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Frances Eleanor Trollope**

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A CHARMING FELLOW.

BY FRANCES ELEANOR TROLLOPE,

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ETC. ETC.**

In Three Volumes.

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A CHARMING FELLOW.

CHAPTER I.

There was a "scene" that evening at Ivy Lodge—not the less a "scene" in that it was conducted on genteel methods. Mrs. Algernon Errington inflicted on her husband during dinner a recapitulation of all her wrongs and injuries which could be covertly hinted at. She would not broadly speak out her meaning before "the servants." The phrase shaped itself thus in her mind from old habit. But in truth "the servants" were represented by one plump-faced damsel in a yellow print gown, into which her person seemed to have been inserted in the same way that bran is inserted into the cover of a pincushion. She seemed to have been stuffed into it by means of considerable force, and with less reference to the natural shape of her body than to the arbitrary outlines of the case made for it by a Whitford dressmaker.

This girl ministered to her master and mistress during dinner, pouring water and wine, changing knives and plates, handing vegetables, and not unfrequently dropping a spoon or a sprinkling of hot gravy into the laps of her employers. She had succeeded to Slater, who resigned her post after a trial of some six weeks' duration. Castalia, in despair at this desertion, had written to Lady Seely to send her a maid from London forthwith. But to this application she received a reply to the effect that my lady could not undertake to find any one who would suit her niece, and that her ladyship thought Castalia had much better make up her mind to do without a regular lady's-maid, and take some humbler attendant, who would make herself generally useful.

"I always knew Slater wouldn't stay with you," wrote Lady Seely; "and you won't get any woman of that kind to stay. You can't afford to keep one. Your uncle is fairly well; but poor Fido gives me a great deal of unhappiness. He eats nothing."

Not by any means from conviction or submission to the imperious advice of Lady Seely, but under the yoke of stern necessity, Castalia had consented to try a young woman of the neighbourhood, "highly recommended." And this abigail, in her tight yellow gown, was the cause of Mrs. Algernon's reticence during dinner. The poor lady might, however, have spared herself this restraint, if its object were to keep her servants in the dark as to domestic disagreements; for no sooner had Lydia (that was the abigail's name) reached the kitchen, than she and Polly, the cook, began a discussion of Mr. and Mrs. Algernon Errington's private affairs, which displayed a surprising knowledge of very minute details, and an almost equally surprising power of piecing

evidence together.

When Lydia was gone, Algernon lit a cigar and drew up his chair to the fireside, where he sat silent, staring at his elegantly-slippered feet on the fender. Castalia rose, fidgeted about the room, walked to the door, stopped, turned back, and, standing directly opposite to Algernon, said querulously, "Do you mean to remain here?"

"For the present, yes; out of consideration for you. You dislike me to smoke in the drawing-room, do you not?"

"Why should you smoke at all?"

Algernon raised his eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders, crossed one leg over the other, and made no answer. His wife went away, and sitting down alone on a corner of the sofa in her little drawing-room, cried bitterly for a long time.

She was made to raise her tear-stained face by feeling a hand passed gently over her hair. She looked up, and found her husband standing beside her. "What's the matter, little woman?" he asked, in a half-coaxing, half-bantering tone, like one speaking to a naughty child, too young to be seriously reproved or argued with.

Now, although Castalia was haughty by education and insolent by temper, she had very little real pride and no dignity in her character. To be noticed and caressed by Algernon was to her a sufficient compensation for almost any indignity. There was but one passion of her nature which had any chance of resisting his personal influence, and that passion had never yet been fully aroused, although frequently irritated. Her jealousy was like a young tiger that had never yet tasted blood.

"What's the matter, little woman?" repeated Algernon, seating himself beside her, and putting his arm round her waist. She shrugged her shoulders fretfully, but at the same time nestled herself nearer to his side. She loved him, and it put her at an immense disadvantage with him.

"Don't you mean to vouchsafe me an answer, Mrs. Algernon Ancram Errington?"

"Oh, I daresay you're very sorry that I am Mrs. Errington. I have no doubt you repent."

"Really! And is that what you were crying for?"

No reply.

"It looks rather as if you repented, madam!"

"Oh, you know I don't; unless you like other people better than you like me!"

"'Other people' don't cry in my company."

"No; because they don't care for you. And because they're—they're nasty, artful minxes!"

"Hear, hear! A charming definition! Castalia, you are really *impayable* sometimes. How my lord would enjoy that speech of yours!"

"No, he wouldn't. Uncle Val would never enjoy what vexed me. My lady might; nasty, disagreeable old thing!"

"There, I can agree with you. A vulgar kind of woman—though she is my blood-relation—thoroughly coarse in the grain. But now that we have relieved our feelings, and spoken our minds on that score, suppose we converse rationally?"

"I don't want to converse rationally."

"Why not?"

"Because that means that you are going to scold me."

"Well—that might be highly rational, certainly; only I never do it."

"Well, but you'll manage to make out that I'm in the wrong and you're in the right, somehow or other."

"Cassy, I want you to write a letter."

"A letter? Whom do you want me to write to?"

Her tears were completely dried, and she looked up at him with a faint smile on her countenance, which, however, looked rueful enough, with red nose and swollen eyes.

"You must write to my lord, and get him to help us with a little money."

Her face fell.

"Ask Uncle Val for money again, Ancram? It is such a short time since he sent me some!"

"And to-morrow, at this hour, it will be 'such a short time' since you had your dinner! Nevertheless, I suppose you will want another dinner."

"I—I don't think Uncle Val can afford it, Ancram."

"Leave that to him. Afford it? Pshaw!"

Algernon made the little sharp ejaculation in a tone expressive of the most impatient contempt.

"But do we really—is it absolutely necessary for us to beg of my uncle again?"

"Not at all. Do just as you please," answered her husband, rising and walking away from the sofa to a distant chair.

Castalia's eyes followed him piteously.

"But what can I say?" she asked. "What excuse can I make? I hate to worry Uncle Val. It isn't as if he had more money than he knew what to do with. And if Lady Seely knew about his helping us, she would lead him such a life!"

"Do as you please. It would be a thousand pities to worry your uncle. Let all the worry fall on me."

He took up a book and threw himself back in his chair as if he had dismissed the subject.

"I don't know what to do!" exclaimed Castalia, with fretful helplessness. At length, after sitting silent for some time twisting her handkerchief backwards and forwards in her fingers, she got up and crossed the room to her husband's chair.

"Ancram!" she said softly.

"Eh? I beg your pardon!" looking up with an appearance of great abstraction, as if the perusal of his book had absorbed all his attention.

"I wish to do what will please you. I only care to please you in the world. But—can't you explain to me a little better why I must write to Uncle Val?"

Explain! Of course he would! He desired nothing better. He had brought her to a point at which encouragement was needed, not coldness. And with the singular flexibility that belonged to him, he was able immediately to plunge into an animated statement of his present situation, which sufficed to persuade his hearer that no course of conduct could be so desirable, so prudent—nay, so praiseworthy, as the course he had suggested.

To be sure the details were vague, but the general impression was vivid enough. If Algernon's pictures were a little inaccurate in drawing, they were at least always admirably coloured. And the general impression was this: that there never had been a person of such brilliant abilities and charming qualities as Algernon Ancram Errington so unjustly consigned to obscurity and poverty. And no contributions to his comfort, luxury, or well-being were too much to expect and claim from the world in general, and his wife's relations in particular. Common honesty—common decency almost—would compel Lord Seely to make all the amends in his power for having placed Algernon in the Whitford Post-office. And there was an insinuation very skilfully and delicately mixed with all the seemingly unstudied and spontaneous outpourings of Algy's conjugal confidence—an insinuation which affected the flavour of the whole, as an accomplished cook will contrive to mingle garlic in a ragoût, never coarsely obtrusive, and yet distinctly perceptible—to the effect that the hand of Miss Castalia Kilfinane had been somewhat officiously thrust upon her charming husband; and that the family owed him no little gratitude for having been kind enough to accept it.

Poor Castalia had an uneasy feeling, at the end of his fluent discourse, that Algernon had been a victim to her great relations, and, in some dim way, to herself. But the garlic was so admirably blended with the whole mass, that it was impossible for her to pick it out, or resent it, or do anything but declare her willingness to help her husband by any means in her power.

"Why, my dear girl, it is as much for your sake as for mine! And as to the necessity for it, I must tell you what Minnie Bodkin said to me to-day. Minnie is an excellent creature, full of friendly feeling—a little too conceited and fond of lecturing" (Castalia's face brightened); "but much must be excused to an afflicted invalid, who never meets her fellow-creatures on equal terms."

Castalia looked almost happy. But she said, "As to her affliction, it seems to me that she has been growing much stronger lately."

"Yes; I am glad to think so too. But let the best happen that can be hoped—let the disease, that has kept her helpless on her couch all these years, be overcome—still she must always be so lame as to make her an object of pity."

"Poor thing! I daresay it does warp her mind a good deal. What did she say to you?"

Algernon recapitulated a part of Minnie's warnings, but gave them such a turn as to make it appear that the greatest wrath and impatience of the Whitford tradesmen were directed against his wife. "They have a narrow kind of provincial prejudice against you, Cassy, on account of your being a 'London fine lady.' Me they know; and, in their great condescension, are pleased to approve of."

"Oh, everybody likes you better than me, of course," answered Castalia, simply. "But I don't care for that, if you will only like me better than anybody."

The genuine devotion with which this was said would have touched most men. It might have

touched Algernon, had he not been too much engrossed in mentally composing the rough draft of Castalia's letter to her uncle, and putting his not inconsiderable powers of plausible persuasion to the task of making it appear that his wife's personal extravagance was the chief cause of their need for ready money.

"Don't tell him that I even know of your writing. My lord will be more willing to come down handsomely if he thinks it's for you only, Cassy," said Algernon, as he drew up his wife's writing-table for her, placed a chair, opened her inkstand, and performed several little acts of attention with a really charming grace and gallantry.

So Castalia, writing almost literally what her husband dictated—(although he kept saying at every sentence, "My dear child, you ought to know best how to address your uncle;" "Well, I really don't know, but I think you might put it thus;" and so forth)—completed an appeal to Lord Seely to anticipate by nearly a quarter the allowance he continued to make her for her dress out of his private purse, and, if possible, to increase its amount.

One such appeal had already been made and responded to by a gift of money. It had been made immediately after the arrival of the newly-married couple in Whitford, on the ground of the unforeseen expenses attendant on installing themselves in their new habitation. In answering it Lord Seely had written kindly, but with evident disapproval of the step that had been taken. "I cannot, Castalia," he said, "bid you keep anything secret from your husband, and yet I can scarcely help saying that I wish he did not know of the cheque I inclose. I fear he is disposed to be reckless in money matters; and nothing encourages such a disposition more than the idea that aid can be had from friends for the asking. Ancram will recollect a serious conversation I had with him the evening before your marriage, and I can only now reiterate what I then assured him of—that it will be impossible for me to repeat the assistance I gave him on that occasion."

"What assistance was that, Ancram?" asked Castalia, who knew not a word of the matter.

"Oh, I believe my lord made me the munificent present of two pair of breeches, and an old coat and waistcoat, or so."

"Made you a present of an old coat and breeches! What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that he paid a twopenny outstanding tailor's bill for me. And he writes now as if he had conferred the most overwhelming obligation."

The fact was that Lord Seely had discharged a great number of Algernon's debts; all of them, as his lordship imagined. But there was clearly no need of troubling Castalia with these details.

When the letter was finished and sealed, Castalia still sat musingly tracing unmeaning figures with the point of her pen on the blotting-book. At length she said with some hesitation, "Ancram, how is it that we spend so much money? I don't think I am very extravagant."

"So much money!" Good Heavens, Castalia—but you really have no conception of these things. Our whole income, and twice our income, is a miserable pittance. The Dormers pay their butler more."

She was again silent for a little while. Then she said, "Isn't there anything we could do without?"

Her husband looked at her in astonishment. It was a quite unexpected suggestion on Castalia's part. "Could you be kind enough to point out anything?" he asked drily. She looked somewhat cast down by his tone, but answered, "There's that last case of wine from town—the Rhine wine. Don't you think we might send it back unopened, and do with a bottle of sherry, now and then, from the 'Blue Bell?' Your mother finds that very good."

"Pshaw!" with the accustomed sharp, impatient contempt. "My mother knows no more about wine than a baby. To drink bad wine is absolutely to poison oneself. I can't do it, and I don't mean to let you do it, either. And when one knows that it is only a question of a few months, more or less, and that directly I get a better berth these greedy rascals will be paid their extortionate bills in full—positively, Castalia, it seems to me childish to talk in that way!"

It was the same with one or two other suggestions of retrenchment she ventured to make. Algernon showed conclusively (conclusively enough to satisfy his hearer, at all events) that it would not do—that it would be absolutely imprudent, on their part, to make any open retrenchment. All these sharks would come round them at once, if they smelt poverty. "I know these gentry better than you do, Castalia," said he. "There is no way of getting on with them except by not being in a hurry to pay them. Nothing spoils tradespeople so much as any over-alcidity of that kind. They immediately conclude that you can't do without them!"

"Oh, they're disgustingly impudent creatures, these Whitford tradespeople! There is no doubt in the world about that," said Castalia, in perfect good faith. "Only I thought you seemed to be made uneasy by what Miss Bodkin said to you on the subject."

"To be sure! But, my dear girl, your method would never answer! I do want money, very badly. And I do hope and expect—as I think I have some right to do—that my lord will assist us without delay, and without making one of his intolerable prosy preachments on the occasion. And we must have a few pounds to go on with, and stop the mouths of these rapacious rascals. But no retrenchment, Castalia! No 'Blue Bell' sherry! Good Heavens, it makes one bilious to think of it! I really cannot sacrifice my digestion to advance the commercial prosperity of Whitford. And when

one considers it, why should we destroy our peace of mind by worrying ourselves? Lord Seely has got us into this scrape, and Lord Seely must get us out of it. *Voilà tout!*"

After that the rest of the evening was spent very harmoniously. Algernon could not repress two or three prodigious yawns, but he politely concealed them. And when Castalia went to her pianoforte, he woke up at the conclusion of an intricate fantasia quite in time to thank her for the performance, and to praise its brilliancy. In a word, so agreeable an evening, Castalia told herself, she had not passed for many weeks, although it had certainly begun in an unpromising way. So softened was she, indeed, by this gleam of happiness, that several times she was on the point of making a confession to her husband, and entreating his forgiveness. But she could not bear to risk bringing a cloud over the light of his countenance, which was the only sunshine in her life. "Ancram would be so angry!" was a thought that checked back words which were on her lips a dozen times. "And since the matter is all over, and he need never know anything about it, I may as well hold my tongue."

It needed, however, no confession on Castalia's part to convince Algernon that she had opened his secretaire, and taken Minnie Bodkin's letter thence, instead of having found it lying open on his table, as she had said. For on the next morning, when he entered his private room at the office, his first action was to try the little secretaire, which was unlocked. He then remembered that, after having secured that repository of his private papers, he had re-opened it, to throw Minnie's note into a drawer of it; and, having been called away at that moment, must have forgotten to re-lock it.

"Damnably provoking!" muttered Algernon to himself as he stood looking at the little cabinet with gloomy, anxious brows. Then, having first bolted the door of his room, he made a thorough search throughout the secretaire. "Nothing disturbed! She probably flew off to Dr. Bodkin's house directly after reading Minnie's note; and that lay in the little empty drawer right in front. It would be the first she opened."

Then he sat down in a mighty comfortable armchair, which was placed in front of an official-looking desk, and meditated so deeply that he forgot to unbolt the door, and was roused by Mr. Gibbs tapping at it, and desiring to speak with him on business.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Gibbs's errand was not a pleasant one. He came to speak to his chief of complaints that had reached the office as to lost and missing letters. The most serious case was that of a man living in the neighbourhood of Duckwell, who complained that a money letter had never reached him, although it had been posted in Bristol three weeks back. Some inquiries had previously been made, but without result. And now the Duckwell man declared he would make a fine fuss, and bring the matter before the very highest authorities, if his letter were not forthcoming.

"What does the bumpkin mean, Gibbs?" asked Algernon, impatiently tapping with his fingers on the desk before him.

"I'm afraid he'll give us a deal of bother, sir," returned Mr. Gibbs slowly. "And I can't understand what has come of the letter. It's very awkward."

"Very awkward for him, if he really has lost his money. But I should not be surprised to learn that it never was posted at all."

"Humph! I don't know. He swears that the sender at Bristol can prove that it was posted."

"And why the deuce do people go on sending bank-notes by post, without the least care or precaution? One must have been connected with a post-office in order fully to appreciate the imbecility of one's fellow-creatures!"

"I don't know that it was bank-notes, sir. It may have been a cheque."

"Oh, depend upon it, it was whatever was stupidest to send, and most calculated to give trouble; if it was sent, that is to say! If it was sent!"

"I can't call to mind such a thing happening for twenty years back; not in this office. But lately there seems to be no end to things going wrong."

"Well, don't distress yourself about it, Gibbs. I have full reliance on you in every way."

"Oh no, sir! It is unpleasant, but I don't know that I specially need distress myself about it."

"Only because you have had the uncontrolled management of the office, Gibbs. And it is too bad, when one has worked so conscientiously as you have, to be worried by blundering bumpkins. I assure you, Gibbs, I am constantly singing your praises to Lord Seely. I tell him frankly, that if it were not for you, I don't know in the least how I should fulfil my onerous duties here! When I'm removed from this place, the powers that be won't have far to look for my successor."

This was the most explicit word that had yet fallen from Mr. Errington on the subject of his subordinate's promotion. And it decidedly gratified Mr. Obadiah Gibbs. Nevertheless, that steady

individual was not so elated by the prospect held out to him as to dismiss from his mind the business he had come to speak about. "It is the most unaccountable thing!" said he. "Three or four cases of the kind within two months! And up to that time no office in the kingdom bore a better character than Whitford. I hope the thing may be cleared up. But it is next to impossible to trace a stolen letter. The Duckwell man—Heath, his name is; Roger Heath—says he is determined to complain to the Postmaster-General. I suppose we shall be having the surveyor coming to look after us. You see, it isn't like a solitary case. That's the worst of it. There's what you may term an accumulation, sir."

Whilst Mr. Gibbs poured forth his troubled mind in these and many more slow sentences, Algernon rose, took his hat, brushed it lightly with his glove, put it on, and was evidently about to depart. Gibbs ventured to lay his hand on his coat-sleeve to detain him. The clerk was not satisfied that the matter should be dismissed so lightly. It might not be possible to do anything, truly; but (in common with a great many other people) Mr. Obadiah Gibbs felt that, where efficacious action was impracticable, it was all the more desirable to mark the gravity of an unpleasant circumstance by copious talking of it. Life would become, in some sort, too frivolous and easy if, when a matter clearly could not be remedied, every one agreed to say no more about it! A vast deal of sage eloquence would thus be choked and dammed up. And Mr. Gibbs, for his special part, was conscious of having some reputation amongst his fellow Wesleyans for a gift of utterance.

"I really don't know, sir, what to say to Roger Heath," he persisted.

"Oh—tell him inquiries will be made in the proper quarters."

"That, sir, has been said already. He has been here twice or thrice."

"Then tell him to go to the devil!" said Algernon, sharply jerking his arm away from the clerk's grasp, and walking off.

The pious and respectable Mr. Gibbs shook his head disapprovingly at this profane speech, and went back to his stool in the outer office with a lowering brow.

Algernon walked along the High Street, and turned down a narrow lane leading towards the river, and past one corner of the Grammar School. The boys were just coming out of school with the usual shrill babble and rush. A party of Dr. Bodkin's private scholars were on their way to Whit Meadow.

"Good day, Ingleby," said Algernon, addressing the eldest of them, the same lad who had been Rhoda's squire in the tea-room on the night of Mrs. Algernon Errington's *début* in Whitford society. "Where are you off to?"

"We're going to have a row. I've got a boat, and we're going up the river as far as Duckwell Reach. We have leave from the doctor. Deuce of a job to get it, though!"

"Why?"

"Oh, because he's nervous about the river; thinks it dangerous, and all that."

"Well, you know, Ingleby," said a younger boy, with much eagerness, "lots of people have been drowned in that bit of the river between here and Duckwell Reach."

"Lots of people! Gammon!"

"Well, two since I've been here!"

"Oh, I daresay. Well, if you funk it you needn't come. There's plenty without you."

"You know I don't funk it for myself, Ingleby. I can swim."

"Yes, my friend. You wouldn't get into my boat if you couldn't. I'm on honour with the doctor to take none but swimmers," said Ingleby, turning to Algernon; "and of course that settles the matter. But, for my part, I should have thought anybody but the quite small boys might walk out of the Whit if they tumbled into it." "Oh no! You do our noble river injustice. You are not a Whitfordian or you would know better than that. There are some very ugly places between here and Duckwell Reach; places where I wouldn't give much for your chance of getting out if once you fell in, swimmer though you are. Good-bye. A pleasant row to you."

The boys pursued their way to the boat, and Algernon, turning off at right angles when he reached the bottom of the lane, got into Whit Meadow through a turnstile at the foot of the Grammar School playground.

There was a footpath through the meadow, and some fields beyond, which made a pleasant walk enough in fine summer weather, and was then a good deal frequented. But at this season it was damp, muddy, and lonely. The day was fine, but the ground had been saturated by previous rains, and that part of the meadow nearest to the margin of the river was almost a swamp. The path continued to skirt the Whit for some miles, running in the direction of Duckwell, and as Algernon walked along it he saw the windings of the river shining in the sun, and presently there appeared on it the boat full of schoolboys. One of them wore a scarlet cap, and thus made a bright spot of colour in the landscape. The sound of their young voices was carried across the water to Algernon's ears.

He stood for a minute or so at the gate of his own garden, which ran down behind the house to the river path, and watched them. The thought crossed his mind that, if any accident should occur to the boat at that spot, there would be little chance of assistance reaching it quickly. Ivy Lodge was the last house on that side of the river between Whitford and Duckwell Reach. And on the willow-fringed shore opposite not a living creature was to be seen, except some cattle grazing in the plashy fields.

The whole scene—the vivid green of the marsh grass, the grey willows, the boat with its wet oars flashing at regular intervals, the red-capped boy, and the sound of the fresh, shrill laughter of the crew, all fixed themselves on his mind with that vividness of impression which trivial external things so often make upon a brain labouring with some inward trouble.

CHAPTER III.

"What a state your boots are in!" exclaimed Castalia, pausing at the foot of the stairs, which she happened to be descending as her husband entered the house. "And why did you come by the back way?"

"I was worried, and did not wish to meet people and be chattered to. I thought the meadow-path would be quiet, and so it was."

"Quiet! Yes; but how horribly muddy! Do change your wet boots at once, Ancram!"

There was little need for her to insist on this proceeding. Algernon hastened to his room, pulled off his wet boots, and desired that they should be thrown away.

"They can be dried and cleaned, sir," said plump-faced Lydia, aghast at this order.

"My good girl you may do what you please with them. I shall never wear them again. Slight boots of that sort that have once been wet through become shapeless, don't you understand? Take them away."

When the master of the house descended to the drawing-room, he found a paper, squarely folded in the shape of a letter, lying in a conspicuous position on the centre table. It was Mr. Gladwish the shoemaker's bill, accompanied by an urgent request for immediate payment.

"More wall-paper, Cassy," said her husband, flinging himself on the sofa.

"Do you know, Lydia tells me the man was quite insolent!" said Castalia. "What can be done with such people? They don't seem to me to have the least idea who we are!"

"Oh, confound the brutes! Don't let us talk about them!"

But Castalia continued to talk about them in a strain of mingled wonder and disgust. She did not cease until dinner was announced, and Algernon was by that time so thoroughly wearied by his conjugal *tête-à-tête*, that he even received with something like satisfaction the announcement that Castalia expected the Misses Rose and Violet McDougall to pass the evening at Ivy Lodge.

"I daresay your mother will come too," said Castalia, "and bring Rhoda Maxfield with her. I asked her."

"Rhoda? Why on earth do you invite that little Maxfield?"

"What is your objection to her, Ancram?"

"Oh, I have no objection to her in the world. But I should not have thought she was precisely the sort of person to suit you."

"That's exactly what Miss Bodkin says! Miss Bodkin tried to keep Rhoda apart from me, I am perfectly sure. And I can't fathom her motive. And now you say the same sort of thing. However, I always notice that you echo her words. But I don't intend to be guided by Miss Bodkin's likes and dislikes. I haven't the same opinion of Miss Bodkin's wisdom that the people have here, and I shall choose my friends for myself. It's quite absurd, the fuss that is made in this place about Miss Bodkin; absolutely sickening. Rose McDougall is the only person of the whole set who seems to keep her senses on the subject."

"Rose McDougall will never lose her senses from admiration of another woman," returned Algernon. And then the colloquy was broken up by the arrival of the Misses McDougall, clogged and cloaked, and attended by their maid-servant. After having exchanged greetings with these ladies, Algernon withdrew, murmuring something about going to smoke his cigar.

"You'll not be long, Ancram, shall you?" said his wife, in a complaining tone. But he disappeared from the room without replying to her.

"I'm so dreadfully afraid that I drive your husband away when I come here, my dear," said Rose McDougall with a spiteful glance at Algernon's retreating figure.

"Good gracious, no! He doesn't think of minding you at all."

"Oh, I daresay he does not mind me; does not think me of importance enough to be taken any notice of. But I cannot help observing that he always keeps out of the way as much as possible when I am spending an evening here."

"Nonsense!" said Castalia, tranquilly continuing to string steel beads on to red silk for the manufacture of a purse.

"You might as well say that it is I who drive Mr. Errington away, Rose," put in Violet.

"Not at all!" returned her sister, with sudden sharpness. "That's quite a different matter."

"I don't see why, Rose!"

The true answer to this remark, in the elder Miss McDougall's mind, would have been, "You are so utterly insignificant, compared with me, that you are effaced in my company, and are neither liked nor disliked on your own merits." But she could not quite say that, so she merely repeated with increased sharpness, "That's a very different matter."

Rose McDougall was one of those persons who prefer animosity to indifference. That any one should simply not care about her was a suggestion so intolerable that she was wont to declare of persons who did not show any special desire for her society, that they hated her. She was sure Mr. A. detested the sight of her, and Miss B. was her bitter enemy. But, perhaps, in Algernon's case, she had more reason for declaring he disliked her than in many others. He did in truth object to the sort of influence she exercised over Castalia. He knew that Castalia was insatiably curious about even the most trifling details of his past life in Whitford; and he knew that Miss McDougall was very capable of misrepresenting—even of innocently misrepresenting—many circumstances and persons in such a way as to irritate Castalia's easily-aroused jealousy; and Castalia's easily-aroused jealousy was an element of discomfort in his daily life. In a word, there had arisen since his marriage a smouldering sort of hostility between him and Rose McDougall. But he was far from conceiving the acrid nature of her feelings towards him. For his part, he laughed at her a little in a playful way, and contradicted her, and, above all, he did not permit her to bore him by exacting any attention from him which he was disinclined to pay. But there was no bitterness in all that. None in the world!

Only he did not reckon on the bitterness excited in Miss Rose's breast by being laughed at and neglected. The graceful and charming way in which the laughter and neglect were accomplished by no means mollified the sting of them; a point which graceful and charming persons would do well sometimes to consider, but to which they are often singularly blind.

"And what have you been doing with yourself all day, Castalia dear?" asked Violet with a great display of affection.

"Oh—what can one do with oneself in this horrid hole?"

"To be sure!" responded Violet. But she responded rather uncertainly. To her, Whitford seemed by no means a horrid hole. She had been content enough to live there for many years—ever since her uncle had brought her and her sister from Scotland in their mourning clothes, and received his orphan nieces into his home.

"Don't speak of it, my dear!" exclaimed Rose, on whom the reminiscences of the years spent in Whitford wrought by no means a softening effect. "What possessed Uncle James to stick himself down in this place, of all places, I cannot conjecture. He might as well have buried us girls alive at once."

"Oh, well, I suppose you have had time enough to get used to it," said Castalia, coolly. "Violet, will you ring the bell? It is close to you. Thank you.—Lydia," when the girl appeared, "where is your master?"

"In the dining-room, ma'am."

"What is he doing?"

"Smoking and reading, ma'am."

"Go and ask him to come here, with my love."

"How the woman worrits him! She doesn't leave him a minute's peace," was Lydia's comment to the cook on this embassy.

"She worrits everybody, in her slow, crawley kind o' way; but I'm sorry for her sometimes, too. It's a trying thing to care more for a person's little finger than a person cares for your whole body and soul," returned Polly, who had a kind of broad good-nature and candour. But Lydia felt no sympathy with her mistress, and maintained that it was all her own fault then! What did she be always nagging at him for?—having that pitiless contempt for other women's mistakes in the management of their husbands which is not uncommon with her sex.

Some such thoughts as Lydia's probably passed through the minds of the Misses McDougall, but, of course, that was not the time or place to express them. They exerted themselves to entertain their hostess with a variety of Whitford gossip, while Castalia—her attention divided between the purse she was making and the drawing-room door, at which she hoped to see her husband presently appear—merely threw in a languid interjection now and then as her contribution to the conversation.

At length she rose, and flung the crimson and steel purse down on the table.

"Do you want anything, dear?" asked the obliging Violet with officious alacrity.

"No; I shan't be long gone. Sit still, Violet."

"She's gone to implore her husband to honour us with a little of his society," whispered Rose, when Castalia had shut the door. "I'm certain of it. More fool she!"

The sisters sat silent for a few minutes. Then they heard the door of the dining-room open, as though Castalia were coming back, and the sound of voices. Rose was seated nearest to the door, which was separated from that of the little dining-room opposite by a very narrow passage, and she distinctly heard Algernon say, "Pooh! The old girl doesn't want me." And again, "Says I hate her? Nonsense! I look on her with the veneration due to her years and virtues." And then Castalia said, "Well, she can't help her years. Besides, that's not the question. You ought to come, for my sake. It's very unkind of you, Ancram." After that there was a lower murmur of speech, as though the speakers had changed their places in the room, and Rose was able to distinguish no more.

When Mrs. Algernon Errington returned to the drawing-room, she found Violet in her old seat near the pianoforte; but Rose had shifted her position, and was standing near the window.

"What are you doing there, Rose? Enjoying the prospect?" asked Castalia. The shutters were not closed, but, as the night was very dark, there certainly did not seem to be any inducement to look out of the window.

"Can't you persuade your husband to come, dear? I'm so sorry!" said Rose, turning round; and her sister looked up quickly at the sound of her voice, which, to Violet's accustomed ear, betrayed in its inflections suppressed anger. Her face, too, was crimson, and her little light blue eyes sparkled with unusual brightness.

Castalia, however, noticed none of these things. "Oh, he'll come presently," she said. "He really was finishing a cigar. I told him that you were offended with him, and——"

"I offended with your husband? Oh dear no! Why on earth should I be? You ought not to have said that, Castalia."

"Well, you thought he was offended with you, or something of the sort. It's all the same," returned Castalia, with her air of weary indifference. "And he says it's nonsense."

"My dear, I am only sorry on your account that he won't come. Really, to myself, it matters very little; very little indeed. What a pity that you have not some one to amuse him! We are none of us clever enough, that is clear."

"Oh, you are quite mistaken if you think Ancram cares particularly for clever women!" said Castalia, whose thoughts instantly reverted to Minnie Bodkin. "Even Miss Bodkin, whom everybody declares to be such a wonder of talent, bores him sometimes, I can tell you. Of course he has known her from his childhood, and all that; but he said to me only yesterday that she was conceited, and too fond of preaching. So you see! I daresay, poor thing, she fancies all the time that she is enchanting him by her wisdom."

"Dear me," said Violet timidly, and with a sort of strangled sigh. "I think that, as a rule, gentlemen don't like any kind of women except pretty women! Though, to be sure, Minnie is handsome enough if it wasn't for her affliction."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of Minnie," said Rose, viciously twitching at her sewing thread. "I meant it was a pity there was no one here who was clever enough, and who thought it worth while, to play off pretty airs and graces for Mr. Errington's amusement. That's the kind of cleverness that attracts men. And your husband, my dear, was always remarkably fond of flirting."

Violet opened her eyes in astonishment, and, from her place a little behind Castalia, made a warning grimace to her sister; but Rose only responded by a defiant toss of the head. Castalia's attention was now effectually aroused, and although she still spoke in the querulous drawl that was natural to her (or had become so from long habit), it was with a countenance earnestly addressed to her interlocutor, instead of, as hitherto, with carelessly averted eyes. "I never heard any one say before that Ancram was fond of flirting," she said.

"I should have thought it was not necessary to hear it. You might see it for yourself; unless, indeed, he is very sly about it in your presence. He, he, he!"

"See it for myself? Why—there's nobody here for him to flirt with!"

This naïve ignoring of any pretensions on the part of her present guests to be eligible for the purposes of flirtation was not lost on Rose.

"Not many who would flirt with a married man. No, I hope and believe not! But there are many kinds of flirtation, you know. There's the soft and sentimental, the shy, sweet sixteen style—little Miss Maxfield's style, for instance."

"Rhoda!"

"Yes; that is her name, I believe. I have never been intimate with the young person myself. Uncle James has always been very particular as to whom we associated with. However, since you have

taken her up, my dear, I suppose she may be considered visitable."

"We have met her at Dr. Bodkin's, you know, Rose," put in Violet, who was looking and listening with a distressed expression of face.

"Oh yes; I believe Minnie asked her there at first to please Algernon. Minnie can be good-natured in that sort of way. But I don't know that it was very judicious."

"Why should you suppose it was to please my husband that Rhoda was invited to the Bodkins?" asked Castalia. "I don't see that at all. The girl might have been asked to please Miss Bodkin. I daresay she had heard of her from Mrs. Errington. Mrs. Errington is always raving about her."

Rose smiled with tightly-closed lips, and nodded. "To be sure! Poor dear Mrs. Errington—I mean no disrespect to your mother-in-law, Castalia, who is really a superior woman, only in some things she is as blind as a bat."

Castalia's sallow face was paler than ever. Her nostrils were dilated as if she had been running fast. "You never told me a word of this before," she said.

"My dear creature," said Rose, looking full at Castalia for the first time, "why, what was there to tell? The subject was led to by chance now, and I had not the least idea that you did not know all Algy's old love-stories. Everybody here—except, I suppose, poor dear Mrs. Errington—knew of the boy-and-girl nonsense between him and that little thing. But of course it never was serious. That was out of the question."

"I don't believe it!" said Castalia, suddenly.

"Well, I daresay the thing was exaggerated, as so often happens. For my part, I never could see what there was in the girl to make so many people admire her. A certain freshness, perhaps; and some men do think a great deal of that pink-and-white sort of insipidity."

"At all events, Ancram does not care about her now," said Castalia, speaking in broken sentences, and twisting her watch-chain nervously backwards and forwards in her fingers.

"Oh, of course not! I daresay he never did care about her in earnest. But that sort of philandering is a little dangerous, isn't it?"

"He does not like me to ask her to the house even."

"Doesn't he?"

"No; he has said so more or less plainly several times. He said so this very evening."

"Did he, indeed? Well, I really am glad to hear it. I scarcely gave Algy—Mr. Errington—credit for so much—prudence!"

"Mrs. Errington and Miss Maxfield," announced Lydia at the door of the drawing-room.

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs. Errington advanced towards her daughter-in-law with her habitual serene stateliness, and Rhoda followed her, modestly, looking very pretty in a new dress, the delicate hue of which set off her fair complexion to great advantage. Castalia received them much as usual; that is to say, without displaying any emotion whatever. But when Mrs. Errington took her daughter-in-law's hand, she exclaimed, "Good gracious, Castalia, how cold you are! A perfect frog! And yet this little room of yours is very warm; oppressively warm to one coming from without."

"We find the temperature so comfortable here!" said Violet. "Dear Castalia always has her rooms deliciously warm, we think."

"Perhaps, Violet, you are chilly by nature. Some constitutions are so. For myself, I have a wonderful circulation. But it is hereditary. All my branch of the Ancrams were renowned for it. I don't know, my dear Castalia, whether my cousin, Lady Seely, has the same peculiarity?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"With us it was a well-known thing among the Faculty for miles around Ancram Park. Our extremities were never cold, nor had we ever red noses. I believe a red nose was absolutely unknown in our family. No doubt that was part of the same thing; perfect circulation of the blood."

With that Mrs. Errington sat down tolerably near the fire and made herself comfortable. "Where is my dear boy?" she asked after a little while. "Not at that dreadful office I hope and trust!"

"He is at home," replied Castalia, slowly. "I asked him to come into the drawing-room, and he said he would by-and-by."

"Oh, I daresay he will come now, dear," said Rose McDougall, without raising her eyes from her sewing.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Errington to her daughter-in-law, "and if he does come 'now' you must not be jealous."

The two sisters glanced at the good lady in quick surprise, and then at Rhoda. Rhoda was looking, for the hundredth time, at a book of prints. It was her usual evening's occupation at Ivy Lodge. Mrs. Errington proceeded, placid, smiling, and condescending as ever: "You must not be jealous, Castalia, if he does come directly he learns that his mother is here. To be sure a wife ranks first. I have always acknowledged that; and, indeed, insisted on it. I am sure it was my own case with poor dear Dr. Errington, who would never have dreamed of putting any human being into competition with me. Still, allowances must be made for the very peculiar and devoted attachment Algy has always felt for me. He is, and ever was, an Ancram to the core. And this kind of—one may say romantic—affection for their mothers has always distinguished the scions of our house from time immemorial. Good evening, my dear Algy. I find our dear Castalia looking a little worn and ill, and I tell her she keeps her rooms too hot. What do you say?"

Algernon had sauntered into the room during his mother's harangue, delivered in the full mellow voice that belonged to her, and now bent to kiss the worthy lady's cheek as he greeted her. It was a cool, firm, rosy cheek. Indeed, Mrs. Errington's freshness and bloom were in singular opposition to Castalia's sallow haggardness, and made the elder lady look doubly buxom and buoyant by the force of contrast.

"You're flourishing, at all events, *chère madame*," said Algernon, looking at his mother with unfeigned satisfaction. It was a relief to him to see a contented, smiling, comfortable countenance. Nevertheless, although agreeable to look upon, Mrs. Errington was apt to become a little wearisome in point of conversation, and her dutiful son cast his eyes round the circle in search of a pleasant seat wherein to bestow himself. But his glance met no response. Rose McDougall had drawn near his wife, and after very stiffly returning his bow, had ceased to take any notice of him, markedly avoiding his eye, and keeping silence after he had spoken. Violet was divided between listening to the elder Mrs. Errington and watching her sister. Castalia was more lazy, more silent, more indifferent than usual. Algernon was as unaccustomed as a spoiled child to be taken no notice of. He to stand among those women as a person of secondary importance, not greeted, not flattered, not smiled upon!

He looked across the group round the fire to Rhoda, who happened to raise her eyes at that moment, and being taken by surprise at meeting his, dropped them hastily, with a vivid blush. Rhoda's blushes were as unmeaning as the smiles of an infant. The most trivial cause made her change colour, as Algernon very well knew. But at least the soft bright pink hue on pretty Rhoda's cheek showed some emotion, however slight or transient, at the sight of him. And, moved partly by a boyish, pettish resentment against the others, partly by the desire to hear a pleasant voice and pleasant words, and look upon a pretty woman's face with its delicate contour and fine subtle changes of tint, he walked across the room and seated himself beside Rhoda Maxfield.

Castalia pushed her chair back out of the lamplight. "You can't see to do your purse in that dark corner, Castalia," exclaimed Mrs. Errington.

"I don't want to do my purse. I'm sick of it."

"Naughty, fickle girl!" This was said playfully. Then in a loud whisper, addressed to the McDougalls as well as to her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Errington exclaimed, "Doesn't Rhoda look charming to-night? That pale lilac is the very colour for her. Trying to skins that have the least tinge of yellow in them, but she is so wonderfully fair! Dear me, it reminds one of old times to see those two side by side. As children they were always together."

No one responded. Violet McDougall fidgeted nervously on her chair and cast an appealing look at her sister. She would have tried to lead Mrs. Errington to talk of something else had she dared, but in Rose's presence Violet never ventured to take the initiative; and, besides, she was afraid of doing more harm than good, Mrs. Errington not being one of those persons who take a hint easily. The silence of her three listeners was no check to the worthy lady's eloquence. She continued to descant on Rhoda's attractions, and graces, and good manners; she dropped hints of the excellent opportunities Rhoda now had of "settling in life," only that she was a little fastidious from long association with such refined persons as the Erringtons, and had turned the cold shoulder to several well-to-do wooers in her own rank of life; she related anecdotes of Rhoda's early devotion to herself and her son, until Violet McDougall muttered under her breath, in a paroxysm of nervous impatience, "One would think the woman was doing it on purpose!"

Meanwhile Algernon was talking to Rhoda more freely and confidentially than he had spoken to her for a long, long time. He was indulging in the luxury of playing victim before a spectator whose pity would certainly be admiring, not contemptuous. And, as he spoke, the old habit of appealing to Rhoda, and confiding in Rhoda, and taking Rhoda's sympathy for granted, resumed its power over him. There was no strain of tenderness in his words. He said not a syllable that his wife and all the world might not freely have listened to. He talked as a petted boy might talk to an idolising sister—with a mixture of boastfulness and repining, which he would have been ashamed to display to a man.

Rhoda listened with sorrowful interest. How could it be that Algernon should have to endure all these troubles and mortifications? He was so clever, so accomplished, so highly connected, had such great and powerful relations! It appeared natural enough that folks like Mrs. Thimbleby,

and the Gladwishes, and even her brother Seth, should sometimes be pressed for money. She herself, although she had never known privation in her father's house, had, until within the last year or so, been accustomed to the most rigid economy—not to say parsimony—and it had never cost her a care. But that Algernon Errington should desire money for various purposes, and not be able to get it, seemed to her a very hard case.

But Algernon's note was not all of complaint. There were occasional intervals in which he spoke of the brightness of his prospects ultimately, when once he should have tided over his present difficulties and had got out of Whitford. And there were a few flourishes about his social successes in town last year. In the indulgence of his all-absorbing egotism, he seemed to forget that the girl beside him had ever been—or had ever had either expectation or right to be—anything more to him than the patient, admiring, sisterly, humble confidante on whom he had relied for praise and sympathy from the time of his earliest recollections, and who supplied him with the most delicious food for his vanity, because unmingled with any doubt of its genuineness. No thought of her feelings (save that they were kindly and admiring towards himself) crossed his mind whilst he talked to her, bending down his head and gesticulating slightly with his white, handsome hands.

But when his mother called to her, "Come, Rhoda, I think, we must be going; I heard the carriage at the gate, child. You and Algy have been having a famous long chat! Reminded you of old times, didn't it?"

When I say Algernon heard these words, a spark of manhood made his cheeks tingle and his tongue stammer as he said, "I—I'm afraid I must have been—boring you dreadfully, Rhoda?"

In truth he was surprised to find that he had spent the whole evening in talking to Rhoda about himself. He glanced quickly at his wife, but she was occupied with the Misses McDougall. So occupied was she that she hardly returned Mrs. Errington's "Good night," which negligence, however, little ruffled that lady's equanimity. But when Rhoda approached to take leave of Castalia, the latter moved aside so suddenly that the movement might almost be called a start, and facing round, came opposite to her own image in the mirror above the chimney-piece, with Rhoda's fair image looking over its shoulder.

For one second, perhaps—it could scarcely have been more—the smooth surface of the glass gave back the two women's faces: one youthful, lily-hued, innocently surprised, with chestnut eyebrows and shining chestnut curls, and tender rosy lips parted like those of a child; the other yellow, worn full of fretful creases, with glittering eager eyes, and a thin mouth set into a straight line, and yet over all the undefinable pathos of a suffering spirit; behind the two, Algernon looking into his wife's dark eyes and recognising something there that he had never seen in them before.

In no longer time than it would take for a breath to dim the mirror all these images were gone, and the cold shiny glass indifferently showed a confusion of cloaks and shoulders and the back of a huge bonnet crowning Mrs. Errington's majestic figure.

From that day forth Castalia gave herself up to a devouring jealousy of Rhoda. She spied her goings and comings; she watched her husband's face when the girl was spoken of; she opened the letters that she found in the pockets of his clothes; she lay in wait to surprise some proof, no matter what, of a tender feeling on his part for his old love. In a word, she pursued her own misery with more eagerness, vigilance, and unflagging singleness of purpose than most people devote to the attainment of any object whatsoever.

CHAPTER V.

The discovery of Minnie Bodkin's note in Algernon's secretaire at the office had incited Castalia to make some other attempts to pry into that depository of her husband's papers. She made excuses to step into the post-office whenever she had any reason for thinking Algernon was absent. Sometimes it was with the pretence of wishing to see him, sometimes on the plea of wanting to rest. She had learned that her husband frequently went into the "Blue Bell," to have luncheon, in the middle of the day; and that, from one cause or another, the Whitford Post-office was not really honoured with so much of his personal superintendence as she had been led to suppose. And this again was a fertile source of self-tormenting. Where was he, when he was not at the office?

It whetted her suspicious curiosity to find the secretaire always carefully locked, ever since her discovery of Miss Bodkin's note there. She now wished that she had searched it thoroughly when she had the opportunity, instead of hastening off to Dr. Bodkin's house, after having read the first letter she came upon. But her feelings at that time had been very different from what they now were. She had been nettled, truly, and jealous of any private consultation between Minnie Bodkin and her husband; hating to think that he could trust, and be confidential with, another woman than herself, but not distinctly suspecting either Minnie or Algernon of any intent to wrong her. Miss Bodkin loved power, and influence, and admiration, and Castalia wished no woman to

influence Algernon, or to be admired by him for any qualities whatsoever, except herself; but all her little envious resentments against Minnie had been mere pinpricks compared with the cruel pangs of jealousy that now pierced her heart when she thought of Rhoda Maxfield.

That secretaire! It seemed to have an irresistible attraction for her thoughts. She even dreamt sometimes of trying to open it, and finding fresh fastenings arise more and more complicated, as she succeeded in undoing one lock after the other. It was not Algernon's habit to lock up anything belonging to him. There must be some special reason for his doing so in this case! And to Castalia's jaundiced mind it seemed that the special reason could only be a desire to keep his letters secret from her. She grew day by day more restless. The servants at Ivy Lodge remarked with wonder their mistress's frequent absences from home. She, who had so dreaded and disliked walking, was now constantly to be seen on the road to the town, or on the meadow-path by the river. This kind of exercise, however, merely fatigued without refreshing her, and she became so lean and haggard, and her eyes had such a feverish glitter, that her looks might have alarmed anyone who loved her, and witnessed the change in her.

"There she goes again!" exclaimed Lydia to her fellow servant, as she watched her mistress down the garden-path, behind the house, one afternoon. "She can't bide at home for an hour together now!"

"She wears herself to the bone," said Polly, shaking her head.

"She wears other folks to the bone, and that's worse," returned the pitiless Lydia.

Meanwhile Castalia had passed out of the little wicket-gate of her garden into the fields, and so along the meadow-path towards Whitford. She made her way along the path resolutely, though with a languid step. The ground was hardened by recent frost, and the usually muddy track was dry. At the corner of the Grammar School playground she turned up the lane towards the High Street, keeping close to the wall of the Grammar School, so as to be out of view of any from the side windows. Before she quite reached the High Street she caught sight of Mr. Diamond, walking briskly along in the direction of his lodgings. He did not see Castalia, or did not choose to see her; for, although she had once or twice saluted him in the street, she had on another occasion regarded him with her most unrecognising stare, and Matthew Diamond was not a man to risk enduring that a second time. But Castalia quickened her step so as to intercept him before he crossed the end of Grammar School Lane.

"Mr. Diamond!" she said almost out of breath.

"Madam!"

Diamond raised his hat and stood still, in some surprise.

"Would you be kind enough—do you happen to know whether Mr. Errington has left the post-office? You must have passed the door. You might have seen him coming out."

"I am sorry, madam, that I cannot inform you."

"You—you haven't seen him anywhere in the town?"

"No; I have only just left the Grammar School. Have you any further commands?"

He asked the question after a slight pause, because Castalia remained standing exactly across his path, glancing anxiously up and down the High Street, and apparently oblivious of Diamond's existence.

"Oh no! I beg your pardon," she answered, moving aside. As she did so young Ingleby came up, and was about to pass them when Diamond touched him on the shoulder and said, "Ingleby, have you chanced to see Mr. Errington?"

"Yes, sir; I saw him going down the High Street not two minutes ago, close to old Maxfield's shop. Do you want him, Mrs. Errington? I can easily catch him if I run."

"No, no, no! Don't go! You must not go after him."

She walked away without any word or sign of farewell, leaving Diamond and the boy looking after her in surprise.

"That is the most disagreeable woman I ever came across!" exclaimed Ingleby, with school-boy frankness. "I hate her stuck-up airs. But Errington is such a capital fellow——! I'd do anything for him."

Diamond did not choose to discuss either the husband or the wife with young Ingleby, but he said to himself, as he pursued his homeward way, that Mrs. Errington's manner had been not only disagreeable but very strange.

Castalia reached the office and walked in. She entered the inner part that was screened off from the public, and passed Mr. Gibbs, behind his desk, without any recognition. She was about to enter Algernon's private room at the back, when Gibbs, rising and bowing, said "Did you want anything, ma'am? Mr. Errington is not there."

"Oh! I'll go in and sit down."

Gibbs looked uneasy and doubtful, and presently made an excuse to follow her into the room. Her

frequent visits to the office of late by no means pleased Mr. Obadiah Gibbs.

"I didn't know how the fire was," said he, poking at the hot coals, and looking furtively at Mrs. Errington.

She was seated in her husband's chair in front of his desk. The little secretaire stood on a table at one side of it.

"I'm afraid Mr. Errington may not be back very soon," said Gibbs.

"Do you know where he's gone?"

"Not I, ma'am."

"Does he often go away during business hours?"

"Why—I don't know what you would call 'often,' ma'am—I crave pardon. I must attend to the office now; there is some one there." And Mr. Gibbs withdrew, leaving the door half open.

Castalia shut it, and fastened it inside. Then she pulled out a bunch of keys from her pocket, and tried them, one after the other, on the lock of the secretaire. This time it was safely secured, and not one of her keys fitted it. Then she opened the drawer of the table, and examined its contents. They consisted of papers, some printed, some written, a pair of driving gloves, and the cover of a letter directed to Algernon Errington, Esq., in a woman's hand. Castalia pounced on the cover, and thrust it into her pocket. After that, she looked behind the almanac on the chimney-piece, and rummaged amongst a litter of newspapers, and torn scraps of writing that lay in a basket. She was thus engaged when Mr. Gibbs's hand was laid on the handle of the door, and Mr. Gibbs's voice was heard demanding admission.

Castalia opened the door at once, and Mr. Gibbs came in with a look of unconcealed annoyance on his face. He looked round the room sharply.

"What do you want?" asked Castalia.

"I want to see that all's right here, ma'am. I'm responsible."

"What should be wrong? What do you mean?" she demanded with so coldly-haughty an air, that Gibbs was abashed. He felt he had gone too far, and muttered an apology. "I wanted to see to the fire. I'm afraid the coal-box is nearly empty. That old woman is so careless. I beg your pardon, but Mr. Errington is very particular about the room being kept warm."

Castalia deigned not to notice him or his speech. She drew her shawl round her shoulders, and began to move away.

"Can I give any message for you to Mr. Errington, ma'am?"

"No—you need not mention that I came. I shall tell him myself this evening."

As she walked down the High Street, she reflected on Mr. Gibbs's unwonted rudeness of look and manner.

"He is told to watch me; to drive me away if possible; to prevent me making any discoveries. I daresay they are all in a league together. I am the poor dupe of a wife—the stranger who knows nothing, and is to know nothing. We shall see; we shall see. I wonder where Ancram can have gone! That boy spoke of seeing him near Maxfield's house."

At that moment she found herself close to it, and with a sudden impulse she entered the shop, and, walking up to a man who stood behind the counter, said, "Is Mr. Errington here?"

The man was James Maxfield, and he answered sulkily, "I don't know whether he's gone or not. You'd better inquire at the private door."

Castalia's heart gave a great throb. "He has been here, then?" she said.

"You'd better inquire at the private door," was all James's response, delivered still more surlily than before.

Castalia left the shop, and knocked at the door indicated to her by James's thumb jerked over his shoulder. "Is Mr. Errington gone?" she asked of the girl who opened the door.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did he—did he stay long?"

"About half an hour, I think."

"Is Mr. Maxfield at home?"

"No, ma'am; master is at Duckwell, and has been since Saturday."

"Who is it, Sally?" cried Betty Grimshaw's voice from the parlour, and upon hearing it Castalia walked hastily away.

When she reached her own home again, between fatigue and excitement she could scarcely stand. She threw herself on the sofa in her little drawing-room, unable to mount the stairs.

"Deary me, missus," cried Polly, who happened to admit her, "why you're a'most dead! Wherever have you been?"

"I've been walking in the fields. I came round by the road. I'm very tired."

"Tired? Nay, and well you may be if you took all that round! I thought you'd happen been into Whitford. Lawk, how you're squashing your bonnet! Let me take it off for you."

"I don't care; leave it alone."

But Polly would not endure to see "good clothes ruined," as she said, so she removed her mistress's shawl and bonnet—folding, and smoothing, and straightening them as well as she could. "Now you'd better take a drop o' wine," she said. "You're a'most green. I never saw such a colour."

Despite her rustic bluntness, Polly was kind in her way. She made her mistress swallow some wine, and put her slippers on her feet for her, and brought a pillow to place beneath her head. "You see you han't got no strength to spare. You're very weak, missus," she said. Then she muttered as she walked away, "Lord, I wouldn't care to be a lady myself! I think they're mostly poor creeturs."

Left alone, Castalia closed her eyes and tried to review the situation, but at first her brain would do nothing but represent to her over and over again certain scenes and circumstances, with a great gap here and there, like a broken kaleidoscope.

Ancram had been to Maxfield's house, and it could not have been to see the old man, who had been absent for some days. Perhaps Ancram was in the habit of going thither! He had never said a word to her about it. How sly he had been! How sly Rhoda had been! All his pretended unwillingness to have Rhoda invited to Ivy Lodge had been a blind. There was nothing clear or definite in her mind except a bitter, burning, jealous hatred of Rhoda.

"We shall see if Ancram confesses to having been to that house to-day," said Castalia to herself. Then she went upstairs wearily. She was physically tired, being weak and utterly unused to much walking, and called Lydia to dress her and brush her hair. And when her toilet was completed, she sat quite still in the drawing-room, neither playing, reading, nor working—quite still, with her hands folded before her, and awaited her husband.

She would first try to lead him to confess his visit to the Maxfields, and, if that failed, would boldly tax him with it. She even went over the very words she would say to her husband when he should descend from his dressing-room before dinner.

But she could not foresee a circumstance which disturbed the plan she had arranged in her mind. When Algernon returned to Ivy Lodge he did not go into his dressing-room as usual, but marched straight into the drawing-room, where Castalia was sitting.

"That's an agreeable sort of letter!" he said, flinging one down on the table.

He was not in a passion—he had never been known to be in a passion—but he was evidently much vexed. His mouth was curved into a satirical smile; he drew his breath between his teeth with a hissing sound, and nodded his head twice or thrice, after repeating ironically, "That's an uncommonly agreeable sort of letter!" Then he thrust his hands deep into his pockets, threw himself into an easy-chair, stretched his legs straight out before him, and looked at his wife.

Castalia was surprised, and curious, and a little anxious, but she made an effort to carry out her programme despite this unexpected beginning. She remained motionless on the sofa, and said, with elaborate indifference of manner, "Do you wish me to read the letter? I wonder at your allowing me to know anything of your affairs."

"Read it? Of course! Why else did I give it to you? Don't be absurd, Castalia. Pshaw!" And he impatiently changed the position of his feet with a sharp, sudden movement.

Castalia's sympathy with his evident annoyance overcame her resentment for the moment. She could not bear to see him troubled. She opened the letter.

"Why it's from Uncle Val!" she exclaimed.

It was from her uncle, addressed to her husband, and was written in a tone of considerable severity. To Castalia it appeared barbarously cruel. Lord Seely curtly refused any money assistance; and stated that he wrote to Algernon instead of to Castalia, because he perceived that, although the application for money had been written by Castalia's hand, it had not been dictated by her head. Lord Seely further advised his niece's husband, in the strongest and plainest terms, to use every method of economy, to retrench his expenditure, to refrain from superfluous luxuries, and to live on his salary.

"The little allowance I give Castalia for her dress will be continued to her," wrote his lordship. "Beyond that, I am unable to give either her or you one farthing. Understand this, and act on it. And, moreover, I had better tell you at once, as an additional inducement to be prudent, that I see no prospect of procuring advancement for you in any other department of his Majesty's service than the one you are in at present. My advice to you is to endeavour to merit advancement by diligence in the performance of your duties. You have abilities which are sure to serve you if honestly applied. You are so young, that even after ten or fifteen years' work you

would be in the prime of all your faculties and powers. And ten or fifteen years' good work might give you an excellent position. As to Castalia, I cannot help feeling a conviction that her discontent is chiefly reflected, and that if she saw you cheerful and active in your daily business, she would not repine at her lot."

Castalia put the letter down on the table in silence. She was astonished, indignant; but yet a little gleam of satisfaction pierced through those feelings—a hope that she and her husband might be drawn closer together by this common trouble. She would show him how well able she was to endure this, and worse, if he would only love her and trust her entirely. Even her jealousy for Rhoda Maxfield was mitigated for the moment. All that fair-weather prettiness and philandering would be put out of sight at the first growl of a storm. The wife would be the nearest to him if troubles came. No pink-and-white coquetry could usurp her right to suffer with him and for him, at all events.

"That's a pleasant sort of thing, isn't it?" said Algernon, who had been watching her face as she read.

"It is too bad of Uncle Val, Ancram."

"Too bad! Yes; to put it mildly, it is too bad, I think. Too bad? By George, I never heard of anything so outrageous!"

"Do you know, I think that my lady is at the bottom of it."

"I wish she was at the bottom of the Thames!"

"Ancram, I do feel sorry for you. It is such a shame to bury your talents, and all that. But still, you know, it is true what he says about your having plenty of time before you. And as to being poor—of course it is horrid to be poor, but we can bear it, I daresay. And, really, I don't think I should mind it so much if once we were acknowledged to be quite, quite poor; because then it wouldn't matter what one wore, and nobody would expect one to have things like other people of one's rank."

Poor Castalia was not eloquent, but had she possessed the most fluent and persuasive tongue in the world, it would not have availed to make Algernon acquiesce in her view of the situation. She was for indignantly breaking off all connection with relatives who could behave as Uncle Val had behaved. It was not his refusing to advance more money (in her conscience Castalia did not believe he could afford much assistance of that kind), but his writing with such cruel coldness to Ancram—his declaring that Ancram's case was not a hard one—his lecturing about duties, and cheerful activity, and so on, just as if Ancram had been an ordinary plodding young man instead of a being exceptionally gifted with all sorts of shining qualities—these were offences not to be forgiven. Castalia, for her part, would have endured any privation, rather than beg more favours of Uncle Val and my lady.

But Algernon's feeling in the matter was by no means the same as Castalia's. He dismissed all her attempts to express her willingness to share his lot for good or ill as matters of no importance. She might find it easy enough. Yes; the chief burthen would not fall on her! And, besides, she did not at all realise what it would be to have to live on the salary of the postmaster of Whitford, and to practise "rigid economy," as my lord phrased it. It was really provoking to see the cool way in which she took it for granted that matters would be mended by their being "acknowledged to be quite, quite poor." "My dear Castalia," he said, with an air of superior tolerance, "you have about as much comprehension of the actual state of the case as a canary-bird."

She paused, silently looking at him for a moment. Then she drew nearer to him, and laid her arm round his shoulder. She wore a dinner-dress with loose hanging sleeves, which were not becoming to her wasted frame. But the poor thin arm clung with a loving touch to her husband, as she said, "I know I am not so clever as you, Ancram, but I can see and understand that if we haven't money enough to pay for things we must do without them." (Castalia advanced this in the tone of one stating a self-evident proposition.) "And I shan't care, Ancram, if you trust me, and—and—don't put any one else before me. I never put any one before you. I was fond of Uncle Val. I think he was the only person I really loved in the world before I saw you. But if he treats you badly I shall give him up."

Algernon shook off the clinging arm from his shoulder, not roughly, but slightly.

"What on earth are you talking about, Cassy? What do you suppose we are to do? I tell you I must have some money, and you must write to your uncle again without delay."

She drew back with a hurt sense of having been unappreciated. The tears sprang to her eyes, and she put her hand into her pocket to take her handkerchief. The hand fell on something that rustled, and was stiff. It was the letter cover she had found in her husband's office that morning. The touch of the crisp paper recalled not only the events of the afternoon, but her own sensations during them. "Where were you this afternoon?" she asked, suddenly checking her tears, as the dry, burning, jealous feeling awoke again in her heart.

"Where was I? Where must I be? Where am I every afternoon? At the office—confound it!"

"You were not there all the afternoon. I—happened to look in there, and you were gone."

"I suppose you came just at the moment I happened to be absent, then. I had to see one or two

men on business. Not pleasant business. I was not amusing myself, I assure you," he added with a short hard laugh.

"What men had you to see?"

"Oh, no one whom you know anything about. Isn't dinner ready? I shan't dress. I have to go out again this evening."

"This evening!"

"Yes; it is a frightful bore, but I have a business appointment. Do ring and tell the cook to make haste."

"You are not going out again this evening, Ancram?"

"I tell you I must. How can you be so childish, Castalia? Whilst I am gone you can employ yourself in making out the draught of a letter to your uncle."

"I will not write to my uncle! I will not. You don't care for me. You—you deceive me," burst out Castalia. And then a storm of sobs choked her voice, and she hurried away, filling the little house with a torrent of incoherent sounds.

Algy looked after her, with his head bent down and his eyebrows raised. Castalia was really very trying to live with. As to her refusal to write to her uncle, she would not of course persist in it. It was out of the question that she should persist in opposing any wish of his. But she was really very trying.

When dinner was announced, Castalia sent word that she had a headache and could not eat. She was lying down in her own room. Her husband murmured a few words of sympathy, but ate his dinner with no sensible diminution of appetite, and, as soon as it was despatched, he lit a cigar, wrapped himself in his great-coat, and went out.

Castalia heard the street-door shut. She rose swiftly from the bed on which she had thrown herself, put on a bonnet and cloak, muffled her face in a veil, and followed her husband.

CHAPTER VI.

The night was dark and cheerless. It was one of those murky November nights when one seems to see and breathe through a dusky gauze. The road from Ivy Lodge to Whitford was not lighted. At a long distance before her, Castalia saw a red, glowing speck, which she knew to be the lamp over the chemist's shop, kept by Mr. Barker, her landlord. After that, a few street lamps glimmered, and the town of Whitford had fairly begun.

It was not late, and yet most of the shops were shut, and the streets very silent and deserted. Castalia strained her eyes onward through the darkness, and presently saw her husband's figure come into the circle of faint light made by a street lamp, traverse it, and disappear again into the shade. She had walked so quickly in her excitement as to have overtaken him sooner than she had expected. Whither was he going?

She slunk along in the shadow of the houses, frightened at the faint sound of her own footfall on the flagstones, starting nervously at every noise, hurrying across the lighted spaces in front of the few shops that remained open with averted face and beating heart, fearing to be noticed by those within. But never once did she falter in her purpose of following her husband. She would have been turned back by no obstacle short of one which defied her physical powers to pass it.

Algernon was now nearing Maxfield's house. The shutters of the shop were closed, but the door was still open, and a light streamed from it on to the pavement. Castalia followed, watching breathlessly. Her husband passed the shop, went on a pace or two, stopped at the private door, and rang the bell. She could see the action of his arm as he raised it. The door was opened without much delay, and Algernon went in.

Castalia stood still, trying to collect her thoughts and determine on her course of action. What should she do? Her husband might be an hour—hours—in that house. She could not stand there in the street. An impulse came upon her to make herself known—to go in and tax Algernon with perfidy and deception then and there. But she checked the impulse. It would have been a desperate step. Algernon might never forgive her. It might be possible for her to reach a pitch of rage and jealousy which would make her deaf to any such considerations—careless as to the consequences of her actions if she could but gratify the imperious passion of the moment. She was dimly conscious that this might be possible; but for the present she had sufficient control over her own actions to pause and deliberate. There she stood, alone at night, in Whitford High Street—stealthily, trembling, and wretched—she, Castalia Kilfinane! Who would believe it? What would her uncle feel if he could see her now, or guess what she was enduring?

The idea came into her mind—floating like a waif on the current of indignant misery that seemed to flood all her spirit—that there might be hundreds of human beings whom she had seen and thought happy smarting with some secret wound like her own, and living lives the half of which was never known to the world. Castalia had never been apt to let her imagination busy itself with

the sorrows of others, and at this moment the conception had no softening effect. It only added an extra flavour of bitterness and rebellion to her sufferings. It was too cruel. Why should such things be? And what had she done to merit so much unhappiness? She shivered a little as a breeze from the river came bringing with it the clammy breath of the marsh mists—the white cloud-kraken that Minnie Bodkin had so often watched from her window.

How long Castalia remained standing at her post she could never reckon; she was conscious only of burning pain of mind, and of a determination not to shrink from her purpose because of the pain. A footstep came sounding along the quiet street and startled her. She shrank back as far as she could, pressing her shoulder close against the wall, and uncertain whether to walk on or remain still. It was a man who came towards her, turning from a narrow street opening into the High Street, which Castalia knew to be Lady Lane. He walked with a very rapid step, hanging his head, and looking neither to the right nor to the left. Castalia was, perhaps, the only dweller in Whitford who would not have recognised the figure as being that of David Powell, the Methodist preacher.

As Powell neared Castalia, he seemed to become aware of her presence by some sixth sense, for to all appearance he had not looked towards her. The truth was, that all his outward perceptions were habitually disregarded by him, except such as carried with them some suggestion of helpfulness and sympathy. A fashionable lady might have stood facing him during a long sermon in chapel, or in the open fields, and (unless she had displayed signs of "grace") he would have taken no heed of her—would not have been able to tell the colour of her garments. But let the same woman be tearful, ragged, sick, or injured, and no observation could be more rapid and comprehensive than David Powell's, to convey all needful particulars of her state and requirements. So this night, as he passed along the quiet Whitford streets, the few persons he had met hitherto were to him as shadows. But when the vague outline of a woman's form made itself a blot of blacker shadow in the darkness, those accustomed sentinels, his senses, gave the spirit notice of a fellow-creature in want, possibly of bread, certainly of sympathy.

He stopped within a few paces of Castalia, and perceived by that time that she was well and warmly clad, and that her trouble, whatever it was, could not be alleviated by alms. In her desire to avoid notice, she shrank away more and more almost crouching down against the wall. It occurred to Powell that she might be ill. "Are you suffering?" he asked, in a low musical voice. "Can I help you?"

Finding that she did not reply, he advanced a step farther, and was stretching out his hand to touch her on the shoulder, when, driven to bay, she raised herself up to her full height, and answered quickly and resentfully, "No; I am not ill. I am waiting for some one."

He stood still, irresolutely. Her voice and accent struck him with surprise, he recognised them as belonging to a person of a different class from any he had expected. How came such a lady to be alone at that hour, standing in the cold street? At length he said, gently, "If I may advise you, it would be well for you to go home. The person who keeps you waiting in the street in such weather, and at this hour, must surely be very thoughtless. Can I not assist you? I am David Powell, a poor preacher of the Word. You need have no fear of me."

"No; please to go away. I am not at all afraid. Go away, go away!" she added with an imperative emphasis, for she began to fear lest her husband should come out of the house, hear the sound of her voice, and find her there. Powell obeyed her, and walked slowly away. There was, in truth, so far as he knew, no reason to fear that any evil could happen to the woman in Whitford High Street, except the evil of standing so long in the cold, raw weather. It had now begun to rain; a fine drizzling rain, that was very chill.

When he had walked some distance along the High Street, and was close to the turning that led to Mrs. Thimbleby's house, he stopped and looked back. Almost at the same moment he saw a man come out of Maxfield's house, and advance along the street towards him. Then, at rather a long interval, the cloaked lady began to move onward also, but without overtaking the man, or apparently trying to do so. It was a strange adventure, and one entirely unparalleled in Powell's experience of the little town; and after he had reached his lodgings he could not, for a long time, divert his thoughts from dwelling on it.

Meanwhile, Algernon, unconscious of the watcher behind him, proceeded straight onward to the post-office. Then he turned up the narrow passage or entry in which was the side door that gave access to his private office. Castalia did not follow him beyond the mouth of the entry. Standing there and listening, she heard the sharp sound of a match being struck, then the turning of a key, and a door softly opened and shut.

It then struck Castalia for the first time that this unexpected visit to the office afforded an opportunity for her to reach home without her husband's discovering her absence. She had not considered before how this was to be accomplished; and, indeed, had Algernon returned directly to Ivy Lodge from Maxfield's house it would have been impossible.

She now saw this, and hastened back along the road, in a tremor at her narrow escape; for, although the impulse had crossed her mind to declare herself, and boldly enter Maxfield's house in quest of her husband, that was a very different matter from being suddenly discovered against her will. In the latter case she would, as she well knew, have been at an immense disadvantage with her husband, who, instead of being accused, would become accuser.

Nothing short, indeed, of the passion of jealousy within her would have given her strength to

combat her husband. This was the only way in which her idolatrous admiration, her very love for him, could be turned into a weapon against him.

"I could bear anything else! Anything else!" she said to herself. "But to be fooled and deceived, and put aside for that girl——!" A great hot wave of passion seemed to flow through her whole body as she thought of Rhoda. "Let the servants see me! What do I care?" she said recklessly. At that moment she would not have heeded if the whole town had seen her, and known her errand into Whitford, and its result. She rang loudly at the bell of Ivy Lodge, and walked in past the servant, with a white face and glittering eyes.

"Isn't master coming?" stammered the girl, staring at her mistress.

"I don't know. Go to bed. I don't want you."

There was something in her face which checked further speech on Lydia's part. Lydia was fairly frightened. She crept away to the garret, where Polly was already sleeping soundly, and vainly tried to rouse her fellow-servant, to feel some interest in her account of how missus had stalked into the house by herself like a ghost, and had ordered her off to bed, and to get up a discussion as to missus's strange goings on altogether of late.

Castalia went to her own room, uncertain whether to undress and go to bed or to remain up and confront her husband when he should return. One dominant desire had been growing in her heart for many days past, and had now become a force overwhelming all smaller motives, and drawing them resistlessly into its strong current. This dominant desire was to be revenged—not on her husband, but on Rhoda Maxfield. And it might be that by waiting and watching yet awhile, by concealing from Ancram the discovery she had that night made, she might be enabled more effectually to strike at her rival. If Ancram knew, he would try to shield Rhoda. He would put the thing in such a light before the world as to elicit sympathy for Rhoda and make her (Castalia) appear ridiculous or obnoxious. He had the gift to do such things when it pleased him. But Rhoda should not escape. No; she would keep her own counsel yet awhile longer.

When Algernon came home about midnight, letting himself into the house with a private key which he carried, he found his wife asleep, or seeming to sleep, and congratulating himself on escaping the querulous catechism as to where he had been, and what he had been doing, which he would have to endure had Castalia been awake on his return. As he crossed the bedchamber to his dressing-room, she moved, and put up one hand to screen her eyes from the light.

"Don't let me disturb you, Cassy," he said. "I have been detained very late. I am going downstairs again—there is a spark of fire in the dining-room—to have one cigar before I turn in. Go to sleep again."

He bent down to kiss her, but she kept her face obstinately buried in the pillow. So he took her left hand, which hung down, and lightly touched it with his lips, saying, "Poor sleepy Cassy!" and went away.

And then she raised her thin left hand, on which her wedding-ring hung loosely, and passionately kissed it where her husband's lips had rested, and burst into a storm of crying, until she fairly sobbed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER VII.

"So you had that fine gentleman, Mr. Algernon—What-d'ye-call-it—Errington, here last evening?" said Jonathan Maxfield to his daughter, on his return from Duckwell.

"Yes, father; he had been before in the afternoon. He was very anxious to see you; but Aunt Betty told him you wouldn't be back until to-day."

"Very anxious to see me, was he? I have my own opinion about that. But, no doubt, he wants me to believe that he's anxious."

"He seems in a good deal of distress of mind, father."

"I daresay. And what about the minds of the folks as hold his promises to pay? Just so much waste paper, those are, I take it; I'd as lief have his word of honour myself. And most people in Whitford know what that's worth."

"I think he has been very unfortunate, father."

"H'm! What worldly folks calls misfortin' is generally the Lord's dealing according to deserts. It's set forth in Scripture that the righteous man shall prosper, and the unrighteous be brought to naught."

"But—father, even good people are sometimes chastened by afflictions," said Rhoda timidly.

Old Max knitted his brows.

"There's nothing," said he, "more dangerous than for the young and inexperienced to wrest texts; it leads 'em far astray. When that kind o' chastening is spoken of, it don't mean the sort of trouble

as has fallen on young Errington. The Almighty has given every man reason enough to understand that, if he spends thirteence out of every shilling, he'll be beggared before the year's end. I don't believe in men being ruined without fault or foolishness of their own."

"He asked me if I—if you—if I thought—he asked me to ask you to have a little patience with him about some bills. I didn't know that he had any bill here; but he said you would understand."

"Aye, aye! I understand. It isn't bills for tea, and flour, and bacon, and such like. It's a different kind o' bills the young gentleman's been meddling with; and a fine hand he's made of it."

"Couldn't you help him, father?"

Rhoda spoke pleadingly, but with the timidity which always attended her requests to her father, whose recent indulgence had never reached a point of weakness, and who clearly showed, in all his dealings with his daughter, that he was not carried away by his affection for her, but acted with the consciousness of a will unfettered by precedents, and perfectly able to choose its course without regard to what other people might expect of him.

For herself, in pleading for Algernon, she was not moved by self-conscious sentimentality, neither did she suppose herself to be doing anything heroic. The peculiar tenderness she still felt for him was made up of pity and memory. The Algy she had loved was gone—had melted into thin air, like a dream under the morning sunlight. Mr. Errington, the postmaster of Whitford, and the husband of the Honourable Castalia Kilfinane, was a very different personage. Still he was inextricably connected in her mind with that bright idol of her childhood and her youth. His marriage had put all possibility of love-making between him and herself as much out of the question, to her mind, as if he had been proved to be her brother. Rhoda had read no romances, and she was neither of an innovating spirit nor a passionate temperament, and it is surprising what power a sincere conviction of the irrevocable and inevitable has to control the "natural feelings" we hear so much of! But she clung tenaciously to a better opinion of Algernon than his actions warranted—as has been the case with many another woman—chiefly to justify herself for ever having loved him.

"Couldn't you help him, father?" she repeated, seeing that her father did not at once reply, but was sitting meditating, with a not altogether ill-pleased expression of face.

"Help him!" cried old Max. "Why should I help him? A reprobate, unregenerate, vain, ungrateful worldling! I did help him once, and earned much gratitude for my pains. And what a sneaking, poor, mean, pitiful fellow he must be to come here and whine to you! A poor, pitiful fellow! Talk of a gentleman! Yah!"

Old Max derived so much grim satisfaction from the contemplation of Algernon's pitiful behaviour that it seemed almost to soften him towards the culprit, in whom any glimpse of nobility would not have been very welcome to his enemy. When you hate a man on excellent private grounds, it is certainly unpleasant to see him displaying qualities in public which win a fallacious admiration. And this aggravation was one which old Max had been suffering for some time at the hands of the popular Algernon. His present money difficulties, combined with his unworthy methods of meeting them, at once gratified and justified Jonathan Maxfield's vindictiveness.

He gave forth the queer grunting noise that served him for a laugh, as he said, "And a lot o' good his fine marriage has done him! And his grand relations! I told him long ago that if he wanted help from such as them, he must ask it with a pocket full of money. Then he might ha' been uplifted into high places. And it wasn't only my own wisdom neither, though that might ha' been enough for such a half-fledged young cockerel as he was in them days, seeing it has been enough for his betters before now. I had the warrant of Scripture; for what says Solomon? 'Wealth maketh many friends; but the poor is separated from his neighbour.'"

Still Rhoda did not altogether despair of inducing her father to do something for Algernon. What that something might be, or how far it was possible for her father to assist young Errington, except by simply giving or lending him money, Rhoda was ignorant. Algernon in talking to her had spoken very glibly, but, to her, very unintelligibly, of bills which were in her father's hands; and had pointed out, with an air of candour and conviction, that it would be imprudent on Mr. Maxfield's part to drive matters to extremity. It had all sounded very convincing, simply from the tone in which it was said. Many of us are astonishingly uncritical as to the coherence and cogency of words if they be but set to a good tune.

Algernon himself was rather hopeful since that interview with Rhoda. It could not be, after all, that Jonathan Maxfield would actually cause him, Algernon Errington, any personal inconvenience for the sake of a sum which was really a mere trifle to Maxfield, and which appeared very trifling to Algernon under every aspect except that of being called upon to pay it.

He had learned not long previously that certain bills he had given, backed by the name of that solid capitalist, the Honourable Jack Price, had found their way into old Max's hands. This startled him considerably, for he had no reason to count on the old man's forbearance. The time was drawing nigh when the bills would become due.

About a month ago some other bills had fallen due, and had been duly honoured. They had been given to a London wine merchant, who would certainly not have scrupled to take any strong measure for getting his money. And even the name of Jack Price was no talisman to charm away this grasping tradesman's determination to be paid for goods delivered; the wine merchant in question doing a large City business, and feeling no anxiety as to the opinion entertained by the

Honourable Mr. Price's fashionable connection about himself or his wares. Under the pressure of this disagreeable conviction, the money had been found to honour the bills held by the wine merchant.

For the discharge of the liabilities represented by the bills now in Maxfield's hands, Algernon had reckoned on Castalia's extracting some money from her uncle. Algernon did not abandon the hope that she might yet succeed in doing so. Castalia must be urged to make new and stronger representations of their necessities to Lord Seely. But it could not be denied that my lord's last letter had been a very heavy blow; and that, moreover, a number of slight embarrassments, which Algernon had hitherto looked on as mere gossamer threads, to be broken when he pleased, had recently exhibited a disconcerting toughness and power of constraining his actions and destroying his comfort.

The thought not infrequently occurred to him that, if he were alone in the world, unhampered by a wife who had no flexibility of character, and who had recently displayed a stubborn kind of obtuseness, showing itself in such remarks as that if they had not money to pay for luxuries, they must do without luxuries, and that if they were poor, it would be better to seem poor, and the like dull commonplaces, which were peculiarly distasteful to Algernon's vivacious intelligence—if, he thought, he had no wife, or a different wife, things would undoubtedly go better with him. He was too quick not to perceive that his marriage, far from improving his social position, had been eminently unpopular amongst his friends and acquaintances. To be sure he had never intended to return to Whitford after allying himself with the family of Lord Seely. He had meant to shake the dust of the sleepy little town from his feet for ever. He reckoned up the advantages he had expected to gain by marrying Castalia, and set the real result against each one in his mind.

He had expected to get into the diplomatic service. He was a provincial postmaster!

He had expected to live in some splendid metropolis. He found himself in the obscure town which, of all others, he wished to avoid!

He had expected to be courted and caressed by wealthy, noble, and distinguished persons. He was looked coldly or shyly upon by even the insignificant middle-class society of a county town!

All this seemed peculiarly hard and unjust, because Algernon had always intended to bear his honours gracefully, without stiffness or arrogance. He would cut nobody; he would turn the cold shoulder to nobody. He had pictured himself sometimes making a meteoric reappearance in Whitford some day; flashing with brief brilliancy across the horizon of that remote neighbourhood, affably shaking hands with old acquaintance, occupying the best rooms in the "Blue Bell," and scattering largesse among the servants, rattling through the streets side by side with some county magnate, whose companionship should by no means chill his recognition of such local stars of the second or third magnitude as the Pawkinses of Pudcombe Hall. He was inclined by taste and temperament to be thoroughly "*bon prince*."

Such fancies may seem childish, but it was a fact that Algernon had indulged in them. With all his tact, he had a considerable strain of his mother's Ancramism in his blood. And the contrast between those former day-dreams and the present reality was so terrible, so mortifying, so ridiculous (direst and most soul-chilling word of all to Algernon!) that he was unable to face it. Some way out must be found. It was impossible, on any tenable theory of society, that he should be permanently consigned to oblivion and the daily round of inglorious duties.

As to what Lord Seely said about meriting advancement by diligence, and working for ten or fifteen years, it seemed to Algernon pretty much like exhorting a convict to step his daily round of treadmill in so painstaking a manner as to win the approbation of the gaol authorities. What would he care for their approbation? It was impossible to take either pride or pleasure in working out one's penal sentence.

Algernon felt very bitter against Lord Seely as he pondered these things, and not a little bitter against Castalia, who had, as it were, bound him to this wheel, and had latterly added the sting of her intolerable temper to his other vexations. Fate had used him despitefully. He seemed to consider that some gratitude was due to him on the part of the supernal powers for his excellent intentions—he would have borne prosperity so well! A feeling grew upon him, which would have been desperation but for his ever-present, instinctive efforts not to hurt himself.

On the morning after the visit to Maxfield's house—of which Castalia had been an unseen witness—Algernon went to the post-office somewhat earlier than usual. As he reached it a man was coming out, who scowled upon him with so sullen and hostile a countenance, that it affected him like a blow.

He was, on the whole, in better spirits on this special morning than he had been for some time past. Not that he was habitually depressed by his troubles, but there was a certain apprehension and anxiety in his daily life which flavoured it all unpleasantly. But on this morning he was, for various reasons, feeling hopeful of at least a reprieve from care, and the man's angry frown not only hurt but startled him.

"Who is that fellow who has just gone out?" he asked of Gibbs, entering the office by the public door instead of his own private one, in order to put the question.

"That is Roger Heath, the man who has lost his money-letter."

"An uncommonly ill-looking rascal, I take leave to think."

"Ahem! He is a decent, God-fearing man, sir, I believe; but at present he is wrath, and not without some excuse, either. He tells me he has written to the head office——"

"And what then?"

"And has been told that due inquiries will be made, of course."

"And what then?"

"Why then—I suppose that's the last he'll hear of it."

Algernon lightly flicked a white handkerchief over his face and bright curling hair, filling the close little office with a delicate perfume as he said, "So there's an end of that!"

"An end of it, I suppose, so far as Heath is concerned. But I doubt we shall hear more of the matter in the office."

Algernon paused with his hand on the lock of the door leading to his private room. He kept his hand there, and scarcely turned his head as he asked, "How so?"

Mr. Gibbs shook his head, and began to expatiate on the singular misfortunes which had been accumulated on the Whitford Post-office, and to hint that when two or three suspicious cases had followed each other in that way, an office was marked by the superior authorities, and means were taken to discover the culprit.

"Means! What means?" said Algernon, carelessly. "You said yourself that it was next to impossible to trace a stolen letter. And, really, if people will be such idiots as to send money by post without precaution, in spite of all the warnings that are given to them, they deserve to lose it."

"That may be, sir. Still, of course, it is no light matter to steal a letter. And as to the means of tracing it, why I have heard of trap-letters being sent, containing marked money."

The handle clicked, the door was opened and sharply shut again, and the Whitford postmaster disappeared into his private room.

It was more than an hour before Algernon reappeared in the outer office. He advanced towards Gibbs, and leaning on his shoulder with great affability, said to him in a low voice, "You've no suspicion of any one about this place, eh? The old woman that cleans the office, that boy Jem, no suspicion of anybody, eh? Oh! well I'm excessively glad of that! One hates to be distrustful of the people about one."

Gibbs shook his head emphatically and decisively. "No one has access to the office unless in my presence, sir; not a creature."

"The fact is," said Algernon, slowly, "that I have missed one or two papers of my own lately; matters of no consequence. God knows why anyone should have thought it worth while to take them! But they're gone."

Gibbs looked up with serious alarm in his face.

"Dear me, sir!" he exclaimed; "dear me, Mr. Errington! I wish you had mentioned this before."

"Oh well, you know, I thought I might be mistaken. I hate being on the watch about trifles. But latterly I am quite sure that papers have disappeared from my secretaire."

"From that little cabinet with drawers in it, that stands in your room?"

"Exactly."

"But—I was under the impression that you kept that carefully locked!"

Algernon laughed outright. "What a fellow you are, Gibbs! Fancy my keeping anything carefully locked! The fact is, it is as often open as shut. Only a few days ago, for instance, Mrs. Errington mentioned to me that she found it unlocked when she was here——" He stopped as if struck by a sudden thought, and turned his eyes away from Gibbs, who was looking up at him with the same uneasy expression on his face. "By-the-way, Mrs. Errington did not stay very long here, did she?" asked Algernon, with a degree of marked embarrassment very unusual in him. It was an embarrassment so ingeniously displayed that one might almost have suspected he wished it to be observed.

"When do you mean, sir? Mrs. Errington comes very often; very often indeed."

"Does she?—I mean—I mean the last time she was here. Did she stay long then?"

"N—no," answered Gibbs, removing his eyes from Algernon's face, and biting the feather of his pen thoughtfully. "At least, I think not, sir. I cannot be sure. She very often does not pass out through my office, but goes away by the private door in the passage."

There was a pause.

"I really am very glad that you don't suspect any of the people about the place, Gibbs," said Algernon at length, rousing himself with some apparent effort from a reverie. "As long as I have any authority here, no innocent person shall be made unhappy for one moment by watchfulness

and suspicion."

"That's a very kind feeling, Mr. Errington. But I shouldn't think an innocent person would mind being watched in such a case. For my own part, I hope we shall trace the matter out. It shan't be my fault if we don't."

"You are wonderfully energetic, Gibbs. An invaluable public servant. But, Gibbs, it will not, I think, be any part of your duty to mention to any one at present the losses I have spoken of from my secretaire. There is no reason, as yet, to connect them with the missing letters. I did not duly consider what I was saying. The papers, after all, were only private letters of my own, Gibbs. They concern no one but myself. One was a mere note—an invitation from a lady. They could have had no value for a thief, you know. I—I daresay I mislaid it, and never put it into the secretaire at all."

Algernon went away with downcast eyes and hurried step, and Mr. Gibbs stared after him with a bewildered gaze. Then slowly the expression of his face changed to one of consternation and pity. "Poor young man!" he exclaimed, half aloud. "That woman has been making free with his papers beyond a doubt. And he does his best to shield her. A worldly-minded, vain woman she is, that looks at us as if we were made of a different kind of clay from her. And they say she is furiously jealous of her husband. But this—this is serious! This is very serious, indeed. I am sorry for the young man with all my heart!"

CHAPTER VIII.

It was no more possible to do anything unusual in Whitford without arresting attention, and being subjected to animadversion, than it was possible for atmospheric conditions to change without affecting the barometer.

Who could tell how it got abroad in the town that young Mrs. Errington was in the habit of following her husband about; of watching him, spying on his actions, and examining his private correspondence? Mr. Obadiah Gibbs, who could have told more than any one on the latter head, was not given to talking. Yet the fact oozed out.

It assumed, of course, a great variety of forms and colours, according to the more or less distorting mediums through which it passed. The fact, as uttered by Miss Chubb, for example, was a very different-looking fact from that which was narrated with bated breath, and nods, and winks, by Mrs. Smith, the surgeon's wife. And her version, again, varied considerably from those of Mr. Gladwish, the Methodist shoemaker; Mr. Barker, the Church of England chemist; and the bosom friends of the servants at Ivy Lodge. Still, under one shape and another, Mrs. Algernon Errington's jealousy of her husband, and her consequent behaviour, were within the cognisance of Whitford, and were discussed in all circles there.

The predominant feeling ran strongly against Castalia. There were persons, indeed, who, exercising an exemplary impartiality (on which they much prided themselves), refused to take sides in the matter, but considered it most probable that both parties were to blame. Mrs. Smith was among these. She had, she declared, that rare gift in woman—a judicial mind, although her conception of the judicial functions appeared to be limited to putting on the black cap and passing sentence. But in the main, public sympathy was with Algernon. He had offended many old acquaintances by his aristocratic marriage; but at least he was now making the only amends in his power by being extremely unhappy in it! A great many wiseacres, male and female, were now able to shake their heads, and say they had known all along how it would turn out. This came of flying too high; for, if Mrs. Errington, senior, was an Ancram by birth, her husband had been only a country surgeon—not even M.D., though she called him "doctor." And this justifying of their predictions was, in a vague way, imputed to Algernon as a merit; or, at the least, it softened disapproval. Then, too, in justice to Whitfordians, it must be said that all their knowledge of Castalia showed them an insolent, supercilious, uninteresting woman, who made no secret of her contempt for them and their town, and who, "although but a poor postmaster's wife, when you came to look at it," as Mrs. Smith the judicial truly observed, gave herself more airs than a duchess. What good, or capacities for good, there might be in her, was hidden from Whitford, whilst her unpleasant qualities were abundantly manifested to all beholders.

Poor Castalia, in her quite unaffected nonchalance and disregard of "all those people," was totally ignorant how much resentment and dislike she was creating, and in what a hostile atmosphere she was living. Her husband's popularity, dimmed by his alliance with her, began to revive when it was perceived that she persecuted and harassed him, and (as was shrewdly suspected) involved him in money difficulties by her extravagance. Some of the men thought it served him right; why did he marry such a woman? But the ladies, as a rule, were on Algernon's side.

There were exceptions, of course. Miss McDougall stood up for her friend, as she said, albeit with some admixture of Mrs. Smith's judicial tendency to blame everybody all round, and a personal disposition towards spitefulness. Minnie Bodkin said very little when the subject was mentioned in her presence; but when an opinion was forced from her, she did not deliver it entirely in favour of Algernon. She was sorry for his wife, she said. And nine-tenths of her hearers would retort with raised hands and eyes, that they, for their part, were sorry for the young man, and that they

could not understand what dear Minnie found to pity in Mrs. Algernon Errington. "A woman who spies on her husband, my dear! Who condescends to open his letters—how a woman can so degrade herself is a mystery to me! And they say she actually follows him about the street at nights—skulks after him! Oh! it is almost too bad to repeat!"

"I don't know that all that is true. But if it be so, it seems to me that there is great cause for pity," Minnie would reply. And the answer was set down to poor dear Miss Bodkin's eccentricity.

There had been, for some time back, a talk of carelessness and mismanagement at the Whitford Post-office. Then Roger Heath made no secret of his loss, and was not soft-hearted or mild in his manner of speaking of it. He complained aloud, and spared nobody. And there were plenty of voices ready to carry his denunciations through all classes of Whitford society. It was very strange! Such a thing as the loss of a money-letter had been almost unknown during the reign of the late postmaster; and now there was, not one case, but two—three—a dozen! The number increased, as it passed from mouth to mouth, at a wonderful rate. There must be great negligence (to say the least of it) somewhere in the Whitford Post-office. If the present postmaster was too much above his business to look after it properly, it was a pity his high friends didn't remove him to some situation better suited to such a fine gentleman!

To be sure he was worried out of his wits by that woman. It really was true that she haunted the office at all hours. She had been seen slipping out of the private door in the entry. She was even said to have a pass key which enabled her to go in and out at her will. Was it not rumoured on very good authority that she had actually gone to the office alone, in the dead of night? What could she want to be always prowling about there for? It was all very well to say she went to spy on her husband, but if things went wrong in the office in consequence of her spyings, it became a public evil. Anyway, it was most extraordinary and unheard-of behaviour, and somebody ought to take the matter up! This latter somewhat vague suggestion was a favourite climax to gossip on the subject of the Algernon Erringtons.

With respect to their private affairs, things did not mend. Tradesmen dunned, and grumbled, and could not get their money, and some declined to execute further orders from Ivy Lodge until their accounts were settled. Among the angriest had been Mr. Ravell, the principal draper of the town, whom Castalia had honoured with a good deal of her custom. But one day, not long after Algernon's conversation with his clerk, mentioned in the last chapter, he was met in the High Street by Mr. Ravell, who bowed very deferentially, and stopped, hesitatingly. "Could I say a word to you, sir?" said Mr. Ravell.

"Certainly," replied Algernon. They were close to the post-office, and he took the draper into his private room, and bade him be seated.

"I suppose, Mr. Ravell," said Algernon, with a shrug and a smile, "that you have come about your bill! Mrs. Errington mentioned to me a short time ago that you had been rather importunate. Upon my word, Mr. Ravell, I think you need not have been in such a deuce of a hurry! I know Mrs. Errington does not understand making bargains, and I suppose you don't neglect to arrange your prices so as not to lose by giving her a little credit, eh?"

This was said lightly, but either the words or the tone made Mr. Ravell colour and look a little confused. He was seated, and Algernon was standing near him with his back to the fire, expressing a sense of his own superiority to the draper in every turn of his well-built figure and every line of his half-smiling, half-bored countenance.

"Why, you see, Mr. Errington, we are not in the habit of giving long credit, unless to a few old-established customers who deal largely with us. It would not suit our style of doing business. And it was reported that you were not settled permanently here. And—and—one or two unpleasant things had been said. But I hope you will not continue to feel so greatly offended with us for sending in the account. It was merely in the regular way of our transactions, I assure you."

"Oh, I'm not offended at all, Mr. Ravell! And I hope by the end of this month to clear off all scores between us entirely. Mrs. Errington has not furnished me with any details, but——"

Ravell looked up quickly. "Clear off all scores between us, sir?" he said.

"I presume you will have no objection to that, Mr. Ravell?"

"Oh, of course, sir, you will have your joke! I am glad you are not offended. You see ladies don't always understand these matters. Mrs. Errington was a little severe on us when she paid the account yesterday. At least, so my cashier said."

"My wife paid your account yesterday?" cried Algernon, with a blank look.

"Yes, sir, in full. We should have been quite satisfied if settlement had been made up to the end of last quarter. But it was paid in full. Oh, I thought you had been aware of it! Mrs. Errington said—my people understood her to say, that it was by your wish, as you were so greatly annoyed at the bill being sent in so often."

"Oh! Yes. Quite right, Mr. Ravell."

He spoke slowly, and as if he were thinking of something other than the words he uttered. Ravell looked at him curiously. Algernon suddenly caught the man's eye, and broke into a little careless laugh. "The fact is," said he, with a frank toss of his head, "that I did not know Mrs. Errington had

paid you. I suppose she had received some remittances, or—but in short," checking himself, and laughing once more, "I daresay you won't trouble yourself as to where the money comes from so long as it comes to you!"

Mr. Ravell laughed back again, but rather in a forced manner. "Not at all, sir! Not at all," he said, bowing and smiling. And, seeing Algernon look significantly at his watch, he bowed and smiled himself out of the office.

Then Mr. Ravell went away to report to his wife the details of his interview with the postmaster, and before noon the next day it was reported throughout Whitford that Mrs. Algernon Errington had the command of mysterious stores of money whereof her husband knew nothing; and that, nevertheless, she ran him into debt right and left, and refused to pay a farthing until she was absolutely forced to do so.

This report was not calculated to make those tradesmen who had not been paid more patient and forbearing. If Mrs. Algernon Errington could find money for one she could for another, they argued, and a shower of bills descended on Ivy Lodge within the next week or two. Algernon said they came like a swarm of locusts, and threatened to devour all before them. He acknowledged to himself that the payment of Ravell's bill had been a fatal precedent. "And, perhaps," he thought, "there was no need for getting rid of the notes after all! However, the thing is done and can't be undone."

The necessity for another appeal to Lord Seely grew more and more imminent. Castalia had displayed an unexpected obstinacy about the matter. She had held to her refusal to ask for more money from her uncle, but Algernon had not yet urged her very strongly to do so. The moment had now come, he thought, when an appeal absolutely must be made, and he doubted not his own power to cause Castalia to make it. Her manner, to be sure, had been very singular of late; alternately sullen and excited, passing from cold silence to passionate tenderness without any intermediate phases. He had surprised her occasionally crying convulsively, and at other times on coming home he had found her sitting absolutely unoccupied, with a blank, fixed face. The few persons who saw Castalia frequently, observed the change in her, and commented on it. Miss Chubb once dropped a word to Algernon indicating a vague suspicion that his wife's intellect was disordered. He did not choose to appear to perceive the drift of her words, but the hint dwelt in his mind.

"You must write to Lord Seely this evening, Cassy," he said one day on returning home to dinner. He had found his wife at her desk, and, on seeing him, she huddled away a confused heap of papers into a drawer, and hastily shut it.

"Must I?" she answered gloomily.

"Well, I don't wish to use an offensive phrase. You will write to oblige me. It has been put off long enough."

"Why should I oblige you?" said Castalia, looking up at him with sunken eyes. She looked so ill and haggard, as to arrest Algernon's attention—not too lavishly bestowed on her in general.

"Cassy," said he, "I am afraid you are not well!"

The tears came into her eyes. She turned her head away. "Do you really care whether I am ill or well?" she asked.

"Do I really care? What a question! Of course I care. Are you suffering?"

"N—no; not now. I believe I should not feel any suffering if you only loved me, Ancram."

"Castalia! How can you be so absurd?"

He rose from his seat beside her, and walked impatiently up and down the room. Nothing irritated him so much as to be called on for sentiment or tenderness.

"There!" she exclaimed, with a little despondent gesture of the head, "you were speaking and looking kindly, and I have driven you away! I wish I was dead."

Algernon stopped in his walk, and cast a singular look at his wife. Then after a moment he said, in his usual light manner, "My dear Cassy, you are low and nervous. It really is not good for you to mope by yourself as you do. Come, rouse yourself to write this letter to my lord, then after dinner you can have the fly to drive to my mother's. She complains that she sees you very seldom."

"Will you come too, Ancram?"

"I—well, yes; if it is possible, I will come too."

"I think," said Castalia, putting her hands on his shoulders, and gazing wistfully into his face, "that if you and I could go away to some quiet strange place—far away from all these odious people—across the seas somewhere—I think we might be happy even now."

"Upon my honour, there's nothing I should like so much as to get away across the seas! And you might as well hint to my lord, in the course of your letter, that I should be very well contented with a berth in the Colonies. A good climate, of course! One wouldn't care to be shipped off to Sierra Leone!"

"I will write that to Uncle Val, willingly. But—don't ask me to beg money of him again."

Algernon made a rapid calculation in his mind, and answered without appreciable pause, "Well, Cassy, it shall be as you will. But as to begging—that, I think, is scarcely the word between us and Lord Seely."

"I'll run upstairs and bathe my eyes, and I shall still have time to write before dinner," said Castalia, and left the room.

When he was alone, Algernon opened the writing-table drawer, and glanced at the papers in it. Castalia's hurried manner of concealing them had suggested to his mind the suspicion that she might have been writing secretly to her uncle. He found no letter addressed to Lord Seely, but he did find an unfinished fragment of writing addressed to himself. It consisted of a few incoherent phrases of despondency and reproach—the expression of confidence betrayed and affection unrequited. There was a word or two in it about the writer's weariness of life and desire to quit it.

Castalia had written many such fragments of late; sometimes as a mere outlet for suppressed feeling, sometimes under the impression that she really could not long support an existence uncheered by sympathy or counsel, embittered by jealousy, and chilled by neglect. She had written such fragments, and then torn them up in many a lonely hour, but she had never thought of complaining of Algernon to Lord Seely. She would complain of him to no human being. But all Algernon's insight into his wife's character did not enable him to feel sure of this. Indeed, he had often said to himself that no rational being could be expected to follow the vagaries of Castalia's sickly fancies and impracticable temper. He would not have been surprised to find her pouring out a long string of lamentations about her lot to Lord Seely. He was not much surprised at what he did find her to have written, although the state of feeling it displayed seemed to him as unreasonable and unaccountable as ever. He gave himself no account of the motive which made him take the fragment of writing, fold it, and place it carefully inside a little pocket-book which he carried.

"I wonder," he thought to himself, "if Castalia is likely to die!"

CHAPTER IX.

The letter to Lord Seely was duly written, and this time in Castalia's own words. Algernon refused to assist her in the composition of it, saying, in answer to her appeals, "No, no, Cassy; I shall make no suggestion whatsoever. I don't choose to expose myself to any more grandiloquence from your uncle about letters being 'written by your hand, but not dictated by your head.' I wonder at my lord talking such high-flown stuff. But pomposity is his master weakness."

Castalia's letter was as follows:

"Whitford, November 23rd.

"DEAR UNCLE VAL,—I am sure you will understand that I was very much surprised and hurt at the tone of your last letter to Ancram. Of course, if you have not the money to help us with, you cannot lend it. And I don't complain of that. But I was vexed at the way you wrote to Ancram. You won't think me ungrateful to you. I know how good you have always been to me, and I am fonder of you than of anybody in the world except Ancram. But nobody can be unkind to him without hurting me, and I shall always resent any slight to him. But I am writing now to ask you something that 'I wish for very much myself;' it is quite my own desire. I am not at all happy in this place. And I want you to get Ancram a berth somewhere in the Colonies, quite away. It is no use changing from one town in England to another. What we want is to get 'far away,' and put the seas between us and all the odious people here. I am sure you might get us something if you would try. I assure you Ancram is perfectly wasted in this hole. Any stupid grocer or tallow-chandler could do what he has to do. Do, dear Uncle Val, try to help us in this. Indeed I shall never be happy in Whitford.—Your affectionate niece,

"C. ERRINGTON.

"Give my love to Aunt Belinda if she cares to have it. But I daresay she won't.—C. E."

"I think my lord will not doubt the genuineness of that epistle!" thought Algernon, after having read it at his wife's request.

Then the fly was announced, and they set off together to pass the evening at the elder Mrs. Errington's lodgings. The "Blue Bell" driver touched his hat in a very respectful manner. His master's long-standing account was unpaid, but he continued to receive, for his part, frequent half-crowns from Algernon, who liked the immediate popularity to be purchased by a gift somewhat out of proportion to his means. Indeed, our young friend enjoyed a better reputation amongst menials and underlings than amongst their employers. The former were apt to speak of him as a pleasant gentleman who was free with his money; and to declare that they felt as if they could do anything for young Mr. Errington, so they could! He had such a way with him! Whereas the mere payment of humdrum debts excites no such agreeable glow of feeling, and is altogether

a flat, stale, and unprofitable proceeding.

"What o'clock shall we say, Castalia?" asked her husband, as they alighted at Mrs. Thimbleby's door.

"Tell him to come at half-past ten," returned Castalia.

It chanced that David Powell was re-entering his lodgings at the moment the younger Erringtons reached the door. He stood aside to let the lady pass into the house before him, and thus heard her answer. The sound of her voice made him start and bend forward to look at her face when the light from the open door fell upon it. She turned round at the same instant, and the two looked full at each other. David Powell asked Mrs. Thimbleby if that lady were not the wife of Mr. Algernon Errington.

"Yes, Mr. Powell, she is his wife; and more's the pity, if all tales be true!"

"Judge not uncharitably, sister Thimbleby! Nor let your tongue belie the gentleness of your spirit. It is an unruly member that speaks not always out of the fulness of the heart. The lady seems very sick, and bears the traces of much sorrow on her countenance."

"Oh yes, indeed, poor thing! Sickly enough she looks, and sorry. Nay, I daresay she has her own trials, but I fear me she leads that pleasant young husband of hers a poor life of it. I shouldn't say as much to anyone but you, sir, for I do try to keep my tongue from evil-speaking. But had you never seen her before, Mr. Powell?"

Powell answered musingly, "N—no—scarcely seen her. But I had heard her voice."

Mrs. Errington received her son and daughter-in-law with an effusive welcome. She was so astonished; so delighted. It was so long since she had seen them. And then to see them together! That had latterly become quite a rare treat. The good lady expatiated on this theme until Castalia's brow grew gloomy with the recollection of her wrongs, her solitary hours spent so drearily, and her suspicions as to how her husband employed the hours of his absence from her. And then Mrs. Errington began playfully to reprove her for being dull and silent, instead of enjoying dear Algy's society now that she had it! "I am sure, my dear Castalia," said the elder lady with her usual self-complacent stateliness, "you won't mind my telling you that I consider one of the great secrets of the perfect felicity I enjoyed during my married life to have been the interest and pleasure I always took—and showed that I took—in Dr. Errington's society."

"Perhaps he liked your society," returned Castalia with a languid sneer, followed by a short bitter sigh.

"Preferred it to any in the world, my dear!" said Mrs. Errington, mellifluously. She said it, too, with an *aplomb* and an air of conviction that mightily tickled Algernon, who, remembering the family rumours which haunted his childhood, thought that his respected father, if he preferred his wife's society to any other, must have put a considerable constraint on his inclinations, not to say sacrificed them altogether to the claims of a convivial circle of friends. "The dear old lady is as good as a play!" thought he. Indeed, he thoroughly relished this bit of domestic comedy.

"But then," proceeded Mrs. Errington, as she rang the bell to order tea, "I have not the vanity to suppose that he would have done so without the exercise of some little care and tact on my part. Tact, my dear Castalia—tact is the most precious gift a wife can bring to the domestic circle. But the Ancrams always had enormous tact—Give us some tea, if you please, Mrs. Thimbleby, and be careful that the water boils—proverbial for it, in fact!"

Algernon thought it time to come to the rescue. He did not choose his comfort to be destroyed by a passage of arms between his mother and his wife, so he deftly turned the conversation to less dangerous topics, and things proceeded peacefully until the tea was served.

"Who was that man that was coming in to the house with us?" asked Castalia, as she sipped her tea from one of Mrs. Errington's antique blue and white china cups.

"Would it be Mr. Diamond—? But no; you know him by sight. Or—oh, I suppose it was that Methodist preacher, Powell!"

"Powell! Yes, that was the name—David Powell."

"Most likely. He is in and out at all hours. Really, Algernon, do you know—you remember the fellow, how he used to annoy us at Maxfield's. Well, do you know, I believe he is quite crazy!"

"You have always entertained that opinion, I believe, ma'am."

"Oh, but, my dear boy, I think he is demented in real downright earnest now. I do indeed. I'm sure the things that poor weak-minded Mrs. Thimbleby tells me about him—! He has delusions of all kinds; hears voices, sees visions. I should say it is a case of what your father would have called 'melancholy madness.' Really, Algy, I frequently think about it. It is quite alarming sometimes in the night if I happen to wake up, to remember that there is a lunatic sleeping overhead. You know he might take it into his head to murder one! Or if he only killed himself—which is perhaps more likely—it would be a highly unpleasant circumstance. I could not possibly remain in the lodgings, you know. Out of the question! And so I told that silly Thimbleby. I said to her, 'Observe, Mrs. Thimbleby, if any dreadful thing happens in this house—a suicide or anything of that sort—I shall leave you at an hour's notice. I wish you well, and I have no desire to

withdraw my patronage from you, but you could not expect me to look over a coroner's inquest."

Algernon threw his head back and laughed heartily. "That was a fair warning, at any rate!" said he. "And if Mr. David Powell has any consideration for his landlady, he will profit by it—that is to say, supposing Mrs. Thimbleby tells him of it. What did she say?"

"Oh, she merely cried and whimpered, and hid her face in her apron. She is terribly weak-minded, poor creature."

Castalia had been listening in silence. All at once she said, "How many miserable people there are!"

"Very true, Cassy; provincial postmasters and others. And part of my miserable lot is to go down to the office again for an hour to-night."

"My poor boy!" "Go to the office again to-night?" exclaimed his mother and his wife simultaneously.

"Yes; it is now half-past eight. I have an appointment. At least—I shall be back in an hour, I have no doubt."

Algernon walked off with an air of good-humoured resignation, smiling and shrugging his shoulders. The two women, left alone together, took his departure very differently. Mrs. Errington was majestically wrathful with a system of things which involved so much discomfort to a scion of the house of Ancram. She was of opinion that some strong representations should be made to the ministry; that Parliament should be appealed to. And she rather enjoyed her own eloquence, and was led on by it to make some most astounding assertions, and utter some scathing condemnations with an air of comfortable self-satisfaction. Castalia, on the other hand, remained gloomily taciturn, huddled into an easy-chair by the hearth, and staring fixedly at the fire.

It has been recorded in these pages that Mrs. Errington did not much object to silence on the part of her companion for the time being; she only required an assenting or admiring interjection now and then, to enable her to carry on what she supposed to be a very agreeable conversation, but she did like her confidante to do that much towards social intercourse. And she liked, moreover, to see some look of pleasure, interest, or sympathy on the confidante's face. Looking at Castalia's moody and abstracted countenance, she could not but remember the gentle listener in whom she had been wont for so many years to find a sweet response to all her utterances.

"Oddly enough," she said, "I have been disappointed of a visitor this evening, and so should have been quite alone if you and Algy had not come in. I had asked Rhoda to spend the evening with me."

Castalia looked round at the sound of that name. "Why didn't she come?" she asked abruptly.

"Oh, I don't know. She merely said she could not leave home to-night. That old father of hers sometimes takes tyrannical fancies into his head. He has been kinder to dear Rhoda of late, and has treated her more becomingly—chiefly, I believe I may say, owing to my influence, although the old booby chose to quarrel with me—but when he takes a thing into his head he is as obstinate as a mule."

"I don't know about treating her 'becomingly,' but I think she needs some one to look after her and keep her in check."

"Who, Rhoda? My dear Castalia, she is the very sweetest-tempered creature I ever met with in my life; and that is saying a good deal, let me tell you, for the Ancram temper was something quite special. A gift. I don't boast of it, because I believe it was simply constitutional. But such was the fact."

"The girl is dressed up beyond her station. The last time I saw her it was absurd. Scarcely reputable, I should think."

Mrs. Errington by no means liked this attack. Over and above the fact that Rhoda was her pet and her *protégée*, which would have sufficed to make any animadversions on her appear impertinent, she was genuinely fond of the girl, and answered with some warmth, "I am sure, Castalia, that whatever Rhoda Maxfield might be dressed in, she would look modest and sweet, not to say excessively pretty, for I suppose there cannot be a doubt about that?"

"I thought you were a stickler for people keeping to their own station, and not aping their betters!"

"We must distinguish, Castalia. Birth will ever be with me the first consideration. Coming of the race I do, it could not be otherwise. But it is useless to shut one's eyes to the fact that money nowadays will do much. Look at our best families!—families of lineage as good as my own. What do we see? We see them allying themselves with commercial people right and left. Now, there was Miss Pickleham. The way in which she was thrown at Algy's head would surprise you. She had a hundred thousand pounds of her own on the day she married, and expectations of much more on old Pickleham's decease. But I never encouraged the thing. Perhaps I was wrong. However!—she married Sir Peregrine Puffin last season. And the Puffins were in Cornwall before the Conquest."

Castalia shrugged her shoulders in undisguised scorn. "All that nonsense is nothing to the purpose," said she, throwing her head back against the cushion of the chair she sat on. Mrs. Errington opened her blue eyes to their widest extent. "Really, Castalia! 'All that nonsense!' You are not very polite."

"I'm sick of all the pretences, and shams, and deceptions," returned Castalia, her eyes glittering feverishly, and her thin fingers twining themselves together with nervous restlessness. "I don't know whether you are made a fool of yourself, or are trying to make a fool of me——"

"Castalia!"

"But, in either case, I am not duped. Your 'sweet Rhoda!' Don't you know that she is an artful, false coquette—perhaps worse!"

"Castalia!"

"Yes, worse. Why should she not be as bad as any other low-bred creature who lures on gentlemen to make love to her? Men are such idiots! So false and fickle! But, though I may be injured and insulted, I will not be laughed at for a dupe."

"Good heavens, Castalia! What does this mean?"

"And I will tell you another thing, if you really are so blind to what goes on, and has been going on, for years: I don't believe Ancram has gone to the post-office to-night at all. I believe he has gone to see Rhoda. It would not be the first time he has deceived me on that score!"

Mrs. Errington sat holding the arms of her easy-chair with both hands, and staring at her daughter-in-law. The poor lady felt as if the world were turned upside down. It was not so long since old Maxfield had astonished her by plainly showing that he thought her of no importance, and choosing to turn her out of his house. And now, here was Castalia conducting herself in a still more amazing manner. Whilst she revolved the case in her brain—much confused and bewildered as that organ was—and endeavoured to come to some clear opinion on it, the younger woman got up and walked up and down the room with the restless, aimless, anxious gait of a caged animal.

At length Mrs. Errington slowly nodded her head two or three times, drew a long breath, folded her hands, and, assuming a judicial air, spoke as follows:

"My dear Castalia! I shall overlook the unbecomingness of certain expressions that you have used towards myself, because I can make allowance for an excited state of feeling. But you must permit me to give you a little advice. Endeavour to control yourself; try to look at things with calmness and judgment, and you will soon perceive how wrong and foolish your present conduct is. And, moreover, you need not be startled if I have discovered the real motive at the bottom of all this display of temper. There never was a member of my family yet who had not a wonderful gift of reading motives. I'm sure it is nothing to envy us! I have often, for my own part, wished myself as slow of perception as other people, for the truth is not always pleasant. But I must say that I can see one thing very plainly—and that is, that you are most unfortunately and most unreasonably giving way to jealousy! I can see it, Castalia, as plain as possible."

Mrs. Errington had finished her harangue with much majesty, bringing out the closing sentences as if they were a most unexpected and powerful climax, when the effect of the whole was marred by her giving a violent start and exclaiming, with more naturalness than dignity, "Mercy on us! Castalia, what will you do next? Do shut that window, for pity's sake! I shall get my death of cold!"

Castalia had opened the window, and was leaning out of it, regardless of the sleet which fell in slanting lines and beat against her cheek. "I knew that was his step," she said, speaking, as it seemed, more to herself than to her mother-in-law. "And he has no umbrella, and those light shoes on!" She ran to the fireplace and stirred the fire into a blaze, displaying an activity which was singularly contrasted with her usual languid slowness of movement. "Can't you give him some hot wine and water?" she asked, ringing the bell at the same time. When her husband came in she removed his damp great-coat with her own hands, made him sit down near the fire, and brought him a pair of his mother's slippers, which were quite sufficiently roomy to admit his slender feet. Algernon submitted to be thus cherished and taken care of, declaring, with an amused smile, as he sipped the hot negus, that this fuss was very kind, but entirely unnecessary, as he had not been three minutes in the rain.

As to Mrs. Errington, she was so perplexed by her daughter-in-law's sudden change of mood and manner, that she lost her presence of mind, and remained gazing from Algernon to his wife very blankly. "I never knew such a thing!" thought the good lady. "One moment she's raging and scolding, and abusing her husband for deceiving her, and the next she is petting him up as if he was a baby!"

When the fly was announced, and Castalia left the little drawing-room to put on her cloak and bonnet, Mrs. Errington drew near to her son and whispered to him solemnly, "Algy, there is something very strange about your wife. I never saw such a changed creature within the last few weeks. Don't you think you should have some one to see her?—some professional person I mean? I fear that her brain is affected!"

"Good gracious, mother! Another lunatic? You are getting to have a monomania on that subject yourself!" Algernon laughed as he said it.

"My dear, there may be two persons afflicted in the same way, may there not? But I said nothing about lunatics, Algy. Only—really, I think some temporary disturbance of the brain is going on. I do, indeed."

"Pooh, pooh! Nonsense, ma'am! But it is odd enough that you are the second person who has made that agreeable suggestion to me within a fortnight. Poor Cassy! That's all she gets by her airs and her temper."

"Another person, was there?"

"Yes; it was little Miss Chubb, and——"

"Miss Chubb! Upon my word, I think that Miss Chubb was guilty of taking a considerable liberty in suggesting anything of the kind about the Honourable Mrs. Ancram Errington!"

"Oh, I don't know about liberty; but, of course, I laughed at her; and, of course, you will too, if she says anything of the kind to you."

"I shall undoubtedly check her pretty severely if she attempts anything of the sort with me! Miss Chubb, indeed!"

The consequence was, that Mrs. Errington went about among her Whitford friends elaborately contradicting and denying "the innuendos spread abroad about her daughter-in-law by certain presumptuous and gossiping persons;" and thus brought the suggestion before many who would not otherwise have heard of it. All which, of course, surprised and annoyed Algernon very much, who had, naturally, not expected anything of the sort from his mother's well-known tact and discretion.

CHAPTER X.

One dreary Sunday afternoon, about this time—that is to say, about the end of November—Matthew Diamond rang at the bell of Mr. Maxfield's door. He had a couple of books under his arm, and he asked the servant, who admitted him, if she could give him back the volume he had last lent to Miss Maxfield. Sally looked askance at the books as she took them from his hand, and shook her head doubtfully.

"It's one o' them French books, isn't it, sir? I don't know one from another. Would you please step upstairs yourself? Miss Rhoda's in the drawing-room."

Diamond went upstairs and tapped at the door of the sitting-room.

"Come in," said a soft, sweet voice, that seemed to him the most deliciously musical he had ever heard, and he entered.

The old room looked very different from what it had looked in the days when Matthew Diamond used to come there to read Latin and history with Algernon Errington. There were still the clumsy beams in the low ceiling, and the old-fashioned cushioned seats in the bay-window, but everything else was changed. A rich carpet covered the floor; there were handsome hangings, and a couch, and a French clock on the chimney-piece; there was a small pianoforte in the room, too; and, at one end, a bookcase well filled with gaily-bound books. These things were the products of old Max's money. But there were evidences about the place of taste and refinement, which were due entirely to Rhoda. She had got a stand of hyacinths like those in Miss Bodkin's room. She had softened and hidden the glare of the bright, brand-new upholstery by dainty bits of lacework spread over the couch and the chairs; and she had, with some difficulty, persuaded her father to substitute for two staring coloured French lithographs, which had decked the walls, a couple of good engravings after Italian pictures. There was a fire glowing redly in the grate, and the room was warm and fragrant. Rhoda was curled up on the window-seat, with a book in her hand, and bending down her pretty head over it, until the soft brown curls swept the page.

Diamond stood still for a moment in the doorway, admiring the graceful figure well defined against the light.

"Come in, Sally," said Rhoda. And then she looked up from her book and saw him.

"I'm afraid I disturb you!" said Diamond. "But the maid told me to come up."

"Oh no! I was just reading——"

"Straining your eyes by this twilight! That's very wrong."

"Yes! I'm afraid it is not very wise, but I wanted to finish the chapter; and my eyes are really very strong."

"I thought you might be at church," said Diamond, seating himself on the opposite side of the bay-window, and within its recess, "so I asked the maid to get me the book I wanted. But she sent me upstairs."

"Aunt Betty is at church, and James; but father wouldn't let me go. He said it was so raw and foggy, and I had been to church this morning."

"Yes; I saw you there. But have you not been well, that your father did not wish you to go out?"

"Oh yes; I'm very well, thank you. But I had a little cold last week; and I should have had to walk to St. Chad's and back, you know. Father doesn't think it right to drive on the Lord's day, so he made me stay at home."

"How very right of him! What were you reading?"

He drew a little nearer to her as he asked the question, and looked at the book she held.

"Oh, it's a Sunday book," said Rhoda, simply. "'The Pilgrim's Progress.' I like it very much."

"I wonder whether you will care to hear of some good news I had to-day?"

"Oh yes; I shall be very glad to hear it."

"I think I stand a good chance of getting the head-mastership of Dorrington Proprietary School. Dorrington is in the next county, you know."

"Oh! I'm very glad."

"It would be a very good position. I am not certain of it yet, you know; but Dr. Bodkin has been very friendly, and has promised to canvass the governing committee for me."

"Oh! I'm very glad indeed."

"I don't know yet myself whether I am very glad or not."

"Don't you?"

Rhoda looked up at him in genuine surprise; but her eyes fell before the answering look they encountered, and she blushed from brow to chin.

"No; it all depends on you, Rhoda, whether I am glad of it to the bottom of my heart, or whether I give it all up as a thing not worth striving for."

There was a pause, which Rhoda broke at length, because the silence embarrassed her unendurably.

"Oh, I don't think it can depend upon me, Mr. Diamond," she said, speaking in a little quivering voice that was barely audible; whilst, at the same time, she hurriedly turned over the pages of "The Pilgrim's Progress" with her eyes fixed on them, although she assuredly did not see one letter. Diamond gently drew the book from her hand and took the hand in his own.

"Yes, Rhoda," he said—and, having once called her so, his lips seemed to dwell lovingly on the sound of her name—"I think you do know! You must know that, if I look forward hopefully and happily to anything in my future life, it is only because I have a hope that you may be able to love me a little. I love you so much."

She trembled violently, but did not withdraw her hand from his clasp. She sat quite still with downcast eyes, neither moving nor looking to the right or the left.

"Rhoda! Rhoda! Won't you say one word to me?"

"I'm trying—thinking what I ought to say," she answered, almost in a whisper.

"Is it so difficult, Rhoda?"

She made a strong effort to command her voice, but she had not the courage to look full at him as she answered, "Yes; it is very difficult for me. I want to do right, Mr. Diamond. I want not to deceive you."

"I am very sure that you will not deceive me, Rhoda!"

"Not if I can help it. But it is so hard to say just the exact truth."

"I don't find it hard to say the exact truth to you. You may believe me implicitly, Rhoda, when I say that I love you with all my heart, and will do my best to make you happy if you will let me."

"I do believe you. I believe you are really fond of me. Only—of course you are much cleverer and wiser than I am, except in thinking too much of me—and you can say just whatever is in your mind. But I can't; not all at once."

"I will wait, Rhoda. I will have patience, and not distress you."

The tears were falling down her cheeks now, not from sorrow, but from sheer agitation. She thanked him by a gesture of her head, and drew her hand away from his very gently, and wiped her eyes. He could not command himself at sight of her tears, although he had resolved not to speak again until she should be calm and ready to hear him.

"My darling," he said, clasping his hands together and looking at her with eyes full of anxious compassion, "don't cry! Is it my fault? You must have had some knowledge of what was in my heart to say to you! I have not startled you and taken you by surprise?"

"No; that's just it, Mr. Diamond. It's that that makes me feel so afraid of doing wrong and deceiving you. I—I—have thought for some time past that you were getting to like me very much."

Some one said so too. But yet I couldn't do anything, could I? I couldn't say, 'Don't get fond of me, Mr. Diamond!'"

"It would have been quite in vain to say, 'Don't get fond of me.' I'm a desperately obstinate man, Rhoda!"

"So then I—I mean to tell you the exact truth, you know, as well as I can. I began to think whether I liked you very much."

"Well, Rhoda?"

There was a rather long silence.

"Well, I thought—yes, I did."

He clasped his arms round her with a sudden impetuous movement, but she held him off with her two hands on his shoulders. "No, but please listen! I did love somebody else once very much. Of course we were very young, and it was nonsense. But I did wrong in being secret, and keeping it from father. And I never want to be secret any more. And—though I do like you very much, and—and—I should be very sorry if you went away—yet it isn't quite the same that I felt before. That is the truth as well as I can say it, and I am very grateful to you for thinking so well of me."

He drew the young head with its soft shining chestnut curls down on to his breast, and pressed his lips to her cheek.

"Now you are mine, my very own—are you not, Rhoda?"

"Yes; if you like, Mr. Diamond."

Matthew Diamond had been successful in his wooing, after feeling very doubtful of success. And he should naturally have been elated in proportion to his previous trepidation. And he was happy, of course; yet scarcely with the fulness of joyful triumph he had promised himself if pretty Rhoda should incline her ear to his suit. There was a subtle flavour of disappointment in it all. Rhoda had behaved very well, very honestly, in making that effort to be quite clear and candid about her feelings. It was a great thing to be able to feel perfect confidence in the woman who was to be his companion for life. And as to her loving him with the same fervour he felt towards her, that was not to be expected. He never had expected that. She was gentle, sweet, modest, thoroughly feminine, and exquisitely pretty. She was willing to give herself to him, and would doubtless be a true and affectionate wife. He held her slight waist in his arm, and her head rested confidingly on his bosom. Of course he was very happy. Only—if only Rhoda were not quite so silent and cold; if she would say one little word of tenderness, or even nestle herself fondly against his shoulder without speaking!

Some such thoughts were vaguely flitting through Diamond's mind when Rhoda raised her head, and, emboldened by the gathering dusk, looked up into his face and said, "You know it cannot be unless father consents."

"I shall speak to him this evening. Do you think he will be stern and hard to persuade, Rhoda?"

"I don't know. He said once that he would like to—to—that he would like to know I had some one to take care of me."

"On that score I am not afraid of falling short. Your father could give his treasure to no man who would take more loving care of her than I!"

"And then you are a gentleman; and father thinks a great deal of that, although he makes no pretence at being anything more than a tradesman himself. And of course I am only a tradesman's daughter. I am greatly below you in station—I know that."

"My Rhoda! As if there could be any question of that between us! God knows I have been poor and obscure enough all my life. But now I shall be able to tell your father that I hope to have a home to offer you that will be at least not sordid, and the position of a lady."

"I hope you won't repent, Mr. Diamond."

"Repent! But, Rhoda, won't you call me by my name? Say Matthew, not Mr. Diamond."

"Yes; I will if you like. But I'm afraid I can't all at once. It seems so strange."

"I wish you liked my name one thousandth part as much as I love the sound of yours! It seems so sweet to be able to call you Rhoda."

"Oh, I like your name very much indeed. But I think, please, that you had better go now. The people are coming out of church, and Aunt Betty may be back at any moment; and I don't wish her to find you here before you have spoken to father."

Rhoda stood up as she said it, and Diamond had no choice but to rise too, and say farewell. He drew her gently towards him and kissed her. "Will you try to love me, Rhoda?" he said, in a tone of almost sad entreaty. "Do you think you shall be able to love me a little?"

"I should not have accepted you if I felt that I could never be fond of you," returned Rhoda, and a little flush spread itself over her face as she spoke. "But you know I have told you the truth. I have told you about—"

He put up his hand to check her. "Yes, yes; you have been quite candid and honourable, and I won't be exacting or unreasonable, or too impatient." He did not think he could endure to hear Rhoda, in her anxiety not to deceive him, recapitulate the confession of her "different feeling" for another man in days past; and yet he had known, or guessed, that it had been so.

Then he took his leave, an accepted lover; and he told himself that he was a very fortunate and happy man. As he passed the door of old Max's little parlour downstairs, he saw a light gleaming under the door into the almost dark passage. He stopped and tapped at the door. "Come in," said Jonathan Maxfield's harsh voice. And Diamond went into the parlour.

CHAPTER XI.

Old Max looked up at his visitor over the great tortoise-shell spectacles on his nose. He had a large Bible open on the table before him. The large Bible was placed there every evening, and on Sunday evenings any other mundane volume which might chance to be lying in the parlour was carefully removed out of sight, to be restored to the light of day on Monday morning. This was the custom of the house, and had been so for years. It had obtained all through the Methodist days, and now lasted under the new orthodox dispensation. Since old Max had his spectacles on, it was to be supposed that he had been reading, and, since there was no other printed document within sight, not even an almanac, it was clear that he could have been reading nothing but his Bible. And yet it was nearly an hour since he had turned the page before him. He had been dozing, sitting up in his chair by the fire. This had latterly become a habit with him whenever he was left alone in the evening. And once, even, he had fallen into a sleep, or a stupor, in the midst of the assembled family, and, on awaking, had been lethargic in his movements, and dazed in his manner for some time.

He was quite awake now, however, as he peered sharply at Diamond over his glasses. The latter found some little difficulty in beginning his communication, not being assisted by a word from old Max, who stared at him silently.

"I have a few words to say to you, Mr. Maxfield, if you are at leisure to hear them," he said at length.

"If it's anything in the nature of a business communication, I can't attend to it now," returned old Max deliberately. "It has been a rule of mine through life to transact no manner of business on the Lord's day, and I have found it prosper with me."

"No, no; it is not a matter of business, Mr. Maxfield," said Diamond smiling, but not quite at his ease. Then he sat down and told his errand. Maxfield listened in perfect silence. "May I hope, Mr. Maxfield, that you will give us your consent and approbation?" asked Diamond, after a pause.

"You're pretty glib, sir! I must know a little more about this matter before I can give an answer one way or another."

"You shall know all that I can tell you, Mr. Maxfield. Indeed, I do not see what more I have to say. I have explained to you what my prospects in life are. I have told you every particular with the most absolute fulness and candour. As to my feeling for your daughter, I don't think I could fully express that if I talked to you all night."

"What did my daughter say to you?"

"She—she told me that she was willing to be my wife, but that it must depend upon your consent."

"Rhoda has always been a very dutiful daughter. There's not many like Rhoda."

"I appreciate her, Mr. Maxfield. You may believe that I do most heartily appreciate her. I have long known that all my happiness depended on winning Rhoda for my wife. I have loved her long. But, of course, I could not venture to ask her to marry me, or to ask you to give her to me, until I had some prospect of a home to offer her."

"Ah! And this prospect, now—you aren't sure about it?"

"No; I am not quite sure."

"And, supposing you don't get the place—how then?"

"Why, then, Mr. Maxfield, I should look for another. If you will give your consent to my engagement to Rhoda, I am not afraid of not finding a place in the world for her. I have a fair share of resolution; I am industrious and well educated; I am not quite thirty years old. If you will give me a word of encouragement I shall be sure to succeed."

"Head-master of Dorrington Proprietary School, eh? Will that be a place like Dr. Bodkin's?"

"Something of that kind, only not so lucrative."

"Dr. Bodkin is thought a good deal of in Whitford."

"Mr. Maxfield, may I hope for a favourable answer from you before I go?"

Old Max struck his hand sharply on the table as he exclaimed, almost with a snarl, "I will not be hurried, sir! nor made to speak rashly and without duly pondering and meditating my words." Then he added, in a different tone, "You are glib, sir! mighty glib! Do you know what Miss Maxfield will have to her portion—if I choose to give it her?"

"No, Mr. Maxfield, I do not. Nor do I care to know. I would take her to my heart to-morrow if she would come, although she were the poorest beggar in the world!"

"And would you take her without my consent?"

"I would, if you had no reasonable grounds for withholding it."

"You would steal my daughter away without my consent?"

"I said nothing about stealing. I should not think of deceiving you in the matter. I think you must acknowledge that I am speaking to you pretty frankly, at any rate!"

Maxfield could not but acknowledge to himself that the young man was honest and straightforward, and spoke fairly. He was well-looking too, and had the air of a gentleman, although there was not a trace about him of the peculiar airy elegance, the graceful charm of face and figure, which made Algernon Errington so attractive. Neither had he Algernon's gift of flattery, so adroitly conveyed as to appear unconscious; nor—what might, under the present circumstances, have served him equally well with the old tradesman—Algernon's good-humoured way of taking for granted his own incontestable social superiority over the Whitford grocer. Maxfield had his doubts as to whether this young man, ex-usher at the Grammar School, a fellow who went about to people's houses and gave lessons for money, could prove to be a fine enough match for his Rhoda, even though he should become head-master at Dorrington—Maxfield had so set his heart on seeing Rhoda "made a lady of," in the phraseology of his class.

"I shall have some conversation with my daughter, and let you have my answer after that, sir," said he, looking half sullenly, half thoughtfully at the suitor. "And as there will be questions of figures to go into, maybe, I am not willing to consider the subject more at length on the Lord's day."

But I am bound to confess that this was an afterthought on old Max's part.

When Diamond had gone, the old man sent for his daughter to come to him in the parlour. "You can take yourself off, Betty Grimshaw," said he to that respectable spinster, very unceremoniously. "You and James can bide in the kitchen till supper's ready. When it is, come and tell me."

Rhoda came, in answer to her father's summons, very calmly. She had, of course, expected it. She had quite got over the agitation of the interview with her lover, and was her usual sweet, placid self again. Yes; she said Mr. Diamond had asked her to marry him, and she was willing to marry him if her father would consent. She believed Mr. Diamond loved her very much, and she liked him very much. She had been afraid of him once because he was so very learned and clever, and seemed rather proud and stern. But he was really extremely gentle when you came to know him. She was sure he would be kind to her.

"It's not a thing to decide upon all in a moment, Rhoda," said her father.

"No, father; but I have thought of it for some time past," answered Rhoda, simply.

The old man looked at her with a slight feeling of surprise. "Rhoda has a vast deal of common sense," thought he. "She has some of my brains inside that pretty brown head of hers, that is so like her poor mother's!" Then he said aloud, "You see, this Mr. Diamond is nobody after all. A schoolmaster! Well, that's no great shakes."

"Dr. Bodkin is a schoolmaster, father."

"Dr. Bodkin is rector of St. Chad's and D.D., and a man of substance besides."

"Mr. Diamond is a gentleman, father. Everybody allows that."

"Do you think you could be happy to be his wife, Rhoda?" As he asked this question her father's voice was almost tender, and he placed his hand gently on her head.

"Yes, father; I think so. He would take care of me, and be good to me, and guide me right. And he would never put himself between you and me, father. I mean he would wish me always to be dutiful and affectionate to you."

"Well, Rhoda, we must consider. And I hope the Lord will send me wisdom in the matter. I would fain see thee happy before I am called away. God bless thee, child."

Jonathan Maxfield turned the matter in his mind during the watches of the night with much anxious consideration, according to his lights. In social status there was truly not much to complain of, he thought. A man in a position like that of Dr. Bodkin, who should have money of his own (or of his wife's) to render him independent of the profits of his place, might come to be a personage of importance. "And money there will be; more'n they think for," said old Max to himself. "The young man seemed to worship Rhoda; as he ought." She had shown herself to be very dutiful, very honest, very sensible on this occasion. "He's out and away a better man than that t'other one! Lives clear and clean before the world, and is ashamed to look no man in the

face."

Thus old Max reflected. And it will be seen that his reflections tended more and more to favour the acceptance of Matthew Diamond as his son-in-law. Yes; he should be glad to see Rhoda safe and happy under a husband's care before he died. And yet—and yet—he felt, as the prosperous wooer had felt, a dim sense of dissatisfaction. Old Max could not be accused of being sentimental, but he had looked forward to Rhoda's marriage as an occasion of triumph and exultation. If she found a husband whom he approved of, he would be large and generous in his dealings with them. He would show the world that Rhoda Maxfield was no tocherless lass, but an heiress, courted, and sought after, and destined to belong to a sphere far above that of Whitford shopkeepers. Now the husband had been found—he had almost made up his mind as to that—but there was no exultation; certainly no triumph. Rhoda was so cool and quiet. Very sensible! Oh, admirably sensible; but— In a word, the whole affair seemed a little flat and chilly. Of all the three personages chiefly interested, Rhoda was the only one who was conscious of no disappointment.

CHAPTER XII.

Miss Chubb could keep a secret. She was proud of being entrusted with one. She was much gratified when Rhoda Maxfield, on the Monday after Diamond's proposal, called at the maiden lady's modest lodgings, and confided to her the fact that Mr. Diamond had asked her to marry him, and that she had accepted him subject to her father's consent. It may seem strange that Rhoda should have chosen to make this confidence to Miss Chubb, rather than to Mrs. Errington, or to Minnie Bodkin, with both of whom she was more intimate. But she told Miss Chubb that she wanted her help.

"My help, my dear! I'm sure I don't know how I can help you. But if I can I will. And I congratulate you sincerely. I've seen how it would be all along. You know I told you that a certain gentleman was falling over head and ears in love, a long time ago. Didn't I, now?"

Rhoda acknowledged that it was so; and then she said she had come to ask a great favour. Would Miss Chubb mind saying a word or two on Mr. Diamond's behalf to her father? "Father told me this morning, after breakfast, that he should make some inquiries about Mr. Diamond. I am quite sure that nothing will come out that is not honourable to him; I am not the least afraid of that. And I believe Dr. Bodkin will praise him very highly, but he will not perhaps say the sort of things that would please father most. He will tell him what a good scholar he is, and all that, but he will never think of making father understand that Mr. Diamond is looked upon as being as much a gentleman as he is himself. Gentlefolks like Dr. Bodkin take those things for granted. But father would like to be told them. He thinks so very much of my marrying—above my own class, for, of course, I have learnt enough to know that Mr. Diamond belongs to a different sort of people from mine."

"I understand, my dear," returned Miss Chubb, nodding her head shrewdly. "And you may depend on my doing my best, if I have the chance. But I'm afraid it is not likely that Mr. Maxfield will consult me on the subject."

"I told him to come to you. Father knows you are one of the few people with whom Mr. Diamond has associated in Whitford."

"Why don't you send him to Mrs. Errington? Oh, I forgot! Your father and she are two." Miss Chubb laughed to cover a little confusion on her own part, for she guessed that Rhoda might have other reasons for not asking Mrs. Errington's testimony in favour of her suitor. Then she added quickly, "Or Minnie Bodkin, now! Minnie's word would go farther with your father than mine would. And Minnie and Mr. Diamond are such cronies. You had better send him to Minnie."

"No, thank you."

"But why not? Good gracious, she is the very person!"

"No, I think not. We don't wish it known until father has given his decided consent. I have only told you in confidence, Miss Chubb."

"But—if the doctor knows it, Minnie must know it! And if I know it, why shouldn't she?"

"No, thank you. I don't want to ask Miss Minnie about it."

"I wonder why that is, now!" pondered Miss Chubb, when Rhoda was gone. And very probably Rhoda could not have told her why.

Old Maxfield duly paid his visit to Miss Chubb. The good-natured little woman waited at home all day lest she should miss him. And about an hour after her early dinner Mr. Maxfield sent in his respects, and would be glad to have a word with her if she were at leisure.

"I hope you will overlook the intrusion, ma'am," said Maxfield, standing up with his hat in his hand, just inside the door of the little sitting-room, where Miss Chubb asked him to walk in.

"No intrusion at all, Mr. Maxfield! I'm very glad to see you. Please to sit down."

He obeyed, and holding his thick stick upright before him, and his hat on his knees, he thus began:

"I'm not a-going to waste your time and mine with vain and worldly discourse, ma'am. I am a man as knows the value of time, thanks be! And I have a serious matter on my mind. You know my daughter Rhoda?"

"I know Rhoda, and like her, and admire her very much."

"Yes; Rhoda is a girl such as you don't see many like her. There's a young man seeking her in marriage."

"I'm not surprised at that!"

"No; there has been several others too. But she gave 'em no encouragement; nor should I have been willing that she should. Some of them were persons in my own rank of life, and that would not do for Rhoda."

"I think you are quite right there, Mr. Maxfield. Rhoda is naturally very refined, and she has associated a good deal with persons of cultivated manners. I don't think Rhoda would be happy if she were obliged to give up certain little graces of life, which a great many excellent people can do without perfectly well."

Maxfield nodded approvingly. "You speak with a good deal of judgment, ma'am," said he, with the air of a recognised authority on wisdom. "But it isn't only that. Rhoda will have money—a great deal of money—more than some folks that holds their heads very high ever had or will have. Now it is but just and rightful that I should expect her husband to bring some advantages in return."

"Of course. And—ahem!—I'm sure you are too sensible a man not to consider that the best thing a husband could bring in exchange would be an honest, loving heart, and a real esteem and respect for your daughter."

Little Miss Chubb became quite fluttered after making this speech, and coloured as if she had been a girl of eighteen.

"Not at all," returned old Max decisively. "The loving heart and the esteem and respect are due to my Rhoda if she hadn't a penny. In return for her fortin' I expect something over and above."

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Chubb, a good deal taken aback.

"Now I don't feel sure that the young man in question has that something over and above. It is Mr. Matthew Diamond, tutor at the Grammar School in this town."

"A most excellent young man! And, I'm sure, most devotedly in love with Rhoda."

"But very poor, and not of much account in the world, as far as I can make out."

"Oh, don't say that, Mr. Maxfield! He is proud and shy, and has kept himself aloof from society because he chose to do so. But he would be a welcome guest anywhere in the town or county. Young Mr. Pawkins, of Pudcombe Hall, quite courts him; he is always asking him to go over there."

Thus much and more Miss Chubb valiantly spoke on behalf of Matthew Diamond in his character of Rhoda's wooer. And then she expatiated on the excellent position he would hold as master of Dorrington School. It was such a "select seminary;" and so many of the first county people sent their boys there. "Dear me," said Miss Chubb, "it seems to me to be the very position for Rhoda! Not too far from Whitford, and yet not too near—of course she couldn't keep up all her old acquaintances here, could she?—and altogether so refined, and scholastic, and quiet! And really, Mr. Maxfield, see how everything turns out for the best. I thought at one time that young Errington was very much smitten with Rhoda; but, if she had taken him, you wouldn't have been so satisfied with her position in life now, would you? With all his talent and connection, see what a poor place he has of it. Mr. Diamond has done best, ten to one."

This was a master-stroke, and made a great impression on old Max. Not that the latter even now was at all dazzled by the prospect of having the head-master of Dorrington School for his son-in-law. But Miss Chubb's allusion did suffice to show him that the world would consider Diamond to be a triumphantly successful man in comparison with Errington.

"Oh, him!" said Maxfield in a tone of bitter contempt. "No; such as him was not for Miss Maxfield. And I'll tell you, moreover, that I don't know but what she's throwing herself away more or less if she takes this other. She's a great catch for him; I know the world, and I know that she is a great catch. But I've felt latterly one or two warnings that my end is near——"

"Dear me, Mr. Maxfield! Don't say so! I'm sure you look very hearty!" exclaimed Miss Chubb, much startled by this cool announcement.

"That my end is near," repeated old Max doggedly, "and I wish to set my house in order, and see my daughter provided for, before I go. And she seems to be contented with this young man. Rhoda ain't just easy to please. It might be a long time, if ever, before she found some one to suit her so well."

Miss Chubb was a little shocked at this singularly prosaic and unemotional way of treating the

subject of love and marriage, as to which she herself preserved the most romantic freshness of ideas. She would have liked the young couple to be like the lovers in a story-book, and the father to bestow his daughter and his blessing with tears of joy. However, she did her best to encourage Mr. Maxfield in giving his consent after his own fashion, and they parted on excellent terms with each other.

"That dry old chip, Jonathan Maxfield, has been to me to-day," said Dr. Bodkin after dinner to his wife and daughter. "He came to ask me what prospect I thought Diamond had of getting the mastership of Dorrington, explaining to me that Diamond was a suitor for his daughter's hand. It took me quite by surprise. Had you any inkling of the matter, Minnie?"

"Oh yes, papa."

"Dear me! Well, women see these things so quickly! H'm! Well, Master Diamond has shown good taste, I must say. That little Rhoda is the prettiest girl I know. And such a sweet, soft, lovable creature! I think she's too good for him."

"It is a singular thing, but I have remarked very often that men in general are apt to think pretty girls too good for anybody but themselves!"

The doctor frowned, and then smiled. "Have you so, Saucebox?" he said.

"I don't know about her being too good for him," said Mrs. Bodkin, in her quick, low tones; "but I suppose he knows very well what he is about. Old Maxfield has feathered his nest very considerably. It will be a very good match for a poor man like Matthew Diamond."

Mrs. Bodkin had for some time past exhibited symptoms of dislike to Diamond. She never had a good word for him; she even was almost rancorous against him at times, although she seldom allowed the feeling to express itself in words before her daughter. Minnie understood it all very well. "Poor mother!" she thought to herself, "she cannot forgive him. I wish I could persuade her that there is nothing to forgive. How could he help it if I was a fool?" Yet the mother and daughter had never exchanged a word on the subject. And Minnie comforted herself with the conviction that her mother was the only person in the world who guessed her secret. "Mamma has a sixth sense where I am concerned," said she to herself.

"I hope you said a good word for the lovers to Mr. Maxfield, papa," she said aloud, in a clear, cheerful voice.

"I had not much to say. I told him that I thought Diamond stood a good chance of getting Dorrington School."

"When will it be known positively, papa?"

"About Dorrington? Oh, before Christmas. I should say by the end of the first week in December. Diamond will be a loss to me, but I shall be glad of his promotion. He's a gentleman, and a very good fellow, although his manner is a trifle self-opiniated. And," added the doctor, shaking his head and lowering his voice as one does who is forced to admit a painful truth, "I am sorry to say that his views as to the use of the Digamma are by no means sound."

"Perhaps Rhoda won't find that a drawback to her happiness!" said Minnie, laughing her sweet, musical laugh.

"Probably not, Puss!"

Then the Rev. Peter Warlock and Mr. Dockett dropped in. A whist-table was made up in the drawing-room. The doctor and Mr. Dockett won three rubbers out of four against Mrs. Bodkin and the curate. And the latter—being seated where he could command a full view of Minnie as she reclined near the fire with a book—made two revokes, and drew down upon himself a very severe homily and a practical lecture or short course on the science of whist, illustrated by all the errors he had made during the evening, from Dr. Bodkin. For the doctor, although he liked to win, cared not for inglorious victory, and was almost as indignant with his opponents as with his partner for any symptom of slovenly play. The Reverend Peter's brow grew serious, even to gloom, and it seemed to him as if the doctor's scolding were almost more than human patience could endure. "I don't mind losing my sixpences," thought the curate, "and I could make up my mind to sacrificing an hour or two over those accursed," (I'm afraid he did mentally use that strong expression!) "those thrice-accursed bits of pasteboard. But to be lectured and scolded at into the bargain——!" He arose from the green table with an almost defiant sullenness.

However, when the tray was brought in and the victimised gentleman had comforted his inner man with hot negus, and was at liberty to sip it in close proximity to Miss Bodkin's chair, and had received one or two kind looks from Miss Bodkin's eyes, and several kind words from Miss Bodkin's lips, his heart grew soft within him, and he began to think that even six, ten—a dozen rubbers of whist with the doctor would not be too high a price to pay for these privileges! Then they talked of Diamond's engagement to Rhoda—it had been spoken of all over Whitford hours ago!—and of his prospects. And Mr. Warlock was quite effusive in his rejoicings on both scores. He had been dimly jealous of Minnie's regard for Diamond, and was heartily glad of the prospect of getting rid of him. Mr. Dockett, too, seemed to think the match a desirable one. He pursed up his mouth and looked knowing as he dropped a mysterious hint as to the extent of Rhoda's dowry. "I made old Max's will myself," said he; "and without violating professional secrecy, I may confirm what I hear old Max bruits abroad at every opportunity—namely, that he is a warm man—a very

warm man in—deed! But I'm sure Mr. Diamond is a young man of sound principles, and will make the girl a good husband. And it is decided promotion for her too, you know. A grocer's daughter! Eh? I'm sure I wish them well most sincerely." And shall we blame Mr. Dockett if, in his fatherly anxiety, he rejoiced at the removal of a dangerous rival to his little Ally, on whom young Pawkins had recently bestowed a good deal of attention whenever Rhoda Maxfield was out of his reach?

"I never knew such a popular engagement," said Dr. Bodkin, innocently. "Everybody seems to approve! One might almost fear it could not be a case of true love, it runs so very smooth. There does not appear to be a single objection."

"Except the Digamma, papa!"

"Except the Digamma," echoed the doctor merrily. And when he was alone with his wife that night, he remarked to her that he was immensely thankful to see the great improvement in their beloved child this winter.

"Minnie is certainly stronger," said the mother.

"And in such excellent spirits!" said the father.

CHAPTER XIII.

The days passed by and brought no letter, in answer to Castalia's, from Lord Seely. Dreary were the hours in Ivy Lodge. The wife was devoured by passionate jealousy and a vain yearning for affection; the husband found that even the bright, smooth, hard metal of his own character was not impervious to the corrosive action of daily cares, regrets, and apprehensions. Algernon was not apt to hate. He usually perceived the absurd side of persons who were obnoxious to him with too keen an amusement to detest them; and the inmost feeling of his heart with respect to his fellow-creatures in general approached, perhaps, as nearly to perfect indifference as it is given to a mortal to attain. But it was not possible to preserve a condition of indifference towards Castalia. She was a thorn in his flesh, a mote in his eye, a weariness to his spirit; and he began to dislike the very sight of the sallow, sickly face, red-eyed too often, and haggard with discontent, that met his view whenever he was in his own home. It was the daily "worry" of it, he told himself, that was unendurable. It was the being shut up with her in a box like Ivy Lodge, where there was no room for them to get away from each other. If he could have shared a mansion in Grosvenor Square with Castalia he might have got on with her well enough! But then, that mansion in Grosvenor Square would have made so many things different in his life.

At length one day came a letter to Castalia, with the London post-mark and sealed with the well-known coat of arms, but it did not bear Lord Seely's frank. Another name was scrawled in the corner, and the direction was written in Lady Seely's crooked, cramped little characters.

"I'm afraid Uncle Val must be ill!" exclaimed Castalia, opening the letter with a trembling hand. She was so weak and nervous now that the most trifling agitation made her heart beat painfully. My lady's epistle was not long, and, as a knowledge of its contents is essential to the due comprehension of this story, it is given in full, with her ladyship's own phraseology and orthography:—

"MY DEAR CASTALIA,—I cannot think what on earth you are about to write such letters to your uncle. Go abroad, indeed! I suppose Ancram would like the embassy to St. Petersburg, or to be governor of the Ionian Islands. It's all nonsense, and you had better put such ideas out of your head at once, and for all. I should think you might know that we have other people to think of besides your husband, especially after all we have done for him. Your uncle is very ill in bed with an attack of the gout, and can't write himself. The doctor thinks he won't be about again for weeks. You can guess what trouble this throws on to my shoulders, so I hope you won't worry me by any more such letters as the last. As if there was not anxiety enough, Fido had a fit on Thursday. I hope you are pretty well. What a blessing you've no sign of a family. With only you two to keep, you ought to do very well on Ancram's salary, and you can tell him I say so. Yours affectionately,

"B. SEELY."

"Poor Uncle Val!" exclaimed Castalia, dropping the letter from her hand. "I was afraid he was ill."

"Pshaw! A touch of the gout won't kill him," said Algernon, who had been reading over her shoulder. "But it's deuced unfortunate for me that he should be laid up at this time, and quite helpless in the hands of that old catamaran."

"Poor Uncle Val! Perhaps he never got my letter at all."

"Nothing more likely, if my lady could prevent his getting it."

"Perhaps, when he gets better, I can write to him again, and ask him——"

"When he gets better? Oh yes, certainly. We have plenty of time. There is no hurry, of course!"

"I see that you are speaking satirically, Ancram, but I don't know why."

Her husband shrugged his shoulders and walked out of the room. As he left the house he was met at the garden-gate by a bright-eyed, consumptive-looking lad, in shabby working clothes, who touched his cap, and held out a paper to Algernon. "What do you want?" asked the latter. "Mr. Gladwish, sir. His account, if you please, sir."

"And who the devil is Mr. Gladwish?"

"The shoemaker, sir."

"Oh! Mr. Gladwish, then, is an extremely importunate, impatient, troublesome fellow. This is the third or fourth time within a very few weeks that he has sent in his bill. I'm not accustomed to that sort of thing. I don't understand it. Don't give me the paper, boy. Take it into the house."

"Please, sir," began the lad, and stopped, hesitatingly. Then seeing that Mr. Errington was walking off without taking any further notice of him, he repeated in a louder, firmer tone, "Please, sir, Mr. Gladwish is really in want of the money. He has two of the children bad with fever. And I was to say that even five pounds on account would be acceptable."

"Five pounds! He's too modest. I haven't got five pounds, nor five minutes. I'm busy."

"Then, I'm sorry to say, sir, that Mr. Gladwish will take legal proceedings for the debt at once. He told me to tell you so."

"Nice state of things!" muttered Algernon, as he walked towards the post-office, with his head bent down and his hands deep in his pockets. "But that's nothing. It's those cursed bills in Maxfield's hands that are on my mind like lead."

His spirits were not lightened by that which awaited him at the office. He had to undergo an interview with the district surveyor, who was very grave, not to say severe, in speaking of the irregularities which had been complained of, and were looked on as very serious at the head office. The surveyor ended by plainly hinting his hope that persons having no business at the office would be strictly forbidden from having access to it at abnormal hours. "I—I don't understand you," stammered Algernon.

"Mr. Errington," said the surveyor, "I am speaking to you, not officially, but confidentially, and as man to man. I have been having a little conversation with Mr. Gibbs—who seems to have none but good feeling towards you, but who—in short, I think it is not needful to be more explicit. I advise you in all friendliness to be stern and decisive in keeping every person out of this office except such as have recognised business to be here. If further trouble arises, I shall have to do my duty, and make my report without respect of any persons whatsoever."

"Perhaps," said Algernon, who was white to his lips, but otherwise apparently unmoved, "perhaps it would be best for me to resign my post here at once. If the authorities above me find cause for dissatisfaction——"

"I can give you no advice as to that, Mr. Errington. You must know your own affairs better than I do."

"There are things which a man can scarcely say even to himself; considerations which are painful as they float dimly in one's own mind, but which would be unendurable uttered aloud in words. Anything like a public scandal—or—or—disgrace to me, would involve a large circle of persons—many of them persons of rank and consideration in the world. You are possibly aware that—my wife"—there was a peculiar tone in Algernon's voice as he said these two words—"is a niece of Lord Seely?"

But the official gentleman declined to enter into the question of Mr. Errington's family connections. "Oh," said he, coldly; "we must hope there will be no question of scandal or disgrace." Then he went away, leaving Algernon in a chaos of doubt as to whether he should, or should not, speak further on the subject to Obadiah Gibbs. Obadiah Gibbs, however, decided the question for him. He came into Algernon's room, closing the door carefully behind him, and asked to speak a few words in private. Algernon was sitting in the luxurious easy-chair which he had had carried into the office for his own use. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of a dull November day. The single window which looked on to a white-washed court threw a ghastly pallid light on Algernon's face as he sat opposite to it, with his head thrown back against the cushions of the high chair. Mr. Gibbs was touched with compassion at seeing how changed the bright young face looked since he had first been acquainted with it. And yet, in truth, the change was not a very deep one: it was more in colouring, and the expression of the moment, than in any lines which care had graven.

"Come in, Gibbs; come in," said Algernon, with his affable air. The clerk seemed the more anxious and disturbed of the two. He sat down on the chair Algernon pointed out to him in a constrained posture, and seemed to have some difficulty in beginning to speak, albeit not a man usually liable to embarrassment of manner. His superior stretched his feet out nearer to the hearth, and slightly moved his white hand to and fro, looking, as a child might have done, at the glitter of a ring he wore in the firelight.

"Mr. Wing did not seem very well pleased, sir," said Gibbs, after clearing his throat.

"Of course he had to appear displeased, whether he was or not, Gibbs. A little hocus-pocus, a

little official solemnity, is the thing to assume, I suppose. I think that man's nose is the very longest I ever saw. Remarkable nose, eh, Gibbs?"

"But, sir," continued Gibbs, declining to discuss the surveyor's nose, "he said that from inquiries that had been made, it's pretty certain that the missing letters were—stolen—they must have been stolen—at Whitford."

"Very intelligent on the part of the official, Mr. Wing! Only I think you and I had come to pretty nearly the same conclusion before."

"He made strict inquiries about the people in the office here, and I had to give him what information I could, sir."

"Of course, of course, Gibbs! I quite understand," said Algernon, putting his hand out to shake that of the clerk with so frank a cordiality that the latter felt the tears spring into his eyes as he took the cool white hand into his own. "I have felt very much for you, Mr. Errington," said he. "Your position is a trying one, indeed. I would do almost anything in my power to set your mind more at rest. But I'm sorry to say that I have an unpleasant matter to speak of."

"I wonder," thought Algernon, leaning back in his chair once more, "whether my friend Obadiah conceives our conversation hitherto to have been of an agreeable and entertaining nature, that he now announces something unpleasant by way of a change!"

"You will understand," said Gibbs, "that I am speaking to you in the very strictest confidence. I should be sorry for it to come out that I had meddled in the matter. Nor, sir, would it be well for you to have it known that I gave you any warning."

"I wish the old bore would not be so confoundedly long-winded!" thought Algernon, nodding meanwhile with an air of thoughtful attention.

But Gibbs was prone to long-windedness and to the making of speeches. And he now availed himself of the opportunity of haranguing the postmaster (one of whose chief faults was a vivacious impatience of his clerk's eloquence) to the fullest extent. But the gist of what he had to say was this: Roger Heath, the man whose money-letter had been lost, now declared that his correspondent at Bristol, being interrogated in the hope that he might be able to furnish some clue to the identification of the missing notes, stated that he remembered one was endorsed in blue ink instead of black: and that he, Heath, had reason to know that one of the notes paid by young Mrs. Errington to Ravell, the mercer, had been endorsed in blue ink!

"Now, sir," proceeded Gibbs, "I remember its being a good deal talked of in the town at the time, that young Mrs. Errington had money unknown to you, and Mrs. Ravell spoke of it to many."

"Damn Mrs. Ravell! What does it all mean, Gibbs?"

Algernon got up from his chair, and leant his elbows on the chimney-piece, and hid his face in his hands, but he so stood that he could watch the clerk's countenance between his fingers. That countenance expressed trouble and compassion. Gibbs got up too, and stood looking at Algernon and shaking his head ruefully.

"I thought it well you should know what was being said, Mr. Errington," said he.

"What can I do, Gibbs? How can I stop their cursed tongues?" Algernon still spoke with his face hidden.

"No, sir, you cannot stop their tongues, but—you might possibly put a stop to what sets their tongues going. Of course, the matter may be all explained simply enough. There may be plenty of bank-notes endorsed in blue ink——"

"Of course there may! Chattering idiots!"

"And as to that particular note, Mr. Ravell paid it away, as well as the others Mrs. Errington gave him, to the agent of a Manchester house he deals with, the next day after it came into his hands. I ascertained that from Ravell himself."

"I'll have the note traced!" exclaimed Algernon, looking up for the first time.

"That would be a difficult matter, sir. It has gone far and wide before now."

"I tell you I will have it traced! And I will have that malignant scoundrel, Heath, pulled up pretty sharply, if he dares to make any more insinuations that—it is not difficult to see what he is driving at!"

Gibbs laid his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I feel for you, Mr. Errington," he said. "If I did not, I shouldn't put myself in the disagreeable position of saying what I have said. I should have attended to my own business, and let matters take their course. I hope you believe that I had only a kind motive in speaking?"

"I do believe it—heartily!"

"Thank you, sir. Then I shall make bold to give you one word of advice. Don't stir in the matter, nor make any threats against any one, until you have ascertained from Mrs. Errington where she got the notes that she paid to Ravell."

Algernon had bent down his head again, and he now answered without looking up:

"No doubt Mrs. Errington can account for them to me, but she is not bound to do so to any one else. Nor can I allow any one to hint that she is so bound. I should be a blackguard if I could listen to a word of that sort."

"I hope it may come right, Mr. Errington. After all, there has been nothing, and, so far as I see, there can be nothing, but talk to hurt you."

"My good fellow," said Algernon, as he once more gave his hand to his clerk, "it's a kind of talk which poisons a man's life. You know that as well as I do."

Then Gibbs took his leave of his superior, and went back into the outer office to watch over the epistolary correspondence of Whitford. As he sat at his desk there his mind was full of sympathy with Algernon Errington. "Poor young man! He took it beautifully. It must be a terrible blow—an awful blow. But, no doubt, he has had his suspicions before now. What a warning against worldly-mindedness! He is a victim to that vain and godless woman; and that's all that comes of the marriage that so uplifted the heart of his mother. But he would be a beautiful character, if he had only got religion, and would leave off profane swearing. He is so guileless and outspoken, like a child, almost. Ah, poor young man! I hope the Lord may bless this trial to him. But—religion or no religion—I don't believe he'll ever be fit to be postmaster of Whitford." Thus ran the reflections of Mr. Obadiah Gibbs.

When Algernon reached home that evening, he bade Lydia put up a few things for him into a little travelling valise; and when he met his wife at the dinner-table, he told her he should go up to London that night by the mail-coach. He explained, in answer to her surprised inquiries, lamentations, and objections, uttered in a querulous drawl, that he must get help from Lord Seely; that it was useless to write to him under the present circumstances, seeing that his wife would probably intercept the letter; and that, therefore, he had resolved to go to town himself and obtain a personal interview with Lord Seely.

"But, Ancram!—what's the use? Why on earth should you fly off in this way? I'm sure it won't do! Do you suppose for an instant that Aunt Belinda will let you get at him?"

"I must try for it. Things have got to that pass now, that—Do you know what happened to me just as I went out after lunch? Gladwish, the shoemaker, sent to threaten me with arrest! I shall be walked off to prison, I suppose, for a few wretched pairs of abominable shoes. The fellow has no more notion of fitting my foot than a farrier."

"To prison! Oh, Ancram! But Gladwish's bill cannot be so very large——"

"Of course it's not 'so very large!'"

"Then, if we paid it, or even part of it——"

"Paid it! Upon my word, Cassy, you are too absurd! 'Paid it!' In the first place, I have only a very few pounds in the house—barely enough to take me to town, I think; and, in the next place, if I paid Gladwish, what would be the result? The butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker would be all down on me with summonses, and writs, and executions, and bedevilments of every imaginable kind. But you have no more notion—you take it all so coolly. 'Pay him!' By George! Cassy, it's very hard to stand such nonsense!"

Castalia withdrew from the table, and sat down on the little sofa and cried. Her husband looked at her across a glass of very excellent sherry, which he was just about to hold up to the light. "I think, Castalia," he said, "I really do think, that when a man is in such trouble as I am, reduced to the brink of ruin, not knowing which way to turn for a ten-pound note, struggling, striving, bothering his brains to find a way out of the confounded mess, he might expect something more cheering and encouraging from his wife than perpetual snivelling." With that he cracked a filbert with a sharp jerk of indignation. But Algernon's forte was not the minatory or impressively wrathful style of eloquence. He could hurl a sarcasm, sharp, light, and polished; but when he came to wielding such a ponderous weapon as serious reproof on moral considerations, he was apt to make a poor hand of it. It was excessively disagreeable, too, to see that woman's thin shoulders moving convulsively under her gay-coloured dress, as she sobbed with her head buried in the sofa cushions. That really must be put a stop to. So, as it appeared evident that scolding would not quench the tears, he tried coaxing. The coaxing was not so efficacious as it would have been once. Still, Castalia responded to it to the extent of endeavouring to check the sobs which still shook her frail chest and throat. "When shall you be back, Ancram?" she said, looking beseechingly at him. He answered that he hoped to be in Whitford again on Tuesday night, or Wednesday at the latest (it was then Monday), and he particularly impressed on her the necessity of telling any one who might inquire the cause of his absence, that he had been suddenly called up to town by the illness of Lord Seely. He had, in fact, said a word or two to that effect when, on his way home, he had ordered the fly, which was to carry him and his valise to the coach-office. Castalia insisted on accompanying him to the coach, despite the damp cold of the night, a proceeding which he did not much combat, since he felt it would serve to give colour to his statement to the landlord of the "Blue Bell."

"Keep up your spirits, Cassy," he cried, waving his hand from the coach-window as he stood in the inn yard, muffled in shawls and furs. "I hope I shall bring back good news of your uncle."

Then Castalia was trundled back to Ivy Lodge in the jingling old fly, whilst her husband rolled

swiftly behind four fleet horses towards London.

CHAPTER XIV.

Stiff, tired, and cold, Algernon alighted the next morning at the coach-office in London after his night journey. He drove to a fashionable hotel not very far from Lord Seely's house, and refreshed himself with a warm bath and a luxurious breakfast. By the time that was done it was eleven o'clock in the forenoon. He had been considering how best to proceed, in a leisurely way, during his breakfast, and had decided to go to Lord Seely's house without further delay. He knew Lady Seely's habits well enough to feel tolerably sure that she would not be out of her bed before eleven o'clock, nor out of her room before mid-day. He thought he might gain access to his lordship by a *coup de main*, if he so timed his visit as to avoid encountering my lady. So he had himself driven to within a few yards of the house, and walked up to the well-known door. It was a different arrival from his first appearance on that threshold. Algernon did not fail to think of the contrast, and he told himself that he had been very badly used by the whole Seely family: they had done so infinitely less for him than he had expected! The sense of injury awakened by this reflection was as supporting to him as a cordial.

The servant who opened the door, and who at once recognised Algernon, stared in surprise on seeing him, but was too well trained to express emotion in any other way. After a few inquiries about Lord Seely's health, Algernon asked if he could be allowed to see his lordship. This, however, was a difficult matter. My lord was better, certainly, the footman said, but my lady had given strict orders that he was not to be disturbed. No one was admitted to his room except the doctor, who would not make his visit until late in the afternoon.

"Oh, I shouldn't think of disturbing my lady at this hour," said Algernon, "but I must speak with Lord Seely. It is of the very greatest importance."

"I'll call Mr. Briggs, sir," the footman was beginning, when Algernon stopped him. Mr. Briggs was Lord Seely's own man, and, like all the servants in the house, was certain to obey his mistress's orders rather than his master's, if the two should happen to conflict. Algernon slipped some money into the footman's hand, together with a note which he had written that morning. "There, James," said he; "if you will manage to convey that into his lordship's own hand, I know he will see me. And, moreover, he would be seriously annoyed if I were sent away without having spoken to him on business of very great importance."

James reflected that the worst that could happen to him would be a scolding from my lady. That was certainly no trifling evil; but he decided to risk it, being moved to do so not only by the bribe, but by a real liking for young Errington, who was generally a favourite with other people's servants.

The note which James carried upstairs was as follows:—

"MY LORD,—I write in the driest and most matter-of-fact terms I can find, to ask for an interview with your lordship with the least possible delay, being unwilling to make, or to appear to make, any claim on the regard you once professed for me, or on the connection which unites us, and desiring you to understand that I appeal to you on behalf of another person; and that, were it not for that other person I should ask no more favours of your lordship—nor, perhaps, need any.

"A. ANCRAM ERRINGTON."

In a few moments James came running downstairs and begged Algernon, almost in a whisper, to walk up to his lordship's room.

Lord Seely was not in bed. He was reclining in an easy-chair, with one foot and leg supported on cushions. He seemed ill and worn, but his dark eyes sparkled as he looked eagerly at Algernon, who entered quietly and closed the door behind him. "What is it? I'm afraid you have bad news, Ancram," said Lord Seely, holding out his hand.

Algernon did not take it. He bowed very gravely, and stood opposite to the little nobleman.

"Castalia—!" cried Lord Seely, much dismayed by the young man's manner. "Don't keep me in suspense, for God's sake! Is she ill? Is she dead?"

"No, my lord. Castalia is not dead. Neither, so far as I know, is she ill—in body."

"What is the matter?"

"I must crave a patient hearing, my lord. I regret to have to trouble you whilst you are ill and suffering; but what I have to say must be said without delay. May I ask if there is anyone within hearing?"

"No! No one. You can close the door of that dressing-closet if you choose. But there is no one there."

Algernon adopted the suggestion at once, and then sat down opposite to Lord Seely's chair. His

whole manner of proceeding was so unusual and unexpected that it produced a very painful impression on Lord Seely. Algernon rather enjoyed this. He began to speak with only one distinct purpose in his mind: namely, to frighten his wife's uncle into making a strong effort to help him out of Whitford. How much pressure would be necessary to achieve that purpose he could not yet tell. And he began to speak with a sort of reckless abandonment of himself to the guidance of the moment, a mood of mind which had become very frequent with him of late.

"Did your lordship receive a letter from Castalia begging you to obtain a post abroad for me?"

"Certainly. My wife answered it. I—I was unable to write myself. But I intended to reply more at length so soon as I should be better."

"Castalia showed me Lady Seely's reply. That was the first intimation I had of Castalia's having made such an application. I mention this because I know your lordship suspected me of being the prime mover in all her applications to you for assistance."

Lord Seely coloured a little as he replied, "It was natural to suppose that you influenced your wife, Ancram."

"Your lordship must not judge all cases by your own," returned the young man, with a candid raising of his brows; and the colour on Lord Seely's face deepened to a dark red flush, which faded, leaving him paler than before. "As I said," continued Algernon, "I did not know what it was that Castalia had asked you to do for us. But, now that I do know it, I may say at once that I heartily concur with her as to its desirability."

"I cannot agree with you there; but, even if it were so, I assure you it is out of my power——"

"Allow me, my lord! I must tax your patience to listen to what I have to say before you give me any positive answer."

Lord Seely leaned back in his chair, and motioned with his head for Algernon to proceed. The latter went on:

"Exile from England and from all the hopes and ambitions not very unnatural at my age, is not such an alluring prospect that I should be suspected of having incited Castalia to write as she has done? However, I will say no more as to my own private and personal feelings in the matter. I did not mean to allude to them. I beg your pardon." Algernon sat leaning a little forward in his chair. His hands were clasped loosely together, and rested on his knees. He kept his eyes gloomily fixed on the carpet for the most part, and only raised them occasionally to look up at Lord Seely without raising his head at the same time. "I could not write what I had to say to you, my lord. I dared not write it. Perhaps, even, if I had written, the letter might not have reached you at once; and I could not wish its falling into other hands, so I came away from Whitford last night quite suddenly. I have no leave of absence; the clerk at the post-office, even, did not know I was coming away."

"Do you mean to say, Ancram, that you have deliberately risked the loss of your situation?"

"My 'situation' was as good as lost already. Do you know what happened yesterday, Lord Seely? I was subjected to the agreeable ordeal of a visit from the surveyor of the postal district in which Whitford is situated. I was catechised magisterially. The whole office—including my private room—was subjected to a sort of scrutiny. There have been a great many letters missing at Whitford lately; some money-letters. That is to say, letters which should have passed through our office have never reached their destination. Nothing has been traced. Nothing is known with certainty. But the concurrence of various circumstances points to Whitford as the place where the letters have been—stolen. I am told on all hands that such things never happened in Mr. Cooper's time. (Mr. Cooper was my predecessor as postmaster.) I am scowled at, and almost openly insulted in the streets, by a miller, or a baker, or something of the kind, who lives in the neighbourhood. He declares he has lost a considerable sum of money by the post, and plainly considers me responsible. You may guess how pleasant my 'situation' has become in consequence of these things being known and talked about."

"But, good Heavens, Ancram——! I don't comprehend your way of looking at the matter. These irregularities are doubtless very distressing, but surely your rational course would be to use every effort to discover the cause of them and set matters right; not run away as if you were a culprit!"

"Your lordship judges without knowing all the facts."

"Pardon me, Ancram, but no facts can justify such rash behaviour. I have some experience of men and of the world, and I give you my deliberate opinion that you have acted very indiscreetly, to say the least. I am disappointed in you, Ancram. I regret to say it, but I am disappointed in you. You have shown a want of steadiness, and—and—almost of common sense! The more I think of it, the more I disapprove of the step you have taken. It shows a great want of consideration for others; for your wife. If you were alone it might be pardonable—although, excessively ill-judged—to throw up your post at the first experience of the rough side of things. We all have difficulties to contend with. The most exalted position is not secure from them, as, indeed, it would appear almost superfluous to point out! The record of my own—my own—official life might supply you with more than one example of the value of steadfast energy, and an inflexible determination to conquer antagonistic circumstances."

Poor Lord Seely! He had been subdued by sickness more completely under the dominion of his wife than could ever be the case when he was able to move about, to get away from her, and to converse with persons who were not entirely devoid of any semblance of respect for his opinion. Lady Seely, it might be said, respected nobody—a point of resemblance between herself and her young kinsman which had not led to any very great sympathy or harmony between them; for, as it is your professed joker who can least bear to be laughed at, so those persons who most flippantly ignore any sentiment of reverence towards others are by no means prepared to tolerate a want of deference towards themselves. Certainly, my lady had snubbed her husband during his illness almost unmercifully; she wished him to get better, and she took care that the doctor's orders were faithfully carried out. But her course of treatment was anything but soothing to the spirit, and my lord's pet vanities received no consideration whatever from her. His mind being now relieved from the first shock of apprehension which Algernon's sudden visit had occasioned (for, though things were bad, it was a relief to him to find that Castalia was safe and well), he could not resist the temptation to lecture a little, and be pompous, and display his suppressed self-esteem with a little more emphasis than usual.

Poor Lord Seely! By so doing he unconsciously drew down a terrible catastrophe. It seemed a trivial cause to determine Algernon to speak as he next spoke—as trivial as the heedless footfall or too-loudly spoken word which brings the avalanche toppling down from the rock.

"The selfishness and egotism of the man are incredible!" thought Algernon, looking at Lord Seely. "Not one word of sympathy with me! Not a syllable to show that my feelings are worthy of any consideration whatever. Pompous little ass!" Then he said, very gravely and quietly, "I think, my lord, that you have forgotten what I said to you in the hurried note I sent upstairs, about appealing to you on behalf of another person."

Lord Seely had forgotten it.

"Ha!—no, Ancram. I—I remember what you said; but, I—I take leave to think that if you wish to consider that other person—it is your wife of whom you spoke, I presume?"

Algernon bowed his head.

"If you wish to consider that person effectually, you ought not to have flown off at a tangent in the manner you have done. You might—ahem!—you might, at least, have written to me for advice."

"Lord Seely, I am sorry to say that you are under an entire misapprehension as to the state of the case."

Lord Seely was not accustomed to be told that he was under an entire misapprehension on any subject.

"If so, Ancram," he answered, with some hauteur, "the fault must be yours. I believe I should succeed in comprehending any moderately clear and accurate statement."

"I will try to speak plainly. During the last six weeks I have been made seriously unhappy by rumours floating about in Whitford respecting my wife."

"Rumours—! Respecting your wife?"

"They reach my ears through various channels, and appear to be rife in every social circle in the place."

"Rumours! Of what nature?"

There was a little pause; then Algernon said, "The least terrible of them is, that Castalia's reason is affected, and that she is not responsible for her actions."

Lord Seely started into a more upright posture, and then sank back again with a suppressed cry of pain. Algernon went on, without looking up: "Her manner has been very singular of late. She has taken to wandering about alone, and to make her wanderings as secretly as may be; she haunts the post-office in my absence, carefully informing herself beforehand whether I am in my private room or not; and if I am reported absent, she enters it, searches the drawers, and, I have the strongest reason to believe—indeed I may say I know—that she has tampered with a little cabinet in which I keep a few private papers, and taken letters out of it!"

"Ancram!"

"These things, my lord, are commonly reported and spoken of by every gossiping tongue in Whitford. I can't help the people talking. Castalia is not liked there; her manners are unpopular, and even the persons who were inclined to receive her kindly for my sake have been offended and alienated. Still, the things I have told you are facts."

"I am shocked—I am surprised—and, forgive me, Ancram, a little incredulous. You may have listened to malicious tongues; you say that my niece is not liked by the—the class of persons with whom she now associates, and it may be—"

"I am sorry to say, my lord, that Castalia cannot be said to associate with any 'class of persons' in Whitford, for latterly it has become plain to me that all our acquaintances have given her the cold shoulder."

The mingled expression of amazement, incredulity, and offended pride on Lord Seely's face, when Algernon made this announcement, did not operate with the latter as an inducement to spare him. Indeed, he had now gone almost too far to stop short. He held up his hand to deprecate any interruption, and said, "One moment, my lord! I must ask you a question. Have you at any time privately supplied Castalia with money unknown to me?"

"Never! I——"

"Then, Lord Seely, I have only one more circumstance to add: Castalia, the other day, paid a bill of considerable amount to a mercer in Whitford without my knowledge, and without my knowing where she found the money to pay it; and yesterday my clerk, an honest fellow and much attached to me, told me in private and in strict confidence, that it was currently reported in the town that one of the notes paid by my wife to the mercer was endorsed in the same way as a note in one of the missing money-letters I have told you of."

"Good God, Ancram! what do you mean?"

"I told you that the least terrible rumour about Castalia was the rumour that her mind was affected."

Lord Seely's face was almost lead-coloured. He pressed his hands one on each side of his head with a gesture of hopeless bewilderment. "This is the most appalling thing!" he murmured, and his voice was scarcely audible as he said it.

"I had to make my choice without delay, Lord Seely. I regret to inflict this blow on you in your present suffering state of body; but, if I spared you, I could not have spared Castalia. I chose to spare my wife."

"Yes, yes;—quite—quite right. Spare Castalia! I—I thank you, Ancram—for choosing to spare her rather than me." The poor little nobleman's face was convulsed by a kind of spasm for a second or two, and then he burst into tears, sobbing out, with his face hidden in his trembling hands, "What is to be done? Gracious heavens! what is to be done?"

"I talked about choosing to spare Castalia," said Algernon, looking at her uncle with a sort of furtive curiosity and a feeling that was more akin to contempt than pity, "but I don't know how long it may be in my power, or anyone's power, to spare her. The only chance for either of us is to get away out of Whitford as quickly as possible."

"But—but——My head is so confused. I am stunned, Ancram—stunned! But—what was I going to say? Oh! have you interrogated Castalia? What representations does she make as to the money? There is so much to be said—to be asked. It cannot be but that there is some error. It cannot be. My poor Castalia!"

"Interrogating Castalia would be quite useless; worse than useless. You don't know what her behaviour and temper have been lately. She is utterly unreasonable. Ask anyone who knows our house in Whitford; ask my servants what my home has been latterly. I have bought the honour of your lordship's alliance somewhat dear."

Lord Seely sank down in his chair as if he had been struck, and his grey head drooped on his breast. "What can I do, Ancram?" he asked, in a tone so contrasted in its feebleness with his usual self-assured, rather strident voice, that it might have touched some persons with compassion. "What can I do?" Then he seemed to make a strong effort to recover some energy of manner, and added, "If it were not for this unfortunate attack which disables me, I would return with you to Whitford to-night. I would see Castalia myself."

Algernon heartily congratulated himself on the fit of gout which kept Lord Seely a prisoner. There was nothing he less desired than that her uncle should be confronted with Castalia. He represented that the only efficacious help Lord Seely could give under the circumstances would be to furnish them with money to pay their debts and leave Whitford forthwith. He pointed out that Castalia must have felt this herself, when she wrote urging her uncle to get them some post abroad. Algernon became eager and persuasive as he spoke, and offered a glimpse to the man before him, whose pride and whose affections were equally wounded, of a future which should make some amends for the bitter present—a future in which Castalia might have peace and safety at least, and in which her mind might regain its balance. He would be gentle, and patient, and tender with her; and, if they were in a position that offered no such temptations as the post-office at Whitford, the anxiety to all who regarded Castalia would be greatly lessened. Lord Seely was, as he had said, too much stunned by the whole interview to follow Algernon's rapid eloquence step by step. He felt that he must have time for reflection; besides, he was physically exhausted. He bade Algernon leave him for a time, and return later in the day. He would give orders that he should be admitted at once. "You—you have not seen my lady?" said Lord Seely hesitatingly.

"No; I purposely avoided doing so. She would have naturally inquired the cause of my unexpected presence in town, and I could speak of all this trouble to nobody on earth but yourself, my lord."

"Right, right, Ancram. But my lady will not fail to learn that you have been here, and we must give her some reason."

"I can say, if you choose, that I came to London on post-office business."

Lord Seely bowed his head almost humbly, and Algernon left him. He left him with an air of sombre resignation, but inwardly he felt himself to be master of the situation.

CHAPTER XV.

"Rubbish!" cried my lady. "It's a trick. I know the Ancrams, and there isn't one of them, and never was one of them—of the Warwickshire Ancrams, that is—who would stick at a lie!"

Lady Seely was in a towering passion. She had met Algernon Errington on the stairs as he was leaving her husband's room for the second time that afternoon. Algernon had slipped past her with a silent bow, and had refused to return, although she screamed after him at the full pitch of her lungs. Upon this Lady Seely had gone to her husband's room, and in a few minutes had drawn from him the confession that he had promised Algernon to use his utmost endeavours to obtain a post for him on the Continent. And then, on her violent opposition to this scheme, Lord Seely had been led on to tell her pretty nearly what Algernon had told him; dwelling very strongly on the circumstance that Castalia was in a strange, excited state, and might not be deemed responsible for her actions. But neither did this terrible revelation make much impression on my lady.

"Rubbish!" she said again. "And if she is in this queer excited condition, what makes her so?"

"Belinda, you do not realise the full extent. This is a more serious, a more frightful matter than you seem to think."

"Oh no it isn't, my lord! You'll see! A young rascal, to come here with his cock-and-a-bull stories, and try to frighten you into getting a berth for him! Why, there's nothing to be had, if one was willing to try, except the consulate at what's-his-name, on the Mediterranean, that Mr. Buller mentioned when you spoke to him about my nephew."

"I thought that might be got for Ancram, Belinda."

"Got for Ancram! Fiddlestick's end! What next? If the consulate is to be had, Reginald shall have it, that's flat!"

Lord Seely lay back in his chair and groaned.

"Yes," cried his wife, her cheeks flaming with anger until the rouge she wore seemed but a pale pigment on the hot colour beneath, "there it is! He has made you ever so much worse; upset you completely; thrown you back a fortnight, as Dr. Nokes said. He couldn't think what was the matter when he came at one o'clock. No more could I. 'My lord appears to have been agitated!' said he. Agitated! Yes; *I'd* agitate that young villain with a vengeance if I could get hold of him!"

"But you agitate me—*me*, Belinda. And, let me tell you, that you are not showing a proper feeling in the case as regards Castalia; my niece Castalia; poor unhappy girl!"

My lady stood up—she had risen to her feet in her wrath against Algernon—big, florid, loud of voice, and vehement of will, and looked down upon her husband in his invalid's chair. And as she looked into his face she perceived, and acknowledged to herself, that it would not do to drive him to extremities; that on this occasion neither indolence, habit, and bodily weakness on the one hand, nor sheer force of tongue and temper on the other, would avail to make him succumb to her. She changed her tone, and began to give her view of the case. She gave it the more effectively in that she spoke the truth, as far as the representation of her genuine opinion went. She did not believe a word about Castalia's having stolen money-letters. (Lord Seely winced when she blurted out the accusation nakedly in so many words.) Not one word! As to the gossip in Whitford, that might be, or might not; they had but Ancram's word for it. If Castalia *was* in this nervous, miserable state of mind; if she did pry on her husband, and prowl about the post-office, and even open his letters (*that* might be; nothing more likely!); if all these statements were true, what conclusion did they point to? Not that Castalia was a thief (my lord put his hand up at the word, as if to ward off a stab), but that she was *insanely jealous*.

The suggestion brought a gleam of comfort to Lord Seely. And it approved itself to his reason. The one explanation was in harmony with all that he knew of his niece's character. The other was not.

"Jealous, eh, Belinda?"

"Of course! *Insanely* jealous, that always was her character, when she lived in our house. She was jealous of Lady Harriet Dormer; she was jealous of everybody and everything that Ancram looked at."

"Jealous!" repeated my lord musingly. "But to act so strangely—to expose herself to animadversion—to go the length of opening desks and letters!—She must have had some cause, some great provocation."

"Nothing more likely! Ancram is good-looking and young; and Castalia—isn't."

"But where did she procure that money without her husband's knowledge?"

"Don't know, I'm sure."

"And her extravagance, and running him into debt as she has done—it seems to point to some mental aberration, does it not, Belinda?"

"Oh, fiddle-faddle, my lord! *Why* this, and *how* that! How do we know what truth there is in the whole story?"

"Belinda?"

"Oh, bless you, I'm too old a bird to be caught by any chaff the *Ancrams* can offer me."

"But, good heavens, Belinda, it is utterly incredible——"

"Nothing's incredible of an Ancram in the way of lying," returned the great lady of that family with much coolness. "This young jackanapes has got into a scrape down at What-do-ye-call-it. Things have gone wrong in the office—(I'll be bound he don't mind his business a bit)—he and his wife have got into debt between them. He don't like the place; and after bothering your life out for money, he comes off here without 'with your leave' or 'by your leave,' and asks to be sent abroad. That's my notion of the matter. And any way, if I were you, Valentine, I should take no sort of action, nor commit myself in any way, until I'd had Castalia's version of the story."

Lord Seely pressed his hand to his forehead, and writhed on his chair. "I wish to God that I could go to the place and speak with Castalia myself!" he cried. "There are things that cannot be written. But here I am a prisoner. It is a dreadful misfortune."

"I can't undertake to go trapesing down there in this weather," exclaimed my lady. "And, besides, I wouldn't leave you just now."

Lord Seely by no means wished that his wife should interfere personally in the matter. He well knew that nothing but discord was likely to arise from any interview between Castalia and her aunt. "There is no one I could send," he murmured. "No one I could trust."

"No, no! It would never do to send anybody at all. This kind of family wash had better be done in private. I tell you what you do, Valentine—you just dictate a letter to me to be sent to Castalia. Send it off *at once*. When does Ancram return? To-morrow? Very well, then. Send it off *at once*, so that it shall reach Whitford before he does."

"Why so, Belinda?" asked my lord anxiously.

"Why so? Dear me, Valentine; how st——unsuspicious you are! If Ancram was there when the letter arrived, do you suppose she would ever get it?"

Lord Seely stared at the florid, fat, unfeeling face before him, with a sensation of oppression and dismay. How was it possible to attribute such actions and motives to persons of one's own family with an air of such matter-of-fact indifference? It was not the first time that his wife's coarseness of feeling had been thrust on his observation to the shocking of his own finer taste and sentiment—for my lord was a gentleman at heart—but this was an amount of phlegmatic cynicism which hurt him to the core. He could not forget that it was his wife who had promoted the marriage of Castalia with this young man. It was his wife who had declared that the Honourable Miss Kilfinane was not likely to make a better match. It was his wife who had urged him to put young Errington into the Whitford Post-office, declaring that the place was in every way a suitable one for him. And now it was his wife who coolly described Ancram as a wretch, full of the vilest duplicity!

The fact was, that my lady was by no means so indifferent on the subject as her words and manner would seem to imply. She was—not pained as Lord Seely was, but—angered excessively. She foresaw various troubles to herself and her husband—even the distant possibility of having Castalia "returned upon their hands," as she phrased it, and of having, sooner or later, to find money, or make interest, to get Ancram a berth which she would more willingly have bestowed on some of her nearer kith and kin. And her fashion of venting her anger was roundly to declare Ancram Errington capable of anything! And in her heart she believed him capable of a good deal of falsehood.

Lord Seely made no immediate reply to his wife's suggestion. He was ill and grieved, and he felt as if his final exit from this world of troubles might not be altogether undesirable. His interview with Algernon had agitated him terribly. His interview with his wife—although she had opened the door for a ray of hope that things might be not quite so terribly bad as he had feared—had certainly not soothed him. But before the departure of the evening mail that night, he had completed and despatched a letter to Castalia. He had insisted on writing it with his own hand, sitting up in bed to do so, although his fingers were scarcely able to guide the pen.

Meanwhile, Algernon was spending a very pleasant evening. He went to the club to which the Honourable Jack Price had introduced him during the brief butterfly period of his London existence. There he found the genial Jack, friendly, affectionate, expansive, as ever: a trifle balder, maybe, but otherwise unchanged. There, too, he found several of his former acquaintances ("old friends," he called them), who, after having his name recalled to their recollection by Jack Price, said, "Hulloa, Errington, where the dooce have you been hiding yourself?" and shook hands with the utmost cordiality. Then Jack Price insisted on adjourning to a favourite haunt of his, and ordering supper in celebration of Algernon's unexpected visit. And the "old friends" were flatteringly willing to do Algernon the honour of eating it. They were mostly unfledged lads, such as affected very often the society of Jack Price, who was really a kind

companion, and gave the boys long lectures on steadiness of purpose and energy, illustrated by warning examples from his own career, and delivered amid such agreeable accompaniments to moral reflection as hot whisky-punch and first-rate Havanas. But there were one or two older men: a newspaper editor from Dublin, who had been at college with Jack; and a grey-whiskered major of cavalry, who had served with Jack during his brief military career; and a middle-aged attaché to His Majesty's legation at the Grand Duchy of Prundenhausen, who had been a contemporary of Jack in the Foreign Office. And all these gentlemen, being warmed by wine and meat, became excessively companionable and entertaining. The Dublin editor, a fat, short, rather humorous-looking individual, sang Irish sentimental ballads with a sweet tenor voice, and, at the whisky-punch stage of the entertainment, brought tears into the eyes of the cavalry major and Jack Price. The middle-aged attaché did not cry; he considered such a manifestation beneath the dignity of the diplomatic service. And although he affected a bitter tone, and secretly considered himself to be a mute inglorious Talleyrand, much injured and unappreciated by the blundering chiefs at the Foreign Office, yet to outsiders he maintained the dignity of the service, at the cost of a good deal of trouble and starch.

Algernon did not cry either. Indeed, the combination of sentimental ballad and stout Dublin editor struck him as being pleasantly comic. But he paid the singer so easy and well-turned a compliment as put to shame the clumsy "Thanks, O'Reilly!" "By Jove, that was delightful!" "What a sweet whistle you have of your own!" and the general shout of "Bravo!" by which the others expressed their approbation. And then he sang himself—one of the French romances for which he had gained a little reputation among a certain society in town. The romance was somewhat thread-bare, and the singer's voice out of practice; still, the performance was favourably received. But Algernon soon changed his ground, and, eschewing music altogether, began to entertain his hearers with stories about the eccentric worthies of Whitford, illustrated by admirable mimicry of their peculiarities of voice, face, and phraseology, so that he soon had the table in a roar of laughter, and achieved a genuine success. Jack Price was enchanted—partly with the consciousness that it was he who had provided his friends with this diverting entertainment, and explained to every one who would listen to him: "Oh, you know, it's great! What? Great, sir! Mathews isn't a patch on him. Inimitable, what? He is the dearest, brightest, most lovable fellow! What a burning shame that a thing of this sort should be hidden under a bushel—I mean, down in what-d'ye-call-it! *By George!* What?"

Yes; Algernon spent a very agreeable evening, and thoroughly enjoyed himself. He certainly had a wonderful share of what his mother called "the Ancram elasticity!"

CHAPTER XVI.

Mrs. Errington was greatly astonished to hear of Algernon's sudden departure from Whitford. The news came to her through Mrs. Thimbleby, who had learned it from the baker, who had been told by the barman at the "Blue Bell" that young Mr. Errington had gone off to London by the night mail on Monday. At first Mrs. Errington was incredulous. But Mrs. Thimbleby's information was so circumstantial, that at length her lodger resolved to go to Ivy Lodge and ascertain the truth. She found Castalia in a very gloomy humour. Yes; Ancram was gone, she said. Why? Well, *he* said he went because Lord Seely was ill. She, for her part, made no such statement. And, beyond that, it was not possible to draw much information out of her.

Mrs. Errington, however, returned not altogether ill-pleased to her lodgings, and assumed an air of majestic melancholy. She desired Mrs. Thimbleby to prepare a cup of chocolate for her, and to bring it forthwith to the sitting-room. And when it appeared she began to sip it languidly, and to hold forth, and to enjoy herself.

"Oh, my dear good soul," she said, half closing her eyes and slowly shaking her head, "I've had a great shock—a great shock!"

"Deary me, ma'am!" cried simple Mrs. Thimbleby, with ready sympathy, looking into her lodger's round comely face. "Nothing wrong with Mr. Algernon, I hope?"

"No, thank Heaven! Not that; but perhaps the next greatest trial that could befall me, in the illness of a dear relative."

"Young Mrs.—" Mrs. Thimbleby checked herself, having been reprov'd for using that distinctive epithet of "young" to Algernon's wife, and substituted the form of words her lodger had taught her. "The Honourable Mrs. Errington ain't ill, ma'am, is she?"

"No, my good creature. We had a despatch last evening announcing the illness of Lord Seely. It was sent to Algy, because dear Lady Seely was so fearful of startling me. And, for the same reason, dear Algy went off without telling me a word about it."

Mrs. Thimbleby had only the haziest notion as to what kinship existed between Mrs. Errington and the nobleman in question. But she knew that her lodger was nearly connected with high folks; but she had often been troubled by doubts and misgivings, as to how far this fact might militate against her lodger's spiritual welfare, as being apt to promote worldliness and vain-glory. But Mrs. Thimbleby was full of abounding charity, and she was always ready to attribute what appeared to her evil to her own "poor head," rather than to other people's poor heart. So she

merely expressed a hope that "the poor gentleman would soon get over it."

"I trust so, Mrs. Thimbleby. His removal from the scene of life would be a terrible loss to this country. From the sovereign downwards, we should all feel it."

"Should we, ma'am?"

"Not, of course, as acutely as the family would feel it. That could not be, of course! But I trust he will recover. I wish I could have accompanied Algy to town, to help to nurse the dear patient, and take some of the care off the shoulders of my poor darling cousin, Belinda. Belinda is Lady Seely's Christian-name, my good Thimbleby. But of course that was impossible. I have not strength for it."

"No, for sure, ma'am; but them high gentle-folks like them—lords, I mean, will be sure to have nurse-tenders, and doctors, and servants, as many as they need!"

"Oh, as to that—! The king's own physician twice daily."

"I hope," said Mrs. Thimbleby, timidly, before leaving the room, "that the Lord will soften your daughter-in-law's heart to you in this trouble."

It must be understood that Mrs. Errington had of late, and especially since Castalia's outburst against Rhoda Maxfield, spoken of her daughter-in-law with a good deal of disapprobation; pitying her son for all he had to endure, and lamenting that he should have thrown himself away as he had done, when so many brilliant matches were, as it might be said, at his feet. "The dear Seelys," she would say, "considered that he was making a sacrifice. That, I happen to *know*. But she displayed so undisguised an attachment—and Algy—Algy is the soul of chivalry. All the Ancrams ever have been."

It had certainly taken some time for the worthy lady to discover that her son's marriage wasn't quite a satisfactory one. But when the discovery did force itself on her perceptions, she was by no means tender to Castalia. Her moral toughness of hide prevented her from being much hurt by such speeches as, "Dear me! Not happy together! Why, I thought this was such a model marriage, Mrs. Errington!" Or, "Ah! jealous and fretful, is she? Well, I always thought it wouldn't do. But of course I said nothing. You plumed yourself so much on the match, you know, at the time." She could always retreat to illogical strongholds of unreason, whence she sent forth retorts, and arguments, and statements, which were found to be unanswerable by the average intellect of Whitford.

"I wonder the woman isn't ashamed—really now!" exclaimed Miss Chubb once in the exasperation of listening to Mrs. Errington calmly superior to facts, and of being quite unable to touch her self-complacency by any recapitulation of them.

"Do you?" asked Rose McDougall tartly. "How odd! Now, as to me, nothing would surprise me more than to find Mrs. Errington ashamed of anything."

These and similar things had been freely spoken in Whitford, and although the world resented Mrs. Errington's manner of complaint, as being deficient in humility and candour—for it is provoking to find people who ought to lament in sackcloth and ashes, holding up their heads and making a merit of their deserved misfortunes—yet the world admitted that Mrs. Errington had substantial cause for complaint. The Honourable Castalia was really intolerable, and the only possible excuse for her behaviour was—what had been whispered with many nods and becks, and much mystery—that she was not quite of sound mind. And when the news began to circulate in Whitford that young Errington had gone to London suddenly, and almost secretly, the first, and most general, impression was that he had run away from his wife. To this solution the tradesmen to whom he owed money added, "And his debts!" Mrs. Errington's statement as to Lord Seely's illness was not much believed. And if he were ill, was it likely that my lord should cause Algernon Errington to be sent for? Later on in the course of the day, it began to be known that Castalia had accompanied her husband to the coach-office, so that his departure had not been clandestine so far as she was concerned, at all events. But was it not rather odd, the postmaster rushing off in this sudden manner? How did he manage to leave his business? Mr. Cooper never did such things! Not, probably, that it would make much difference whether Algernon Errington were here or not; for everybody knew pretty well that he was a mere cipher in the office, and Mr. Gibbs did everything!

As to Mr. Gibbs, he was inwardly much disquieted at his chief's unwarranted absence. He had received a note which Algernon had left behind him to be delivered on the morning after his departure. But the note was not very satisfactory:—

"MY DEAR GIBBS," it said—"I am off to town by the night mail. My wife's uncle, Lord Seely, is ill, and I must see him. I shall speak to him on your behalf, of course. The inheritance must soon fall to you, without waiting for the demise of the present holder. I shall be back on Wednesday at latest. Meanwhile, I trust implicitly to your discretion.

"Yours always,

"A. A. E."

This was oracular enough. But Mr. Obadiah Gibbs understood very well, as he read it, that by the "inheritance" which must soon fall to him, Algernon meant the place of postmaster. Still there

was nothing in the note to commit Algernon in any way whatever. And his going off to London without leave and without notice, was a proceeding which shocked all the old clerk's notions of what was fitting. The thought did cross his mind, "Suppose he should never come back! Suppose he is off to America, as a short cut out of his troubles!" The thing was possible. And the possibility haunted Mr. Obadiah Gibbs persistently, though he tried to argue it away.

In the afternoon of Tuesday, Rhoda Maxfield walked into the post-office, and asked to speak with Mr. Errington. She was on foot and alone, and was looking so pretty and blooming as to arrest the attention of the dry old clerk. When he told her that Mr. Errington was away in London, and would not be back until the next day, she appeared disappointed. "Will you tell him, please, that I came, and wanted to speak to him particularly, and beg him to come to me as soon as ever he gets back to Whitford?" she said, in her soft lady's voice. Mr. Gibbs did not answer her. He stared straight over her shoulder as if Medusa's head had suddenly appeared behind her. Rhoda turned to see what had petrified Mr. Gibbs into silence, and saw Castalia Errington.

Rhoda was startled, but more from sympathy with Gibbs than from any other reason. The quick colour mounted into her cheeks and deepened their blush rose hue to damask. "Oh, Mrs. Errington," she said, and held out her hand. Castalia did not take it; did not speak; did not, after one baleful stare of anger, look at her. "Come into the private office," she said, addressing Gibbs in a dry, husky voice, and with a manner of imperious harshness. As she stood with her hand on the lock of the door leading into the inner room, she looked round over her shoulder and flung these words at Rhoda like a missile; "You have made a mistake. My husband is not here to-day, of all days. He has been remiss in not letting you know of his journey. But men are apt, I have been told, to fail in polite attention to persons of your sort."

"Mrs. Errington!" cried Rhoda, turning pale, less at the words than at the look and tone which interpreted their meaning so that it was impossible altogether to misunderstand it. "I came here to speak to Mr. Errington about something he wished to hear of. And if I may say it to you instead —"

"To ME? How dare you?" Castalia turned full on her with a livid, furious face, lit by a pair of hollow, burning eyes. Poor, artificial, small product of her social surroundings as she usually seemed, the passion in the woman transfigured her now with a tragic fire and force, before which Rhoda's innocent lily nature seemed shrivelled and discoloured, like a flower in the blast of a furnace. It was strange to himself, but Mr. Gibbs, as he looked at the two women, and was fully conscious on which side lay the right in the matter, could not help feeling an inexplicable thrill of sympathy with Castalia as she stood there breathing quickly and hard, with dilated nostrils and suffering, tearless eyes. The truth is that there was some subtle ingredient in Mr. Gibbs's composition which was more cognate with flesh and blood—even erring, passionate flesh and blood—than with the cool fluid that circulates in the petals of a lily. David Powell would have said that it was a manifest stirring of the Old Adam which caused the regenerate Obadiah Gibbs—a professing Christian, a confirmed and tried pillar of Methodism, a man whose precious experiences had been poured forth for the edification of many a band meeting—to be conscious for the first time of some fellow-feeling with Castalia, at the very moment when she was conducting herself in a manner to shock every sentiment of what was just and fitting. But whether it were due to original sin, or to whatever other cause, the fact remained that Obadiah Gibbs for the first time in his life now felt disposed to spare and screen the postmaster's wife.

"I'll give the message when Mr. Errington comes back," said he to Rhoda, almost hustling her out of the office as he spoke. "The poor thing is not very well," he added, in a lower voice. "She has been a good deal cut up, one way and another. You mustn't think anything of her manner, nor bear malice, Miss Maxfield. Good morning."

When Rhoda was gone—feeling almost dizzy with surprise and fright—Gibbs followed Mrs. Errington into the inner office. He found her openly examining the contents of the table-drawer, having tossed all the papers she had found in it pell-mell on to the table. Gibbs entered and closed the door carefully. "Mrs. Errington," he began, intending to remonstrate with her—or, perhaps, utter something stronger than a remonstrance—on her manner of conducting herself in the office, when she interrupted him at once, looking up from the heap of papers. "What message did that creature give you for my husband?" she asked abruptly.

"Now, Mrs. Errington, you really must not go on in this way! I'm responsible to Mr. Errington, you know, for things being right here."

"Did you hear me? What message did that creature give you?"

"Oh now, really, Mrs. Errington, I think you ought not to speak of Rhoda Maxfield in that way. She is a very good girl, and you hurt her terribly by your manner."

Castalia smiled bitterly. "Did I?" she said. "Of course you're in league with her. Why does this good young woman come here in secret to see my husband? What can she want to say to him that cannot be said openly?"

"I cannot hear such things, ma'am; I cannot, indeed. If you would give yourself an instant for reflection, you would remember that Miss Maxfield offered to tell her message to you yourself."

"Offered to tell me! Do you really suppose I am duped by such low tricks? I heard her say, 'Send him to me directly he comes back'—heard it with my own ears. But of course you won't tell me the truth."

"I am obliged to say, Mrs. Errington, that you really must leave the office. I am very sorry, but I am responsible in Mr. Errington's absence, and I cannot allow you to turn everything topsy-turvy here in this way. There has been trouble enough by your coming here already."

"Trouble enough! Who says so? Who is troubled?"

"Mr. Errington is troubled, and I am troubled, and—in short, it's altogether out of rule."

"Then he confesses, does he, that he is afraid of my coming here to make discoveries about him? Why should he be troubled if he had nothing to conceal?"

Castalia spoke with trembling eagerness and excitement. She had thrown all semblance of dignity or reserve to the winds. She would have spoken as she was speaking at that moment in Whitford market-place. Gibbs looked at her, and a doubt came into his mind as to whether his suspicions, and other people's suspicions, about her were quite so well-founded as he had thought. She was terribly violent, jealous, insolent, unconverted, full of the leaven of unrighteousness—but was she a practised hypocrite, a woman experienced in dishonesty? For the life of him, Obadiah Gibbs could not feel so sure of this as he had felt, now that he looked into her poor, haggard face, and met her eyes, and heard her utterly incautious and vehement speeches.

"As to me not telling you the truth, Mrs. Errington," he said, "I suppose you know the truth as to why your visits here bring trouble on everybody?"

"Tell it me, you!"

"Well, I—oh you must be aware of it, I suppose. And if I was to tell you, you would only be more angry and offended with me than ever, though what I have done to excite your displeasure I don't know."

"Tell me this truth that I know so well! Do you think I should seriously care for anything *you* could say, except as it concerned my husband?"

"Mrs. Errington, I don't know whether you are feigning or not. But, anyway, I think it my duty to answer you with Christian sincerity. It is borne in upon me that I ought to do so."

"Go on, go on, go on!" cried Castalia, drumming with restless fingers on the table and looking up at the clerk with eyes that blazed with excitement and impatience.

"You are aware that there have been unpleasant circumstances at the post-office—letters lost—*money-letters* lost. Well, your name has been mentioned in connection with those losses. It is known in Whitford that you come haunting the office at all hours when your husband is away. A little while ago you paid a bill with some notes that were endorsed in a peculiar way. People ask where you got those notes. I thought it my duty to mention the subject to Mr. Errington the other day. He was greatly distressed, of course. He said he should interrogate you about the notes. My advice to you is—in all sincerity and charity, as the Lord sees me—to tell your husband the truth, whatever it is."

He ended his speech with a tremor of compassion in his voice, and with a sudden breakdown of his rhetorical manner, for Castalia's face changed so piteously, so terribly, as he spoke, that the man's heart was deeply touched by it. She grew ashy pale. The quick fingers that had been tapping impatiently on the table seemed turned to lead. They lay there heavy and motionless. Her mouth was half open, and her eyes stared straight before her at the blank wall of the yard, as though they saw a spectre.

"Lord have mercy on us, she is guilty!" thought Obadiah Gibbs. And at that moment if he could have hidden her crime from the eyes of all men, I believe he would have done it at the cost of a lie.

"Of course you're not bound to say anything to me, you know, Mrs. Errington," he went on, after a short pause. And as he spoke he bent nearer to her, to rouse her, for she seemed neither to hear nor to see him. "You'd better go home now at once, you don't seem very strong."

Still she did not move.

"Look here, Mrs. Errington, I—you may rely upon my not breaking a word—not one syllable to anybody else, if you—if you will try to make things straight again as far as in your power lies. Go home now, pray do!"

Still she did not move.

"You don't look much able to walk, I fear. Shall I send the boy for a fly? Let me send for a fly?"

He softly touched her shoulder as he spoke, and she immediately turned her head and answered with a composure that startled him, "Yes; get me a fly." Then she sat quite still again, staring at the wall as before.

Gibbs went out into the outer office and sent the boy for a vehicle. There he remained, pen in hand, behind his desk until the jingle of the fly was heard at the door. He went back himself to the private office to call Castalia, and found her sitting in exactly the same place and attitude. She rose mechanically to her feet when he told her the fly was ready, but as she began to walk towards the door she staggered and caught at Gibbs's arm. He supported her with a sort of quiet gravity;—much as if he had been her old servant, and she a cripple whose infirmity was a matter

of course,—which showed much delicacy of feeling, and as they neared the door he said in her ear, "Take my advice, ma'am, and tell your husband the truth." She turned her eyes on him with a singular look, but said nothing. "Tell him the truth! and—and look upward. Lift your heart in prayer. There is a fountain of grace and love ready for all who seek it!"

"Not for me," she answered in a very low but distinct voice.

"Oh, my poor soul, don't say so! Don't think so!"

By this time she was in the carriage, having been almost lifted into it by Gibbs. She was perfectly quiet and tearless, and as the vehicle drove away, and Gibbs stood watching it disappear, he said to himself that her face was as the face of a corpse.

CHAPTER XVII.

Castalia was driven home, and walked up the path of the tiny garden in front of Ivy Lodge with a step much like her ordinary one. She went into the drawing-room and looked about her curiously, as if she were a stranger seeing the place for the first time. Then she sat down for a minute, still in her bonnet and shawl. But she got up again quickly from the sofa, holding her hand to her throat as if she were choking, and went out to the garden behind the house, and from thence to the meadows near the river. There was at the bottom of the garden, and outside of it, a miserable, dilapidated wooden shed, euphoniouly called a summer-house. There was a worm-eaten wooden bench in it looking towards the Whit, and commanding a view of the wide meadows on the other side of it, of a turn in the river, now lead-coloured beneath a dreary sky, and of the distant spire of Duckwell Church rising beyond the hazy woods of Pudcombe. No one ever entered this summer-house. It was rotting to pieces with damp and decay, and was inhabited by a colony of insects and a toad that squatted in one corner. In this wretched place Castalia sat down, being indeed unable to walk farther, but feeling a sensation of suffocation at the mere thought of returning to the house. She fancied she could not breathe there. A steaming mist was rising from the river and the damp meadows beyond it. The grey clouds seemed to touch the grey horizon. It was cold, and the last brown leaf or two, hanging, as it seemed, by a thread on the boughs of a tree just within sight from the summer-house, twirled, and shook, and shuddered in the slight gusts of wind that arose now and again. There was not a sound to be heard except the mournful lowing of some cattle in a distant field, until all at once a movement of the air brought from Whitford the sound of the old chimes muffled by the heavy atmosphere. There sat Castalia and stared at the river, and the mist, and the brown withered leaves, much as she had stared at the blank yard wall in the office.

"My heart is sore pained within me, and the terrors of death are fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me!"

She heard a voice saying these words distinctly. She did not start. She scarcely felt surprise. The direful lamentation was in harmony with all she saw, and heard, and felt.

Again the voice spoke: "Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. They cried unto thee and were delivered; they trusted in thee and were not confounded. But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people!"

Castalia heard, scarcely listening. The words flowed by her like a tune that brings tears to the eyes by mere sympathy with its sad sound.

Presently a man passed before her, walking with an unequal pace—now quick, now slow, now stopping outright. He had his hands clasped at the back of his neck; his head was bent down, and he was talking aloud to himself.

"Aye, there have been such. The lot has fallen upon me. I know it with a sure knowledge. It is borne in upon me with a certainty that pierces through bone and marrow. I am of the number of those that go down to the pit. Why, O Lord—Nay! though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him. For he is not a man, as I am, that I should answer him, and we should come together in judgment."

He stopped in his walk; stood still for a second or two, and then turned to pace back again. In so doing he saw Castalia. She also looked full at him, and recognised the Methodist preacher. David Powell went up to her without hesitation. He remembered her at once; and he remembered, too, in a confused way, something of what Mrs. Thimbleby had been recently telling him about dissensions between this woman and her husband; of unhappiness and quarrels; and—what was that the widow had said of young Mrs. Errington being jealous of Rhoda? Ah, yes! He had it all now.

The time had been when David Powell would have had to wrestle hard with indignation against anyone who should have spoken evil of Rhoda. He would have felt a hot, human flush of anger; and would have combated it as a stirring of the unregenerate man within him. But all such feelings were over with him. No ray from the outside world appeared able to pierce the gloom which had gathered thicker and thicker in his own mind, unless it touched his sense of sympathy with suffering. He was still sensitive to that, as certain chemicals are to the light.

He went close up to Castalia, and said, without any preliminary or usual greeting, "You are in

affliction. Have you called upon the Lord? Have you cast your burthen upon him? He is a good shepherd. He will carry the weary and footsore of his flock lest they faint by the way and perish utterly."

It was noticeable when he spoke that his voice, which had been of such full sweetness, was now hoarse, and even harsh here and there, like a fine instrument that has been jarred. This did not seem to be altogether due to physical causes; for there still came out of his mouth every now and then a tone that was exquisitely musical. But the discord seemed to be in the spirit that moved the voice, and could not guide it with complete freedom and mastery.

Castalia shook her head impatiently, and turned her eyes away from him. But she did not do so with any of her old hauteur and intimation of the vast distance which separated her from her humbler fellow-creatures. Pain of mind had familiarised her with the conception that she held her humanity in common with a very heterogeneous multitude. Had Powell been a sleek, smug personage like Brother Jackson, veiling profound self-complacency under the technical announcement of himself as a miserable sinner, she might have turned from him in disgust. As it was, she felt merely the unwillingness to be disturbed, of a creature in whom the numbness of apathy has succeeded to acute anguish. She wanted to be rid of him. He looked at her with the yearning pity which was so fundamental a part of his nature. "Pray!" he said, clasping his hands together. "Go to your Father, which is in Heaven, and He shall give you rest. Oh, God loves you—he *loves* you!"

"No one loves me," returned Castalia, with white rigid lips. Then she got up from the bench, and went back into her own garden and into the house, with the air of a person walking in sleep.

Powell looked after her sadly. "If she would but pray!" he murmured. "I would pray for her. I would wrestle with the Lord on her behalf. But—of late I have feared more and more that my prayers are not acceptable; that my voice is an abomination to the Lord."

He resumed his walk along the river bank, speaking aloud, and gesticulating to himself as he went.

Meanwhile, Castalia wandered about her own house "like a ghost," as the servants said. She went from the little dining-room to the drawing-room, and then she painfully mounted the steep staircase to her bed-room, opened the door of her husband's little dressing-closet, shut it again, and went downstairs once more. She could not sit still; she could not read; she could not even think. She could only suffer, and move about restlessly, as if with a dim instinctive idea of escaping from her suffering. Presently she began to open the drawers of a little toy cabinet in the drawing-room, and examine their contents, as if she had never seen them before. From that she went to a window-seat, made hollow, and with a cushioned lid, so that it served as a seat and a box, and began to rummage among its contents. These consisted chiefly of valueless scraps, odds and ends, put there to be hidden and out of the way. Among them were some of poor Mrs. Errington's wedding-presents to her son and daughter-in-law. Castalia's maid, Slater, had unceremoniously consigned these to oblivion, together with a few other old-fashioned articles, under the generic name of "rubbish." There was a pair of hand-screens elaborately embroidered in silk, very faded and out of date. Mrs. Errington declared them to be the work of her grand-aunt, the beautiful Miss Jacintha Ancram, who made such a great match, and became a Marchioness. There was an ancient carved ivory fan, yellow with age, brought by a cadet of the house of Ancram from India, as a present to some forgotten sweetheart. There was a little cardboard box, covered with fragments of raised rice-paper, arranged in a pattern. This was the work of Mrs. Errington's own hands in her school-girl days, and was of the kind called then, if I mistake not, "filagree work." Castalia took these and other things out of the window-seat, and examined them and put them back, one by one, moving exactly like an automaton figure that had been wound up to perform those motions. When she came to the filagree box, she opened that too. There was a Tonquin bean in it, filling the box with its faint sweet odour. There was a pair of gold buckles, that seemed to be attenuated with age; and a garnet-brooch, with one or two stones missing. And then at the bottom of the box was something flat, wrapped in silver paper. She unwrapped it and looked at it.

It was a water-colour drawing done by Algernon immediately on his return from Llanryddan, in the first flush of his love-making, and represented himself and Rhoda standing side by side in front of the little cottage where they had lodged there. Algernon had given himself pinker cheeks, bluer eyes, and more amber-coloured hair than nature had endowed him with. Rhoda was equally over-tinted. There was no merit in the drawing, which was stiff and school-boyish, but the very exaggerations of form and colour emphasised the likeness in a way not to be mistaken.

Castalia trembled from head to foot as she looked on the two rosy simpering faces. A curious ripple or tremor ran over her body, such as may be observed in persons recovering consciousness after a swoon. She tore the drawing into small fragments. Her teeth were set. Her eyes glared. She looked like a murderess. She trod the scattered bits into the carpet with her heel. Then, as if with an afterthought, she swept them contemptuously into the bright steel shovel, and threw them into the fire, and stood and watched them blaze and smoulder. After that she wrapped her shawl more tightly round her—she had forgotten to remove either it or her bonnet on coming in—and went out at the front door, and walked straight into Whitford, and to Jonathan Maxfield's house.

She asked for "the master." The old man was at home, in the little parlour, and Sally showed Mrs. Errington into the room almost without the ceremony of tapping with her knuckles at the door,

and then made off to the kitchen to tell Mrs. Grimshaw. The lady's face had scared her.

Old Max was sitting near the dull fire which burned in the grate. The big Bible, his constant companion now, lay open on the table. But he had not been devoting his attention to that solely. He had had a large old-fashioned wooden desk brought down from his own room, and had been fingering the papers in it, reading some, and merely glancing at the outside folds of others. He now looked up at Castalia without recognising her.

"What is your business with me?" he asked, peering at her in perplexity.

"I've come to speak to you——" began Castalia; and at the first sound of her voice, Maxfield recognised her. He remembered the only visit she had paid him previously, when she came to beg that Rhoda might be allowed to visit her. She had taken a great fancy to his pretty Rhoda, this skinny, yellow-faced, fine lady. Ha! Well, she might show what civilities she pleased to Rhoda. No objection to that. Indeed, it was a proceeding to be encouraged, seeing that it probably caused a good deal of discomfort and embarrassment to Algernon! So he gave a little nod, meant to be courteous, and said, "Oh, I didn't just know you at first. Won't you be seated?"

Castalia refused by a gesture, and stood still opposite to him with one hand on the table, apparently in some embarrassment how to begin. Then it flashed on old Max that this "Honourable Missis," as he called her, had probably come to thank him, and found it not altogether easy to do so. But what could Castalia have to thank him for? This; Rhoda had so implored her father to relieve Algernon from his anxiety about the bills, that at length the old man had said with a chuckle, "Tell you what, Rhoda, I'll hand 'em over to Mr. Diamond, and maybe he will give them to you as a wedding present if he gets the school. And then you can do what you like with 'em. My gentleman won't be above taking a present from you or your husband. I've seen what meanness she can do and what dirt he can swallow, and not even make a wry face over it! Aye, dirt as would turn many a poor labouring man's stomach."

Rhoda, upon this, had consulted Matthew Diamond, and had not found it difficult to make him agree with her wish to give up the bills to Algernon. Indeed, although he had almost come to old Max's opinion of his former pupil, he would not for the world have behaved so as to make Rhoda suppose that he bore him a grudge. Rhoda's errand to the post-office that afternoon had been to bring Algernon this comforting news. She had taken care not to tell her father of Mrs. Algernon's behaviour, but had come home and cried a little quietly in her own room, and kept her tears and the cause of them to herself. Therefore it was that Jonathan Maxfield supposed the fine lady to have come to thank him for his magnanimity on behalf of her absent husband, and he was already preparing to give her "a dose," as he phrased it, and to spare her no item of Rhoda's prosperity, and wealth, and good prospects in the world.

Castalia remained leaning with one hand on the table, and did not continue her speech during the second or two in which these thoughts and intentions were passing through old Maxfield's brain. But it was by no means that she hesitated from embarrassment or lack of words: rather the words crowded to her lips too quickly and fiercely for utterance.

"I've come to speak to you about your daughter," she said at length.

"Aye, aye. Miss Maxfield's a bit of a friend o' yours. Miss Maxfield's allus been very kind to all the fam'ly ever since we've known 'em. But you'd best be seated."

"They say you are an honest, decent man," Castalia went on, neither seating herself nor noticing the invitation to do so. "It may be so. I am willing to believe it. But, if so, you are grossly deceived, cheated, and played upon by that vile girl."

Maxfield brought his two clenched fists heavily down on the table, and half raised himself in his chair. "Stop!" said he. "Who are you talking of?"

"You may believe me. I tell you I have watched—I have seen. She was in love with my husband years ago. She used every art to catch him. And now—now that he is married, she receives secret visits from him. Do you know that he came at night—ten o'clock at night—to your house when you were away? She goes to the post-office silyly to see him. I caught her there this morning leaving a private message for him with the clerk! Is that decent? Is it what you wish? Do you sanction it? She writes to him. She has turned his heart against me. He schemes to keep me out of the office. I know why now. Oh yes; I am not the blind dupe they think for. She has made him more cruel, more wicked to me than I could have imagined any man *could* be. My heart is broken. But as true as there is a God in Heaven I'll have amends made to me. She shall beg my pardon on her knees. And you had better look to it, if you don't want her character to be torn to pieces by every foul tongue in this town. I have borne enough. Keep her at home. Keep her from decoying other women's husbands, I warn you——"

Maxfield, who had been struggling to reach the bell, pulled it so violently that the wire was broken. At the peal Betty Grimshaw came running in, terrified. "Mercy, brother-in-law!" she cried. "What is it?"

"Get the police," gasped old Max, as if he were choking. "Send some one for a policeman, to turn that mad quean out of my house. She's not fit for a decent house. She's—she's——Oh, but you shall repent this! I'll sell you up, every stick of trumpery in the place. You audacious Jezebel! Turn her out of doors, I say! Do you hear me?"

Betty and the servant stood white and quivering, looking from the old man unable to rise from his

chair without help, and the lady who stood opposite to him, glaring with a Medusa face. Neither of the two frightened women stirred hand or foot to fulfil the master's behest. But Castalia relieved them from any perplexity on that score, at least, by voluntarily turning to leave the room. In the doorway she met Rhoda, who had run downstairs in alarm at the violent pealing of the bell. Castalia drew herself suddenly aside, as though something unspeakably loathsome stood in her path, held her dress away from any passing contact with the amazed girl, and rushed out of the house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Algernon's state of mind during his return journey to Whitford was very much pleasanter than it had been on his way up to town. To be sure, he had committed himself distinctly to a very grave statement. That was always disagreeable. But then he had made an immense impression on Lord Seely by his statement. He had crushed and overwhelmed that "pompous little ass." He had humiliated that "absurd little upstart." And—best of all; for these others were mere *dilettante* pleasures, which no man of intelligence would indulge in at the cost of his solid interests—he had terrified him so completely with the spectre of a public scandal and disgrace, that my lord was ready to do anything to help him and Castalia out of England. Of that there could be no doubt.

It must be owned that Algernon had so far justified the quick suspicions of his Whitford creditors and acquaintances as to have conceived for a moment the idea of never more returning to that uninteresting town. It was extremely exhilarating to be in the position of a bachelor at large; to find himself free, for a time, of the dead weight of debt, which seemed to make breathing difficult in Whitford; for, although by plodding characters the relief might not have been felt until the debts were paid, Algernon Errington's spirit was of a sort that rose buoyant as ever, directly the external pressure was removed. It was delightful to be reinstated in the enjoyment of his reputation as a charming fellow—much fallen into oblivion at Whitford. And perhaps it was pleasantest of all to feel strengthened in the assurance that he still *was* a charming fellow, with capacities for winning admiration and making a brilliant figure, quite uninjured (although they had been temporarily eclipsed) by all the cloud of troubles which had gathered around him.

So he *had*, for a moment, thought of fairly running away from wife, and duns, and dangers of official severities. But it was but a brief unsubstantial vision that flashed for an instant and was gone. Algernon was too clear-sighted not to perceive that the course was inconvenient—nay, to one of his temperament, impracticable. People who started off to live on their wits in a foreign country ought to be armed with a coarser indifference to material comforts than he was gifted with. Alternations of ortolans and champagne, with bread and onions, would be—even supposing one could be sure of the ortolans, which Algernon knew he could not—entirely repugnant to his temperament. He had no such strain of adventurousness as would have given a pleasant glow of excitement to the endurance of privation under any circumstances whatever. Professed Bohemians might talk as they pleased about kicking over traces, and getting rid of trammels, and so forth; but, for his part, he had never felt his spirit in the least oppressed by velvet hangings, gilded furniture, or French cookery! Whereas to be obliged to wear shabby gloves would have been a kind of "trammel" he would strongly have objected to. In a word, he desired to be luxuriously comfortable always. And he consistently (albeit, perhaps, mistakenly, for the cleverest of us are liable to error) endeavoured to be so.

Therefore he did not ship himself aboard an emigrant vessel for the United States; nor did he even cross the Channel to Calais; but found himself in a corner of the mail-coach on the night after Jack Price's supper party, bowling along, not altogether unpleasantly, towards Whitford. He had not seen Lord Seely again. He had inquired for him at his house, and had been told that his lordship was worse; was confined to bed entirely; and that Dr. Nokes had called in two other physicians in consultation. "Deuce of a job if he dies before I get a berth!" thought Algernon. But before he had gone many yards down the street, he was in a great measure reassured as to that danger, by seeing Lady Seely in her big yellow coach, with Fido on the seat beside her, and her favourite nephew lounging on the cushions opposite. The nephew had been apparently entertaining Lady Seely by some amusing story, for she was laughing (rather to the ear than the eye, as was her custom; for my lady made a great noise, sending out "Ha-ha-ha's!" with a kind of defiant distinctness, whilst all the while eyes and mouth plainly professed themselves disdainful of too cordial a hilarity, and ready to stop short in a second), and stroking Fido very unconcernedly with one fat tightly-gloved hand. Now although Algernon did not give my lady credit for much depth of sentiment, he felt sure that she would, for various reasons, have been greatly disquieted had any danger threatened her husband's life, and would certainly not have left his side to drive in the Park with young Reginald. So he drew the inference that my lord was not so desperately ill as he had been told, and that the servants had had orders to give him that account in order to keep him away—which was pretty nearly the fact.

"The old woman would be in a fury with me when my lord told her he had promised me that post without consulting her," thought Algernon; "and would tell any lie to keep me out of the house. But we shall beat her this time." As he so thought he pulled off his hat and made so distinguished and condescending a bow to my lady, that her nephew, who was near-sighted and did not recognise Errington, pulled off his own hat in a hurry, very awkwardly, and acknowledged the salute with some confused idea that the graceful gentleman was a foreigner of distinction; whilst

my lady, turning purple, shook her head at him in anger at the whole incident. All which Algernon saw, understood, and was immensely diverted by.

In summing up the results of his journey to town, he was satisfied. Things were certainly not so pleasant as they might be. But were they not better, on the whole, than when he had left Whitford? He decidedly thought they were; which did not, of course, diminish his sense of being a victim to circumstances and the Seely family. Anyway he had broken with Whitford. My lord *must* get him out of that *baraque*! The very thought of leaving the place raised his spirits. And, as he had the coach to himself during nearly all the journey, he was able to stretch his legs and make himself comfortable; and he awoke from a sound and refreshing sleep as the mail-coach rattled into the High Street and rumbled under the archway of the "Blue Bell."

The hour was early, and the morning was raw, and Algernon resolved to refresh himself with a hot bath and breakfast before proceeding to Ivy Lodge. "No use disturbing Mrs. Errington so early," he said to the landlord, who appeared just as Algernon was sipping his tea before a blazing fire. "Very good devilled kidneys, Mr. Rumbold," he added condescendingly. Mr. Rumbold rubbed his hands and stood looking half-sulkily, half-deferentially at his guest. His wife had said to him, "Don't you go chatting with that young Errington, Rumbold; not if you want to get your money. I know what he is, and I know what you are, Rumbold; and he'll talk you over in no time."

But Mr. Rumbold had allowed his own valour to override his wife's discretion, and had declared that he would make the young man understand before he left the "Blue Bell" that it was absolutely necessary to settle his account there without delay. And the result justified Mrs. Rumbold's apprehension; for Algernon Errington drove away from the inn without having paid even for the breakfast he had eaten there that morning, and having added the vehicle which carried him home to the long list beginning "Flys: A. Errington, Esq.," in which he figured as debtor to the landlord of the "Blue Bell." He had flourished Lord Seely in Mr. Rumbold's face with excellent effect, and was feeling quite cheerful when he alighted at the gate of Ivy Lodge.

It was still early according to Castalia's reckoning—little more than ten o'clock. So he was not surprised at not finding her in the drawing-room or the dining-room. Lydia, of whom he inquired at length as to where her mistress was, having first bade her light a fire for him to have a cigar by, before going to the office—Lydia said with a queer, half-scared, half-saucy look, "Laws, sir, missus has been out this hour and a half."

"Out!"

"Yes, sir. She said as how she couldn't rest in her bed, nor yet in the house, sir. Polly made her take a cup of tea, and then she went off to Whit Meadow."

"To Whit Meadow! In this damp raw weather at nine o'clock in the morning!"

"Please, sir, me and Polly thought it wasn't safe for missus, and her so delicate. But she would go."

Algernon shrugged his shoulders and said no more. Before the girl left the room, she said, "Oh, and please, sir, here's some letters as came for you," pointing to a little heap of papers on Castalia's desk.

Left alone, Algernon drew his chair up to the fire and lit a cigar. He did not hasten himself to examine the letters. Bills, of course! What else could they be? He began to smoke and ruminate. He would have liked to see Castalia before going to the office. He would have liked to make his own representation to her of the story he had told Lord Seely. She must be got to corroborate it unknowingly if possible. He reflected with some bitterness that she had lately shown so much power of opposing him, that it might be she would insist on taking a course of conduct which would upset all the combination he—with the help of chance circumstances—had so neatly pieced together. And then he reflected further, knitting his brows a little, that at any cost she must be prevented from spoiling his plans; and that her conduct lately had been so strange that it wouldn't be very difficult to convince the world of her insanity. "Gad, I'm almost convinced of it myself," said Algernon, half aloud. But it was not true.

The fire was warm, the room was quiet, the cigar was good, the chair was easy. Algernon felt tempted to sit still and put off the moment when he must re-enter the Whitford Post-office. He shuddered as he thought of the place with a kind of physical repulsion. Nevertheless, it must be faced once or twice more. Not much more often, he hoped. He rose up, put on a great-coat, and said to himself lazily as he ran his fingers through his hair in front of the looking-glass, "Where the devil can Castalia have gone mooning to?" Then he turned to leave the room. As he turned his eyes fell on the little heap of letters. He took them up and turned them over with a grimace.

"H'm! Ravell—respectful compliments. Ah! no; your mouth ought to have been stopped, I think! But that's the way. More they get, more they want. Never pay an instalment. Fatal precedent! What's this—a lawyer's letter! Gladwish. Oh! Very well, Mr. Gladwish. *Nous verrons*. Chemist! What on earth—? Oh, rose-water! Better than his boluses, I daresay, but not very good, and quite humorously dear. Extortionate rascal! And who are you, my illiterate-looking friend?"

He took a square blue envelope between his finger and thumb, and examined the cramped handwriting on it, running in a slanting line from one corner to the other. It was addressed to "Mr. Algernon Errington." "Some *very* angry creditor, who won't even indulge me with the customary 'Esquire,'" thought Algernon with a contemptuous smile and some genuine

amusement. Then he opened it. It was from Jonathan Maxfield!

CHAPTER XIX.

In about a quarter of an hour after reading that letter, Algernon called to the servants to know if their mistress had come back. He did not ring as usual, but went to the door of the kitchen and spoke to both the women, saying that he was uneasy at Mrs. Errington's absence, and did not like to go to the office without seeing her. He said two or three times, how strange it was that his wife should have wandered out in that way; and plainly showed considerable anxiety about her. Both the women remarked how pale and upset their master looked. "Oh, it's enough to wear out anybody the way she goes on," said Lydia. "Poor young man! A nice way to welcome him home!"

"Ah," returned Polly, the cook, shaking her head, "I'm afraid there's going to be awful trouble with missus, poor thing. *I* believe she's half out of her mind with jealousy. Just think how she's been going on about Miss Maxfield. Why 'tis all over the place. And they say old Max is going to law against her, or something. But I can't but pity her, poor thing."

"Oh! they say worse of her than being out of her mind with jealousy," returned Lydia. "Don't you know what Mrs. Ravell's housemaid told her young man at the grocer's?" Et cetera, et cetera.

The discussion was checked in full career by their master returning to say that he should not go to the office until he had seen Mrs. Errington, and that he was then going to Whit Meadow to look for her. He went out past the kitchen and through the garden at the back of the house.

He looked about him when he got to the garden gate. Nothing to be seen but damp green meadow, leaden sky, and leaden river. Where was Castalia? A thought shot into his mind, swift and keen as an arrow—had she thrown herself into the Whit? And, if she had, what a load of his cares would be drowned with her! He walked a few paces towards the town, then turned and looked in the opposite direction. For as far as he could see, there was not a human being on the meadow-path. His eyes were very good and he used them eagerly, scanning all the space of Whit Meadow within their range of vision. At length he caught sight of something moving among a clump of low bushes—blackberry bushes and dog-roses, a tangle of leafless spikes now, although in the summer they would be fresh and fragrant, and the holiday haunt of little merry children—which grew on a sloping part of the bank between him and the Whit. He walked straight towards it, and as he drew nearer, became satisfied that the moving figure was that of his wife. He recognised a dark tartan shawl which she wore. It was not bright enough to be visible at a long distance; but as he advanced he became sure that he knew it. In a few minutes the husband and wife stood face to face.

"This is a nice reception to give me," said Algernon, in a hard, cold voice, after they had looked at each other for a second, and Castalia had remained silent and still. In truth, she was physically unable to speak to him in that first moment of meeting. Her heart throbbed so that every beat of it seemed like an angry blow threatening her life.

"Why do you wander out alone in this way? Why do you conduct yourself like a mad woman? Though, indeed, perhaps you are not so wrong there; madness might excuse your conduct. Nothing else can."

"I couldn't stay in that house. I should have died there. Everything in every room reminded me of you."

She answered so faintly that he had to strain his ear to hear her, and her colourless lips trembled as the lips tremble of a person trying to keep back tears. But her eyes were quite dry.

Algernon was pale, with the peculiar ghastly pallor of a fresh ruddy complexion. His blue eyes had a glitter in them like ice, not fire; and there was a set, sarcastic, bitter smile on his mouth.

"Look here, Castalia; we had better understand one another at once. I shall begin by telling you what I have resolved upon, and what I have done, and you will then have to obey me *implicitly*. There must be no sort of discussion or hesitation. Come back to the house with me at once."

She shook her head quickly. "No! no! Tell me here—out here by ourselves, where no one can hear us. I cannot bear to go into that house yet."

"Pshaw! What intolerable fooling! Well, here be it. I have no time to waste. I have seen your uncle. Don't interrupt me! He has promised to get us out of this cursed place, and to find a post for me abroad as consul. I had to exercise a good deal of persistence and ability to bring him to that point, but to that point I have brought him. We must keep him to it, and be active. My lady will move heaven and earth—or t'other place and earth, which is more in her line—to thwart us. Now, when it is necessary to keep things here as smooth as possible, to arouse no suspicion that we may be off at a moment's notice, to hold out hopes of everything being settled by Lord Seely's help, what do I find? I find that you have gone to a man who is a creditor of mine, who is not over fond of me to begin with, and have grossly and outrageously insulted him and his daughter! Just as if you had ingeniously cast about for the most effectual means of doing me a mischief. I found this letter on the table. He threatens to ruin me, and he can do it. If my name is posted, my bills protested, and a public hullabaloo made about them and other matters, your uncle's influence

will hardly suffice to get me the berth I want in the face of the opposition newspapers' bellowing on the subject. Your uncle is but small beer in London at best. But that much he might have managed, if you hadn't behaved in this maniacal way."

"And how have *you* behaved? Oh, Ancram, Ancram, I would not have believed—I *could* not——" She burst into tears, and sank down on the damp grass, covering her face with her hands, and shaking with sobs.

"Listen! Castalia! Do you hear me?" said her husband, shaking her lightly by the arm.

She did not answer, but continued to cry convulsively, rocking herself to and fro.

Algernon stood looking down upon her with folded arms. "Upon my soul!" he said, after a minute, and with a contemptuous little nod of the head, which expressed an unbounded sense of the hopeless imbecility of the woman at his feet, and of his own long-suffering tolerance towards her, "Upon my life and soul, Castalia, I have never even heard of anyone so outrageously unreasonable as you are. Your jealousy—we may as well speak plainly—your jealousy has passed the bounds of sanity. But, as I told you, I am not going to argue with you. I am going to give directions for your guidance, since it is quite clear you are unable to guide yourself. In the first place—for God's sake stop that noise!" he cried, a sudden fierce irritation piercing through his self-restraint. "In the first place, you must make a full, free, and humble apology to Rhoda Maxfield!"

Castalia started to her feet and confronted him. "Never!" she said. "I will never do it!"

"I told you I was not going to argue with you. I am giving you your orders. A full, free, and humble—very humble—apology to Rhoda Maxfield is our one chance of softening her father. And if you have any sense or conscience left, you must know that Rhoda richly deserves every apology you can make her."

"You think so, do you?"

"Yes; I think so. She is a thoroughly good and charming girl. The only crime she has ever committed against you is being young and pretty. And if you quarrel with every woman who is so, you will find the battle a rather unequal one." He could not resist the sneer. He detested Castalia at that moment. Her whole nature, her violence, her passionate jealousy, her no less passionate love, her piteous grief, her demands on some sentiment in himself, which he knew to be non-existent; every turn of her body, every tone of her voice, were at that moment intensely repulsive to him.

The poor thing was stung into such pain by his taunt that she scarcely knew what she said or what she did.

"Oh, I know," she cried, "that you care more for her than for me! A pink-and-white face, that's all you value! More than wife, or—or—anything in the world. More than the honour of a gentleman. She's a devil; a sly, sleek little devil! She has got your love away from me. She has made you tell lies, and be cruel to me. But I'll expose her to all the world."

"What, in the name of all that's incomprehensible, has put this craze into your head against Rhoda Maxfield? It's the wildest thing!"

"Oh, Ancram! you can't deceive me any longer. I know—I have seen. She came on the sly to see you at the office. You used to go to her when you told me you had to be busy at the office. I watched you, I followed you all down Whitford High Street one night, and found out that you were cheating me."

"Ha! And you also opened my desk at the office, and took out letters and papers! Do you know what people are called who do such things?" said Algernon, now in a white heat of anger.

She drew back and looked at him. "Yes," she said, "I know."

"Have you no shame, then? No common sense? You attack a young lady—yes, a lady! A far better lady than you are!—of whom you take it into your head to be jealous, merely because she is pretty and admired by everybody. By me amongst the everybodies. Why not? I didn't lose my eyesight when I married you. You talk about my not loving you——! Do you think you go the way to make me do anything but detest the sight of you? You disgrace me in the town. You disgrace me before my clerk in the office. You and your relations persecuted me into marrying you, and now you haven't even the decency to behave like a rational being, but make yourself a laughing-stock, and me a butt for contemptuous pity in having tied myself to such a woman. One would have thought you would try to make some amends for the troubles I have been plunged into by my marriage."

She put her hands up one to each side of her head, and held them there tightly pressed. "Ancram," she said, "*do* you detest the sight of me?"

"You've tried your best to make me."

"Have you no spark of kindness or affection for me in your heart—not one?"

"Come, Castalia, let us have done with this! I thoroughly dislike and object to 'scenes' of any kind. You have a taste for them, unfortunately. What you have to do now is to do as I bid you, and try to make your peace by begging Rhoda's pardon, and so trying to undo a little of the mischief your

insane temper has caused."

"Ancram, say one kind word to me!"

"Good God, Castalia! How can you be so exasperatingly childish?"

"One word! Say you love me a little still! Say you did love me when you married me! Don't let me believe that I have been a miserable dupe all along."

She no longer refused point-blank to obey him. She was bending into her old attitude of submission to his wishes. His ascendancy over her was paramount still. But she had made herself thoroughly obnoxious to him, and must be punished. Algernon's resentments were neither quick nor numerous, but they were lasting. His distaste for certain temperaments was profound. Castalia's intensity of emotion, and her uncontrolled way of showing it, roused a sense of antagonism in him, which came nearer to passion than anything he had ever felt. With the sure instinct of cruelty, he confronted her wild, eager, supplicating face with a hard, cold, sarcastic smile, and a slight shrug. A blow from his hand would have been tender by comparison. Then he pulled out his watch and said, "How long do you intend this performance to last?" in the quietest voice in the world. And all the while he was in a white heat of anger, as I have said.

"Oh, Ancram! Oh, Ancram!" she cried. Then with a sudden change of tone, she said, "Will you promise me one thing? Will you swear never to see Rhoda Maxfield again? If you will do that, I will—I will—try to forgive you."

"To *forgive* me! Then you really *have* lost your senses?"

"No; I wish I had! I would rather be mad than know what I know. But think, Ancram, think well before you refuse me! This one thing is all I ask. Never see or speak to her, or write to her again—not even when I am dead! Swear it. I think if you swore it you would keep to it, wouldn't you? This one poor thing for all I have borne, for all I am willing to bear. I'll take that as a proof that you don't love her best. I'll be content with that. I'll give up everything else in the whole world. Only do this one thing for me, Ancram; I beg it on my knees!"

She did, indeed, fall on her knees as she spoke, and stretched out her clasped hands towards him. For one second their eyes met, then he turned his way and said, as quietly as ever, "I am going to Mr. and Miss Maxfield at once, with the most effectual apology which could be offered to them—namely, that you are a maniac, and in any case not responsible for your actions, nor to be treated like a rational being."

She staggered up to her feet. "Very well," she gasped out, "then I shall not spare you—nor her. I have had a letter from my uncle. He has told me what you accused me of. I went to the office. That man there told me the same. The notes that I paid away to Ravell—you 'wondered'—*you* were 'uneasy!' Why, you gave me them yourself. Oh, Ancram, how *could* you have the heart? I wish I was dead!"

"I wish to God you were!"

She was standing close to the edge of the steep, slippery bank; and when he said these words she staggered and, with a little heart-broken moan, put out her hand to clutch at him, groping like a blind person. He shook off her grasp with a sudden rough movement, and the next instant she was deep in the dark ice-cold water.

CHAPTER XX.

It was past mid-day when a loud peal at the bell of Ivy Lodge startled the women in the kitchen. Polly ran to the front door to open it. There stood her master, who pushed quickly into the house past her. "Is your mistress come back?" he asked almost breathlessly.

"No, sir! Oh, mercy me, what's the matter? What has happened?" she cried, for his face showed undisguised terror and agitation. He sat down in the dining-room and asked for a glass of wine. Having drunk it at a gulp, he said, "I cannot understand it. I have been nearly to Whitford along the meadow-path; I didn't try the other way, but then she would not have wandered towards Duckwell, surely! Then I crossed the fields and came back by the road, looking everywhere, and asking every one I met. Nothing to be seen of her. Your mistress's manner has been so strange of late. You must have noticed it. I—I—am afraid—I cannot help being afraid that some terrible thing has happened to her. I have had a dreadful weight and presentiment on my mind all the morning. Where can she be?"

"Oh no, no, sir. Never fear! She'll be all safe somewheres or other. She'll just have gone wandering on into the town. She *have* been strange in her ways, poor thing! and we couldn't but see it, sir. But she can't have come to no harm. There's nothing to hurt her here-about."

Thus honest Polly, consolingly. But she was infected, too, by the terror in her master's white face.

"You don't know," said he tremulously, "what reason I have for uneasiness." He drew out from his pocket-book a torn scrap of paper with some writing on it. "I found this on the floor by her desk this morning. This is what alarmed me so before I went out, but I wouldn't say anything about it

then."

Polly stared at the paper with eager curiosity, but the sharp, slanting writing puzzled her eyes, never quite at their ease with the alphabet in any shape. "Is it missus's writing?" she asked.

"Yes; see, she talks of being so wretched. Why, God knows! Her mind has been quite unhinged. That is the only explanation. And, you see, she says, 'It will not be long before this misery is at an end. I cannot live on as I am living. *I will not.*'"

"Lord, ha' mercy upon us!" ejaculated the woman, on whom the full force of her master's anxiety and alarm suddenly broke. Her round ruddy cheeks grew almost as white as his, and Lydia, who had been peeping and listening at the door, burst out crying, and began uttering a series of incoherent phrases.

"Hold your noise!" said Polly roughly. "There's troubles enough without you. Now look ye here, sir. I'll put on my bonnet and go right down into Whitford. You take a look along Whit Meadow up Duckwell way. I bet ten pounds she's there somewhere's about. She has taken to going about through the fields, hasn't she, Lydia? Oh, hold your noise, and try and do something to help, you whimpering fool!"

Polly's violent excitement and trepidation took a practical form, whilst the other woman was utterly helpless. She was bidden to stay at home and "receive missus," and tell her that master was come back, and beg her "to bide still in the house, until he should return."

"But I'm afraid she'll never come back!" sobbed Lydia. "I'm so frightened to stop here by myself."

"Ugh, you great silly! Haven't you got no feeling for the poor husband? He looks scared well-nigh to death, poor lad. And as for you, it ain't much *you* care what's become of missus. You never had a good word for her. You're only crying because you're a coward."

Meanwhile Algernon sat in the little dining-room, with a strange sensation, as if every muscle in his body had been turned into lead. He *must* get up, and go out as the woman had said. He *must!* But there he sat with that sensation of marvellous *weight* holding him down in his chair. The house was absolutely still. Lydia, unable to remain alone in the kitchen, had gone to stand at the front door and stare up and down the road. Thus she heard nothing of footsteps approaching the house at the back, coming hurriedly through the garden, and pausing at the threshold of the door, which was open.

Presently, after some muttered conversation, in which two or three voices took part, a man entered the house and came along the passage, looking, as he went, into the kitchen and finding no one. Just as he reached the door of the dining-room, Algernon came out and confronted him.

"There's been an accident, sir, I'm sorry to say," said the man. "The alarm was given up our way about an hour and a half ago. Somebody's fallen into the Whit. I'm very sorry, sir, but I'm afraid you must prepare for bad news."

Whilst he was still speaking, the house had filled with an ever-gathering crowd. People stood in the passage, peeping over each other's shoulders, and pushing to get a glimpse of Algernon. There were even faces pressed to the windows outside, and the garden was blocked up. Polly had come hurrying back from the town, and now elbowed her way through the crowd to her master. She soon cleared the passage of the throng of idlers who blocked it up, and shut them outside the door by main force. They still swarmed about the house and garden, both on the side of the road and that of Whit Meadow. And their numbers increased every minute. Polly pulled the man who had been spokesman into the dining-room, and bade him say what he had to say without further preamble. "It's no use 'preparing' him," she said, pointing to Algernon, who had sunk into a chair, and was holding his forehead with his hands; "you'll only make it worse. I'm afraid you can't tell him anything dreadfuller than he's got into his head already. Speak out!"

Thus requested, the man, a carpenter of Pudcombe village, told his tale. Some men, working in the fields about a mile above Whitford—half a mile, perhaps, from Ivy Lodge, had heard cries for help from the meadows near the river. He, the carpenter, happened to be passing along a field path from a farmhouse where he had been at work, and ran with the labourers down to the water's edge. There they saw David Powell, the Methodist preacher, wildly shouting for help, and with clothes dripping wet. He had waded waist-deep into the Whit to try to save some one who was drowning there, but in vain. He could not swim, and the current had carried the drowning person out of his reach. "You know," said the carpenter, "there are some ugly swirls and currents in the Whit, for all it looks so sluggish." A boat had been got out and manned, and had made all speed in the direction Powell pointed out. He insisted on accompanying them in his wet clothes. They searched the river for some time in vain. They had got as far as Duckwell Reach when they caught sight of a dark object close in shore. It was the form of a woman. Her clothes had caught in the broken stump of an old willow that grew half in the water; and she was thus held there, swinging to and fro with the current. She was taken out and carried to Duckwell Farm, where every effort had been made to restore her to consciousness. Powell understood the best methods to employ. The Seth Maxfields had done everything in their power, but it was no use. She had never moved, nor breathed, nor quivered an eyelash.

That was the substance of the carpenter's story.

"Is she dead?" asked Algernon with his face hidden. They were the first words he had spoken. And when the man answered with a mournful but positive "Yes; quite, quite dead," he said not a

syllable further, but turned away from them, and buried his head in the cushions of the chair.

"He hasn't even asked who the woman was!" whispered the carpenter to Polly. The tears were streaming down the woman's cheeks. Castalia had not made herself beloved in her own house, but Polly had felt the sort of regard for her which grows by acts of kindness, and forbearance and compassion, performed. She shook her head, and answered in an equally low tone, "No need for him to ask, poor young fellow. We've all been fearing something dreadful about missus all morning. And he had his reasons for being afraid as she had gone and done something desperate."

"What—you don't mean that she made away with herself?" said the carpenter, raising his hands.

"Oh, that's more than you and I know. Best say nothing. How can we judge? Poor soul! Well, I always did feel sorry for her, and that I'll say. Though, mind you, I'm sorry for him too. But there's some folks as can't stroke the dog without kicking the cat."

The news spread rapidly through Whitford, and caused the utmost excitement there. Mrs. Algernon Errington had been found drowned in the Whit. How—whether by accident or design—no one knew. But that did not prevent people from hazarding a thousand conjectures. She had wandered out alone, had ventured too near the edge of the slippery bank, and had lost her footing. She had been robbed and thrown into the river. She had committed suicide from ungovernable jealousy. She had committed suicide in a fit of insanity. She had become a hypochondriac. She had gone raving mad. She had committed various frauds at the post-office, and had killed herself in terror at the prospect of their coming to light. This latter hypothesis found much credence. So many circumstances—trifling, perhaps, in themselves, but important when massed together—seemed to corroborate it. And then, if that did not seem an adequate motive for the desperate deed, Castalia's notorious and passionate jealousy was thrown in as a make-weight. There would be a coroner's inquest, of course. And the chief witness at it would probably be David Powell. It appeared he was the last person who had seen the unfortunate woman alive.

Mrs. Thimbleby was in terrible affliction. Mr. Powell was very ill. He had plunged into the ice-cold river, and had then remained for hours in his wet clothes. He had not been able to walk back from Duckwell Farm, and Farmer Maxfield had brought him home himself in his spring-cart, and had bidden widow Thimbleby look after him a little, for he (Maxfield) thought the preacher in a very bad way. He was seized with violent fits of shivering, and the doctor whom Mrs. Thimbleby sent for to see him, on her own responsibility, told them to get him into bed at once, to keep him warm, and to administer certain remedies which he ordered. But no word would Powell speak about his ailments to the doctor, or to anyone else. He waved off all questions with a determined though gentle resolution. He allowed himself to be helped into bed, being absolutely unable to stand or walk without assistance. And he did not refuse the warm clothing which the widow heaped upon him. He lay still and passive, but he would say no word of his symptoms and sensations to the doctor. "The man can in no wise help me," he said to Mrs. Thimbleby. "All the wisdom of this world is foolishness to one whom the Lord has laid his hands on. I am bowed as a reed; yea, I am broken."

His voice was hoarse and feeble, and his eyes blazed with a feverish light. The widow found it vain to importune him to swallow the medicines that had been sent. In her heart she had some misgivings that it might be wrong to interfere in the dealings of Providence with so holy a man, by administering drugs to him. But the misgivings never reached a point of conviction that might have comforted her.

"I'll leave you quiet awhile, Mr. Powell," she said. "Maybe you'll sleep, and that would do you more good than anything. Sleep is God's own cure for a many troubles, isn't it?"

He looked at her with a wild unrecognising stare. "When I say my bed shall comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint, then thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions," he murmured.

The good woman softly went away, wiping the tears from her eyes. "One thing is a mercy," said the poor soul to herself, "and that is, that Mr. Diamond is so kind and thoughtful. He gives no trouble, and is a help on the contrary. And I'm sure I don't know how we should have managed without his arm to help Mr. Powell upstairs. And another thing is a mercy—I hope it isn't wrong to feel it so!—that Mrs. Errington is out of the house. I do not know how I should have been strengthened to keep up and attend upon her, and she in such a way, poor thing! The Lord has had pity on us for Mr. Powell's sake."

Minnie Bodkin had driven to Mrs. Thimbleby's house early in the afternoon, and taken Mrs. Errington away with her. Mrs. Errington had rushed to Ivy Lodge under the first shock of the terrible news which Mr. Smith, the surgeon, communicated to her. She had seen her son for a few minutes. Her intention had been to remain with him, but this he would not allow. He had insisted on his mother's returning to her own lodgings after a very brief interview with him.

"No wonder he can't bear to have her about, though she *is* his mother. Tiresome old thing!" exclaimed Lydia, peevishly.

But if Algernon got rid of his mother as quickly as possible, he refused to admit any one else at all, and remained shut up in the dining-room, whither he had had a sofa carried, meaning to sleep there. He had been obliged to receive Seth Maxfield, who came to ask when and how he would

wish his wife's body conveyed from Duckwell Farm to Whitford. "Can't she stay there?" he had asked in a dazed sort of manner. Then added quickly, turning away his head, "I'll leave it all to you. You've been very good. You've done everything for the best, I am sure." And he put out his hand to the farmer with his face still turned away. And later on he had had to see some officials about the inquest. But after that was over, he locked his door, and refused to open it except to Polly, when she brought him food. He ate almost ravenously, drank a great deal of wine, and then lay down and dozed away the hours until dawn next day.

CHAPTER XXI.

The inquest was to be held at the "Blue Bell" inn. And after the inquest, the dust of the Honourable Castalia Errington was to be laid beneath the turf of the humble village churchyard, amidst less noble dust, with the daisies growing impartially above all, and spreading their pink-edged petals over the just and the unjust alike.

It was now currently reported that the thefts at the post-office had been Castalia's doing. Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Dockett had been "sure of it all along"—so they said, and so they really imagined now. The story of the mysterious notes paid to Ravell, the draper, was in every mouth. Roger Heath went about saying that Mr. Errington ought to make *his* loss good out of his own pocket, if he had any feelings of honour. But all the people who had not lost any money in the post-office were disgusted at Roger Heath's hardness and avarice, and asked indignantly if that was the moment to speak of such things? For the tragedy of Castalia's death had produced a strong effect in Whitford. Perhaps there was not one human being in the town who grieved that she was gone; but many were oppressed by the manner of her going. People had an uneasy feeling in remembering how much they had disliked her; almost as if their dislike made them guilty of her death in some vague, far-off, inexplicable way. They told themselves and each other that though "her manners had been repellent, poor thing," yet for their part they had always felt sorry for her, and had long perceived that her mind was astray, and that she was falling into a low melancholy state, that was likely to lead to some terrible catastrophe. By this time scarcely any one in Whitford entertained a doubt as to Castalia's having destroyed herself. And the social verdict, "Temporary insanity," was pronounced in assured anticipation that the legal verdict would be to that effect also.

There were two men who did not mystify themselves by conjuring up any factitious tenderness about Castalia's memory, and who gave way to no superstitious uneasiness of conscience as to their dislike of her when she was alive. One of these men was Jonathan Maxfield; the other was the dead woman's husband.

Maxfield had no retrospective softness on the subject. He, indeed, being accustomed to take certain passages of the Old Testament very seriously and literally, and having fed his mind almost exclusively upon those passages, was of opinion that Castalia's tragic fate had been brought about by a direct interposition of Providence as a judgment on her for her bad behaviour to himself and his daughter. And if this opinion on Maxfield's part should appear incredibly monstrous, let it be remembered that in his own mind "the godly" were typified by the Maxfield family, and "the ungodly" by the enemies of that family.

As to Algernon—harassed, anxious, and doubtful of the future as he might be, he was glad that his wife was dead, and he knew that he was glad. Her death made a way out—apparently the only possible way out—of a labyrinth of troubles, and relieved Algernon from the apprehension of an exposure which it made him sick to think of. He had not meant to kill her, he said to himself. He had certainly laid no deliberate plan to do so. Had he, in truth, been the cause of her death? In the state of mind she was in, would she not have thrown herself into the river, or otherwise put an end to herself, without that touch from him which he had given, he knew not how?

It all seemed unreal to him when he thought of it—the leaden water, the grey sky and meadows, and the slippery bank with its tufts of blackberry bushes. He went over and over again in his mind the words that had passed between himself and Castalia; her violence, and her wild jealousy and suspicions, and her allusion to her uncle's letter, and to what Gibbs had told her, and then her fierce threat that she would not spare him! She had become utterly unmanageable—mad, in fact. She had resolved to die. She had a suicidal mania. That scrap of writing would suffice to prove it. To be sure he had found it and put it in his pocket-book weeks ago, although he told the servant that he had picked it up off the floor that morning of his return from London. But that only indicated that the idea had long been rooted in her mind. And besides, the paper bore no date. There was nothing to show how long it had been written.

No, it was not he who had killed Castalia. She had gone down willingly to death. She had uttered no sound, no cry. He should have heard a cry all across the silent meadows. He had not looked back. He had fled away from the river at his topmost speed after he saw her slip, and stagger, and fall heavily into the black water under the shadow of the bank. Had she risen again to the surface? It was said that drowning persons always rose three times. But she had made no sound. Surely she would have cried out if she had longed for life. Ugh! It was horrible to imagine her white face and staring eyes rising above the strong dragging current and looking for help. That was all very ghastly, very hideous. He would not think of it. It was over. Castalia was dead. And although he would have given much that she should have died in any other way, yet he was glad

that she was dead, and he knew that he was glad.

He made no pretence to himself of a factitious tenderness about her. She had been thoroughly antagonistic and distasteful to him of late. She had been the bitter drop flavouring every action, every hope, every minute of his life. He had been the victim of a hard fate, and of the false promises (implied, if not expressed) of Lord Seely. Those paltry sums—those notes that he had taken—he had been driven into committing that action altogether by stress of circumstances. It was strange to himself to think of the light that action would appear in to other people. To his own mind, knowing how it had come to pass in an instant, by the tug of a sudden impulse, it seemed so clear that there was no real ground for blaming him in the matter! He had felt the difficulty of getting money with a severity which the rest of the world probably could not conceive. He was absolutely indifferent to the question of abstract right or wrong, justice or injustice, in the case. But the concrete hardship to himself of being poor he had keenly felt to be undeserved.

And now, if it were not for one thing, he should begin to breathe more freely. The one thing that weighed on him with a gloomy, though formless foreboding, was the inquest. He had been obliged to go to Duckwell Farm. He had been asked to look at Castalia's dead body. He had not dared to refuse to do so; but he had requested to be shown into the room where she lay, alone and without witnesses. The room was that sunny parlour where Rhoda Maxfield had sat on many a summer evening, and where the neighbours had discussed the news of his own marriage less than a year ago. But Algernon's imagination did not wander very far from the present. He walked to the window and looked out through the black trellis-work of leafless vine branches. Then he stared at the prints on the walls, and the gay china vases filled with winter nosegays of trembling grass and chrysanthemums. And then his eyes, which had wandered in every other direction, were compelled to turn towards the broad, old-fashioned sofa covered with fair white linen, under which the outlines of a human shape revealed themselves.

Was that stiff, white, silent thing Castalia? He could not realise it. He would scarcely have started if the door had opened and his wife had walked into the room in her ordinary dress, and with her ordinary gait. He had seen her last full of passionate excitement. That stiff, white, silent thing could not be she. He would not lift the coverlet, though, nor look on that which lay beneath. But he stood and gazed at it until the heap beneath the linen sheet seemed to stir and change its outlines. Then he turned away shuddering to the window, and looked at his watch to see whether he might venture to leave the room yet. Would the people think he had been there too short a time? He came out at length, looking pale and depressed enough to excite a good deal of sympathy in the breast of Mrs. Seth Maxfield. And with his usual quick susceptibility to the impression he produced on others, he was fully aware of this, and gratified by it, despite the chill vision of the still white heap under the coverlet which persistently haunted his memory. He saw looks of pity; he heard whispered exclamations of admiration, and they did more than gratify, they reassured him. It had entered into nobody's mind to conceive that he had been the cause of his wife's death. Into whose head, indeed, should it enter? or how? He remembered the last lightning-quick glance he had cast over the wide meadows, and how it had shown them to him empty and bare of any living thing for as far as his eye could reach. No; he was safe from suspicion. Of course he was safe from suspicion! And yet—he would have given a year of his life to have the inquest over, and the dead woman safely put away beneath the daisies in Duckwell churchyard.

Meanwhile the mortal frame that had so throbbed and suffered for his sake, lay there lonely and neglected. Strangers' hands had composed it decently; a stranger's roof sheltered it. It was to lie in a stranger's grave. Only one woman came and stood beside the couch in the sunny parlour, and looked on the dead shape with eyes full of compassionate tears; and, before going away, laid some sprays of fern and delicate hothouse blossoms on the quiet breast, and fastened there a curl of light hair. The hair had been cut jestingly from Algernon Errington's head when he was a school-boy, and then put away and forgotten for years. It now lay above his dead wife's heart. "She was so fond of him, poor soul!" said the compassionate woman. It was Minnie Bodkin.

CHAPTER XXII.

The big room at the "Blue Bell" was full. It was a room associated in the minds of most of the people present with occasions of festivity or entertainment. The Archery Club balls were held in it. It was used for the exhibitions of any travelling conjurer, lecturer, or musician, whose evil fate brought him to Whitford. Once a strolling company of players had performed there before some fifteen persons and several dozen cane-bottomed chairs. There were the tarnished candelabra stuck in the walls, the little gallery up aloft where the fiddlers sat on ball nights, and the big looking-glass at one end of the room, muffled with yellow muslin, and surmounted by a dusty garland of paper flowers. Now the wintry daylight coming through the uncurtained windows, made all these things look chill, ghastly, and forlorn. People who had thought the "Blue Bell" Assembly Room a cheerful place enough under the bright illumination of wax candles, now shivered, and whispered to each other how dreary it was.

The coroner's jury had been out to Duckwell Farm to view the body, and to look at the exact spot on the bank where it had been landed from the boat, and to stare at the willow stump to which it

had been found fastened by the clothes. And they had returned to the "Blue Bell" inn to complete the inquiry into the causes of the death of Castalia Errington. A great many witnesses had already been examined. Their testimony went to show that the deceased lady's behaviour of late had been very strange, capricious, and unreasonable. Almost every one of the witnesses, including the servants at Ivy Lodge, confessed that they had heard rumours of young Mrs. Errington being "not right in her mind." They had observed an increasing depression of spirits in her of late. Obadiah Gibbs's evidence was the strongest of all, and his revelations created a great sensation. He described his last interview with Castalia at the post-office, and left the impression on all his hearers which was honestly his own; namely, that on Castalia, and on her alone, rested the onus of the irregularities and robberies of money-letters at Whitford. He did his best to spare her memory. He sincerely thought her irresponsible for her actions. But the facts, as he saw and represented them, admitted of but one conclusion being come to.

Algernon Errington's appearance in the room elicited a low murmur of sympathy from the spectators. His manner of giving his evidence was perfect, and nothing could have been better in keeping with the circumstances of his painful position, than the subdued, yet quiet tones of his voice, and the white, strained look of his face, which revealed rather the effect of a great shock to the nerves than a deep wound to the heart. Of course he could not be expected to grieve as a husband would grieve who had lost a dearly-loved and loving wife; but their having been on somewhat bad terms, and Castalia's notorious jealousy and bad temper, made the manner of her death all the more terrible. Poor young man! He was dreadfully cut up, one could see that. But he made no pretences, put on no affectations of woe. He was so simple and quiet! In a word, he was credited with feeling precisely what he ought to have felt.

His statement added scarcely any new fact to those already known. He had not seen his wife alive since he parted from her when he started for London to visit Lord Seely, who was ill. He corroborated his servants' testimony to the facts that Castalia had wandered out on to Whit Meadow about nine o'clock in the morning; that he had been made uneasy by her strange absence, and that he had gone himself to seek her, but without success. In reply to some questions by a jurymen, as to whether he had gone to London solely because of Lord Seely's illness, he answered, with a look of quiet sadness, that that had not been his sole reason. There were private matters to be spoken of between himself and his wife's uncle—matters which admitted of no delay. Could he not have written them? No; he did not feel at liberty to write them. They concerned his wife. He had mentioned to Lord Seely his fears that her mind was giving way, as Lord Seely would be able to affirm. A letter found in the pocket of the deceased woman's gown was produced and read. It had become partly illegible from immersion in the water, but the greater portion of it could be made out. It was from Lord Seely, and referred to a painful conversation he had had with his niece's husband about herself. It was a kind letter, but written evidently in much agitation and pain of mind. The writer exhorted and even implored his niece to confide fully in him, for her own sake, as well as that of her family; and promised that he would help and support her under all circumstances, if she would but tell him the truth unreservedly.

Nothing could have been better for Algernon's case than that letter. Instead of being the cause of his disgrace and exposure, it was obviously the means of confirming every one of his statements, implied as well as expressed. It showed clearly enough—first, that Algernon had given Lord Seely to understand that his wife laboured under grave suspicions of having stolen money-letters from the Whitford Post-office; secondly, that he (Algernon) believed those suspicions to be well founded; thirdly, that symptoms of mental aberration, which had recently manifested themselves in Castalia, were at once the explanation of, and the excuse for, her conduct. This letter, which, if Castalia were alive to speak for herself, would have been like a brand on her husband's forehead for life, was now a most valuable testimony in his favour.

Algernon's hard and unrelenting mood towards his dead wife grew still harder and more unrelenting as he listened to this letter, and remembered that Castalia had threatened him with exposure, and had resolved not to spare him. Nothing in the world but her death could have saved him from ruin. Even supposing that she could have been cajoled into promising to comply with his directions, she would not have been able to do so. She was so stupidly literal in her statements. A direct lie would have embarrassed her. And then, at the first jealous fit which might have seized her, he would have been at her mercy. Lord Seely's letter showed a strong feeling of irritation—almost of hostility—against Algernon. It might not be recognisable by the audience at the inquest, but Algernon recognised it completely, and felt a distinct sense of triumph in the impotence of Lord Seely to harm him, or to wriggle away from under his heel. Algernon was master of the position. He appeared before the world in the light of a victim to his alliance with the Seelys. There could be no further talk on their part of condescension, or honour conferred. He and his mother had lived their lives as persons of gentle blood and unblemished reputation until the Honourable Castalia Kilfinane brought disgrace and misery into their home. In making these reflections Algernon was not, of course, considering the inward truth of facts, but their outward semblances. It made no difference to his indignation against the "pompous little ass" who had treated him with hauteur, nor to his satisfaction in humbling the "pompous little ass," that if all the secret circumstances hidden and silenced for ever under the cold white shroud that covered his dead wife could be revealed before the eyes of all men, Lord Seely would have the right to detest and despise him. Lord Seely had not treated him as he ought. He was firmly persuaded of that. And as he measured Lord Seely's duty towards him accurately by the extent of all he desired and expected of Lord Seely, it will be seen how far short the latter had fallen of Algernon's standard.

The Seth Maxfields gave their testimony as to how the deceased body had been carried into their house; how they had tried all means to revive her; and how every effort had been in vain, and she had never moved nor breathed again. The two men who had rescued the body from the water, and the carpenter who had brought the news to Ivy Lodge, repeated their story, and corroborated all that the Maxfields had said. There only remained to be heard the important testimony of David Powell. He had been so ill that it was feared at one time that the inquest must be adjourned until he should be able to give his evidence. But he declared that he would come and speak before the jury; that he should be strengthened to do so when the moment arrived; and had opposed a fixed silence to all the representations and remonstrances of the doctor. On the morning of the inquest he arose and dressed himself before Mrs. Thimbleby was up, albeit she was no sluggard in the morning. He had gone out, while it was still dark, into the raw foggy atmosphere of Whit Meadow, and had wandered there for a long time. On returning to the widow Thimbleby's house, he had seated himself opposite to the blazing fire in the kitchen, staring at it, and muttering to himself like a man in a feverish dream.

Nevertheless, when the due time arrived, he entered the room at the "Blue Bell" to give his evidence with a quiet steady gait. His appearance there produced a profound impression.

A stranger contrast than he presented to the Whitford burghers by whom he was surrounded could scarcely be imagined. Not only were his bodily shape and colouring different from theirs, but the expression of his face was almost unearthly. There was some subtle contradiction between the expression of David Powell's sorrow-laden eyes and brow, and that of the mouth, with its tightly-closed lips drawn back at the corners with what on ordinary faces would have been a smile. But on his face, being coupled with a singular pinched look of the nostrils and a strained tightness of the upper lip, it became something which troubled the beholder with a sense of inexplicable pain—almost terror.

As he advanced along the room, there was a hush of attentive expectation, during which Dr. Evans, the coroner, curiously examined the Methodist preacher with grave professional eyes. After a few preliminary questions, to which Powell gave brief, clear answers, he said, "I have been brought hither to testify in this matter. I am an instrument in the hands of the great and terrible God. He works not as men work. In His hand all tools are alike."

"What can you tell us of the death of this unfortunate lady, Mr. Powell?" asked the coroner, quietly. "You were the first to see her struggling in the water, were you not? And you made a gallant effort to save her."

"She struggled but little. She went to her death as a lamb to the slaughter; nay, as a victim who desires to die."

Powell spoke in a low but distinct voice; broken and harsh, indeed, compared with what it once was, but still with a soft tremulous note in it now and then, that seemed to stir deep fibres of feeling in the hearts of those who heard him. In such a tone it was that he uttered the words, "as a victim who desires to die." And tears sprang into the eyes of many from sheer emotional sympathy with the sound of his voice.

"You are of opinion, then, Mr. Powell," said the coroner, "that the deceased wilfully put an end to her own life."

"No."

"You think that she was not in a state of mind to be responsible for her actions?"

"She was murdered," said Powell, in a distinct, grating tone, which was audible in every corner of the crowded room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

There was a momentary rustling, as if every person present had moved slightly, and then a deep hush. The silence seemed to last a long time; but, in fact, only a second or two elapsed before Powell, drawing up his tall, lean figure to its utmost height, and pointing with outstretched hand full at Algernon, exclaimed with a kind of cry, "There is her murderer! Woe to the cruel, woe to the unrighteous man! Ye have ploughed wickedness; ye have reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies!"

There arose a murmur, a movement, a confused sound of ejaculations. Algernon started up, and some one laid a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back into his seat. "Ask what he means," said Algernon; but his voice was so weak and faint that the words were not heard beyond the few persons who immediately surrounded him. He could scarcely grow paler than he had been from the beginning of the inquest, but a ghastly ashen-grey hue showed itself round his mouth. His lips were quite colourless. Terror, agonising terror, was in his heart. What did this preacher know? What had he seen? Had Castalia spoken and accused him before her death?

Anguish for anguish; perhaps he suffered at that moment as much as his victim had suffered when she felt the hand she loved send her to her death.

The movement and the murmur in the crowd were over in an instant. The coroner sternly commanded order. There was silence again, and the very air seemed charged with a horrible apprehension, which weighed upon every one as a coming thunderstorm oppresses the cowering birds.

"You must speak clearly and plainly, Mr. Powell," said the coroner in a severe tone. "State what grounds you have for this very extraordinary accusation. The evidence laid before us to-day goes to show that Mr. Errington did not see his wife since parting from her on the Monday night to go to London, until he was called on to identify her dead body at Duckwell Farm."

"He spoke with her in the meadow by the river's brink. She appealed to him; she implored him; she knelt to him. I saw her gestures. Then he hurled her down the steep bank into the water and fled away, leaving her to perish!"

A most profound sensation was caused by these words throughout the whole assembly. The jury looked at each other like men suddenly aroused from sleep. They seemed not only startled but scared. Indeed, a singular expression of disquietude appeared on every face—almost as if each individual in the crowd had felt *himself* accused. Before any further questions could be put to Powell, there was a stir and a commotion at the lower end of the room and a murmur of voices. Algernon Errington had swooned dead away. He must have fallen to the ground had he not been caught in the arms of his next neighbour, who happened to be Mr. Ravell, the draper. Some one in the crowd handed a smelling-bottle to be held under his nose, and they cleared a little space around him to give him air, by the directions of Mr. Smith, the surgeon, who was at hand. It was proposed to carry him away out of the heat and the throng; but in less than a couple of minutes he revived, and immediately on recovering consciousness he desired to remain where he was. The terror of listening to what Powell said was not so appalling to his imagination as the terror of fancying what he might be saying when he (Algernon) should not be there to hear it.

Order being restored, the preacher's examination was continued. On being asked where he had been when the circumstances alleged to have taken place happened, he replied that he had been at some distance up the river, in the midst of a thick coppice which grew low down on the bank there. He had been near enough to see, although not to hear, the interview between young Errington and his wife. And to the questions what had brought him to that remote spot at such an hour, and why he did not make his presence known at once on seeing the deceased lady fall into the water, he answered, waving his hands to and fro, "I was prostrate on the earth—not praying, I may not pray, but suffering under the wrath of the powers of the air. The voices were very terrible on that day. They had aroused me from my bed. They had hunted me forth in the early morning. I had wandered for a long time—for hours, after your reckoning, but for years according to the time of the spirits."

"Mr. Powell," said Dr. Evans, sternly, "this will not do. You must speak less wildly. Remember what a tremendous responsibility rests on you after making such an allegation as you have made! Answer the questions put to you clearly and seriously."

But it was in vain that David Powell was catechised and cross-examined in the endeavour to draw from him any more definite account of the events of that last morning of Castalia's life. He reiterated, indeed, his statement that Algernon had wilfully and forcibly thrust his wife down the bank into the river, and had then fled away at his utmost speed. And he added that he (Powell) had not thought of pursuing or calling to the murderer, being absorbed in his attempts to rescue the drowning woman. He persisted, too, in declaring that Castalia had been willing, nay, wishful, to die. She had not struggled. She had not cried out. She had not tried to reach his outstretched hand. She had closed her eyes, and given herself up to the power of the death-cold waters. So far he was coherent and consistent; but when he endeavoured to describe how or why he had found himself on that spot at that hour, he wandered off into the wildest statements, and grew ever more and more excited. His face flushed. His eyes blazed. His voice rose almost to a scream. He broke into a torrent of words, standing up in face of the crowd and emphasising his discourse with strange violent gestures. "I will declare the truth," he exclaimed. "I will cry aloud, and spare not. Now, therefore, be content; look upon me, for it is evident unto you if I lie!" Then with a sudden change of tone, sinking his voice to a hoarse, hollow monotone, and gazing straight before him with wide, horror-stricken eyes, he added, "Let me speak, let me confess the truth, before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death. A land of darkness as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death without any order, and where the light is as darkness."

A shudder ran through the audience. The preacher seemed to hold them in a spell. No voice was raised to interrupt him. Many persons turned pale as they listened. But on one face in the crowd the colour faintly dawned again. In one breast the preacher's voice giving utterance to the awful and glowing imagery of the Hebrew of old time, awoke something like a sensation of relief and comfort. Algernon Errington felt the life-blood pulsing warmly again in his veins. This Methodist man was mad—clearly mad! What was his testimony worth?

Powell went on, speaking still more brokenly and incoherently. "I am a castaway," he said. "I declare it before you all. Some of you have listened to my ministrations in other days. I spoke then of assurance—of Christian perfection. Those words were vain. There are but the elect and the reprobate, and unto the number of those latter am I doomed. I have long known it and struggled against the knowledge, but I declare it to ye now as a testimony. How shall a man be just with God? This is one thing, therefore I said it. He destroyeth the perfect and the wicked."

The coroner recovered his presence of mind. In truth he had been so absorbed in studying David Powell with the professional interest of a doctor and a psychologist, that he had suffered him to ramble on thus far unchecked. But now he broke in upon him abruptly. "We cannot listen to this sort of thing, Mr. Powell," he said. "All this has no bearing on the present inquiry." Then he said a few words as to the desirability of an adjournment. Mr. Errington might wish to call some other witnesses. Powell had acknowledged that he had been too far distant to hear a word of the conversation he alleged to have taken place between the husband and wife. It was possible, therefore, that he had been too distant to see the two persons with sufficient distinctness to swear to their identity. Some more particular testimony might be obtained as to the precise hour at which the deceased lady had been last seen alive, and as to what her husband had been doing at that time. Upon this, Algernon Errington arose in his place and said in a clear, though slightly tremulous voice, "For myself, I desire no adjournment. But I should like to put a few questions to this witness."

There was a sudden hush of profound attention. David Powell still stood up in face of the assembly. He was rocking himself to and fro in a singular, restless way, and muttering under his breath very rapidly. It was observable, too, that his eyes seemed continually attracted to one point in the room just behind Algernon Errington. Every now and then he passed his hands over his eyes, as if to obliterate, or shut out, some painful sight, but he did not turn his head away; and the next instant after making that gesture, he would stare at the same point again, with an expression of intense horror. Algernon waited for an instant before speaking. Then he said in such a tone as one uses to attract the attention of a very young child, "Mr. Powell, will you try to listen to me?"

The preacher immediately looked full at him, but without replying. Algernon did not meet his eye, but turned his face aside towards the coroner and the jury. He looked at them with an appealing glance, and a slight movement of his head in the direction of Powell. Then he resumed:

"The accusation you have brought against me is so overwhelming, so amazing, that it is not very wonderful if I feel almost stunned and dizzy. How such a notion ever entered your brain Heaven only knows! I deny it completely, unequivocally, solemnly. To me it seems that such a denial must be unnecessary. The thing is so monstrous! But will you try to answer one or two questions with some calmness? How long had you been in the copse before you saw my wife walking by the river-side?"

Powell shook his head restlessly, and passed his hand over his forehead with the action of brushing something off. "I was called out before the dawn," he said. "The voices bade me go forth. They sounded like brazen bells in the silence, beating and quivering here," and he pressed his fingers on his temples.

"You hear voices which are unheard by other people, then?"

"Often. Every day. Every hour."

"Tell me—do you not sometimes see forms that other persons cannot see?"

Powell started, trembled violently, and looked at Algernon with an expression of bewildered terror. But it was at the same time manifest that some gleam of reason was struggling against the delusions in his mind. He felt and perceived dimly, as one perceives external circumstances through sleep, that a trap was being laid for him. The pathetic questioning look in his eyes, as he vainly tried to recover the government of his mind, was intensely painful. For a second or two, he remained silent with parted lips and clenched hands, like a man making a violent and supreme effort. It seemed as if in another instant he might succeed in gaining sufficient mastery over himself to reply collectedly. But Algernon did not give time for such a chance to happen. He repeated his question more eagerly and loudly, looking at the preacher almost threateningly as he spoke.

"Tell me, Mr. Powell, and remember what a responsibility you have assumed before God and man in making this accusation—tell me truly whether you do not see visions—figures of men and women, that other people cannot see? Don't forms appear before your eyes and vanish again as suddenly? Have you not told your landlady, Mrs. Thimbleby, as much on many occasions? How can you dare to assert with confidence, that from the distance you say you were at, you could distinguish my face and that of my wife? All your description of her violent gestures, and kneeling on the ground, and clasping her hands—does not that seem more like the delusions of fancy than the information of your sober senses?"

Algernon spoke with indignant heat and rapidity—a calculated heat, a purposed rapidity meant to have a confusing effect on the preacher, and which had that effect; but which also excited a sympathetic indignation in many of the auditors. Powell looked wildly around him, and clasped his hands above his head.

"You must put one question at a time, Mr. Errington," said Dr. Evans.

"Then I put this question: David Powell, do you, or do you not, see visions and faces and figures that the rest of the world is as unconscious of as of the voices that called you out on to Whit Meadow that morning that my poor wife was drowned?"

Powell, with his eyes still fixed on the same point that he had been gazing on so long, suddenly cried out with a loud voice, "As God liveth, who hath taken away my judgment, and the Almighty,

who hath vexed my soul, my lips shall not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit! God forbid that I should justify you! Till I die I will not remove my integrity from me. It is there—there behind his shoulder. It has been holding me with the power of its eyes. Oh, how dreadful are those eyes, and that ashen-grey face! Look, behold! the Lord has brought a witness from the grave to testify to the truth. See, behold! Can you not see her? Look where she stands in her cold wet garments, with the water dripping from her hair! She points at him—oh God most terrible!—the drowned woman points her cold finger at her murderer!" He stretched out his arms towards Algernon, and then with one bound leaped shrieking into the midst of the crowd.

A dozen hands were put forth to hold him. He struggled with the tremendous strength of insanity; but was at length forcibly carried out of the room a raving maniac.

After that there were not many words of an official nature spoken in the room. The inquest was adjourned to the following day, and the assembly dispersed to carry the account of the strange scene that had happened all over Whitford and its neighbourhood.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The next day medical evidence was forthcoming as to the insanity of David Powell, who had been removed to the County Asylum. Testimony was, moreover, given by many persons showing that the preacher's mind had long been disordered. Even the widow Thimbleby's evidence, given with many tears, went to prove that. But she tried with all her might to bear witness to his goodness, and clung loyally to her loving admiration for his character. "He may not be quite in his right senses for matters of this world," sobbed the poor woman, "and he has been sorely tormented by taking up with these doctrines of election. But if ever there was an angel sent down to suffer on this earth, and help the sorrowful, and call sinners to repentance, Mr. Powell is that angel. I know what he is. And I have had other lodgers—good, kind gentlemen, too; I don't say to the contrary. But overboil their eggs in the morning, or leave a lump in their feather-bed, and you'd soon get a glimpse of the old Adam. Now with Mr. Powell, nothing put him out except sin; and even that did but make him the more eager to save your soul."

Several witnesses who had testified on the previous day were re-examined. And some new ones were found who swore to having met Mr. Errington going along the road from his own house towards Whitford in great agitation, and asking everyone he met if they had seen his wife. The hour was such that to the best of their belief it was impossible he should have had such an interview as Powell described, with the deceased, between the time at which the cook swore he left his own house and their meeting him in the road. On this point, however, the evidence was somewhat conflicting. But the Whitford clocks were well known to be conflicting also; St. Mary's being always foremost with its jangling bell, the Town Hall clock coming next—except occasionally, when it hastened to be first with apparently quite capricious zeal—and the mellow chimes of St. Chad's, that were heard far over town and meadow, closing the chorus with their sweet cadence.

There certainly appeared to be no cause, no conceivable motive for Algernon Errington to have committed the crime. Many witnesses combined to show with what sweetness and good-humour he bore his wife's jealous tempers. And, besides, it was notorious that he had hoped through her influence to obtain assistance and promotion from her uncle, Lord Seely. Whereas, on the other hand, there did seem to be several motives at work to induce the unfortunate lady to put an end to her own existence. There could be little doubt that she had committed the post-office robberies, and the fear of detection had weighed on her mind. Moreover, that she had for some time past been made unhappy by jealousy and discontent, and had contemplated making away with herself, was proved by several scraps of writing besides that which her husband had found and produced at the inquest the first day. In brief, no one was surprised when the foreman of the coroner's jury delivered a verdict to the effect that the deceased lady had committed suicide while under the influence of temporary insanity; and added a few words stating the opinion of the jury that Mr. Algernon Errington's character was quite unstained by the accusation of a maniac, who had been proved to have been subject to insane delusions for some time past. It was just the sort of verdict that every one had expected, and the general sympathy with Algernon still ran high.

As for him, he got away from the "Blue Bell" as quickly as possible after the inquest was over, slipping away by a back door where a closed fly was waiting for him. When he reached his home he locked himself into the dining-room, and sat down on the sofa with closed eyes and his body leaning listlessly against the cushions, as if all vital force were gone from him. The prevailing—and, for a time, the only sensation he felt was one of utter weariness. He was so completely exhausted that the restful attitude, the silence, and the solitude seemed positive luxuries. He was scarcely conscious of his escape. He felt merely that the strain was over, and that voice, face, and limbs might sink back from the terrible tension he had held them in to a natural lassitude.

But by-and-by he began to realise the danger he had passed, and to exult in his new sense of freedom. Castalia being removed, it seemed as if all troubles must be removed with her!

The funeral of Mrs. Algernon Errington was to take place on the following day, and it was known that Lord Seely would be present at it if it were possible for him to make the journey from

London. It was said that he had been very ill, but was now better, and would use his utmost endeavours to pay that mark of respect to his niece's memory. Mrs. Errington, indeed, talked of my lord's coming as a proof of his sympathy with her boy. But the world knew better than that. It knew, by some mysterious means, that Lord Seely had quarrelled with Algernon. And when his lordship did appear in Whitford, and took up his quarters at the "Blue Bell," rumours went about to the effect that he had refused to see young Errington, and had remained shut up in his own room, attended by his physician. This, however, was not true. Lord Seely had seen Algernon and spoken with him. But he had not touched his proffered hand; he had said no word to him of sympathy; he had barely looked at him. The poor old man was overpowered by grief for Castalia, and it was in vain for Algernon to put on a show of grief. About a matter of fact Lord Seely would even now have found it difficult to think that Algernon was telling him a point-blank lie; but on a matter of feeling it was different. Algernon's words and voice rang false and hollow, and the old man shrank from him.

Lord Seely had come down to Whitford on getting the news of Castalia's terrible death, without knowing any particulars about it. Those were not the days when the telegraph brought a budget of intelligence from the most distant parts of the earth every morning. A few hurried and confused lines were all that Lord Seely had received, but they were sufficient to make him insist on performing the journey to Whitford at once. Lady Seely had tried to impress on him the necessity of shaking off young Errington now that Castalia was gone. "Wash your hands of him, Valentine," my lady had said. "If poor Cassy *has* done this desperate deed, it's he that drove her to it—smooth-faced young villain!" To all this Lord Seely had made no reply. But in his own mind he had almost resolved to help Algernon to a place abroad. It was what his poor niece would have desired.

But, then, after his arrival in Whitford all the painful details of the coroner's inquest were made known to him. He made inquiries in all directions, and learned a great deal about his niece's life in the little town. The prominent feelings in his mind were pity and remorse. Pity for Castalia's unhappy fate, and acute remorse for having been so weak as to let her marriage take place without any attempt to interfere, despite his own secret conviction that it was an ill-assorted and ill-omened one. "You couldn't have helped it, my lord," said the friendly physician, to whom he poured out some of the feelings that oppressed his heart. "Perhaps not; perhaps not. But I ought to have tried. My poor, dear, unhappy girl!"

On the day of the funeral Lord Seely stood side by side with Algernon at Castalia's grave, in Duckwell churchyard. But, when it was over, they parted, and drove back to Whitford in separate carriages. Lord Seely was to return to London early the next morning, but before he went away he determined to pay a visit to the county lunatic asylum and see David Powell.

On the day of the funeral Algernon had spoken a few words to Lord Seely about his wish to get away from the painful associations which must henceforward haunt him in Whitford; and had reminded his lordship of the promise made in London. But Lord Seely had made no definite answer, and, moreover, he had said that, by his doctor's advice, he must decline a visit which Algernon offered to make him that evening. Was the "pompous little ass" going to throw him over after all?

In the course of that afternoon he heard that old Maxfield intended to come down on him pitilessly for the full amount of the bills he held. A reaction had set in in public sentiment. Tradesmen, who could not get paid, and whose hopes of eventual payment were greatly damped by the coolness of Lord Seely's behaviour to his nephew-in-law, began to feel their indignation once more override their compassion. The two servants at Ivy Lodge asked for their wages, and declared that they did not wish to remain there another week. Algernon's position at the post-office was forfeited. He knew that he could not keep it even if he would.

It began to appear that the removal of Castalia had not, after all, removed all troubles from her husband's path!

But the heaviest blow of all was to come.

Lord Seely left Whitford without seeing him again, and sent back unopened a note, which Algernon had written, begging for an interview, with these words written outside the cover in a trembling hand: "*Dare not to write to me or importune me more.*"

Algernon received this late at night; and before noon the next day the fact was known all over Whitford. People began to say that Lord Seely had obtained access to David Powell, had spoken with him, and had gone away convinced of the substantial truth of his testimony; that his lordship had left orders that Powell should lack no comfort or attention which his unhappy state permitted of his enjoying; and that he had strongly expressed his grateful sense of the poor preacher's efforts to save his niece.

From London Lord Seely—who had heard that Miss Bodkin had visited Duckwell Farm while his niece lay dead there, and had placed flowers on her unconscious breast—sent a mourning-ring and a letter, the contents of which Minnie communicated to no one but her parents. Nevertheless, its contents were discussed pretty widely, and were said to be of a nature very damnatory to Algernon Errington's character. However, the painful things that were said in Whitford could not hurt him, for he had gone—disappeared in the night like a thief, as his creditors said—and no one could say whither.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

Our tale is almost told. The last words that need saying can be briefly said. When some weeks had passed away, Mrs. Errington received a letter from her son demanding a remittance to be sent forthwith *Poste Restante* to a little seaport town on the Italian Riviera. He had not during the interval left his mother in absolute ignorance as to what had become of him, but had sent her a few brief lines from London, saying that he had been obliged to leave Whitford in order to escape being put in prison for debt; that his present intention was to go abroad; and that she should hear again from him before long.

Algernon had been so quick in his movements that he managed to be in town before the story of Lord Seely's having cast him off had had time to be circulated amongst his acquaintance there. And he was enabled, as the result of his activity, to obtain from Mrs. Machyn-Stubbs and others several letters of introduction calculated to be of use to him abroad. He was described by Mrs. Machyn-Stubbs as a nephew of Lord Seely and her intimate friend, who was travelling on the Continent to recruit his health after the shock of his wife's sudden death.

He had brought away from Whitford such few jewels belonging to his dead wife as were of any value, and he sold them in London. He furnished himself handsomely with such articles as were desirable for a gentleman of fortune travelling for his pleasure; and allowed the West-end tradesmen, to whom the Honourable John Patrick Price had recommended him during his brilliant London season, to write down against him in their books some very extortionate charges for the same. His outfit being accomplished in this inexpensive manner, he was enabled to travel with as much comfort as was compatible in those days with a journey from London to Calais, and he stepped on to the French shore with a considerable sum of money in his pocket.

For a long time the tidings of him that reached Whitford were uncertain and conflicting; then they began to arrive at even wider and wider intervals; and, finally, after Mrs. Errington left the town, they ceased altogether to reach the general world of Whitfordians. The real history of the circumstances which induced Mrs. Errington to leave the home of so many years was known to very few persons. It was this:

About a twelvemonth after Algernon's departure Mrs. Errington made a sudden journey to London; and, on her return, she confided to her old friend, Dr. Bodkin, that she had sold out of the funds nearly the whole sum from which her little income was derived and transmitted it to Algy, who had an absolute need for the money, which she considered paramount. "But, my dear soul, you have ruined yourself!" cried the doctor aghast. "Algernon will repay me, sir," replied the poor old woman, drawing herself up with the ghost of her old Ancram grandeur. The upshot was that Dr. Bodkin, in concert with one or two other old friends of her late husband, made some representations on her behalf to Mr. Filthorpe, the wealthy Bristol merchant, who was, as the reader may remember, a cousin of Dr. Errington; and that Mr. Filthorpe benevolently allowed his cousin's widow a small annuity, which, together with the few pounds that still remained to her of her own, enabled her to live in decent comfort. But she professed herself unable to remain in Whitford, and removed to a cottage in Dorrington, where she had a kind friend in the wife of the head-master of the proprietary school, whom we first presented to the reader as "little Rhoda Maxfield."

Mrs. Diamond (as she was now) lived in a very handsome house, and wore very elegant dresses, and was looked upon as a personage of some importance in Dorrington and its vicinity. Her husband had decidedly opposed a proposition she made to him to receive Mrs. Errington as an inmate of his home. But he put no further constraint on Rhoda's affectionate solicitude about her old friend.

And the two women drove together, and sewed together, and talked together; and their talk was chiefly about that exiled victim of unmerited misfortune, Algernon Errington. Rhoda preserved her faith in the Ancram glories. And although she acknowledged to herself that Algernon had treated her badly, he was invested in her mind with some mysterious immunity from the obligations that bind ordinary mortals.

A visitor, who was often cordially welcomed at Dorrington by Matthew Diamond, was Miss Chubb. And the kind-hearted little spinster endured a vast amount of snubbing and patronage from her old enemy on the battle-ground of polite society—Mrs. Errington—with much charitable sweetness.

Old Max lived to see his daughter's first-born child; but he was unable to move from his bed for many months before his death. Perhaps it was the period of quiet reflection thus obtained, when the things of this world were melting away from his grasp, which occasioned the addition of a codicil to the old man's will, that surprised most of his acquaintance. He had settled the bulk of his property on his daughter at her marriage, and, in his original testament, had bequeathed the whole of the residue to her also. But the codicil set forth that his only and beloved daughter being amply provided for, and his son James inheriting the stock, fixtures, and good-will of his flourishing business, together with the house and furniture, Jonathan Maxfield felt that he was doing injustice to no one by bequeathing the sum of three thousand pounds to Miss Minnie

Bodkin as a mark of respect and admiration. And he, moreover, left one hundred pounds, free of duty, to "that God-fearing member of the Wesleyan Society, Richard Gibbs, now living as groom in the service of Orlando Pawkins, Esquire, of Pudcombe Hall;" a bequest which sensibly embittered the flavour of the sermon preached by the un-legacied Brother Jackson on the next Sunday after old Max's funeral.

Dr. Bodkin still lives and rules in Whitford Grammar School. His wife's life is brightened by the sight of her Minnie's increased health and strength. But she has never quite forgiven Matthew Diamond, and has been heard to say that young Mrs. Diamond's children are the most singularly uninteresting she ever saw!

Of Minnie herself, the chronicle hitherto records a life of useful benevolence, undisfigured by ascetic affectation, or the assumption of any pious livery whatever. She keeps her old delight in all the beautiful things of art and nature, and old Max's legacy has enabled her to enjoy some foreign travel. She is still in the first prime of womanhood, and more beautiful than ever. But, at the latest accounts, poor Mr. Warlock has not been tortured by the spectacle of any successful rival. For his part, he goes on worshipping Miss Bodkin with hopeless fidelity.

For a long time Minnie continued to visit David Powell in the lunatic asylum at stated periods. He generally recognised her, and the sight of her seemed to soothe and comfort him. After a while he was pronounced cured, and left the asylum; but his madness returned on him at intervals, and he would voluntarily go and place himself under restraint when he felt the black fit coming. He did not live very long, being assailed by a mortal consumption. But as his body wasted, his mind grew clearer, stronger, and more serene; and before his death Minnie had the satisfaction to hear him profess a humble faith in the Divine Goodness, and a fearless confidence in the mysterious hand that was leading him even as a little child into the shadowy land. There was as large a concourse of people at his burial as had ever thronged to hear his fiery preaching on Whit Meadow. His memory became surrounded by a saintly radiance in the imaginations of the poor. Stories of his goodness and his afflictions, and the final ray of peace which God sent to cheer his last moments, were long retailed amongst the Whitford Methodists. And his grave is still bright with carefully-tended flowers.

Of Algernon Errington the strangest rumours were circulated for a time. Some said he had become croupier at a foreign gambling-table; others declared he had married a West Indian heiress with a million of money, and was living in Florence in unheard-of luxury. Others, again, affirmed that they had the best authority for believing that he had gone to the United States, and had appeared on the stage there with immense success. However, the remembrance of him passed away from men's minds in Whitford within a few years; in London within a few months. But it was a long time before Jack Price left off recounting his final interview with Errington. "That young Ancram, you know. Captivating way of his own. What? On my honour, the rascal borrowed ten pounds of me. Ready money, sir, down on the nail! Bedad, it was a *tour de force*, for I never have a shilling in my pocket for my own use. But Ancram would coax the little birds off the bushes, as they say in my part of the world. Principle? Oh, devil a rag of principle in his whole composition. What? I wonder what the deuce has become of him! I give ye my word and honour he was really—*really* now—a CHARMING FELLOW."

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A CHARMING FELLOW, VOLUME III ***

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