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A SEARCH FOR A SECRET.

A Novel.

BY G. A. HENTY.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CHAPTER I.

GREAT CHANGES.

Now that I have finished the account of the last of the series of unsuccessful attempts which were made to find the will, I must hurry over the subsequent events of my life in a much briefer and more concise way. It is now nearly six years since Robert Gregory died, and I must content myself with a mere sketch of what has taken place in that time; for this my history has already spun out to a most unreasonable length, many times surpassing the limits I proposed to myself when I first sat down with the intention of writing it. But my pen has run on and on, as I recalled all the past events of my life; and I feel every day, when I see the mass of manuscript which has accumulated in my drawer—for my desk has long since been too small to contain its growing bulk—that the chances that any one will ever take the trouble to read it through, are growing fainter and fainter every day.

However, should it be so, my task has served its purpose. It has, by chaining my attention to the period of which I have been writing, saved me from many an hour of sorrowful thought, and has served as a break to the monotony of many a weary day. It has, too, often served as an excuse for me to seclude myself in my own room, when my spirits have felt unequal to take part in the constant flow of tittle-tattle and harmless gossip, which form the staple of the conversation of those with whom my life is now cast, and is likely, I hope, to remain to the end.

After I came back from our three months' trip on the continent, with my health greatly restored, my spirits rose proportionately; and as I had nothing to throw me back again into my old state, with the exception of the shock I received at the news of Angela Harmer's death, I really began to look at things in a more hopeful way, and to think that the eight years—no, the seven years and a half—I was getting very particular as to dates—which were to elapse before Percy started on his return from India, were not such a hopelessly long time to look forward to after all.

By the way, I did not mention in its proper place that he started with his regiment for India while we were on the continent. Poor Percy! he was terribly disappointed and grieved that he could not see me before he sailed. But we were in Italy at the time he received his order, and as he had very short notice, it was quite out of the question that he could come for the purpose.

I, too, was very sorry that it so happened, and had we been in England I certainly should have made no objection to our meeting; and yet the interview would have been so painful to us both, that although I was very sorry I did not see him, I was yet sure that it was for the best that we should not meet. My letters from him, except during the voyage, came regularly every three months, and it did not seem nearly so hard hearing at these long intervals—now that he was so very far off—as it had done while he was within a day's journey of me. I knew how hard Percy must have felt it before by own feelings; for I, who had made the rule, fretted and complained to myself against it. It seemed so cruel, when by merely sitting down and writing to him, I could have given myself so much pleasure as well as conferred it upon him—so hard, when the postman came of a day with letters for others, that none should come from him, who if I only gave him leave, would have written such long loving letters to me every day. I knew that I had determined for the best, but still it had been a very great trial for me. But now it was quite different; letters from India could only come once a month or so, and therefore, as I have said, three months did not seem so very unnatural.

When the letters did come, they were quite volumes; for I had put no limit to length, and Percy used to write a little nearly every day, so that in the three months it swelled to quite a bulky packet. They were delightful letters; such long accounts of his Indian life, and of everything which could interest me in it. Such bright, happy pictures of our future life out there, and such welcome reiterations of his love for me. How often I read them through and through, until I knew them by heart! They are all in my desk now, faded and torn from constant reading. I take them out sometimes and read little bits—I never can get very far with them—and then have a long, sad cry over my dead hopes and faded dreams; but I end at last by cheering up and thanking God, that at least in my present tranquil life, if I have had great troubles, I have some very happy moments to look back upon, which nothing can ever change or alter, or efface from my memory.

All this time Ada corresponded with me regularly; not very frequently, indeed, but often enough to show me that she thought very often of me, and loved me as of old. She wrote more like a sister than before, and always talked of my marriage with Percy as of a settled event which was certain to occur on his return from India, to which she said that she, like I, was counting the months and years. I judged from the tone of her letters that she did not care so much for gaiety as she had done, and that the constant whirl of dissipation in which she lived during the London season had greatly lost its charm for her. At last one of her letters came, which she said at the beginning, she was sure would give me pleasure, and indeed it did; for it told me that Lord Holmeskirk, who had proposed to me during the season I had spent in London, had for the last two seasons transferred his attentions to her, and that he had now proposed and she had accepted him, to the great satisfaction of her mother. I was indeed delighted at the news, for I liked the young nobleman very much—he was so perfectly natural and unaffected.

It was, of course, a very good match for her; and what was, I thought, of far more importance, I could see by the way she wrote that she really was very fond of him for his own sake. In one of her after letters to me, she laughed and said that it was terribly galling to her pride to have to take up with my rejected one; but that, as this was the only possible objection she could find to marrying him, she could not allow it to counterbalance all the advantages of her so doing.

When the time for her marriage drew near, she wrote to say how much she regretted that she could not ask me to be her bridesmaid, and how much pleasure it would have given her could she have done so; but that, of course, in the present state of relationship between Lady Desborough

and myself, it was out of the question.

However, I saw the report of the wedding in the *Morning Post*, with a full account of how the bride looked, and of the bridesmaids' dresses; and Ada sent me a large piece of her wedding-cake, and wrote to me from Switzerland where she had gone with her husband, giving me a detailed account of the whole ceremony, and of how happy she was. She wound up by saying that Lord Holmeskirk had requested her to send his compliments, but that she had pointed out to him that compliments to a future sister-in-law were simply ridiculous, and so he had sent his love.

She corresponded with me much oftener after she was married than she had done before; indeed, I noticed that she wrote regularly once a month, and as I answered as regularly, I have no doubt that my letters to her were sent out to Percy, as being the next best thing to having letters direct from me; and very often she sent me his letters to herself, so that I heard pretty regularly how Percy was, and what he was doing.

Ada seemed very happy in her new character as Viscountess Holmeskirk. The first winter after she was married, she sent me a very pressing invitation to go up and spend a few weeks with her: but as I pointed out to her in my reply, it would be unpleasant to all parties, for Lady Desborough could not come to her house the whole time I was there; at any rate that if she did, I certainly could not meet her: so that it was really better I should not come, as I could not possibly feel at ease, and, in any case, I should not have cared for entering into the gaieties of London life.

Ada wrote back to say that although she was very much disappointed that she should not see me, still, there was so much truth in what I said, that she could not urge me farther; she said, however, that the same objection did not apply to Polly, and that she should be very glad if she could come up, and be introduced into society under her care.

Polly at first made some objections, but I overruled them as I knew what a treat it would be for her, and she accordingly went up in February, and stayed for six weeks with Ada. She came back delighted with her visit, and looking upon London as a species of fairy-land. Lord Holmeskirk and Ada, she said, had been so extremely kind to her, and treated her quite like a sister: she had been as gay as I had during my stay at Lady Desborough's, and had been out almost every evening of her visit in London. She said that, no doubt owing to her stay there, Lady Desborough had been very seldom to Ada's, and then only during the day. On these occasions she had, under some pretence or other, generally absented herself from the room; still, she had occasionally remained, as she did not wish to seem afraid of meeting her, for, as Polly said, certainly she had nothing to feel ashamed of, whatever her ladyship might have. Ada had, of course, introduced her, Lady Desborough had bowed with extreme frigidity, and Polly flattered herself that she was at least as distant and cool as her ladyship. This visit served Polly and me as a topic of conversation for a long time, and, as she had met very many of the people that I had done, it gave us a great subject in common, whereas previously my London experience had been of little interest to her, owing to her knowing nothing either of the place or people.

And so my life passed away very quietly. I had become quite strong again now; and month passed after month, and year after year since Percy had gone—so that two and a half out of the eight years were gone—and there were only five and a half more to be looked forward to. Percy's letters were unaltered in tone, and loving and fond as ever, and so I began to be quite cheerful and happy again, and to believe that there was great happiness in store for me yet.

My only little fear was that when Percy came back he would find me looking dreadfully old. I was more than eighteen when the eight years' agreement was made, and I should be nearly twenty-seven when he returned, and twenty-seven then seemed to me to be quite old; and I used very often to wonder whether I should be much changed, and frequently looked at my face in a glass very carefully, to see if I could detect any sign of alteration in it; but the glass at present told me no disagreeable tidings, for my cheeks had filled out again and the colour had come back into them, and I looked once more bright and hopeful.

Polly and I were able to take long walks together, and were a happy, laughing couple of girls again. And so another year went by, quiet and uneventful, varied only by our Christmas gaieties and the festivities of the cricket week. Polly enjoyed these immensely; I, too, liked them; but certainly principally for her sake—at any rate they were a change.

All this time Harry had continued at his employment as an engineer, with but indifferent success. I do not mean that he was not keeping himself; but it was not much more. The market, he said, was overstocked. All the great jobs were taken up by great men, who found the money, and got the plans through Parliament. These men, of course, employed their own staff and pupils, and an outsider had a very poor chance of getting a footing. If the great engineer to whom Harry had been articled had lived a few years longer, so that he could have put him into some post where he would have had an opportunity of making himself a name, it would have been quite different. As it was, he had to be content with the supervision of comparatively small works, and when these were completed, had to look out for something else.

Another thing which prevented him getting on, was that, in some respects, Harry was a very diffident man. He had no idea of pushing himself, or of blowing his own trumpet; but was content to work hard, and let other people take the credit. However, he did not fret about it; he had enough to live upon, and as he did not stand out for high salaries he was never long out of work.

He had twice spent a month or two with us down at Canterbury, in his intervals between leaving one place and going to another. These were delightful times, and we made the happiest quartet

possible. I used to ask Harry sometimes, on these occasions, whether there was any chance of his bringing home a new sister some day; but he would only laugh in his loud way, and say,—

"Never, Agnes, never!" It was, he said, much too expensive a luxury for him to think of; indeed, he should have no time to enjoy one if he had her; he was out all day at his work, and had plans and drawings to make of an evening. Besides, he smoked all day, and nearly all night, and what would a wife say to that? His work, too, lay chiefly in out-of-the-way places, where his only companions were rough, unpolished men, who did very well for him, but who would by no means accord with a wife's idea of good society.

And after all these and various other objections, he would wind up with,—

"No, no, Agnes; I am very well as I am, and I by no means think a wife would better my condition."

Evidently, Harry was at present quite heart whole. About this time he got an engagement upon a series of extensive works in the neighbourhood of London, where he was likely to be engaged for a very long time. Indeed, the engineer who was carrying them out, and who had known Harry when he was serving his time in town, told him that he could promise him regular work for some years.

And now there came a time when our happy life at Canterbury was to come to an end, and the dear old house which we loved so much, and where we had lived so many years, was to pass into other hands. Our father, our dear, kind father, was found one morning dead in his bed. He died of disease of the heart, of the presence of which, it appeared afterwards, he had been conscious for many years.

I pass over that terrible time without a word.

Harry came down at once and managed everything. Polly was heart-broken; and this time it was I who was the stronger, and who was able, in my turn, to console and support her.

At last, when all was over, when a week had passed, we drew our chairs round the fire after dinner, as was our old custom, to discuss the future; and yet how different from the old times, with that dreadful gap among us,—that empty chair which was never to be filled again. It was some time before any of us could speak; but at last Harry began talking on indifferent subjects, and we all gradually joined in. Still, we only did so at intervals; for we felt that we must presently come to that point from which we all shrank—the future. We had not come to any understanding with each other that we were to discuss our future arrangements at this particular time; but I think we all felt instinctively, as we drew our chairs round the fire, that the question could not be put off any longer, and that this was the time at which it must be faced. At last, Harry, who was, as usual, puffing away at his pipe, began it by saying as cheerfully as he could,—

"And now, girls, we must talk business. In the first place, I have had a long chat this morning with Mr. Fairlow, our lawyer. He tells me that, as I had expected, there is not very much besides the life-insurance. The practice has hardly done more than paid for the carriage and horses for the last three years. Mr. Petersfield and I are executors. The will was made nearly four years ago, just after you girls missed finding the will in the secret room at Harmer Place. Papa asked me at the time if I agreed to its provisions, and I said that of course I did, for it was just as I should have wished it to be. The amount of insurance, £4,000, is divided among you girls; I am left everything else."

"But what is there else?" I asked dubiously, after a short silence.

"Oh, lots of things," Harry said, cheerfully. "The furniture and the horses and carriage to begin with, the book debts, and all sorts of other things. Besides, had there been nothing at all, it would not have made the least difference to me, for as I can earn enough to live upon, what do I want with more?"

We afterwards learnt that at the time the will was made, there was a house worth upwards of a thousand pounds, which had also been left to Harry; but that this had, at Harry's own suggestion, been sold a short time afterwards, as at that time papa did not expect to live many months. He had told Harry this, and was naturally desirous of going on living in the same style he had been accustomed to; and as the professional income had, as I have said, been very small, this thousand pounds had been very nearly expended in the three years for the housekeeping expenses, and for the payments of the premiums upon the insurance.

"And now, girls, that you know exactly what you have, what do you think of doing?"

"How much a year will £4,000 bring in, Harry?"

"Well, it depends upon what you put it into. I daresay Mr. Petersfield could put it out for you on mortgage, on good security, at four and a half or five per cent."

"And how much would that be a year?"

"£180 to £200."

"And how could we best live upon that, Harry?"

"Well, you might take a nice little place for £30 or £35 a year, put furniture into it, keep one servant, and manage very comfortably upon it; or, should you prefer it—which I should think you

would not—you could live in a boarding-house very well, the two of you, for—say £140 a year, which would leave you about £50 a year for clothes and other expenses."

"No, no, Harry," we both said, "we would much rather live alone; not here, for the present, at any rate, although we might some day come back, but somewhere near London."

"Then," Harry said, "there is one more proposition, and that is—I am likely to remain in London for some time; my income is £200 a year. Now if you like, we will take a little cottage, and live together. You shall keep house for me, and I will take care of you, and if I move, you can either move with me, or set up for yourselves, just as you like."

"Oh, yes, yes, Harry," we both exclaimed, delightedly. "That will be nice, that will be charming," and we kissed the dear old fellow again and again, in greater glee than I should have thought it possible that anything could have made us feel; and so pleased were we at the thought of it, that it was some time before we could settle down to discuss the question quietly.

"And now, girls, that we may consider that settled, what part of London do you think you should like to live in?"

"You don't mean in London itself, Harry, do you?" I asked, rather frightened at the thought of all the smoke and noise.

"No, no," Harry said; "we should find some difficulty in getting the sort of house we want there. We must get out of the smoke, on one side or other of it. The question is, where?"

For some time neither of us offered any suggestion, for we knew very little indeed about the suburbs of London. At last I said, "I think Harry I should like to be somewhere near the river, if that would suit you as well as any other side of London. When we were at Grendon House, we used to go up the river to Kew in a steamer, once or twice every summer, on the Miss Pilgrims' birthdays, and grand occasions of that sort, and I remember I used to think to myself, that if I were to live in London, I should like it to be near the river."

"Just the very thing I should have proposed, if you had no decided preference for any other part," Harry said. "I have lately joined the 'Metropolitan Rowing Club,' which was started about a year since. It is held at Putney, and Putney would suit me very well for business, for I can get up by train in twenty minutes, as early of a morning as I like. Yes, that will do capitally for us all."

So to Putney it was unanimously settled we should go.

"And now, girls, when will you leave here?"

"The sooner the better, Harry," Polly said, eagerly; and I agreed with her, for I really dreaded being by our two selves in that rambling old house, where every room, every piece of furniture, every act of our daily life would bring back some association of him who was gone.

"How long can you stay, Harry?"

"Not beyond Saturday, Agnes—five more days. Pellat has written to me saying that, although of course under the circumstances he does not wish to hurry me, still that I am greatly wanted; and I answered him to-day saying that I could not possibly get away before, but that I would be at work on Monday morning."

"Do you mean to sell the furniture, or move it, Harry?"

"Sell it, my dear; it will be of no use to us: it is all very old, and would hardly pay for the carriage. Of course those things which have any particular association we will take with us."

"Do you think there would be any possibility of our going up with you on Saturday, Harry?" Polly asked, anxiously. "I should not mind how hard I worked, if we could but do it; don't you think we could?"

"Well, Polly, I don't know that there is any absolute reason against it, if you work very hard, and get everything packed up; of course I will help you. To-morrow morning I am going to speak to Dr. Hooper. He has written to me saying that he should be glad to take the lease of the house of me. There are only three more years to run. I answered him that I would let him know to-morrow; but of course I could give no decided answer till I knew what your plans would be."

"I suppose if we can get ready to go up with you, Harry, we could go into lodgings at Putney, till we find a house to suit us?"

"Certainly, Polly, that will be what we must do."

"I can tell you of some lodgings," I said. "I have the address upstairs."

I accordingly went up at once to the drawer where I kept all my old pocket-books. I found the one for the year when we had been at Ramsgate, and there in pencil, as I had written it down when the old bathing-woman told me of it, was her daughter's address at Putney. I went down with it triumphantly, and found them wondering where I could have got the address of lodgings at Putney. However, I explained the matter to them, and although, as Harry said, she might have moved long since, we agreed at any rate to try there first, as it was much pleasanter to have some fixed place to go to, than to drive about vaguely looking for lodgings.

The next morning we girls set to work at our packing, and at luncheon Harry came in with the

welcome news, that he had arranged everything most satisfactorily with Dr. Hooper.

Dr. Hooper was at present living in a furnished house, and he had gladly agreed to take all our furniture at a valuation, and also the carriage and horses, and to continue old Andrew as coachman—at any rate, for the present; and Harry, on his part, agreed to ask very little for the lease of the house, which we held on favourable terms for three years longer. This was a very good arrangement, as it saved us all further trouble; and it was more pleasant to think of the old house remaining as it had been during our time, which we could not have done had the furniture been put up and sold by auction. I have no doubt that it suited Dr. Hooper equally well, as it was a very large, roomy house, at a moderate rent, and the good-will, although not worth much, was still an advantage to any medical man taking the house.

That afternoon we went through the house, and decided on the few articles we should like to keep. The next day a valuer came in, and on Friday morning Dr. Hooper gave Harry a cheque for £500, which was, with the exception of £70 or £80, which some of the richer of papa's patients owed him, all that Harry ever received as his share of the property.

That four days we were dreadfully busy—what with packing, and seeing all our friends who came in to say good-bye; but on Saturday we had finished, bade farewell to Canterbury, and started by the one o'clock train for London.

CHAPTER II.

A QUIET TIME.

It was dusk when we got to Putney. We had left all our heavy baggage, to be sent up after us when we should have got into a house, and had brought up only what we should require for the present. We got into one of the rickety-looking flies standing at the station, and told the man to drive us to No. 12, Charlemagne Villas. We were soon there, and in the uncertain light we could see that it was a little detached house standing in a garden, and cut off from its neighbours and the road by a wall.

The driver got down and rang at the bell, and the gate, or rather the door in the wall, was opened by a small servant-girl.

"Does Mrs. Thompson live here?"

"Yes, ma'am; will you walk in?"

Very pleased to find that the object of our search still lived there, Polly and I got out of the fly and went in; while Harry, who said he hated this sort of thing, stopped outside to look after the boxes.

We were shown into a pretty little drawing-room, where the servant drew down the blind and lighted the gas, and in a minute or two a brisk little woman came in and said—

"My name is Thompson, ma'am; did you wish to see me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Thompson: some four years ago I was at Ramsgate, and when there I struck up a great acquaintance with your mother. She gave me your address, and I said that if ever I came to London I would come to you. Do you still let lodgings, and are they vacant?"

"I do, ma'am," Mrs. Thompson said, "and shall be only too glad to let them to any one whom mother recommended them to. If you had come two months later I might have been full, but my season does not begin till April, so we are quite empty at present."

A bargain was soon made with her, and Mrs. Thompson went to the top of the stairs and called "Mother," and, to my great surprise, the old bathing-woman herself came up. She knew me at once.

"Miss Ashleigh!" she exclaimed. "Oh, miss, I am so glad to see you. Do you know it is only ten days ago, when I saw your loss in the paper, that I said to Jane: 'Now, Jane, I should not be surprised if Miss Ashleigh comes up to town; every one does seem to come up here some time or other in their lives—perhaps this is her time.' And I said, miss, that I should take the liberty of writing to you in a few days, in case you might be coming up. I remembered I had given you Jane's address, but I thought you would have lost that long since. It is very kind of you to have thought of what an old woman said so long ago."

"Not kind at all," I said, "I was very glad to think that there was a place I seemed to know something of, and as I wrote the address down in my pocket-book at the time, I had no trouble in finding it. Have you given up your old occupation?"

"No, miss, but it is not the season now, and only one of us waits on through the winter, and as I begin to find the water then too cold for my old limbs, I have given it up these last two winters, and come here and stop with Jane and her husband."

Our landlady now took us upstairs. Our room was a nice large one, over the drawing room.

Harry's was behind ours, smaller, but quite large enough for him, and both were beautifully clean and nice.

While tea was getting ready, we unpacked as much as we could, and in half an hour, when Harry's voice was heard shouting at the foot of the stairs that tea was ready, we were quite astonished to find how much we had done, and how nearly we had finished our unpacking and putting away. The room below looked so comfortable that we could not help exclaiming with surprise and pleasure when we went in. A bright fire blazed in the grate, various gauze covers which had been placed over the chimney glass and picture frames, had been taken off. A white table-cloth was laid on the table, with a very pretty tea service upon it. Harry had made the tea, and the bright copper kettle was standing on the fire. I don't know when I enjoyed a meal so much—it seemed so homelike and comfortable that we were all quite in spirits, and certainly all very hungry; and we agreed that it was most fortunate that I had kept the old bathing-woman's address.

We were very comfortable at Mrs. Thompson's; indeed, we could not have been more so in our own house, and we almost debated whether we should not stay as we were. Still, after all, there is nothing like being in a house of one's own; and it would give Polly and me something to do to see after the housekeeping. Besides, Harry said that he wanted a place where he could have men in of an evening to have a glass of grog and smoke a pipe with him; for, although he did not mind smoking when alone with us, he said he did not wish the room where his sisters were to look like the bar parlour in a public-house.

On the Monday after we got there, Harry went up to work. Sometimes he went to an office at the West End, and on these days we breakfasted at half-past seven, which was rather a hardship; still it would cease to be one in another month, when the mornings got lighter and the weather warmer; and it could not be helped, as Harry had to catch the ten minutes past eight train, so as to be at his office by nine. Sometimes he had to go out surveying, and on these mornings he had to start very early—soon after six. When he did this, we did not get up to breakfast with him, but he had some bread and butter taken up to his room overnight, and he made a cup of coffee in a patent machine over a spirit-lamp.

After we had been in Putney about a week, and began to know the place a little, Harry asked us to look about for a house. We were not long in finding one, for Polly and I had observed a pretty little place to let within a hundred yards of us, which we both agreed would suit exactly; and now, having Harry's permission to look for a house, we at once went there.

We found that it was just what we wanted; indeed, that it could not have been more so if it had been specially built for the purpose. It was one of a row of six little semi-detached villas—at least they were called villas—but I think the word cottages would have been more appropriate. They stood back from the road, with pretty flower gardens in front, and a good large piece of ground behind for vegetables. A row of lime-trees grew in the gardens close to the road, the branches of which were trained towards each other, so that they formed a green wall in summer, and it was only through the arch cut over each gate that the houses could then be seen at all by passers-by. It was just the right size, and was altogether a charming little place, and the rent was £35 a year.

Harry stopped at home the next morning an hour behind his usual time, to go in with us to see it. He was as much pleased with it as we were, and at once decided upon taking it. It was a few days before he could spare time to give a day with us in town to buy the furniture; but in just a month from the date of our arrival in Putney we were snugly installed in our new home, which was called No. 1, Daisy Villas, Charlemagne Road; and comfortable as we had been at Mrs. Thompson's, we all agreed it was far pleasanter being in a house of our own. Harry had furnished the drawing-room very nicely, and bought a piano as a joint present for Polly and myself.

We had promised old Andrew that directly we were in a house of our own we would have up his youngest daughter Susan, who had been with us for a year before we left Canterbury, as our servant; and, accordingly, when we had taken the cottage, and the furniture came in, we sent for Susan, who arrived in due course, and was installed as our maid-of-all-work; and an excellent servant she turned out.

On the opposite side of the road to us was a large field, which had as yet escaped the builder's hands, and which was in autumn and winter used as a playground for the children of the neighbourhood, and in spring and summer was shut up, and kept for hay. Before we left, however, a builder had began to erect a line of villas opposite to us, but for the first two years there was nothing to interfere with our view; and even afterwards it did not matter so much, for, as I have said, in summer our lime-trees formed such a leafy screen that we could not see beyond our bright little flower garden.

We liked Putney very much. Polly and I were capital walkers, and there were such pretty walks to be taken round it—up the hill, and across the common to Wimbledon, or on nearly to Kingston, or across Putney heath, through Barnes, to Mortlake and Kew, or—best of all—through the green lanes to Richmond Park, with its groups of splendid trees, its brown fern brakes, and fallow-deer; and sometimes, when it was fine and the water was high, along the towing-path to Hammersmith, to watch the barges drifting lazily on the quiet water, and the steamboats, full of holiday-makers to Kew, cleaving their swift way through it.

I certainly got to like Putney, with its quaint High Street, its noble river, and its pretty walks, very very much—not in the same way that I loved Canterbury. Canterbury, with its quiet, sleepy

ways, is far better suited to me as I am now; but as I was then, I thought Putney a delightful place to live in. It was, too, such a convenient distance from town, and once a week Polly and I used to walk across the bridge, get into an omnibus, and go as far as the Circus, and then get out and walk up Regent Street and Oxford Street, and look at the shops.

It was not always that we had shopping to do, although we generally managed to want something, as a sort of excuse for going; but we both enjoyed it much, it was all so new to us; for we had never been in London at all, except at the time when we were at school—and then, of course, we never went up into London itself, and when we were staying respectively with Lady Desborough and Ada, when we were very much too grand to go out shopping on foot. So that the shops, and the gay carriages, and the bustle and confusion were all quite new, and very pleasant to us.

Sometimes of an evening, when Harry got back in good time, he would take us up to the theatre, at which he occasionally had a box given him by a friend in the "Metropolitan." Being in deep mourning, we could not go into any other part of the house; nor, indeed, did we go at all for the first six months of our stay in London.

After we had been in our new home about a fortnight, I wrote to tell Ada where we were. I had not done so before, because I did not wish her to come down to see us till we were quite straight, and had everything very nice: it was a little bit of pride, perhaps, but so it was. I had received a letter from her a week after dear papa's death, condoling with us, and asking Polly and me to go and stay with her for a while, when we felt equal to it, until our future plans were settled; and I had written back, thanking her, and telling her I would let her know when things were arranged. After that, I had not sent my usual monthly letter to her, but, as I had written myself to Percy, that did not matter. The day before I wrote, I had received a letter from her, which was forwarded from Canterbury, asking what had become of me, and this I now answered by giving our present address, and saying how pleased we should be to see her.

By this time it was the end of April; the season happened to be an early one, and our garden was gay with spring flowers, with which we had stocked it from a nursery close by, and the lime-trees in front were just putting out their delicate green leaves.

On the very day after I had written to Ada, an open carriage with a splendid pair of horses stopped in front of our house, and a tall powdered footman got down, opened the gate and came down the little walk, with a rather mystified air, as if wondering what his mistress could possibly want at No. 1, Daisy Villas.

He knocked a prolonged and thundering knock at the door, such as had probably never before been sounded upon it, and which was evidently intended to impress us all with a sense of the extreme importance and urgency of our visitor, and I heard him inquire of Susan, when she opened the door, in a tone of the most dignified condescension, "If Miss Ashleigh were at home?" Finding that she was, he returned, opened the carriage door and let down the steps, and Ada got out and came up to the door, and in another minute she was in my arms.

It was some time before we were composed enough to talk at all. It was so long since we had met —nearly five years now—at the time when Percy came down with her to Canterbury, when I became engaged to him. How much had happened since then! how many changes! it seemed an age to look back upon, and a very sad age too. Ada was naturally the first to recover herself, and as soon as she saw that I could listen to her, she began to scold me for being six weeks so near London without writing to let her know, and said that she had felt so indignant, when she first received my letter, that she had a great mind not to come down at all. I excused myself as well as I could, and told her frankly that I had been influenced by three reasons—the first, that from the time when we came up we had been so occupied in seeing about the furniture of our new house, that we had been busy from morning till night; the second, that owing to the same cause, both we and the house had been in such a state of confusion that we were not fit to receive visitors, and that I preferred her seeing the place when it was clean and tidy; and lastly, that I really had hardly felt equal to seeing her, and having so many sad memories called up. Ada still scolded me a little, and then, finding that I had now recovered myself, said:—

"There, Agnes, I will forgive you; and now let me look fairly at you: turn to the light. Really, I do not think you look a year older."

"Nonsense, Ada, I know I am looking older; I do not care for myself, but I only hope Percy will not think me looking dreadfully old when he comes back."

"If he does, Agnes, I will have nothing to say to him. Let me see, he has been gone now nearly four years,—four more, darling! it seems a long time to wait, but still it is something that half has gone, and what a happiness it is that his regiment was not out in that dreadful Crimea. And now, how am I looking, Agnes?"

"A little changed, Ada. You see I speak the truth. You were, like myself, nearly eighteen then; you are twenty-three now. Older, and a little more matronly-looking, for you were a girl then; you are a woman now, but certainly not less beautiful; indeed, I think more so, for your face has a calmer and brighter expression than it had."

I was not flattering her, for as I looked at her I thought I had never seen such a lovely woman in my life. Ada laughed and coloured a little, and declared I was an old goose; and then I said:—

"And now for a very important question, Ada; how is baby?"

"Very well, Agnes; he is six months old now, getting quite a big, troublesome boy. Ah, here is Polly!"

For Polly, always thoughtful, had remained out of the room, to let Ada and me have our first meeting, after so long a separation, together alone. It was only a year since they had met, and I was pleased to see by her manner how fond Ada was of her; as in the event of my going to India with Percy, her friendship would be very valuable to Polly.

"And is that your carriage, Ada?" I asked.

"Dear me, no," Ada said, "my equipage is a simple brougham. But I was in at the Square this morning with Holmeskirk, and I said I was coming down to see you; so the countess—who has a very high opinion of you, my dear, and who constantly inquires after you, especially as she knows, of course, how you stand with Percy—insisted on my taking her carriage and leaving her card. She sent her love, and she hopes that you and Polly will call upon her when you come over to see me; and I can assure you, Agnes, the dear old lady meant it. And now what day will you come? I will send my brougham down any day you like to name, that is if you will let me first see what days I am disengaged."

Ada thereupon took out her tablets, and found she was engaged for every day except Friday.

"Now, Agnes, I want you and Polly to come early to lunch. Then we will have the countess's carriage—she is a great invalid now, and she likes my using her carriage,—and we will have a drive in the park, and then a long cosy talk till dinner, at seven. And I want your brother to come to dinner, and then the brougham shall bring you back. Holmeskirk would have called himself; but your letter said that your brother always went out early, so he knew he had no chance of finding him in; but he asked me to leave his card."

After a little consultation with Polly, I accepted the invitation as far as the going up to dinner was concerned, but solely on condition that we came up in our own way. Ada inquired what was our own way, and I said that we should send up a box by the Parcels' Delivery with the things we required for dinner, and that we ourselves should come up by an omnibus to Sloane Street; that we would walk from there to her ladyship's, and that we should have a fly to fetch us at night. And so it was agreed; and Ada sat and talked for more than an hour, and then got up to go. We went down the garden with her, and she stopped at the gate to kiss us again before she got in; to, I have no doubt, the intense astonishment of the powdered footman, who was holding the carriage-door open, and who must have suffered the more that his position prevented him expressing his feelings, except by assuming an expression of even more stony impassiveness than before; for I have no doubt that before he saw this mark of affection and familiarity, he had the impression that Viscountess Holmeskirk had come down to pay a visit to some old nurse or domestic whom she had known in childhood.

When Harry came home, I told him of the engagement we had made for him, and he pished and grumbled, and said at first that he would not go; but, as I pointed out, there was no possible excuse for his not doing so, and indeed that it would be of no use, for Ada had particularly begged me, should Harry say he was engaged for that day, to write at once and let her know, and she would change the day for one in the following week. So Harry had to give in, and on the day of our engagement arranged to dress in town, and come straight down, for he was busy just then, and could not get away till six o'clock. Polly and I got to Ada's house, which was in Wilton Crescent, at one o'clock. Lord Holmeskirk was at home, and renewed his acquaintance with me with the frank heartiness which was natural to him.

After lunch Ada took us up to the nursery to see baby, and after we had sufficiently admired him —and he was really a fine little fellow—we put on our things and went for a drive with her in the park in the Countess of Rochester's carriage. On our return we went in with Ada to call on the countess herself, who lived in Belgrave Square, and who was very kind in her manner and remarks. She was evidently very fond of Ada, and not a little proud of her beautiful daughter-in-law; and I could see that Ada, on her part, was very attached to the kind old lady, whom she treated with a deference which I had certainly never seen her exhibit for her own imperious mother.

After we got back to Ada's we took off our things, and sat down for a long, cozy chat about the past. I found she was very happy in her married life, and that her husband was all she could possibly wish him. I certainly thought that her happiness had improved her; for, although quite as cheerful as of old, she had a quiet dignity which very much became her. She said that she hoped, when we were able to enter into gaiety again, that we would let her take us with her into society.

For myself I declined at once, and I am glad that Polly did the same. I told her we moved in a sphere as far removed from the one in which she did, as the sun was from the earth, and that I was sure it was a great mistake, as my own example might prove, to go out of it. "It is pleasant for a time, Ada," I said, "but it is a bitter fruit; no good can come of it. When Percy comes home, if we are married, and if Polly is still single, it will be a different thing; but at present Daisy Villa has nothing in common, except our affection, with Wilton Crescent and Belgrave Square. We shall be very glad to come over sometimes to see you quietly, and for you to drive over to see us when you can spare time from your gaieties, but beyond that, as long as I am Miss Ashleigh, nothing." Ada tried hard to shake my resolution, but in vain, and Polly was equally firm with myself.

Harry came to dinner, and Ada made him feel perfectly at home. Certainly prosperity had not spoiled her; she was just as frank and as friendly as when she had been staying with us as a girl at Canterbury; she introduced him to Lord Holmeskirk with a laughing remark, that Harry had at one time very nearly prevented her from ever occupying the position she now so unworthily filled, by making the most desperate love to her when she was only sixteen years old. Lord Holmeskirk laughed, and said, that in that case he was very greatly Harry's debtor in that he had not succeeded in his attempt upon Ada's affections.

Harry and Lord Holmeskirk were soon on very friendly terms. They suited each other well. They had moved certainly in very different circles, and had seen very different sides of life; but they were of the same happy disposition; both in their way singularly straightforward men, and both gifted with the same honest determination to see only the best side of things.

Our little dinner-party went off very pleasantly; and I felt quite relieved to find that when we were helped, the servants left the room; and Ada then told us that she had suffered so much as a girl from the stony presence behind her mother's chair, that she had always determined, if she were at the head of a house of her own, never to have a servant in the room one moment longer than necessary.

After dessert was over, Ada and we went up to the nursery, leaving the gentlemen over their wine, and I believe they would have sat and talked there all night if Ada had not at last sent them message after message to say that tea was ready upstairs. Soon after they came up our fly arrived, and we went home very much pleased with our evening.

After that Harry never raised any objection to going to dine at Wilton Crescent, which we afterwards did every month or so when Ada was in town. Polly and I used to lunch with her once a fortnight, and the coronetted carriage was very often down at Daisy Villa, where it never ceased to be an object of wonder and admiration to the small children of the neighbourhood, and I have no doubt gave us great standing and dignity in the eyes of the inhabitants of the other five villas. I really believe we never ceased to be subjects for wonder and speculation to the countess's powdered footman, who knowing that Lord Holmeskirk had married the daughter of the fashionable Lady Desborough, could never form any hypothesis perfectly satisfactory to himself as to how she could possibly come to be familiar with people living in such a small, and exceedingly unfashionable domicile as No. 1, Daisy Villas, Charlemagne Road, Putney.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE PROFESSION.

A very touching picture Sophy Gregory presented as she sat in the little parlour at work, a week after Dr. Ashleigh's visit; in her mourning dress, and with the tiny fatherless child in her lap. She was very pale, and looked years older than she was. Sophy had gone through a heavy trial. She had loved her husband very truly; not indeed with the same admiring affection she had felt for him when they met in the plantations of Harmer Place—that dream had been dispelled rudely enough long ago,—but she had loved him as a true woman, knowing his faults, and bearing with them, taking them indeed as a special and deserved punishment upon herself for her fault in marrying him as she had done; but yet loving him the more, in that she saw how hard he tried, in spite of his faults, to make her happy. For this she had thanked God, and had prayed very earnestly that some day it might be granted to her, that through her influence over him, and his love for her, he might yet turn out nearly such a man as, in her early days of love, she had fancied him to be. But now all those pictures which she had been so fondly painting of their life in a distant land, had suddenly faded away; those bright pictures which had been ever before her eyes, as she sat at her work through the day, or of an evening, with Robert sitting moodily drinking beside her; fair, happy pictures of their future life, in a rude hut in some lonely clearing, far away from the nearest neighbours; she, engaged in her household work, listening to the ring of Robert's axe, till the hour should come for him to return from his labour, tired, but cheery and bright, to spend the evening with her happily without that dreadful bottle; contented with her fond welcome, sitting by the log fire-side, perhaps with his children climbing on his knee, or standing by while he told them stories, or taught them their first simple lessons, while she sat by busy at her work watching them fondly. At the thought of these, or some such fancies, Sophy's face had brightened often, and, trusting in the future, she had almost forgotten the present, and once again admired as well as loved her husband, not for what he was, but for what he would some day become. But now all these pictures were gone, blotted out in a moment by the rude hand of death,—and of such a death! If he had died as most men die, tranquilly and peacefully, with his last words breathed in her ears, his last look fixed upon herself, Sophy thought she could have borne it with resignation; but to die such a death as this, to be shot down in his strength, to go out full of health and spirits, and never to return; and for her only to be told that he lay in an obscure grave in a distant town! this she could hardly bear; and as she looked with a blank hopeless look into the fire, she thought that were it not for the unconscious babe on her knees, she would gladly—oh, how gladly!—go where there is no more weeping and tears. But for the child's sake she must live and work; for that child who, if he had his rights, would be heir to wealth and fortune—to that very home where his father had been shot down like a common robber, by the woman who had defrauded him of his rights. Sophy did not know all the history of

that night's work, only what Dr. Ashleigh had told her; that Robert had gone with the intention of alarming Miss Harmer into divulging where the will was hidden. Angela Harmer's death she regarded as an unfortunate effect of the fright, which could not have been foreseen; of the violence used towards her she was of course ignorant.

Was not Robert, she asked herself, right in what he did? Was he not in his own house, seeking his own for her sake and the child's. Should all this go for ever unpunished? Should this woman who had robbed her and her child, who had now slain her husband, who had, as Dr. Ashleigh had told her, destroyed his daughter's happiness, and brought her to the verge of the grave; should she prosper and triumph? No, a thousand times no; and day after day Sophy's determination became more and more deeply rooted, her purpose more strongly confirmed. Should it cost her her life as it had done Robert's, she would yet find the will. But how? And she brooded over the thought till her brain seemed on fire; she fell into reveries from which nothing except the crying of her child could rouse her; her eyes began to have a dreamy, far-off look, and had there not been anything to rouse and occupy her, it is probable that her reason would have given way entirely under the strain of this fixed idea upon her mind. Upon this day, however, there was a knock at the door, and a little talking in the passage, and then Mrs. Billow, who had been as kind as a mother to Sophy during this period, came into the room.

"Mr. Fielding wishes to speak to you, my dear; he has been here three or four times to ask after you, and I do think you had better see him."

Sophy looked up at her as she spoke, but it was evident that she did not hear what was said to her; her thoughts were too far away to be called back all at once.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Billow," she said presently, with an effort, "what are you saying?" Mrs. Billow repeated her message.

"Do see him, my dear," she went on as Sophy shook her head, "It will do you good; you are fretting yourself to death. Indeed, indeed, my dear, you are, and it is very wrong of you; what is to become of your little baby if you get ill, as I am sure you will, if you sit here think, think, all day, without speaking a word to any one? Do see him, now there's a deary, it will do you good, indeed it will."

Sophy paused a little, and then said in a weary tone, "Very well, Mrs. Billow, if it will please you, I will see him."

Mr. Fielding was shown in. He was a rough man, and, to a certain extent, an unprincipled one; but he had been a gentleman once, and could be one still when he chose, and his heart was, after all, not far from its right place.

"Mrs. Gregory," he said, as he came in, "I will not pain you by offering you my condolences, or by telling you how I feel for you in your affliction. Please to consider all that as said, and to take this visit as one simply of business. When I called the day before yesterday, I took the liberty of asking your landlady what you were thinking of doing. She told me that from what you said she believed that you intended teaching again. Now will you excuse me if I say, that although, under other circumstances, such a plan might have its advantages, yet that I think, that with a young baby, whom you would be obliged to leave without you the whole day, it would be attended by great inconveniences. Besides, there is no occasion why you should do so. My proposition is, that you should continue to do as you have hitherto done. I can leave the papers, letters, and such information as you require, here of a day, without coming in to disturb you. If I were to see you, say once a week at present, while it is the slack time, it would, I should think, be sufficient. By the time the busy season comes on, you will, I hope, be so far recovered as to be able to see me for half an hour or so every day. Of course, the remuneration will be the same as it has been up to this time. I do not think you could earn more at your teaching, and you will be able to have baby with you all day. There is another thing I should wish to say. It was through—through my late partner's capital and assistance, that we managed to do as well as we did, and it has laid the foundation for a first-rate business this year. There is at present £150 only in the bank, half of which is your property. Should you choose to let that remain in the business, I will give you, as I think would be fair, an interest in it—say one-fifth of the profits at the end of the year."

"But I have no right to that, have I, Mr. Fielding? For I know that I heard Robert say that any man would be ready to put £1,000 into the business for a third of the profits."

"That is right enough, Mrs. Gregory, and I do not disguise from you that the fifth of the business is worth a great deal more than £75, even for a sleeping partner; but that is not the question: it is not for the money, but for your interest and partnership, as it were, that I think it fair that you should still have a share in it."

"But I have no absolute right to any share, Mr. Fielding?"

"Well, not actually a right, Mrs. Gregory. You see we never drew up any deed of partnership when we began; but it was, of course, an understood thing that if anything should happen to either of us that his representatives should have some sort of interest or pull out of the affair."

"And about the writing, Mr. Fielding? Are you sure that my work is worth what you pay me?"

"Quite sure," he said, in a far less hesitating and undecided way than he had before spoken in. "I can assure you that I could not get any one on whom I could rely to do the work for less money, and that I should be very sorry for any one else to know all my affairs as you do."

"Then in that case I accept with many thanks," Sophy said, gratefully; "and I feel that you are acting with great kindness, for the £75 is no equivalent for my share of the profits. You have, indeed, taken a great weight off my mind, for I have been very troubled, wondering what I should do with baby while I was out."

"That is settled, then," Mr. Fielding said, cheerfully, as if greatly relieved that the matter had been so arranged. "I will send you the papers and letters to-morrow, when the post comes in. I can assure you it will be quite a relief to me; for although work is slack now, I have got into such a muddle that I hardly know which letters I have answered and which I have not. I have all this week's lot here." And he took a large bundle of letters from his pocket. "I believe I have answered all the others, but I have not touched one of these. I will leave them with you to clear up. And now, good bye. I will call again this day week."

And so Sophy, very joyful that she should be always with her baby, again set to at her old work of making out lists, and answering correspondents, and sending out the names of winning horses; and busied in these pursuits, and in the nursing and fondling of baby, her thoughts ceased to dwell on her project for the recovery of the will, and her eyes recovered their former expression. Not that she had given up her idea, but she had postponed it for a fitting season; the only step she took towards it being to write to her foster-mother, the woman who had brought her up, to ask her to send an account of Miss Harmer's state of health every three months, and to let her know at once if she should be taken ill.

As time went on, the first faint gleams of consciousness came into baby's eyes, and then it came to know her, and to hold out its arms, and struggle and cry to come to her, and Sophy began to feel that life might have some happiness for her yet, for she had something to love and work for, something which loved her in return.

And so a year passed, and now the little child was able just to toddle across the room, to Sophy's delight and terror, and to call her "mammy," and to utter other sounds, perfectly unintelligible to any one, but which she persisted was talking; and Sophy was able to toss him and play with him almost as gleefully as she would have done years before. She looked far younger than she had done eighteen months back, for she had now no care on her mind. Sometimes, indeed, of an evening, when her work was all done, and the child in bed, she would sit by the hour musing over her plans for the recovery of the will; but her eyes had not the fixed, strange look they used to wear when thinking it over; for then she had thought of it as a duty, as a something which she had to do; but now that it was for her darling's sake, it was a pleasure; and her eyes would lighten as she thought over what she would do when she had succeeded, and she and her boy were rich.

She was comfortably off now; for the firm was doing well, and James Fielding was a member of Tattersall's and began to stand high in the ring. His drawings had risen from five pounds to ten pounds a week. He told Sophy so, and said that he considered this five pounds had been payment for his work, in the same way that her two pounds was of hers, but this additional five pounds he looked upon as a weekly division of profits, and consequently she was entitled to another one pound a week also. So she had now three pounds a week and was very comfortable. At the end of the season he showed her his banker's book, and there was nearly £2,000 standing to his credit; and he said that next year, having so good a capital, he should be able to bet more heavily, and had no question that he should do much better.

All through that winter although business was very slack, and there was no occasion for his so doing, James Fielding used to come over three times a week to see her. And indeed all along his kindness had been very great, sending her little presents of game and poultry, and bringing baskets of choice fruit from Covent Garden.

It was not for a year after Robert Gregory's death that Sophy thought anything of all this. James Fielding had been very kind to her, and she had learned to think of him as a true friend; but absorbed as she was in her child, and with her spare thoughts so fixed on that other purpose of hers, she had never thought more on the subject. At length one day, something he said, some tone of his voice came upon her like a revelation. She started, looked hurriedly and anxiously at him and saw that it was indeed so. With an exclamation almost of pain she rose—

"James Fielding," she said, "don't say it to me. Never think of it again. Do not take away the last friend I have in the world from me. You are the only one I have to rely upon, do not make it impossible for me ever to receive a kindness from you again. I shall never marry again; do not, do not speak of it."

"I know, Sophy, I am not worthy of you," James Fielding began slowly, and then—as with an imploring gesture, she tried to silence him—"Let me speak, Sophy, I will never allude to it again."

"No, no, no," Sophy cried, passionately; "I will not hear you! If you once tell me you love me, you can never be to me what you have been before. I cannot be your wife; pray, pray, do not ask me."

"And can it never be, Sophy? Not in a long, long time?"

"Never, James, never! Think of me as a dear friend, as a sister. Shake hands, James. You will be my friend as you have been before, will you not? And the friend of my child?"

"I will, Sophy," he said, sorrowfully but earnestly. "I will, so help me God!"

It was a great blow to him; for he had come to love his late partner's pale young widow very truly,

with her grave, sedate face when at business, and her pretty winning ways when he had come in sometimes and found her romping with her baby.

However, he saw at once that it was not to be, and very sorrowfully determined that at all events she should not find any change in his manner or way, and that she should be able to look on him as a brother. Had he thought that time could have made any change in his favour he would have been content to wait and hope; but he saw that there was none, and as he said to himself on his way home, "a man may back a horse when the odds are a hundred to one against it, and land his money in the end, but no one but a fool would put money on a scratched horse."

From that time Sophy never saw by his manner that she was anything more than a dear friend to him; and although for a little while she was timid and reserved with him, yet this in time wore off, and they fell back into their old relations, and things went on as before.

Next to James Fielding, Sophy's greatest friends were Mr. Harley and his wife who lived opposite. They had known her before Robert's death, and had about that time been very kind to her, and were really much attached to her and her boy. He played first violin at the Victoria, and his wife took the singing chambermaid at the same theatre. She was considered very clever in her line, and could have obtained an engagement at one of the houses across the water, but she preferred remaining at the same theatre with her husband. He was a man about thirty; she was twenty-six. They had been married five years, and it was their great grief that they had no children. They took very much to Sophy and her boy, who was christened James, after Mr. Fielding, his godfather; for Sophy could not at that time have borne that her child should be named after his father.

And so three years more went on. Little James was now four years old, and was growing up a very fine little fellow, and Sophy, who almost adored him, began to tell herself that it was time that she should leave him and devote herself for a while to that purpose which, if successful, would make him a rich man.

One day, nearly four years after her husband's death, James Fielding called upon her. After talking for some time on indifferent matters, he said—

"My dear Sophy, three years ago I asked you a question, and you said it could not be."

Sophy looked up for a moment with a little frightened start, but seeing by his steady face that he was not as she feared going to repeat that question, she listened quietly as he went on.

"Had your answer been other than it was—had you given me the least hope, I should have been contented to have waited any time; but I saw that what you said was final, and that it was not to be. I therefore gave up all hope and have looked upon you ever since as you asked me to do—as a sister; and now I am come to tell you that I am going to be married."

"I am very glad to hear it, James," Sophy said, cordially; "more glad than I can tell."

"I was sure you would be, Sophy. She is a cousin of mine down in Leicestershire. She was a child when I left home, at my poor father's death, and came up to London, twelve years ago; now she is twenty-five. The winter before last, as you know, I went down to see the old place and the old folk. Two of my uncles were living there, and they were glad enough to see me. I don't say that they altogether approved of my profession; still, it is a sporting county. One of my uncles is a lawyer, the other a doctor, and both ride to the hounds, and they consequently did not think my being a betting man quite such a dreadful thing as some people might have done. At any rate they received me kindly, and I had rather a strong flirtation with my cousin. Last winter we came pretty well to an understanding, and now we have arranged that I shall go down to spend Christmas with them, and shall carry her away with me a day or two afterwards. And now, Sophy, I am going to talk business. These last few years we have been doing better and better, and we have now as nearly as may be £25,000 in the bank. Now, some of this I want to take out, as I have arranged to settle £8,000 on my wife, and I therefore propose that you should draw your share out. It is now £5,000, which will be enough to make you comfortable with your child, and place you beyond all necessity for work. It is better for us both, for, careful as I am, I might, by a run of ill luck, have it all swept away, yours and mine, and by this arrangement we shall be safe."

"I had already made up my mind, James, to tell you that I wished our partnership to be dissolved. To begin with, you now bet in such a large way, that I am sure this commission business is only an annoyance to you, and that you only continue it because it affords me work. However, I have kept a private account for the last three years, and I found that there was a good balance of profit after paying me my four pounds a week, so I did not hesitate in keeping on. However, I am now desirous of giving it up. For these four years I have been putting off the execution of a purpose I have had in my mind, and I must delay no longer. I do not tell you what it is, James, true friend as you are, for you might try and dissuade me from it, and that would only trouble me, without diverting me from my purpose. As for the £5,000, I cannot take such a sum as that; that is the result of your work, and not of the £75, which was what I put in. Still, as you say that you did benefit by Robert's work that year, and as that year laid the foundation of your fortune, I will consent to take £2,000, and I do that only for the sake of my child. Will you let it be so?"

James Fielding did not let it be so without a great struggle; but nothing could persuade Sophy to take more than the £2,000. At last, when he found that nothing could change her determination, he gave in, and agreed that it should be as she wished. He then began to ask her about her future plans.

"I cannot tell you, James, so do not ask me. My design, whatever it is, may take a year in execution—it may take two years. I may be gone before you come back."

"Gone!" James Fielding said, in astonishment; "but where on earth are you going?"

"I cannot tell you, James, so it is not of the slightest use asking."

"But what on earth are you going to do, Sophy?"

"I can tell you nothing now, James, so pray do not ask. I will send you my address when I am gone, and you can write to me; and if anything should happen to me, James, will you promise to be a father to my boy?"

"I will, Sophy. I will bring him up as my own child. But all this is really too bad, Sophy. You promised to look upon me as a brother, and now you are going upon some extraordinary business, and don't give me the slightest clue as to what you are going to do; and yet it is so serious that you ask me to take care of your child, if anything happens to you."

"I do look upon you as a brother, James, but not to my own brother would I tell what I am going to do. But at any rate you shall know in six weeks where I am."

More than this James Fielding could not obtain from her, and went away greatly mystified and rather anxious. James Fielding had a shrewd suspicion of how Robert Gregory had met his end. He knew the anticipations of fortune he had under Mr. Harmer's will. He knew—for Robert had spoken to him of it—of the efforts which had been made to find the will. He had read in the papers the account of the burglary at Harmer Place, and that one of the robbers was supposed to have been wounded. When therefore he heard of Robert's death, and that it had resulted from an accident, without any particulars of the how or where being given, the idea had struck him that he had fallen in the attempt to recover the will. All these thoughts forgotten for many years now came back to him, and he could not help fancying that in some way Sophy's new resolution was connected with the same end. However, it was no use guessing on the subject; it was evident that time alone would show, for Sophy would tell him nothing.

The next day James Fielding paid £2,000 in to Sophy's account, and a week afterwards went down into Leicestershire to fetch his bride.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ODD WOOING.

We had not much society at Putney—that is, not much ladies' society. Putney is too near to London for people to call upon new comers; so the only acquaintances we made were the wives and sisters of the "Metropolitan" men who resided there. There were only four or five of them—that is only that number of married men; but that gave us as much quiet evening visiting as we cared for. We were all very sociable, and very frequently met at each other's houses to tea, and then, after a little music, the gentlemen sat down to whist, while we talked and looked on. It was a great place for whist, and both Polly and I were fond of it, and played, Harry said, very fairly for girls. We often played when we were wanted; and when Harry brought in two friends with him, we took it by turns to play the double rubber. In summer this was constantly the case, for then Putney was full of "Metropolitan" men, who took up their quarters there for the rowing season, went up to their business by the morning train, and came down in quite a strong body for the rowing; in the evening—increased as their numbers were by those who lived in other parts of London, and had to return again the same evening. A finer-looking set of men could hardly be found—men with straight, active figures, and fresh, healthy complexions; not noisy, and yet full of fun and life. They were almost all in business of some kind in the City; merchants, Stock Exchange men, solicitors, and men in government and other offices. Harry was very particular who he brought home with him, and certainly Polly's opinion and mine—as far as our little season in town had qualified us to judge—was, that they were as pleasant and gentlemanly a set of men as could be found. There were, Harry said, of course, a few men in the club who were not quite so presentable; but that was to be expected in any large body of men.

Harry came down twice a week all through the summer, to go out in the club-eights, and we generally walked a little way along the towing-path on these evenings, to see them come along with their measured stroke, and steady swing. In time, from hearing so much talk about it, we got to know how nearly every man in the club rowed.

It was more especially when the club races were coming on, and three or four eights had entered, that these matters were discussed with the greatest interest.

Harry always entered for them. He had taken to rowing too late ever to become a finished oar; but he was considered a very useful man in the middle of the boat. What excitement we all felt about it; and I believe the ladies of the club—if I may call them so—were at least as much interested as the men. We discussed the chances of the boats quite scientifically, and laid bets of kid-gloves with each other upon the result. The first great excitement was the evening when Harry came back from the club on the night of choosing the crews, with the lists. How eagerly we

looked over them, and how glad we would be to see that he had Griffin for stroke, and Thompson for seven, a host in themselves; but as our eye ran down it, our faces would fall greatly, when we saw that he had also Big Hamper, who it was notorious never pulled his weight along, and Long Black, who in himself was enough to——well I must not use Harry's word, though it was very expressive—but enough to spoil any crew he got among.

During the fortnight they were practising for the race, pretty Miss Planter would generally call in for us every evening, as we lived nearer to the water than she did; and we would walk through the cricket-field to the towing-path, and watch the different boats coming down over the course. In time we became quite judges of rowing, and could tell pretty nearly which would be most likely to win, by the regularity of the stroke and the steadiness of the swing with which they did the last half-mile down to the bridge; for, as Harry said, any crew could swing when they were fresh, but the boat which kept its form after going over the course might be pretty well relied upon to win the race. Miss Planter was a better judge than we were, for her brother was the life and soul, the guiding spirit of the club.

Rupert Planter was a tall, wiry man, rather loosely put together, with a rolling, uncouth walk. On shore, no one would have singled him out as a man of unusual strength, or as a practised gymnast; but put him into a boat, and his muscles seemed to stiffen into steel, and, as he tore his oar through the water, you saw before you the most finished, as well as, perhaps, the most plucky, oarsman in the world. Rupert Planter's life was passed, when not at business or asleep, in a boat. His every thought and energy were devoted to the promotion of the aquatic art in general, and of the "Metropolitan Rowing Club" in particular. His whole time was at its disposal, and no trouble was grudged by him in the endeavour to maintain it in its proud position of the first rowing club in England.

He was rather a despot in his way, and a little fond of carrying things with a high hand, and anything like shirking was greeted with a force of denunciation which sometimes rather astonished new members; but no one minded what he said, for they knew that he only spoke as he did for the good of the club. It was wonderful the influence he had over them, and how much better a boat went when he was steering her; and if he were on the bank, and an eight came along pulling heavily against the tide, the moment his voice was heard, with his sharp "Now lift her up, boys!" the way in which the tired crew straightened up and lay out to their work was almost magical.

On the day of the race we went in the steamer which the club hired to accompany it, and great was our interest and excitement. I don't know anything prettier than to see four eights dash off together at the word "Go!" their oars all dipping together, amidst the burst of shouts and encouragement from their friends in the accompanying steamer, and the breathless excitement, lest—as they close nearer to each other, in their efforts to draw over to the Middlesex shore—there should be a foul; then the thrill of pleasure and triumph with which you see the boat you wish to win, slowly, inch by inch, draw itself out from among the others. Even should the boat which first leads not be your favourite, still you do not give up hope, but continue to wave your handkerchief, and to watch each fresh effort, until, perhaps, towards Hammersmith, your boat, stroke by stroke, slowly gains on the leader till it is nearly abreast, and then with a desperate spurt, amidst the wild cheering from the steamer, it snatches the victory in the last quarter of a mile. Oh, it is a glorious exercise! and if ever I wished myself a man, it was, certainly, that I might be able to row in a boat-race.

Polly would get even more excited than I did, and I remember that on one or two occasions of particularly hard races, she came home with her handkerchief and gloves literally torn into shreds, quite unconsciously to herself, in the excitement she felt in watching the varying chances of the boat Harry pulled in.

On occasions of general interest, such as the University contests, or races for the championship, we used to go up to the club-room, and out into the long balcony looking over the river; and it was very interesting to see the river crowded with steamers, and the excited crowd on the towing-path, and to hear the burst of cheering which broke out when they started. But it was only the start we saw, and not even always that—for the steamers often got in our way—so that, on the whole, I enjoyed the club races far more than these great contests.

On quiet afternoons, when the tide was favourable, and there was no racing on, Harry would come down early, and, perhaps, bring a friend round with him, and take a club skiff, and row us up to Richmond. Very pleasant it was, lying back in the boat, with its gentle gliding motion through the still water, and listening to the regular plash of the oars; and then, when we reached Richmond, to get out, and stroll up into the park, and look out on the wonderfully beautiful view over the rich wooded country towards Windsor, with the winding river, and the pretty mansions, and country seats on its banks. Then, when the tide turned, we would start again, floating down lazily with the current, and not getting back to the boat-house until it was growing quite dark, and the mists were beginning to curl up from the still river.

We had now been two years at Putney, and in this time Polly had many admirers; indeed, I don't think any one could help loving her; and she could, had she given them the slightest encouragement, have married almost any one of Harry's friends. But her heart was evidently quite untouched at present, and she did not seem to be at all anxious to change her name. Among Harry's friends it was generally understood that I was engaged. I wished it to be so, as it made my position more pleasant, by putting me quite at my ease with them, and by preventing the possibility of any unfortunate mistake being made; besides, I was the better able to chaperone

Polly.

In the winter season, as I have said, we were much quieter than in summer, for then the rowing men almost all went away to London till the spring; but twice a week at any rate we went in of an evening to the Planters', or one of the other resident families, or they came in to us. Saturday was the club-day, and then Harry went out on the water when the weather was fine, and in the evening to the club-room, where he boxed, fenced, and played whist till twelve o'clock.

It was not till we had been there two years that we came to know one of Harry's friends, he had never brought home before; and yet we had heard more of him than of almost any man in the club. This was Charley Horton, a merchant, with a very good business in the City—not that any one would have taken him for a merchant, or, indeed, for anything connected with business in any way. He was a man of about thirty, of middle height, but very strongly built, with a large pair of whiskers, a ruddy complexion, a clear, honest eye, a big voice, and a hearty laugh. Harry had often spoken of him as one of the most popular men in the club, but when we had asked him why he did not bring him in, Harry had said—

"Oh, Charley can't stand women; it is not that he dislikes them absolutely, but he says he does not understand them, and can never think of anything to say to them; a man who once met him at a party reports that he stood at the door all the evening, and looked as afraid of speaking to a woman as if he had never seen one before in his life."

One day, however, when Harry came down early with the intention of taking us up the river, Charley happened to come down in the same carriage with him, and Harry told him what he was going to do, and asked him to take an oar. After great difficulty, and only under the promise that he should pull bow, so as to be as far out of the way of conversation as possible, Charley consented to come. Harry came home to fetch us, while his friend went round to the club-room to dress, and met us at the boat-house. When he saw us coming I do believe that if he could by any possibility have got away he would have done so; but there was no escape. Harry introduced him to us, he murmured something vague, and then went off to help to get the boat down.

I do not think that I ever remember Polly in such a wild humour as she was on that afternoon. She kept up a string of questions and talk the whole time we were on the water, I believe on purpose to put Mr. Horton out, and as we were going up with the tide there was no occasion to pull hard, and the rowers had no excuse for not talking.

Polly commenced the attack directly the boat had pushed off. I believe she waited for that lest her victim should escape her.

"Do you know, Mr. Horton, we have been wishing to make your acquaintance for ever so long; Harry has so often spoken about you, that we seem to know you quite well."

Charley Horton coloured up like a girl, and murmured something about "mutual pleasure, he was sure."

I was obliged to hold my face down, while I thought that Harry, who was pulling stroke and had therefore his back to Charley Horton, would have laughed out loud. However, he restrained himself, and shook his head admonishingly at Polly, who, however, paid not the slightest attention to it; but with a perfectly innocent and unconscious look continued to talk, sometimes addressing Harry, sometimes his friend, but always a question requiring rather a long answer or explanation. I do believe that for his own sake, Charley Horton would willingly have jumped overboard and swam ashore at any time during our trip up. Coming back again she was more merciful, and confined her questions chiefly to boating matters, and on these Charley was able to answer pretty fluently, and was more at his ease. I leaned forward and asked Harry to invite his friend round. He nodded, but said nothing about it till we got out of the boat. Then he asked—

"I suppose you are not going up to town, Charley, till a late train?"

"No," he answered, "not till the 10.40."

"Well, then," Harry said, "you may as well come round with us, we are going to have a dinner-tea."

Charley opened his eyes with an expression of absolute alarm.

"Much obliged," he said, "but I can't anyhow. It is quite impossible."

"Why, Mr. Horton," I said quietly, "you said you were not going up to town till late, so there can be surely nothing to prevent your coming in to us."

"Come, old fellow," Harry laughed, "there can't be any reason why you won't come, so say no more about it, but come."

"Well, I don't know that there is any particular reason," Charley said in a tone of extreme depression, and evidently quite unable at the moment to invent any excuse whatever, "No—well, Ashleigh, I'll come."

"That's right," Harry said, "I want to speak to some one at the rooms, so I will go round with you; you may as well go on girls and get tea ready."

As we went home I talked quite seriously to Polly, and told her I was really very surprised at her; but Polly would by no means allow she was wrong, and insisted that she had only been very polite

and chatty. This was, to a certain extent, true and I was quite unable to extract any promise from her that she would be more merciful. Presently the two gentlemen came in, and Harry told us afterwards that had he not gone round with his friend he would never have come; as it was, he had endeavoured to persuade Harry to tell us that he had received some urgent message calling him to town; but Harry refused to do this, and pointed out that if he did we should not believe him, and that he would have to call and apologize next time he came down.

And so Charley, with great discontent, came round, and was for some time evidently very uncomfortable; but as the evening went on, he became more at his ease, although it was ridiculous to hear the difference between his loud, jovial tone when he spoke to Harry, and his shy, disconnected way of speaking when he answered our questions.

This was Charley Horton's first visit to us, but it was by no means the last. After this he came with Harry, not often at first, but as he became more intimate, much more frequently, and sometimes even when Harry did not bring him in; and as he got to know us, and found that women were not such terrible beings after all, he became comparatively at his ease. Certainly Polly did not help to make him so, for she teazed and put him out of countenance most unmercifully; the consequence was, that although before very long he got to talk to me almost in the same way he did to Harry, he was always shy and awkward when he addressed her. I wondered myself that he came at all, for Polly plagued him sadly in spite of what I could say to her; I even expressed myself surprised to Harry, but Harry laughed, and said, "Do you know, Agnes, I am firmly of opinion that Charley is rather smitten with Polly."

"What nonsense," I said; greatly amused at the idea; "you are not in earnest, Harry, are you?"

"I am, indeed, Agnes," he said, "and a capital husband he would make, too."

"Why, my dear Harry, Polly would as soon think of marrying the man in the moon as Charley Horton. Why, she could marry almost any one she liked, and she does nothing but make fun of him."

I told Polly what Harry had said, as a very great joke. Polly laughed too, but she coloured a little, and said, "What ridiculous nonsense, Agnes;" altogether she was not so amused at the idea as I had thought she would be. After this I watched them closely, and at last came to the conclusion that Harry was right, and that Charley really was serious about it. About Polly I could not tell at all; she was just as teazing as ever with him, and I could not see the least change in her manner.

I cannot enter into all this at length, or I shall never bring this story of mine to an end, and I must, therefore, be very brief with it, as I have been with all this part of my history.

It was a funny courtship, and I never, till it was settled, felt quite certain that it was a courtship at all. I never heard Charley pay her a compliment, or say anything such as people in his condition do; never at least, but once, and that was not at all the usual way of doing it. We had been talking about a race, and Polly said that she should like to steer one of the boats, when Charley came out in his loud way,—"By Jove! Miss Ashleigh, if you did, there would be no occasion to say, 'Eyes in the boat.'" Harry and I laughed heartily, and Polly got up and made a very deep curtsey, and poor Charley was so completely astonished at himself that he could not say another word that evening, and took his leave very shortly. It was only to Harry that he would confide anything, and he at last told him that he was only waiting for an opportunity to ask Polly, but that for the life of him he could not imagine what he should say to her. However, I suppose he did manage it somehow, for one day Polly told me that it was all settled, and that she was going to marry Charley Horton.

I was very pleased; for although Charley was not a bit the man I should have thought Polly would have chosen, still I was sure, from what I had heard and seen of him, that he was a really good fellow, and would make her extremely happy. How Charley managed to summon up courage enough to propose to her I never found out; for although I several times asked Polly, she always laughed, and would never tell me a word about it. She at first wanted to wait until Percy came back from India for me, as she said she did not like to leave me alone; but this, of course, I would not hear of. I had not so much longer now to wait; and, besides, Charley urged, if anything should take Harry away from town, that of course I should come and live with them. And so it was arranged that they should be married in six months. Now that it was all settled, it seemed very strange to me; and yet I was very glad that it was so, for I had hoped anxiously that Polly would be married to some one, whom I could like very much, before I was myself, as I should have been very loath to have gone away and left her alone, while leaving her with a husband she loved, I should know in my far off home in India that she was happy as well as myself: and so I was heartily glad at her engagement with Charley Horton.

About this time I was rather anxious about Harry. He was restless and unhappy; it was some time before I could make out the reason, and then I guessed, that whether from the idea of Polly being married, or why, I know not, but that he had fallen in love with Planter's pretty sister. Of course, Harry, in his present circumstances, could not think of marrying; and I knew whatever he felt, that he was one of the last men in the world to become engaged unless he could keep a wife. I said one day,—

"Well, Harry, I suppose I shall have you following Polly's example next;" and he answered so sharply,—"Yes, a nice match I should be, on my £200 a year," that I was certain that there was something of the sort in his mind.

It happened that one day soon after this I read in the paper a prospectus of a company to execute some extensive engineering works in Australia, and Lord Holmeskirk's name was among the directors.

The same day I went up and saw Ada and her husband, and asked if he could procure Harry an appointment upon it. He kindly said that he would do what he could, and ten days later Harry received a letter, offering him the appointment of resident engineer, at a salary of £800 a year to begin with, and £1,200 at the end of three years. Harry accepted the offer with the greatest joy; and thus, in the space of a month, I was to lose my brother and sister—I say, lose them both, because Harry would be absolutely gone, and Polly would have other loves and cares, and I should no longer be, as I had so long been, her first object in life. Harry was not to leave for six months yet, and it was arranged that Polly should be married immediately before he started, and that I was to take up my abode with her and her husband.

Charley, now his shyness had worn off, improved wonderfully, and I liked him more and more every day, with his hearty, straightforward manner. Polly's manner to him was very little changed, and she still delighted in teazing and bothering her "dear old bear," as she generally called him, but I could see now, that under all her fun and raillery she was very, very fond of him.

CHAPTER V.

TERRIBLE TIDINGS.

And now, when all seemed so fair and smooth, when I thought that at last fortune had resolved to make amends for all her frowns—with Harry looking forward hopefully to his new appointment in Australia, with Polly engaged to a man whom I felt sure would make her happy, with five and a half years passed since Percy left for India, and only two and a half to look forward to, and these I felt sure would be happy ones, spent as we had arranged that they should be, with Polly and her husband—now was to come the blow which should shatter for ever my fabric of happiness, and destroy at once all those plans which I had vainly fancied were so fixed and settled.

It was the end of March. Polly was to be married in July. Early in the month I had received my periodical letter from Percy. It was written in his usual spirits; but there was one part of it which made me rather uneasy at the time, although I did not think that it could be anything serious. It was as follows:—

"You must not fidget yourself, dearest, about what I am going to say now. I should not say it at all, but the fact is so notorious that I have no doubt you will see allusions and accounts in the newspapers, which will very likely, as newspapers often do, greatly exaggerate matters, and had I not written to you on the subject, might make you very uneasy. Some of the native troops are grumbling and disaffected. It seems that some one has persuaded them that the cartridges they use are greased with pig's fat, on purpose to destroy their caste. However, the authorities are quite awake, and several of the regiments have been disarmed; and there, no doubt, with a severe punishment of some of the ringleaders, the matter will end. These scamps are too well treated, and, like all men who are too well fed and too much petted, they must find something to grumble at. The cartridge question is a mere pretext, and could be at once avoided by withdrawing all the cartridges which have been served, and letting the men make them for themselves. I suppose it will blow over, as these things usually do; but the native mind is certainly a good deal disturbed; strange rumours are going about the country, and the natives in general have an idea that the Company's raj, or rule, is going to end shortly; but I confess that, for my part, I don't think John Company is at all likely to give up this trifling bit of country in a hurry."

The rest of Percy's letter was written in his usual way, and was very loving and tender. He said that in a little more than two years he should be thinking of starting for England, and that as he had not fallen in love with any native princess yet, he thought there was every chance now of his claiming me when he got back. It was a very long letter—longer even than usual; but long as it was, how often and often I have read it over since!

It was the last I ever received from him.

The letter was written from a place in India then but little known in England, although it has attained a terrible celebrity since. It was dated from Lucknow, where Percy had recently been sent with a very good staff appointment, his regiment being in quite another part of India. The mail which brought his letter, brought, as he had predicted, accounts of disaffection in the Bengal army; but still, no one thought that it was anything very serious, and I did not feel at all uneasy, for the scene where the regiments had been mutinous and were disarmed, was a very long distance from the place where he was stationed.

The next mail brought news of how the disaffection was spreading—fresh regiments had mutinied, and had been disbanded; and the next—oh, what a throb of agony it sent through England!—told of risings and massacres, and unutterable horrors. Oh, it was terrible! With what fearful anxiety I waited, as thousands did in England at that dreadful time, for the arrival of the next mail! and how that anxiety grew when the post only brought darker and darker news, and

tidings that at every station there were risings and massacres.

Every one during that two months was very, very kind to me. We were very quiet, for Harry brought no one in now, and Charley Horton was our only visitor. He tried to moderate his big hearty voice for my sake, and brought me down what cheering news he could from the City,—of how people thought it would not spread farther, and that our troops would soon get the upper hand again. I tried hard to believe him; but I could not but feel that he only told me so to cheer me, and not because he believed what he said.

At last one morning Harry went up as usual to catch the eight o'clock train, but instead of going by it, came back in twenty minutes after he had started. As he came in at the gate I saw that he had the paper in his hand, and I felt intuitively that there was bad news in it, and that he had come back to tell me.

"Do not be alarmed, Agnes," he said, as he came in, seeing the look of terrible suspense on my face. "There is nothing about Percy in the paper."

"Thank God!" I murmured.

"The news," he went on, "is only what we had almost expected. The last mail told us that they were making every preparation; and with a man like Lawrence to lead them, there is, I trust, no fear for their ultimate safety. Still, darling, the news is undoubtedly bad. They have risen at Lucknow. The garrison have retreated to the Residency. They made a sortie at first to meet the rebels, who were marching towards the town; but it seems that our men got the worst of it. So they blew up the fort, which the last mail said they were fortifying, and all retired into the Residency: it appears to be a fortified sort of place, and they think they can hold out until relief comes."

This was terrible news. Harry gave me the paper, now, to look at. There was a long list of telegrams about different stations and garrisons, but that was all I read; it was nearly word for word as he had told me, nothing more—but what could be worse? It was evident that the garrison was terribly weak, or they would never have abandoned the post they had so carefully fortified. Probably they had suffered dreadfully in that sortie, and Percy was sure to have been among them.

Had he ever got back into Lucknow? and if so, could they hold out till relief came? And where was it to come from? Oh, what a terrible four or five days that was before the mail came in with the details of the news, what a sickening agony of suspense I suffered!

At the end of that time all suspense, all hope was over.

The day that it was expected, Polly went down to the gate to watch if Harry returned from the station, which he was sure to do if there was news.

I could not stand there with her, but sat indoors watching her, with my heart hardly beating, and my hands grasping tightly the arms of the chair, as if to keep down the wild impulse which prompted me to rush madly down to the station to see the paper. At last Polly moved, and then went up the road, out of my sight, and I knew then that she saw Harry coming back again, and that the news was in.

How long—oh, how long they were coming! I knew that, owing to a little turn of the road, he could not have been more than a hundred yards off when she caught sight of him, not fifty when she met him. Oh, how long they were! and as second passed by after second—each second seeming an age to me—and still they did not come, my heart sank lower and lower, and hope died quite out. At last they appeared at the gate. I could not see Harry's face, for it was bent down, but Polly's was as white as death, and then I knew that Percy was killed.

I did not hear anything about it for some time afterwards: I remember them coming in at the gate, and the sight of Polly's face, and the next thing that I recollect, was that I was laying on the sofa, with Polly crying softly over me, and Dr. Whitmore standing beside me.

Harry was not there, for he had cried so terribly, and had been so much in the way, that the doctor had been obliged to send him out of the room. I had been for a long time in a faint, so long that they had become seriously alarmed, and had sent the servant to fetch the doctor; but even with his aid, there had been a great difficulty in bringing me round.

As soon as I recovered sufficiently to be moved, Harry came in and carried me up to my room, and Polly got me into bed. I was very faint and weak still, and soon dozed off to sleep. I believe, indeed, that Dr. Whitmore gave me some powerful sedative. It was not till next day that I was recovered sufficiently to ask any questions. I had never been told that Percy was dead, but I knew it as well as if they had spoken; they saw that I knew it, and had not even alluded to the subject.

"Let me see the account," I said at last.

"Are you strong enough, darling?" Polly said, anxiously.

"Yes, it cannot do me any harm, Polly. I know the worst; please let me see how it was."

Polly in silence fetched the paper, folded it down to the place, and gave it to me. It was the account of that disastrous sortie made from Lucknow just before the siege began. In the account of the retreat of the little column back to the town, during which so many noble fellows fell, were

the words: "Among the little troop of cavalry, composed principally of officers either on the staff, or who had found their way to Lucknow, where their regiments had mutinied, Lieutenant Desborough, of the Lancers, greatly distinguished himself, until, heading a gallant charge to check the pursuing rebels, he fell. He had already, earlier in the day, been wounded, but not so badly as to prevent his keeping his seat. In common with nearly every one who fell, it was impossible, from the close pursuit of the rebels, to bring off his body."

Two or three times I read through the paragraph and then turned round wearily to the wall. This was the end then. My Percy was dead, and there was not even the consolation of knowing that he had been laid tenderly in some quiet churchyard, there to wait, under that burning Indian sky, till the time should come, when we should again meet, and never part more. But now I could not even think of him so; I had not even that consolation; I could not think of him as lying anywhere; his body had fallen into the hands of the rebels, to be hacked and mutilated, before they left it to the jackals and wild dogs. I could not think of him at all, it was too horrible—Oh, Percy, Percy!

The next day Ada came down to see me. Grieved and shocked as she was, the dear girl had thought of me, and of my sorrow—greater even than hers—and so had driven down in her brougham to see me.

Polly left us to ourselves, and Ada cried with me, and talked with me over her dead brother, till our tears ceased to flow so fast, and we were both comforted.

The next day I was about the house again, and the next Polly went to London to buy mourning for me. Not for herself, although she had intended to do so, but I would not allow it. I pointed out to her that Harry would sail in little over three months now, and that it was absolutely necessary that our original plan should be carried out, and that she should be married before he started. I showed her how inconvenient delay would be; for that we had given notice to give up the house at that time, and I knew the landlord had already found a tenant for it, and that therefore there would be nowhere for her to be married from. Consequently, that our plans must hold good as before intended, and it would be a useless expense for her to go into mourning.

Polly endeavoured at first to argue that her marriage should be postponed; but finding that I would not hear of it, and seeing that it really would be very inconvenient, she gave way. However, when she came back from town, I found that she had bought a black dress and bonnet for herself, to wear until her marriage.

Charley Horton came that evening. I did not see him, but Polly did, and had a long talk with him. Polly told me afterwards that directly he came in and had inquired after me, he said—

"Well, Polly, all we can do is to try hard to make your poor sister as happy as we can. Her loss will in one way be your gain, Polly; for she would have gone back with her husband to India, and you would not have seen her for years. Now, you will be always able to keep her with you, as of course she will live with us, you know."

Polly thereupon, as she confided to me, straightway bestowed upon Charley, to his great embarrassment and delight, the first kiss which she had yet vouchsafed him.

"Do you know, my dear old bear, that only this afternoon I was thinking that, perhaps, we should not be married after all?"

"You don't say so, Polly," Charley said, in great astonishment; "and why not?"

"Well you see, Charley, I cannot leave Agnes now, and if you had raised the least difficulty or question——"

"Oh, come now, Polly, dash it——I beg your pardon, but I can't help it. No, really now, that is too bad. Why I should be glad, very glad to have Agnes to live with us. I like her almost as much as I do you. Not so well you know, Polly, and in a different sort of way, but still very much. And even if I did not——No, really now, Polly, that's not fair on a man."

"Never mind, Charley, it is all right now; but you see I was thinking so much of my sister and of her life, that I almost forgot what a good old bear it is, and you don't know how pleased I am that you have spoken as you have done."

Polly then had a serious talk with him; for he was of course anxious to know whether she wished her marriage postponed. But she told him what I had said against any alteration being made in the time; and so to his great pleasure it was settled that things should remain as previously arranged. When Charley had gone, Polly came up to me to tell me how warmly and sincerely he had expressed his pleasure at the thought of my taking up my permanent residence with them.

I expressed my earnest satisfaction; for I would not for worlds have damped her pleasure by telling her what my own resolve was. Indeed, I was firmly convinced that had she known it, much as she loved Charley, Polly would have at once broken off her engagement with him; for I had quite made up my mind that I would not on any account live with her and her husband. It was not so much that I did not wish to inflict my dulness upon her, for I knew how kindly they would bear with me; but I felt quite unequal to join even in home society like theirs. I was certain that at any rate for a very, very long time I should be a sad, unsociable woman. I had lived so many years on hope, that now that hope was gone I seemed to have nothing more to live for. I knew that I should not for years be fit to join in society. I felt already old and strange; the light and youth seemed at once to have faded out of my life. I was resolved that I would return to Canterbury and

take up my abode there. My heart seemed to yearn for the dear old town, with its tranquil, sleepy ways, and I felt that it would harmonize well with my changed life, and that I should be calmer, more resigned and tranquil, there than I could be anywhere else. And now my next thought was of Harry. Why should he not take a wife with him on his long journey?

I asked him this the first time that I had an opportunity of speaking to him alone. After much pressing he owned that when he first accepted the appointment he had thought of it; but that these Indian troubles had begun, and while I was so anxious and troubled he could not be thinking of marrying; but he said that he had spoken to Nelly Planter, and that she had agreed to wait three years until he came back to fetch her. But I cried—

"No, no, Harry; take her with you. No more waiting. Oh, think of my ruined life, Harry, and don't ask her to wait! Go at once, Harry! go at once, and persuade her to go with you. There are three months yet."

I would not let Harry rest till he went. He was away two hours, and when he came back I saw by his face that he had succeeded, and that his wife would accompany him on his journey.

I pass over those three months. I tried hard for Harry and Polly's sake to keep up, and as there was so much to do with his outfit and her trousseau, I succeeded pretty well.

It was a very quiet double wedding in the old Putney church. I could not trust myself to go with them, but went in to Rupert Planter's, where they had a quiet breakfast afterwards. When they had finished, I said good-bye to Harry and my new sister—good-bye for a long time, for they were to start at once and go down to Plymouth, where the ship they were to sail in would touch in a week's time. Charley and Polly were going up the Rhine. They all said good-bye, and started together. I did not cry—I could not—I did not feel as if anything but my own sad thoughts could ever make me cry again. I then went off to Ada's, where my things had been sent the night before. I did not return to Daisy Villa, for all had been arranged for our leaving; everything was packed and ready, and Rupert Planter willingly promised to see the boxes off, and to hand the house over to the landlord. Our servant was to go down for three weeks to Canterbury to see her friends, and was then to come back to Polly's new home, which was a pretty villa on Putney Hill. There I was to meet her, and was to get everything ready for her new master and mistress's return. And so I went to Ada's for three weeks; very, very kind she was to me during that time, and so was her husband. Ada told me that her mother felt Percy's death terribly, and that it seemed quite to have crushed her. Ada was sure, although Lady Desborough had not said so to her, that she bitterly regretted now the course she had taken with reference to his engagement with me.

Thus it often is with us, we take a course, and we keep to it, as if we were infallible, and we allow nothing to alter our convictions. We persuade ourselves that we are right, and we hold on our course unmoved. Death steps in: and now, when the past is irrevocable, the scales that have so long darkened our eyes, fall at once to the ground, and we see that we were wrong after all. How much cruel conduct, how many harsh words, how many little unkindnesses do we wish unspoken and undone when we look upon a dead face we have loved, or stand by the side of a new-made grave! how we wish—how we wish that we could but have the time over again! Perhaps in past times we were quite content with our own conduct; we had no doubts in our mind but that we always did what was right and kind, and that we were in every way doing our duty. But now in what a different light do right and duty appear! how we regret that we ever caused tears to flow from those dear eyes, now never to open again! why could we not have made those small concessions which would have cost us so little, why were we so hard upon that trifling fault, why so impatient with that little failing? Ah me! ah me! if we could but live our lives over again, how different, oh, how different it should be! And yet while we say this, we do not think that there are others yet alive upon whose faults we are just as hard, with whose failings we bear just as little, and that these, too, may some day go down into the quiet grave, and that we may again have to stand beside and cry "peccavi."

And so with Lady Desborough; now that Percy was dead, and her repentance—as far as he was concerned—came too late, she murmured and grieved bitterly over what she had done. I did not see her while I stayed at Ada's, but she sent a very pitiable message to me by her daughter, praying me to forgive her. I sent back to say that I forgave and pitied her, but I was obliged to decline an interview, which she asked for, that she might personally express her contrition, as I was not equal to such a scene. Before I left Ada's I told her of my intention of taking up my residence at Canterbury, she would have combated the idea, but I told her at once that my mind was made up, at any rate for some time. I had already had a correspondence with Mrs. Mapleside, a very old friend of ours at Canterbury, and had accepted her invitation to stay with her until I settled myself there. From Ada's home I went to Polly's pretty new abode, and saw that everything was in readiness for their return; and I then left, on the afternoon of the day they were to come back, leaving a letter for Polly stating my determination and my reasons for it. I told her that I knew that she would be grieved, but that I begged her not to try and change my determination, which was immoveable; and I promised to come up every six months and stay for a fortnight at least with her. Polly wrote in return quite heart-broken; but sorry as I was for the grief I knew my darling was suffering for my sake, I was still sure that I had acted for the best and that my life would never be fit to mingle with gay happy society, while in dear old Canterbury it might at least flow easily and tranquilly along.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SEARCH RENEWED.

James Fielding being gone, Sophy proceeded to put her long-cherished plans into execution. She gave notice to Mrs. Billow that she was going to leave. Had she been informed that the sky was on the point of falling, Mrs. Billow could not have been more astonished. Sophy had been there now more than five years, and her good landlady had come to look upon her as a daughter; as one, indeed, who by education and habits was far above herself; as one who had been brought up, and had married, in a station far above her own, and with whom, therefore, she could not feel upon quite equal terms, but yet she loved her as she might have done had Sophy really been a daughter. She had been so long Sophy's only friend; she had nursed her through her illness; she had soothed and consoled her when there were none else to do so; she had looked upon her child as almost belonging to her also;—so that when, after the first incredulous burst of astonishment was over, she saw that Sophy was really in earnest, and that she was going to leave her, Mrs. Billow sat down and had a great cry over it. She, too, was a lonely woman; her husband, from the nature of his pursuits, allowed her to have no friends; and he himself passed his existence in sleep and drunkenness; so that she had attached herself very much to her young widow lodger and her baby, and felt that, for her at least, it would be a heavy loss when she went.

When Mrs. Billow had recovered herself sufficiently to speak, she said—

"And where on earth are you going, my dear?"

"I am going to Italy," Sophy said, quietly.

"Italy!" Mrs. Billow said, in the greatest consternation; "going to foreign parts! Then I shall never see you again!" And here the good woman again gave way to plentiful tears.

"I shall only be gone a year, Mrs. Billow; I shall be sure to be back in that time."

But Mrs. Billow was not to be comforted.

"No, no, my dear, I shall never see you again. They all say it is only for a year when they go to foreign parts; but they never come back again. My nephew—that is, my sister Jane's son—William, he went to Australy. 'Never mind, mother,' he said to her, 'I shall be back in a year or two, a rich man;' and she never heard of him afterwards. It always is so—either you get wrecked under the sea, or eaten by savages, or something dreadful; any how, they never come back again."

Sophy after some difficulty persuaded Mrs. Billow that there was a great difference between Italy and Australia; that one was a four months' journey and the other four days; and that it all, with the exception of two hours, was by land.

Mrs. Billow was somewhat comforted by this information; but was still very despondent and low for the few days Sophy remained with her.

Mr. Billow, too, was much put out, and, indeed, felt himself personally aggrieved. She had been with them so long, that he had come to look upon the twelve shillings a week as a species of annuity which he received by right. As he said, he should never get another lodger who would suit him so well, who would give so little trouble, and ask no questions; indeed, that he did not think that he would take any lodger at all again, and that, therefore, it was a clear robbery of twelve shillings a week.

Sophy's friends, too, the Harleys, were greatly grieved when they heard that Sophy and her child were leaving, and could not understand why she wanted to go to Italy; but the only explanation they received was that she wished to learn the language. They tried very hard to dissuade her from her intention, but without avail; and in less than ten days after James Fielding had left town, Sophy and her child started for Italy, her destination being Florence.

That fortnight's travelling Sophy enjoyed as she had never enjoyed anything before. She journeyed by comparatively short stages; for time was no object to her, nor did she spare money. She was resolved to enjoy herself, and she entered into all the novelty of the scene with as much zest as a schoolgirl out for her holidays. It was all so new and so strange to her. She had never travelled before, except on that hurried flight to Scotland, when her heart was so troubled at the thought of the old man she had left behind. Her life had been always so monotonous and even, that the rapid motion, the strange sights and dresses, and the novelty of everything, flushed her cheeks and brightened her eyes with pleasurable excitement; besides, had she not at last entered upon that enterprise upon which her heart and thoughts had for the last three years been fixed—that enterprise, the result of which was to make her child rich; and although, before that was to come, she might have trouble and danger to encounter, still that was distant as yet: she had a year's holiday before her, and she was determined to make the most of it.

Little James was fortunately no drawback to this pleasure. Children generally go into either one extreme or the other: when travelling, they are either terribly peevish and irritable, or as good as gold. Fortunately, James chose the latter alternative; he either looked out of the windows and talked a great deal—principally about the horses and sheep and cattle grazing quietly in the meadows, as the train flew past them—or else slept for hours on the seat.

They went by train as far as Chambéry, and then by diligence and in sledges over Mont Cenis. Very cold this journey was; but Sophy was well wrapped up, and, with her child nestling on her lap, felt nothing but enjoyment as they passed over the pass and through the magnificent scenery which was all so new to her. At Susa they again took train, and thence through Turin to Genoa.

Here Sophy stopped for a day, and wandered through the long streets and narrow lanes, with the picturesque houses and quaint little jewellers' shops. The next morning they went by steamer to Leghorn, starting again next day by train to Florence. Past Pisa, with its leaning tower and lofty campaniles, visible for miles across the plain; and then along lovely valleys, studded with pretty villages, where every foot of ground is a garden; till at last the hills receded, and before them lay Florence in all its beauty. Here Sophy remained in a hotel for a week, waiting for answers to an advertisement she had inserted in the local paper on the day of her arrival—

"An English lady, with a little boy, desires to enter into an Italian family residing a short distance from Florence, where she can be treated as one of themselves."

To this she had many answers, but she finally selected one to which she was recommended by the proprietor of the hotel, to whom she had mentioned her wishes. He had, in turn, spoken to his wife, and she was sure that her brother Giacomo would be glad to receive the lady. Giacomo was written to, and came over to Florence with his wife. He lived in the valley through which Sophy had journeyed from Pisa, and his wife and he would be glad to receive the signora and her child, if she would not find the place too rough for her.

Sophy, before deciding, went over to see it, and when she did so, she accepted their proposal at once. The house stood by itself on the side of the hill, a little way out of a village, and the view from its windows was lovely. It was the property of her hosts, who owned, besides, about fifty acres of ground—a large farm in that locality, where ground is very valuable. The family consisted of her host, a fine specimen of the small Italian *proprietario;* his wife, a cheery, talkative woman of about forty; and three daughters, from seventeen to twenty-one, all lively, hearty girls, even more talkative than their mother.

Here Sophy and her child took up their abode. She had studied Italian for the four years that she had had this journey in anticipation, and could write and speak it grammatically, although, of course, her accent was very imperfect. At first she was unable to follow the rapid conversation around her, but before long she was quite at home at it, and could talk away as fast as themselves. Sophy insisted upon being treated as one of the family, helped the girls and their mother in their household work, and was very happy. Little James was soon as much at home as herself: he speedily picked up the language, and in six months spoke it as well, or better, than English, which, indeed, he would have quite lost, had not Sophy spoken to him in it when they were alone together.

It was a very quiet, happy life. In the morning Sophy assisted at the domestic work; that done, she sat under the shelter of the vines, working sometimes, and looking over the lovely country, with its picturesque houses—picturesque not only in shape but in colour, with their fancifully painted walls—with its innumerable little gardens—they could be hardly called fields—separated by trees, over and between which the vines clustered and hung with graceful festoons; with the hills rising on either side, cultivated to the very tops; and over all the bright Italian sky, with its intense, cloudless blue.

It was very charming; and as she sat there, and listened to her boy's laughter, as he romped with the sisters, by whom he was made chief pet and favourite, she would close her eyes, and almost wish it could last for ever. Had she been alone in the world, she would have been well content that it should be so. The interest of the money that she had would have been amply sufficient for her present mode of life, but, for her boy's sake, she must leave it, as he, the rightful heir to a noble property, must not grow up an Italian peasant. Her purpose must be carried out; yet still she felt it very hard to have to return again to England, with that heavy task before her of finding the will. Not that she ever wavered for an instant; but, as the time drew on, her spirits drooped, her cheek paled again, and she would sit for long hours without speaking, musing over every detail of her purposed plans. And so, at the end of the year, Sophy and her child took their leave of their quiet Italian home, not without many tears on their own parts and those of their friends; giving each of the women pretty presents and keepsakes, and promising that they should hear from her before long, and that some day she would pay them another, though it might be only a short, visit.

Sophy did not go straight back, but proceeded to Bologna, and made an excursion from there, which lasted three days; then—having carried out the two objects she had proposed to herself when she left England—she went back again over the St. Gothard; travelling, as before, without haste, until she returned to King Edward Street, Lambeth.

Great was the pleasure with which she was received by Mrs. Billow and her other friends. Her rooms were still unlet—for Mr. Billow had remained firm to his determination to receive no other lodgers—and so Sophy went into them again, telling Mrs. Billow, however, that she should not, probably, occupy them for long, as she should shortly be going away again. James Fielding and his wife came over to see her as soon as he heard of her return. His business was still prospering, and Sophy liked his wife very much, but refused to go and stay with them, as they wanted her to do.

About ten days after her return, she said, one day, to the Harleys, who were sitting with her—

"I am going into the country in a fortnight or so. I have been so long accustomed to fields and trees, that I long to be in them again, or, at any rate, out of London. I have nothing to do now, and feel lonely and sad here. It is such a change for Jamie, too, after the open-air life he has had for the last year. But I want to ask you something. I may, at any moment, have to go far away again, and this time I cannot take him with me. If I come up suddenly, and leave him with you, will you take care of him as your own? It may be for three months—it may be for three years. Of course, I shall pay you; but it is not that. Will you take care of him as your own?"

Both husband and wife agreed willingly to take the child, if necessary, but asked what his mother could be going to do that she could not take her boy with her? But to this they received no reply: she had to go, and that was all she would tell them.

The next day, when Mrs. Billow was out, and Jamie had gone over for a game of play with his friends opposite, Sophy went down into the kitchen, perfectly astounding Mr. Billow—who was, as usual, dozing over the fire—by her appearance there.

"Mrs. Billow is out, and I want to have some talk with you alone, Mr. Billow," she said quietly, sitting down opposite to the old man.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Gregory?" he asked, when he had roused himself a little.

"Nothing, just at present, Mr. Billow. I want to ask you a question. I know that, in your way of business, you become connected with all sorts of strange characters."

Mr. Billow opened his eyes in greater surprise than before. Was she coming, as her husband had done more than five years before, to ask to be introduced to two men for some desperate business? or what could she want? He was too astonished to speak, and Sophy continued—

"Now, do you think, Mr. Billow, that, in the circle of your acquaintance, you could find any one who could imitate a handwriting so exactly that it should not be known?"

"Do you mean you want a forger?"

"Not exactly that," Sophy said, quite composedly—for she had thought all this over so frequently, that it seemed to come quite as a matter of course to her—"not exactly that, Mr. Billow. I want a man who can exactly imitate a handwriting, so that, if I send you a specimen of the hand I want copied, and the words of a letter to be written in that handwriting, the letter can be executed so that no one will know the difference. I may as well mention, that it is not for any purpose of getting money, or anything of that sort; it is a simple ordinary letter."

"It is such an extraordinary thing for you to ask."

"Quite so, Mr. Billow, I am quite aware of that; but that is my business, not yours. Of course it is an unusual thing, and I am ready to pay an unusual price for it. What could you get me such a thing done for?"

Mr. Billow thought for some little time.

"It is not at all in my line," he said, at last, "still, I could get at a man who would do it; but I daresay he would charge a twenty pound note."

"Very well, Mr. Billow, when the time comes, which may not be for a long time yet, I will send you a specimen of handwriting, a copy of the letter to be written, and thirty pounds, and I shall expect it back in two or three days at most after you receive it. That is all I wanted to say, Mr. Billow, I need not ask you not to mention it to your wife."

So saying, Sophy Gregory went up to her own room again, leaving Mr. Billow so extremely surprised that he was unable to settle comfortably off to sleep again for the rest of the evening.

Sophy did not carry out the intention she had expressed of going into the country with her child; for a day or two before she had intended to start, a letter came from her foster-mother, saying, that it wanted a month yet of her usual time of writing; but that Miss Harmer had broken so much during the last two months, that she thought she ought to write to Sophy as she had put so much stress upon it. The writer went on to say that as far as she heard the village people say, there was no immediate danger at all, but that she had given up going in to Canterbury to mass, and kept entirely in the house.

Sophy, after she got this letter, sat for a long time quietly looking into the fire. The colour died out from her face, and her expression changed and hardened strangely. So it was come at last, this time for which she had waited so long and so patiently; it was now or never this great prize was to be won, this grievous wrong to be righted. She did not doubt or hesitate a moment, yet still she could not help being sorry. She was so happy with her boy, she loved him so much that it seemed hard to go away and leave him; and perhaps—who could say? never see him again. But all this feeling, natural as it was, she shortly put aside, and began once again to think over her plans; at last—with a face very different from that with which she had sat down—she got up, put on her things, and went out, across the water to a strange looking shop near Drury Lane Theatre; here she purchased some of the things she needed, and ordered others, which would require preparation, to be made up at once, and sent home the next evening.

Then back again to King Edward Street. Mr. Billow told her that Jamie was over at Mr. Harley's, and there she went. There was something so unusual and strange in her look and manner that

both Mr. and Mrs. Harley noticed it at once, and asked if she were ill, or if anything was the matter.

Sophy shook her head, and sat down without speaking; her child ran up to her side to show her some new toy which his friends had given him: but she did not look down at him, she only put her hand on his head and stroked it gently while she was speaking.

"The other day, Mrs. Harley," she began, "you said that when I came up from the country you would take care of Jamie for me. I find that I must go away upon this business at once, the day after to-morrow; are you willing to take him now?"

"Certainly, if you require it," Mrs. Harley said; "but must this be, Sophy? I don't know why, but this strange mystery makes me quite uneasy; and you look so white and unlike yourself."

"I am quite well," Sophy replied; but she could not say more, for Jamie awakening to the fact that his mammy was going away without him, set up such a terrible roaring that all farther conversation was suspended for some time; at last, on the promise that he should go out the next day and choose any plaything he liked, his tears were dried, and for the rest of the day he was occupied debating with himself, and with every one else, on the respective merits of a big farm-yard, a big Noah's ark, a big ship, or a big horse. The next day Sophy packed up; she did this quietly and methodically, talking very little to Jamie, but with every faculty absorbed in the one thought of the work she had before her. In the afternoon she bade good-bye to her friends opposite, left them money for half a year's keep for James, and said she would send the next instalment when the time came. Just as she was going out Mrs. Harley said—

"But you have not given us your address, Sophy. Where are we to write to you?"

"Not at all," she said. "Please put an advertisement in the *Times* the first Monday of each month —'S. G., Jamie is well.' If anything should be the matter in the mean time, advertise in the same way. I shall be sure to see it. Good-bye, God bless you! take care of Jamie."

Mr. and Mrs. Harley had a long talk together after Sophy had gone across to her own house, and they came to the conclusion that it was very strange; and they were both inclined to believe that their friend's brain must be a little touched; still, what could they do? she was not mad enough to be shut up. Altogether it was very strange.

That evening Sophy wrote a letter to James Fielding saying that she was going away for a time, but imploring him on no account to institute any inquiry after her, as such a proceeding might damage her to an extent he could not possibly imagine. She told him that she had left Jamie with the Harleys, and recalled his promise that in case of anything happening to her, he would take care of her boy. She inclosed her will appointing him to be her boy's guardian, and her sole executor in case of her death.

In the morning she got up early, and dressed very quietly, keeping the blinds down, so as not to disturb Jamie. She took a little breakfast, kissed her sleeping child—one long, loving kiss,—and was gone.

CHAPTER VII.

A BROKEN LIFE.

And so I returned to dear old Canterbury. I had so many friends there, and the town itself, which I loved better than them all, that as I looked out of the window of the fly as I drove through its well-remembered streets, it seemed to me as if the events of the last four years were all obliterated from my mind, and that I was coming back after only a short absence to my dear old home. Mrs. Mapleside, with whom, as I have said, I was going to stay, was an elderly lady when I was a young girl. She was then known as Miss Mapleside; but she had now taken brevet rank, and was grievously displeased if she were addressed in any other way; she was now more than seventy-five, but was still brisk and lively, and her heart was kindness itself. She was short, but very upright, and generally dressed in brown plum-coloured, or black silk. She inclined to bright colours in her bonnet, and rather prided herself upon her taste in dress. Personally she was the reverse of vain, and wore the most palpable wig I ever saw, and a pair of spectacles, with tortoiseshell rims of an immense thickness. She had besides a pair of heavy gold double eye-glasses, which hung upon her chain on state occasions, and which she sometimes put on; but I think this was merely from a little harmless pride in their possession, for whenever she had really to look at anything, she always pulled out her tortoiseshell spectacles, and not unfrequently tried to put them on, forgetful that the gold spectacles were already fixed on her nose.

Mrs. Mapleside lived in a pretty little house on the terrace overlooking the market-place; and when I arrived that evening, she received me with an almost motherly affection and interest. She would hardly allow me to go upstairs, to take my things off. She was sure that I must be so terribly fatigued, for to her a three hours' journey by rail was an undertaking not to be lightly entered upon, and involving immense risk and fatigue. The old lady had once when a girl made a journey to London, and the coach had been snowed up, and they had been two days on the road; and she still retained a vivid remembrance of her sufferings. For the last fifty years she had never

been beyond Whitstable or Ramsgate, to one or other of which places she made an expedition for a fortnight or so every two years; always going in the coach, as long as coaches ran, and after that in some friend's carriage; for the railway to her was a terrible monster, and nothing would convince her that collisions and catastrophes of all sorts were not its normal state of being. She expressed her gratitude to Providence most warmly that I should have been preserved from destruction on the way, and seemed to think that an almost special dispensation had taken place in my favour.

Mrs. Mapleside read the *Times* regularly, getting it on the third day from the library, and her principal object of interest in it was to search for railway accidents; and as few days pass without some mishap of greater or less importance being recorded, she was constantly quoting them in support of her pet theory. It was in vain that I assured her that the number of accidents was as nothing in proportion to the immense number of trains which ran daily. This was a light in which she would not look at it; but had an argument, quite original to herself, with which she always triumphantly confuted anything I could urge on the opposite side of the question.

"Now, my dear," she would say, "this accident happened by the train which left York at ten o'clock in the morning. Will you be kind enough to look in Bradshaw, which I never can understand, and see by which train we must have left Canterbury, to have reached York in time to have gone on by that ten-o'clock train?"

I would get the book and find that if we had gone up to London by the four o'clock train the evening before, and then on by the night mail to York, and had slept there for a few hours, we could have gone on by the ten o'clock train to which the accident happened.

"There, my dear," she would exclaim triumphantly, "you see we have had a wonderful escape. If we had started by that four o'clock train on our way to Scotland we should have been very likely killed, and if you remember, if we had gone by the twelve o'clock train the day before to Bath, we should have been in that dreadful accident at the bridge, where so many people were killed. No, no, my dear, there is hardly a day passes when if we had taken our places by one of the trains from here, and gone on a journey to some part of England or other, we should not have met with some accident or other; perhaps only run over a signalman, but even that would have been very unpleasant to the feelings. You may say what you like, my dear, but nothing will persuade me that we do not have almost daily the most providential escapes from destruction."

This was Mrs. Mapleside's great hobby. She had only one other curious conviction; and that was that the population of London was composed almost exclusively of bad characters, and that an inhabitant there must expect, as an ordinary occurrence, to have his house destroyed by fire. The columns of the *Times* afforded her an immense array of facts in support of this theory; and as some one had unfortunately once told her, that not one in fifty of the cases before the London magistrates were reported, the argument that these cases were as nothing in proportion to the population, carried no weight with her whatever. She was absolutely pathetic in her description of the fires.

"There, my dear," she would say, "four fires on last Tuesday night: only think, Agnes, what a terrible spectacle to look out of one's window and see the town blazing in four directions all at once; the clank of the engines—I saw a fire once my dear, and I shall never forget it,—and the roaring of the flames, and the cries of the lookers on; and the poor people getting their furniture out of the next houses, and the water running down the street; and only think of seeing all this in four directions at once."

These are Mrs. Mapleside's peculiarities, and nothing will shake her faith in her view of the subjects; on all other points she is the most easy old lady possible, hardly having any opinion of her own, and ready to do, or say anything to give pleasure to others. On the whole she is one of the kindest and most cheerful old ladies in the world.

Her welcome to me was, as I have said, most affectionate, and when tea was over, she made me sit down in a large easy chair by the fire—for although it was hardly cold enough for one, she had it lighted because she was sure I should come in perished with cold from my journey.

I sat there, contented and snug, listening and yet hardly hearing Mrs. Mapleside as she ran on, telling me all the changes which had taken place in Canterbury in those four years that I had been away. The old names sounded very pleasant to me, and called up many happy memories of the past; and that night, when I had gone up to my own room, I threw up the window, and looked out; and as I heard the old cathedral bells chiming the hour, I felt once more at home again, and that my life, although it could no longer be bright and happy as I had hoped, might yet be a very contented and cheerful one.

In a day or two all my old friends called upon me, and in a week I felt completely at home. The place itself was so perfectly unchanged, the very goods in the shop windows seemed arranged in precisely the same order in which they had been when I had last walked down the High Street. I found my acquaintances and friends exactly as I had left them; I had changed so much that it seemed almost strange to me that they should have altered so little. I had at seventeen been as merry and as full of fun as any of them. My separation from Percy and my ill health, had certainly changed me a good deal a year and a half after that; but in the three years before papa's death I had again recovered my spirits, and had been able to take my place again with my old playfellows and friends. Only two months back I had been as merry and perhaps more happy than any of them, but now how changed I was! they were still lively girls, I was a quiet sad woman. It was not

of course in feature that I was so much altered, it was in expression. I think sometimes now, when I look in the glass, that if I could but laugh again, and if my eyes could once more light up, I should not be so much changed from what I was seven years ago; but I know that can never be again. I have fought my fight for happiness, and have lost; I staked my whole life upon one throw, and after so many years weary waiting, when it seemed as if the prize would soon be mine, the cup was dashed in an instant from my lips; and henceforth I know that I am no longer an actor in the long drama of life, but a mere spectator—content to look on at the play, and to feel, I hope, an interest in the success of others.

So I told all my friends who came to see me on my first arrival—and who were proposing little schemes of pleasure and amusement—that I should not, at any rate for some time, enter into any society even of the quietest kind; but that I should be glad, very glad if they would come and sit with me, and talk to me, and make me a confidant in their hopes and plans, as they had done long ago. At first my old playfellows were rather shy of me, I seemed so different to themselves, so grave and sad in my deep mourning, that they could hardly feel at home with me. They knew that I had gone through some great sorrow, and perhaps guessed at its nature, but they had heard no particulars, nor who it was that I mourned; for although my engagement with Percy had been generally known, it had been supposed by every one—from my illness after the will was lost, and from Percy's departure for India—that it had been broken off; and we had never deemed it necessary to tell any one how the matter really stood, as a long engagement like ours is such a very uncertain affair, even at the best. So every one supposed that I had become engaged in London, and that death had in someway broken it off, and I have never given any further explanation of it.

Now that six months have passed, and my friends are more accustomed to my changed appearance and manners—and now that I am, perhaps, a little more cheerful—their timidity has worn off, and few days pass that one of them does not bring in her work and come and sit for an hour and chat with me.

But if my old playmates find me strangely quiet and old, I see but little alteration in them. They are all girls still, as merry and genial as of old. Even those who were many years older than I, who had been elder girls at our children's parties when I was one of the youngest of the little ones, are still quite young women, and have by no means ceased to consider themselves as eligible partners at a ball. These sometimes try to rally me out of my determination never again to go into society. They tell me that I am only a little over twenty-five, a mere child yet, and that I shall think better of it some day. But I know that it will never be otherwise. My heart is dead, and I have neither thought nor hope of any change as long as my life lasts. But, of course, they cannot know this, and I let them prophecy and predict as they please, knowing that their anticipations can never turn out true.

With hardly an exception, nearly all my young friends are there still, and all are like myself, single. Indeed, it cannot well be otherwise, for there is literally no one for them to marry. The boys, as they have grown up, have left the town, and are seen no more; and of them all—of all those rude, unruly boys who used to go to our parties, and blow out the lights and kiss us, hardly one remains. Many are dead. Rivers was killed at the Cape; Jameson died of fever in India; Smithers, Lacy, and Marsden, all sleep far away from their English homes, under the rich soil of the Crimea; Thompson was drowned at sea. Many of them are in the army and navy, and scattered all over the world. Two or three have emigrated to Australia. Hampton is a rising young barrister on the Northern circuit. Travers is a struggling curate in London; and Douglas, more fortunate, has a living in Devonshire. Two of the Hoopers are clerks in the Bank of Ireland, and one of them a medical man of good position near Reigate. Many of them have married; but they have chosen their wives in the neighbourhoods where their profession had thrown them. Anyhow, none of them had taken Canterbury girls; and these—pretty, amiable, and ladylike, as many of them are—seemed doomed to remain unmarried. One or two of them only, frightened at the hopeless look-out, have recklessly taken up with marching subalterns from the garrison; but the rest look but gravely upon such doings, for the Canterbury girls are far too properly brought up to regard a red coat with anything but a pious horror, as a creature of the most dangerous description, very wild, and generally very poor; but withal exceedingly fascinating, to be approached with great caution, and to be flirted with demurely at the race-ball, and during the cricket-week, but at other times to be avoided and shunned; and it is an agreed thing among them, supported by the general experience of the few who have tried the experiment, that even a life of celibacy at Canterbury is preferable to the lot of a sub.'s wife in a marching regiment.

Thus it happens that all my old schoolfellows were still single, and indeed we have a riddle among ourselves, "Why is Canterbury like heaven? Because we neither marry nor are given in marriage."

Before I had been long in Canterbury I found myself so comfortable with Mrs. Mapleside, that I was convinced that any change must be for the worse. I therefore suggested to the dear old lady that we should enter into an arrangement for me to take up my abode permanently with her. To this she assented very willingly; for, she said, she found it far more cheerful than living by herself; besides which my living would not add very much to her expenses, and the sum I proposed to pay, sixty pounds a year, would enable her to indulge in many little additional luxuries; for her income, although just sufficient to live upon in the way she was accustomed to, was still by no means large.

Thus the arrangement would be mutually beneficial to us, and when it was settled, I looked with

increased pleasure at my beautifully neat little bedroom, where before I had only been as a guest, but which I could now look upon as my own sanctuary—my home.

I am very comfortable now, more even than when I had been a visitor; for then the good old lady fussed a little about my comforts, and I could seldom leave her and get up to my room in quiet; but now that I am a permanent inmate of the house, I am able to mark out my own day, and to pursue my course while Mrs. Mapleside keeps hers.

Mrs. Mapleside keeps one servant, a tidy, cheerful-looking young woman of about seven-and-twenty. She has been thirteen years with her, Mrs. Mapleside having taken her from the national school, and trained her into a perfect knowledge of all her little ways. Her name is Hannah, but Mrs. Mapleside always addressed her as "child."

My life here is not eventful, but on the other hand it is not dull. I am never unoccupied, and time passes away in an easy, steady flow, which is very tranquillizing and soothing to me. The first thing after breakfast I read the *Times* aloud to Mrs. Mapleside, and then whenever there is an accident I look out the train in Bradshaw, and she is always devoutly thankful for another hairbreadth escape which she insists we have had. About eleven, either one or other of my friends comes in with her work and sits with us until lunch-time, or else I myself go out to call upon one of them. After lunch we go for a walk, or at least I do, and Mrs. Mapleside makes calls—to which she is very partial, and of which I confess I have quite a horror. Indeed, I never pay regular visits, preferring much to take my work and sit for a while of a morning at the houses where I am intimate. After dinner, Mrs. Mapleside dozes, and I go up into my room—for it has been summer—and write my story. I have now been here six months, and in that time have, between dinner and tea, written this little history of the principal events in my life, and in the lives of those dear to me; and the exercise has been a great solace and amusement to me. I have nearly come to an end now.

After I had been down here for four months I yielded to Polly's entreaties, and made my first half-yearly visit to them, from which I have only returned a fortnight. I confess that I had rather dreaded this meeting, but now that it is over I am very glad that I made it. It is so pleasant to think of Polly in her happy home, for it is a very happy one. Charley is such a capital fellow, so thoroughly good and hearty, and I am sure he would cut off his little finger if he thought it would give Polly pleasure. I tell her that I think she has her own way too much, more than it is good that a wife should, but Polly only laughs, and says, "That her dear old bear is quite contented with his chain, but that if he were to take it into his head to growl, and pull his own way, that he would find the chain only a flimsy pretence after all."

I believe they are as happy as it is possible for a couple to be. Polly says it would be quite perfect if she only had me with them. Charley and she tried very hard to persuade me, but I was firm in my resolution. Canterbury is my home, and shall always remain so; but when my spirits get better I shall make my visits longer in London; but not till I feel that my dull presence is no drawback to the brightness of their hearth: and this will not be for a long time yet. I try very hard to be patient, but I feel at times irritable and impatient at my sorrow, I hope, with time, that this will die away, and that I shall settle down into a tranquil, even-tempered, cheerful old maid. I find it difficult, at present, to enter into all the tittle-tattle and gossip of this town, but I endeavour to do so, for I know that I shall not be the same as those around me if I do not. So I am beginning to join in the working parties and tea-meetings, which form the staple of the amusements of our quiet set, and where we discuss the affairs of Canterbury to our hearts' content. And now I lay down my pen, which has already run on far beyond the limits I had originally assigned for it.

I have told briefly, in general—but in those parts which I thought of most interest, more at length—the story of my life, and of the lives of those dear to me, and I have now arrived at a proper point to stop; but should any unexpected event occur—not in my life, for that is out of the question, but in theirs—I shall again take up my pen to narrate it. But this is not likely, for Polly, Harry, and Ada are all married, and have a fair chance of having the old ending to all the fairy stories I used to read as a child, written at the end of the chapter of their lives, "And so they married and lived very happily ever after."

CHAPTER VIII.

RISEN FROM THE DEAD.

I take up my pen again, but in what a different spirit to that with which I laid it down, as I thought for ever. Then I believed that I had done with the world; that its joys and its pleasures, its griefs and anxieties, were no more for me, but that I was to remain a mere spectator of the drama; interested indeed, as a spectator always is, hoping that virtue will be rewarded, and the villains of the play unmasked and punished in the end, and giving my best wishes to all the young lovers, but really caring only for the happiness of Harry, and Polly and Ada; and my greatest ambition and hope being to become some day a quiet, contented old maid, the friend and confidant of the young people round me, and the beloved aunty of Polly's and Harry's children. But in these three months two events have happened, the first of which is important enough for me to have taken up my pen to have chronicled; but the second, and which is the one of which I shall write first, has once more altered all my life, has at once changed all the plans which I had,

in my sagacity, thought so unalterably settled, and has, when I least dreamt of it, given me fresh life, and hope, and happiness. I cannot stay to tell it as it was told me, my heart is too full, I must write it at once. Percy is alive, is alive; think of that! My eyes are full of tears of joy as I write it, and I can hardly sit still, although it is a week now since I heard it, but I could not trust myself to write it before. I am wild with joy; thank God—thank God for all his mercies, and for this most of all. Oh, how happy, how intensely happy I am! Percy is alive; he has written to me, and in another year he will be home to claim me. What a changed being I am in this short week. I can hardly keep myself from bursting into wild songs of joy. My happiness is so exquisite, it is almost too much for me, and I want all the world to rejoice with me, for this, my own Percy, who was dead and is alive again; who was lost, and is found. Mrs. Mapleside tells me that I look ten years younger than I did a week ago. I can quite believe her; I feel fifty. If I had Polly here now, to play for me, I think it would be a relief to dance myself into a state of exhaustion; but poor Mrs. Mapleside would not understand it. As it is she says she does not know my step about the house; so I forego the relief a tarantella would give me, and keep myself as quiet as I can, and continually bless and thank God for all this, His great mercy to me. And now I must tell how it happened.

Last Friday—that is, this day week—we had finished lunch, and Mrs. Mapleside had just gone out, when a fly stopped at the door. There was a knock, a word or two in the passage to Hannah, and then the parlour door opened, and in walked—I could hardly believe my eyes—Polly.

What a surprise! but what a pleasure it was; and how delighted I felt to see her!

"My dear, darling Polly," I said, as soon as our first embrace was over, "what on earth brings you to Canterbury?"

"You, Agnes, I suppose. It is nearly three months since you were up, and it will be as much before your next visit; so as it was about half-way, I persuaded Charley to let me run down for three or four days to see you, so that I might judge for myself what your life was like here. Besides, it is so long since I was down in dear old Canterbury that I had a great longing to see it again. You told me that you had a spare room here, and Charley has promised to come down to-morrow and stay till Monday. He says I rave so about the place, that though he can't help thinking it must be dreadfully slow, with no river wide enough to pull on, still he really must come down, too, to see it."

"I am so, so glad, Polly; but why did you not write to tell me?"

"I thought I would surprise you, Agnes; and, indeed, it was not finally settled before last night. Charley could not tell whether he should be able to get away or not. And now I will go up to your room, Agnes, and take off my things."

It was not until we had come down again, and had at last sat quietly down, that I noticed Polly's face, and then I saw at once that she was not looking at all herself. She was very pale, and looked, I thought, anxious and flurried.

"There is nothing the matter, Polly, is there?" I asked anxiously. "You have not any bad news to tell me?"

"No, Agnes, none at all," Polly said.

"You are quite sure, Polly?" I repeated, for I could not help thinking that there was something the matter. "You have not heard any bad news from Harry, in Australia, have you?"

"No, indeed, Agnes; I have not heard of him since the last mail, a fortnight since, and you had a letter from him at the same time."

"Nor about Ada, or her family?" I persisted.

"Nothing at all, Agnes. I assure you I have no bad news of any kind whatever to give you."

I could not help believing, although still I could not understand her.

"Excuse me, Polly," I said, at last; "but you have not had any foolish quarrel with Charley, have you?"

"Bless me, no, Agnes," she laughed. "The idea of my quarrelling with my dear old bear. What will you imagine next?"

I could not help laughing, too—the idea was ridiculous, certainly; for Polly and Charley were about as little likely to quarrel as any pair I ever saw. Here Hannah brought up the tray. Polly ate a little and had a glass of wine. When Hannah took away the things, she requested her to leave a tumbler of water on the table, as she felt rather thirsty after her journey. When we were alone again, she asked me to give her a piece of work to keep her fingers employed while she talked to me.

I accordingly gave her a piece of embroidery to do, and we chatted over our friends at Putney, and my quiet little doings here; but I could see that Polly was thinking of something else, for her answers to my questions were sometimes quite vague; and it certainly was not from the attention she was bestowing upon my work, for I could see that her needle moved quite mechanically, and that she was making a terrible mess of my unfortunate piece of embroidery. I was quite confirmed in my belief that something or other was the matter; but as Polly was evidently not

inclined to tell it, I waited patiently, but rather anxiously, for her to take her own time and manner of so doing.

At last she changed the subject of the conversation from Putney and Canterbury to a topic in which I at first felt little interest, as I thought she had merely started it to delay the communication which I was sure, whatever it was, was coming presently.

"Have you seen the paper to-day, Agnes?"

"I have seen our paper; but that, as I have told you, is three days' old. Is there any particular news this morning?"

"The Indian mail is in to-day."

"Is it?" I said, indifferently. "One has no great interest in it now, ever since Sir Colin Campbell relieved Lucknow. One mail is exactly like another; merely the exploits of the flying columns, and the gradual restoration of order."

"Yes, Agnes; but still, many of these captures of forts are very gallant actions."

"No doubt, Polly; but unless one has some friend actually engaged, one has no great interest in them."

"No," Polly said, absently, "of course not. Still, it is pleasant to read how sometimes, when they take these distant forts, they find captives long since missing, and given up by their friends."

"Yes, indeed," I said, "I always do feel an interest in that; it is such joyous news to those who have grieved for them."

Polly was silent; and I wondered how much longer she was going on talking about indifferent matters, and what it could be that she took so long before she could tell me. Presently she asked —

"Do you think, Agnes, that sudden joy ever kills?"

"I do not know, Polly, my experience has been so entirely the other way that I cannot say how it might be; and there is one thing certain that I am never likely to have the experiment tried upon myself."

"I do not know that," Polly said in a low voice.

There was a something in the way she spoke, a strange meaning tone which sent a thrill through me; and yet there was no good news I could have to receive, except, indeed, that the will was found; but if it ever should be, I should be more likely to give the news to Polly than she to me; besides, even this would give me no such great pleasure now.

"Who can tell," Polly went on, seeing that I made no remark, "such strange things do happen, that one should never be surprised. Fortunes turn up which were long thought lost; people come to life again who were long since mourned for as dead; people, for instance, supposed to be lost at sea, but who were picked up by some passing ship; people, who in this Indian mutiny we were speaking of just now, have been hidden for months by some native prince or peasant; officers who have been cut off from their regiments, and left for dead on the battle-field."

I had dropped my work now, and was looking at her, with my breath held, while my heart seemed to stop beating. What did she mean? These questions about sudden joy, this talk about officers found after being long supposed dead?—could it be?—but I could not speak. Polly looked up at me now for the first time, for she had before kept her eyes on her work; then she threw down the embroidery, came over to me, and knelt down beside me.

"Drink a little water, Agnes, prepare yourself to bear what I have to tell you. God is very, very good to you, Agnes. The news from India to-day, says, that two officers long supposed to be dead have been recovered, and one of them is——"

"Percy," I gasped.

"Yes, dearest, your own Percy Desborough."

I did not faint; by a mighty effort I kept myself from screaming wildly, then all the blood seemed to rush up to my head, and I should have fallen had not Polly supported me, and sprinkled some water in my face and moistened my lips with it. Then the quiet tears of joy and thankfulness came to my relief, and I was able to hang round Polly's neck and kiss her and cry with her for a little time, till I was composed enough to kneel down at the sofa, and to thank God for this His great and unexpected mercy to me. When I rose from my knees, I felt more myself again, but I was still dazed and giddy with my great joy. I could hardly even now believe that it was true, and that Percy whom I had mourned as dead so long was yet alive—would yet come home again; it seemed too great a happiness to be true, and yet I could not doubt, for there was the paragraph in the Indian telegram, before my eyes, to assure me that it was so.

"Two officers, Major Payne, 105th regiment, and Lieutenant Desborough, 25th Lancers, were found concealed by friendly natives in the district of Jemundar, by the flying column under Colonel Heaviside."

There could be no mistake or doubt about it. Percy was saved. I need not say what my feelings

were; they were too deep for me to express then, and are far too deep for me to write of now. Polly was so pleased, too, not only at the news itself, but also because I had borne it better than she had been afraid I should have done. When we became composed at last, Polly made me sit in the easy chair, while she drew a stool up and took her old position upon it by my side, and we talked long and thankfully of my changed life and restored happiness.

At last I said, "Do you know, Polly, I could not think what you had to tell me. I saw you had something on your mind, that you were anxious and absent, and that your visit had some purpose more than you pretended,—and yet, as you assured me that all I cared for were well, I could not conceive what it could be. Did you see it in the paper before Charley started to business?"

"I did, Agnes, and we had quite a scene, I can assure you. I will tell you all about it. You know, Agnes, we always breakfast at a quarter past eight, and Charley goes up by the nine o'clock train, that gives him plenty of time, and he hates being hurried. The newspaper comes a few minutes past eight, and Charley always looks at the money article the first thing, before we begin, for I won't let him read at breakfast; as I tell him, he has all day for business, and he can study his paper as he goes up in the train, so I insist on his giving up his breakfast-time to me. Well, my dear, he had just sat down to the table, and had opened the paper quite wide to look at his City article; I was standing up, waiting for the coffee to be brought up, when I noticed on the part of the paper turned towards me, the Indian telegrams—they are always in large print, you know—so I could read them easily as I stood, and I glanced down them till I came to the one about Percy; without a word I snatched the paper out of Charley's hand to read it closely, and then I saw that I was not mistaken, and that it was indeed he. I am not quite clear what I did—something extravagant, I daresay. I think I kissed Charley violently, and then, for the first time in my life, went into a sort of hysterics. The first thing I distinctly remember is, that my dear old Charley was trying to calm me. He was evidently in the greatest alarm, and had not the least idea what was the matter, or what ought to be done, and I believe he thought I had gone suddenly out of my mind. He was evidently afraid to touch me lest it should make me more violent, but was going on,—'Now, my dear Polly!—Oh, I say, now, Polly!—It is all right, Polly; it is, indeed!—For God's sake, try and compose yourself!' and he looked so dreadfully frightened, and his dear red old cheeks were so pale, that with another wild fit of laughing, which I could not help, I threw my arms round his neck and kissed him; frightening him more than ever, for he evidently thought my madness had taken a fresh turn.

"'It is all right, Charley,' I said, as soon as I could speak at all. "'I am only so pleased.'

"'Oh, you are?' Charley said, still thinking I was out of my mind; 'that is right, my dear—you are quite right to be pleased, but try and quiet yourself. It is very jolly, no doubt, and I quite agree with you; but there now, dear, don't laugh any more like that—for, upon my soul, you frighten me horribly!'

"'I am better now, Charley,' I said. 'Get me a little cold water.'

"Just at this moment the servant came in with the breakfast, and Charley rushed up to her, snatched the coffee-pot from her, and shouted out at the top of his voice,—'Some cold water,—quick, quick!' frightening the servant nearly as much as I alarmed him; he then ran back to the table, burning himself terribly from the way he had taken the coffee-pot in his hands, and then swearing to himself—which he only does on very rare occasions now—dreadfully. It nearly set me off again; however, the girl now came back with some water, and when I had drank a little I began to recover myself.

"'Do you know what it was that gave me so much pleasure, Charley?'

"'Not in the least, my dear; but never mind telling me now. I dare say it was very clever; but you can tell me presently. I shan't go up to town to-day.'

"'It was something I read in the paper, Charley.'

"'Oh, it was!' he said, doubtfully, evidently not believing me in the least, but considering that I was still wandering in my mind.

"'Yes, Charley, only think, Percy Desborough, who was engaged to Agnes——'

"'Yes, my dear, I know; the man who was killed at Lucknow a year ago.'

"'He is not dead after all, Charley.'

"'No, I dare say not,' Charley said, soothingly; 'I should not be at all surprised. I never thought he was myself; but don't mind him now. Lay down, my dear, and try and compose yourself.'

"'You silly old goose,' I said, 'look in the paper yourself.'

"Charley, evidently to humour me, turned to the paper; but he still watched me closely, in case I should be going to do anything fresh. When he saw that it was really as I said, he was quite delighted; at first principally for my sake, as he now began to see that after all, I had only had a fit of hysterics from my sudden delight, and was not out of my mind after all: that fear once removed, he was truly pleased at the news for your sake. Presently I said,—

"'Oh, Charley, only think of Agnes; if she reads it in the papers, the sudden shock will kill her.'

"'By Jove!' Charley said, 'so it might. What is to be done?'

"'May I run down and tell her?' I asked. 'She does not see the *Times* the first day, and no one in Canterbury knows that she is engaged to him; every one supposed it was broken off years ago, so no one is likely to go in to tell her the first thing."

"'Of course you may, Polly, if you like; and, look here! I think I will go down with you, for you have frightened me so confoundedly that I shall be fit for nothing to-day in the City, and as to-morrow is Saturday, I will go down with you and bring you back on Monday morning.'

"We looked in a Bradshaw, and found there was an eleven o'clock train down here; so he went up to town directly after breakfast, to say he should be away till Monday; I went up rather later, and he met me at the London Bridge Station in time to catch the train."

"Then where is Charley?" I asked, when Polly had finished her story.

"I sent him on to Ramsgate. I told him that I should have to take some time to break it to you; and that then we should want to be alone; so that, as altogether he would be dreadfully in the way, his best plan was to go on to Ramsgate, and out for a sail, and to have dinner there; and that he could come back here about seven o'clock. I mean to sleep here, as I said, Agnes; but Charley will go to an hotel. He will like that much better, as then he can smoke and do as he likes."

I was now quite myself again, and Polly had evidently made her story as long as she could, to allow me to recover myself, and to divert my thoughts a little from my great joy.

Mrs. Mapleside now came in, and was very surprised and glad to see Polly. We confided to her, under promise of strict secrecy, the good news Polly had come down to bring; a promise which the dear old lady did not keep, for she was so delighted and full of it, that I really do not believe she could have kept it to herself had her life depended upon it. So she informed—also in the strictest confidence—three or four of her most intimate friends, and as these were the greatest gossips in Canterbury, it was not long before the whole town knew of it; and, although I would, perhaps, rather that it had not been known, yet I could not be vexed with the kind old lady, for I was very pleased at the sincere pleasure all my friends seemed to feel at my happiness.

I wrote the same afternoon to Ada, telling her that Polly had come down to break the news to me, and congratulating her on the happiness which she, as well as myself, must be feeling.

A few days after, I heard from her, saying that my letter had been forwarded to her in Scotland, where she was visiting with her husband, and how great a relief it had been to her; for that after she had seen the joyful news in the paper, she was very anxious about me, and had she been in London, she should certainly have acted as our dear Polly had done, and have come down to break the news to me.

At about seven o'clock Charley came in from his trip to Ramsgate, and very hearty and cordial was he in the pleasure he felt at my happiness. Mrs. Mapleside took a great fancy to him, and their three days' stay was altogether a delightful time. On Monday morning they returned to town, as Charley could not stay away longer from his business. Polly and he tried hard to persuade me now to give up my plan of a residence at Canterbury, and to go and live with them; but this I would not do. I am very comfortable and happy where I am, and Mrs. Mapleside looks upon me quite as her own child, and would, I know, miss me dreadfully; and as at farthest I thought Percy would be back in two years, I made up my mind to remain as I was till then, but I promised to pass a good deal of my time with Polly.

Yesterday I got a letter from Percy, which Polly forwarded to me from Putney, where he had of course directed it. It was a very long letter, and began by saying how grieved he was to think how much I must have suffered at the news of his supposed death, and that he should be very anxious about my health till he heard from me. He then went on to tell me all his adventures and hairbreadth escapes, and it really seemed as if over and over again he had been saved almost by a miracle. He had, as was supposed, been severely wounded by a rebel ball, and had fallen from his horse; but he had strength enough left to crawl away and conceal himself under some bushes till the rebels had passed, which, occupied as they were in harassing the retreating column, they did without much search. Before their return he had crawled some considerable distance, and again concealed himself till night, he had then made his way to a cottage which he entered and threw himself on the hospitality of the peasants who lived there.

The poor people had been most kind to him and had concealed him there for nearly a month, by which time his wounds, for he had two, had healed; neither of them, fortunately, were very serious, and it was principally from loss of blood that he had fallen from his horse. They had then sent him up the country to a friendly Zemindar who had received him kindly, but had not the power openly to protect him. Here he had stayed ten months, till the arrival of Colonel Heaviside's column had given him an opportunity of rejoining the British forces. This ten months had been one continual danger, and had been passed sometimes in one disguise, sometimes in another, which only his perfect knowledge of Hindostanee had enabled him to carry through.

He wrote word that he was now quite well and strong again, and that he hoped to be in England in a year at the farthest; but he promised to give me at any rate a couple of months notice, and said that he should expect to have everything ready to be married a week after he landed; for that after waiting all these years he did not see any reason why he should be kept without me a single day, after he returned, longer than necessary.

This was only yesterday. All this has happened in a week. I can hardly steady myself down—I can

hardly believe that all this happiness is true, and that in another year Percy will be home to claim me. But yet it is all true, and it seems to have given me back my youth and life again. Every one tells me that in this short week I am so changed, that they look at me almost with wonder, and are hardly able to believe that I am the same person they knew ten days ago, as a quiet, melancholy-looking woman. Thank God for it all—for all His exceeding mercy and goodness to me!

This great grief has had one good effect. It has removed the only obstacle to my marriage with Percy. Three days after I received the joyful news, a letter came to me from Lady Desborough. It was such a letter as I had not imagined that she could have written. She said that, in her grief, she had thought often of me, and had seen how wrong she had been in her conduct towards us. She had said to herself that, if the opportunity could but come over again, she would act differently. That opportunity, by God's mercy, had come, and she wrote to say that she should no longer, in any way, raise the slightest obstacle to our union. She besought me to forget the past, and the weary years of separation and waiting which her cruelty had entailed upon us, and she prayed me to forgive her, and to think of it as if it had never been.

This letter gave me, for Percy's sake, great pleasure. I, of course, responded to it; and from that time we exchanged letters regularly.

CHAPTER IX.

PREPARED FOR THE ATTEMPT.

And now I have told of the joyful news which has so wonderfully altered the current of my life, and restored me to youth and happiness, I must relate another incident which happened, indeed, two months prior to it in point of time, but which I record after it, because the other is so infinitely more important to myself, and, indeed, filled my heart, to the exclusion of all else. And yet, until I received the news of Percy's recovery—I had almost written resurrection, for to me it is indeed a coming back from the grave—I had, from the time the event happened, thought a great deal about it. Not, indeed, that I attached, or do attach, the slightest importance to it, as far as regards myself; but it has brought back to my mind all the circumstances connected with the series of efforts which we made to find the will of Mr. Harmer, from six to seven years ago, and which terminated in the death of the unfortunate Robert Gregory. This research, so long abandoned, has now, strangely enough, been once again taken in hand; and this time even more methodically and determinately than at any of our former attempts, and that by the very person whose conduct indirectly caused the original loss of the will—Sophy Gregory.

It was about a month after my return from my visit to London, that I was in the parlour alone, when Hannah came in and said that a person wished to speak to me.

"Do you know who it is, Hannah?"

"No, miss. She is a servant, I should say, by her looks."

"Did she ask for me, or for Mrs. Mapleside?"

"For you, miss, special."

"Very well, Hannah, then show her in."

And Hannah accordingly ushered my visitor into the room. She was a woman of apparently three or four and thirty, and was paler, I think, than any person I ever saw. Not the pallor produced by illness, although that may have had something to do with it; but a complete absence of colour, such as may be caused by some wearing anxiety, or some very great and sudden shock; her eyes, too, had a strange unnatural look, which, coupled with her unusual paleness, gave her a very strange appearance; indeed, it struck me at once that there was something wrong with her mind, and had not Hannah closed the door as soon as she had shown her in, I should certainly have told her to remain in the room with us. I had not the least recollection of having seen her face before, and waited in silence for her to address me, but as she did not, I said:—

"Did I understand that you wished to speak to me? my name is Miss Ashleigh."

"Then you have no recollection of me?" she asked.

The instant she spoke I recognized her voice: it was Sophy.

"Sophy!" I almost cried out.

"Yes, indeed, Agnes, it is Sophy."

I was very much shocked at the terrible change which seven years had made in her. My poor friend what must she have suffered, what had my grief and sorrow been to hers? We had both lost those we loved best in the world, but I had no painful or shameful circumstances in the death of my lover, as there had been in the death of her husband. Percy had died honourably, in the field of battle; Robert had fallen, shot as a burglar by a woman's hand; beside, I was not alone in the world, I had my brother Harry, and my dear Polly, and Ada, and many kind and sympathizing

friends. Sophy was quite alone. Truly my own sufferings seemed but small in my eyes when I thought of hers, and I was very much moved by pity and tenderness for my old friend, as I thought of what she had gone through. All these thoughts rushed through me, as I embraced her with almost more than the warmth of my old affection for her; for it seemed to me that the sorrow which we both suffered was an additional tie between us. It was some time before we were composed enough to speak, or rather before I was; for she, although she had responded to my embrace, and was evidently glad to see me, was plainly in a state of too great tension of mind to find relief as I did in tears.

When I came to look at her face more quietly, I was still puzzled by it. It was not so much that it was changed and aged, as that there was something which seemed to me to be quite different, to what I remembered: what it was I could not for some time make out. At last I exclaimed,—

"Why, Sophy, you have put on a black wig and dyed your eyebrows. They were quite fair before, and now they are black."

"It was only last night that I did so," she said quietly. "I did not wish to be recognized down here for a very particular reason, which I will tell you presently."

Now I knew what the change in Sophy's face was, I could recall it, and saw that the alteration in her was not really so great as I had imagined. She certainly looked many years older than she was, but it was the black hair and eyebrows which gave the pale and unnatural appearance to her face, which had so struck me when she first entered the room.

"And now, Sophy," I said, "tell me all about yourself; where have you been living, and how have you been getting on all this time, and what are your plans for the future? Your little child, too, Sophy? What has become of it? You have not lost it, have you?"

"No, Agnes," Sophy said quietly, "I have not lost Jamie, and he is a very good, dear little fellow; but I have left him now for some time, and so I would rather talk of something else. And now I will give you the history of my life, as nearly as I can, from the time I went away from here."

But although Sophy had thus volunteered me this information, it was some little time before she could begin the sad narrative of her early married days. And yet she was not agitated as she told it—she seemed rather cold and strange; and I think the very manner which would have repelled other people drew me towards her. I had felt so much the same; I was still so quiet and old from my great loss, that I saw in that abstracted air of hers, and the impassive tone in which she spoke of times when she must have suffered so deeply, that she, like me, had had so great a grief, that nothing again would ever move her from her quiet self-possession. And yet I fancied afterwards that it was not exactly so, for it was upon a point in the future that all her thoughts and energies were centered, while all mine were buried in the past.

But by degrees Sophy told me all her history, from the date of her elopement up to the present time. She did not, at that time, enter into all the details of her life, but she has done so in the two visits she has paid me since she came down. As much of her history as is at all important in itself —more especially as having any reference to my own story,—particularly their life in London when first married, and the events prior to Robert's coming down to try and recover the will, I have told at some length. The rest of her tale I have had to relate very briefly; and I have now written it out in chapters, and arranged them with my own story, as well as I could, according to the date at which the various events took place, so that our two stories may be read in their proper order.

When Sophy had finished her tale, she told me that she had left her boy in London, and had come down to devote herself to the task she had so long had before her.

"What is this task, Sophy?" I asked. "You have alluded to it several times in the course of your story. What is it?"

"I am resolved, Agnes," Sophy said quietly, "for my boy's sake, and for yours, to find Mr. Harmer's missing will."

"Oh no, no Sophy!" I said, frightened at the thought, "pray give up all thought of it. That will has proved a curse to us all. It has cost one life if not two already, it has ruined your happiness and mine. Oh, Sophy! if it still exist let it lie where it is, it will do none of us any good now."

"I must find it," Sophy continued, quite unmoved; "you have tried together and failed; your sister tried alone, but without success; Robert tried, and died in the attempt; it is my turn now, if it costs me, too, my life. I ought to have tried first of all, for through my sin it was that the will was lost. Had I not deceived and left him, my grandfather would have lived perhaps for years, the will would have been handed back to the lawyer, and we should all have been happy. I lost it Agnes, and I will find it. From the day when I heard how Robert died, this has been the one purpose of my life. I will find that will, I will make my son a rich man yet, I will atone to you all, as far as I can, for the grief and loss I have caused you. I have thought it all over, Agnes, till my brain seemed to be on fire with it."

And Sophy's eyes looked so strange and wild, that I really thought, and think still, that her brain has a little turned by long thinking upon this subject. I saw at once that it would be worse than useless to endeavour to dissuade her from what I feel is a perfectly hopeless attempt. After a pause I said, "Well, Sophy, tell me at least what your plan is, and in any way in which I can give you assistance without mixing myself up in your project, I will do so. But I must tell you at once

that I will take no active part in it whatever, because in the first place after the time which has now elapsed, I question much whether I should feel justified in acting even as I acted when the loss of the will was a recent event; in the next place, one life has already been lost in the search, indeed I may say two, and I consider all has been attempted which could be done, and lastly, I believe the search to be perfectly hopeless. But in any way in which I can help you without taking an active part, I will do so, not with any hope of finding the will, but for our old friendship's sake.

"I do not know at present," said Sophy quietly, "that I require any assistance, but there is one point which you may be able to inform me, and on which depends very much the method in which I shall set about my work. The only question I have to ask, Agnes, is does Miss Harmer's confessor live in the house with her, or in the priest's house in the village?"

"Just as before, Sophy, in the village. One would have thought that it would have been far more convenient for him to have lived at the house. But Miss Harmer, who I hear is just as obstinate at eighty as ever she was, insists on making no change, but on doing as has always been done. Ever since her sister's death her maid sleeps in the room with her, and the other servants in the room immediately adjoining, instead of in the servants' quarter, at the end of the house as they used to do. But now what else can I do to help you?"

"Nothing," Sophy said, "what you have told me is exactly what I have hoped and wished, although I was afraid it would not be so. Had it been otherwise, I had arranged other methods of going to work; but the one which I shall now try—and I look upon its success as nearly certain—could not have been carried out unless the confessor had lived as before. Now I see that every thing is in my favour. Do you know, Agnes, I have every minute detail arranged in my mind. It was for that I went to Italy. It was necessary that I should be able to speak the language like a native, and I can do so. I wanted to see the Bishop of Ravenna, and I saw him. So you see I am getting on already;" and she gave a laugh that made me feel quite uncomfortable, it was so wild and strange.

"The Bishop of Ravenna," I said, "I seem to have heard that name before; oh, I remember! it is the man that Miss Harmer telegraphed the news of her brother's death to."

"It is, Agnes, and that is why I went to see him. Do you know I have copied out every word, in the letters that you and your papa wrote to me, which is in any way related to the will, and have learnt them by heart."

"But what are you going to do first Sophy?"

"You think no one will know me?"

"I am quite sure they will not; even I, knowing who you are, and what you have done to yourself can hardly see any resemblance between your face now, and what it was then."

"I intend, Agnes, to go as servant to the priest."

"You, Sophy, as a servant! You must not think of such a thing. There are so many, many things against it. Oh, pray give it all up Sophy! Even supposing that you go through all this without detection, what nearer will you be to the will, as his servant, than as you are now?" I argued and pleaded, but neither argument nor entreaty had the slightest effect upon her. Her mind was so entirely fixed upon her plan, that she hardly even paid attention to what I said, and soon after took her leave.

I have seen her two or three times since, but shall say nothing of it here, more than that she is still engaged upon her hopeless task. When she gives it up, and goes out, as I suppose she will eventually to Australia, I will write down the particulars.

I believe she is on this point rather out of her mind, and I do hope the poor thing will not do anything wild, and get into mischief.

At the time she first came down I had not heard of Percy being alive, and consequently I had really, putting aside that I knew it to be utterly hopeless, hardly any interest at all in the search. Now, that he is alive, I should of course, for his sake, like to recover the money, but I know I might as well wish to come into possession of a snug estate in the moon. No good can come of this madcap scheme, and I only hope that there may be no harm. I shall wait with great anxiety to see if she gets found out, and to ascertain what plan she proposes to herself for finding out where the will is concealed; for that she fancies she has an idea, which will enable her to do so, is certain; if it seems likely to get her into any danger, I must, for her own sake, poor thing, take some step or other to prevent her carrying on schemes which might end, as her husband's did, fatally for her.

CHAPTER X.

THE SPY IN THE CAMP.

It is a year now since I wrote any of this story, and this time I shall really finish it. How little do we foresee the course of events! and certainly, when I last laid down my pen, I little thought that this story would have ended as it has. Most of what follows I have at times gathered from Sophy's

lips, the rest from my own knowledge of the affair.

Sophy Gregory did not leave me, the first time when she came, until it was getting dusk, as she did not wish to arrive at Sturry until after dark, for a single woman with a bundle entering that quiet village would be almost certain to attract attention. Then she rose to go, and submitted to my embrace as before, in a quiet, impassive way; and yet, as she turned to leave me, there was a strange, wistful look in her eyes, as if with me she felt that she had left the last of her old landmarks behind, that she had finally started on the strange course which she had chosen. But whatever her thoughts were, there was no sign of wavering or hesitation. Steadily and quietly as she had said good-bye, she went out, down the steps, and through the gathering darkness.

By the time she was past the barracks and out into the bleak country beyond, night had fairly fallen, and the wind blew keenly across the flats. But Sophy hardly felt it; she had entered upon her task at last, and it would have been no ordinary event which would have attracted her attention now.

Presently the long, straight, level road rose suddenly, and she heard the heavy water-shed wheel working, and could dimly see the black mass of the building to her right. She was nearly at Sturry now; a little further on and she could just see two white foaming streams on her left, and she knew now she was passing the great mill. Another hundred yards and she was in the village itself. There was hardly any one about, but the windows were a-glow with the bright fires within. Sophy shivered slightly and drew her shawl more closely round her, as she hurried on; but it was her own bitter memories, and no thought of the cutting wind, which had so chilled her. The last time she had passed through the village was on the night she had eloped; the time before that she had driven through it in her pony chaise with her two pretty ponies.

Sophy passed through the village and went up the hill beyond it till she reached the plantation where she had so often met Robert Gregory, and the lane where the dog-cart had stood waiting on that evening for her. Absorbed as she was in the future, concentrated as all her energies and thoughts were upon that one point, she could not help being moved by that sad remembrance of the past. That night—oh, how different might her life have been had she not taken that false step! How different—oh, how different! and with a wailing cry Sophy sat down upon some stones at the corner of the lane, and cried with a terrible sorrow over her lost life, cried as she had not cried since her husband's death. A long time she sat there and wept; passionately and bitterly at first, quietly and tranquilly afterwards. When she rose at last and went on, it was with feebler steps than before, but with a mind lightened and relieved. It seemed to her that a great weight was taken from her brain. She had, for so many weary months, thought of this one idea to the exclusion of all other, that her brain sorely needed relief; and that long fit of crying took off the deadening strain, and I do believe saved her reason. Her eyes had a softer look afterwards, and her manner was less hard and cold. I noticed the change when I saw her a month afterwards, and told her that she looked much more like herself, and that her eyes had lost a strange look which they had about them. She answered that she knew that it was so, and she had herself, at times, thought that her brain was failing her; she told me she believed that that fit of crying had been mercifully sent as a relief to her, for she had felt a different woman ever since.

And so Sophy rose from the heap of stones, weaker indeed in body, but with a clearer and brighter intellect; and although her search was by no means given up, she went about it in a more steady and thoughtful, if with a less fixed and cunning method; and she herself told me, "If at times my old, strange, wild feeling comes over me, I shut myself up in my room, and think over my past life; I am able now to pray God to have pity on me, to bring wrong right, and to spare my reason for my child's sake."

Sophy went on until at last she came to the well-remembered east lodge, where she had lived so long as a child, not dreaming then but that it was her proper home; and afterwards, as long as she lived at Harmer Place, she had been in the habit of going down at least once a week to see her foster-mother. She knocked at the door, and without waiting for an answer, lifted the latch and went in.

A tall woman of about fifty years old came out from the inner room on hearing the door open, for she had not heard Sophy's gentle knock.

She looked suspiciously for a moment at her visitor, and then seeing by her attire, which was that of a respectable servant, that although she had a bundle in her hand, she was no ordinary tramp, she asked civilly, "What may you please to want?"

"Don't you know me, Mammy Green?" Sophy said, calling her by her old childish name.

The woman fell back as if struck by a blow, her candle dropped from her hand and was extinguished; then she seized Sophy's arm and almost dragged her to the fire, that she might see her features more distinctly, and then as Sophy smiled sadly, she recognized her face again, and with a cry of "Sophy! Sophy!" caught her in her strong arms and kissed her, and cried over her. Sophy cried too, and the old woman recovered from her unwonted emotion first, for Sophy was weak and exhausted by the day's excitement, and her foster-mother soothed and petted her as she would have done a child. When Sophy was composed again, her nurse took off her bonnet and shawl, and made her sit down quietly in the great oak settle by the fire, while she put some wood on and made a cheerful blaze. Then she lit the candle again, and laid the little round table with the tea-things; in a short time the kettle boiled, and Sophy, after taking a cup of tea, felt once more herself.

"And are you come down to live with me again, my dear?" her nurse asked presently.

"We will talk all that over to-morrow, Mammy Green, and I will tell you some of my history, and what I intend doing. I am tired now, I suppose my little bedroom is nearly as it used to be?"

"Yes, just the same, deary," the woman said, and taking down a key she unlocked the door, and Sophy saw her little room quite unchanged, and looking exactly as it did when she slept there last, twelve years before. Her little drawings hung on the wall, the elaborate sampler she had worked when quite a child, was in its frame in its old place over the mantle. Not a speck of dirt was visible anywhere, and a sweet scent of rosemary and lavender filled the room. Everything was just as she had left it; the white coverlid lay on the bed, which needed only its sheets to be ready for sleeping in.

"The bed is quite aired," her nurse said, "I have the room opened, and aired, and dusted once a week, and I take the bed off and put it before the fire all day once a month, and the blankets and sheets are kept in the closet against the kitchen chimney, so they are always warm and dry. I have always been hoping you would come back to me again some day, and I was determined you should find it all ready."

She then took the paper ornament off the grate, the fire was ready laid behind it; this she lit, and in a few minutes, by the time she had made the bed, the fire burned brightly up. Sophy, exhausted and tired with her day's excitement, was soon in bed, and her old nurse then came in to see if she wanted anything else, and to tuck her up and kiss her as she had done when she was a child; and Sophy, when she had said "good night, Mammy Green," lay drowsily watching the dancing shadows cast by the fire on the wall, and could hardly believe that she was not a child again, and that all these last twenty years were not a troubled feverish dream.

Sophy's last injunction to her foster-mother before going to bed was, that on no account—should she see any one in the morning—was she to mention that she had returned; but that Mrs. Green was to tell all whom she met, that a young woman who had been in service in London, had come down with a letter from some old friend there, asking her to take her in until she could find a place in the country, which she was anxious to do for the sake of her health.

Accordingly, when Mrs. Green went down into the village early in the morning, before Sophy was awake, to purchase a few little luxuries—such as white sugar, some ham, and a little fresh meat—she told her neighbours that a friend of her old acquaintance Martha White, who had gone up to London to service eight years before, had come down with a letter from her, asking her to take her friend in for a while, as she had been ill, and was ordered country air.

When Sophy awoke, she heard her old nurse moving about in the next room. On calling to her, she came in, with many inquiries as to how Sophy had slept, and Sophy was able honestly to answer, that she had not slept so well for weeks. The first question, in return, was, whether her nurse had seen any one that morning; and when she found that she had, she insisted on her repeating, word for word, what she had said; and not until she had done so twice was Sophy satisfied that her nurse had in no way betrayed her secret. In a quarter of an hour she was dressed, and found breakfast in the next room—tea and fresh cream, eggs newly laid, for Mrs. Green kept a number of fowls, and a rasher of ham.

"You look better, much better, this morning, deary," her nurse said, as she came in; "but still there is something quite strange about you, which makes you look altogether different to what you used to."

"Never mind now, nurse: I will tell you all about it after breakfast."

Presently her nurse put down a cup of tea she was in the act of raising to her lips.

"There is one question I must ask you, deary; it has been on my lips ever since you came in last night, only you looked so tired and weary I was feared to sorrow you. But in the short letters you sent me when I wrote to you, as you asked me, about the old lady's health up there, you used to write about your little boy. Have you—have you lost the little darling, Sophy?"

"No, Mammy Green—no. Thank God! he is alive and well; but I have left him with some kind friends in London while I came down here."

"Thank God! indeed, Miss Sophy. Do you know, I have been so anxious ever since you came in about him, only I daren't, for the life of me, ask you last night, though I almost had to bite my tongue off to keep quiet. There—go on with your breakfast now, deary. Now my mind is at rest, you need not tell me any more till you are quite ready to do so yourself."

After breakfast was over, Sophy tucked up her sleeves, and, in spite of many remonstrances, helped to clear the things away, and wash them up. When all was tidy, they sat down to the fire—Mrs. Green knitting, and Sophy hemming an apron, to keep her fingers employed while she talked—and then she began, and told as much of her past history as she deemed it expedient for the woman to know.

Mrs. Green interrupted her frequently with ejaculations of wonder and pity.

When Sophy had finished her story, she told her old nurse that she had come down for the express purpose of finding the will, by which she would become the heiress of Harmer Place; and that it was to this end that she had begged her to write, letting her know how Miss Harmer was,

as—in the way in which she intended to attempt to find the will—it was useless for her to attempt anything as long as Miss Harmer was in good health.

"My dear," her old nurse said, shaking her head, "well or ill, it will make no difference. It is my belief, and always has been, that that woman has got a stone for a heart, and, well or ill, you might as well try to stop one of them engines which go running along the valley, as try and change what she has once resolved upon."

"I have no idea of changing her mind," Sophy said, quietly; "my opinion on that subject perfectly agrees with yours. I am going quite another way to work, and in this I require your help. I wish to get the place of servant to Miss Harmer's confessor."

This proposal so much roused Mrs. Green's indignation and amazement, that for a long time Sophy could not utter a word.

"What! Miss Sophy, who was the lawful mistress of the Hall, to go for a servant! and—most of all—as a servant to a Popish priest! What was she thinking of? A servant, indeed! She had thought, from the way Sophy had spoken of what she had been doing, that she had money; if not, it was of no consequence. She had two hundred pounds in the savings' bank, which she had laid by in the good times; and was it likely that, as long as that lasted, she would let her Miss Sophy go out as a servant? No, indeed!"

Sophy had to wait patiently till the storm was past, and she then explained to her nurse that it was not because she wanted money that she did this, for that she had an abundant supply; that she was very much obliged to her dear old Mammy Green for her offer, but it was not a question of money at all; and that it was absolutely necessary, for the recovery of the will, that she should enter the priest's service.

The nurse for a long time obstinately refused to do anything whatever to forward the design, and it was only by dint of coaxings and arguments innumerable, and, indeed, by the threat, if she would not assist her, that she must proceed—difficult as it would be—by herself, that she at last succeeded in persuading Mrs. Green into giving her assistance in the enterprise. At last, however, she gave in, and consented—although under protest that she disapproved of it all, and that she washed her hands of the whole affair—to do what Sophy desired of her.

Accordingly the next day Mrs. Green went down into the village, putting some eggs and a chicken into a basket, and under pretence of offering them for sale to the priest entered into conversation with his old servant. She mentioned to her that she had a friend down from London who had been in service there, but whose health was very bad, and who was ordered by the doctor to go down into the country and to take some very quiet situation there. Mrs. Green said that her friend had saved some money in service and would not mind paying handsomely for such a place as she wanted, as the doctor said her life depended upon it.

The old woman listened with great interest, and a day or two afterwards when Mrs. Green went down again with eggs, she told her that she should like very much to have a talk with her friend, for that she herself had been thinking of leaving service for some time, and of going to live with some relatives in a distant part of the country. Mrs. Green thereupon invited her to come up and take a cup of tea with her on the following evening—which invitation was accepted.

The next evening, after tea, the matter was entered into, and a great amount of bargaining and discussion went on between Sophy and the old servant, as Sophy did not wish to appear too eager about it. But it was at last settled that Sophy should give £8—which was a year's wages—if the place could be procured for her at once. The old woman took her leave, chuckling inwardly at the thought of the good bargain she had made; for Miss Harmer was not expected now to last many months longer, and as there was no heir, and the property would pass to strangers, who were not likely to require the services of a priest, she thought it probable that her successor would not remain long enough in her new place even to receive the year's wages she had paid for it.

The next morning the old servant told her master the tale which had been agreed upon, namely—that she had just heard that a relative in a distant town was taken seriously ill, and wished her to go and live with her and nurse her. She said that she should take it very kind of her master if he would let her go at once; and that she trusted that he would not be inconvenienced; for that there was a person staying in the village who would suit his situation exactly. She was a friend of her own—indeed, a sort of relation; she had been in service but had left to marry a tradesman; it was altogether a very sad story; for her husband had been ruined and had died; the poor thing's health was not very strong, and so she wished to take some quiet place in the country; and that she was quite sure she would suit master.

The priest heard her quietly to the end, and then asked if her friend would be willing to come.

"Yes, she would, sir. After you had gone up to the Hall yesterday, I went up to see her, as I could not have asked you to let me go at once, if I could not have found some one to take my place. She would be glad to come, sir; and I am sure she will suit you."

"Ask her to come in to see me at once, then," Father Eustace said, "before I go up to the Hall."

In an hour Sophy came down. Father Eustace looked at her gravely, and saw a respectable quiet-looking woman before him, very pale and sad-looking—much as he might have expected from what he had heard of her story.

He asked a few questions, which were satisfactorily answered, and that same afternoon Sophy Gregory entered upon her new duties as servant to Father Eustace.

CHAPTER XI.

OFF GUARD.

And so Sophy succeeded in the first step of her enterprise, and was promoted to the honourable position of servant to Father Eustace, *vice* old Peggy resigned; and, although she was a long way from the goal yet, she felt very sanguine of success now, and looked upon the easy way in which this first part of her scheme had been effected as a sure omen of her future success. The priest lived in a comfortable little house at the extreme end of the village nearest to Harmer Place, and which belonged to the estate, having indeed been built by the grandfather of Miss Harmer specially as a residence for the family confessor. It stood back a little from the road, and had a small garden in front. There was a coach-house and stable attached, over which was a room where the groom slept.

Sophy commenced her new duties in earnest, and Father Eustace very soon had reason to congratulate himself on his change of domestics, and on the advent of this quiet, respectable-looking woman in the place of his former garrulous and slatternly old servant; and he soon felt a great increase of comfort in his domestic arrangements. This new servant was scrupulously neat and tidy. What little cooking she had to do, was sure to be well done; and above all, she was always at home, and, come in when he would, she was there at her work, instead of gossiping about the village, as he had frequently found it the case before: his only regret was that the change had not taken place years earlier.

Sophy's duties were not heavy. Father Eustace breakfasted at home, and then sat writing until lunch-time, after which he went up to the Hall; from this he seldom returned until late in the evening, never taking his dinner at home. The groom was on board wages, and did not have any of his meals in the house; consequently, when breakfast was over, Sophy had the rest of the day nearly to herself.

The thing, perhaps, for which of all others Father Eustace liked his new domestic, was, that he could now leave his papers about with the absolute certainty that on his return he would find them precisely as he left them; and with no fear that they would be crumpled up, and put away in a closet, or piled in a heap in a corner, either to make way for a breakfast or lunch-tray, or in an accession of an occasional fit of tidiness, such as sometimes seized his former servant. To his new domestic his papers were sacred; leave them about in the wildest apparent confusion, and he might rely upon it that she would never move them; and to such a point did she carry this, that one or two mornings after her arrival—when the priest had left some papers on the table—she brought a small round table out of another room, on which she placed the breakfast things; after this she always continued the same practice, so that there was no longer any occasion for the papers to be moved from the table at all. This being the case, Father Eustace ceased to put them away, but left them all about, feeling quite secure that, from their being entirely in Italian, it would be out of the question that any one would attempt to read them.

Father Eustace had not changed in appearance in the slightest, in the seven years he had been at Harmer Place. His thin face, with its shaven cheeks and chin, was perhaps a shade thinner, but that was all; and yet Father Eustace chafed inwardly at his long detention there, wasting six precious years of his life in his daily ministrations on this obstinate iron old woman. Sometimes he regretted that he had ever accepted the post, but yet the reward at the end would be great. The Bishop of Ravenna, his especial patron, at whose bidding he had come over, would see that his merits were known in the proper quarter, and that a reward proportionate to the service he had rendered was bestowed upon him. The bishop was a man of great influence; he had been spoken of for a cardinal's hat; and he had promised Father Eustace that he would put his conduct in such a light, that it would be nearly sure to lead to his elevation to some vacant see.

Father Eustace was a clever man, and an ambitious—for himself and his Church, and would have scrupled at little for the good of either. Still it was very wearying waiting so long for this iron old woman to die; the more so as the principal object of his coming had not yet been attained. However, he had been trained in a good school for patience, and although when alone his eyes would sometimes flash angrily, and his thin hands clench in his impatience, at ordinary times he was bland and gentle, and seemed never weary of reading to her in that suave, mellow voice of his for hours at a time.

As a resource for his leisure hours, he occupied himself in writing an elaborate history of the martyrs of the early Church, and it was with the sheets of this manuscript that his tables were generally littered.

From these Sophy gained no information, and it was some little time, indeed, before she did so; but one day, rendered careless by the tidiness and care of his servant, Father Eustace went out, leaving his key in the lock of his desk. It was for this that Sophy had been waiting and hoping. She lost not a moment in taking it out, and taking an impression of it on a flat cake of wax, which she had carried ready in her pocket from the day she had entered his service. The same

afternoon she sent the cake of wax, in a small tin box, to Mr. Billow, King Edward Street, Lambeth, enclosed in a letter with a £5 note, requesting a key to be made from the impression, and sent down at once to the direction, "Mary Westwood, Post Office, Sturry, Kent."

In three days the key arrived, and Sophy was now able to indulge her intense desire to examine the contents of Father Eustace's desk. It was a large one, and contained a great number of letters and documents; but all that she had any interest in were two bundles of papers, of about the same size, the one endorsed, "Letters of Monseigneur the Bishop of Ravenna," the other, "Copies of my letters to the Bishop of Ravenna."

These she read through and through, taking one letter out at a time, and reading it up in her own room; so that in case her master suddenly returned, even should he go at once to his desk, he would find it locked, and the bundles of papers apparently as he had left them.

The earlier letters were the most interesting: in these Father Eustace related the events of the funeral, and of the ineffectual search for the will. He said that Miss Harmer, on his arrival, had told him at once that she was determined that her elder brother's will should be carried out, that the property should all go to the Church, and that no will would ever be forthcoming. He had of course applauded her resolution, and promised her the blessing of the Church. But he said that she had not, even in confession, told him where the will really was.

As time went on, he wrote to say that he could not elicit from her where it was hidden, and that, devoted as she was to the Church, she was of so obstinate a character, that he was afraid he never should find out from her; but that he did not like to appear too pertinacious on the point, about which indeed there was no especial hurry. He told the bishop that he believed that this reticence of hers was caused by two reasons—the one, that she wished to be able to say conscientiously that she had never seen it; the other and stronger one, that she was ridiculously superstitious; that she had an idea that her brother's spirit was guarding it, and that his curse would fall upon her if she destroyed it. He said that he had reasoned with her, and rebuked her for her superstition; but that nothing he could say had the least effect upon her. Angela Harmer, he said, he should have been able to have managed without difficulty; but she was guided entirely by her elder sister, who had even bound her by a solemn vow not to tell, even in confession, anything about the will; and no assurance on the part of himself that any vow which was to the detriment of the Church was binding, had any effect upon her. In return, the bishop exhorted him to patience. From his own knowledge of Cecilia Harmer's character, he was certain that she would not be easily diverted from any purpose she had once taken up; but when the time should come, he would use his own authority, and he had no doubt that then she would give way.

The bishop, however, thought that the will might be found and destroyed without the Miss Harmers' knowledge, for he believed he knew where it was hidden. The Miss Harmers had frequently, in their conversations with him, spoken of the way in which their family had in the old times of persecution concealed fugitive priests, in a secret room constructed in a chimney; access was had to this room from the hall, by unscrewing the tongue of one of the iron dogs in the fireplace, and by pushing a spring inside the mouth, and also pressing a spring in the chimney behind the mantelpiece. The bishop said that he had taken a note of it at the time, as he always did of everything which could by any possibility ever turn out useful; and that he had no doubt the will would be found there.

Father Eustace wrote in reply to say that he had followed the instructions, and had entered the secret chamber; but that there was no will there.

After this there was nothing in any of the letters of much interest until the last one or two. In these Father Eustace repeated that Miss Harmer was breaking fast, and that it was becoming necessary to make another effort to find the will.

The Bishop replied that when the time came he would himself write to her; and would point out, "that the house must be sold at her death, and that some day it might be pulled down and the will found, and thereby all her good intentions for the benefit of the Church would be frustrated; that he, therefore, exhorted—nay, more, commanded, if necessary, that she would reveal the hiding-place to her confessor in order that such a contingency as the will ever being found might be rendered an impossibility."

All these letters Sophy read through and through. She was disappointed, for she had hoped that she should have found this secret which she so longed to find out, but it was not to be; and so she fell back upon another plan, for she had thoroughly foreseen every possible difficulty and discouragement, and had marked out various schemes for herself, which were to be adopted according to circumstances. One of the letters from the bishop happened to have the large seal with which he sealed his letters unbroken. Of this she carefully took an impression, with a piece of bread, kneaded up with a little oil, just as she had often taken seal impressions when a girl. This she put by to dry, in order to be in readiness when required. She then carefully wrote the two letters she wished copied, took one of the bishop's earlier letters from the bundle, and also a note in Father Eustace's own handwriting, and enclosed them to Mr. Billow, with the following letter:—

"Dear Mr. Billow,

"The time has now come when I require the letters I spoke to you about when in London. I enclose copies of the two letters I wish written, and also letters the handwriting of which is to be imitated; the long one in Italian must be done on foreign letter-paper, and the other on note-paper, and let the addresses be written as in the copies, on the back. I enclose £25 in notes, and will forward another £25 when I receive the letter from you. Please register it, and enclose it to Mary Westwood, Sturry, Kent."

In three days the letters came down, and the handwritings were so exactly imitated, that Sophy could not detect the slightest difference. She folded them, sealed one with the broad seal, and then locked them up in her box till wanted. She was now ready for the attempt, and only waited for the time. It was longer coming than she had expected, and six months went on after she had come down to Sturry before there was any decided change. Then Miss Harmer began to sink rapidly, and took to her bed. Sophy could see that her master was nervous and anxious, and he wrote off at once to the Bishop of Ravenna. He came back now to dinner at five, and soon after six again went up to Harmer Place, and remained there till late in the evening.

Sophy now felt that the time was come. She sat down and wrote to me, asking me to hire a man the next day at the livery-stable, to ride out and deliver a note, which she enclosed in her letter to me; with strict injunctions that he was to leave Canterbury at six exactly: that he was to ride up to the door of Father Eustace's house, to ring the bell, deliver the letter, and ride off instantly without waiting to be questioned. She implored me not to fail in this, for that upon its being done exactly as she had dictated the whole of her plan depended, and that she believed ere long she should be able to tell me that she had found the will.

I confess that when I had read her letter I was very much puzzled what to do. I had no idea what her plans were, or what were the contents of the letter. I had not the least hope that she would find the will; and yet she wrote so urgently, that I was sure she believed herself that she had; and as she was going through so much, surely I need not mind risking a little. I had a long debate with myself, but at last came to the conclusion that I could not but do as she asked me, and send the little note, which was merely directed Father Eustace, in a hurried, almost illegible writing—to its destination. However, I determined to run as little risk of being discovered as being connected with it as possible, and I accordingly went down to old Andrew's cottage. I have not mentioned that he was still living in Dr. Hooper's service, and resided as before close to the old house, nor have I told of the delight with which he received me on my return.

"Andrew," I said to him, "I have got a piece of rather particular business I want done, and I know you will manage it for me."

"That I will, Miss Agnes. What is it?"

"I have a note here which I want delivered at the priest's at Sturry. You know the house, Andrew, the last one in the village."

"Aye, aye, Miss, I know it well enough."

"Well, Andrew, I want you either to go yourself, or get one of your sons to go there on horseback this evening. Now be very particular. You are to start from here at six exactly, you are to ride over there, ring at the bell, give this note to the servant, and ride off as fast as you can without waiting to be asked any questions. Do you quite understand? Of course I do not wish any one to know who left the note, or anything about it."

"I'll do it, Miss Agnes, sure enough—at least my son William will. I am getting too old for riding. He is at home at present; I will take one of master's horses and bring him out quietly, and William will do just as you say; and if master should come into the stable—which he won't do at that time of day—I will say Bill has taken him round to have a shoe put on."

All that day Sophy was very anxious and nervous, not so much as to the success of her plans as to whether her request would be fulfilled and her letter sent as directed. Even Father Eustace looked up rather surprised at dinner, for his usually quiet composed servant seemed anxious and excited. Her movements were hurried and quick, and there was a red patch of colour on her cheeks, and her eyes were bright and restless.

"Come here, child," he said, presently. "Give me your hand."

Rather surprised, she did as he told her.

"Your hand is hot and feverish, Mary," he said, "and your pulse is high. You are not at all well. I shall be back in an hour or two from the hall, and then I will give you a powder, and you must go to bed. I am afraid you are going to be ill."

At half-past six, Sophy, listening anxiously, heard the sound of horse's hoofs approaching at a gallop. It stopped at the gate. There was a ring at the bell. She went out, a letter was placed in her hands without a word, and the man and horse galloped off. She took the letter in to her master. He opened and read it.

"Mary," he said, quietly, "will you be good enough to see if Thomas is out in the stable; and if so, tell him to put the horse into the gig at once, and get ready to drive me to Sittingbourne."

Sophy did as he had ordered her, and then returned to the parlour.

"I am sorry I am obliged to go out this evening, Mary; but I am sent for to Sittingbourne, to Mrs. Ford, where I dined a short time since. The poor thing is taken suddenly ill, is dying in fact, and has sent to ask me to go over at once to administer the sacraments, and that is a call which I cannot refuse. Here is a powder; take that, and I should advise you to go to bed at once. Do not lock the door, I will let myself in when I come back."

In another ten minutes the gig was at the door, and Father Eustace went out, and in another minute was gone. Sophy stood at the door and watched them drive down into the village. Then she went in and shut the door. So far her plans had succeeded—would they to the end?

CHAPTER XII.

FOUND!

After Father Eustace had gone, Sophy sat herself down in the kitchen, and watched the clock for ten minutes, in case her master might have forgotten something, and driven back again to fetch it. That time passed, she did not hesitate a moment; but went at once up to her room, unlocked her box, and took from it the things which she had long ago prepared for her enterprise. Then she proceeded to undress herself, and put on the clothes she had laid ready on the bed. All this was done quickly, but yet without hurry. She appeared as if she had so thoroughly rehearsed the actions she was performing that there was not the least hesitation or delay in any of her movements. Then she took off the dark wig which had so much changed her, and put on another, with close-cut hair, and a tonsure shaved upon it; and in five minutes Sophy Gregory was gone, and a Roman Catholic ecclesiastic stood in her place. The clothes had been carefully padded to conceal the extreme slightness of her figure. The wig she had put on was nearly grey; and with some pigments she laid on lines at the corner of her eyes, her forehead, and round her lips. She also slightly tinged her cheeks and chin, to represent the dark marks of the shorn whiskers and beard. All this she did with care, but very quickly. Her hand never hesitated: night after night she had tried the effect of each line. And now her disguise was so complete that it would have required, a close observer, even by daylight, to detect that it was not a man of fifty, with a slight, very short, well-preserved figure who stood before him.

As Sophy went out of the door it was a little over half-past seven; Father Eustace had started at seven; it was still broad day out of doors, but indoors the light was fading, and in another half-hour it would be quite dusk, for it was now at the end of August.

Sophy locked the door behind her, and walked fast up the hill out of the village, past the plantation, to the lodge gate; she turned in here, walked up to the well-remembered hall door, and rang the bell. She had no thought of hesitation now; she knew that this was the last time that there was a possibility of recovering the object of her search, and that this chance gone, the will was lost for ever. She had no time to lose, for she calculated that she had hardly three clear hours before the priest's return. It would take him two hours to drive to Sittingbourne; but, the fraud which had been practised upon him once discovered, he would drive back in an hour and a half—three hours and a half in all; certainly not under that, for his horse was a fat, over-fed animal, whose farthest drive was into Canterbury, and who went even that short distance quite at his own pace. So she hoped she should have nearly four hours, but of that three-quarters of an hour was gone already.

The servant who opened the door looked rather surprised at seeing a strange gentleman standing there, for visitors had for many years been quite unknown at Harmer Place.

"I come from Father Eustace," Sophy said, with a strong foreign accent, and in a deep tone, which had cost her great trouble to learn to speak naturally and unfalteringly. "Will you be good enough to give this note to Miss Harmer?"

Sophy was shown into a sitting-room, every object in which she knew so well, and where she had last sat in such a different character. At another time, perhaps, she would have broken down and cried at the thought of the changes since then, but now her whole thoughts were absorbed in the present. She was not excited; she was perfectly cool and collected; her pulse beat faster, and there was a strange, wild look in her eyes, which she was conscious of herself, and strove to keep down and conceal; otherwise she was perfectly quiet, and hardly moved from the seat she had taken when she entered the room, scarcely even looking round at the familiar furniture, but sitting with her eyes fixed on the door, waiting her summons to go upstairs.

The servant took the letter up to Miss Harmer. She was sitting up in bed, partly supported by pillows. She was a very old woman now, and her once upright form had become bent, and her firm step grown feeble and uncertain for some time past; but her face was little changed; her eye was as bright, and her voice as cold and harsh as of old, sounding more strangely now, coming from the decrepid form.

"Is it Father Eustace, Hannah?"

"No, Miss Harmer; it is a gentleman with a letter from him." And the servant gave her the letter.

"Draw down the blinds, Hannah, and light the candles, and put them on the table by my side."

This done, Miss Harmer opened the letter and read as follows—it was in Italian—

> "My dear, Sister,
>
> "I have just received a letter with the commands of my superior, our beloved Bishop of Ravenna, to proceed at once to London upon a special mission, which will perhaps detain me there for some days. He has sent these orders by the hands of Father Boniface, one of the most esteemed of his clergy, and in whom I know he reposes the most absolute confidence. He was well known to me in Italy, and I judge, from the manner in which the bishop writes to me, that his business in England is of great importance. He is the bearer of a letter to you. I am unable to visit you before I leave this, as I have only just time to catch the train, and it is necessary that I should reach London to-night. I pray that the Holy Virgin and all the saints may have you in their keeping."

"Bring the gentleman up here," Miss Harmer said, when she had read the letter; and her eyes brightened at the thought of news direct from her beloved friend and guide, the Bishop of Ravenna.

The ecclesiastic entered with the usual *benedicte*, and then, advancing to the bed, bestowed a particular and solemn benediction upon her, as sent direct from the bishop. He then sat down by her bedside, and inquired, in a tone of earnest sympathy, after her health.

"I am not long for this world, father," she said. "A short time, a very short time, and my place will be empty."

"You have fought a good fight, sister, a good fight for our Church, and you will assuredly win the prize."

"I trust so, father—I do indeed trust so. And now, how is my old friend? is it well with him?"

"It is not, sister. He is ill—very ill, I grieve to say."

"I indeed grieve, father, to hear this news. What is the cause of his illness?"

"A broken constitution. He is worn out with long fastings and continued abstinence and prayer. Once, as you are aware, of a commanding figure, he is bent now with care and thought; his wide brow is furrowed, his hairs are few and white. But his spirit is bright and clear as ever, and his voice smooth and sonorous. The very last time he preached he had to be assisted to his place, but when he once began to speak, his voice still rang with its old tone; he was as vehement in denunciation as ever, as soft and earnest in his persuasions to repentance, as rich in promises and blessings upon those who devote their lives to God and their Church."

Miss Harmer was much affected at this narrative, which called up before her the bishop as she had known him of old; and she asked many more questions of his life and doings.

"You are, I presume, father, by the purity of your accent, a Florentine?"

The priest bowed assent.

"You are, Father Eustace tells me, much in our dear friend's confidence?"

"The good bishop condescends to consult much with my unworthy self upon most matters, and more especially on the subject on which I have now journeyed to England has he spoken often and much. Our good friend believes, and I fear with truth, that his life will not be prolonged many days. Of late this subject has pressed very heavily upon his mind, and he has felt so sorely that so many years of thought and hope might yet be wasted, that he at last told me he could not die easy until this good work was completed and the Church secure of her own. Seeing his deep feeling upon the subject, I offered, should he consider me worthy of so great a trust, to come over here to fetch what he desired, and to convey his last blessing to you. He accepted my offer, and this letter to you will fully explain his wishes."

Miss Harmer took the letter eagerly, looked at the direction, examined the seal, broke it open, and looked onwards to the signature, which she raised reverentially to her lips.

She was very much shocked at the news of her old friend's illness, and yet she could not help feeling a strange thrill of satisfaction to think that their deaths would probably occur within a very few days of each other. She could not have told why she felt so; but she had loved and respected this man beyond all others; loved him, perhaps, far more than she had ever admitted to herself. Had he been other than what he was, a Roman Catholic priest, Cecilia Harmer's life might have turned out a very different one.

The letter began with his usual greeting and benediction; it went on:—

> "My days, my dear sister, are drawing fast to a close; yours also, I learn from my brother Eustace, are, as might be expected from your great age, nearly numbered; and you will shortly reap the benefit of all your sacrifices and efforts for the cause of God's holy Church here upon earth. I cannot write at great length, for my strength is failing fast; but there is one thought which weighs heavily upon me, and prevents my feeling

that all my work here upon earth is finished. My greatest object in life has been to strengthen and magnify our great and glorious Church. In several cases I have, by the blessing of the holy Saints, succeeded in aiding this great work. In your own case, owing to the noble devotion which you have manifested—and for which your future reward is certain—a property, originally largely derived from the Church, has been preserved from falling into the hands of her enemies. At first you expressed by letter to me the repugnance you felt to destroying the document which would have so willed it away. These scruples you will remember, I respected, although I considered them misplaced; but I would not force the tenderest conscience, and I have forborne in my letters, to urge you upon this point. I find, however, from Father Eustace, that these scruples have still lingered, and that he believes you have up to this time omitted to destroy the will. But I now feel that this step has become necessary. At your death my dear sister, the property must be sold, and the purchaser will not improbably pull down the house; the will must then be found, and the labour of your life frustrated. It is, therefore, essential that you should now reveal the hiding-place of the will. This I myself have never asked you, but I suppose it is in the secret chamber where you told me that many years ago your ancestors were in the habit of concealing the persecuted servants of our Church. This secret I have confided to Father Boniface. He is entirely in my confidence, so much so, that I have urgently recommended his appointment to this See at my death. I have deputed him especially for the purpose, as it would be better, should any inquiry ever be made, that Father Eustace, who is likely to be suspected, should be able to affirm truly that he had never seen it. I have other reasons into which I cannot now enter, for selecting Father Boniface to perform this service in his place. As I before told you, although I cannot agree with your scruples, I am yet willing to respect them; and, therefore, as you feel that you would not like the will to be destroyed, I promise most solemnly to you on the faith of a bishop of the Church, and of a dying man, that it shall not be destroyed, but shall be placed among the papers of the monastery here, where it will never be disturbed or discovered. My doctor gives me only a week of life. Father Boniface will travel night and day, and can only stay a few hours with you, and I trust that I shall be spared until his return. And now, sister, farewell."

The letter concluded with numberless blessings and farewells, and was signed Ravenna ✠.

Miss Harmer read this letter through twice with great deliberation, so much so indeed, that her visitor moved uneasily several times upon her chair.

"You know the contents of this letter, Father Boniface?" she asked at length.

"I do, Miss Harmer, it was written in my presence."

"And you agree that the will is likely to be found?"

"Unquestionably, Miss Harmer. The trustees to whom you have devised the property for the benefit of the Church must sell it; and when the house is pulled down, as it is certain to be ere long, the will will be discovered, grievous loss and scandal brought upon the church, and discredit upon your memory."

"The bishop has promised me that it shall not be destroyed," Miss Harmer said, hesitatingly.

"I ratify that promise, Miss Harmer. Should I return too late, and our dear friend be no more, I promise you that the will shall be preserved in the way he mentions."

Miss Harmer was silent for some time, and then said—

"Father Boniface, before you search for the will, I must tell you, that it is my solemn conviction that the spirit of my brother keeps watch over that will."

"Any spirit that there be who would prevent this work being completed," the priest said gravely, "must needs be an evil spirit, and such, I, acting in the Church's behalf, do not fear. Tell me where it is that I may at once perform my errand."

"I do not know, remember, that the will is in existence. I have never looked for it, and have all along said with truth that I know nothing of it. But, if it be in existence, I believe that it is placed in a secret hiding-place in the chamber, to which you know the means of entrance; going up from that room to what was my brother's room, is another flight of stairs, go up five steps and you are standing upon the secret hiding-place; look closely by the side of the step, and you will see a small projection; press that, and the step will open by itself. You are not afraid, father?"

"I am not," the priest said, rising and taking a candle in his hand. "In a good cause the servant of the Church fears not the powers of evil." And with these words she was gone.

There was not a moment to be lost, the time had flown by terribly fast, and terrible had been the effort to speak quietly and collectively when every pulse throbbed with excitement and impatience; but she had the secret at last.

With rapid, but noiseless steps, she sped down the stairs. The hall was empty. She knelt down upon the hearth with breathless eagerness; the tongue of the iron dog was unscrewed, and the spring clicked in another instant; then a trembling passing of the fingers at the back of the

mantel piece; in a few moments she felt the projecting nob, and the door swung round on its hinges beside her. Taking up her candle, she flew up the narrow steps; she had no fear now of interruption from below, for no one passing through the hall would notice that open door in the fireplace. Up the first flight, into the secret chamber, and then up again. She knelt down upon the third step, and then looked at the wall by the step above her. The slight projection was visible, she pressed it, and the step rolled back, and disclosed a sort of receptacle, the width of the stair, and about a foot deep, filled with papers. She turned these over, her breath held, her hands trembling with excitement, her eyes staring and wild. The first three or four which she threw out were leases and deeds; the next that she came to was a bulky packet endorsed upon its back —*The last Will and Testament of Herbert Harmer*. Sophy seized it with a short sharp cry of delight, and then hurried down into the hall again. She closed the iron door behind her; blew out the candle, placed it on the table; and then opened the hall door, and without hat or covering on her head she flew down the drive at the top of her speed. She had it then at last, after all these years; it was hers, hers and her boy's! and Sophy with the greatest difficulty repressed the wild cries of delight which rose to her lips. Once past the lodge she kept on at her full speed towards the village, but when she reached the top of the hill she paused to listen. Below her she could see the bright lamps of an approaching vehicle, and in the still night air could hear the noise of a vehicle coming up the hill, and a man's voice urging the horse to his best speed. So she was only just in time. Father Eustace had returned. She hid herself behind a hedge, and as they came along, she could tell by the laboured breathing of the horse how fast he had been driven, and she could even catch what the men, who were walking up the hill to relieve it, were saying. The first voice she heard was that of the priest.

"It is most extraordinary, Thomas; I cannot understand it. That I should be sent for over to Sittingbourne was annoying enough; but I thought that was only a foolish trick, though who would have taken the trouble to play it upon me I cannot imagine: but now that we find the house locked up, and Mary gone, I can still less understand what it means, especially as in the hasty search I gave I found nothing missing."

"Perhaps she has gone out to see some friend in the village," the man suggested.

"But I tell you, Thomas, she has left the clothes which she wore in her room; and more extraordinary still, there is the black wig which I have observed she wore laying on the bed. It is most singular and looks like a deep plot of some sort or other."

"But why are you going up to Harmer Place, sir?" the groom asked. "Surely they will know nothing about it there?"

"I cannot say," the priest said anxiously. "There Thomas, we are at the top of the hill now! Jump up again!"

And so they went on; and Sophy came out and continued her flight down the steep hill at the top of her speed, and far faster than she could have run in her ordinary attire. Going through the village, she went more quietly—not that she feared interruption, for it was eleven now, and the village was all asleep, but she wanted to husband her powers. As she walked she took off the stiff collar which pressed on her neck, and directly she was past the houses she began to run again at a speed of which at ordinary times she would have been incapable, but which in her present state of excitement and exultation seemed nothing to her.

She had been only just in time; it had taken longer than she had expected, for she had hoped to have reached Canterbury before she met the priest, when she would have gone straight to a lawyer whom she had known in the old times, and deposited the precious document in his hands. She had before determined that if pressed for time she would conceal the will in a thicket and suffer herself to be taken; but all this was forgotten now—her brain had held up thus far, but it was failing her. The only impulse in her mind was that of flight, that and a fierce determination to defend the will to the last. As she ran, she felt in her pocket to see that a pistol she had placed there was safe. She took it out, and with it in one hand and the will in the other, she ran on past the great mill and on over the bridge out into the long straight road to Canterbury.

CHAPTER XIII.

A VAIN PURSUIT.

For nearly a mile Sophy ran, hope and excitement lending her unnatural strength and speed. Then for a little time she broke into a walk, drawing her breath in short quick sobs. She looked round as she stopped running, but there was no light on the road behind her, nothing to tell of pursuit. Before she had walked a hundred yards, she again turned, and far behind her along the straight road she saw the two bright lights, and felt that it was the gig in pursuit, felt, too, that she could never reach Canterbury before she was overtaken. She turned again to run, for her only thought now was of flight. On one side of the road ran a deep dyke full of water, on the other the country was open, so that had she thought of leaving the road and concealing herself, she could still have done so. But no such thought entered her mind; her only hope was to gain the town in time, or if overtaken to defend the will with her life. Could she have run with her former speed, she would have been there, but her breath came short and hard, and she could scarcely

keep at a pace beyond a walk. Once or twice she looked wildly over her shoulder. The lights gained fast, terribly fast, upon her; she had not much farther to go, but she felt that before that little was past, the gig would be up to her. She could hear the sound of wheels, and of the galloping horse behind her, but the barracks were close to her now, and if she could but enter them she would be safe; but the gig was gaining too fast upon her, and as she reached the corner of the barracks it was just behind her. She stopped suddenly in the middle of the road, and before the horse could be pulled up he was almost upon her. She levelled her pistol and fired in his face; she did not wound him, but startled, by the flash and report close to his eyes, the animal reared up, struck wildly out with its forefeet, and then wheeling round, dashed back at full speed, along the road it had come. Sophy continued her flight: on through the turnpike the bar of which stood across the road; along by the side of the long iron railings, and past the closed entrance to the cavalry barracks; she could hear her pursuers behind her again, but feeble and slow as her pace was now, she felt that she was saved. Breathless and faint, stumbling and nearly falling, she held on as far as the gate of the infantry barracks. It was open, and a party of officers were just coming in from the town.

She was but just in time; for she could hear footsteps following fast behind her, for on reaching the gate Father Eustace had not waited for it to be opened, but had leaped out and had run on on foot. Sophy did not hesitate a moment, but rushed in among the group of officers. She clung to the one nearest to her, with a hoarse cry, and panted out, "Save me! I am a woman; I am Mr. Harmer's grand-daughter, and this is his will: don't give it up—don't let him have it—don't let"—and Sophy sank in a lifeless heap at the officers' feet. When she first began to speak, there had been a general exclamation of astonishment, but now they all clustered round her, and the eldest of them raised her from the ground. He had hardly done so, when the group was broken again, and Father Eustace burst in among them: "I charge you to deliver that man up to me; he is a thief—he has stolen a deed, a document of value. Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, seeing it in the hand of the officer, into whose hold Sophy had thrust it when she came in, and who still retained it in his hand, although hardly knowing that he did so, so surprised and bewildered were they all by this strange scene.

"You have it—give it to me, sir," and he made an effort to snatch at it.

"No, no, sir," the officer said. "The priest or woman, or whatever it is, begged me to keep it, and I don't even know that it belongs to you; what do you say, major?"

"Certainly not," said the officer who was porting Sophy; "by no means, Featherstone. This is a serious matter."

Father Eustace again made an effort to possess himself of the will. He saw the labour of years slipping from him now, and he would have stopped at nothing to regain the will. He again pushed forward, exclaiming—

"It is my paper—it is my paper; she has stolen it. You dare not keep it from me."

"Stand back, sir," the young officer who was holding the will said, "or else, priest or no priest, down you go."

"Sir," the major said, "violence will do no good here, nor are we likely to be alarmed at your threats. This is a very serious affair. I was stationed here eight years ago, and I was then often over at Mr. Harmer's, and knew his grand-daughter well. I do not know whether this person dressed as a man is she, but I have heard that she ran away many years ago, and that at Mr. Harmer's death the will which would have made her his heiress was missing. For aught I know that paper which she has just brought in may be the will after all. Hold it up to the light, Featherstone, and see what it says."

"By Jove, major!" the young officer said, examining it, "it is endorsed 'The last will and testament of Herbert Harmer,' sure enough."

"It is a forgery," the priest broke out, "it is an infamous forgery. I insist on having it. I warn you at your peril, sir, to detain it."

"I will take the risk of that, sir," the major said coolly; "and as you say it was stolen from you, it is evident that the forgery, if it be one, was not committed by this person here. Your own words convict you, sir. There, say no more. My name is Charteris—Major Charteris, and any charge you may bring against this lady, for so I believe her to be, I will be responsible that she shall appear to answer it, and I will hold this will till it is proved who is the proper person to take charge of it. I have nothing more to say, sir. Hankey, help me to carry this lady up to my rooms. Leighton, I wish you would run up to the mess-room, and ask the doctor to come round to my quarters at once."

And so the officers moved off in a body, talking among themselves of the strange event, the two priests, one a woman, and the will, which seemed of such importance. "'Pon my soul, it's quite a romance;" and so talking they went up towards their barracks, leaving the priest standing, rigid and ghastly, looking after them. How long he might have stood there, with a strange whirl of despairing thoughts surging up in his heart, I cannot say. He stood there till the sergeant of the guard who had heard all that had passed, after speaking to him twice, and receiving no answer, came up and touched him on the shoulder, and said—

"I am going to close the gate, sir."

The priest looked at him for a moment as if not understanding him, then he threw up his hands despairingly, and with a low moaning cry, turned round and went out as if in a dream. Mechanically he got up into his gig which was standing there, and then with a wild hopeless look in his eyes, he cowered down, while his servant drove the weary horse off into the darkness again.

Major Charteris was a married man, and his wife at once took charge of Sophy, and with the maid's assistance undressed the insensible woman and put her into bed, by which time the doctor arrived. But it was a long time before she showed any signs of returning consciousness.

Presently the major went down into the mess-room where the other officers were sitting, discussing this singular adventure, smoking many cigars and pipes over their consultation, and making various bets as to the result. His entrance was greeted with a shout—

"Well, major, how is the fair priest?"

"She is very ill," the major said seriously, "she has recovered from her faint, but she is quite unconscious, and the doctor talks about brain fever."

"Is she Mr. Harmer's grand-daughter, major?"

"I cannot say for certain, Featherstone, although I should think that she is, but she is so changed I should not have known her again in the least; besides, all her hair is cut close."

"Let us hear all you know about it, major. What was the will about?"

"I left here nearly a year before Mr. Harmer's death, so I do not know much about it. But I remember at that time it was stated that he had left his property between this girl, whose name was Sophy, and the children of a Dr. Ashleigh. By the way, that reminds me, I met Miss Ashleigh in the High Street only yesterday. I knew her again directly, and some one told me she was living with an old woman named Mapleback—no Mapleside, or something of that sort, in the terrace looking over the market. I know she was a great friend of Sophy's, for we used to talk a good deal about it at that time, as this Sophy was the great heiress of the county. I will go up at once, and get her to come down to the poor woman."

"But, major, it is half-past twelve."

"I can't help that," the major said; "it is right the poor woman, whether she be this Sophy or not, should have her friends by her if possible; besides, if this will is correct—which I have no doubt, or the priest would not be so anxious about it—it is but right that Miss Ashleigh should know of it, as if I remember rightly her share is twenty or thirty thousand pounds."

"By Jove!" one of them said, as the major went out, "I wish that some one would wake me up to-night and tell me I had come into a fortune."

And so they continued talking the matter over while Major Charteris went down into the town.

It was about one o'clock when I was woke up by a loud knocking at the door. I thought it must be a mistake, but after a minute it was repeated. I got up and went to the window, and heard Hannah moving overhead. In another minute I heard her throw up her window and ask,—

"What is the matter?"

Then I heard a man's voice below saying,—

"I am really very sorry to disturb you, but does not Miss Ashleigh live here?"

"Yes she does," Hannah said; "but what do you want at this time of night?"

"My name is Major Charteris. I must speak to Miss Ashleigh at once. It is a matter of great importance, almost of life and death, or I would not disturb her at this hour. Please give her my message."

I had struck a light by this time, and began dressing hurriedly. What could he want? what could be the matter? I opened the door and called out to Hannah to put on her things at once, and that I would be ready in five minutes. I do not think I was ever so puzzled in my life as I was while I was dressing at that time. I could not form the slightest conjecture what it could be about—not the slightest. If I had not heard him speak, and listened to his regular tramp as he walked up and down outside, I should have thought that he must have been drinking, and that all this must be some tipsy frolic. But the earnest, steady tones of his voice precluded the possibility of this supposition; and I really could form no other. I do not think I was more than five minutes dressing, and putting my hair in a net, and just as I was ready I heard Hannah coming downstairs. I went out of my room, and down into the parlour. I lit the two candles on the mantelpiece, and then stood anxiously waiting while Hannah unbolted the front door; in another minute the major entered.

"Miss Ashleigh," he began at once, "I had the pleasure of knowing you some years ago, and I trust that you are assured that I would not needlessly disturb you at this time of the night; but I am sure you will excuse my so doing when you know the cause. You were once great friends, I believe, with Mr. Harmer's grand-daughter,—do you know where she is now?"

"I must first know why you ask, Major Charteris."

"I ask, because at the present moment there is a woman in my quarters in barracks; how she got there I will tell you presently—she is in charge of my wife. She says she is Mr. Harmer's grand-daughter; but whether truly or not, I cannot say. If she is, she is so much altered that I should not have known her."

"Yes, yes," I said, "no doubt it is Sophy. I know she is in this part of the country; but what is the matter with her? and how came she in the barracks?"

"She came in for refuge, Miss Ashleigh; she was dressed as a Roman Catholic priest."

"As a priest!" I exclaimed, astonished.

"Yes, indeed, Miss Ashleigh; and what is most curious, she was followed by a real priest, to escape from whom she took refuge in the barracks; I should not have disturbed you, but she has had a fainting fit, and is now delirious; and I am afraid, by what our doctor says, in a state of great danger. It struck me that you, being connected with Mr. Harmer, might know if it were really his grand-daughter, and, if so, might wish to come to her; so I thought it my duty to come and inform you at once, in spite of the strangeness of the hour."

"I am very much obliged to you, Major Charteris," I said, "very much. Poor Sophy, what must she have gone through! So this is the end of her search."

"Although I do not know, Miss Ashleigh, exactly to what you allude, I believe from what I know of the circumstances, and from what the poor lady said to-night, that one consequence has arisen which will, I think, affect you. I have in my rooms a document which she brought with her, and which seemed to be the object of the priest's pursuit. It purports to be the will of the late Mr. Harmer."

"The lost will!" I exclaimed, sitting down in utter astonishment. "Is it possible that Sophy has at last found Mr. Harmer's will?"

"She has, indeed, Miss Ashleigh; at least if I may judge from the appearance and the endorsement upon it. I believe I have to congratulate you upon its discovery—have I not?"

"You may, indeed," I said. "It leaves me a fortune. However, at present I must think of poor Sophy. I should like to go to her, Major Charteris, very much."

"Mrs. Charteris begged me to say that she hoped you would do so, Miss Ashleigh. Indeed your presence would be a great relief to her, and would take the responsibility off her shoulders. My wife will endeavour to make it as comfortable for you as possible."

"Thank you very much, major; I will go with you at once. Will you be kind enough to wait a few minutes while I awake Mrs. Mapleside, and explain to her what has happened."

Major Charteris assented, and I went out into the hall, where Hannah had, according to my instructions, waited during the interview, and I astonished her, even more than she had been before, by telling her to go upstairs and put on her things, for that she was to go up to the barracks with me at once. I believe she thought I was mad, and I was obliged to leave her in that belief, as I had no time to enter into explanations with her on this subject. Then I went up to Mrs. Mapleside's door, and knocked. I was a long time making her hear, for she was a heavy sleeper, and had not been disturbed by all this noise and confusion. When I did make her hear, and she got up and unlocked her door and let me in, I had the greatest difficulty in assuring her that the house was not on fire. Her fears on that point allayed, I had still greater trouble in explaining to her what was really the matter; that Sophy Gregory was lying dangerously ill in the barracks, and that the will was found. All this was for a long time quite incomprehensible to Mrs. Mapleside, who did not know that Sophy was in that part of the country, or that I had seen or heard from her for years.

When she was at last made to understand it, and to know that I was going to inherit a fortune after all, the dear old lady got into the wildest state of excitement and congratulation, and was only calmed down by my speaking of Sophy's illness; after that I had great difficulty in dissuading her from getting up and accompanying me. However, at last I quieted her, and arranged to take Hannah with me, and to send her back at seven o'clock in the morning.

I also impressed very seriously upon her that it was absolutely necessary that she should not breathe a word of all this to a soul; we should endeavour to arrange the whole affair with as little scandal and talk as possible, and therefore it would be most distasteful to all our feelings if the thing was to get abroad. The old lady promised secrecy, and on this occasion I believe really kept her word.

I dressed myself quickly, and then went out with Hannah and the major, and walked to the barracks. On the way the major related at length to me all the occurrences of the night, and from what he told me I could nearly guess how it had all come about.

It felt very strange walking through the streets at that time of night; the major had indeed volunteered to call them up at one of the hotels and get a vehicle for me, but I knew that this would take at least an hour, and so I preferred, strange as it was, walking; it felt still more strange going into the barracks. However, when Major Charteris introduced me to his wife, who received me very kindly, and at once took me in to the room where Sophy was lying, all feelings of strangeness past off, and I forgot everything in the poor girl before me. She was in a terrible

state of delirium, and it was at times almost more than Hannah and I could do to keep her down. Her appearance was shocking: her pale cheeks, with a patch of red in their centres, her wild staring eyes, her closely cut hair, the strange streaks of paint upon her face, made her dreadful to see; while her wild screams of terror as she tried to fly from some pursuer, rang in my ears for weeks. All night long she continued to rehearse what she had gone through the evening before. Now she was arguing with Miss Harmer, now discovering the will, then listening to the pursuing gig, and then her screams would break out again, and she would writhe in agonies of terror. It was a dreadful night, and I shall never forget it. The doctor never left the room, and Mrs. Charteris came in from time to time, and brought me in some tea, for which I felt very grateful. Towards morning the powerful opiates which the doctor had given her began to take effect, and she sank into a troubled doze.

It was quite impossible, of course, to think of Sophy being moved, and I was very sorry for the dreadful trouble to which we were putting our kind entertainers. However, they would not hear of its being any inconvenience to them, and as it was evident that it might be some considerable time before she could be moved, they gave us up entire possession of their rooms, and moved into the quarters of another married officer in the same building, who happened to be away on leave with his wife. At seven o'clock I sent Hannah home, and got a regular nurse to come in and be with me. I should, I think, have sent for Polly, but she was daily expecting her confinement, and I was to have gone up the very next day to have stayed with her.

At eight o'clock in the morning I sent up a telegram to Mr. Petersfield, asking him to come down to me by the first train, as the will was found, and telling him that he would find me by inquiring for Major Charteris, at the barracks. He came down soon after one o'clock. He was astonished at the will being found, and was, I believe, almost as pleased as I was at the discovery. He was most anxious to know how it was found, and I told him all I knew about Sophy's coming down in disguise and entering into the service of Father Eustace, also what I had gleaned from her ravings during the night, and the fact of her pursuit and taking refuge in the barracks.

Mr. Petersfield was delighted with the story, and said that it was a thousand pities that she had not been born a detective.

We then proceeded to business, and the will was formally opened by Mr. Petersfield, in the presence of Major and Mrs. Charteris, the doctor, and myself. The lawyer at once declared it to be the genuine document, as he knew the handwriting in which it was drawn up, and could swear to the signatures of his late partner, and of a clerk, still in his office, who were the attesting witnesses. It was couched precisely in the terms which Mr. Harmer had told papa years before, £20,000 to various charities, and the rest, about £150,000, half to Sophy, and the remaining half between Harry, Polly, and me. The only proviso in it with which we were not previously acquainted was, that Harmer Place, with the exception of the chapel, was to be pulled down. The estate itself was specially mentioned as part of Sophy's share, she might sell it if she wished, but if she resided there it was to be in a new house, which he expressly provided was not to be called Harmer Place.

When Mr. Petersfield had finished, he folded up the will, came over and shook my hand, and congratulated me formally, and said that he hoped to continue to act for me as his firm had done so many years for this estate. I laughed, and said that I thought I had sufficient confidence in him to intrust it to his care. He then asked me what I should wish in the matter. I said that at any rate I should wish nothing done until Miss Harmer's death, that she was not expected to live for a week, and that she must not be disturbed; but with that exception I gave him *carte blanche*.

He said that in that case, as soon as he heard of Miss Harmer's death, he should proceed to prove the will, and that he should then notify the firm in London who had acted as the Miss Harmers' solicitors since their brother's death, that the will was in his hands, and that they could inspect it at his office; and he should call upon them to deliver up all the late Mr. Harmer's property in conformity with its provisions, with all accumulations.

I objected to this last point, but Mr. Petersfield pointed out to me that Miss Harmer had certainly not spent more than her own income, and that, therefore, the interest of all this property had been accumulating, and would, if we did not claim it, undoubtedly go by her will to the Romish Church. To this I assented, and he returned to London the same evening in the highest spirits, taking the will with him.

I wrote that afternoon to Polly, telling her the news, and congratulating her as well as myself upon it, and saying that could I have left Sophy, I would have gone up to London at once. I also wrote to Ada, who would I knew be as pleased at the great discovery as I was myself, as it removed any possible feeling of dislike on the part of Lady Desborough to my marriage with Percy, which now promised to turn out, after all, to the satisfaction of all parties.

CHAPTER XIV.

ENJOYING THE SPOILS.

For a long week Sophy Gregory lay between life and death, and the doctors who attended her

thought very badly of her case, and doubted much whether—even if, contrary to their expectation, she should ever recover from her illness, and regain her bodily strength—her intellect would not be hopelessly shattered from the effect of the terrible strain it had undergone.

I do not know how I should ever have supported the responsibility and anxiety of that week's watching, had it not been that on the second day of her illness Sophy uttered, in her ravings, a name which I remembered directly I heard it as that of the woman who had brought her up in childhood, and with whom she had stayed for some days when she first came down to Sturry. In her delirium Sophy called wildly to Mammy Green to save and hide her. She plaintively recalled her childish days, and besought her, for the sake of their love in those times, to shelter and protect her.

I immediately sent over to Sturry to her, asking her to come at once, and take charge of her foster-child.

Mrs. Green had been in a terrible state of anxiety, for all sorts of vague rumours were afloat in the village of the strange doings up at the Hall, and of the flight, and pursuit by the priest, concerning the reason for which, even the servant who had driven Father Eustace was ignorant. All that he knew was, "that they had been sent over to Sittingbourne on a fool's errand; and that when they reached home his fellow-servant was found to be missing. That they had then driven up to Harmer Place, and his master had gone in telling him to wait, and had returned in two or three minutes in a state of the greatest excitement, had jumped into the gig, and had told him to drive as hard as he could; and that he believed, from what he said, they were in pursuit of the missing servant. They had not, however, seen anything of her; but when they were nearly at Canterbury, a man, or a boy, he could not say which, who was running before them, had suddenly turned round and fired a pistol in the horse's face. This man had afterwards taken refuge in the barracks, and Father Eustace had gone in after him. What had happened there he could not say: he only knew that his master came out shortly, and did not speak while they drove back to the village, but looked, he thought, quite queer, and cut-up like. Father Eustace had got out at the door, had left him to put the horse up—which the poor thing wanted badly enough, for he had never done such a day's work in his life—and had gone up to the Hall, where he remained till morning."

Nor could the servants at Harmer Place give Mrs. Green any account of Sophy. They knew that something strange had taken place, but what they could not say. "A strange priest had arrived, and had, by her orders, been shown up to Miss Harmer's room; that was about half-past seven, and they heard nothing more of him till near eleven. Then the bell had rang violently, and the servant, on answering it, had found Miss Harmer alone, to her great surprise, for no one had heard the priest go out. Her mistress had asked her if she had seen him, and she had answered that she had not, and had thought he was with her mistress. Miss Harmer had appeared very much agitated, and had told her to call another servant, and to go down into the hall, and that they would find a sort of door open by the side of the fireplace, and a flight of steps; they were to call out loudly at the bottom of these, and if they received no answer, were to come up to tell her.

"Rather scared, thinking that their mistress had gone out of her mind, and wondering over the mysterious disappearance of the strange priest, the women had done as she had ordered, but had found no signs of the door she spoke of, and had gone up, with white faces, to tell their mistress so. Miss Harmer had been still more agitated, and had said to herself, 'He must have let the door close behind him, and cannot open it from the inside;' and then, after a minute, wrung her hands and cried out, 'Oh, my dream! my dream! What has happened to him? has it been as I thought? has the spirit——' and then she had broken off, and told them to dress her somewhat, and to call the men-servants, for that she must be carried down into the hall at once. Greatly scared by all this strange mystery, and believing that their mistress was delirious, they were still afraid to disobey her, and had just commenced carrying out her instructions, when Father Eustace arrived. He had at once gone up into Miss Harmer's room, and had a short conversation with her; what had been its import the servants could not tell, but both parties seemed greatly excited. The priest had then run downstairs again, very pale, and evidently much agitated, had called for a light, knelt down at the hall fireplace, picked up one of the iron dogs'-tongues which was lying on the hearth, and pushed it into its place; he had then risen, and put his hand up the chimney, and immediately a small door, that none of them had ever seen before, had flown open by the side of the fireplace. Father Eustace had snatched up the candle, and ran up some steps which went up behind it; he had been away a minute or two, and then came down again, looking out of his senses, and rushed wildly upstairs to Miss Harmer's room. He had only stayed there a moment, and said a word or two to her; but their mistress had given a terrible cry, and fallen back like dead upon her bed, while the priest had run downstairs again, calling to them to look to Miss Harmer, had leapt into the gig, and driven off again, telling his servant to drive for his life." This was all they knew; what it was all about they could not even guess; but judging from the priest's and their mistress's faces, something very terrible. As to Father Eustace's maid-servant, they knew nothing, and indeed had not heard until the next day that she was missing.

Mrs. Green had therefore remained in a state of terrible anxiety concerning Sophy, until she received my summons; and, bad as the reality was, she almost felt it a relief after the agony of suspense she had before endured. She came over immediately to the barracks, and at once took the responsibility off my hands, never leaving her night or day, and nursing her with a mother's tenderness; and as Sophy had, besides, the nurse I had before engaged, my services could be now, to a certain extent, dispensed with, and I was therefore enabled to go back of an evening to Mrs. Mapleside's, and to sleep there, returning to take my place by Sophy's bedside early in the

morning. But still it was a terrible week, believing, as I did, that her illness could have but one termination, or that at best—if it could be called best—even should her life be spared, that her reason was gone for ever.

But God in His infinite mercy willed it otherwise.

At the end of a week Sophy fell into a long sleep, so quiet and still, that I several times leaned over her to see that she still breathed. This sleep the doctors said was the crisis of her illness, and upon the state in which she woke depended her life and reason.

Very long she lay so; the time seeming even longer than it was, to us watching by her side, longing for, and yet fearing, her waking. At last she moved slightly, and her eyes opened. I leant over her and saw that she knew me.

"Do not try to talk, dear," I said; "you have been ill, but are better now, do not trouble about anything. I am here to watch you, and your kind nurse, Mrs. Green, is beside you."

The old woman gently took one of Sophy's hands in her own; she could not speak, for she was crying now with joy and thankfulness.

Sophy gave a very faint smile of pleasure and recognition, and then taking a little medicine, which the doctor had prepared in readiness for her waking, she closed her eyes, and was soon again asleep.

A great burden was lifted from our hearts, for the doctor said that he had every hope now, for that nature had made a wonderful effort, that he believed she was saved, body and mind.

This time she slept about two hours, and when she woke, even my unpractised eye could see that she was decidedly better than before.

After the first faint look of pleased recognition at Mrs. Green and myself, and a little pressure of the fingers we held in ours, she lay quite quiet, but with her eyes open as if thinking. Then they wandered over the room as if in vague wonder as to where she was. Presently she spoke in a voice which sounded strangely low and weak, after the loud ravings and terrible screams of the past week.

"Where am I? What has happened?"

"You have been very ill, darling," I said soothingly, "but you will be better now. Do not wonder or trouble about anything; you are with friends, and when you get strong enough, you shall hear all about it."

She was quiet for a while again, and lay with no expression beyond a thoughtful wonder in her eyes, gradually she closed them again, and I hoped that she was going to doze off. But presently they opened suddenly, and she said, in a voice so loud and sharp in comparison with that in which she had before spoken, that it quite startled me, "Where is the will?"

"It is quite safe, dearest; all is well; do not think more about it now, you shall hear all in good time."

Sophy lay quiet for a while, but I could see that she was not satisfied; and then she asked again, "where is it?"

"In Mr. Petersfield's hands, dear, so you need not feel uneasy about it. It will never be lost again."

A look of pleasure came across Sophy's face. "Thank God," she murmured, and then closed her eyes, and was soon asleep again.

From that time Sophy recovered rapidly; in ten days she was able to be removed from barracks, and in a month was strong enough to be taken up to London, to stay with me at Polly's, where her little boy was to meet her.

Upon the very day when life was coming back to Sophy, and she was snatched as it were from the grasp of death, Miss Harmer passed away.

How she died I never heard, but I have no doubt bravely and trustfully. She had, according to her light, fought for eighty years, a good fight, and had held the faith; and although the battle was in the end lost, and the purpose of her life frustrated, still I doubt not that she died, if angry and grieved, as I can well believe she was, at the failure of the schemes from which she had hoped so much, yet of good conscience and a fair hope that she would reap the reward of a life spent in the service of her beloved Church, and at length, after her long weary life's struggle, attain peace in the world to come.

Mr. Petersfield, at her death, wrote to her lawyers, inclosing a copy of the will, and took the necessary steps for proving it. Of course delays and difficulties arose, but as there was no one to oppose, it took less time to arrange matters than might have been anticipated, more especially with respect to the accumulations. But it appeared, that strangely enough—probably with the constant dread before her eyes, that the secret would be some day supernaturally disclosed to Polly, and the will discovered—Miss Harmer had never touched one penny of the rents or interest arising from the property left by her brother; but by her direction a separate account had been opened at the bank, to which these moneys had been regularly paid in, and in these seven years the property had accumulated to nearly a third more than the original account. In consequence

our shares had increased from £25,000 each to over £32,000.

From the order and regularity with which everything had been kept, and the absence of any opposition whatever, in about two months from the time of Miss Harmer's death, Mr. Petersfield, who had exerted himself very much in the matter, told us that it now only required our signatures to obtain our respective shares of the property.

Mr. Petersfield besides acting as our man of business in the affair, was one of the executors; for Mr. Ransome and papa, who were the two originally named, being both dead, he, with James Fielding, who was appointed at Sophy's request, acted as executors, and arranged the whole business with as little trouble to us as possible.

In accordance with the terms of the will, as soon as we were fairly in possession, Harmer Place was ordered to be pulled down, and the estate, which was part of Sophy's share, was by her wishes, soon afterwards advertised to be sold.

And so at last we were really rich. I could hardly believe that it was true; for I had for so long given up all hopes of ever finding the will. However, I was very glad for all our sakes that it was so, and I was very pleased to think that dear Polly was now placed beyond all possibility of a reverse of fortune; for Charley insisted on executing a deed settling the whole of her share upon her; not, as he said, that he had any reason to fear such an event—for he was doing a capital business—still it was as well to be prepared for all possible eventualities.

And so Sophy and I left Canterbury together, but with very different feelings in so doing. I with some little regret, for I dearly loved the old town where I had lived so many happy years; and to which I had gone back as to a haven of rest, in the time of my great sorrow. How different were my feelings now from those with which I had come down little more than a year before! Then I believed that all hope was for ever dead, that my life, as far as pleasure and happiness were concerned was over; and that the most I could ever look forward to or strive for, was a chastened content in my lonely life. But now how bright was my prospect! with Percy alive and soon to return, with every obstacle to our union cleared away, with a happy, happy future with him to look forward to! And yet, happy as I was, as I looked from the window of the train, and caught the last sight of the dear old town, and its stately cathedral, I could not help a little sigh of regret at leaving it, and all the friends who had been so kind to me in my hour of sadness.

But with Sophy it was quite otherwise, and she gave what she told me was a sigh of relief at leaving it for ever behind. The place was to her hateful, every association connected with it full of pain, and she felt happy in the thought that she was leaving it never to return.

Polly and Charley received us joyfully at Putney, and I was very, very glad to be with them. Polly was a mother now, a son having been born to her a few days after the will was found. The meeting between Sophy and her child was very pitiful; she kissed him and cried over him, while the little fellow, in his joy at seeing her again, could not understand her tears, and could only stroke her thin cheeks and say, "Don't cry, mammy; mammy has got her little Jamie again, she must not cry any more."

Sophy stayed with us for a week, and then took rooms near us. She was still pale and weak, and did not gain strength as she should have done. She never spoke of the past, except upon one occasion before we came up to town, when she related to me the whole circumstances of her finding the will; except on that occasion she never mentioned the past, and the slightest allusion to it excited a nervous horror in her, and greatly retarded her recovery. The medical men said that her brain had not recovered from the terrible strain upon it, and that a perfect change was necessary, and a total absence of anything which might, by recalling the past, tend to excite her.

Accordingly, about two months after coming up to town, she started for the continent, taking with her a maid, and a young lady as governess for her little boy, and companion to herself, and accompanied by James Fielding and his wife, who were only going for a short time, but who took charge of her as far as Florence, which was her destination, at any rate for the present.

Her letters tell me that she is much better, and that she is happy with her boy. She has spent a fortnight with her old friends, leaving her companion and maid at Florence, and living with them as before as one of themselves. I earnestly hope that this improvement may continue, and that Sophy may have happy days yet in store for her. Poor girl, she has indeed suffered sorely, and has paid dearly for the fault she committed. And yet I have always thought that the fault was not all hers, and that had it not been for the harsh verdict of society against her, she would never have fallen so easy a victim to the snares of Robert Gregory, at a time when her wounded feelings led her to cling to any one who would show her kindness. However, I may be mistaken. Society certainly never took any of the blame of her misdeeds upon itself, and she alone has paid the penalty. I trust that that penalty is now paid in full, and that her future life may in some sort atone to her for the unhappiness of the past.

In due course I received a letter from Harry, in answer to mine announcing the recovery of the will. He said that he was delighted to hear of it, not so much for his own sake as for that of his wife, for that the climate of Australia did not suit her; the hot winds and sudden changes were very trying to her constitution, and he should therefore, as soon as he could be relieved, return to England, and carry out his original plan of buying a partnership in a good firm in London.

And now I have only myself to speak of, and in that I shall be exceedingly brief. My happiness is far too great to speak of—too perfect to describe.

Little more than a month after I returned to Putney, I received a letter from Percy, now long since become Captain Desborough, saying that he should sail for England by the next mail, that he should, as he had warned me, claim me at once, and that he hoped I would not keep him more than a fortnight waiting.

Although he had not received my letter telling him of my late-found wealth, yet he knew that there would be no cloud to dim the brightness of our happiness, for he had long since heard from his mother of the determination she had arrived at, on hearing of his being alive, that she would no longer in any way oppose our union. In due time Percy came home. I cannot tell how we met. That happiness is too deep, too sacred to be described.

Percy was somewhat changed, the terrible trials and anxiety he underwent have told upon his constitution, and the doctors have recommended him to leave the army, and to lead a quiet life, at any rate for the present.

To this he has acceded, and intends at the end of his two years' leave of absence to sell out. However, in the short time he has been at home, he has greatly recovered his strength, and will I trust soon be as strong as ever.

He talks of going into Parliament, for Percy is of too energetic a nature to rest content with a life of perfect idleness. Lady Desborough, Ada, and I encourage him in the idea, and, of course, prophesy great things of him.

We have now been married three months. He is sitting beside me, and even with his dear, dear face looking at me I can hardly believe that it is indeed all true, that it is not a mere happy dream.

I have finished my story, such as it is, and glancing over the earlier pages, I can hardly, in my present happiness, believe that they are mine, or understand the sad feelings with which I then wrote it. Were I to begin again now, it would be written in a very different strain; but that cannot be. The occupation of recording my history has served its purpose, and cheered and occupied me at a time when I sorely needed consolation.

Percy is telling me that if I go on writing any more, he shall begin to think he has married a blue-stocking. So I must end now, with a fervent feeling of thankfulness for the great mercies which have been vouchsafed to me; which have dissipated all the dark clouds which hung over me, and have changed an existence which promised to be a very sad one, into a life of as perfect happiness as ever falls to the lot of mortals upon earth.

forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

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