face. A very fair complexion, a delicate colour, a slight figure, light hair, which then fell in curls, but which she now wore in bands, with a pretty apology for a cap on the back of her head. She had not much colour left when I first remember her, unless it came in a sudden flush; but she was still, we thought, very pretty, although so delicate-looking. She lay upon the sofa most of the day, and would seldom have quitted it, had she not been so restlessly anxious about the various household and nursery details, that every quarter of an hour she would be off upon a tour of inspection and supervision through the house. She was very particular about our dress and manners, and I am sure loved us very much; but from her weak state of health she could not have us long with her at a time.

It was one bright summer afternoon, I remember well, when I was rather more than fourteen years old, we had finished our early dinner, Harry had started for school, and we had taken our books and gone out to establish ourselves in our favourite haunt, the summer-house at the end of the garden. This summer-house was completely covered with creepers, which climbed all over the roof, and hung in thick festoons and clusters, almost hiding the woodwork, and making it a perfect leafy bower; only towards the river we kept it clear. It was so charming to sit there with our toys or our work and watch the fish, the drifting weeds and fallen leaves, to wonder which would get out of sight first, and whether they would catch in the wooden piles of the bridge,—for there was a bridge over from our garden into the fields beyond, where our cow Brindle was kept, and where our horses were sometimes turned out to graze, and make holiday. It was a very happy and peaceful spot. When we were little, the summer-house was our fairy bower; here we could play with our dolls, and be queens and princesses without fear of interruption, and sometimes when Harry was with us, we would be Robinson Crusoes wrecked on a desert island; here we would store up provisions, and make feasts, here we would find footprints in the sand, and here above all we would wage desperate battles with imaginary fleets of canoes full of savages endeavouring to cross the stream. Harry would stand courageously in front, and we girls carefully concealing ourselves from the enemy, would keep him supplied with stones from the magazine, with which he would pour volleys into the water, to the imaginary terror of the savages, and the real alarm of our friends the fish. With what zeal did we throw ourselves into these fights, with what excited shouts and cries, and what delight we felt when Harry proclaimed the victory complete and the enemy in full flight!

As time went on, and the dolls were given up, and we could no longer believe in savages, and began to think romping and throwing stones unladylike, although at times very pleasant, the summer-house became our reading-room, and at last, after we had a governess, our schoolroom in fine weather. This was not obtained without some opposition upon the part of mamma, who considered it as an irregular sort of proceeding; but we coaxed papa into putting in a good word for us, and then mamma, who was only too glad to see us happy, gave in at once. We had but just gone out, and after a look down at the river and the fish, and across at the pretty country beyond, had opened our books with a little sigh of regret, when we heard a footstep coming down the garden and to our surprise found it was papa.

"Now girls," he said, "put on your things as quickly as you can. I am going over to Mr. Harmer at Sturry, and will take you with me. First though, we must ask mamma's leave. I have no doubt Miss Harrison here, will be as glad of a holiday as you are."

Mamma, however, although she seldom opposed any of papa's plans for our amusement, raised many objections. Indeed, I had for some time past noticed that she did not like our visiting at Harmer Place. Upon this occasion she was particularly averse to our going, and said that I "was getting too old to associate with a person of such extraordinary antecedents as——."

We did not hear who the person was, for papa broke in more sternly than I had ever before heard him speak to mamma, and said that "he differed from her entirely: for his part he could see no harm whatever in our going, and that, at any rate until we were of an age to judge for ourselves, no question of the sort could arise."

Mamma, directly she saw he was in earnest, said no more, and we set out soon afterwards, with the understanding that we should most probably not be back until evening.

Although neither Polly nor I ever made any remark to each other about that conversation, we—or at least I can answer for myself—were not the less astonished at it. It seemed perfectly inexplicable to me. What objection could there be to our going to the Harmers? I was, as I have said, past fourteen, and was beginning to think and reason about all sorts of things, and this was a problem which I tried in vain for a long time to solve to my satisfaction. How I pondered the matter over in every light, but ever without success. Mamma had said it was a person. Now, person generally means a woman, and the only women at Harmer Place were the two Miss Harmers. Had it been a principle mamma objected to, I could have understood it, for the Miss Harmers were bigoted Catholics. Not that that would have made any difference with papa, who looked at these matters with a very latitudinarian eye. "In my opinion," I have heard him say, "the sect to which a man belongs makes but little difference, if he does but do his best according to his belief."

And I remember that in after years, when we had suffered much, he warned us not to blame a creed for the acts of its professors. "History has shown," he would say, "that a bigot, whether he be Catholic, Protestant, or Mussulman, will be equally a cruel persecutor of others, equally ready

to sacrifice everything which he believes to stand in the way of his Church."

I mention this here because I should be very sorry that the feelings of any one who may ever come to read this story of mine should be hurt, or that it should be taken to be an attack or even an implication against a particular form of worship.

I knew then that although papa objected to the extreme opinions which the Miss Harmers held, and which had been caused by the exceptional life which they had led, still the antecedents, to which mamma alluded, could be no question of religion. And yet the only other female at Harmer Place was Sophy Needham, the pretty girl we so often met there. She was an orphan village child, to whom Mr. Harmer had taken such a fancy that he had sent her, at his own expense, to a London school, and had her constantly staying at the house with him. But, of course, it could not be Sophy; for I was quite sure that the fact of her having been a village girl would not make the slightest difference in either papa's or mamma's eyes, so far as our associating with her went; and in other respects there could be no objection, for she was a particularly quiet, retiring girl, and was two years older than myself.

The objection, then, did not appear to apply to any one at Harmer Place, and I puzzled myself in vain upon the subject; and indeed it was not for some years afterwards that the mystery was solved, or that I found out that it was indeed Sophy Needham to whom mamma had alluded. There is no reason why I should make a mystery of it in this journal of mine, which will be more easily understood by making the matter clear at once, and I will therefore, before I go on with my own story, relate the history of the Harmers as nearly as I can as it was told to me.

CHAPTER II.

THE HARMERS OF HARMER PLACE.

The Harmers of Harmer Place, although of ancient descent, could yet hardly be ranked among the very old Kentish families, for they could trace back their history very little beyond the commencement of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, of pious and Protestant memory. About that period it is ascertained that they were small landed proprietors, probably half gentry, half farmers. All documentary and traditional history goes to prove that the Harmers of those days were a stiff-necked race, and that their consciences were by no means of the same plastic nature as those of the great majority of their neighbours. They could not, for the life of them, see why—because the Royal family had all of a sudden come to the conclusion that the old Roman religion, in which their fore-fathers had for so many centuries worshipped, was after all wrong, that therefore the whole nation was bound to make the same discovery at the same moment.

So the Harmers clung to the old faith, and were looked upon with grievous disfavour in consequence by the authorities for the time being. Many were the domiciliary visits paid them, and grievous were the fines inflicted upon them for nonconformity. Still, whether from information privately sent to them previous to these researches, or whether from the superior secrecy and snugness of their "Priest's chamber," certain it is, that although frequently denounced and searched, no priest or emissary of papacy was ever found concealed there; and so, although constantly harassed and vexed, they were suffered to remain in possession of their estate.

As generation of Harmers succeeded generation, they continued the same stiff-necked race, clinging to their old tenets, and hardening their hearts to all inducements to desert them. Over and over again they went through "troublous times," especially when those God-fearing and enlightened Puritans domineered it over England. In after reigns difficulties arose, but the days of persecution were over then, and they had nothing to undergo comparable to their former trials.

It would have been naturally supposed that as at the commencement of the reign of Elizabeth the Harmers were by no means a wealthy race, they would speedily have been shorn of all the little property they then possessed. But it was not so. The more they were persecuted so much the more they flourished, and from mere farmers they speedily rose to the rank of county families.

One reason, doubtless, for their immunity from more than comparatively petty persecutions, such as fines and imprisonments, was, that the Harmers never took any part in political affairs; neither in plots, nor risings, nor civil wars, were they ever known actively to interfere.

As the Harmers were in other respects an obstinate, quarrelsome race, stubborn in will, strong in their likes and dislikes, it was singular that they should never have actively bestirred themselves in favour of the cause which they all had so strongly at heart. The popular belief on the matter was, that a settled and traditional line of policy had been recommended, and enforced upon the family, by their priests; namely, to keep quite neutral in politics, in order that there might be at least one house in the country—and that, from its proximity to the sea-coast, peculiarly suitable to the purpose,—where, in cases of necessity, a secure hiding-place could be relied on. Mother Church is very good to her obedient children; and if the Harmers gave up their personal feelings for her benefit, and sheltered her ministers in time of peril, she no doubt took care that in the long run they should not be losers. And so, while their Roman Catholic neighbours threw

themselves into plots and parties, and lost house and land, and not uncommonly life, the Harmers rode quietly through the gale, thriving more and more under the small persecutions they suffered for the faith's sake. And thus it happened that going into troubles as small proprietors in the reign of Elizabeth, they came out of them in that of George, owners of a large estate and a rambling old mansion in every style of architecture.

After that date, persecution having ceased, and "Priests' chambers" being no longer useful, the Harmers ceased to enlarge their boundaries, and lived retired lives on their property, passing a considerable portion of their time on the Continent.

Robert Harmer had, contrary to the usual custom of his ancestors, six children—four sons and two daughters. Edward was, of course, intended to inherit the family property, and was brought up in accordance with the strictest traditions of his race; Robert was also similarly educated, in order to be fitted to take his brother's place should Edward not survive his father, or die leaving no heirs; Gregory was intended for the priesthood; and Herbert, the youngest of all, was left to take his chance in any position which the influence of his family or Church might obtain for him.

Herbert Harmer, however, was not so ready as the rest of his family to submit his judgment without question to that of others; and having, when about sixteen, had what he conceived an extremely heavy and unfair penance imposed upon him for some trifling offence, he quitted his home, leaving a letter behind him stating his intention of never returning to it. Herbert Harmer was not of the stuff of which a docile son of Holy Church is made; of a warm and affectionate disposition, and a naturally buoyant, joyous frame of mind, the stern and repressive discipline to which he was subjected, and the monotonous existence he led in his father's house, seemed to him the height of misery.

The lad, when he turned his back on home, knew little of the world. He had lived the life almost of a recluse, never stirring beyond the grounds of the mansion except to attend mass at the Roman Catholic chapel at Canterbury, and this only upon grand occasions, as the family confessor, who acted also as his tutor, resided in the village, and ordinarily performed the service at the chapel attached to the place.

Companions he had none. Gregory, the brother next to him in age, was away in Italy studying for the priesthood; Cecilia and Angela he had seen but seldom, as they also were abroad, being educated in a convent; Edward and Robert were young men nearly ten years older than himself, and were when at home his father's companions rather than his, and both were of grave taciturn disposition, ascetic and bigoted even beyond the usual Harmer type.

Thrown therefore almost entirely upon his own resources, Herbert had sought what companionship he best could. Books, first and best; but of these his stock was limited. Religious and controversial treatises, church histories, and polemical writings formed the principal part of the library, together with a few volumes of travel and biography which had somehow found their way there. On a library so limited as this the boy could not employ his whole time, but had to seek amusement and exercise out of doors, and the only companion he had there, was perhaps of all others the very one with whom he would have been most strictly forbidden to associate, had their intimacy been guessed at.

Robert Althorpe was the son of a tenant on the estate, and was a man of thirty or thereabouts. Originally a wild, reckless lad, he had, as many an English boy has done before and since, ran away to sea, and, after nearly fifteen years absence, had lately returned with only one arm, having lost the other in a naval engagement. On his return he had been received with open arms by his father, as at that time (that is, in the year 1795) all England was wild with our naval glory. And now Robert Althorpe passed his time, sitting by the fire smoking, or wandering about to relate his tales of adventure among the farmhouses of the country, at each of which he was received as a welcome guest.

The sailor took a particular fancy to young Herbert Harmer, whose ignorance of the world and eager desire to hear something of it, and whose breathless attention to his yarns, amused and gratified him. On many a summer afternoon, then, when Herbert had finished his prescribed course of study, he would slip quietly away to meet Robert Althorpe, and would sit for hours under the trees listening to tales of the world and life of which he knew so little. Robert had in his period of service seen much; for those were stirring times. He had taken part in the victories of Howe and Jervis, and in the capture of the numerous West Indian isles. He had fought, too, under the invincible Nelson at the Nile, in which battle he had lost his arm. He had been stationed for two years out on the Indian coast, and Herbert above all loved to hear of that wonderful country, then the recent scene of the victories of Clive and Hastings.

When therefore he left his home, the one fixed idea in Herbert Harmer's mind was, that first of all he would go to sea, and that then he would some day visit India; both which resolutions he carried into effect.

It was some ten years after, when the memory of the young brother of whom they had seen so little had nearly faded from the minds of his family, that a letter arrived from him, addressed to his father, but which was opened by his brother Edward as the head of the house, the old man having been three years before laid in the family vault. Gregory too was dead, having died years previously of a fever contracted among the marshes near Rome. The contents of the letter, instead of being hailed with the delight with which news from a long lost prodigal is usually greeted, were received with unmingled indignation and horror.

A solemn family conclave was held in the old library, Edward Harmer at the head of the table, Father Paul at the foot, and the contents of the letter were taken into formal consideration. A joint answer was then drawn up, stating the horror and indignation with which his communication had been received—that the anathema had been passed against him, that to them he was dead for ever, and that they regretted that he had ever been born at all.

All this was expressed at great length, and with that exceedingly complicated bitterness of cursing, which is a characteristic of the Roman Church when roused. At the end, each of the family signed his or her name, and the priest added his, with a cross affixed there to, as a token for ever against him.

The contents of the letter which had caused all this commotion of spirit, were briefly as follows.

Herbert had gone to sea, and had for two years voyaged to different parts of the world. At the end of that time he had arrived in India, and there leaving his ship, had determined to cast his lot. After various employments, he had finally obtained a situation as a clerk to a planter up the country, whose daughter he had three years afterwards married; he was now doing well, and hoped that his father would forgive his having ran away from home.

So far the letter was satisfactory enough, it was the final paragraph which had caused the explosion of family wrath against him—namely, that his wife was a Protestant, and that having carefully examined the Bible with her, he had come to the conclusion that the Reformed Church more closely carried out the precepts and teachings of that book than his own. That he was afraid this would prove a serious annoyance to his father; but that, as he was so far away, and should never be likely to return to obtrude the new religion he had adopted upon them, he hoped that it would be no bar to his continuing an amicable correspondence with them.

This hope was, as has been seen, not destined to be realized. The answer was sealed and duly sent off, and henceforth Herbert Harmer, as far as his family was concerned, ceased to have any existence. It was nearly twenty years before they again heard of him, and then the news came that he had returned to England, a widower, bringing his only son, a young man of about twenty-one years old, with him; that he had purchased a house in the neighbourhood of London, and that he did not intend to return to India.

Very shortly after his return, a letter from him was received by his elder brother, but immediately it was opened, and the first line showed from whom it came, it was closed unread, resealed, and returned to the writer.

During the thirty years which Herbert Harmer had been absent, the old place had certainly not improved. Edward and Robert had both been married, but were, like their brother, widowers. Edward never had children. Robert had several born to him, but all had died quite young. The sisters had remained single.

It was a gloomy house in those days. They all lived together there. Father Paul was long since dead, and Father Gabriel literally reigned in his stead—a man even more gloomy and bigoted than his predecessors—chosen probably on that account, as being in keeping with the character of the people to whom he ministered. An unhappy family; unhappy in their lives and dispositions, unhappy in the view they had taken of religion and its duties, very unhappy—and this was the only count to which they themselves would have pleaded guilty—very unhappy because the old line of Harmer would die with them, and that there was none of the name to inherit after them; for that Herbert the apostate should succeed them, that a Protestant Harmer should dwell where his Catholic ancestors had so long lived, was never even for a moment discussed as a possibility: the very idea would have been a desecration, at which their dead fathers would have moved in their graves. Better, a thousand times better, that the old place should go to strangers. And so Edward's will was made; everything was done that could be done, and they dwelt in gloomy resignation, waiting for the end.

That end was to come to some of them sooner than they expected.

Edward and Robert Harmer had one interest, one worldly amusement, in which they indulged. As young men they had been for some time together at Genoa, and in that town of mariners they had become passionately attached to the sea. This taste they had never lost, and they still delighted occasionally to go out for a day's sailing, in a small pleasure yacht, which they kept at the little fishing-village of Herne Bay. She was an open boat, of about eight tons, and was considered a good sea-boat for her size. In this, with two men to sail her, under the command of an old one-armed sailor, whom they employed because he had once lived on the estate, they would go out for hours, once a week or so; not on fine sunny days—in them they had no pleasure—but when the wind blew fresh, and the waves broke a tawny yellow on the sand, and the long banks off the coast were white with foaming breakers. It was a strange sight in such weather, to see the two men, now from fifty to sixty years old, and very similar in face and figure, taking their places in the stern of their little craft, while the boatmen, in their rough-weather coats and fearnought hats, hoisted the sails and prepared for sea.

Very quiet they would sit, while the spray dashed over them, and the boat tore across the surface of the water, with a smile half glad, half defiant, on their dark features, till the one-armed captain would say, touching his hat, "It is getting wilder, your honours; I think we had better put about." Then they would give an assenting gesture, and the boat's head would be turned to shore, where they would arrive, wet through and storm-beaten, but with a deep joy in their hearts, such as they experienced at no other time.

But once they went out, and came back alive no more. It happened thus. It was the 3rd of March, and the morning was overcast and dull; there was wind, though not strong, coming in short sudden puffs, and then dying away again. The brothers started early, and drove over, through the village of Herne, to the little fishing-hamlet in the bay, and stopped at the cottage of the captain, as he termed himself, of their little yacht. The old sailor came out to the door.

"You are not thinking of going out to-day, your honours, are you?"

"Why not?" Edward Harmer asked; "don't you think there will be wind enough?"

"Aye, aye, your honour, wind enough, and more than enough before long; there is a gale brewing up there;" and the old man shaded his eyes with his remaining hand, and looked earnestly at the clouds.

"Pooh, pooh, man!" Robert Harmer said; "there is no wind to speak of yet, although I think with you that it may come on to blow as the sun goes down. What then? It is nearly easterly, so if we sail straight out we can always turn and run back again before the sea gets up high enough to prevent us. You know we are always ready to return when you give the word."

The old sailor made no further remonstrance, but summoning the two young men who generally accompanied them, he busied himself in carrying down the oars, and making preparations to launch the little boat which was to carry them to where the yacht was moored about a hundred yards out, with many quiet disapproving shakes of his head as he did so. They were soon in, and launched through the waves, which were breaking with a long, heavy, menacing roar. It was not rough yet, but even in the quarter of an hour which had elapsed between their arrival at the village, and reaching the side of the yacht, the aspect of the weather had changed much; the gusts of wind came more frequently, and with far greater force, whitening the surface of the water, and tearing off the tops of the waves in sheets of spray. The dull heavy clouds overhead were beginning to break up suddenly, as if stirred by some mighty force within themselves, great openings and rents seemed torn asunder in the dark curtain, and then as suddenly closed up again; but through these momentary openings, the scud could be seen flying rapidly past in the higher regions of the air.

On reaching the side of the yacht, which was rolling heavily on the rising waves, the one-armed sailor again glanced at the brothers to see if they noticed these ominous signs, and if they made any change in their determination; but they gave no signs of doing so. Their faces were both set in that expression of stern pleasure which they always wore on occasions like this, and with another disapproving shake of his head, even more decided than those in which he had before indulged, he turned to assist the men in fastening the boat they had come in to the moorings to await their return, in loosing the sails, and taking a couple of reefs in them, and preparing for a start.

In another five minutes the little craft was far out at sea, ploughing her way through the ever increasing waves, dashing them aside from her bows in sheets of spray, and leaving a broad white track behind her.

The wind was getting up every minute, and blew with a hoarse roar across the water.

Before they had been gone fifteen minutes, the old sailor felt that it was indeed madness to go farther. He saw that the force of the wind was already more than the boat could bear, and was momentarily increasing, and that the sea was fast getting up under its power.

But as his counsel had been already once disregarded, he determined to let the first order for return come from the brothers, and he glanced for a moment from the sails and the sea to the two men sitting beside him. There was no thought of turning back there. Their lips were hard set, yet half smiling; their eyes wide open, as if to take in the tumultuous joy of the scene; their hands lay clenched on their knees. They had evidently no thought of danger, no thought of anything but deep, wild pleasure.

The old sailor bit his lips. He looked again over the sea, he looked at the sails, and at the lads crouched down in the bow with consternation strongly expressed on their faces; he glanced at the dark green water, rushing past the side, and sometimes as she lay over combing in over the gunwale; he felt the boat quiver under the shock as each succeeding wave struck her, and he knew she could bear no more. He therefore again turned round to the impassive figures beside him, and made his usual speech.

"Your honours, it is time to go about."

But this time so absorbed were they in their sensations, that they did not hear him, and he had to touch them to attract their notice, and to shout in their ears, "Your honours, we must go about."

They started at the touch, and rose like men waked suddenly from a dream. They cast a glance round, and seemed to take in for the first time the real state of things, the raging wind, the flying scud, the waves which rose round the boat, and struck her with a force that threatened to break her into fragments. And then Edward said, "Yes! by all means, if indeed it is not already too late. God forgive us for bringing you out into it; *peccavi, culpa mea*." And then the brothers, influenced not by fear for themselves, but for the lives of those whom they had brought into danger, commenced rapidly uttering, in a low voice, the prayers of their Church for those in peril.

The prayer was never to be finished. The men sprang with alacrity to the ropes when the order

was given, "Prepare to go about;" but whether their fingers were numb, or what it was which went wrong, no one will ever know. The boat obeyed her rudder, and came up into the wind. There was a momentary lull, and then as her head payed round towards the shore, a fresh gust struck her with even greater force than ever. Some rope refused to run, it was but for an instant, but that instant sealed the fate of the boat; over she lay till her sail all but touched the water, and the sea poured in over her side. For a moment she seemed to try to recover herself, and then a wild cry went up to heaven, and the boat lay bottom upwards in the trough of the waves.

CHAPTER III.

"L'HOMME PROPOSE, DIEU DISPOSE."

Mr. Herbert Harmer was sitting at breakfast reading the *Times*,—a tall, slight man, of from forty-five to fifty, with a benevolent expressive face, very sunburnt; a broad forehead, a well-defined mouth, and a soft, thoughtful eye—careless as to attire, as most Anglo-Indians are, and yet, in appearance as in manner, an unmistakable gentleman.

Opposite to him sat his son, good-looking, but not so prepossessing a man as his father. He was about twenty-two, and looked, contrary to what might have been expected from his birth and bringing up in a hot climate, younger than he really was. His complexion was very fair, an inheritance probably from his mother, as all the Harmers were dark: his face, too, was much less bronzed than his father's, the year he had spent in England having nearly effaced the effects of the Indian sun. He was of about middle height, and well formed; but he had a languid, listless air, which detracted much from the manliness of his appearance. His face was a good-looking, almost a handsome one, and yet it gave the impression of there being something wanting. That something was character. The mouth and chin were weak and indecisive—not absolutely bad, only weak,—but it was sufficient to mar the general effect of his face.

He was toying with a spoon, balancing it on the edge of an empty coffee cup, when a sudden exclamation from his father startled him, and the spoon fell with a crash.

"What is the matter?"

Mr. Harmer gave no answer for some time, but continued to read in silence the paragraph which had so strangely excited him. He presently laid the paper down on his knees, seemed lost for some time in deep thought, and then took out his handkerchief and blew his nose violently.

"My dear father," the young man said, for once fairly roused by all this emotion and mystery, "what in the name of goodness is the matter? You quite alarm me. The bank has not broken, has it? or anything terrible happened?"

"A very sad affair, Gerald; a very sad affair. Your uncles are both drowned."

"By Jove!"

This being the only appropriate remark that occurred to Gerald Harmer, there was silence again; and then, seeing that his father was not disposed to say more, the young man stretched out his hand for the paper, and read the paragraph which contained the intelligence.

> "Appalling Accident On The Kentish Coast.—The neighbourhood of Canterbury has been thrown into a state of consternation by an accident which has deprived one of the oldest and most highly-respected families in the county of its heads. The two Messrs. Harmer, of Harmer Place, near Canterbury, had rashly ventured out from Herne Bay, with three boatmen, in a small yacht belonging to them, just before the awful tempest, which while we write is still raging, broke upon the coast. The storm came on so rapidly that it is supposed that they were unable to return. At present nothing certain is known concerning the catastrophe; but late in the afternoon, a small black object was observed by one of the Whitstable coast-guard men, drifting past at a considerable distance from shore. A telescope being brought to bear upon it, it was at once seen to be either a large spar or a boat bottom upwards, with a human figure still clinging to it. In spite of the fury of the gale, a band of noble fellows put off in one of the large fishing-boats, and succeeded in bringing off the only survivor of the five men who had embarked in the ill-fated craft. He proved to be the sailor who generally managed Mr. Harmer's little yacht. He is a one-armed man, and this fact, singularly enough, was the means of his life being saved; for he had succeeded in fastening the hook at the end of his wooden arm so firmly in the keel of the yacht, that, even after his strength had failed, and he could no longer have clung on, this singular contrivance remained secure, and kept him in his place, in spite of all the violence of the waves. He was nearly insensible when first rescued, and still lies in a precarious state, and has not yet been able to give any details of the mournful catastrophe. The bodies of the elder Mr. Harmer, and of one of the boatmen, were washed ashore this morning, and experienced sailors anticipate that the remaining bodies will come ashore with this evening's tide. Several men are on the look-out for them. The Harmers of Harmer Place are one of the oldest of the Kentish families, and were strict adherents to the Romish persuasion. It is

believed that no male heir remains, and it is confidently stated that the large property will go eventually towards the aggrandisement of the Church to which they belonged."

"Is that last part true?" Gerald asked. "Do we get the property, or does it go to the priests?"

"We shall have none of it, Gerald: of that you may be quite sure. The priests have taken good care of that point. They would never allow the property to fall into Protestant hands if they could help it; and my poor brothers were, as far as I can hear, mere puppets in their hands. No, there is not the least chance of that. I do not say that it would not have been useful had it been otherwise; for, as you know, owing to the troubles and riots I lost a good deal of money the last three years we were in India; and although I have enough left for us to live upon comfortably, Harmer Place would have been no bad addition. However, that was not to be. I have always known that there was not be the slightest probability of such a thing, so I shall feel no disappointment about the matter."

"Do you mean to go down to the funeral?" Gerald asked.

"Yes. Yes, I shall go, certainly. My poor brothers and I have never been friends; have not seen each other for thirty years; indeed, even as a boy I saw next to nothing of them; however, the least I can do is to follow them to the grave. I shall go down to-morrow." After a pause, Mr. Harmer added, "I shall get Ransome to go down with me to be present at the reading of the will. I know it is of no use, as everything is sure to be done in legal form; still, as I have no desire to lose even the remotest chance of saving from the priests a property that has been in the hands of the family for centuries, I will take every possible precaution. I shall therefore take Ransome down with me. I think you may as well stay here until I return: it will be a painful and unpleasant business."

Gerald had not the least wish to go. "He saw no advantage in putting himself in the way of being snubbed, perhaps insulted, and only to see a fine property that ought to come to them handed over to found monasteries and convents."

So on the next morning Herbert Harmer, or Mr. Harmer, as he should now be called, took his seat on the top of the Canterbury coach, with Mr. Ransome, his solicitor, a shrewd man of business, beside him.

It was late in the evening when the coach drew up at the "Fountain," at that time one of the most famous posting-inns in England.

"You stop here to-night, gentlemen?" the landlord asked.

"This gentleman will stop here," Mr. Harmer answered. "I want a conveyance in half an hour's time to take me on to Harmer Place."

The two gentlemen entered the hotel, and had some dinner, and then when the vehicle which was to convey him was announced to be in readiness, Mr. Harmer prepared to start, saying, "I am afraid I shall meet no warm welcome, Ransome. I think you may as well order a bed-room for me; very likely I shall return here to-night. If I do not, come over early to-morrow morning."

Mr. Harmer leaned gloomily back in the carriage as it passed out through the town on to the road to Sturry, and mused sadly about old times. How different, and yet in some respects how similar, was his position now to what it was when he last trod that road thirty years back. Then, no one had loved him; his absence would be little missed, and even less regretted. And now, when he returned to his old home after so long an absence, he could assuredly expect to be received with no pleasure, with no warm welcome. His sisters he remembered but faintly; he had not seen them more than three or four times, and they were then slim, pale girls, unnaturally constrained in manner, with thin pinched lips and downcast eyes. It was a short drive: in a quarter of an hour or so they passed through the lodge-gates, the gravel crunched under the wheels for another minute or two, and then there was a stop. Mr. Harmer alighted. The front of the house was dark, not a single light gleamed in any of the windows, all was hushed and quiet. He pulled at the great bell; it sounded with a loud empty clang, which seemed to grate unnaturally in the still night air.

"Stop here," he said to the driver. "I may return in a quarter of an hour."

The door was opened and a faint light streamed out. "Who is it?" a voice asked.

"Mr. Herbert Harmer," he said, entering. There was a slight exclamation of astonishment, and then the door closed behind him. Mr. Harmer looked round; the old hall, seen by the faint light which the servant carried in his hand, was even blacker and more gloomy than he remembered it as a boy. He followed the man, who in silence led the way across it to a small sitting-room, and who, lighting some candles standing on the mantlepiece, then withdrew, saying he would inform his mistresses that Mr. Harmer was here.

It was some minutes before Herbert Harmer heard any other sound than the ticking of a clock against the wall, then the door opened and his two sisters entered, not quite so tall as he had expected to see them, not perhaps so old, and yet with faces which disappointed him, faces which no human love had ever brightened, no loving fingers caressingly stroked, no lover's lips ever kissed. Faces expressing an abnegation of self, indeed, but without that love and charity for others which should have taken the place of self. Faces thin and pale, as by long vigil and fasting; and eyes which seemed at times to reach your very thoughts, and then to droop to avoid the answering glance which might seek to fathom theirs. Habitually, perhaps from a long residence

in convents abroad, their heads were slightly bent, and their eyes fixed on the ground, while their arms lay usually folded one on the other. Both were singular instances of the manner in which natures, naturally fiery and wilful, can be completely subdued and kept down by severe discipline and long training, and of how a warm and perhaps affectionate disposition can be warped and constrained by the iron trammels of an ascetic and joyless life.

When they had entered and the door was closed, they stood side by side in exactly the same attitude, apparently not looking at their brother, but waiting for him to speak. As he did not, Cecilia the eldest broke the silence in a harsh, monotonous voice, speaking like one who has learnt a lesson, and who only delivers what she has got by rote.

"So you have come back at last, Herbert Harmer, to the house you have disgraced, to the home you have forfeited. We expected you; what would you have?"

"Nothing," Mr. Harmer answered. "I want nothing; I am come only to attend the funeral of my dead brothers."

"And would you, Herbert Harmer—apostate to the faith of your ancestors—would you dare to follow those who died faithful to their God? They cast you off in their life, and their dead bodies would bleed if you approached them."

"Cecilia," Mr. Harmer said, much shocked, "to what end these useless recriminations? I have trodden my path; those who are gone have followed theirs. We shall each answer before our Maker. Why should we make earthly quarrels about heavenly matters? Rather let us be friends, let us forget the long unfortunate past, let us be as brother and sisters to each other, and let me try to fill to you the place of those who are gone."

For the space of a minute there was no answer, and then the elder sister again spoke, but in a changed tone, and a voice in which some natural feeling struggled.

"It cannot be, Herbert. We have chosen, as you say, opposite paths, and we must keep them to the end. I do not—we do not—wish to think unkindly of you; we will try and forget what cause we have for doing so. Even you must feel sorrow to know that the old walls which have held the Harmers so long, will, at our death, hold them no longer. For I tell you, brother, that it will be so. He who has gone has left us a life interest in part of the property, as trustees only for the good cause, and at our death it all goes to support the glory and power of the true Church. I tell you this that you may cherish no false hopes of what is not to be."

"I did not, sister. Knowing the Harmers as I know them, I was sure that neither I nor mine would ever dwell here. Still, I owe it to myself and my son to be present when that will is read. It is better to know for certain that the matter is final and irrevocable."

"The will will be opened and read after the funeral, which will take place at half-past eleven to-morrow. You are perfectly welcome to be present: indeed, it is better so."

"I have my legal adviser with me; I should wish him to accompany me."

"Certainly; he will see that everything has been done in perfectly legal form. Is there anything else you would say?"

"Nothing," Mr. Harmer said; and preparing to take leave, he approached the door, near which they were standing. He stopped before them, and then, with a sudden impulse, held out a hand to each.

"Oh, sisters, why should this be? Why, after so many years, should we meet and part thus? Can we not be friends? Can we not yet love each other? Can we not be happy together, and worship God in our own ways?"

Touched by the voice and manner, and by the warm, loving tone—such as for years had not fallen upon their ears—perhaps at that moment, for nearly the first time in their lives, they obtained a glimpse of what life might have been to them, but was not and now never could be; the floodgates of the hearts of those two cold, self-restrained women were all at once broken down, as never before they had been, and, with a passion of tears, they threw themselves simultaneously on their brother's neck.

It was not for long. Training and habit soon reasserted their power, and they stood before him again, calm, but still tearful and shaken.

"We have been wrong, brother; but no, not so. It has been good for us to have met you. I believe you to be a good man. I believe now that you are sincere, although grievously mistaken. If, as will probably be the case, after to-morrow we should not see you again—for our present intention is at once to retire from the world—we shall always think of you with kindness, as of the only being in it in whom we have an interest; we shall remember you with prayers to God, that you may yet see your errors and be saved; and now, good-bye."

"I shall see you to-morrow?" Mr. Harmer asked.

"Yes, after the funeral." And they were gone.

Mr. Harmer again took his place in the carriage, and returned sad and thoughtful to Canterbury.

At a quarter after eleven the next day, Mr. Harmer and his solicitor alighted from a carriage at

the lodge gates, and, sending the vehicle back to the town, entered the grounds.

"I think you were wrong to come so early, Ransome. The service will last at least two hours. You had much better have taken my advice, and come on by yourself later."

"I shall do very well, Mr. Harmer. I can walk about the grounds. I see there are a good many people about, and I am sure to find some one to talk to till it is time for me to come in."

There were several other persons walking the same way as themselves towards the house; but they presently met a man coming in the opposite direction,—an old man, in a rough sailor's suit, with only one arm. When he came up to them he stopped, looked Mr. Harmer full in the face, and then took off his hat, saying, "God bless your honour! it's many a long year since I saw you. Do you not remember Robert Althorpe?"

"Bless me!" Mr. Harmer exclaimed, shaking the old sailor warmly by the hand. "I am indeed glad to see you, old friend. This, Mr. Ransome, is a very old friend of mine; I may say the first I ever had. So you are still here?"

"Aye, aye, your honour; but I live at Herne now. I came over here late last night, and heard you had been up at the house in the evening; so I thought you would be coming to the funeral this morning, and made bold to wait here in hopes of seeing you."

"You did quite right, and I am very glad that I met you. But there, the time is getting on, and I must not wait. Come down to the 'Fountain' this afternoon, and ask for me; we must have a long talk over old times, and I will see what can be done to make you comfortable for the future. This is a dreadful business," he added, as he turned to go up to the house.

"Aye, your honour, it is. God knows, I would have saved them if I could."

"You!" Mr. Harmer said, stopping suddenly. "What, were you with them? I remember now that the account said it was a one-armed sailor, but of course I never thought for a moment of its being you."

"Aye, your honour, it were me sure enough; but don't let me keep you now. I will tell you the whole yarn this afternoon."

Mr. Harmer walked away leaving the old sailor with the solicitor, who had, from the instant when the man said he had been present at the accident, regarded him with the most lively interest.

"So you were there, my man," he said. "Well, the day is very cold, I have some time to wait, and I daresay you have nothing particular to do, so walk down with me to the village; we shall be able, I have no doubt, to get a snug room with a good fire, and you shall tell me the whole story over a glass of grog."

When Mr. Harmer entered the house, he found the hall, and indeed the whole dwelling, thronged with the priests and assistants of the Romish Church, in the full robes of their office. All seemed engaged, and no one paid much attention to him. In a few minutes a procession was formed; in the rear of this he took his place, and it then moved with low chanting through the long passages of the house to the chapel which adjoined, and indeed formed part of it. Herbert Harmer followed mechanically, mechanically he took the place assigned to him there, and listened to the solemn service. As in a dream he saw the chapel hung with black, and the catafalque containing the coffins of his dead brothers, and the two black figures kneeling beside them; as if it were some strange thing in which he had no part or share. His thoughts went far back, through long years, to the time when he had last heard those solemn chants and smelt the faint odour of the incense, the tears welled up in his eyes, and his thoughts were still of the days of his childhood, when a stir around him roused him, and he saw that the service was over. In a few minutes the chapel was emptied, and all returned into the dwelling. Here a servant informed him that a gentleman was awaiting him in the library. Opening the door, he beckoned to Mr. Ransome to follow him, and together they went into the drawing-room. Here he found his sisters, and several of the higher clergy who had assisted at the ceremonial, assembled.

On his entrance his sisters rose to meet him, and greeted him with formal ceremony; but Mr. Harmer thought that, under their impassive exterior, he could perceive that they were much moved; and that, although thoroughly agreeing as they did in the propriety and justice of the deed, they were yet sorry at heart for the coming sentence which was to cut off their only surviving brother from all share in the old family property. Miss Harmer then shortly introduced her brother to those present, who received him courteously, being far too well bred men of the world to betray the least exultation over a conquered enemy who could no longer be dangerous, and towards whom, therefore, a generous magnanimity might be safely displayed.

A few general remarks suitable to the occasion were exchanged, and then at a sign from Miss Harmer, all took seats round the room, and a quiet business-looking man, evidently a solicitor, approached the table with a legal document in his hand. It was the will of the late Edward Harmer, which he opened and proceeded to read. Divested of all legal technicalities, the contents were briefly as follows:—

After leaving his sisters a life interest in a considerable sum, he bequeathed the whole remainder to his brother Robert. In the event, however, of Robert not surviving him, he ordered that the estate should be sold, and that the proceeds, together with all other property whatsoever of which he should be possessed—and the amount was large, as the Harmers had not for years lived

up to their income—should be paid into the hands of two well-known dignitaries of the Roman Catholic Church, to be expended by them in accordance with an enclosed document.

When the lawyer had finished, he folded up the will, and, addressing Mr. Harman, said,—

"Have you any question you would like to ask? If so I shall be happy to answer you. This will was drawn up by me some years since at the request of the testator, who was in good health, mentally and bodily. I was myself one of the witnesses of his signature; the other witness can be produced."

"I have no question to ask," Mr. Harmer said, gravely; "the contents of the will are precisely such as I had anticipated they would be."

There was a pause, and the lawyer remarked,—

"In that case I do not know that there is anything further to be said at present."

Mr. Harmer turned towards his sister with the intention of saying farewell, when he was surprised by Mr. Ransome stepping forward and saying—

"I have a remark or two to make on behalf of Mr. Harmer in reference to the document which has just been read."

There was a little movement of surprise, Mr. Harmer being more astonished than any one present, and all listened with anxiety for what was to follow.

"I admit on behalf of Mr. Harmer that the document which has just been read is the last testament of the late Mr. Edward Harmer; of that no question can I suppose arise. By the terms of that will he bequeathes the whole of his property to his brother Robert, subject to the payment of the legacies to the Misses Harmer. In the event of Robert not surviving him, he makes other dispositions of his property. These it is not necessary to enter into, as that contingency has not arisen. For, gentlemen, I am in a position to prove to you that Mr. Robert Harmer did survive his brother; he, therefore, under the will, came into possession of the property, and as Mr. Robert Harmer has unfortunately died intestate, at least so I presume, Mr. Herbert Harmer, as heir-at-law, of course inherits the estate."

As Mr. Ransome spoke he moved to the door, opened it and called to some one who was waiting in the hall, and Robert Althorpe entered with his hat in his hand. No one moved, no one spoke, a stupor of blank dismay had fallen upon all present. Their faces, which when the will was read, were bright with irrepressible exultation, now expressed the deepest consternation. They could hardly believe that the prize which they had made so sure of was about to be snatched from their grasp.

"This," Mr. Ransome said, "is Robert Althorpe, the sailor who had charge of the little yacht belonging to the late Mr. Harmer, and who was the sole survivor of those who embarked in her. Miss Harmer knows that this is correct. Be so good, my man, will you, as to tell these ladies and gentlemen what you told me relative to the death of the Mr. Harmers.

"Well ladies, and your honours," the sailor said, "when I felt the boat go over I stuck to her, and never left go. I soon got my head above water, and clambered on to her bottom. I had hardly got my breath, before I saw a head come out of the water close by me. I held on to the keel with my hook, leaned over, and caught him by the hair, and helped him on to the boat beside me. That was Mr. Robert Harmer. I looked round again, and thought I saw an arm come up for a moment, but that was all I saw of any of them, and I don't think one of them ever came up after she upset. Mr. Robert Harmer was very weak, but he clung with me for nigh ten minutes, sometimes washed nearly off, and getting weaker and weaker every minute, and I saw he could not last long. We did not speak, the waves and the wind were too high, and we were half the time under water; but I could see the poor gentleman was praying very hard. At last a big wave came over all, and nearly carried me off, and I had a hard fight to get back again. When I had time to look round, Mr. Robert Harmer was gone, and that was the last I ever saw of him. Which I am ready to take my davy."

When the sailor had done there was another long silence, and then Mr. Ransome said,—

"This, gentlemen, is perfectly conclusive proof that Mr. Robert Harmer survived his brother, and would be held so in any court of law. It is, I have no question, a surprise to you, as it is to my client, Mr. Harmer; indeed, it is only within the last hour that I have been put in possession of the fact; I am sure, therefore, that Mr. Harmer will not wish to force upon you any sudden decision; but I would submit to you that no question can arise either in the point of law or fact. I would suggest to him that he should retire for an hour and then return for your answer. In the meantime, merely as a matter of form, I have placed a person in the hall to keep possession of the place in the name of Mr. Herbert Harmer, as heir-at-law to his brother the late Mr. Robert Harmer. The sailor will remain here, and you can interrogate him further on the subject."

So saying, and bowing to those present, who had not yet recovered sufficiently from their dismay to utter a word, he took the almost stupefied Mr. Harmer by the arm and left the room.

After they had gone there was a long and animated debate; but the conclusion at which they most reluctantly arrived, under the advice of the lawyer who had drawn up the will, was, that there was at present nothing to do, but to leave Mr. Herbert Harmer in possession, and then, if upon

deliberation and further advice it should be thought right to bring the case to trial, to do so. And so they all went away, and Mr. Harmer took possession of the home of his father; but not immediately, for his sisters asked him to leave them a week to make their arrangements. He begged them to stay there as long as they wished, and indeed pressed them to make it their home. This, however, they refused to do. By the will of their brother they were amply provided for, and they intended to travel, and perhaps finally to enter a religious house on the Continent.

So in a week the old house was empty, and Herbert Harmer entered it as undisputed master.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAST OF THE HARMERS.

And so in spite of all human precautions and care, the property of the old Roman Catholic family was not disposed of for the benefit and glory of Mother Church; but passed into the hands of the Protestant and apostate younger brother, under whose ownership and care it changed not a little.

Not externally; there no great alteration was possible, unless the whole place had been pulled down and rebuilt, but the thick trees which had crowded it in, and made it dark and gloomy, were thinned out, so that the air and light could come in upon it; bright flower-beds took the place of the masses of shrubbery on the lawn in front, and as far as could be done, the whole place was cleared and brightened. Inside, much greater changes were made—there, indeed, the old house was completely remodelled, new paper, new paint, new furniture and fittings of every description. Modern windows were put in where practicable, that is, wherever they could be inserted without violent incongruity with the style of architecture; part of the house indeed—that part containing the principal apartments—was entirely modernized, party walls were pulled away, small rooms thrown into large ones, the ceilings and roofs raised, bow windows thrown out, and a bright, cheerful air given to it.

In the chapel adjoining the house great alterations were made. Coloured glass windows took the place of the plain ones formerly there; these had been inserted after a visit of inspection paid by a party of Puritan cavalry, who, not having succeeded in finding the man of Belial of whom they were in search, consoled themselves under their disappointment by the holy amusement of smashing the beautiful stained-glass windows, and destroying the decoration and carvings of the little chapel. The seats were now removed, and the shrines, hangings, pictures, and other emblems of the Romish Church were taken down. The grand stone altar was retained, and a large cross in black marble was placed over it, taking the place of the wooden crucifix which had so long hung there. At the foot of the steps leading up to the altar, and where they had so often knelt in prayer, a beautiful monument of white marble was erected to the dead brothers, on which the sun threw strange, solemn lights as it streamed in through the coloured windows.

All these changes and alterations were carried on under the personal care and inspection of Mr. Harmer, who, with his son, came down at once to Canterbury, taking up their residence for the first two months at the "Fountain," but spending most of their time over at the "Place." And although when masons and decorators once take possession of a house they generally contrive to make their stay nearly interminable, yet, money, energy, and personal supervision will occasionally work wonders, and in this case, in three months after taking possession—that is, by the end of June—Mr. Harmer had the satisfaction of seeing the work completed, and the little army of men engaged upon it fairly out of the house.

As soon as they had gone into residence, the neighbouring gentry called almost in a body. To them it possessed the charm of a new discovery; they knew the place existed, but all they had seen of it was the lodge gate, and the twisted chimneys of the house as they rose among the trees which shut it in from the view; that was all. They hardly knew what it was like, even from tradition; neither their fathers or grandfathers had ever called there; not that the religion of its owner had constituted any serious objection to their so doing, but the Harmers led too secluded and recluse a life to care about knowing any one. With only a very few among the county families of their own creed had they any visiting acquaintance whatever, and this was confined to an exchange of formal calls, or of stately dinners once or so in the course of a year. Their only intimate acquaintances were chosen among foreigners, ecclesiastics or others, generally Italian, whom they had known during their long absences on the Continent; of these there had been usually one or two staying in the house when the family were at home; beyond this they had no friends. But now all this was to change, and the carriages of the neighbouring gentry dashed in quick succession up the drive where once the green moss had grown undisturbed, and gay talk and merry laughter were heard where formerly silence had reigned almost unbroken.

The visits afforded great satisfaction to those who paid them. The father and son were both much liked, and pronounced great acquisitions to the county society.

These visits were shortly returned, and invitations to dinner speedily followed. But not to dinner-parties alone was the festivity confined; picnics were got up, balls given, and it was unanimously agreed for once to overlook the fact that there was no lady head to Harmer Place, but that mothers and daughters should accept Mr. Harmer's lavish hospitality regardless of that fact. Indeed, the Harmers' accession to the property gave rise to a series of feasting and festivity such

as had not been known in that part of the county for years previously.

Into all this Mr. Harmer entered with a fresh pleasure, and a frank joyous spirit which charmed and attracted all. With the ladies he was an especial favourite; to them his manners and address were so singularly different to those of the men with whom they were accustomed to associate, that they could not fail to be greatly impressed by it. Herbert Harmer had seen little or nothing of women, for—with the exception only of his wife, who had always been a great invalid, and whom he had nursed for years with almost devotional care and kindness—he had been thrown in contact with very few English women, and he regarded the whole sex with an almost chivalrous devotion and respect which in a man of his age was very strange and touching. Although a very well-read man—for in his distant home he had kept himself well supplied with the current English literature, and with scientific works of every description—he knew very little of real life. Of commanding intellect, had he been placed in different circumstances where his mind could have had fair scope for its exercise, Herbert Harmer would have made a conspicuous figure for himself; as it was, although all found in him a charming companion and a sympathizer in their various tastes, few would have suspected how great were the stores of knowledge which the simple-hearted childlike man had stored up in all those years of solitary reading.

It was this general sympathy for the tastes of others, together with the reverence for the sex, which led him to treat the young girl of seventeen with a deference not inferior to that which he would have exhibited for her white-haired grandmother, which made him so universally liked by women; and had Herbert Harmer, although a man of forty-seven, and looking older than he was, wished to marry again, he might have nearly taken his choice among the fair young Kentish maidens who surrounded him.

Women, especially young women, appreciate a character such as this far better than men can do. Their purity of heart recognizes instinctively its goodness and childlike wisdom; and very many would own to themselves that, without entertaining any passionate love for him, they could yet entrust their happiness to such a one with a confidence far more serene and implicit than that which they would experience in the case of a younger man.

Perhaps a thought as to the possibility of Mr. Harmer marrying again may have entered into the calculations of some of the matrons with grown-up families, and who would not have unwillingly have seen one of their daughters holding sway as mistress at Harmer Place. But if so, it was not for long; for Mr. Harmer, upon one occasion—when the possibility of such an event as a new mistress for his house being forthcoming when the alterations were completed, was laughingly suggested—resented the idea in quite a serious manner. From this it was quite evident that the future mistress of Harmer Place, whomsoever she might be, would enter it as the wife of Gerald rather than of Herbert Harmer.

Gerald was by no means so great a favourite as his father; nor, although he earnestly desired to be popular, could he altogether succeed in his object. He could not overcome the listless manner which his long residence in India had rendered part of his nature; he could not acquire an interest in all the chit-chat and gossip of country society, or manifest more than a most languid interest in the agricultural conversations and disquisitions which formed the large staple of the country gentleman's talk. Of the price of corn he knew nothing. Malt and hops were mysteries, into which, beyond drinking the resulting compound, he had no desire to penetrate. And yet he was a sensible, good-hearted young fellow enough. His misfortune was that he had not strength of mind to adapt himself to the life and people he was thrown among.

Mr. Harmer was extremely anxious that his son should marry early and well; not well in a worldly point of view, but to some true woman, to whom he could look up, and who would in time correct the faults of his character. Those faults his father saw and understood; and he feared much that his weak and facile disposition would render him liable to fall into serious errors and faults, and would be not unlikely to lead him to be entrapped into some hasty marriage, the evil consequences of which might be incalculable to him. Mr. Harmer therefore watched with anxiety to see to which, among the various young girls of the neighbourhood, Gerald was most attracted, and at first he gave his father some little trouble. New to female society, it possessed an infinite charm to him; but he seemed to admire too generally to devote himself to any one in particular, and although he at once commenced a series of active flirtations, he appeared quite unable to single out any one for especial preference. *Les absents ont toujours tort*; and the converse of the proverb seemed to him to be equally true—the present are always right. Whosoever might chance to be in his society would assuredly, for the time being, appear to approach the nearest to perfection. Gerald Harmer was certainly a much greater favourite with the girls than he was with their fathers and brothers. That languid, indolent way of his, as if he rather thought that it was the duty of other people to devote themselves to his amusement, and which made the men vote him a puppy, was to them quite new and very amusing. Girls, too, rather like occasionally reversing positions, and bestowing homage instead of receiving it; and so the lively country girls enjoyed these languid flirtations with Gerald, and entered into them with great spirit, laughing in their sleeves, perhaps, at him while they did so, and not being in the least likely to become the victims of any very ardent passion.

When the shooting season commenced, however, a great change came over him, for he threw himself into the sport with an ardour that astonished his father. At last he really seemed to have found something worth caring for, and in a short time, by his devotion for field sports, he rose many degrees in the estimation of the young squires, who agreed that Gerald Harmer had turned out a capital fellow after all, in spite of his airs and nonsense. It is probable that he sank in the

sisters' estimation as he rose in the brothers', for he now no longer cared for female society, and spent the whole of his time either in shooting over his own or other estates, with parties of their young owners, or sometimes alone, with no other companion than Long William, the keeper—or else in hunting, to which also he took with great ardour. His sporting tastes rapidly developed; dogs, horses, and guns occupied his whole thoughts; and few would have recognized in the figure in shooting-jacket and gaiters, returning splashed to the head, after a hard day's work, the indolent lounger who had considered it almost too great a trouble to think for himself. His father observed this change with pleasure, as he had noticed with pain his son's increasing listlessness, although he was personally a loser by it; for Gerald had been hitherto his constant companion in his walks over his estate, and his visits of kindness at his labourers' cottages, which, under his care, assumed a very different and far more comfortable aspect than that which they had worn under the old *régime*. Still, he felt that it might do him much good; he thought it natural that the young man should be fond of sport, and should seek the companionship of men of his own age; and though he missed the former familiar intercourse with his son, he assented with a little sigh of regret to the new state of things, and told himself that it was much better so, and was very right and proper. Even of an evening it was seldom now that Gerald accompanied his father to the houses of the neighbouring gentry, always pleading fatigue, or some other excuse, for not doing so. On these occasions, when his father had started alone, he would be sure to find some pretext, some forgotten order, or question which must be asked, as a reason for strolling down in the course of the evening to smoke a pipe with his inseparable ally, Long William, the keeper.

Of this his father of course knew nothing; but the people of the village soon noticed these visits, and shook their heads when they saw the young squire go in at the cottage door, for William's character stood by no means high, and such companionship could do no good. Sometimes, too, Long William would not have returned from his duties when Gerald sauntered down, and then the task of entertaining him till his return would fall on William's pretty sister, Madge, who kept house for her brother. Altogether it would have been far better for Gerald to have accompanied his father, than to spend the evening sitting there smoking, and occasionally drinking; not truly that he was fond of drink for its own sake, but as he felt obliged to send Long William out for a bottle of spirits, he felt equally bound to keep him in countenance while he drank it.

So things went on into the spring, and then the shooting and hunting being over, Gerald, to his father's great annoyance, subsided into his former listless state; indeed, into a much worse condition than he was in before. He no longer was Mr. Harmer's companion in his rambles over the estate; he took no interest in his plans for the improvement of the houses of their poorer neighbours; he had no pleasure in society, which before he had so enjoyed; indeed, so entirely without aim or object did his life seem to have become, that Mr. Harmer felt that some change was absolutely necessary for him, and proposed to him that he should go for a few months' ramble on the Continent.

This proposition Gerald embraced with eagerness, and in a few days started on his tour.

Mr. Harmer had at first thought of accompanying him, but finally decided against doing so, as he judged it better that Gerald should have to think and act entirely for himself; for being forced to do this, and to make new acquaintances and friends—which in travelling he could only do by exerting himself to be agreeable—he would be far more likely to shake off his listless apathy, than if he had some one ever with him, to arrange matters, and take all necessity of thought or exertion off his hands.

And so Gerald went alone, and, as far as could be gleaned from his letters, he certainly seemed improving. At first he wrote without much interest in what he saw, but gradually the tone of his letters became more healthy, and when he reached Switzerland, he wrote in quite enthusiastic terms. He had joined a party who intended to stay there two or three months, and thoroughly wander over the various lakes and valleys of that lovely country. He enjoyed the life immensely, was becoming a first-rate mountaineer, and altogether he appeared to have entirely recovered his life and spirits.

Mr. Harmer remained quietly at home, passing his time between his books, the management of his estates, and the pleasures of social intercourse with his neighbours; and few days passed without his riding out into the country, or into Canterbury, for a visit to some among them.

Everywhere he continued to gain golden opinions, and became so popular that he was requested to allow himself to be put in nomination as member for that division of the county at the next election. This offer, although very gratifying, Mr. Harmer declined. He was very happy and contented with his present mode of life, and had not the least wish to take upon himself the care and responsibility of a seat in Parliament.

In autumn, soon after the shooting began, Gerald returned, looking sunburnt and healthy; full of life and of his adventures and travels, and, seemingly, permanently cured of his listless, indolent ways. His father was much pleased with the change, and was now quite satisfied with him; and yet at times he fancied—but it might be only fancy—that in the pauses of conversation he would fall into short reveries of something unpleasant; a quick, gloomy, anxious look seemed to pass across his face, and although it would be instantly dispelled, still Mr. Harmer could not help thinking that he had something on his mind. But if it was so, he said no word to his father; and Herbert Harmer, even had he been sure that such a secret had existed, which he was far from being, was of too delicate a disposition to make the least advance towards a confidence which his son did not seek to repose in him.

At last the hunting season began again, to which Gerald had been looking forward eagerly, as he preferred it even to shooting, perhaps because it was a much greater change, as the meets were seldom held near Canterbury, and he would have to send his hunter on the night before, and drive over perhaps fifteen or twenty miles in the morning. However, it happened that one of the first meets of the season was appointed to take place near Canterbury, about three miles out on the old Dover Road, and Gerald started off, after an early breakfast, in unusually high spirits.

Mr. Harmer, late in the afternoon, was in his library, which was in the front of the house, and the windows of which commanded a view down the drive.

He had been reading, but the fast-closing shades of a wintry afternoon—it was the 12th of November, had rendered that difficult, and he had laid down his book and walked to the window, to look out at the still trees and the quiet hush of the thickening twilight.

Suddenly there came on his ear a low confused sound, as of many people moving and speaking; and then a horse's footsteps came fast up the drive.

He strained his eyes for the first sight of the rider, as he came round the turn of the drive into sight.

It was not Gerald—it was one of his most intimate friends.

What could it be? He threw open the window and listened again; between the strokes of the horses' feet in the still evening air, he could hear the confused sound of voices and the trampling of feet coming nearer. What could it be? A nameless terror blanched his cheek, a dim vision of the truth flashed across him. In an instant he was at the hall-door, which he opened and went out on to the steps. The horseman had alighted, and now stood looking pale and anxious at the door. When it opened, and he saw Mr. Harmer himself, he shrank back as a man might, who, knowing that he had something very painful to go through, is suddenly confronted with it before he had quite nerved himself to undergo it. Recovering himself, however, although his usually hearty, jovial face was blanched white, he prepared to speak. Herbert Harmer waved him back, he could tell him nothing that could be new to him now. He had seen his face, and hope had died with the look, and the father stood listening with suspended breath to the irregular trampling now rapidly approaching up the avenue.

"Is he dead?" he asked with his eyes, for no sound came from the lips. "Not dead—but——" The eyes closed for a moment in answer that they understood—not dead, but dying; and then he stood rigid and immovable, his eyes open but seeing nothing, his whole senses merged in the effort of hearing.

The gentleman who had brought the news, seeing that at present he could do nothing there, quietly entered the house and ordered the affrighted servants instantly to get a bed-room ready, with hot water, sponges, and everything that could be required.

Mr. Harmer moved not till he saw appear round the turn of the drive the head of a sad procession: carried on the shoulders of six men, on a door hastily taken from a cottage for the purpose, was something in red covered with a cloak; riding by the side were several horsemen in scarlet, most of whom, on seeing Mr. Harmer standing on the steps, reined back their horses and returned into the village, there to wait for news. Not that they expected any news, save one; for the man in green riding by the head of the little procession was the doctor. He was on the field at the time of the accident, he had already examined the injured man, had shaken his head sadly over him, and the word had gone round—no hope.

His horse, a young hunter which he had only purchased a few days before, had struck the top bar in leaping a gate, and had come down headlong on its rider, fearfully crushing and mangling him. They carried him up to his room and laid him on the bed; his father walking beside speechless and tearless. The only question he asked was, "Will he ever recover his consciousness?"

The doctor replied, "He may at the last."

The last did not come till next morning, when, just as the grey light was breaking, he opened his eyes. For some time they wandered confusedly about the room, as if endeavouring to comprehend what had happened; then he tried to move, and a slight groan of pain broke from him, and by the change in his expression it was evident he remembered all. His eyes met those of his father, and fixed there with a look of deep affection, then a sudden recollection of pain seemed to occur to him, and he closed his eyes again and lay for sometime quite still.

The doctor who had his finger on his wrist motioned to the father that the end was fast approaching. Again the eyes opened and he was evidently rallying his strength to speak. The doctor withdrew a few paces, and the father placed his ear to the dying man's mouth. The lips moved, but all that the hearer could catch was—"Dear father—kind to Madge—my sake—God forgive;" then the lips ceased moving, and the spirit was gone for ever.

Ten days had passed since then, Gerald Harmer had been laid in the quiet graveyard of the village church, and his father was sitting thoughtful and alone in his library. A knock at the door, and Mr. Brandon, the rector of the place, was announced, and by Mr. Harmer's manner as he rose to meet him, it was evident that he was an expected visitor.

"I am much obliged to you for calling so speedily," he said, after they had seated themselves. "I have a question which weighs much upon my mind, and which is to me an inexpressibly painful

one. Yet it is one which I must ask, and you are the only person of whom I can ask it. I may be mistaken altogether. I may be agitating myself under some wretched misconception; God grant it may be so; and yet I must arrive at the truth. Do you know any young person in the village by the name of Madge? how old is she, who are her parents, and what character does she bear?"

The clergyman's face became very serious as Mr. Harmer addressed him, and the latter saw at once by his unmistakable start of surprise, and by the look of distress which came across his face, that he not only knew such a person, but that he was very well aware why the question was asked.

Mr. Harmer laid his face in his hands and groaned; this was almost harder to bear than his son's death. It was some time before he looked up again. When he did so, the clergyman said in a tone of deep feeling and commiseration—

"It is a truly sad affair, my dear sir; indeed, I question if you yet know how sad. The name of the young girl of whom you ask was Madge Needham; she lived with her brother, one of your keepers. I hardly know how to tell you what has occurred. She had been for some time in delicate health, and was standing at the door of her cottage when she saw a little crowd coming down the village street. She carelessly asked a lad who was running past what it was, and was told that they were carrying home your unfortunate son who had been killed out hunting. The boy ran on; she said nothing, but closed the door of the cottage. The shock had struck home. That night a little child was born into the world, who before morning had lost both father and mother."

Mr. Brandon ceased, his voice faltered as he spoke, and the tears fell from his eyes. Mr. Harmer hid his face in his hands, and sobbed unrestrainedly; he was inexpressibly shocked and grieved. At last he said—

"Is the child alive?"

"Yes; a young married woman in the village who had just lost a baby of her own has taken it for the present. She consulted me about it only this morning, and I told her that in a short time when I could approach the subject with you, I would do so, although I did not expect that the opportunity would have occurred so soon. Still, I thought it right, painful as it must be to you, that you should know the truth. I believe from what I have heard that there can be no question as to the paternity of the infant, as I heard, late in the spring, rumours of your son being frequently down at the cottage. But it did not reach my ears until after he had gone abroad, consequently I could do nothing in the matter but hope for the best, and trust that rumour was mistaken."

After another short silence, Mr. Harmer said—

"Mr. Brandon, I am very much indebted to you for what you have already done in the matter; will you further oblige me by acting for me in it? If the woman who has now charge of the child is a respectable and proper person, and is willing to continue the care of it, so much the better. If not, will you seek some one who will do so? Make any arrangements in the way of money you may think fit. By the way, the east lodge, which is the one farthest from the village, is at present unoccupied; let them move in there. I will give orders that it shall be made comfortable. Will you see to this for me? So much for the present; we can make other arrangements afterwards."

And so it was carried out. Mrs. Green, the woman who had first taken care of the child, with her husband, a steady working carpenter, moved into the east lodge. They had no other children, and soon took to the little orphan, and loved her as their own. To them, indeed, the adoption of the child proved of great benefit. The lodge was made comfortable; a piece of ground was added to it, and put in order for a garden; a handsome yearly sum was paid; and the husband had steady work upon the estate.

Long William, the keeper, had a sufficient sum of money given him, to enable him to emigrate to Australia.

Upon the death of his son, Mr. Harmer went abroad for three or four years, and then returned again to the old place. The shock which he had undergone had aged him much, and at fifty-one he looked as old as many men of sixty. He still kept up the acquaintance of his former friends; but although fond of quiet social intercourse, he ceased altogether to enter into general society, and devoted himself entirely to study and scientific pursuits.

It was a little before Mr. Harmer's return, that Dr. Ashleigh established himself at Canterbury, having purchased a practice there. They met accidentally at a friend's house, and soon became very intimate with each other. They were mutually attracted by the similarity of their tastes and pursuits, and by each other's intellectual superiority and goodness of heart. They were indeed kindred spirits, and their society became a source of the greatest mutual pleasure and gratification. Whenever Dr. Ashleigh could find time from his professional pursuits, he would drive over to pass a few hours of scientific research and experiment with his friend; and if anything should occur to prevent the visit being paid for a few days, Mr. Harmer would, in turn, come over for an evening to the doctor's, at Canterbury.

In the mean time little Sophy Needham was growing up. She was not a pretty child, but had an intelligent face, with large thoughtful grey eyes.

It was some time after his return from abroad before Mr. Harmer trusted himself to ride out at the east gate. At last, one day—it was the anniversary of his son's death—he did so, and stopping there, fastened up his horse, and went in to see the child, then exactly four years old.

At first she was inclined to be distant and shy; but when once she had recovered sufficiently to fix her large grey inquiring eyes upon him, she went to him readily, and in five minutes they were fast friends; for indeed he was one of those men whom children instinctively feel to be good, and take to as if by intuition.

After this he would frequently go down to see her, and take her little presents of toys and dolls. Until she was ten years old she went to the village school, and then he sent her to London to a good school, to be educated as he said, for a governess. When she came home for the holidays, he would frequently have her up for a day to the house, and would interest himself greatly in her talk and growing knowledge.

It was some little time after his return from abroad that Mr. Harmer received a letter from his sisters, who had since they left been travelling and living abroad, saying, that if he were still of the same mind, and would repeat his invitation, they would be glad to come and stay with him for a time, as they longed to see the old place where they had lived so long. Although much surprised, Mr. Harmer willingly assented, and his two sisters soon afterwards arrived. Their visit, at first intended only to last for a few weeks, lengthened into months; then they went away for a time, but soon returned, and took up their abode there permanently.

Whatever their motives may have been originally in returning to the place, they unquestionably became very much attached to their brother, and were far happier than they had ever before been during their lives: they pursued their religious exercises, he his scientific pursuits, without interference from each other, and as the genial intercourse and kindness of their brother brightened their days, so did their affection and interest soothe his. Their presence was a relief to the previous silence and monotony of the house, and their management took all household cares off his hands.

On one subject alone had any disagreement arisen, and that was the presence of Sophy; but here their brother at once so decidedly, and even sternly, stated that his wishes on that point were to be considered as law, and that no interference with them would be for a moment tolerated, that they were obliged at once to acquiesce, although they still, as much as they dare, kept up by their manner a protest against her presence.

Sophy now, during her holidays, stopped entirely at the house, occupying a position something between that of visitor and humble companion. The girl accepted her lot with rare tact for one of her age. She felt her anomalous position, for she had, at Mr. Harmer's wish, been made acquainted with her history, as he was sure that, sooner or later, she was certain to be informed of it. She was of a quiet, retiring manner, self-contained, and thoughtful, and manifested a quiet deference for the Miss Harmers—with which, however much they might have wished it, they could have found no fault—and a warm, though subdued, affection for Mr. Harmer.

And thus matters stood when this story began.

CHAPTER V.

TESTAMENTARY INTENTIONS.

All this history of the Harmers I have told nearly as I heard it, passing briefly over such parts as were not essential to the understanding of the story, and retaining all that was necessary to be told in order that the relative position of the various inmates of Harmer Place may be quite understood by any one who may hereafter read this story of mine. And having done so, I can now proceed with the regular course of my journal.

That visit of ours to Harmer Place was a very memorable one, and exercised not a little influence upon my fortunes, although certainly I little dreamt at the time of our return that evening, that it had done so. To Polly and I it had been simply an extremely pleasant day. We had rambled about the garden with Sophy Needham, and had taken tea in the summer-house, while papa and Mr. Harmer were at dinner. We had then gone into desert, and, that over, had again rambled out, leaving the gentlemen over their wine. It was while thus engaged, that a conversation took place, which I did not hear of for more than a year afterwards, but which entirely altered my worldly prospects. It was began by Mr. Harmer, who had been for some time sitting rather silent and abstracted.

"I think it is high time, my dear doctor, for me to speak to you frankly and openly, of what my intentions are in reference to the disposal of my property. I mentioned somewhat of this to you four or five years since, but I should like now to speak explicitly. I am aware that such matters are not usually gone into; but I think in many cases, of which this is one, it is right and better that it should be so. I have no relations whatever in the world, with the exception of my sisters, who have an ample life provision, and Sophy Needham, my son's child. My property is very large; I have the Harmer estates, my own savings in India, and the accumulation of my brothers, who never lived up to their income for very many years. In all about seven thousand a year. As I have said, Sophy Needham is my only connection in the world—you my only friend. To Sophy I have left half my fortune, the other half I have bequeathed to your children. Do not start, my dear Ashleigh, or offer any fruitless objection, my decision is fixed and immovable. For the last

thirteen years my existence has been brightened by your friendly intercourse, in you I have found a scientific guide and friend; indeed, I may say that my life as far as this world is concerned, has been entirely made what it is, tranquil, contented, and happy by your friendship. Ten years ago you will remember I begged you to retire from practice, and to take up your abode here with your family, upon any terms you might name, but in fact as my adopted family. This offer you, from motives I could not but respect, declined. You loved your profession, and considered it incompatible with your duty to leave a career of active usefulness. Things, therefore, went on as before. Towards Sophy my intentions were not fixed, but she has turned out a very good girl, and I shall therefore leave her half my fortune, about seventy-five thousand pounds. Had I any other relation, or any person who could have the smallest claim upon me, you might hesitate; as it is, not even the most morbid feeling of delicacy can tell you that you are depriving others of their expectations. Being so, let the matter be tacitly understood, and say nothing whatever about it; you ought not to have known of it till my death, just suppose that you do not know of it now. You will ask me why have I then told you. For this reason. I wish to benefit your children. My life is uncertain; but I may live for many years yet, and my money might come too late to do good. Your son may have spent the best years of his life struggling in some profession which he does not like; your daughters may have suffered too. I therefore wish at once to place Harry with the best man in the profession he wishes to enter, which I have heard him say is that of a civil engineer, and I shall allow him a hundred and fifty pounds a year for the present. Your daughters I should wish sent to some good school in London to finish their education; and when the time shall come, when such an event may be considered probable, I should wish it to be publicly known that they will each have upon their wedding day ten thousand pounds. Your son shall have a like sum when the time comes for him to enter into a partnership, or start in business for himself. These sums to be deducted from their moiety of my fortune at my death. And now, doctor, let us shake hands and not mention the matter again, and as you do not seem to be drinking your wine, let us go out and join the young ladies in the garden."

It was not until after several further discussions upon the subject of Mr. Harmer's kind intentions towards us that papa agreed to accept his offer. When he at last consented to do so, no time was lost in carrying out the plans, and in a month or two Harry went up to London to be articled to a well-known engineer. As for us, it was settled that Miss Harrison should remain with us until Christmas, and that after the holidays we should go up to a school near London. How delighted we were at the prospect, and how very slowly that autumn seemed to pass; however, at last the time came, and we started under papa's charge for London. When we were once there, and were fairly in a cab on our way to school, we felt a little nervous and frightened. However, there was a great comfort in the thought that there would, at any rate, be one face we knew, that of Clara Fairthorne, who came from our part of the country we had met her at some of our Christmas parties, and it was by her parents the school had been recommended to papa. But although we felt rather nervous, it was not until we were in sight of the school that our spirits really fell; and even at the lapse of all these years, I do think that its aspect was enough to make any girl's heart sink, who was going to school for the first time.

Any one who has passed along the road from Hyde Park Corner to Putney Bridge may have noticed Grendon House, and any one who has done so, must have exclaimed to himself "a girls' school." Palpably a girls' school, it could be nothing else. With the high wall surrounding it, to keep all passers-by from even imagining what was going on within, with the trees which grew inside it, and almost hid the house from view, with its square stiff aspect when one did get a glimpse of it, and with its small windows, each furnished with muslin curtains of an extreme whiteness and primness of arrangement, and through which no face was ever seen to glance out, —certainly it could be nothing but a girls' school.

On the door in the wall were two brass plates, the one inscribed in stiff Roman characters "Grendon House;" the other "The Misses Pilgrim," in a running flourishing handwriting. I remember after we had driven up to the door, and were waiting for the bell to be answered, wondering whether the Misses Pilgrim wrote at all like that, and if so, what their character would be likely to be. In the door, by the side of the plate, was a small grating, or grille, through which a cautious survey could be made of any applicant for admission within those sacred precincts.

On passing through the door, and entering the inclosure, one found oneself in a small, irregular piece of ground, dignified by the name of the garden, although, from its appearance, it would be supposed that this was a mere pleasantry; but it was not so. Indeed, no such thing as a pleasantry ever was or could be attempted about anything connected with "Grendon House." Certain it is that nothing in the way of a flower was ever acclimatized there. The gloom and frigidity of the place would have been far too much for any flower known in temperate climates to have supported.

I remember, indeed, Constance Biglow, who had a brother who had just started on an Arctic expedition, lamented that she had forgotten to ask him to bring home some of the plants from those regions, as an appropriate present for the Misses Pilgrim, for their garden. I know at the time we considered it to be a very good, although a dreadfully disrespectful, joke towards those ladies.

In spring, indeed, a few crocuses (Miss Pilgrim spoke of them as croci) ventured to come up and show their heads, but they soon faded away again in such an uncongenial atmosphere. The only thing which really flourished there was the box edging to the borders, which grew luxuriantly, and added somehow to the funereal aspect of the place. It was no wonder nothing grew there, for the house, and the high walls, and the trees within them, completely shaded it, and cut it off from

all light and air. Round the so-called flower-beds the gravel path was wider, and was dignified by the name of the carriage drive, though how any coachman was to have turned a carriage in that little confined space, even had he got through the impassable gate, was, and probably ever will remain, a mystery.

Behind the house was the playground, a good-sized triangular-shaped gravelled yard, for Grendon House was situated at the junction of two roads, and the house itself stood across the base of the triangle they formed. This playground was several times larger than the garden, and was indeed quite extensive enough for such games as we indulged in. It was, of course, surrounded by the high wall, with its belt of trees, underneath which was a narrow strip of border, divided into regular portions; and here the girls were permitted to prove the correctness of the axiom, that plants will not live without light or air.

So much for the exterior; inside, if the sensation of gloom and propriety which pervaded the very atmosphere could have been got rid of, it would have been really a fine house.

The hall, which was very large, extended up to the top of the house; from it, on the ground floor, led off the dining and schoolrooms, large, well-proportioned rooms, but very cold and bare-looking, especially the former; for the schoolroom walls were nearly covered with maps of different countries, some rolled up and out of use, others hanging down open; beside them hung genealogized trees of the various monarchies of Europe; while in the corner was a large stand with a black board for drawing diagrams in chalk. Nothing else in either of them but bare walls, and equally bare forms and tables.

There was another little room opening from the great hall: this was the cloak-room, where the girls put on their bonnets and shawls before going out for their walks. It was here that, when they were able to slip out from the schoolroom, they would meet to talk in English for a change, and interchange those little confidences about nothing in which school-girls delight. This room looked into the garden; and to prevent the possibility of any one who might be—which nobody ever was—wandering there, looking in at the window, white silver paper, with coloured flowers under it, was stuck on to the glass, something in the manner of decalcomanie, only that extraordinary and difficult name was not at that time invented.

Upstairs was the drawing-room. It was here that the Misses Pilgrim received visitors to the girls, and here that the lady professors, who came twice a week to teach music, imparted lessons in singing and on the pianoforte to the pupils.

This room was a model of propriety and frigidity—if there be such a word, for no other will describe the effect produced. The curtains were of white muslin, so stiff and carefully arranged that they might have been cut out of marble. The chairs were of some light wood, with gilding on them, and so extremely fragile, that it was only with the greatest caution and care that any one could venture to sit down upon them; there were couches too, here and there, but these as seats were altogether out of the question, being so covered with Berlin work of every kind, and antimacassars of such stiffness and intricacy of pattern, that no one would ever have thought of assuming a sitting position even upon the extreme edge of them.

The room was literally crowded with tables of every imaginable shape and form, generally on twisted legs, and looking as if a breath would upset them. On these tables were placed works of art and industry of every description. Vases of wax flowers and fruit, Berlin wool mats of every colour and pattern, inkstands of various shapes and sizes, books of engravings, stuffed birds under glass shades; in short, knicknacks of every sort and kind, and on a great majority of them were inscribed, "Presented to Miss Pilgrim, or Miss Isabella Pilgrim, by her attached pupils on her birth-day;" or, "Presented to the Misses Pilgrim by their attached pupil so-and-so on the occasion of her leaving school."

Through all this it was next to impossible to move without the greatest risk of bringing some of the little fragile tables down with a crash, and visitors would generally, after a vague glance of perplexity round, drop, or rather lower themselves carefully, into one of the little minikin chairs, as near as possible to the door.

So chilling was the effect of this room, so overwhelming its atmosphere of propriety, that many fathers and brothers who have come up from the country to see their daughters or sisters after a long absence, men with big voices and hearty manner, have felt so constrained and overpowered by it, that in place of taking them into their arms with a loud-sounding kiss, they have been known to hold out their hand in a most formal manner and to inquire almost in a whisper as to their state of health. In this drawing-room the elder girls used to practise, and if any visitor was shown up there the proper form to be observed was to rise from the music-stool, walk to the door, and then, making a deep curtsey, to leave the room—a performance not unfrequently completely astounding any one strange to the ceremonies inculcated at young ladies' schools as being suitable to occasions like this.

It will be judged from all this that "Grendon House" was a model academy, and indeed it was. The only wonder is that it did not turn us all into the stiffest pieces of prim propriety possible; but somehow it did not; for I think, on looking back, that a merrier and more lively set of girls it would be difficult to have found, and yet we most certainly had not much to be merry about. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." It may be so, but it decidedly did not have that effect upon Jack's sisters. We certainly did work very hard. I suppose it was necessary in order to cram all the accomplishments girls are expected to know into our heads; but however it was, I am quite

sure that in those two years I was at school, I worked more hours and steadier at them, than Harry ever did in four; he allows it himself, and I am sure it is generally the case, that girls work infinitely harder than their brothers, and certainly have no amusement or recreation at all in proportion. I suppose it is all right, but yet I do think that if we worked a good deal less, and played a great deal more, we should know quite as much, and be far more healthy and natural than we are.

However, I am not writing an essay, or I should have a great deal more to say on this point; as it is I must leave it for abler hands, and go back to my story.

When we first caught sight of Grendon House our spirits fell many degrees, and when we entered its solemn portals we felt terribly awed and uncomfortable. We were, of course, shown up into that dreadful drawing-room, and I think papa was as much affected by it as we were; he certainly was not a bit like himself, and he stayed a very short time talking to Miss Pilgrim, who came up in great state, and in a very stiff silk dress, which rustled alarmingly as she walked, to receive us. Miss Pilgrim was small but stately, almost overpoweringly so. Her hair was arranged in little stiff ringlets on each temple; her nose was very prominent; her lips thin and rather pinched; her eyes bright and searching; she was, on the whole, in good keeping with the room, and yet I thought that, although she looked so sharp, and spoke so shortly and decidedly, that she was kind at heart, and that I should like her. And I may say I did; she was, although strict and sharp with us girls—as indeed she had need to be—kind-hearted and thoughtful, and I parted with her when I left school with regret. Her sister Isabella was so exactly the counterpart of herself that one description will do for the two; and, except that she wore her hair in flat braids instead of in ringlets, and that she was not quite so sharp and decided, although equally kind, she might have been easily mistaken for her elder sister.

When papa got up to go away, I could not help crying a little; for, though I was fifteen, I had never been away from home before. However, I soon came round after he was once fairly gone. Polly was longer recovering herself; but she, too, soon got over it, when I told her that if we cried the girls would be sure to call us cry-babies.

Presently Miss Pilgrim, who had considerately left us for a few minutes to let us have our cry out, came back again, and took us up to show us our room, where we could take off our things. She also kindly sent for Clara Fairthorne, so that we might go down into the schoolroom with some one we knew. It was rather an ordeal going in there, and seeing all the faces lifted up from their work to look at the new comers. However, it was not so bad as we had expected; they did not stare at us disagreeably, nor did they, when we went out into the playground afterwards, ask us so many questions as papa had warned us they would. Indeed, there was no occasion for their doing so, as they had heard all about us from Clara. One or two of them took us under their special protection, as it were, for the first few days, and we felt at home very much sooner than I had expected that we should do. We were about twenty in all, from Annie Morgan and Selma Colman, the two parlour boarders, down to Julia Jackson, a West-Indian child of eleven years old, the darling and pet of the whole school.

I am not going to write a long account of my schooldays. The daily routine of one girl's school is so much like that of another, that there is nothing new to be told of it; the little disputes, the rivalries, the friendships sworn to last for life, but which seldom survive a year or two of occasional correspondence,—all these things have been so frequently told, that I shall not repeat them, but shall only mention briefly such incidents as had an effect upon my after life.

The account of one day's work is a description of all. Breakfast at eight; school from half-past eight until twelve; then a walk for three-quarters of an hour. Dinner at one; play for half an hour; school from two till half-past five; another half-hour's play; tea at six; school till eight; then to bed.

Looking back upon it now, I wonder how I, and all the countless girls who go through such slavery as this, keep their health and spirits. Our walk was no recreation to us; we went, two and two, through the streets, or into Kensington Gardens—the same walks week after week—till we knew every stone on the pavement we walked on. It was a dreadfully formal affair, and I think I would rather have been in school. The only play we really had was the half-hour after dinner and the half-hour after tea, and also on Saturday afternoons. Then, indeed, we made up for all the day's repression,—running, jumping, skipping, laughing, and shouting like mad girls, till I am sure sometimes we scandalized the whole neighbourhood, and that passers by on the other side of the high wall paused in astonishment at such an outburst of joyous cries and laughter. Even at this time, as at all others during the day, we had to speak French, not a word of English being allowed to be spoken in "Grendon House;" and I remember congratulating myself that French girls laughed the same way as we did, for we should certainly have been obliged to laugh in French, had such a thing been possible. I was very good friends with all my schoolfellows, and, indeed, there was very little quarrelling among us,—just a sharp word or two, and a little extra stateliness and ceremony for a day or so; but even this was uncommon, for we had neither time nor opportunity to quarrel. My greatest favourite was Ada Desborough, who was a month or two younger than myself. Ada was tall, slight, with a very pretty figure, and a particularly easy, graceful carriage. She was lively, talkative, full of fun,—indeed inclined, to be almost too noisy, and it was easy to see she would turn out a perfect flirt.

Ada and I would sometimes quarrel, and she would take up with some one else for three weeks or a month, and then come back to me all of a sudden, and be as affectionate as ever. She was such a warm-hearted girl it was impossible to be angry with her; and, on the whole, she was by far my

greatest friend all the time I was at Grendon House. It was through Ada that the only break which ever occurred in the monotony of our life at Grendon House took place. Ada's mother, Lady Eveline Desborough, lived in Eaton Square, and Ada generally went home from Saturday afternoon till Sunday evening. Sometimes, perhaps twice in a half-year, she would bring an invitation from her mamma for three or four of us to go there to spend the next Saturday afternoon with her. I was always of the number, as being Ada's particular friend. We looked forward to these little parties as a change; but there was not any great amusement in them.

Lady Desborough was the widow of General Sir William Desborough, and moved in quite the extreme fashionable world. She was a tall, elegant woman, with a haughty, aristocratic face. She used, I really think, to try and unbend to us girls; but her success was not great: she was so tall and haughty-looking, so splendidly dressed, and her attempt at cordiality was so very distant that we were all quite awed by it.

The programme of the afternoon's amusement was generally as follows. We would go first either to the Polytechnic or the Zoological Gardens, or, in fact, wherever we chose, under the escort of Lady Desborough's housekeeper, a respectable middle-aged woman, who used to let us wander about and do just as we liked. This part of the day was really enjoyable; when we got back to Eaton Square, we had our tea together in the small room behind the dining-room, where Lady Desborough dined in solitary state. This was great fun. Ada made tea with a vast affectation of ceremony, and the laughing and noise we made were prodigious, and would have scandalized Miss Pilgrim, could she have heard us; and we should not have ventured to indulge in it, had not Ada assured us that the partition was so thick that it was quite impossible for our voices to penetrate to the next room. When tea was over, we quieted down gradually at the thought of what was in store for us, for when Lady Desborough had finished her dinner, and gone up into the drawing-room, we were sent for, and went up-stairs, putting on our best company manners, as inculcated at "Grendon House," and seated ourselves on the edges of the chairs, in the primest of attitudes, with our feet perfectly straight, and our hands folded before us. We would first have a little frigid conversation, and Lady Desborough would then ask us to oblige her by playing on the piano, and as we always, by Miss Pilgrim's order, brought a piece of music each with us, there was no possibility of evading the infliction, but each had in turn to perform her piece; and then we sat stiff and uncomfortable, till the welcome intelligence came that Miss Pilgrim's servant was at the door with a cab.

After the first year I was at school had passed, and when we were about sixteen, the stiffness of these visits wore away, but we never were quite comfortable with Lady Desborough; and, indeed, did not enjoy our visit as much even as we had done the year before, for we were too old to go now sightseeing under the housekeeper's care, and our merry teas were exchanged for stiff dinners with Lady Desborough.

Ada had one brother, whom I have not yet spoken of. He was five years older than she was, and she always spoke of him in enthusiastic terms; but I never saw him except the twice I went to Eaton Square, in my first half-year. He was then rather more than twenty, and seemed a quiet young man, and I thought a little shy, and out of his element with us five girls. He was tall, and dark like his sister, but with a thoughtful, studious face, very unlike hers. Ada said that at ordinary times he was full of fun. All I can say is at these two visits I saw nothing of it. He had, I believe, entered the Guards, but after a short time determined to see some active service, and accordingly exchanged into the Lancers, I understood from Ada, very much to his mother's dissatisfaction.

I have now briefly told all the events which occurred in my two years at school, which had in any way a bearing upon my after-life. I have told them all at once, in order that I may not have to go back to my schooldays again, which, indeed, were monotonous enough. I have read and heard that in some schools the girls engage in all sorts of fun and flirtation and adventures. It may be so; I do not know. I can only say we had no such goings on at "Grendon House," but, although naturally lively and full of fun enough, were certainly a quiet, well-conducted, ladylike set of girls, and no such nonsense, as far as I ever heard, entered into any one of our heads.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BISHOP OF RAVENNA.

The autumn sun was blazing down upon the ancient city of Ravenna, and, over the flat pestilential country around it, an unwholesome malarious vapour hung thick and heavy. Perhaps in all Italy there is no more unhealthy spot than is the neighbourhood of Ravenna. The whole country is a swamp, the water oozes up in the fields at the very foot of its walls, and the agriculturist has but to sink a bottomless tub in the ground and he will have a well full to the brim, which no amount of drawing upon will exhaust. The city itself sits lonely and deserted amongst her green rice-grounds and swamps; her wide streets are empty, her churches without worshippers, her aspect mournful and desolate in the extreme. And yet this was once a mighty city, second only to imperial Rome in magnitude and importance, the seat of Emperors, and the cradle of Christianity. The swamps then were not in existence, but the bright waves of the Adriatic broke close to its walls, and the Roman galleys lay moored in the port of Classis within

bow-shot range. The sea is far off now, and the rice-grounds stretch away level and flat where the waves broke. Classis has disappeared, and has left no sign; the hungry morasses have swallowed every stone and vestige, and the ancient church of St. Apollinarius alone marks where the place once stood; while, where the galleys anchored, the thick groves of the pine forest extend for miles in an unbroken shade. The emperors and exarchs, the Gothic and Frank monarchs, the conquerors innumerable who in turns lorded it there; the great family of Polenta, the patrons of art, who for centuries were her masters;—all these are gone, and their tombs alone tell that they ever existed: and now it lies forgotten and alone, visited only for the sake of its early Christian churches, with their glorious mosaics.

Perhaps in all Italy there was at that time no city which, for its size, contained so large a number of priests; probably its hush and quiet suited them; but nearly every other person in the streets was an ecclesiastic, and the clang of the bells calling to prayer from their picturesque round campaniles never ceased. It was past mid-day, and mass was over in most of the churches, when two aged women, in black dresses and thick veils, which entirely concealed their faces, rang at the bell of the Bishop's palace. The door was opened by a man in a sort of semi-clerical attire. On giving their names, he bowed respectfully, and saying "His lordship is expecting you," led the way up some wide stairs, through a long corridor, and then signing to them to wait a moment, he entered the room; returning in a few seconds, he requested them to enter, and closed the door behind them. It was a very large room, although its length was comparatively greater than its width. A range of bookshelves, extending from the floor to a height of about five feet, ran completely round it, and upon the dark-panelled walls were hung a long series of portraits, probably those of the bishop's predecessors in office. Above, the ceiling was divided by a richly-gilt framework into a number of irregular partitions, in which were inserted a fine series of paintings by ancient masters, the subjects of which were not all so strictly Scriptural as might have been expected in the palace of a Church dignitary. The light entered by a very large window at the end of the apartment, the panes of which were of the small diamond pattern. With his back to this window, by the side of a large chair, in which he had apparently been sitting reading when his visitors were announced, stood the Bishop of Ravenna. Although he had returned from mass some quarter of an hour, he still wore a part of the robes in which he had officiated. It is probable that as he expected the ladies who had just entered, and as he was particularly anxious upon this occasion to impress their minds strongly, he had purposely retained these insignia of his office to add to the power which he had for many years been accustomed to exercise over them. Not, indeed, that the bishop needed any adventitious aids to his personal appearance. He was a tall, stately figure, but little bent with the weight of the seventy years which had passed over him. His hair was silver white, but the lines of the face were still strong and marked. His manner was very variable,—at times commanding, even harsh; at other moments mild and persuasive. As an orator he had few equals in his Church,—the varying modulations of his voice alternately awing and melting his audience. He advanced to meet the two women, who, their veils raised now, hurried towards him, and knelt at his feet to receive the blessing which he impressively bestowed upon them. That done, he raised them, and placed them in chairs facing the one he himself occupied.

"My dear sisters," he began, in Italian, "I received your note before I went out this morning, telling me that you were here, and would call upon me after mass. I was indeed glad to hear of your coming. It is three years now since I last saw you. It was in a humbler lodging than this that you then visited me."

"My sister and myself were indeed glad to learn that your services to the Church had met the reward so richly deserved," the elder of the two women said.

The bishop waved his hand deprecatingly.

"The Church has far too highly honoured my poor services," he said; "and indeed I should have been well content to have remained in the sphere in which I had so long worked; but it was not for me to oppose my will to that of those who know far better than I can do what is best for our holy Church. And you, sisters, how has it fared with you these three years? Not badly in health, I should say, for you are in no way changed since I saw you last."

"Our health is good, truly, father, but our minds fare but badly. We are weary of this long struggle, which has ended only in defeat, as our letters have told you; and now we hope that you will grant the prayer we have so often made, and allow us to retire into a convent for the rest of our days."

"But your struggle has not ended in a defeat," the bishop said, ignoring the request contained in the last part of the speech. "No defeat can come until the end of a battle. It is true that the news which you send me is very bad. It is bad that the apostate who wrongfully holds Harmer Place is still impenitent, still more bad that he should have determined to will the property which rightfully belongs to the Church away to other hands. But that I know that in this you are weak, that your hearts turn towards him who is unworthy of it, I should long since have called down the anger of an offended God upon him."

"No, no, father," the younger of the two women, who had not as yet spoken, said; "he is mistaken, grievously mistaken indeed, and we lament it with tears, while we pray for him continually; but in other respects he is very good, very kind to all, most of all to us."

"That may be, sister Angela," the bishop said, sternly. "It is easy to be kind in manner when all goes well with you in the world; it is easier and more pleasant, but it is mere outside. What avails this if within all is rotten, if the vital point of all is wanting? Such a man is but a whited

sepulchre. However," he continued, more mildly, "for your sake, my sisters, the Church has been content to wait; for your sake it has forborne to use the power of cursing and anathema which is confided to her, here upon earth; for your sake it is content to remain tranquil under the privation of the worldly goods which in her hands would have done such incalculable good, but which are now devoted to far different purposes."

Here the bishop paused, and there was silence for a little, and then the elder sister again asked, —

"And our request, father; will you grant us now that we may retire to a convent? Our task is done here."

"Your task is not done," the bishop said, sternly, "and may not be relinquished. Our path in this life must be regulated by our duty, not our wishes. Your duty is plain,—to endeavour to restore to the Church that property of which it has been unjustly defrauded. No one can perform this but you; and although at present things have worked but ill, yet no one can say what may yet occur. You have already, in your brother's present position, a striking instance of the unexpected way in which the events of this world occur, and how little we can foresee the intentions of God. Who can say, therefore, that in time this great wrong may not be rectified, and that the will of your dead brothers, those true children of the Church, may not yet be carried into effect? Events have indeed turned out badly, but there is no ground for losing hope; and you, who have hitherto worked so well for the good cause, I little looked to see shrink from your allotted task; I expected better things of you, sister Cecilia and sister Angela,—you, of all women, having once put your hands to the plough, I did not think to see turn back from the labour."

"But we have tried hard, father, very hard for many long years," Cecilia Harmer said, "and it is only because we find that our work has come to nothing, that it is over, as it were, that we would gladly retire to die in peace and quietness. It is eighteen years since we left the convent we had entered, when the news came of our nephew's death. You bade us go, and we went. For eighteen years we have worked and hoped. Hope and work are over now; let us rest."

"It has been so long, father, such weary years, almost without hope all the while; we are so tired —so, so sick of the world. Oh, father, let us go back to our convent!" the younger sister almost wailed, plaintively.

"My dear sister," the bishop said, and this time his voice was soft and persuasive, "we have all our trials; life is no rosy path, but is paved with the sharp stones of duty; but yet we must all tread it as unflinchingly as we may, looking for strength where only it can be found. To you has been confided a great and important mission. You have the opportunity of doing great things for the Holy Church. You have that great and glorious object in view, and you are, moreover, filled with the pious hope of saving a lost soul, and that the soul of your erring brother. It is a task which the angels themselves might be glad to perform. To the Church is given all power here, to bind and to loose, and, for your sakes, I have promised you that your brother's errors shall be passed over. Prayers are offered up that he may be forgiven; and when the time comes, rest assured that at least no testimony shall be made against him; and that if the Church cannot bless, it will at least not curse the mistaken one. Every allowance has been and will be made for his youth at the time he forsook the right path, and the strong influences brought to bear upon him; his life has been, as you have testified in your letters, save as to this grievous falling off, an exemplary one; and I trust that, when at last stricken with illness, he will turn back as a wandering sheep to the fold. These, my sisters, are the inducements—a lost soul to be saved, the Church to be strengthened. Not often are such inducements offered. But," and here he raised and hardened his voice, "it is not by inducements only that the Church acts, but by orders and threatenings. Upon you a certain burden has been placed, hard to bear, perhaps, but not beyond your strength. From this task you must not shrink; your private wishes are as nothing in the balance. You have a duty, and would fain escape it to pass your life in the way it would please you in a convent; you would say, to serve God there, but He will not be so served; He has given you another sphere, other tasks. The convent is for those who see no path of active usefulness traced out for them—not for such as you. Who can tell what may yet occur? I at first acceded to your request, and allowed you to retire from the world, until your nephew's death clearly indicated that Providence had not destined the property of the Church to pass from the apostate father to the heretic son. Then your path of duty was clear; and although at present the future looks dark, although your brother is obstinate in his recusancy, and although he may talk of leaving his property to others, yet the case is by no means hopeless. He may repent and turn; this girl whom he has adopted may displease him; he may die without a will. These and many other contingencies may arise, but until his death your task cannot be ended."

"But he is younger than we are; he may survive us both," the elder sister said.

"He may, but he may not; but that does not alter your path of duty," the bishop answered. "But one thing I will concede. Just at present your presence in England can do little or no good. You have my consent, therefore, to your entering a religious house, and remaining there until you shall hear, from the person whom you have informed me has undertaken to let you know what is passing there, that some change has taken place, either in his sentiments towards this girl, or in his health. This may be weeks, months, or even years. When that word comes, you must be prepared to go instantly back, and to do whatever I, or any one who may speak in my name to you, may direct you."

"Thank you, dear father," the elder sister said, while even Angela acquiesced mutely; "to this we

are ready, quite ready, to agree. We know the importance of our success to the Church; we grieve over seeing the property pass away into the hands of others; and I, for my part, seem to feel a presentiment that the time will come before long when we shall be successful. Three times, lately, Robert and Edward have come to me in my sleep, and have told me to hope on, for that the light will yet shine through the darkness. You have yourself told me, father, that there is much in dreams."

"Undoubtedly, sister; the Church has in all ages maintained that at times revelations are made to the faithful in dreams, and by apparitions, at which the vulgar mock. And now return to your hotel. You shall hear from me in the course of the day; and if, as I believe, you would rather be within reach of my ministration, than go among strangers, I will speak to the superior of an establishment here, who will, I am sure, gladly receive you as inmates."

Again the sisters knelt before him, and received his blessing, and then returned through the quiet streets of Ravenna to their hotel.

CHAPTER VII.

SOCIETY GRACIOUSLY CONDESCENDS.

For upwards of a year after Mr. Harmer had spoken to papa relative to the intended disposition of his property, the matter was not mentioned to any one, but was known only to Dr. and Mrs. Ashleigh, my brother Harry, himself, and his sisters. At the end of that time he made public his intentions, and spoke of them openly. He did this for reasons connected with Sophy Needham, for whom he was desirous of obtaining suitable society. At the time the matter gave papa a good deal of annoyance. Much as he was generally liked and esteemed, there were people found, as there always are found upon every occasion, who made ill-natured remarks upon our good fortune, and who really seemed by their talk to be personally aggrieved at Mr. Harmer's kind intentions towards us. Had they been asked why they were so, they probably could not have replied; for as Mr. Harmer had—with the exception of his sisters, who were amply provided for—no relation in the world, it was evident that there was no one who could be considered as wronged or injured by this disposition of his property. However, so it was; and, although papa received the sincere congratulations of all his old friends, I think he felt a good deal the ill-natured remarks, which came to his ears, of people for whose opinion I should have thought he would have cared nothing whatever. I was rather surprised at this; for if there was one person more than another who had by his whole life and conduct showed that he did not care for money, it was papa. He might, therefore, have well afforded to laugh at such accusations as this; but I suppose no one, however conscious of rectitude, likes to be spoken ill of, even by people whom he despises, and whose opinion about others he would treat with contempt.

This was not, however, of long continuance, for, as far as we were concerned, the talk and wonder soon died away, and things settled down into their usual state; but it was not so as regarded Sophy Needham. The announcement that she was to be the heiress of half of Mr. Harmer's large fortune, elicited the greatest reprobation and disgust among the very portion of the population who had been most cordial in their congratulations as to the destination of the other half; namely, among the country gentry, the clergy—a very numerous and powerful body in Canterbury,—the professional men, and respectabilities of the place.

"To think that that girl,—that——[and they called poor Sophy very hard names],—that young person, should be raised up into one of the richest heiresses of that part of the country, was a scandal to morality and an outrage to public decency. Her elevation was offering a premium to immorality among the lower orders. Did Mr. Harmer suppose that a person of that kind, however wealthy, would be received into society? No, indeed; the thing was quite out of the question."

This was the first outburst of opinion among the upper two hundred of Canterbury.

By degrees, finding that Mr. Harmer did not concern himself greatly with what was said about him, and that he showed no sign of changing his declared intentions in deference to the popular voice, society gave up talking so much about it; but its opinion was, it declared, unchangeable as to the objectionable nature of his conduct.

I think it likely that Mr. Harmer, who loved peace and quiet above all things, would have suffered matters to remain as they were; but papa had a serious talk with him on the subject. He pointed out that Sophy was now eighteen years old, that the mere declaration of Mr. Harmer's intentions towards her had not been of any use in procuring her friends of her own age, and that, for her sake, he ought to again re-enter society. She was growing up knowing nothing of the world; and should anything happen to Mr. Harmer, she, being left entirely unprotected and alone, would fall an easy prey to some fortune-hunter of the worst kind, and her fortune would thus, instead of a benefit, turn out a positive evil to her.

Mr. Harmer acknowledged the truth of all this, and agreed with the doctor, that reluctant as he felt to change his present studious and retired mode of life, he ought still, for her sake, to make an effort to re-enter society.

Accordingly, the next day he ordered his carriage, and made a long round of visits to his old

friends in the town and precincts; for, although he had ceased to visit, he had still kept up a casual acquaintance with those he had before known, and indeed had met many of them during his frequent visits to papa.

Mr. Harmer's calls were everywhere received with pleasure, and his frank, winning manner seemed at once to place him upon a familiar footing with those of his friends with whom he had once been such a favourite. He apologized for the hermit life he had so long led; said that circumstances had induced him to determine to abandon it, and that he hoped that they, their wives, and daughters would show that they forgave him by calling at Harmer Place. But at the end of the day, if well satisfied with the reception he had personally met with, he was unable to persuade himself that he had made the slightest progress, as far as Sophy—who was the real object of his visits—was concerned. A cordial invitation had been in each instance given him to repeat his calls, but in no case had more than an evasive answer been returned in reply to his invitation to the ladies of the family.

On the day succeeding these visits the interchange of calls which took place at Canterbury was quite without precedent. The great question which every one had to ask was, "Should they go over to Harmer Place to call upon Sophy Needham?" It would hardly have been supposed necessary to have asked a question upon which they had, three months before, decided unanimously in the negative; but then it is so easy to say you will not do a thing before you have been asked—so very difficult to refuse when you are. Indeed, many of the Canterbury ladies were now sorry that they had spoken so very decidedly, and were ready to admit that there was really a good deal to be said in favour of calling upon the poor girl.

However, fortunately for these vaccillating creatures, and happily for the propriety and strict respectability of the town, the heads of the society, from whose dicta there was no appeal, sternly said that such a thing was, of course, out of the question; and society in general naturally followed suit, repressed a little sigh of regret, and agreed that it was quite out of the question. Had the population of Canterbury been differently proportioned to what it was, the answer might have been otherwise. Had there been young men in the place, who might have won the heiress, their mothers might have rebelled against the edict of exclusion, and for their sons' sake have called upon Sophy Needham; but, as I shall explain in its proper place, there were no young men in Canterbury, and therefore no motive for any one to rebel against constituted authority, or to outrage propriety by calling at Harmer Place.

Papa, when informed of this decision, was very indignant and angry—much more so than he had been by the recent aspersions on himself. He even went so far as to say, that if this were Christian charity, he would rather fall among heathens. He exerted himself to the utmost to bring matters about, but the other ladies would not call unless the ladies of the precincts did, and the ladies of the precincts would not. However, it was not papa's way to give up anything he had once undertaken, and he accordingly one day sat down and wrote as follows:—

> "My dear old Friend,
>
> "Although our correspondence has been pretty regular, it is now three years since we met, and I want you, your wife, and daughter to come down and stay a week with us, either before or after Christmas, as may suit you best. Your diocese can, I am sure, do without you for a little while, and I know you will be glad to see again the old place, where you lived so long; and it would give us all great pleasure to enjoy your society once more. At the same time, I tell you frankly that it is in your power to confer a great favour and benefit both upon myself and upon another old friend of yours, Herbert Harmer.
>
> "You will remember he brought up the child his son left behind him, that he sent her to school, and, in fact, adopted her as his own. All this happened when you were here. In my last letter I told you that he intended to leave her half his fortune, about £75,000. He is now naturally anxious to introduce her into society, in order that she may see the world, and make some suitable match, as otherwise the poor girl would, at his death, be nearly certain to be snapped up by some worthless fortune-hunter. Now you will hardly believe me when I tell you that the Christian matrons of this town shake their garments at the poor child, and insist that her presence would be a contamination to the pure atmosphere they breathe.
>
> "Sophy is a quiet, modest, ladylike girl, and I am greatly interested in her. But here I can do nothing. I am sure that the great proportion of the ladies would be willing enough to call upon her, but they are like society in general—a mere flock of sheep, who will only follow where the bell-wethers lead them. Now, the two or three ladies who act in that capacity to Canterbury society consider that this poor little lamb will taint the whole flock, and therefore pronounce her infect and excommunicated.
>
> "My dear old friend, I rely upon you and your kind wife to take off the ban these Pharisees have lain upon her. If you will both go over, during your stay here, to call upon her, Canterbury will be only too glad to do the same. If a bishop and his lady pronounce her visitable, who shall say them nay? I know, old friend, that in the eyes of yourself and your wife the sin of this poor girl's parents will not affect her. She is not to blame, and why should their faults be visited upon her? But I know that upon this head I need say nothing. Your wide views of Christian love and charity are so well known, that any word upon the subject would be superfluous. If you will do this, my dear

bishop, you will confer an inestimable benefit upon Herbert Harmer and his grand-daughter; and you will very greatly oblige,

"Yours, very truly,

"ALFRED ASHLEIGH."

All turned out as papa had hoped. The bishop, with his wife and daughter, came down to spend a week with us. The day after they arrived we had a perfect levee of visitors; and when the room was at its fullest, Mr. Harmer came in, being, of course, in complete ignorance that the visit had been principally brought about for his especial benefit. The bishop greeted him warmly, for they mutually esteemed and liked each other.

"I am very glad, Mr. Harmer, to hear from our friend, the doctor, that you have given up your hermit-mode of life, and are going out into the world again. I suppose all these years you have been hoarding up treasures: your house must be a perfect scientific museum by this time; and the doctor tells me that your library is nearly perfect, of its kind. I must really come over some day before I leave and inspect your collection."

Mr. Harmer expressed the gratification the visit would afford him.

"I shall certainly come," the bishop went on; "it will give me great pleasure. Let me see. To-morrow I shall be engaged in calls upon my friends in the town; suppose we say the day after. What do you say, my dear?" he asked, raising his voice, to his wife, who was sitting on the other side of the room, "I am going over the day after to-morrow to see Mr. Harmer's museum and library; will you and Gertude accompany me? Your adopted daughter," he added, turning to Mr. Harmer, "must be growing quite a young woman by this time."

"Certainly, my dear," his wife answered, "I should like it very much."

Mr. Harmer's face flushed with pleasure, and he wrung the bishop's hand. It was easy to see that he felt the kindness, and saw the true motive of the offer to brings his wife and daughter to Harmer Place. As to the remainder of those present, they were simply astounded. The buzz of conversation ceased throughout the room, and a dead silence ensued. As for myself, I should certainly have laughed out loud—had not the silence been so great that I dared not do so—at the general look of dismay in the female faces, and of rather amusement on the part of the gentlemen, who I could guess had been vainly urging their wives to call. The conversation presently became general again, but the effort was too great to be continued long; and in a very few minutes most of those present took their leave, only to be succeeded by fresh callers, until half-past four, after which hour it was the strict etiquette of Canterbury that no visits were permissible.

On the appointed day the visit was paid. I accompanied them in the carriage, and papa rode on horseback.

The Miss Harmers were away, as, indeed, had been the case since Sophy had left school and taken up her permanent residence there. Sophy was pale, and evidently very nervous; and in her manifest desire to please it was easy to see that she was much affected, and deeply grateful for the kindness which would be the means of removing the disadvantages under which she had laboured, and which had weighed much upon her mind. However, before the visit, which lasted some time, as the library and collection of scientific apparatus had to be inspected, was over, she had recovered her usual placid demeanour.

This visit had the consequences which papa had predicted from it. Society unanimously agreed that although certainly it was a strange, a very strange step for the bishop and his lady to have taken, still as they had done so, there could be no harm in every one else doing the same; in fact that it would only be what was right and proper. The ladies whom papa had rather irreverently spoken of in his letter as the bell-wethers of the flock, held out to the last and declared that they could not reconcile it to their conscience, or to their sense of what was due to their husbands' position. But the flock were no longer obedient to their lead, and indeed whispered amongst themselves, that a bishop's lady, who was moreover the daughter of a peeress, must know a good deal better what was proper and right than a mere canon's wife could do; and the consequence was that from that moment the influence of these ladies over Canterbury society waned much, and the opposition to poor Sophy recoiled upon the heads of those who had made it. In a short time every one in Canterbury and the neighbourhood called at Harmer Place, and the general verdict upon Sophy was decidedly satisfactory. She was pronounced quiet, self-composed, and ladylike; and indeed Sophy evinced none of that nervousness which she had shown upon the occasion of the bishop's visit. To him she felt she owed all; to these people nothing. So, although perfectly polite and courteous, she was yet composed and tranquil; and some of the ladies who had called, quite prepared to be very patronizing and kind, found any such line of conduct completely out of the question. There was a quiet dignity and self possession about her which became her much. She was the well-bred hostess receiving her grandfather's guests, and few girls enacting such a part for the first time could have played it so well.

For three or four months after the bishop's visit had given the signal for society to admit Sophy Needham within its circle, the intercourse was restricted to morning calls of an extremely formal nature, which seemed by no means likely to bring about the result, to obtain which Mr. Harmer had emerged from his solitude; he made up his mind, therefore, to break the ice, which again seemed setting over the surface of the Canterbury society, by giving a series of picnics and open

air fêtes. The first of these took place early in June, when I was away at school; but I heard full particulars of it upon my return. The whole of the inhabitants of Canterbury and the neighbourhood whose position rendered them eligible were invited, together with the officers of the garrison, a very necessary addition at Canterbury, where dancing young men are almost unknown. A large marquee was erected and boarded for dancing, a quadrille band brought down from London, and the military band engaged for the afternoon. Archery butts were set up, bowling-greens mowed and rolled, and coloured lamps placed in all the walks, to be illuminated after dusk. People met at between three and four, had a substantial tea at six, and a magnificent supper at eleven. Nothing, in short, which taste and an unlimited purse could do, was neglected, and the result was a splendid success. And yet early in the evening a difference had arisen which would have marred the pleasure of the whole scene had it not been for the firmness of Mr. Harmer. It seemed that soon after nine o'clock when it began to get dusk, some of the ladies of the precincts had objected strongly to the coloured lamps which had just been lighted, and which began to sparkle in the trees and grass by the side of the various walks. Not in themselves, for they allowed the effect to be very pretty; but as offering inducements and pretexts for isolated couples to stroll away, and get entirely beyond maternal supervision. Two of the ladies waited upon Mr. Harmer as a sort of deputation from the others, and it happened that one of them was the chief of the party who had opposed Sophy Needham's introduction into society, but who had at last come to the conclusion that, as others were going, it would be showing a want of Christian feeling to refuse to do as others did. These ladies recited to Mr. Harmer the objections they entertained, and concluded—

"The lighted walks will tempt the young people to stroll away and get quite out of our sight, and as all these thoughtless officers are sure to persuade them to walk there, it will lead to all sorts of silly nonsense and flirtation."

"My dear ladies," Mr. Harmer said, "as to the result I entirely agree with you, and as I, although I am an old fellow now, do like to see young people enjoying themselves, it is precisely for the very reason that you have alleged that I have had the garden lighted up."

There was nothing to reply to this, but one of the ladies said rather angrily—

"Of course, Mr. Harmer, you can do as you like, but we shall forbid our daughters to walk there."

"My dear madam," Mr. Harmer said, gently, "you can equally of course do as you please; but it appears to me, and it will appear to every one else, if you issue such an order, that you can have but a very poor opinion of, and very slight confidence in, the principles of your daughters. You show, in fact, that you cannot trust them to stroll for a few minutes, with gentlemen they have never met before, in well-lighted walks, where there will be dozens of other couples similarly enjoying themselves. Were I in your place, I should hesitate greatly before I laid such a serious imputation upon my children."

The deputation retired greatly crestfallen, and the result was that for that evening the young Canterbury girls were for the first time in their lives nearly emancipated from maternal supervision, and enjoyed the evening proportionately, flirting with a zest all the greater for its being an amusement indulged in for the first time, and making their mothers' hearts swell, and their mothers' hair figuratively stand on end at such unheard of goings on. Another consequence of the lighted walks was that many families of girls who had never hitherto been allowed to dance except in quadrilles, now found themselves allowed to waltz as they pleased. Not that their mothers' views of the extreme impropriety of such dances had undergone any change; but that of two evils they chose the least, and thought it better to have their daughters waltzing under their eyes, than that they should be wandering away altogether beyond their ken.

Why is it that mothers are so much stricter than fathers? It is certain that it is so, and upon this occasion, while the mothers were inwardly bewailing the conduct of their daughters, the fathers, although many of them clergymen, were looking on with beaming faces on the young people enjoying themselves so thoroughly; and more than one would have been delighted, could such a thing have been permitted, to have put his clerical dignity aside, and his clerical white neckcloth into his pocket, and to have joined heartily in the fun.

They did what they could to add to the general enjoyment, and several times some of them gathered into a little knot, with two or three of their wives, and sung some old glees—"Five times by the taper's light," "The winds whistle cold," and "The chough and crow;" and splendidly they sang them too. They had some famous voices among them, and I do not think I have ever heard those fine old glees better sung than I have heard them at Canterbury.

Sophy, of course, attracted much attention throughout the evening, and was constantly the centre of a little group of officers, not a few of whom would have been very willing to have turned their swords into ploughshares for her sake, and to have devoted their lives to the care of her and her possessions.

Sophy, however, by no means appeared to reciprocate their feelings in her favour. She was naturally of a quiet and retiring disposition, and did not care for dancing; and therefore, under the excuse of attending to her guests, she danced very little; when she did so, her conversation was so simple and straightforward, that any attempt at flirting upon the part of her partners was out of the question. Altogether, although the success of the fête was brilliant, as the officers agreed on their way back to barracks, and that nothing could have been better done, still, as far as Sophy was concerned—and several of them had previously announced their intention of going

in for the heiress, and had even exchanged bets upon the subject—the affair was a failure. However, they consoled themselves that there was plenty of time yet, especially as Mr. Harmer had announced at supper, that another fête would take place that day six weeks, upon the 28th of July, to which he invited all friends.

This fête completely roused Canterbury from its usual lethargy, as Mr. Harmer's return to the abode of his father had done twenty years before. Every one gave parties; picnics upon a large scale were organized to different places in the neighbourhood, and the officers of the garrison gave a ball.

At the second of Mr. Harmer's fêtes Polly and I were present, as it came off just at the end of our holidays. I need not describe it, as it was in most respects similar to the first, and was just as great a success. I enjoyed myself very much, and danced a great deal with the officers, who did not seem to consider my being a schoolgirl any bar to me as a partner, as I had expected that they would have done. When not dancing I amused myself in watching Sophy. I knew that Mr. Harmer wished her to marry, and I was interested to see with what sort of a man she was likely to be taken. But Sophy was so quiet, that she did not seem to care in the least with whom she danced, or to evince the slightest preference for any one. There was, however, one thing I noticed, and that puzzled me a good deal at the time. I never spoke to any one about it, but as events turned out, I afterwards bitterly regretted that I had not done so. I noticed early in the evening a remarkably handsome man, standing by himself, and watching Sophy as she danced. I did not know him, and asked a lady next to me, who he was.

"That is Robert Gregory, my dear, the son of Mr. Gregory, the hop-factor, who died about two years ago. He was thought to have been a wealthy man, but he died worth next to nothing. It was supposed that this son of his—who is, I am told, one of the most idle and worthless young men in the country—squandered it all away. He was absent some years in London, and went on terribly there, and it is said that his poor old father was silly and weak enough to ruin himself paying the worthless fellow's debts. I am surprised to meet such a person in respectable society; but I suppose Mr. Harmer knew nothing about him, and only invited him as the son of a man who stood well in the town."

Robert Gregory was certainly a very handsome man, of a powerful build, about twenty eight years old. But as I watched him, his face seemed to me, not to be a pleasant one, but to have a bold and defiant expression. It might be merely the effect of what I had just heard; but certainly the more I looked at the man the more I felt repelled by him. He was still watching Sophy, and as I mechanically followed the direction of his gaze, I distinctly observed her, to my intense surprise, glance two or three times in his direction, not mere ordinary glances, which might fall upon any one, but positive stolen looks, which rested upon him, and were unmistakably in answer to his. After this I could not help watching them whenever I was not dancing, and I observed her once or twice in the course of the evening, as she passed by where he stood, exchange a word or two with him, not naturally and openly, but speaking as she walked past, so that no one, not watching as I was doing, would have noticed it.

I thought, as I have said, a good deal about it at the time. I did not like to speak to papa upon such a subject, as it might seem like prying, and, had there been nothing in it, it would have caused a great deal of unpleasantness; still, I do think that I should finally have done so, under promise of secrecy, had I not started for school next day. Before Christmas came round, when I left school and came back for good, I had forgotten all about the circumstance, and even had I not done so, should certainly not have mentioned it after all that lapse of time.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTRODUCED TO THE WORLD.

About three months after I left school for good I received an invitation to go up to London and stay for a month with Ada Desborough. This was a great event. Ada told me that her mother was going to give a grand ball, at which she was to come out, and that I should be formally introduced to the world upon the same occasion; and she remarked that she flattered herself that society in general ought to rejoice at the advent of two such charming votaries at its shrine. She added, in a postscript, that her brother Percy would be at home on leave.

I was, of course, delighted at the prospect of a month of real London life, with its balls and operas, and looked forward to my visit as if going into fairy-land. Mr. Harmer, when he heard of my invitation, made me a very handsome present to buy myself dresses fitted for the occasion. I had, therefore, a fortnight of excitement and preparation, as my morning and walking dresses were made at Canterbury; but my ball-dresses were ordered of a London dressmaker, as mamma thought that Canterbury fashions would not do for me at Lady Desborough's.

At last all was ready, and I started for town. Papa put me in charge of a lady of his acquaintance, who was also going to London, and then said good-bye, with many comic injunctions as to my behaviour in good society.

Nothing particular happened on our journey to London, and when I got out at the station, a tall

footman, whose face I remembered, came up and touched his hat, and asked what luggage I had.

Lady Desborough had sent her carriage to meet me, and I began to realize the fact that I had all at once become a young woman.

I felt a little flurried when we drew up at the house in Eaton Square, and the tall footman knocked at the door, in a way I thought unnecessarily loud and important.

However, I soon felt at home when Ada came flying downstairs into the hall, and kissed me as warmly as she had done three months before when we parted at Miss Pilgrim's.

"Come along, Agnes, dear; never mind your things; they will be all brought up safe. Your room is next to mine, with a door between, so we shall be able to talk as much as we like. Mamma is not very well, and is lying down, and you will not see her till dinner-time, so I have got you all to myself for three hours. There, that is your room, and this is mine."

Very snug and comfortable they looked, with two large fires blazing in the grates, which gave a cosy look to the rooms, and caused me to forget the unusual grandeur of the furniture; for I should, I think, have otherwise felt not a little awe-struck, it was all so very different from my quiet old-fashioned low-ceiled room, with its white hangings, down in Canterbury.

However, I had no time to notice much then, for Ada, in her impulsive way, was already occupied in taking off my wraps; this done, she again kissed me, and then made me seat myself in a chair in front of the fire, while she nestled down on a low stool beside me.

"There, Agnes, now you will get warm again. Do you know you are looking very well after your journey, and are certainly even prettier than when I saw you last. I begin to think I was very foolish to have you here at all: you will quite eclipse poor little me."

I laughed at the nonsense she was talking, for Ada was one of the loveliest girls I ever saw, and I —well, I believe I was pretty, but certainly nothing to compare to Ada. We chatted merrily over old times, and then Ada gave me the list of our engagements, which quite frightened me, at the number of titled people I was going to visit. At last it was time to get ready for dinner; so I went into my own room, where I found Ada's maid had already unpacked my boxes, and put all my things away ready for use into the drawers and wardrobes. I was therefore able to take my time dressing, talking to Ada the while through the open door.

When we went down into the drawing-room ready for dinner, we found Percy sitting reading by the light of the bright fire. He must have heard the rustle of our dresses as we entered, but he continued reading to the last moment; then closing his book, reluctantly as it were, rose to speak to us. As he did so he gave quite a start; he had evidently expected to meet the schoolgirl he had seen nearly two years before, looking demure and half frightened at his mamma's presence, and I certainly felt flattered at the evident surprise and admiration his face expressed when his eyes fell upon me. It was my first effect, and I could not help colouring up and feeling gratified.

"I need not say how do you do, Miss Ashleigh," he said, coming forward to shake hands with me. "Your looks speak for themselves. I should hardly have known you; how you have grown, and how very pretty you have become."

I coloured high in laughing confusion, and Ada said, coming to my relief, "Really, Percy, how sadly *gauche* and unpolished you are in your way of paying compliments: the idea of telling a young lady just come out, that she has grown very pretty; just the sort of thing you might have said to a little child, or a milkmaid. You might have conveyed the idea, which in itself is true and unexceptionable, in some delicate way in which it would have been acceptable. Grown pretty, indeed! You never had much manners, Percy, but the Lancers certainly have not improved you."

"I really beg your pardon, Miss Ashleigh," he said, colouring almost as much as I had done, "but I felt so much surprised for a moment at the change in you, that I was obliged to express myself in the most straightforward way: had what I said been less true, I should have put it into some different form."

"That is better, Percy," Ada said, approvingly.

"Agnes, make one of your best Grendon House curtsies."

I swept to the ground in a deep reverence, and then having quite recovered my confusion by seeing Percy embarrassed by Ada's attack, I was able to take my own part in the conversation; and—accustomed as I was to wordy skirmishes with papa and Harry—with Ada on my side, we soon completely silenced Percy, who, indeed, in a war of words, was no match for either of us alone.

Percy Desborough was, in my opinion, a handsome man; and yet, perhaps, as I am prejudiced in his favour, my opinion may not be worth much, and I do not think girls in general would have thought him so. He was now nearly twenty-three, about middle height, rather slight, with a lithe, sinewy figure: very upright. His brown hair was brushed back with a wave from his forehead, for in the year of grace, 1848, young men had not taken to cutting their hair like convicts, or charity boys. He had a thoughtful and yet a quick eye, a firm, resolute mouth, and a white and thin, but very nervous hand. He looked a soldier every inch, of the type of which our Indian heroes are made; thoughtful, studious men, with warm hearts, and iron resolutions, with manners quiet and gentle, but with the fiery courage of a Bayard. He was as far removed from the ordinary drawing-

room soldier as can well be; men who, doubtless, when necessity comes, are, as every English gentleman must be, brave as far as personal courage goes, but who care little for their military duties, contenting themselves with going through the daily routine, reserving all their best energies for the evening. Men with a rather supercilious smile, and languid air, with a great flow of small talk and compliments: men much given to stroking their moustache and whiskers, and with an amazing idea of their own powers of fascination; not, indeed, that I blame them for that, for we girls do make such fools of them, that it is no wonder they should consider that as far as we are concerned they are invincible. Percy was, on the other hand, almost shy with women, and was very studious, especially in all matters relating to his profession. He expected, Ada told me, to embark for India with his regiment in about a year's time, and he was working very hard at Hindostanee and the other Eastern languages, in order to qualify himself for a staff appointment.

Lady Desborough presently came down. She was extremely gracious and cordial, and, although it was not more than six months since she had seen me, she assured me that I had very much improved, especially in figure and carriage,—the points, she observed, in which young girls generally fail; and she said she should be quite proud of two such belles as Ada and myself to introduce into society.

We dined earlier than usual, and did not sit so long at the table. This was a great relief to me, as I hardly felt enough at home to have quite recovered from my old sense of oppression at the extreme stateliness of the meal. The reason for this change was, that we were going to the opera in the evening. We had dressed for it before dinner, so that there was no time lost, and we entered Lady Desborough's box a little before the overture began. Lady Desborough insisted on us girls taking the front seats. She sat between us, but rather farther back, while Percy stood sometimes behind Ada, sometimes behind me.

While the overture was going on, Ada told me to look down upon the sea of heads below. It was wonderful, but yet a little confusing, there were so many men looking up with opera-glasses, and a great many of them seemed gazing right into our box.

"How very rude they are, Ada!"

Ada laughed. She had often been there before, and was accustomed to it.

"My dear, it is the greatest possible compliment to us. All these lorgnettes turned to our box proclaim us indisputable belles. Men would not take the trouble to look at us if we were not pretty. There, child, don't colour up so; the only way is to look perfectly indifferent, as if you were quite unconscious of it."

It was easy advice to give, and I followed it to the best of my power; but I felt very hot and uncomfortable till the curtain drew up, and then I was too entirely absorbed in the music to have noticed it, even if the whole house had been looking at me.

It was to me an evening of enchantment. The opera was "Lucrezia Borgia," with Alboni as Orsini, and I had never before conceived it possible that the human voice was capable of producing such exquisite full liquid notes as those which poured from her, seemingly without the slightest effort. It was marvellous, and I was literally enchanted; and even between the acts I did not recover sufficiently from the effect it produced on me to listen to Ada, who wanted to talk, and tell me who every one was in the different boxes.

When we reached home, Lady Desborough said it was quite a treat going with any one who enjoyed herself as thoroughly as I did. The first time Ada went she did not seem to care in the least about the music, and only occupied herself in asking who all the people were.

The next day we went for a drive in the park, and I was quite astonished and delighted at the number and beauty of the carriages and horses; for in our walks at school, we had only kept in the secluded parts of the park and gardens, and had never been allowed to go near the fashionable quarters. It was quite a new pleasure to me. But whatever I felt, I knew it was right and proper to sit quite still, and to look passive and quiet as Ada did, especially as numbers of ladies in carriages bowed to Lady Desborough, and men on horseback lifted their hats, or sometimes rode up to the carriage and spoke. Ada knew most of them by name, but very few to speak to, as her mamma had not been in the habit of taking her out to drive with her, or of introducing her to any one, as she was not yet out. But now as we were to appear the next evening in public, Lady Desborough introduced several of the gentlemen to us, and some of them rode for a little way by the side of the carriage, talking to her ladyship, and sometimes exchanging a few words with Ada and myself. That evening we were a quiet little party, and after Ada and I had played some of our old school duets together, we went to bed quite early, in order to be fresh for the next day's fatigues.

What an exciting day that was! Early in the morning Gunter's men came and took possession of the dining-room, turning it completely upside down. A large cartload of benches and tressels came at the same time, and they took the dining-table away, and erected a large horse-shoe table in its place. In the mean time the upholsterer's men were hard at work in the drawing-room. First they removed all the furniture from it; then they took out the window-sashes, and erected a most lovely little tent over the whole balcony, lined with white and blue muslin, and furnished with couches, forming a most charming place to go out into between the dances. Having done this, they stretched a drugget over both drawing-rooms, and placed forms round the room. As soon as they were gone, Ada and I came into it, and performed a waltz on the drugget, which was pronounced stretched to perfection. About this time Percy arrived from Covent Garden, where he

had been to see that the flowers which had been previously ordered were coming. Scarcely had he arrived when two carts drove up to the door full of them. We thereupon formed ourselves into a council of taste, and the flowers were distributed under our supervision in the hall, in the room behind the dining-room—which was to be for tea and ices—on the landings of the staircase, and in the grates of the drawing-rooms. The conservatory had been filled the day before, and a perfumed fountain from Rimmel's, placed there to play during the evening. When all was done, we pronounced the effect to be charming. Lady Desborough, at Ada's request, came down from her room, where she had been all the morning, to inspect the arrangements, which she pronounced exceedingly good. Indeed it looked extremely well, for the drawing-rooms, which were very large and handsome, had been repapered specially for the occasion, Lady Desborough being determined that nothing should be wanting, and their effect, with the pretty tent outside, and the large boudoir opening from the farther end, was really lovely. When she had inspected everything, she said that she particularly wished us to lie down for a time in the afternoon, and to get a short sleep if possible, if not to take a book, but at all events to keep quiet, in order that we might be fresh in the evening. This advice we of course had to follow, but it was very unpalatable to us both, as we were girls enough to enjoy all the bustle immensely; still there was no help for it; and so we went up to our rooms, where lunch, by Lady Desborough's orders, was brought up to us. After that we lay down, but I don't think either of us closed our eyes. I am sure I was far too excited at the thought of the evening before me. Presently Ada came into my room, and said that lying down was out of the question, so we wheeled two easy chairs before the fire, and sat there and chatted quietly.

By six o'clock the supper was all laid, under the superintendence of Gunter's managing man himself, and the effect, when we went in to see it on our way down to dinner in the back dining-room, was certainly superb. Even Lady Desborough condescended to express her conviction to Gunter's managing man, that nothing could be better.

After this, the house subsided into quiet, and soon after seven we went up to dress. We had thus nearly three hours before us, as it was quite certain no one would come before ten; and I confess I did not see how we could possibly occupy all that, and was half inclined to side with Percy in his remarks as to the absurdity of our being so long at our toilet. However, Ada paid no attention to what he said, and, of course, I went up-stairs with her. It was very pleasant up there, and we chatted a long time, sitting before Ada's fire, before we made any signs of beginning to dress.

Presently a knock at the door interrupted us, and we were told that the hairdresser was below.

"I will go down first, Agnes; you get on with your dressing. I shall not be twenty minutes at most."

While I was dressing a small parcel was brought up, which had been left at the door for me. It contained a note and a small jewel-box. The note was from Messrs. Hunt and Roskell, saying, "That they had received orders from Mr. Harmer, of Canterbury, to send me a cross, the choice of which he had left with them, and a small chain to suspend it round my neck. That they trusted the jewel would give me satisfaction; but that, if I wished, they would exchange it for any other in their shop, if I would favour them with a call." The contents of the case were a small cross, composed entirely of very large diamonds, of the value of which I had no idea, but which looked very lovely, and a small chain to hang it round my neck. I said nothing to Ada, although the door was open, as I wished to surprise her.

Ada's maid seemed a long time to me putting the finishing touches to my dress; for I was not accustomed to all these little minutiæ; but at last it was done, and I turned round to go into Ada's room—she having been dressed by Lady Desborough's own maid—when she came into the room to me, and as she did so we uttered an exclamation of mutual admiration. Ada certainly looked lovely; she was dressed in white silk, with white tulle over it, which was looped up with scarlet flowers, and she had a wreath of the same, with green leaves in her dark hair; round her neck was a beautiful necklace of pearls of great value, which was, I believe, a family heirloom.

My dress, like hers, was of white silk, with a skirt of lovely Brussels lace, a present from Mr. Harmer, over it. This was slightly looped up with blue forget-me-nots, and I had a wreath of the same flowers in my hair.

"Oh Agnes," Ada exclaimed, after our first burst of mutual congratulations was over, "Oh, Agnes, what a lovely diamond cross; where did you get it from? you never showed it me before."

I explained to her the manner in which I had just received it.

"Well, Agnes, that Mr. Harmer of yours is a trump, as Percy would say. What a beautiful thing. Have you any idea of the value of it?"

I knew nothing of the value of diamonds, and suggested twenty pounds.

"Twenty pounds, you silly child," Ada said; "you don't deserve to have presents made you. If I know anything of diamonds, it is worth two hundred."

"You don't mean that, Ada," I exclaimed, quite frightened at the idea of carrying such a valuable thing round my neck; "you are only laughing at me."

"I can assure you I am in earnest, Agnes; they are quite worth that; they are splendid diamonds, and the cross looks quite a blaze of light on your neck."

We were down stairs by a quarter to ten. Percy was already there, and paid us both many

nonsensical compliments. Lady Desborough soon came down, and also expressed herself highly pleased with our appearance. She fully endorsed what Ada had said as to the value of the cross, and said that it was worth more than Ada had put it at, perhaps nearly twice as much.

"Now," she said, when Percy had gone out of the room to fetch something he had forgotten, "I wish to give you a last piece of advice. I give it to you, Miss Ashleigh, as much as I do to Ada, for as you come out under my charge, I consider myself as responsible for you equally. To you, Ada, I say be very careful you do not let your high spirits run away with you; above all, do not become noisy: I know well what your tendency is. This does not apply to you, Miss Ashleigh, for although you have good spirits, I know you are not likely to let them run away with you as Ada is. Do not either of you, I beg, dance more than once, or at most twice with any gentleman. This applies equally to you, Miss Ashleigh, as the heiress to a considerable fortune. It is incumbent on you both to be very careful with whom you dance,—I mean, dance frequently: there is nothing more damaging to a girl than that her name should be mentioned as seen flirting with any but a most eligible party; and as at present you do not know who is who, you cannot be too careful."

Here Percy's return interrupted any further advice which Lady Desborough might have been disposed to have tendered us; and in a few minutes the visitors began to arrive, and my first ball began.

I may here mention, with reference to Lady Desborough's remark about my being an heiress, that Clara Fairthorne had brought the news to school, when Mr. Harmer's intentions with respect to us were publicly announced, and from that time we were generally known there by the nickname of the "heiresses."

CHAPTER IX.

THE OLD STORY.

I never enjoyed myself in my life as much as I did at that ball. Lady Desborough introduced a good many of the first comers to me, and Percy brought up more. He had engaged me for the first waltz, and he presently asked me for the first polka after supper; and my card was soon quite full for the whole evening.

At some times I should have been sorry for this, as one does not like to be obliged to refuse any very eligible looking man who may be introduced to one. Besides, it prevents dancing a second dance with any particularly pleasant partner,—that is, of course, unless one has the coolness to turn out some one already on the list, which at that time I certainly had not.

But that night I preferred having fresh partners every dance. It was all so new to me, and I wanted to see everything; and in this way I was less engaged in interesting conversation, and was able to give more attention to what was going on.

It was a brilliant scene. The *élite* of London society were there, and very beautiful were many of the faces, and very exquisite the dresses. Not one of them all through was more lovely than Ada, and almost every one of my partners remarked to me how very lovely she was; indeed, she made quite a sensation.

The men I was not so much struck with. They were very distinguished-looking and very gentlemanly and polished in manner,—very, very different from what few young men there were at Canterbury. But they had a languid air about them which impressed me unpleasantly. They gave me the idea that they had gone out so much into society that they had quite ceased to care for dancing, and that even conversation was too much labour to be undertaken; and I knew it was bad taste, but I certainly preferred as partners the officers I had met at Canterbury to these languid young Guardsmen and scions of nobility.

For myself, I could not understand how any one could help dancing with spirit to that inspiring music; and the only drawback to my enjoyment was that the rooms were so very full that one was dreadfully squeezed and knocked about. However, on my venturing to remark to one of my partners that the room was extremely full, I found that I knew nothing about it, for he answered, —

"Dear me! Do you think so, now? Why, every one has been remarking to me how pleasant it is that the rooms are not crowded."

I found afterwards that my partner was right, and that I had shown my ignorance; for, at some of the balls I went to afterwards, the crush was so great that dancing was literally an impossibility.

I felt very thankful I had been to the opera, for most of my partners, on finding I was fresh from the country, asked that question, having, I suppose, no other topic in common with me. Had I danced oftener than once with some of them, no doubt my conversations would have been more lively. As it was, with a few exceptions, they were not interesting. But they all danced well, and that part I did enjoy most thoroughly. Most of all I liked my dances with Percy, for he told me who every one was, and did it really good naturedly, while some of my other partners, who had done the same, had been as sarcastic and ill-natured about every one, as if they thought that it

must give me pleasure to hear other people run down; whereas, when they were making depreciating remarks upon other girls' dresses and manners, I could not but feel quite uncomfortable in wondering what they would say about me presently.

Percy managed to take me down to supper, carrying me off from my last partner in a very dexterous manner; and, what was very nice, he managed to get me a place next to Ada, who had been taken down by young Lord Holmeskirk, a very pleasant young fellow in the Guards. Ada introduced him to me at once, and he pleaded very hard for a dance after supper; I told him that my card was full, but he urged it so much that I said at last I would dance with him if he would manage it for me, but that I had not the least idea how it was to be done. I may here say that he did so; the second dance after supper, coming up to me as I was leaning on Percy's arm, after my polka with him, and saying, in the quietest way, "I believe I have the pleasure of this dance, Miss Ashleigh," he carried me off immediately the music struck up, before my real partner, whoever he was, could find me. Not being accustomed to this sort of thing, and not having the least idea who it was I was engaged to, I felt quite nervous and uncomfortable for the next dance or two, expecting that every gentleman who came near me was on the point of reproaching me for having broken my engagement to him. And, indeed, to the very end of my stay in London, I could never bring myself, in spite of what Ada told me about every one doing so, to turn off a partner in this way without feeling that I was doing something very wrong. I dare say my conscience would have been blunted in time, but as it was I never arrived at that point. Lord Holmeskirk turned out the most pleasant partner of all I had been introduced to, and I could chat with him with more freedom,—he was so perfectly natural and unaffected.

We were a very merry little group at supper; what I ate I have not the slightest idea. Percy kept my plate constantly filled, but, with the exception of strawberries and cream, I did not recognise a single thing he gave me. Then we pulled crackers, and found the mottoes within them of a singularly silly and unsatisfactory nature.

At last we got up from supper, and went up to the drawing-room, and then the gentlemen, at least those of them who were fortunate enough to find seats, sat down; and when they once did so, I began to think they would never come up again, they were such a terribly long time; and it seemed such a waste to be sitting still doing nothing, with that splendid music ready to go on again. While they were downstairs I was introduced to several ladies, to whose houses I was going in the next few nights with Lady Desborough and Ada.

At last the gentlemen came up again, and we began to dance as if to make up for lost time; for the dancing was certainly better than before supper, and my partners more agreeable and chatty; besides, some of the people had left, so that there was more room, and I enjoyed it accordingly. I think every one else did the same, for there seemed to me to be much more lively conversation and flirting going on than before supper.

I have said that I only danced once with each partner, but there was one exception: this was Lord Bangley, a captain in the Guards. He was introduced to me early in the evening, before my card was full, and he begged so earnestly for two dances that I had no excuse for refusing him; but of all the partners I had that evening, I disliked him certainly the most. He was a handsome man, that I could not deny; but that was all I could say for him. He was tall and very stiff—so stiff that his head seemed set too far back—with a supercilious sneering manner, a very harsh unpleasant voice, and an insufferable air of arrogance and conceit.

Ada told me next day that Lord Bangley had condescended to express to her his great approval of my appearance and manner. I curtsied low when Ada told me, but all that I could say was, "that the feeling was by no means reciprocal."

Presently the room began to thin in earnest, and there was a great noise outside, in the intervals of the music, of shouting for carriages and prancing of horses; and then, in a very short time, they were all gone, and there remained in the great drawing-room only Lady Desborough, Ada, Percy, and myself.

"What do you think of your first ball?" Lady Desborough asked.

"Oh, delightful!" we exclaimed simultaneously; "we could have gone on dancing all night."

"It has gone off very well indeed, and I am perfectly satisfied with everything. But now let us go off to bed; we shall have plenty of time to talk it all over in the morning."

It was, however, very long before Ada and

I went to bed. We took off our ball-dresses, let down our hair, put our feet into slippers, and then sat by the fire in my room talking over the evening, and our partners, and our impressions of everything.

At last I said, "If we do not go to bed soon, Ada, we may as well give up all idea of going at all. It is nearly six o'clock."

Ada rose to go into her own room.

"We have a good five hours to sleep yet. We shall not breakfast till twelve. Good night, dear."

After this memorable *entrée* into society, we were out nearly every night, until, before the end of a month, I had had quite enough of parties and balls, and was really glad when we had a quiet

evening to ourselves.

Sometimes, before going to the balls, we went to the opera, which, I think, after a time I liked more than the parties. Percy always accompanied us there, but he did not often go the balls, which I was sorry for; I liked him so much as a partner, and I could talk with him, so much more naturally and freely about every one there, than I could with my other partners.

For the first few nights I went out, Lord Bangley was very attentive to me; but I disliked him so much that at last I always was engaged when he asked me to dance; and, although he was very slow to see that any one really could dislike dancing with so very exalted a person as himself, he at last was forced to adopt that conclusion, and so gave up asking me, which was a great relief to me, for his disagreeable manner quite oppressed me.

Ada, one morning at breakfast—at which meal, by the bye, Lady Desborough never appeared—was laughing at me about him, when I said, sharply, that I could not bear him, and that I had shown him so most unmistakably.

"I am glad to hear you say so, Agnes," Percy said; for by this time Ada had pointed out to us the extreme absurdity of our being constantly together for two months, and calling each other Miss Ashleigh and Mr. Desborough all that time. So Percy, having obtained my willing consent, took to calling me Agnes, while I don't think I called him anything; but really Percy came almost naturally to my lips, for Ada had so often spoken of him to me by that name. "I am very glad to hear you say so, Agnes; Bangley is hated by his brother officers, and and is what I should call, although an earl's son, a downright snob;—a snob, because he is conceited about his advantages of person and position;—a snob, because he is a narrow-minded, empty-headed coxcomb."

"Well done, oh! most outspoken brother," Ada said. "Pray what offence has poor Lord Bangley given you for all this outburst?"

"No particular offence, Ada; but I can't bear the fellow."

"Curious, now," Ada said, rather mischievously; "I never heard you say anything against him before: your dislike must be of very recent origin."

"Recent or not recent," Percy said, dogmatically, "I can't bear him."

After I had been three weeks in London, Lady Desborough asked me to stay two months instead of one, as I had originally intended. She kindly said that it was so very advantageous and pleasant for Ada having me with her, and, indeed, pressed me so much that I saw she really wished it, and on my part I was only too glad to prolong my stay.

I was quite at home now in society, and knew nearly every one, and enjoyed the conversation now as much, or more, than the dancing. Ada told me one morning, when I had been there about five weeks, that I was getting a perfect flirt—quite as bad as she was—indeed worse, because quieter—and therefore much more dangerous.

"There is Lord Holmeskirk, Agnes: he is quite assiduous in his attentions to you. Now, Percy, you have certainly nothing to say against him, for he is an exceedingly nice, unaffected fellow."

"Holmeskirk," broke in Percy, "why, he is a mere boy!"

"He is an officer in the Guards, Percy. He is, I grant you, two years younger than your sapient self; still he is more than three years older than Agnes. Don't mind what he says, my dear: you have my free consent and approbation. I only wish it had been my magnificent self at whom he had deigned to throw his handkerchief."

"Nonsense, Ada. I do wish you would get out of the way of always talking such ridiculous nonsense;" and Percy got up quite crossly, and went straight out of the room.

Ada lifted her eyes in comic amazement and penitence.

"Dear me! to think of my having angered his royal highness! Did I say anything very dreadful, Agnes? I do not remember his being so fierce with me since I was twelve years old. One would think he had been crossed in love. Eh, Agnes! what do you say to that?" she asked, with rather a mischievous tone.

"I am sure I do not know," I said, composedly.

"Oh, you are sure you do not know! Well, let us see if we can guess. Not long ago, when Lord Bangley was in question, he became furious against him; now, he is enraged with me for recommending that nice little Lord Holmeskirk. Put two and two together, my dear, and four is the undoubted result."

"What nonsense you are talking, Ada!" I said, colouring greatly. "Your brother no more thinks anything about me than—than—" and I stopped for a comparison.

"Than you do about him," Ada suggested.

"He thinks nothing of me," I said, ignoring her suggestion, "except as an old school-fellow and friend; and I really am surprised, Ada, that ever you should talk such nonsense."

"Very well, my dear," Ada said, tranquilly; "then I will say no more about it. I certainly thought I had an average amount of perception, and could see as far into a brick wall as my neighbours;

but it seems I cannot. I know, now, that my brother, who never cared for music, and who never went ten times to the opera in his life, only goes every night we do because he has acquired a sudden taste for music. Still, in that case, you will allow it is odd that he should sit so much behind your chair, and talk to you all the time the music is going on. No doubt, however, he is criticising the performance for your benefit; but, as he never speaks loud enough for me to hear, of course I could not guess that. Another thing too, is, to say the least of it, strange—Percy, till you came, was at work all day in his room upon Sanscrit and Hindostanee, and smoking so, that, in spite of the double doors which he has on purpose, the upper part of the house used quite to smell of his cigars, and I was always expecting mamma to complain about it. It is, then, certainly strange that he should now find time to idle away all his morning with us, and to ride out by the side of our carriage in the Park of an afternoon. However, I dare say all this is because he has finished his study of Eastern tongues, and is arrived at perfection in them. How stupid I have been not to have thought of all this before!" and here Ada went on sipping her coffee, as if quite convinced that she had been altogether in error.

Honestly, I was astonished. It had seemed so natural having Percy always with us, so pleasant listening to his sensible conversation, so different from the light flow of badinage we heard of an evening—it seemed such a matter of course, to enjoy the little quiet—well—flirtation at the opera, that, up to this moment, I can say honestly that it had never seriously entered my head that Percy Desborough cared for me. As, however, I thought over all our conversation together, not so much what he had said as the way in which he had said it, the conviction came over me that perhaps Ada was right after all; and the colour came mounting up into my face, till I felt a deep crimson even over my forehead.

Ada was watching me, although she did not seem to be doing so; and guessing, from what she could see of my face, that I had arrived at the conclusion that it was as she said, she jumped up from her chair, and, kneeling down by me in her old impulsive way, she put her arms round me, and kissed my burning cheeks.

"You dear, silly, blind Agnes! you know I am right, and that Percy loves you."

I was silent a little, and then I said—

"But are you sure of what you say, Ada?"

"Quite sure, Agnes: he has not yet said as much to me, but I know it just as well as if he had. Have I not seen the way he looks at you when you are not noticing him? My dear child, I am quite sure about him. But about you, Agnes, do you care for him?"

"I never thought of him so, Ada—never once. I liked him very much indeed, but it never entered my mind that he cared for me in that way; so I never thought of it."

"But now you know he does?" Ada persisted, kissing me coaxingly.

"Ah, but I don't know yet, Ada; so you will get no answer from me on that head. But, oh, Ada!" I exclaimed, suddenly. "What would Lady Desborough say? Oh, I do hope it is not true! What would she say to Percy falling in love with a country doctor's daughter?"

Ada did not look at all alarmed.

"My dear," she said, laughing, "I do not think you need trouble yourself on that score. Country doctors' daughters, in general, are not heiresses of twenty-five thousand pounds. Mamma is, no doubt, ambitious, and expects that I shall make a great match; and had Percy been like other people, and remained in the Guards, and stayed at home, I dare say she would have thought nothing under a duke's daughter good enough for him. As it is, all that is changed. She was very angry indeed with him about it, but she has given it up now. Here he is in a regiment which in a year or so will go on foreign service; he is mad enough to intend to go with it, and where is he then? You may be quite sure of one thing, Agnes. My mamma is a very excellent woman, but she knows far too much of human nature not to have weighed in her mind, and accepted the possibility of Percy's falling in love, before she invited a very pretty girl like you to spend a month in the house at a time she knew Percy would be at home on leave."

I had no reply ready to this argument of Ada's, which I knew enough of Lady Desborough to feel was true; so I kissed her, and told her that she had talked quite nonsense enough for one morning, and that it was quite time to get ready to go out.

The last three weeks I spent in Eaton Square were perhaps more happy than the previous time, but I don't think they were so pleasant; that is, I did not feel so much at home. Before, I had been with Percy as I might have been with a brother, or rather, perhaps, with a cousin; but now, to feel in my heart—as I now did feel—that he looked at me in quite another way, made me feel different, and at times a little awkward with him. Before, if Ada left the room for any thing, I continued to chat with Percy as unconcernedly as if she had been present; now, I made some excuse to accompany her, or, if obliged to remain, rattled on about anything that came uppermost, to prevent the conversation by any possibility taking a serious turn.

Ada told me one day that Percy had asked her the reason of my remaining away so; but I told her she had no one to blame but herself, who had made me uncomfortable by talking nonsense to me about him.

"But he is very much in earnest, Agnes. He spoke to me last night, and said he was only waiting

for an opportunity of speaking to you. You won't say 'no,' will you, Agnes darling?"

She asked in her coaxing way, kissing me as she used to do at school when she wanted me to do anything for her.

I did not answer. I felt very very happy to know now for certain that he loved me, still, I could not answer that question except to himself, especially to Ada, who would be sure whatever she promised me, to tell Percy. So I said at last, "There is no use, Ada, in his speaking to me now at all. I would never accept him or any other man, even if I loved him with all my heart, until my father had seen and liked him."

"But how is Dr. Ashleigh to see Percy?" Ada asked, with a dismayed face.

"Of course, Ada, it is not for me to make arrangements for your brother," I said quietly; and then, after a pause, seeing her blank dismay, I went on, "It is not for me to suggest, Ada; but as you have promised to come down for a week to us, in another six weeks when the season is over, on your way to Lady Dashwood's, I have no doubt that papa would be very happy to see your brother if he should be happening to accompany you."

I was conscious that although I said this laughingly, I was blushing crimson; but still I felt it was better so than that Percy should ask me now, for I quite meant what I said about papa's consent; but I was by no means sure of my own resolution if he asked me, which he was certain to do if I did not somehow put it off. Ada looked me full in the face, she saw that it would be as she wished, and she took me very gently in her arms, and we kissed each other lovingly, as if in pledge of the nearer relationship we were to bear. And then she made one more effort.

"But could you not say 'yes,' now, Agnes, and refer him to your papa? It would be the same thing, and put him out of his suspense."

"No, Ada," I said positively; "it would not be the same thing at all. If I said 'yes,' but which, mind, I have not said that I ever shall do, papa would be sure to give his consent because he loves me. But before I am engaged to any one, I should like papa to see him and like him first, and then when he tells me he approves my choice, I shall know he really means what he says."

After this, I have no doubt Ada told him something of what I had said, for from that time they ceased to try and contrive *tête-à-têtes* between us, and I saw that Percy was content to wait till the time I had indicated. So I was much more comfortable with him. His leave expired, and he went away three or four days before my visit ended. I took care the last day or two not to be alone with him, for I confess I doubted my own resolution as much as I did his. However, nothing was said till he was going, and then as he was saying good-bye, he held my hand and said, "Then I may hope to see you again in six weeks, Agnes?" and he looked so earnestly at me, that my stupid colour would come rushing up.

"Yes," I said, as steadily as I could, "papa will be very glad to see you, if you should happen to be accompanying Ada."

For a moment longer he held my hand, and it seemed to me that he drew me a little towards him as if he were going to kiss me. If Ada had not been in the room, I believe he would have done so; as it was, he lifted my hand and pressed it to his lips, kissed Ada heartily, and was gone.

The very last ball I went to before I left, a circumstance happened which gave me great pain at the time. I was dancing with Lord Holmeskirk, with whom, indeed, I danced more perhaps than with any one else, and we were speaking of my leaving on the following day, and he remarked almost seriously how much I should be missed, to which I replied with laughing disbelief. After the dance was over we took our seats on a sofa placed in a conservatory on the landing, half way up the stairs, and which was otherwise unoccupied. It was quite surrounded by flowers, so that although any one who came up-stairs could see us, still no one could hear what we said.

When we had sat down Lord Holmeskirk said, "So you do not think you will be missed, Miss Ashleigh? Now I can assure you that at least by me your absence will be keenly felt." And then without further introduction, he made me an honest straightforward offer.

I felt very surprised, and very very sorry, and told him so. I had looked upon him as a very pleasant partner, and had liked him very much, and I assured him that I had never for a moment imagined that he had regarded me in any other light.

"I don't suppose you love me now, Miss Ashleigh," he said earnestly. "There is no reason in the world why you should; but don't you think you could some day. Is it quite impossible that you may in time get to care for me?" And the honest young nobleman looked so pleadingly up in my face, that I could hardly restrain my tears.

"Lord Holmeskirk," I said, "I am very sorry indeed for what you have said to me. I am grieved that I should unwittingly have obtained the love of a true heart such as yours is without being able to requite it. It will be a matter of lasting regret to me. But it would be cruel kindness to deceive you. I cannot encourage you even to hope. There are many here far more fitted than I am to win your love, and whose rank would render them far more suitable matches for you than I could be. Your parents——"

"I can assure you," he began, earnestly, "I have their consent; I have already spoken to them."

"I esteem you still more for having done so, Lord Holmeskirk, and I am touched at their

willingness to receive me; still, their consent must have been the result rather of their affection for you, than their own real approval of it."

I saw at once in his open face that it was so, and that his parents' consent had been reluctantly given.

"It could not be otherwise," I said; "they naturally wish you to choose one who, from her rank and connections, may strengthen your position, however high that may be. And now, I can only say again how sorry I am for the pain I have given you, but that it cannot be. I shall always remember you with esteem and regard, and nothing will give me greater pleasure than to hear you have made some happier choice."

The young man saw that any further appeal would be hopeless, and the tears stood in his honest grey eyes.

"Thank you very much for your kindness, Miss Ashleigh, but, believe me, I shall ever regard you ——" "as a friend," I said, rising, and making a movement to the staircase. He offered me his arm, and as we went up I began chatting on indifferent subjects, as I did not wish any one to even guess what had taken place. As we walked round the room, we passed by where the countess, his mother, was sitting. I saw she looked at us anxiously, and as her son caught her eye, he shook his head slightly in answer to the question she asked, and I could see her eyes open, first in astonishment, and then soften with a variety of emotions,—sorrow for her son's disappointment, —pleasure that he was not going to make a match which she could not have thought suitable. As we passed again, she stopped us, and spoke a few words to me, for I had frequently spoken to her before, and had liked her much, for she was a kind, motherly sort of woman, though she was a countess. She said she heard this was my last ball, and that she should quite miss my face amongst the dancers.

"It is a fresh, happy face, my dear, and I hope it may continue so. Good-bye; you have my best wishes;" and she shook hands with me very kindly and affectionately, in a way which seemed to say a very great many things which she could not well express.

When I got back that evening, Ada, who had been rather silent on our way home, came into my room, as she usually did, for a talk, and said, "Agnes, I was going down the stairs to get an ice, and I saw you and Lord Holmeskirk go into the conservatory together, and you were there when I came up again, and I am quite sure by both your looks that he has made you an offer. Well?"

"What do you mean by *well*?" I asked, for I felt a little hurt that, after what I had said to her about Percy, she should ever dream of the possibility of my accepting any one else.

"Of course I mean what did you answer? Don't keep me waiting, Agnes: you don't know how anxious and impatient I have been to get home to ask you."

"After what I said to you about Percy, Ada," I said, rather coldly, "I should have thought it hardly necessary to ask. Of course I refused him."

"There, you dear Agnes," Ada said, almost crying on my neck, "don't be angry with me; but I have been so nervous, though I knew you would say 'no.' Still, it must require so much courage to refuse a nobleman; I know I never could;" and so she went on till she coaxed me into a good humour again, and we talked a long time before we went to bed. And so my gaieties ended, and next morning, bidding adieu to Ada and Lady Desborough, who was very gracious, and even kissed me, I started for Canterbury, under charge of a lady who was going down, and whom I met by arrangement on the platform of the station.

CHAPTER X.

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW.

Although I had enjoyed my trip to London immensely, yet I was very, very glad to get back to my dear old home again; happier even than before, for now, in addition to all my former home-pleasures, I had a secret source of happiness to muse over when alone. How bright life appeared to me, how thankful I felt for all my deep happiness, and how my heart seemed to open to all created things!

I had only one cause for sorrow, and that one which had for years been seen as a dim shadow in the far distance, but which had been for the last two or three years past increasing in magnitude, growing from vague ill-defined dread, to the sad certainty of coming grief. I mean the rapidly failing health of mamma.

From my farthest back remembrance of her she had never been strong. Not, perhaps, suffering from any decided pain or illness, but weak and languid, and unequal to any unusual exertion. For years the great part of her time had been spent on the sofa, but during the last few months she had been unmistakably failing; on my return home after my visit in London I found that there was a marked change in her appearance, and that she had grown decidedly thinner and weaker in that short time.

Papa, I could see, was very anxious about her; he was a good deal more at home now, and spent as much time as he could spare in the room with her, bringing his books in there, and sitting to study where she could see his face, and so close that she could exchange a few words with him occasionally without having to raise her voice. Ill as mamma was, I think she was never so happy in her married life as she was at that time. She now no longer troubled herself with domestic arrangements, but left all that to me, and was content to lie, holding a book in her wasted hands, and looking fondly across at her husband at his reading. When papa was there she liked, I think, best being alone with him and her thoughts; but when he was out, I used to take my work and sit beside her, and talk when she felt inclined, which was not often. Indeed, I had only one long conversation with her, which was about a month after I came back.

She had been lying very quiet one day, not speaking at all, but watching me while I worked, when she said:

"You have told us all about your trip to London, Agnes, and about your gaieties and amusements; but I do not think you have told all. As you sit there I can see sometimes the colour come up over your face, and your lips part a little, and your eyes soften, while your fingers lie idle on your work. Have you not some pleasant thoughts, dearest—some sweet hope for the future which you have not yet spoken of? Tell me, darling. I have not much longer to be with you, and it would make my last time more happy to be able to think of your future as somewhat secured, and to picture you to myself as mistress of some happy home. Am I right, my child? Have you some such hope?"

Kneeling down beside her, when my tears suffered me to speak, I told her all that had passed between me and Percy, and that, although not yet actually engaged, we should be when he came down, if papa and she approved of him; and I explained to her the reason why I had not at once told them about it was, that I wished them to see him with unbiased eyes first of all, and to like him for his own sake, before they did for mine. Mamma asked me several questions about Percy's dispositions and habits, which I answered as minutely and fairly as I could; when I had done she said:

"I think from what you say, my darling, he will make you very happy, and I shall be able to trust you to him. I shall look forward to seeing him. I am very glad you have told me, my child; I shall have pleasant thoughts of the future now, in addition to all my happy memories of the past."

From this time mamma grew fonder than ever of having me with her, and would watch me as she watched papa. She liked me best to sit on a low stool beside her, so close that without exertion she could softly stroke my hair, and let her poor thin hand rest on my head. I did not go out anywhere, except over to Sturry. There I went as often as I could; for I liked Sophy, and loved Mr. Harmer, as indeed I had good reason to do. About him papa was very uneasy; he had had a rather severe stroke of paralysis when I was away in London, and, although he had greatly recovered from it, he still felt its effects, and papa said that he must be kept very quiet, for that any excitement might bring on another and fatal attack.

The first time I went over to see Mr. Harmer, I was quite shocked at the change which had taken place since I had last seen him, little more than two months before. He rose to meet me when I went into the library where he was sitting, with quite his old smile of welcome, and I did not so much notice the change till he was fairly on his feet. Then indeed I saw how great it was. His old free, erect bearing was gone, and he stood upright with difficulty, and when he tried to walk, it was in a stiff and jointless sort of way, very painful to see. But the greatest alteration was in his voice; formerly he spoke in such a frank, hearty, joyous way, and now each word seemed to come out slowly and with difficulty. Although papa had warned me that I should see a great change in him, I had no idea of such a terrible alteration as this, and it was so great a shock to me, that I could not help breaking down and crying.

"You must not do that," Mr. Harmer said, placing me in a chair at one side of him, while Sophy, who had gone in with me, sat on the other, and he took my hand in his own, and held it there the whole time I was with him. "You must not cry, Agnes; I am getting an old man, and could not, in the ordinary course of nature, have expected to have lived many years more. I have led a very happy life, and have innumerable blessings to be thankful for; not the least, although that may seem selfish on my part, that there are some who care for me in my age, and who will be sorry when I am taken away. There, my dear, dry your eyes, and give me a full description of all your gaieties in London."

I told him all about what I had been doing, where I had gone, and everything I could think of likely to amuse him, and was still in the middle of my story when Miss Harmer came in.

"I am very sorry to have to disturb you Miss Ashleigh," she said, after shaking hands with me, "for I know how much my brother enjoys a talk with you; but your papa's orders were so very strict, that on no account should he be allowed to talk for long at a time, that I really must put a stop to your conversation."

I had not seen Miss Harmer for some time, for she and her sister had been away on the Continent for two years previously, and had returned only on receipt of the news of their brother's illness.

When Miss Harmer spoke, I got up at once to leave, feeling a little ashamed of my own thoughtlessness, for papa had particularly warned me before I started, not to talk long; but I had quite forgotten his injunction, in the pleasure Mr. Harmer had evidently felt in listening to me.

"You see, my dear," he said, "I must do as I am told now; but you will come again soon to see me, will you not?"

I promised to come as soon as I could, and from that time whenever mamma could spare me, I went over for half an hour's chat with Mr. Harmer, very often at first, but as he got better, and mamma became weaker, of course my visits became very much less frequent.

During my visits at this time, I was a good deal puzzled about Sophy. There was something in her manner, which I could not at all understand. She was evidently extremely attached to her grandfather, and was unwearied in her constant attention to him; and yet at times it appeared to me that her thoughts were far off from what was passing before her, and that after one of these fits of abstraction she would rouse herself with almost a start, and then glance furtively at Mr. Harmer, as if afraid that he had noticed it. When he praised her too, which he often did to me, for her care and kindness to him, I fancied that she almost shrank from his praise in a sort of pained way, as if she felt that his commendation was undeserved. I daresay at any other time I might have thought a great deal about this; but as it was I had so much to occupy me. What with my mother's almost daily increasing weakness; what with the rapidly approaching visit of Ada and Percy; what with my own grief and my own happiness, I had no thoughts to give to Sophy. Perhaps on my walk home from Sturry, I wondered and puzzled as to her conduct; but once past my own doors, all thought of her and her mysterious ways, were laid aside till I started for my next visit to Harmer Place.

I have not mentioned that after I had told mamma about Percy, I suppose she must have hinted something to papa; at any rate he wrote to Percy, saying that hearing from his daughter that he proposed accompanying his sister Ada on a visit to Lady Dashwood's, he should be very glad if, like her, Percy would take Canterbury on his way, and stay for a week with us. Percy answered the letter in the affirmative. Papa's eyes rather twinkled with amusement as he one day at breakfast told me in a casual sort of way that he had written to Mr. Desborough, asking him to stay with us while his sister did, and that he had heard that morning that his invitation was accepted.

I know I tried to look unconscious, but finally had to go round the table and rumple papa's hair all over, and tell him that he was a dear old goose.

It was about two months after my return from London that I received a letter from Ada, saying that her brother had obtained leave of absence again, and that the season was now quite over, and London dreadfully hot; that she longed to be out of it and in the country again, and that if convenient she would come on that day week, and that Percy would accompany her. I had been expecting this news for some time, still, now that it had come—now that I knew for certain that in another week Percy would be with me—it was very difficult to realize, and very hard, indeed, to go about looking tranquil and unconcerned under sister Polly's watchful eye and sly remarks. Polly was now at home for the holidays, and during the week I many times wished her back at school again, for she was really a serious plague to me. She had somehow guessed, or fancied she guessed, the state of things between Percy and me, and she was constantly making remarks about their coming visit, and then slyly watching me to see the colour which would, on the mention of his name, mount up into my cheeks. I had, as a girl, a dreadful habit of blushing, which, do what I would, I could not break myself of. It was very tiresome, and I would have given anything to have cured myself of the trick.

So now, what with Polly's mischievous hints and my ridiculous habit of blushing, I was made quite uncomfortable for that week. At last I had to tell her she was annoying me very much, and that if she did it when they came down I should be seriously angry with her. When she saw I was quite in earnest, she pretended to be very penitent, although I am sure she was only amused; however, she gave it up as much as she could for the time.

At last the day came for them to arrive, and I went down to the train to meet them with papa and Polly. I proposed this myself, as it was much less embarrassing to meet in all that bustle and confusion than in the quiet of our hall.

Presently the train came up, and I saw Ada's face at the window. We were soon at the door and helped her out. When I had kissed her I shook hands with Percy and introduced him to papa, and they went off together to look after the luggage, leaving us three girls talking on the platform. Altogether it had been much less embarrassing than I had feared. Papa ordered a man to take the boxes round to our house, and we started to walk, retaining the same order; we girls together in front, and papa and Percy behind. So down Westgate, across the bridge over the Stour, and under the noble old gate, which, so many centuries back, frowned down upon the haughty priest à Becket, as he passed under it upon that last journey to Canterbury from which he returned alive no more. It was an old gateway then, but still capable of a sturdy defence against the weapons of the time; for on either side the city walls stretched away, lofty and strong. Now, at this point they are gone, and the old gateway stands isolated and alone; but it is still strong and well preserved, and looks as if, unless disturbed by the hand of man, it could bid defiance to the action of time for many a century yet to come. Under this we walked, and then down the High Street, with its quaint, high-gabled, overhanging houses, and up the narrow lane which led to our house. After we had lunched, we went up into the drawing-room, to mamma, who was very pleased to see Ada again, with her bright face and happy laugh,—for I did not mention in its proper place that Ada had spent one of her Christmas holidays with us. Mamma looked very earnestly at Percy, as if she could read his character at a glance, and listened very attentively to all he said. As we went out of the room—which we did in about a quarter of an hour, for mamma

could not bear so many in the room for long together—she kissed me, as I lingered behind the others, and pressed my hand lovingly, and I could see she was quite satisfied.

I did not see much of Percy for the next two days, at which I was very glad, for I could not help feeling a little awkward; and although I endeavoured to soothe my conscience by telling myself that had I not put him off he would have proposed to me when I was staying in London, yet I could not help feeling that somehow I had invited him down here on purpose for him to ask me to be his wife. For these two days he was as much as he could be with papa, accompanying him in his drives and rides, and I could see by papa's manner that he really liked him very much. To me he was very nice, not at all showing me any marked attention so as to be perceptible to any one else; and yet I could feel there was something different in his tone of voice and manner when he addressed me to what he used when he spoke to others. Ada and I found lots to talk about when we were alone; for although she had written very often, and given me very full accounts, still there was an immense deal to tell me about all the different balls she had been to since, and what engagements had been made during the season; I found, too, although this was a subject Ada was very chary of speaking of, that she herself had refused one very good offer, and that she was rather under the ban of her lady-mother's displeasure in consequence. "She consoles herself, however," Ada said, "with the conclusion, that there are even better matches to be made than the one I refused, and that I must have set my mind on being a duchess; for that any idea of love is necessary for a marriage, is a matter which never entered her mind." Ada was a little bitter upon the subject, and I was sorry to see she was likely to have disputes with her mother upon the point; for there was no doubt that Lady Desborough was a very worldly woman, and I was quite sure that Ada, although at times thoughtless and fond of admiration, would never marry any one, however high his rank, to whom she had not given her heart.

The third morning of their visit I was up early, and went for my usual little stroll in the garden before breakfast. I had not been there many minutes before Percy joined me, and when we went in together we were engaged. I do not tell how it came about, what he said, or how I answered him. There is very little in the words thus spoken to interest others, although so unutterably sweet to listen to. To me there is something almost sacred in the thought of that time; far too sacred to be told to any one; and even now, eight years after, my cheeks flush, my eyes fill with tears, and my fingers quiver at the thought of those few words, and of the kiss by which our engagement was sealed. Oh Percy, Percy, could we but have seen the future then! But, perhaps, better not—better, certainly, for I have at least the pleasure left me of looking back upon that short space of intense happiness—a memory which is all my own, and which nothing can take away from me. I do not know how I made breakfast that morning—I am sure I must have made all sorts of blunders; but Ada, who at once saw what had happened, and Polly, who I think guessed, chattered away so incessantly, that I was not obliged to take any part in the conversation. Ada afterwards told me that in the first cup of tea I gave her no milk, and that she saw me put no less than eight pieces of sugar into the second. I only hope the others were better, but I have serious doubts on the subject. After breakfast was over, papa went into the study, and Percy at once followed him in there. As soon as the door closed upon them, Ada came round, and kissed me very warmly and lovingly; and Polly, as soon as she saw by our manner that her suspicions were correct, and that Percy and I were engaged, first nearly suffocated me with the violence of her embraces, and then performed a wild and triumphant *pas seul* round the breakfast-table, in a manner directly opposed to the injunction and teaching of the Misses Pilgrim and "Grendon House." Altogether she was quite wild, and I had the greatest difficulty in sobering her down, especially as Ada was rather inclined to abet her in her folly.

I shall pass very briefly over the remaining ten days that Percy and Ada stayed with us, for indeed that happy time is more than even now I can write about calmly. Papa's and mamma's consent was warmly given, and they were very much pleased with Percy. The only drawback to papa's satisfaction at the match, was the fact of Percy being in the army, and the thought of my going abroad. Percy, indeed, offered to leave the service, but this I would not hear of. I knew how much he was attached to his profession, and I had no objection to the thought of going abroad; and my money, with his pay and allowance from his mother, would enable us to live in luxury in any part of the world.

Two days after our engagement took place I received a very nice letter from Lady Desborough, saying how pleased she was to hear of Percy's choice, and its success. She said a good many kind and complimentary things, to which I did not, even at the time, attach much importance, for I knew well that it was only the fact of her son choosing, greatly against her wishes, an active military life, which made her regard with approval his engagement with myself. However, I did not fret seriously about that; she gave her consent, and that was all that was required, while I had the hearty approval of my own dear parents in my choice. I believed Percy loved me with all his heart, and I certainly did him with all mine. So the time they stopped with us went over very happily and quickly. Nothing was said before they went away about our marriage; indeed, mamma was so very ill, that it was a question which could not be discussed, as of course I could not have left her in the state she was in, and how long she might remain as she was no one could tell.

However, it was willed that her stay with us should be even more brief than our worst fears had whispered. Percy and Ada had not left us much more than a month, when papa said at breakfast one morning: "Agnes, I wrote yesterday to Harry to come home; write to-day to Miss Pilgrim, asking her to send Polly home to-morrow." It did not need for me to look in his face; the quiver of his voice told me his meaning: they were to come home to see mamma before she died. What a

dreadful shock it was. I had long known mamma must leave us soon, but she had so long been ill, and she changed so gradually, that, until papa spoke that morning, I had never realized that her time was so near at hand. Yet, when I recovered from that terrible fit of crying, I remembered how I could count back from week to week, and see how the change, gradual as it seemed, had yet been strongly marked, and that the last two months had wrought terrible havoc with her little remaining strength.

At the beginning of that time she had been up nearly all day, lying on the sofa. As time went on, she got up later and went to bed earlier; at the end of the month, papa had taken to carrying her in, and now, for the last ten days, her visits to the drawing-room had ceased altogether. She was wonderfully calm and patient, and through all those long months of illness, I never heard a murmur or word of complaint pass her lips.

Polly arrived the day after I wrote, and was, poor child, in a dreadful state of grief. Harry came the day after: to him the shock was greater than to any of us. He had not seen her fading gradually away as we had, and although from our letters, he knew how ill she was, he had never until he came back completely realized it.

I pass over the week which mamma lived after Harry's return, as also the week after her death. These solemn griefs are too sacred to be described. Do we not all know them? For are not these great scenes common to every one? Have we not all of us lost our darlings, our loves? Is there not an empty chair in every household; a place in every heart where one lives who is no longer seen on earth; a secret shrine whence, in the dead of the night, the well-known figure steps gently out, and communes with us over happy times that are gone, and bids us hope and wait for that happier meeting to come, after which there will be no more parting and tears?

CHAPTER XI.

LAYING A TRAIN.

It was not for three weeks after mamma's death that I again saw Mr. Harmer, and then he came over in his carriage to say good-bye to me, as he would not see me again for some little time, for I was going away for a month with papa to Ramsgate for a change.

In truth we both needed it. I was pale and nervous; all the scenes and emotions of the last three months had shaken me very much, and I think that had I not gone to the sea-side I should have had a serious illness of some sort. Papa, too, looked ill and worn. He had felt mamma's loss very much; and, indeed, the long watching and the constant noting the signs of her rapid decay, all so clear to his medical eye, must have been a terrible trial.

The house, too, was now so dreadfully lonely and dull that I became quite affected by it, and began to feel my old childish terrors of the dark passages, and the midnight sounds of the old house grew upon me again: in fact, I became sadly nervous and out of sorts, and a change was absolutely necessary.

Harry had gone back to his work in the North, and Polly to Grendon House, so papa and I had only ourselves and each other to think of.

When Mr. Harmer called, I found him very much better than when I had seen him last. His difficulty of utterance had quite passed off, and he was able to walk again nearly as firmly and freely as he had before. He was very kind to me, as, indeed, he always was; and sympathized with me so gently and feelingly upon the great loss I had sustained, that he soothed rather than opened the recent wounds. Altogether, his visit did me good; and I was very glad to find him so much better than I had expected, for, although papa had told me that he was getting round wonderfully, and was likely, unless he had another seizure, to live for many years, I had not hoped to see him as well as he was. He did not at all mind papa's going away, for he had promised to come up twice a week from Ramsgate to see him, and he could be telegraphed for at any moment should anything occur to render such a step necessary.

So papa and I went down to Ramsgate for a month, and a very great deal of good it did us. The fresh air and sea-bathing soon cured my nervousness, and the change of scene and the variety and life of the place—so different from the quiet sleepiness of Canterbury—gradually softened the bitterness of my grief; while nearly every day I had letters from Percy—long, loving letters, very cheering and dear to me—painting our future life together, and making me feel very happy; so happy, that I sometimes blamed myself for feeling so, so soon after my dear mother's death. It was a tranquil, quiet life, and I rapidly recovered my health and strength again. I had no acquaintances down there, for Ramsgate is too near to Canterbury for the people from there to visit it. Besides, Canterbury is a great deal too genteel to patronize so exceedingly vulgar a place as Ramsgate. I had a chatting acquaintance with several of the boatmen, and papa was very fond of sitting of an evening at the end of the pier, on the great stone posts to which the steamers are fastened, and talking to the fishermen of the wrecks they had known on those terrible Goodwins, and of the vessels which had been lost in trying to make the entrance to the Harbour. I also struck up a great acquaintance with the old bathing-woman—not, certainly, from any use that she was to me, for I would never let her take me by the hands and plunge me under water as I saw

some girls do, but I used to talk to her of an evening when her work was done, and she was hanging up the towels to dry. She was a very worthy old body, and not so frightfully ugly as she looked in her bathing-costume, with her draggled clothes and weather-beaten bonnet, but was a quiet respectable-looking old woman. She had been a bathing-woman there for years and years; and had, I have no doubt, saved up a snug little sum of money. She told me that she had a married daughter who lived near London, and who had a very nice cottage down at Putney, and who let part of it to lodgers; and she hoped that if I were ever going near London, I would patronize her. I told her that there was not the remotest probability of such a thing; but she suggested that I might know some one who might one day go, and, accordingly, to please her, I took the address down in my pocket-book, but certainly without the remotest idea that it would ever turn out of the slightest use to me.

Papa, on his return from his visits to Canterbury twice a week, always brought back some fresh topics for conversation. He was at all times fond of talking over his day's visits, and told me so much about his patients that I grew quite interested in his accounts of the improvement or otherwise of those who were seriously ill, and was pleased or sorry as his report of their state was good or the reverse. This had always been papa's habit, partly because he felt so much interested in his work that his patients were constantly in his thoughts, and partly because when we were at home he always had soups, jellies, and other strengthening food made for those among his poorer patients as required such treatment.

One evening when papa came back, he looked vexed and thoughtful; however, I asked no questions for I knew that if he thought right he would tell me presently what it was. When we had finished our dinner we strolled out on to the esplanade in front of our house. He lit his cigar, and we leant on the rail and looked down upon the shipping in the harbour, in the gathering twilight, and at the light on the Goodwin which was as yet but just visible. For some time papa did not speak; at last he took his cigar out of his mouth, and said, "I am vexed, Agnes; or rather troubled. I will tell you why: you are a discreet little woman now, and so I can trust you with what I have seen."

He again paused, and took two or three quick puffs at his cigar, as if in angry thought of how he should begin, and then went on.

"There lives near Canterbury, Agnes, a lazy, bad, dissolute man, named Robert Gregory. I do not suppose you have noticed him, although you may have possibly met him casually. He is, as I have said, a bad man, and bears a character of the worst description. Some eight or ten years since, when he was a very young man, he went up to London, and by his extravagance and bad habits there, he ruined the old man, his father, and brought him prenaturely to the grave.

"This man, Agnes, is good-looking, and yet with a bad face. It is rather coarse perhaps, more so than it was ten years since when I first saw him, for that sort of face, when it once begins to go off, loses its beauty rapidly; still, I allow, much as I object to the man, that he is handsome. It is just the sort of face likely to attract a young girl who is new to the world. A face apparently frank and good-natured, and yet with something—imperious and even defiant about it; very taking to the young, who cannot help feeling flattered by seeing that the man, who looks as if he neither cared for nor feared any other living thing, should yet bow to them; that the fierce eye should soften, and the loud voice become gentle when he addresses them. Altogether a dangerous man for a young girl to know, a very dangerous one for her to love. To a man like myself, accustomed from habit and profession to study character, he is peculiarly repulsive. His face to me is all bad. The man is not only a blackguard, and a handsome blackguard, but he is a clever and determined one; his face is marked with lines of profligacy and drunkenness, and there is a passionate, dangerous flash about his eye. He has, too, seen the world, although only a bad side of it; but he can, when he chooses, lay aside his roughness and rampant blackguardism, and assume a tolerably gentlemanly, quiet demeanour, which would very well pass muster with an inexperienced girl. In short, my dear, if I were asked to select the man of all others, of those with whom I am acquainted, whom I would least rather meet in any society where my daughter, or any young girl might see him, I should unhesitatingly say—Robert Gregory. Fortunately for society here, the man, by his well-known drunken and bad character, has placed himself beyond its pale, and so he can do it no great harm. It was only the last time that I was in Canterbury that I heard, and I acknowledge that I heard with great pleasure, that Robert Gregory was so deeply in debt that writs were out against him; and that unless he went away he would in a short time be consigned to a debtor's prison, so that Canterbury, at any rate for some time, might hope to be free of him. Well, my dear, I daresay you are wondering what all this long story about a person of whom you know nothing can be going to end in, but you will see that it is all very much to the point. To-day I was rather earlier than usual in my visit to Mr. Harmer. I was driving fast, and as I turned the corner of the road where the plantation in Mr. Harmer's ground begins, I saw a man getting over the hedge into the road. Probably the noise he was making breaking through the twigs, together with the turn of the road, prevented his seeing or hearing the gig until he was fairly over; for as he jumped into the road and looked round I was not twenty yards off, and could hear him swear a deep oath, as he pulled his hat down over his eyes, and turned his back to me as I drove past to prevent my seeing his face; but it was too late, for I had recognized Robert Gregory. Of course I said nothing; but as I drove up to the house, looking over the grounds, I saw Sophy Needham coming up through the trees from the very direction from which I had seen him come out. She was at some distance off, and I was almost at the door, so I could not have stopped to speak to her without being noticed, even had I wished it. She did not come into the room while I was there, so that I had no opportunity of questioning her about it, even had I made up my mind

to do so; indeed it was so delicate a matter that I could not have spoken to her without previous reflection.

"Altogether the affair has a very curious and ugly look. It could hardly be a mere coincidence, that he should be getting over the hedge from the plantation—where he could have no possible reason for going except to see her—at the very time of her coming away from that part of the grounds. It looks very like a secret meeting, but how such a thing could have been brought about is more than I can imagine. But if it is so, it is a dreadful business."

We were both silent for some time, and then I said,—

"Do you know, papa, I remember meeting the man you speak of at the fête at Mr. Harmer's last year."

"Now you mention it, Agnes, I recollect that he was there. I wondered at the time at his being invited, but I supposed Mr. Harmer had known his father as a respectable man, and had asked the son, knowing nothing of his character, or the disrepute in which he was held. I did not notice him much, nor did I see him dance with Sophy; had I done so I should have warned Mr. Harmer of his real character."

"He did not dance with her, papa," I said, rather timidly, for I was frightened at the thought of what dreadful mischief had resulted, which might have been averted had I spoken of the matter at the time. "He did not dance with her, but he had some sort of secret understanding with her; at least I thought so;" and I then told him all I had observed that evening at the fête. "I should have mentioned it at the time, papa, for it perplexed me a good deal, but I went back to school next day, and never thought of it from that day to this."

"Do you know, Agnes," papa said, throwing away his cigar, and taking three or four turns up and down in extreme perplexity, "this is very serious; I am quite frightened to think of it. What on earth is to be done?" and papa took off his hat and rubbed his hair back from his forehead. "How very unfortunate that you did not speak of what you noticed at the time. I am not blaming you; going off to school, as you say, of course put it out of your head; besides, you did not know the man as I do, and could not guess what terrible results might be growing out of what you saw; you could not, as a mere girl, tell how bad it is for a young woman to have a secret understanding of that sort with any man—how fatal, when with such a man as Robert Gregory.

"Had I known it at that time, I might have done something to put a stop to it. It would, in any case, have been a delicate matter to have interfered in, merely on the grounds of what you noticed, and which Sophy would, of course, have disputed; still I might have warned Mr. Harmer against allowing such a man to enter his doors, and I would have spoken when Sophy was present, and said how bad his character was, so as to have opened her eyes to the real nature of the man. It might have done no good. A girl is very slow to believe anything against a man she loves. Still it would have been something; and had there been any opportunity, I could have related some stories about him, which I knew to be true, which must have convinced her that he was a thorough blackguard.

"It might have been quite ineffectual; still it might possibly have done good. But now—really, Agnes," he said, stopping short, "I don't know what to do: it is a dreadful affair. There, don't distress yourself, my child"—for I was crying now—"matters may not be as bad as we fancy, although I confess that I do not see any possible interpretation which can put the affair in a better light. The only question is, what is to be done?

"To begin with, we are, you see, placed in a peculiarly delicate position in respect to Sophy. In case of any scandal being discovered through our means, and Mr. Harmer altering his will in consequence, you might benefit from it, and it would place my conduct and motive for interfering in a very false and unpleasant light. In the next place, in Mr. Harmer's present state of health, the agitation such a disclosure would produce, would not improbably—indeed, would be very likely to—bring on another paralytic fit, and cost him his life. The only thing I can at present think of is to appeal to Sophy herself.

"I fear that would hardly be successful, as the secret understanding between them must have gone on for more than a year, to our knowledge, and we dare not even think in what relation they may now stand to each other. Still it must be tried. Should that fail, as I feel it is quite certain to do, an appeal must be made to him. He may be bought off. Of course, with him it is a mere question of time. If he waits till Mr. Harmer's death, which may not occur for years yet, Sophy is sure to be a wealthy heiress; if he marries her before that, Mr. Harmer will infallibly alter his will. He would, no doubt, still leave her something, for he loves her too much to leave her a beggar even in a moment of anger.

"So you see it is quite a matter of calculation. Robert Gregory has waited until now, but he must be getting desperate. This writ, of which I spoke, may induce him to come to some sudden decision—no one can say what. It is altogether a very bad business, and a difficult matter for any one, far more for myself, to meddle in. However, something must be done: that much is certain. To-day is Wednesday. I had not intended to go into Canterbury again till Saturday, but now I shall go on Friday. So we shall have to-morrow to talk over what is the best thing to be done, and how I am to set about it. It is getting late, Agnes: it is time to be going in."

I shall never forget that evening, as we turned and strolled along the edge of the cliffs towards home. I thought I had never seen such a beautiful night. The tide was high, and the sea was very

calm, and hardly moved under the warm autumnal breeze, but broke on the beach far below our feet with a gentle plash. Out at sea the lights on the Goodwin shone clear and bright; while far away to the right, looking like a star near the horizon, we could plainly see the Deal light. Below us lay the harbour, with its dark shipping, and its bright lamps reflected in the still waters within it. Sometimes, from the sea, came up faint snatches of songs from parties in boats enjoying the lovely evening.

Above it was most beautiful of all. The sky was a very deep blue, and I do not think I ever saw so many stars as were visible that lovely September night. The heavens seemed spangled with them, and they shone out clear and bright, with none of the restless, unquiet twinkle they usually have, but still and tranquil, seeming—as they never do seem except on such nights as this—to hang suspended from the deep blue above them. The moon was up, but it was only a thin crescent, and was lovely in itself without outshining the glory of the stars. It was a glorious night, and, absorbed as we were with our own thoughts, and troubled by what had occurred, we could not help feeling soothed and elevated by the wondrous beauty of the scene we looked upon.

Had papa known all that had passed at that interview between Sophy Needham and Robert Gregory, he would not have ridden out to Ramsgate with his news, but would have acted upon it there and then, and perhaps I should never have written this story; or, if I had done so, it would have been very different to what it is.

Long afterwards I learnt the history of that interview, and of many others which had gone before it; and so I shall again have the pleasure of dropping that first personal pronoun of which I am so tired, and of relating the story as it was told to me.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EXPLOSION.

There are some boys so naturally passionate and vicious, in whose dispositions the evil so strongly predominates over the good, that we are obliged to own that under no conceivable course of training could they have turned out otherwise than bad. Some faults might have been checked by early firmness, some vices eradicated by judicious kindness and care, yet nothing could ever have altered the radical nature; nothing could ever have made a fair, straight tree out of that crooked and distorted sapling. Such a character was that of Robert Gregory, and in his case there was no countervailing force, either of judicious kindness or of proper severity, to check the strong tendency to evil in his disposition. His mother had died when he was an infant, and his father—who had married late in life, and who had no other children,—indulged his every whim, and neither thwarted him in any desire, nor punished him for any fault; and so he grew up an idle, passionate, turbulent boy, pursuing his own way, and laughing to scorn the entreaties and prayers of his weak father. As time went on, his character developed; he chose his companions from the wildest and least reputable youths of the neighbourhood, and soon became even wilder and less reputable than the worst of them. He at length led such a life, that his father was only too glad when he expressed a desire to go up to London, in hopes that there, with other companions and habits, he might yet retrieve himself. Robert Gregory was not all bad, he had his good points, and with other training might have turned out, if not a good man, at any rate not the character that Dr. Ashleigh had described. He was good-natured and even generous—by fits and starts certainly—but still enough so to make those who knew him as a boy, before he had got entirely beyond all control, regret that his father, by his weakness and injudicious kindness, was allowing him to grow up a curse to himself and a nuisance to the whole neighbourhood. Any hopes his father may have entertained of his reformation from the influence of a life in London, were destined to be very shortly extinguished. He wrote at first flaming accounts of the grand friends he was making, but lamenting their expensive way of living, and begging more money to enable him to do as they did. For months, for years, the letters came regularly, and always demanding money, sometimes very large sums. Some of these letters were accompanied by plausible tales that he wished to oblige his great friends, through whom he shortly expected to obtain a lucrative appointment. At other times he told the truth—various losses on the turf, or heavy gambling debts which must, he said, be paid, or his honour would be irretrievably lost. The old man patiently answered these constant demands upon him, and paid without a complaint the large sums required. He truly, although weakly, loved this reprobate son of his: he knew that no remonstrances could now avail: he feared so to alienate the liking which his son still felt for him by remonstrances which would irritate, without reforming him, and so he continued to pay, and pay. "The boy can have it but once," he said to himself; "as well now as at my death; there will be enough to last my time." But there hardly was. After Robert had been six years in London, during which he had only paid three or four flying visits to his native place, he received a letter from his father, asking him to let him know the total amount of his debts; as he would rather settle the whole at once and set him clear, than be continually asked for money. Robert consequently sent him a list, which even he had grace enough left to be ashamed of. However, the enormous amount was paid without a word; but a week afterwards a letter came from his father, saying that in six years he had spent no less than £40,000, and that now there only remained the house in which the old man lived and a small farm which yielded a bare £200 a year; that this he would not touch, and that not one single penny would he farther advance his son; but that if he chose to

come down and live with him, that he would meet with a hearty welcome, and with not one word of reproach for the past. Seeing no other course open to him, Robert Gregory came back sulkily enough to the old house, where, as has before been said, the old man did not live many months.

Long as was the list of debts which Robert had sent up from London, it had by no means comprised the whole of them. At his father's death, therefore, he was obliged to mortgage the farm to nearly its full value, to satisfy the most pressing of his creditors, and then, for the first time in his life, Robert Gregory asked himself how he was to live. It was by no means an easy question to answer; indeed, think the matter over as he would, he could imagine no mode by which, even had he been inclined to work, which he was not, he could have earned his living. It was while he was vainly, week after week, endeavouring to solve this problem, that the intention of Mr. Harmer to make Sophy Needham his heiress was made public. Robert Gregory hailed the news as a direct answer to his question—he would marry the heiress. He did not jump at the conclusion in haste; he inquired closely concerning the habits of the family at Harmer Place, of whom previously he had known nothing except by name; he found that their life had been hitherto one of seclusion, owing to the ascetic life of the Miss Harmers, and the studious one of their brother; he heard of Sophy Needham's birth and origin, and he heard, too, that society refused to visit her, and at last he said to himself confidently and firmly, "I will marry her." Having arrived at this determination, Robert Gregory at once proceeded to act upon it, and soon had his whole scheme arranged to his satisfaction. He felt that the matter was one which required time, and he accordingly sold the farm for two or three hundred pounds beyond the amount for which it was mortgaged, and on this sum he calculated to be able to live until he was able to marry Sophy.

This done, putting on a shooting suit, he day after day concealed himself in the grounds at some distance from the house, at a spot from which he could see when Sophy strolled out, and could watch the direction she took. One day he perceived that the course she was following in her ramble would lead her close to the boundary of the property; making a circuit, he took his position on the other side of the hedge, and therefore off the Harmer estate. When Sophy came along, and he could see that she was immediately opposite him, separated only by the hedge, he discharged both barrels of his gun. Sophy naturally uttered an exclamation of surprise and alarm, and this was all he needed.

As if astonished at finding a lady so close to him, he crossed the hedge, and lifting his hat, he apologized deeply for the alarm he had given her, trusted that the shock had not been serious, and in fact made so good a use of his time, that he managed to detain her in conversation for a quarter of an hour.

Robert Gregory, it has already been said, was a handsome man with a good figure. His conversation and manners might not have passed muster in critical society, still he had seen enough of the world to be able to assume the air of a gentleman sufficiently well to deceive a girl who had hardly ever conversed with a young man before in her life; his address to her was straightforward and outspoken, and yet with something deferential about it to which Sophy was quite unaccustomed, and which gratified her exceedingly.

The attempt of Robert Gregory was well-timed. Sophy knew that Mr. Harmer had proclaimed her his heiress, and she felt, and felt keenly, that society refused to call upon her or recognise her; she was naturally a sensitive, shy girl, and the accident of her birth had been a constant pain and sorrow to her, and she was, therefore, in exactly the frame of mind to receive with greedy pleasure the expression of Robert Gregory's deference and distantly expressed admiration. She noted no bad expression in the handsome face which smiled upon her, she detected no flaw in the fine figure which bent a little as he spoke to her; she only saw one who treated her—her whom the world scorned and repelled—with respectful deference and admiration; and from that moment her heart went out freely and fully towards him.

As he was leaving her, Robert Gregory mentioned that he lived on the other side of Canterbury, but was out for a day's shooting on the neighbouring estate. He said that on that day week he should again be there, and asked her if she frequently walked in that direction; he urged that he should feel really anxious to know if she had suffered from the effect of the sudden alarm he had given her, and that he hoped she would be kind enough to let him know how she was.

Sophy coloured and paused, and then said that she frequently walked in that direction, and that if he happened to see her as she went past, she should of course be happy to assure him that she was not in the least upset by the little start that she had had. And so they parted, and Robert Gregory felt, that as far as she was concerned, the game was won.

Again and again they met, and before very long he spoke of love to her; and Sophy, whose life had been hitherto a joyless one, gave him her heart without concealment, and found that, for the first time, she had discovered happiness. But that happiness soon had its alloy of trouble. When Christmas came, and the Bishop and his wife called, and society in general followed their example, Sophy naturally wondered, and asked Robert why he did not do the same. He was prepared for the question, which he knew must come sooner or later, and his answer had long been determined upon. He at once said that he threw himself entirely on her mercy, and even if it were the signal for his dismissal from her side for ever, he would tell her the truth. He told her that, owing to want of control as a boy, he had been when a very young man, spendthrift and wild, and that he had dissipated his fortune in folly and amusements. That the Christian propriety of Canterbury had taken upon itself to be greatly scandalized thereby; and that although he had long since given up his former courses, and had returned and lived happily and quietly with his

old father, although that father himself had never complained to him, or, he believed, to any one, of his previous folly, yet that society in general had taken upon itself to refuse its assent to the welcome of the prodigal, but had indeed desired him to go into a far country and be fed upon husks.

Sophy, instead of being shocked at all this, clung to him, as might have been expected, all the closer. The well-affected scorn and bitterness with which he spoke of the Christian charity of society, struck, as he had intended it should, a sympathetic chord in her own breast; for had not she, too, been declared under the ban of society, and for no fault or sin of her own? It is true, society had now condescended to visit her, but why? Was she any better or more honourably born than before? Had her conduct in any way softened them towards her? Not a bit. A bishop had said that she might be visited, and so the world had graciously extended its hand and received her into its fold. But although Sophy accepted the offered hand, she hated the giver of it; and although she arrayed her face with a placid smile as she entered into society, it only covered a sense of bitter outrage and of indignant contempt. Nursing, as she did, feelings like these, it was with an absolute sense of pleasure that she found that her lover, like herself, was deemed an outcast. To her it was but one more new tie between them; and when Robert had finished his confession, her own rage and wrongs against society broke out in a stream of bitter, passionate words, and Robert Gregory found there was far more in the ordinarily tranquil, quiet woman before him than he had ever given her credit for. However, her present frame of mind was most favourable for his plans, and he therefore took good care to keep alive her resentment against the world, in order to bind her more closely to himself. It was soon after this that the fêtes at Harmer Place were given. Robert Gregory managed to obtain an invitation, but arranged with Sophy that he would not dance with her, alleging the truth, that if he did so, society would be sure to poison Mr. Harmer's mind against him, and render his consent to their marriage out of the question; and Sophy was content to follow his guidance in all things, and to see everything with his eyes.

The real difficulties of Robert Gregory's course were only yet beginning. Sophy was, indeed, won; but it was Sophy's money, and not herself, that he cared for; now Sophy's money at present depended upon Mr. Harmer, and not upon herself; and Robert feared that in the event of a runaway match, Mr. Harmer would very materially alter his will. Still, on the other hand, her grandfather was extremely fond of her; he had no one else to leave his money to, and he might in time reinstate her in his favour. At last he asked Sophy if she thought Mr. Harmer would, after a time, forgive her if she made a runaway match with him, for he had no hope of ever obtaining his consent beforehand. Sophy was very loath to answer the question. She was quite ready to marry Robert, but she shrank from the thought of paining the old man who had been so kind to her. However, as Robert again and again returned to the point, she at last came to discuss it as calmly as he did.

"Yes, she thought Mr. Harmer would be reconciled to her; she believed he would miss her so much, that he would be sure to forgive her in a short time; it was not in his nature to bear malice to any one. Yes, he would soon come round; indeed, she was certain that if Robert would but make himself known to him, that Mr. Harmer would not care for what other people said, but would judge for himself, and would esteem and like him as she did."

This course Sophy pressed very much upon her lover, with many loving entreaties and tears, for she really loved Mr. Harmer truly, and shrank from grieving him. These entreaties, however, Robert always gently, but decidedly put aside. He said that Mr. Harmer would be certain to believe the edict of society against him, would decline to grant him any opportunity of justifying himself, and would refuse to allow him to enter the house. Besides he would be just as angry at discovering the secret understanding which existed between them, as he would be at their marriage, and he would be certain to forbid all intercourse between them, and perhaps even insert a condition in his will forbidding her to marry him under pain of the forfeiture of his fortune. For Robert made no secret from Sophy that her money would be of the greatest use to them; not, as he put it, that he cared for money for its own sake, but that if they were rich they could spend their life abroad, where no scoff or sneer of society could reach them, and where they should never be disturbed by the sarcasms and whispers of the world; while they, in their turn, would be able to show society how heartily they despised it, and how well they could do without it.

Sophy, in her present state of mind, thought all this very grand and heroic, and really believed that her lover spoke in a noble and disinterested manner; and as she was herself perfectly conscious of the advantages of wealth, she quite agreed that, if possible, her fortune should not be sacrificed.

Robert, then, at last, succeeded in persuading her that a runaway match was the only alternative, and as she really believed that she would be very soon forgiven by Mr. Harmer, it was at length arranged to take place shortly. This was in the spring of the year, and their secret acquaintance had then continued eighteen months. The date was fixed for the elopement, when the paralytic stroke which Mr. Harmer had put a stop to all their plans; and this for two reasons: pressed as he again was for money—for his creditors, who had been only partially paid before, were now becoming clamorous—Robert Gregory felt that with Mr. Harmer at the point of death it would be perfect madness to run the risk of Sophy being disinherited, when a few weeks might leave her the undisputed owner of £75,000; so although sorely harassed for money, he was content to wait. The other reason was that Sophy was full of remorse at the thought that she had been at the point of deserting her benefactor. She met Robert now very seldom, but devoted herself to Mr.

Harmer. As, however, the weeks ran on, he slowly but surely recovered health and became his former self, and her constant attendance on him was no longer needed; so she fell back to her old habits; her meetings in the plantation became more frequent, and his influence resumed its power over her. Robert Gregory had discernment enough to suit his behaviour to his words: when the old man was at his worst, he was full of tender commiseration for her; when he began to recover, he pretended a warm interest in his health, although inwardly he was filled with rage and chagrin at his convalescence. At length his own affairs arrived at such a crisis that he was in momentary fear of arrest, and he felt that once in prison his union with Sophy must be postponed at any rate till after Mr. Harmer's death, which now again appeared to be a distant event. He, therefore, once more began to persuade Sophy to elope with him; but he had a far more difficult task than before. All his old arguments were brought forward; but it was some time before he could succeed. Gradually, however, her old habit of listening to his opinion prevailed; she allowed herself to be persuaded that her grandfather might now live for many years, and that he could for a short time dispense with her services; that as she had been so useful to him during his illness, and as he must be more attached to her than ever, it was quite certain that he could not for long remain proof to her entreaties for forgiveness.

And so at last, but not without many tears and much bitter self-reproach, Sophy consented to an elopement—consented at that very interview coming from which Dr. Ashleigh surprised Robert Gregory—who, elated by his success, was making his way off without observing his usual care and precaution.

At breakfast on the following morning, Mr. Harmer remarked that Sophy looked pale and ill; she answered that her head ached sadly, but that she had no doubt a stroll in the grounds would do it good. After breakfast she accordingly went out, and, after wandering for some time carelessly in sight of the house, she made her usual circuit to avoid observation, and then entered the plantation near the road. She found Robert Gregory waiting for her under the tree where they had now met for just two years, sometimes once a week, sometimes once a month, according to the time of year, and the opportunities Sophy had for rambling about. Robert looked anxiously at her as she came up, to see if there were any signs of flinching or drawing back in her pale face, but there were none. Sophy was quiet and shy, but she had a fund of quiet determination and courage within her. He kissed her tenderly. "You are looking pale this morning, little one."

"I daresay," she answered, "for I have not closed my eyes all night. Is everything ready?"

"Quite. I shall be with the gig in the road just outside that gap, a minute or two before a quarter past eight; if you will get here a few minutes after that time, we shall be able to catch the nine o'clock train to London easily. I shall take you to an Hotel near Euston Square, and we will go on by the early train to Scotland, and shall be half way there before they find out in the morning that you are gone. You can trust me, dearest?"

"Yes, Robert," Sophy said quietly. "I have trusted you all these meetings here, and I have found you an honourable gentleman, and I am not going to distrust you now. I feel sure that all will turn out as we wish, and that grandpapa will forgive me very soon, and take us both into favour; and I hope that in a fortnight we shall be back here again, forgiven and welcome." Sophy spoke cheerfully, for she really believed what she said.

"Are you sure to be able to slip out unobserved?"

"Quite sure, Robert. I shall go up to bed at eight, and ask not to be disturbed, as I wish to sleep. I shall bring a bag with me, and shall put on a thick veil, so as not to be recognized by any one as we go through Canterbury. I have, as I told you, plenty of money. Good-bye now, Robert, I must not wait here any longer."

"Good bye, dear, till this evening."

He looked after her as she went lightly away among the trees, her footsteps scarcely sounding in the limp, new-fallen autumn leaves, and a shade of compunction came over his face. He was certainly a blackguard, he knew it well, but, by heavens, he would try to make this little girl happy. They would be rich some day, and then they would travel for years, and when he came back his evil name would have died out, and he could then lead a quiet, happy life, perhaps at the old house there; and then—and then, who knows; perhaps little children would grow up round him: surely then he must be happy. Could it be—good God! could it be possible that he might yet turn out a good man after all? "Yes, there was hope for him yet." And as Robert Gregory turned away, there was a tear in his eye, which was even now growing heavy and red from long excesses and hard drinking, and a sigh, and a half prayer from the heart, from which for long years such things had ceased to rise.

The next morning at ten o'clock, as Sophy had not come down to breakfast, Mr. Harmer, as he went into the library, desired the servant to take his compliments to Miss Needham, and inquire how she felt. Presently the servant came into the library looking very pale and scared. "If you please, sir, Miss Sophy is not in her room, but there was this letter for you laying on the table." So saying, the girl hastily left the room, to relate to the other servants the extraordinary fact that Miss Sophy was not in her room, and that her bed had not been slept in.

The letter to Mr. Harmer was as follows:—

> "My dearest Grandpapa,

"If you were other than you are, this letter would not be written; I should not dare to plead my cause with you; but I know you so well—I know how kind and good you are—and so I venture to hope for your forgiveness. I am very wicked, grandpapa; I am going away without your consent to be married. He—my husband that is to be—is named Robert Gregory. He has told me frankly that men do not speak well of him, and that when he was young he was wild and bad. He tells me so, and I must believe him; but he must have been very different to what he is now—for now I know him to be good and noble. I have known him long—I own it with shame that I have never told you before, and many tears the concealment has cost me; but, oh, grandpapa, had I told you, you would have sent him away, and I should have lost him. He and you are all I have in the world; let me keep you both. He showed me kindness when all the world, except you—my kindest and best of friends—turned their backs upon me, and I could not give him up. While I write now, my eyes are full of tears, and my heart bleeds to think of the pain this will give you, after all your goodness to me. Oh, forgive me. Do for my sake, dear, dear grandpapa, see him and judge for yourself. I only ask this, and then I know you will forgive him and me. Write soon to me—only one word—say you forgive me, and let me be your little Sophy once more. I shall not love you the less for loving him, and much as I love him, without your forgiveness my life will indeed be miserable.

"Write soon, grandpapa—write soon, and say you forgive me, and that I shall again be your own—

"SOPHY."

Presently the Misses Harmer—who always breakfasted much earlier together, and then retired to a dressing-room they had fitted up as a small oratory—were surprised at loud talking, and confusion in the house. In a short time their own maid knocked at the door, and then came in with a face full of excitement, to say that Miss Sophy had not slept in her bed, and that they had searched the whole house, and found no signs of her.

"Does my brother know?" Miss Harmer asked, after hearing the whole story very quietly to the end.

"I can't say, ma'am; there was a letter on Miss Sophy's table, which Mary took into Mr. Harmer, in the library, when she first found it, and he has not come out since."

The Misses Harmer, with their usual deliberate walk, went down stairs, and then into the library.

Mr. Harmer was sitting at the table, with his back to the door, and did not turn round at their approach. They went up. Beside him on the table lay an open letter—the one from Sophy;—in his hand was a pen, and before him a sheet of paper. On it he had written: "My dearest Sophy, come back; I forgive"—but the handwriting was strangely indistinct, and the last word, the word "forgive," was large and sprawling, like a schoolboy's writing, and then the pen stopped, and had stopped for ever;—Herbert Harmer was dead.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BAD BUSINESS.

"Mr. Harmer is dead! Sophy Needham is missing!"

Such was the news a groom, riding into Canterbury for a doctor, brought; such was the telegram which a friend at once sent down to us at Ramsgate.

Mr. Harmer dead! Sophy Needham missing! It flashed like wildfire through Canterbury, and the quiet old town was again shaken out of its lethargy by the intelligence. Mr. Harmer, during his lifetime, had been a standing topic of conversation; he had on several occasions quite roused it from the even tenor of its way, but this last sensation was greater and more astounding than any of its predecessors, and Canterbury enjoyed it with proportionate gusto.

"Sophy Needham eloped with that notorious reprobate, Robert Gregory"—for the Misses Harmer, by their invectives on reading the letter, at once had told those round them with whom Sophy had fled— "and poor Mr. Harmer gone off in a fit in consequence!!" It was indeed a terrible affair, and it was not mended in the telling. By the time the tale had made its round, it had swollen to extraordinary proportions—fresh additions were made by each mouth through which it passed, until at last it was extremely difficult to find out what the truth of the matter was.

From the simple report that Sophy Needham had eloped with Robert Gregory, and that it had killed poor Mr. Harmer, the transition was easy to—"and *he* had killed poor Mr. Harmer;" and details of the supposed murder grew till it became a tragedy of the most coldblooded description.

The groom's statement that the Misses Harmer were in a dreadful state about it, soon lost the last two words, and grew into,—"The Misses Harmer were also attacked, and were lying in a dreadful state."

Altogether, although Robert Gregory and Sophy were undoubtedly much to blame, and had acted

very wrongly, I believe they would hardly have recognised themselves or their doings, in the two fiends in human shape, whose deeds were commented upon in Canterbury that afternoon.

The next day the real truth of the story became known, and there was some feeling of disappointment that things were not as bad as had been reported; but even then the opinion in respect to Sophy and her lover were hardly modified;—give a dog a bad name and you may as well hang him.

This couple had been accused of murder and violence, and, although the charge was now disproved, yet it was universally agreed that these crimes might, and in all probability would have been perpetrated, had the fugitives been detected at the time of their flight. Sophy's conduct was so atrocious, her ingratitude to Mr. Harmer so base, that there was no question that a nature so depraved would hesitate at nothing. The ladies of the Canterbury society were the more inclined to insist upon this, as it justified the views they had originally entertained of the impropriety of calling upon the young person at Harmer Place, and the doubts, they now affirmed they had always experienced of the possibility of such a person ever turning out otherwise than badly. They felt, therefore, that they had attained a great triumph over their husbands, who had been, on the whole, inclined to differ from their opinions. They had always, they said, predicted something of the kind from the time when they had heard of Mr. Harmer's intention towards her, and it really appeared to them to be almost a judgment upon him, for his infatuation, and for his venturing to fly in the face of the public feelings of morality and propriety in the way he had done.

Some of the husbands, indeed, even now ventured to offer excuses for Sophy, and to point out that a good deal might be urged in her behalf—her lonely position, her ignorance of the world, and of the character of the man she had gone off with; and, still more, the temptation to which she would be exposed by such an unprincipled blackguard as Robert Gregory. But these suggestions were contemptuously put aside. The bad character of the man, in place of being a palliation, was an aggravation of the offence, and this was satisfactorily proved by that *argumentum ad hominem* in which women so delight.

"You know very well, my dear, that if your own daughter had gone off with such a man, you would have considered it a very much worse business, and have been far more angry about it, than if she had run away with some gentleman of position and character; so how can you now talk such nonsense as to say that the man's bad character is a palliation of her fault?"

I have often wondered why it is that we women are so much more severe upon offenders of our own sex than men are. Is it that men know so much more of life and human nature than we do? Is it that they know how comparatively few women ever are seriously thus tempted during their lives, and how hard it is to withstand great trials of this kind? Is it because they know, too, that very few of us who are so loud and so bitter in our contempt for those who fall, but would, if placed under the same circumstances, and exposed to the same temptation, have acted precisely in the same way? I think it must be that; and when I hear women so loud and bitter in their denunciations, and when I see men look grieved and sorry, but say nothing, I cannot help thinking sometimes, that it would be better if we judged not so harshly and scornfully of those who have fallen under a temptation to which we, through God's mercy, have never been exposed.

Of course, next to the startling events which had taken place, the great question upon which the interest of Canterbury was fixed, was whether Mr. Harmer had destroyed his will or not before he died. But this was a point upon which no one could enlighten them, and all awaited with intense interest the day of the funeral, after which it would, of course, be known all about it.

To us at Ramsgate the news came with a terrible shock. Papa, who had settled to have gone over on that day, had, from some reason or other, postponed it to the next; consequently, he was with me when the boy arrived from the station with the telegram at about twelve o'clock.

It happened to be a wet day, so that, contrary to our usual habit, we were indoors when the boy came up with the note. Papa signed the receipt, and the lad left before he opened it. When he did so, he glanced at the contents, and dropped it on the table with almost a groan.

"What is it, papa?" I asked, dreadfully alarmed; "may I read it?" Papa motioned assent, and my heart almost stood still as I read the terrible tidings—

"Mr. Harmer is dead; Sophy Needham is missing."

It was a dreadful shock; and yet we had talked and thought so much the last two days of Sophy and Robert Gregory, and of the consequences the discovery of their connection might have upon Mr. Harmer, that it could be hardly said to come upon us as a surprise. For some time we were too shocked to speak at all. At last I said—

"Poor Mr. Harmer! how dreadful!"

"Rather poor Sophy," papa said. "Unfortunate, misguided girl, how bitterly she will repent this! What a life-long remorse hers will be! She has sacrificed the happiness of her own life by joining it to that of Robert Gregory, and she has caused her benefactor's death; and whatever be the folly, whatever the terrible fault of Sophy's conduct now, undoubtedly she loved him dearly."

While papa was speaking, another telegram arrived, and this time from Miss Harmer, for the former one was sent by a friend who had heard the news, and knowing our interest in it, had at once forwarded it to us, while the groom who brought it in, was searching for a doctor to go over

at once. Miss Harmer's message was only—

"Please come at once. My brother is dead."

On the receipt of this, we consulted a timetable, found a train would start in half an hour, and in a few minutes papa started, leaving me to cry over the news I had heard—to cry as much for Sophy as for Mr. Harmer—(for, from what papa said, she was indeed to be pitied), and to look forward anxiously to his return with full particulars of the terrible event.

I shall tell the story of his visit to Harmer Place, and its results, as he told it to me; and I may here mention that in future, in this narrative of mine, I shall always drop the first person when I am telling of events at which I was not myself present, and shall relate them in the order in which they happened, and not when they were told to me, which was not, in some cases, till years after.

When Dr. Ashleigh arrived at Harmer Place, he was shown at once into the drawing-room, where in a few minutes he was joined by the Misses Harmer.

As nothing has been said of the personal appearance of the Misses Harmer from the time when their brother met them, twenty-one years before this date, and as they will in future play a far more important part in this narrative than they have hitherto done, it is proper to say what they were like at this period.

The Misses Harmer, when their brother left England in the year 1795, a boy of sixteen, were aged respectively twenty and twenty-one, and were consequently at the time of his death, in the year 1848, seventy-three and seventy-four. At the time when they were last described they were extremely similar in appearance, and, indeed, might almost have been mistaken one for the other, but there was now a great and marked difference between them: the younger sister looked the elder of the two by at least ten years. The ascetic life, the severe self-repressive discipline to which they had subjected themselves, seemed to have worn out the one sister while it had but hardened the other—hardened her till her impassive face had a stony and petrified appearance. Of the two, she had, perhaps, been originally the woman of the stronger passions and the more determined will; and yet her more vigorous constitution had enabled her to support that lonely, hard, loveless life, and to come through it harder and sterner than before, while her weaker sister was fast succumbing to the long and weary struggle.

Angela's bended head was more bowed now than of yore, her look more mild and gentle; the light of that peace which was to her fast approaching—when watching, and penance, and tears should be all over—seemed to shine already on her face, and to soften its hard, unhappy outlines.

Cecilia was more upright than before. The comparatively cheerful life she had led at her brother's house for nearly twenty years, had, to a certain extent, worn off the look and habit of repression and humility which she had gained from her early residence in a convent, and afterwards with her stern elder brothers. She had too, for all these last twenty years, been working with a purpose—a vague one indeed, and, seemingly, a hopeless one, but yet to her a holy purpose, worthy of her dedicating her life to attain—namely, the hope that her brother might yet return to the old faith, or that, if he died before them, he might leave them his property; so that, in either of these cases, the Roman Church might reap the rich harvest which her elder brothers had intended for it. This hope had been to a great extent defeated by the declared intentions of Herbert Harmer, and yet she clung desperately to it.

The Bishop of Ravenna had cheered them all this time with his letters and his counsel; but even he had almost given up all hope of ever winning their rich property for the Church; but Cecilia never despaired, and when she had hurried back again on the news of Mr. Harmer's first paralytic seizure, it was with the strong hope and conviction that he would yet on his deathbed alter his will, abjure the errors of the faith he had adopted, and be received and forgiven by Mother Church. However, events had not turned out as she had hoped. Herbert Harmer had died a member of his new faith, and the estate was certainly not willed to the sisters, and Cecilia, while she endured a true sense of sorrow for her brother's loss, yet mingled with it a deep feeling of disappointment and rage, and a stern determination that the labour of her life should not be frustrated.

Doctor Ashleigh, when they entered the room, saw at once that both sisters were much agitated, and yet in a different way. Both had evidently been crying; but Miss Harmer seemed endeavouring to keep down her grief by a fierce, angry determination; while Angela's sorrow was mingled with a strange, timid, anxious manner, which Dr. Ashleigh could not understand.

"You received our message, Dr. Ashleigh, and are aware of the terrible event which has taken place here?"

"I am, Miss Harmer, and am indeed shocked to hear it."

"You have heard that our brother was murdered?"

"Murdered!" Dr. Ashleigh said aghast; for he had heard some of the floating rumours as he passed through the town, but had quite disbelieved them.

"Yes, Dr. Ashleigh, my brother was murdered—killed by the conduct of that wretched, ungrateful woman; murdered as much as if she had stabbed him to the heart."

"Really, Miss Harmer," the Doctor said, "you alarmed me for a moment into believing that my old

friend had met his end by foul play. Sophy's conduct is inexcusable, and I do not wish to enter into any defence of it; but still she can hardly be termed a murderess."

"I can see no distinction, Dr. Ashleigh," Miss Harmer said; and as she spoke her tall figure seemed to gain additional height, her eyes flashed, and her colour rose angrily. "My brother, Dr. Ashleigh, was on the fair way to perfect recovery—you, yourself, told me so—and that only some sudden shock would be likely to throw him back again, but that another attack would probably be fatal. That shock, this wretched girl deliberately and knowingly gave him, and I say she is as wilfully the murderess of the man who had picked her from the kennel where she was born, as if she had given him poison. I pray that her sin may be punished by divine law, if it cannot be by human. I pray that the man for whom she has murdered my brother may turn out a constant retribution and curse to her. May she never know happiness again. May her children, if she bear them, cause her the misery she has brought on us. May——"

"Hold, Miss Harmer!" Dr. Ashleigh said sternly, stepping forward and laying his hand impressively on the excited woman's arm. "Forbear! Blessings and curses proceed from God alone. At present your grief at this sad affair urges you to say things which in your calmer moments you would be, I am sure, the first to regret. This unhappy girl has assuredly grievously erred, and grievous have been the consequences; and she will, undoubtedly, have to expiate it by a life-long sorrow and repentance—and her bitterest enemy need wish her no worse punishment than her own thoughts and the husband she has chosen."

"We need not discuss the question, Dr. Ashleigh!" Miss Harmer said, angrily. "Nothing will ever alter my feelings towards this wretched girl! Nothing can ever soften the horror and loathing I feel towards her! Nothing shall ever induce me to see her face again! She may be beyond human law, but in my sight she is a murderess!"

Dr. Ashleigh saw that in Miss Harmer's present state of nervous and excited feeling, any argument which he could urge would be only vain, and would, indeed, tend to heighten her anger. He therefore remained silent.

Angela Harmer had not yet spoken, but it was evident that she—as far as her milder nature could go—sympathized with her sister's anger, and yet sorrow was with her predominant. She had seated herself in a large arm-chair by the fire, on entering; and most of the time she sat with her face hidden in her hands, and the Doctor could see the tears trickle through her withered fingers. Sometimes, however, when her sister was speaking she looked up with an anxious deprecating glance, but Cecilia heeded her not; but, when she had done speaking, walked up and down the room with her hands tightly clenched, her eyes flashing with anger—even through the tears of sorrow which rolled unheeded down her cheek;—her whole form so inspired by her emotion, that Dr. Ashleigh could hardly believe her to be the quiet self-contained woman he had known so long.

At last she became more calm, stopped before him, and said, "Dr. Ashleigh, you were our brother's greatest friend; may I ask you to see to all arrangements connected with his funeral. We should wish him to be buried in such state as is becoming to the last of an old race. Alas! that he cannot be laid where his fore-fathers have been! Will you see to all this?"

"I will, Miss Harmer, willingly. I do not know whether you have any particular wishes as to where he should be laid? I have heard him express a preference for the village churchyard here. I do not know whether he has mentioned his wishes in his will."

"I know nothing of the will whatever!" Miss Harmer said positively, and Dr. Ashleigh noticed her sister cast one of the frightened glances towards her which he had before perceived. "I know nothing whatever of the will," she repeated steadily; "but if he expressed any preference for Sturry, let it be so. And now, Dr. Ashleigh," and here her voice softened, "I do not know that we have any more to say: you will wish, of course, to go up to see our poor brother. We shall see you, I hope, to-morrow or next day." So saying, the Misses Harmer took their leave of Dr. Ashleigh, and retired to their own rooms, while he took the well-known way to his old friend's bed-room.

As he went up-stairs he met Mary—the girl who had been Sophy Needham's maid—coming down. Her eyes were red with crying. She curtsied to the Doctor as he passed—for they all loved him, and he had ever a kind word for all he met. "This is a sad affair, Mary!" he said.

"Dreadful, Sir," the girl answered. "Will you please to tell me what has become of Miss Sophy? We are all so anxious to know the real truth."

"I am afraid she has eloped with Mr. Gregory," the Doctor said, gravely; "there is no secret about it."

"I was afraid she was gone, Sir, when I went into her room this morning, and found the bed had not been slept in, and the letter for Mr. Harmer on the table. It gave me such a turn, Sir; you might have knocked me down with a breath."

"Did Mr. Harmer say anything when you gave him the letter?" the Doctor asked, anxiously.

"No, Sir! I gave him the letter and went straight out, for I was frightened; he was sitting at the table just as he was when we found him dead—just the same. He was a kind, good master, Sir, as ever lived—never angry or put out; and he forgived Miss Sophy with his dying breath." And the girl began to cry again.

"How do you know he forgave Miss Sophy?" Dr. Ashleigh asked, stopping, for he was just

continuing his way up-stairs. "How do you know he forgave Miss Sophy?"

"This way. Sir. When the Misses Harmer went into the room, I went and stood at the door to listen, for we all wanted to hear what had become of poor Miss Sophy. They went up to the table and leant over him, and gave a cry; and I ran in, and they were lifting him up, and on the table before him was a letter he had just begun to write, it was only five or six words, but I saw it began 'My dearest Sophy;' I did not read anything else, but the last two words were 'I forgive.' They were writ very large indeed, and I could not help seeing them, Sir, as I helped to lift him up. After he had been carried up-stairs I went into the library to get that letter, Sir—for I knew it would be a great comfort to poor Miss Sophy—but when I got there it was gone. I asked the servants but none of them had seen it, so I suppose one of the Misses Harmer had taken care of it."

"I am very glad you told me this, Mary, very glad! It will indeed be a great comfort to your poor young mistress." So saying the Doctor went into the dead man's room.

Mr. Harmer lay on his bed, and the warm light of the afternoon sun streamed bright and full upon his face. It was tranquil and peaceful as in life, and his lips were parted in a calm smile—a smile as of the peace and forgiveness he felt as he died.

The Doctor looked into his old friend's face, and the tears welled up into his eyes. "He died as he lived," he said to himself, "forgiving as he also would be forgiven. Dear old friend, we have spent many a happy hour together; yet, dying as you died, how can I grieve for you?"

The Doctor stood for some time sadly musing by the bed-side; and then turning softly away, was soon on his way back to Canterbury, where he gave the necessary orders and then returned to Ramsgate.

CHAPTER XIV.

MISSING!

Mr. Harmer died on Friday morning, and it was arranged that his funeral should take place on that day week. On the day preceding Dr. Ashleigh left Ramsgate early, and went direct to his own house, to see several patients who were to call upon him there prior to his going out on his rounds. Most of those he expected had called, and he was sitting alone in his library when the door opened and the servant announced "Mr. Gregory."

Dr. Ashleigh rose from his seat, with a cold, haughty look on his face, such as had not for many years been seen upon it. Robert Gregory's face wore a mingled air of anxiety and triumph, slightly veiled under an expression of gravity and decorum which he had assumed as suitable to the occasion. He was evidently much embarrassed how to begin, and the extremely repellant and hostile expression of Dr. Ashleigh's face did not assist him in his difficulty.

"May I ask," the Doctor said, "to what I owe this visit?"

"I have called, Dr. Ashleigh," Robert Gregory began, in a voice to which he in vain attempted to give its usual loud, careless tone. "I have called from my wife to ask you—you to whom she alone could apply at the present time—to give her some intelligence respecting the death of her grandfather."

"If the unfortunate girl who has become your wife will call upon me herself, I will give her every information and assistance in my power. With you I will hold no communication whatever."

Robert Gregory bit his lips angrily, and his eye flashed: he was a man but little accustomed to be thwarted. However, as he felt that any outburst of anger would only injure his cause, and could do him no good, after a momentary, but fierce struggle with himself, he went on quietly.

"You are naturally indignant with me, Dr. Ashleigh. I know that after the sad consequences which have ensued you cannot be otherwise, and am aware that it is useless my making any excuses or protestations. I know that the only way in which I can ever justify the course I have taken will be by making Sophy happy, and by proving that her love and confidence in me are not so greatly misplaced, and that, after all, I am not so utter a scamp as the world gives me credit for."

Undoubtedly the man had carefully thought over beforehand what he intended to say, and yet he spoke earnestly, for he really meant what he said, and Dr. Ashleigh, a shrewd observer of men, saw that he did so, and his face rather softened in its expression. Robert Gregory observed the change, and went on.

"I myself should never have come on this errand could she have done so. But the truth is a friend telegraphed the news to me, and the message reached me only on Monday morning, as I was returning leisurely from the north. Sophy is nearly out of her mind, and the doctor I called in to see her fears that she will have an attack of brain fever. I should not have left, but her cry was unceasing to know the details of his death, and whether he said a word of forgiveness to her. I came down by this morning's train, and return by the one o'clock to London."

Dr. Ashleigh was softened now; he saw by the man's anxious face and changed voice that he was truly in earnest, and that although he had unquestionably wooed and married Sophy for her money, yet that he did really care for herself, and the Doctor thought that her chance of happiness was, after all, better than he had imagined it.

"I am sorry to hear what you say about your wife," he said, in quite a different tone to that which he had previously adopted, "although I cannot say I am surprised. The knowledge that the news of her flight had caused Mr. Harmer's death must of necessity be a terrible grief and sorrow to her. On that head, however, I truly rejoice that I can give her some consolation and alleviate her remorse. Mr. Harmer forgave her. Her letter was taken in to him, and he was found dead with it before him, and a sheet of paper on which he had begun a letter to her. The last words he ever wrote were: 'I forgive.' Tell her this from me."

Robert Gregory's face lit up with pleasure, and this time the emotion was not purely of a selfish kind. He was glad, very glad for Sophy's sake to hear that Mr. Harmer had forgiven her before he died; indeed, even for his own sake he felt the news to be a relief. Hardened as he was, he could not have felt easy with the knowledge that that good old man had died invoking a curse upon him with his last breath. But although for both these reasons he received the news with pleasure, it was as nothing to the satisfaction he felt at the account which had been given him of Mr. Harmer's death; for it was quite evident from it that he had died leaving his will unaltered—he had died a few minutes after finding Sophy was gone, with his unfinished letter of forgiveness before him—had probably never even risen from his chair, and had certainly taken no steps towards altering or cancelling his will. Gratified as he felt, however, he speedily repressed all show of his feelings, for he felt that Dr. Ashleigh was watching him, and he knew that his good will and countenance would be of great service at this time; besides which, for Sophy's sake, he wished to stand well with him, for Sophy, he knew, esteemed and loved Dr. Ashleigh more than any other man, now Mr. Harmer was dead. He, therefore, after a minute's silence, said with an air of frankness:

"I am, indeed, glad to hear what you tell me, Dr. Ashleigh. It will be an immense relief to poor Sophy, and even to myself, for it is not pleasant to lie under the curse of a dead man; besides which, it would be idle of me to pretend that I am not very gratified to hear that Mr. Harmer took no steps towards altering his will. As you, a man of the world, will naturally suppose, Sophy's wealth was the great inducement to me, when I first sought her; and although I trust to prove to her and to you, that I have now learnt to love her truly for herself, I am still, of course, very glad to hear that her property is not forfeited. It is now time that I should return to the train, and I hope that my news may have a good effect upon Sophy's health. I shall be down again the day after to-morrow, not to attend the funeral, but to be present at the reading of the will, which will, I suppose, take place afterwards."

"It will," Dr. Ashleigh said. "Miss Harmer wrote to the solicitor in London yesterday, informing him of her brother's death, and begging him to be down at the funeral, which takes place at two o'clock. And now, Mr. Gregory, will you say to Sophy, that her grandfather forgave her freely and at once, and that it is not for me, whom she has not injured, to judge more severely than he has done; will you tell her from me, that in my daughter and myself she will find friends glad to welcome her back, and to forget the past. For yourself, Mr. Gregory, it would be folly to say that a strong prejudice does not exist, you best know whether justly or not. However, these days are past, and it is now, according as you treat Sophy, that you will be received, at any rate by us. Make her happy; try and dry the tears which the consequences of her love for you have caused to flow, and you will find that we shall be glad to know you as Sophy's husband."

So saying, Dr. Ashleigh held out his hand to the man before him, and Robert Gregory, as he grasped it, experienced a feeling of real gratification. He knew that this was a truly good man, and that his course towards Sophy was in no way altered by the fact of her being an heiress, but because she had been forgiven by his old friend Mr. Harmer, and for the sake of the many years of affectionate intercourse he had had with herself. He was gratified, too, by what the Doctor had said respecting himself, for the countenance and friendship of a good man can be appreciated even by the worst character. And so Robert Gregory took his leave of Dr. Ashleigh and returned to town with a softened, although exultant heart. The Doctor then went over to Harmer Place and saw the sisters. They passed most of their time in their own rooms, engaged in earnest prayer for the benefit of their brother's soul; and once, when the Doctor had been there, they spoke to him in glowing terms of the power which their church possessed to forgive all sins, even the greatest. While they thus spoke their eyes lit up with a strange, passionate fervour of religious zeal—that fierce, burning zeal, which has for so many centuries made men equally ready to martyrize others or to die martyrs themselves—that zeal which has led some to give up all worldly goods, and live the life of wandering beggars, and others to allow no scruple to interfere with any deed which can enrich and benefit the church to which they belong. To these remarks Dr. Ashleigh returned no answer; he was at all times indisposed to enter into religious arguments, and with women in the exalted state of mind in which the Misses Harmer were, it would have been worse than useless. On this occasion, however, he found them both in a calmer state, and he mentioned to them that he had seen Robert Gregory, and that he spoke of coming up on the part of his wife after the funeral. For a minute or so they were silent, and then Miss Harmer said, with stern vehemence,—

"Let him come—I presume it is his right; but never again while I live shall the murderer of my brother darken this door."

The Doctor half smiled at the idle threat, while Angela Harmer glanced up at her sister from under her drooping eyelids.

"I should, perhaps, rather say," Miss Harmer corrected herself, "as long as I am in this house; if he enter, I leave it. Harmer Place shall never hold together for one day the sisters of Herbert Harmer and his murderers."

The Doctor was silent, for he thought that what she said would certainly turn out correct, for he did not deem it probable that Robert Gregory, when he came into possession, was at all the man to invite the two Misses Harmer to take up their abode with him.

The next night Dr. Ashleigh did not return to Ramsgate. Harry was to arrive by the late train from the North, and after the funeral they were to go down to Ramsgate, where it was arranged they should stop for a week or two. After that, as we should be well able to afford it, papa had settled to go on to the Continent for the winter with me.

Accordingly, the next day Herbert Harmer was laid in his grave in the quiet churchyard of Sturry. Agreeably to Miss Harmer's wishes, the funeral was celebrated with a pomp which he who had gone had never desired for himself while alive. The hearse and mourning-coaches, each with their four horses and tossing feathers, the man in front with the tray of sable plumes, the mutes in long array—all was done in the best style, and people came in from quite a long distance to see it. A good many of his old Canterbury friends sent their carriages to join the procession, but there were not many real mourners among those who followed. The first mourning-coach contained Dr. Ashleigh, his son, and the solicitor, who had arrived just as the cortège was starting; the other coaches contained the principal tenants, who had liked their late landlord, and who had always found him compliant and kind in the extreme; they had, however, very seldom seen him, as since his son's death he had gone very little himself among his tenants, although he had always kept himself well informed concerning the affairs of each of them. As the procession wound through the village many a blessing and prayer was murmured for the dead man; there, indeed, he had been a benefactor; many a sick bed, many an aching heart had his bounty relieved; and they blessed his memory, blessed him as thousands had done before them—thousands lying in agony in London hospitals, some never to go out again alive, many more to be restored in health and strength to their families; these had poured out countless prayers for the unknown benefactor who had endowed this ward, added that comfort, or whose munificent donations had enabled the hospital largely to extend its benefits; and doubtless their prayers were not the less heard that no name was uttered, and that they went up for their unknown friend.

And so Herbert Harmer slept the sleep of the blessed in the quiet churchyard, and the funeral cortège went back to Harmer Place.

The doctor had been much affected by the service over his old friend. Harry, too, was much moved, but in his case it was more the thought of the grave he had last stood beside, and her over whom he had heard the service read two months before.

Mr. Petersfield, the solicitor, was calm. With him it was a pure matter of business. He had hardly ever seen the dead man; he knew him only as one of the wealthiest and most eccentric of his clients; he had heard from his partner that he was a man of sterling worth; but Mr. Ransome had always managed Mr. Harmer's business, and he himself knew nothing about it. Mr. Ransome had died six months before, and it would have been his duty, in a short time, to have made himself thoroughly acquainted with Mr. Harmer's affairs; as it was, he knew very little about them.

During the short ride to and from the church there was hardly a word exchanged in the carriage, as Dr. Ashleigh was an entire stranger to the solicitor. When they reached the house they were shown into the drawing-room; into which, a few minutes later, Robert Gregory was ushered.

"How is your wife, Mr. Gregory?" the doctor asked, as he shook hands.

"She is very ill, doctor, but I left her certainly calmer and more tranquil, and I trust, from what the medical man said last night, that she will escape any serious attack of brain fever. The news you sent her was a very great consolation to her, but she is still in terribly low spirits."

Here the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of the Misses Harmer, who bowed to Dr. Ashleigh, his son, and the solicitor, all of whom they had seen before, but who took no notice whatever of the presence of Robert Gregory.

The Misses Harmer were accompanied, or rather followed into the room by a gentleman, whom it was easy to see by his dress was an ecclesiastic of the Romish Church, and who was an entire stranger to Dr. Ashleigh.

"This gentleman," Miss Harmer said, introducing him, "is Father Eustace, a friend of ours for many years, and who, having heard of our loss, has come over from abroad to assist and comfort us with his presence and advice."

Father Eustace was a pale, ascetic looking man, with large, eager bright eyes; his complexion was dark and swarthy, and he looked every inch what he was—an Italian. He spoke English with a strong foreign accent, but still grammatically and pretty distinctly. He bowed courteously to those present, and then took his seat, and during what followed occupied himself in closely scrutinizing their countenances, especially those of Dr. Ashleigh and Robert Gregory, as if desirous to judge for himself how nearly they tallied with the description he had received of them.

The Misses Harmer were very pale, but had a quiet, fixed look about them, in which Dr. Ashleigh thought he read their determination to listen with composure to the reading of the will, which would place the hated Robert and Sophy Gregory in the position of master and mistress of Harmer Place.

For some little time after they had taken their seats there was a dead silence, as if each were waiting for the other to begin. At last Mr. Petersfield said—

"With your permission, Miss Harmer, I will at once proceed to read the will of my late client, Mr. Herbert Harmer. Will you be good enough to hand it to me?"

"I have not any will of my brother in my possession," Miss Harmer answered, coldly.

"Not in your possession, madam? But you are doubtless aware where your late brother was in the habit of keeping his important documents?"

"I have looked, Mr. Petersfield, among his papers, but I have found no will among them."

There was a pause of blank astonishment.

"How is it, Mr. Petersfield," Dr. Ashleigh said, gravely, "that you have not Mr. Harmer's will in your custody?"

"It was in our hands, doctor, until about two months ago, when Mr. Harmer wrote to me, saying that he was desirous of making some slight alterations in it, and requesting me to forward it. I did so, in charge of one of my clerks. On the day he came down here, some friend of Mr. Harmer's died—I understood it was Mrs. Ashleigh—and he told my clerk that he did not feel equal to attend to business, but that if he would leave the document with him, he would look it over, and write to me to send down again in a short time to make the alterations he required. I did not hear any further from him, and therefore supposed that he had either changed his mind in reference to the alteration, or had forgotten the matter altogether. I remember, when my clerk came back, he told me that he had ventured to suggest that so valuable a document ought to be kept in a safe place, and that Mr. Harmer had smiled, and answered, 'You need not be afraid on that score. I have a place to put it in where all the burglars in the world could not get at it."

There was again a blank silence, and then the solicitor went on—

"In any case, madam, I think it but right that we should search Mr. Harmer's library thoroughly."

"Certainly, Mr. Petersfield; you are quite at liberty to search where you like. Father Eustace, will you do me the kindness to accompany these gentlemen."

Father Eustace at once rose, and preceded the others to the library.

"This looks a very strange business, Mr. Petersfield," Dr. Ashleigh said, on their way thither.

"Very—very much so indeed, doctor, and I do not think our search here is likely to be attended with any success."

The library was thoroughly ransacked. Every drawer was pulled out and examined for secret hiding-places; the books were all taken down from their shelves to look behind them; every place, possible and impossible, was searched, but, as the lawyer had predicted, without the slightest result. Harry and Robert Gregory performed the active portion of the work, the doctor and Mr. Petersfield directing their operations, and examining the piles of papers which came to light during the search. All were very silent: they were too interested and excited to talk. From time to time Robert Gregory muttered savage execrations between his teeth; but, with that exception, the search was conducted in silence.

The priest sat quietly and watched them—watched them, and not their proceedings: in these he seemed to have no curiosity, his attention being directed entirely to the way in which they each bore their disappointment.

The search lasted for an hour. By that time the place had been completely ransacked, and every possible place examined; and the whole floor of the room was closely covered with books, papers, scientific apparatus, and the accumulated litter of years. When all was done, and it was evident that no corner remained unexplored, the searchers rested from their work, wiped the perspiration from their foreheads, and looked at their leader for further instructions.

Dr. Ashleigh drew the solicitor to a door which led into the garden, opened it, and went out with him, so that they could converse without restraint from the presence of the priest.

"This is an extraordinary business, Mr. Petersfield," Dr. Ashleigh said; "what do you think of it?"

"Do you consult me professionally, Dr. Ashleigh?" the lawyer asked, in return.

"Certainly I do," Dr. Ashleigh said vehemently. "Mr. Harmer was one of my oldest and my dearest friends; and even were I not so deeply interested in the discovery of the will as I am, I would spend every penny I have in the world in seeing his wishes carried out. You are aware of the nature of the will?"

"In a general way I am. My late partner, Mr. Ransome, who has managed Mr. Harmer's business ever since he came to England, some twenty-three years ago, told me that Mr. Harmer had left all his property, with the exception of some comparatively small legacies, between your children

and his illegitimate grandchild, Miss Needham—now, as I understand, Mrs. Gregory."

"Precisely," Dr. Ashleigh said. "This is the disposition he publicly announced that he had made of his property; and in the event of this will not being found, I presume the Misses Harmer, as his only relations, will inherit everything?"

"Clearly so, doctor. It is a most awkward business. However, we cannot now determine what steps to take: we shall have plenty of time for that hereafter. Is there any other place you can suggest as worth searching—his bed-room, for instance?"

"None at all," the doctor answered. "Mr. Harmer was a man of the simplest personal habits. His bed-room is furnished just as it was in India—a plain French bedstead without hangings, an India matting on the floor, a few cane chairs, and a small chest of drawers. No, it is no use searching there."

"Or anywhere, I believe, frankly," Mr. Petersfield said. "Wherever the will may be, we shall never find it."

So saying, they returned into the library. Father Eustace was sitting unmoved in the chair where they had left him. Harry was pacing up and down that portion of the floor which remained free from the books and instruments, sometimes stopping and looking out of the window, and drumming on the panes with his fingers in a state of angry impatience; he was anxious and uneasy, but he could not believe that the will was more than mislaid for a time.

Robert Gregory had cast himself sullenly into an arm chair, and sat with his elbows on the arms, and his chin resting on his hands. His face was flushed, his eyes wide open, and his lips set hard. A deadly sensation of despair was stealing over him, which he in vain strove against. Was it possible that, after all these years of scheming and watchfulness, his prize was to be snatched from him in the moment of success? He could not and would not believe it, and yet he had a hopeless feeling in him which told him that the will was either lost or destroyed, and that it would never be found or heard of again. When Mr. Petersfield said, "We can do no good here—let us return to the drawing-room," he rose, and followed the others mechanically.

The Misses Harmer were sitting as they had left them, stiff and composed, the stern look upon their faces, a red spot in the centre of their cheeks, and a strange light in their eyes.

"You have not found my brother's will?" Miss Harmer asked, as they came in.

"As you are probably pretty well aware, Miss Harmer, we have not found it. And now let me ask you distinctly, do you, or do you not, know where your late brother's will is?"

Miss Harmer paused for a moment, and Mr. Petersfield and the doctor saw that she glanced towards Father Eustace, who was looking on the ground.

"I do not know where my brother was in the habit of keeping his various documents."

"I said nothing about various documents, Miss Harmer," Dr. Ashleigh said, sternly. "I asked you, do you, or do you not, know where the will is?"

"I do not," Miss Harmer said, steadily. "Should you find the will, you will, I presume, let us know?"

"Should I find it, I will do so."

"It is not easy to find what has never been lost," Robert Gregory said, bitterly.

Miss Harmer faced round at once upon this new antagonist, as if glad to turn her face from the stern, searching look of the doctor. She and her sister had risen from their seats now, and none of the others had seated themselves. Father Eustace had moved across and taken his place by them, as if to support them by his presence; the others stood in a group together, with Dr. Ashleigh slightly in advance.

"As for you, sir," Miss Harmer broke out, addressing Robert Gregory—"as for you, as I have already told Dr. Ashleigh, I look upon you and the woman you call your wife, as the murderers of my brother; and now, having struck him down, and seeing him laid in his grave, you would fain come here to grasp at his property. Why do you come here to ask for his will? What is so likely as that, when he heard of that ungrateful girl's conduct, that conduct which gave him his deathblow, he tore his will into fragments?"

"But, Miss Harmer," Dr. Ashleigh said, in his quiet, firm voice, motioning Robert Gregory, who had advanced to reply to the attack upon him, to be silent. "But, Miss Harmer, we know that such was not the case; we know that he was found in the same position in which he was sitting when he received Sophy's letter. We know that he did not leave the room, and that no one entered it. We know that there were no fragments of paper scattered about, as there would in all probability have been had he destroyed the will in the way you suggest; and lastly, Miss Harmer," and here the doctor advanced a step nearer and spoke even more impressingly, "lastly, we know that such an intention was farthest from Mr. Harmer's mind; for that he began a letter, which is, or has been in your possession, a letter to Sophy expressing his full forgiveness. So that in your bitter anger against the poor girl, you are acting in direct contradiction to the dying words of your brother."

The two Misses Harmer and Father Eustace were evidently staggered by this attack. Miss

Harmer's cheek, which had flushed up when she attacked Robert Gregory, turned deadly pale again, and she shrank back as if she had received a blow. She was a little time before she answered, and then the change of her voice showed how much she was unnerved:

"How do you know what you say, Dr. Ashleigh? Have you been enquiring about among my servants?"

"I should think, Miss Harmer, you must by this time know me well enough to be aware that I am not a man given to enquiring among servants. I was simply told the matter, the truth of which you do not and cannot deny; and for Sophy's sake I was delighted to hear it. I was glad, also, for the sake of him who is gone to know that he died with words of forgiveness on his lips; a forgiveness which you have taken upon yourself to conceal and to refuse."

Miss Harmer evidently quailed before Dr. Ashleigh's words. He saw his advantage, and continued solemnly, pointing with his finger towards her as he spoke—

"And now listen to me, Miss Harmer. I believe, I more than believe, that will to be concealed, and that you know its place of concealment. Now I, your dead brother's greatest friend, warn you solemnly. I speak in his name and my own, and I warn you not to destroy that document. It is your dead brother's will, and if you destroy it may his curse light upon you."

"Cease, sir," Father Eustace said, interposing himself between Dr. Ashleigh and the sister, now pale and almost gasping for breath; "cease these impious insults!"

Dr. Ashleigh waved him aside, and seeing the effect he was producing, continued in the same earnest voice, never removing his eyes from the sisters' faces—

"I warn you if you destroy it, your dead brother's voice will cry from the grave. There will be no more peace for you in this world or the next. His curse will follow you here, and plead against you at the judgment-seat of God."

"Come," he said, turning to his companions; for Angela Harmer had sunk nearly lifeless in a chair, and Cecilia would have fallen had not the priest, who had in vain endeavoured to check the doctor's solemn denunciation, supported her. "Come, let us leave this;" and the four men in silence went out, entered Dr. Ashleigh's carriage, which was in waiting, and drove off.

END OF VOL. I.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A SEARCH FOR A SECRET: A NOVEL. VOL. 1 ***

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