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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WIDOW BARNABY. VOL. 2 (OF 3) ***

THE WIDOW BARNABY.

BY FRANCES TROLLOPE,

**AUTHOR OF "THE VICAR OF WREXHILL," "A ROMANCE OF VIENNA,"
ETC.**

**IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. II.**

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THE WIDOW BARNABY.

CHAPTER I.

DIFFICULTIES ATTENDING A YOUNG LADY'S APPEARANCE AT A BALL.— A WET SUNDAY.—DIFFERENCE OF TASTE.

Though it was two minutes and a half past the time named for dinner when Agnes made her appearance, she found her aunt's temper very slightly acerbated by the delay, for the delightful recollections of her morning expedition still endured, and she was more inclined to boast than to scold.

"Well, Agnes, I hope at last I have some news that will please you," she said. "What think you of my having subscribed for us both for six weeks?"

"Subscribed for what, aunt? ... to the library?"

"Yes; I have subscribed there, too, for a month ... and we must go every day, rain or shine, to make it answer. But I have done a good deal more than that for you, my dear; I have subscribed to the balls entirely for your sake, Agnes: and whatever becomes of you in future life, I trust you will never forget all I have done for you now."

"But I am afraid, aunt, it will cost you a great deal of money to take me with you to the balls; and as I have never been yet, I cannot know anything about it, you know; and I do assure you that I shall not at all mind being left at home."

"And a pretty story that would make, wouldn't it?... I tell you, child, I *have* paid the money already ... and here are the cutlets; so sit down, and be thankful for all my kindness to you.... Is my beer come, Jerningham?"

Agnes sat down, and began eating her cutlet; but it was thoughtfully, for there were cares that rested heavily upon her heart; and though they were certainly of a minor species, she must be forgiven if at sixteen and a half they were sufficient to perplex her sorely. She had neither shoes nor gloves fit to appear at a ball. She dared not ask for them, she dared not go without them, and she dared not refuse to go at all.

"This certainly is the most beautiful place I ever saw in my life!" said the widow, while renewing her attack upon the dish of cutlets; "such shops!... such a milliner! and, as for the library, its perfectly like going into public! What an advantage it is every morning of one's life to be able to go to such a place as that! Elizabeth Peters seemed to know everybody; and I heard them talking of people of the highest fashion, as some of those we are sure to meet at the ball. What an immense advantage it is for you, Agnes, to be introduced in such a manner at such a place as this!"

"It is indeed a most beautiful place, aunt, and the Peterses are most kind and charming people."

"Then for once in your life, child, you are pleased!... that's a comfort.... And I have got something to shew you, Agnes, such a scarf!... real French blonde: ... its monstrous expensive, I'm afraid; but everybody says that the respectability of a girl depends entirely upon the style of her chaperon. I'm sure I would no more let my poor dear sister's child go out with me, if I was shabbily dressed, than I would fly. I wonder Mrs. Duval does not send home my things; but perhaps she waits for me to send my turban. She's going to put my feathers in for me, Agnes,—quite a favour I assure you; ... but she was so respectful in her manner to Elizabeth Peters. I am sure, if I had had any notion what sort of people they were, I should have made Barnaby leave his business to Mr. Dobbs for a little while, that he might have brought me to see them long ago."

"It is indeed a pleasure to meet with such friends," said Agnes; "and perhaps..."

"Perhaps what, child?"

"If either of the three girls stay away from the ball, perhaps, aunt, you would be so kind as to let me stay away too, and we should pass the evening so delightfully together."

"God give me patience, Agnes, for I'm sure you are enough to drive one wild. Here have I been subscribing to the balls, and actually paying down ready money beforehand for your tickets; and now, ungrateful creature that you are, you tell me you won't go!... I only wish the Peterses could hear you, and then they'd know what you are."

"My only objection to going to the ball, aunt," said Agnes with desperate courage, "is, the fear that you would be obliged to get gloves and shoes for me."

"Gloves and shoes!... why, that's just the advantage of mourning. You'll have my black silk stockings, you know, all except a pair or two of the best,—and with black stockings I don't suppose you would choose to put on white shoes. That would be rather too much in the magpie style, I suppose, wouldn't it?... And for gloves, I don't see how, in such *very* deep mourning, you would wear anything but black gloves too; and there are two pair of mine that you may have. I could lend you an old pair of my black satin shoes too, only your feet and your hands are so frightfully out of proportion to your height.... I was always reckoned to be most perfectly in proportion, every part of my figure; but your hands and feet are absolutely ridiculous from their smallness: you take after your father in that, and a great misfortune it is, for it will prevent your ever profiting by my shoes or my gloves either, unless you are clever enough to take them in,—

and that I don't believe you are—not fingers and all...."

"May I wear long sleeves then, aunt?" said Agnes with considerable animation, from having suddenly conceived a project, by means of which she thought she might render herself and her sables presentable.

"Because you have got no long gloves, I suppose? Why yes, child, I see no objection, in such very deep mourning as yours. It is a strange whim you have taken, Agnes; but it is certainly very convenient."

"And will you give me leave, aunt, to use all the black you have been so kind as to give me?"

"Use it?... use all of it?... Yes; I don't want to have any of it again: the great desire of my life is to be liberal and generous to you in all ways, Agnes. But I don't know what you mean about using it all,—you can't mean all the things at once?"

"No, aunt," replied Agnes, laughing, "I don't mean that; but if I may use the crape that covers nearly the whole of your best gown, I think I could make my own frock look very well, for I would make it the same as one I saw last year at Empton. May I?"

"Yes, if you will, child; but to say the truth, I have no great faith in your mantua-making talents. However, I am glad to see that you have got such a notion in your head; and if it turns out well, I may set you to work for me perhaps one of these days. I have a great deal of taste in that way; but with my fortune it would be ridiculous if I did much beside ornamental work.... There.... Take away, Jerningham, and bring the two cheesecakes.... Agnes, do you wish for one?"

"No, thank you, aunt."

"What an odd girl you are!... You never seem to care about what you eat.... I must say that I am a little more dainty, and know what is nice, and like it too. But poor dear Barnaby spoils me in that way; and if ever you should be lucky enough to be the idol of a husband, as I was, you will learn to like nice eating too, Agnes ... for it is a thing that grows upon one, I believe. But I dare say at the out-of-the-way place your aunt Betsy put you to, there was no great chance of your being over-indulged that way.... That will do, Jerningham, give me that drop of beer; and now eat up your own dinner as fast as you can, and ask little Kitty to shew you the way to Mrs. Duval's, the milliner; and take with you, very carefully mind, the hat-box that you will find ready tied up on my bed, and bring back with you my new scarf and gloves.... I long to shew you my scarf, Agnes.... You shall not be ashamed of your chaperon,—that's a point I'm resolved upon."

It was Saturday night, and the important ball was to be on the following Tuesday; so Agnes, as soon as the dinner was ended, hastened to set about her work, a general idea of which she had very clearly in her little head, but felt some misgivings about her skill in the detail.

Hardly, however, had she brought forth "her needle and her shears," when her aunt exclaimed,—

"Good gracious, child!... you are not going to set to work now?... Why, it is the pleasantest part of the day, and I mean to take you out to walk with me under the windows where we saw all the smart people last night.—Just look out, and you will see they are beginning to come already. Put on your things, my dear; and put your bonnet a little back, and try to look as smart as you can. You are certainly very pretty, but you are a terrible dowdy in your way of putting on your things. You have nothing jaunty and taking about you, as I used to have at your age, Agnes; and I'm sure I don't know what to do to improve you.... I suspect that your aunt will get more eyes upon her now than you will with all your youth,—and that's a shame.... But I always was famous for putting on my things well."

Agnes retired to her little room; but her quiet bonnet was put on much as usual when she came out from it; and Mrs. Barnaby might have been discouraged at seeing the very undashing appearance of her companion, had she not been conscious that the manner in which she had repaired her own charms, and the general style of her dress and person, were such as might well atone for it.

Nor was she disappointed as to the degree of attention she expected to draw; not a party passed them without giving her a decided stare, and many indulged their curiosity by a very pertinacious look over the shoulder after them.

This was very delightful, but it was not all: ere they had taken half a dozen turns, the widely-roaming eyes of Mrs. Barnaby descried two additional gentlemen, decidedly the most distinguished-looking personages she had seen, approaching from the further end of the walk.

"That tall one is the man we watched last night, Agnes: I should know him amongst a thousand."

Agnes looked up, and felt equally convinced of the fact.

The two gentlemen approached; and Mrs. Barnaby herself could not have wished for a look of more marked examination than the tall individual bestowed upon her as he went by: but satisfactory as this was, and greatly as it occupied her attention, she was aware also that his companion looked with equal attention at Agnes.

"For goodness' sake, Agnes, throw back that abominable veil; it is getting quite dark already, and I'm sure you cannot see."

"I can see very well, thank you, aunt," replied Agnes.

"Fool!..." muttered Mrs. Barnaby; but she would not spoil her features by a frown, and continued to enjoy for three turns more the repeated gaze of the tall gentleman.

The following day being Sunday was one of great importance to strangers about to be initiated into the society of the place; and Mrs. Barnaby had fondly flattered herself that Mrs. Peters, or at least the young ladies, would upon such an occasion have extended their patronage, both to help them to a seat, and to tell them "who was who." But in this she was disappointed: in fact, a compact had been entered into between Mrs. Peters and her son and daughters, by which it was agreed that, on condition of her permitting them to join her party at the balls, she was always to be allowed to go to church in peace. This was so reasonable that even the petted Mary submitted to it without a murmur; and the consequence was that Mrs. Barnaby found herself left to her own devices as to the manner in which she should make the most of the Sabbath-day.

Fortunately for the tranquillity of Mrs. Peters, the landlady of the lodgings, on being questioned, gave it as her opinion that the chapel at the Hot Wells, which was within a very pleasant walk, would be more likely to offer accommodation to strangers than the parish church, that being always crowded by the resident families; so to the chapel at the Hot Wells Mrs. Barnaby resolved to go, and the tea-urn was ordered half an hour earlier than usual, that time enough might be allowed to "get ready."

"Now do make the best of yourself, Agnes, to-day, will you? I am sure those men are not Bristol people.... So different they looked—didn't they?—from all the rest. Of course, you will put on your best crape bonnet, and one of my nicest broad-hemmed white crape collars ... there is one I have quite clean ... I have no doubt in the world we shall see them."

Having finished her breakfast, and reiterated these orders, Mrs. Barnaby turned her attention to her own toilet, and a most elaborate one it was, taking so long a time as to leave scarcely sufficient for the walk; but proving at length so perfectly satisfactory as to make her indifferent to that, or almost any other *contretems*.

On this occasion she came forth in a new dress of light grey gros-de-Naples, with a gay bonnet of *paille de riz*, decorated with poppy blossoms both within and without, a "lady-like" profusion of her own embroidery on cuffs, collar, and pocket-handkerchief, her well-oiled ringlets half hiding her large, coarse, handsome face, her eyes set off by a suffusion of carmine, and her whole person redolent of musk.

This was the figure beside which Agnes was doomed to make her first appearance at the crowded chapel of the Hot Wells. Had she thought about herself, the contrast its expansive splendour offered to her own slight figure, her delicate fair face seen but by stealth through her thick veil, and the sad decorum of her sable robe, might have struck her as being favourable; instead of that, however, it was another contrast that occurred to her; for, as she looked at Mrs. Barnaby, she suddenly recollected the general look and air of her aunt Compton, just at the moment when the widow attacked her so violently on the meanness of her apparel during their terrible encounter at the village school, and she could not quite restrain a sigh as she thought how greatly she should have preferred entering a crowded and fashionable chapel with her.

But no sighing could effect the change, and they set forth together, as strangely a matched pair in appearance as can well be imagined. They entered the crowded building just as the Psalms concluded, and were stared at and scrutinised with quite as much attention as was consistent with the solemnity of the place: moreover, seats were after some time offered to them, and there was no reason in the world to believe that they were in any way overlooked. Nevertheless Mrs. Barnaby was disappointed. Neither the tall gentleman nor his companion were there; nor did Major Allen, or any one like him, appear to reward her labour and her skill.

Long and wearisome did the steep up-hill walk back to her lodgings appear after this unpropitious act of devotion, and sadly passed the remainder of the day, for it rained hard ... no strollers, not even an idle *endimanché*, came to awaken the musical echo she loved to listen to from the pavement under the windows. In short, it was a day of existence lost, save that she found out one or two new defects in Agnes, and ended at last by very nearly convincing herself that it was in some way or other her fault that it rained.

But happily nothing lasts for ever in this world, and Agnes found herself quietly in bed at last.

The next morning rose bright in sunshine, and the widow rose too, and "blessed the useful light," which she determined should see her exactly at the fashionable hour take her way to the library, and the pastry-cook's, or wherever else she was most likely to be seen; but, fortunately for the *refacimento* upon which Agnes desired to employ herself, this fashionable hour was not early, and her sable draperies had made great progress before her aunt gave notice that she must get ready to go out with her. To have a voice upon any question of this kind had fortunately never yet occurred to Agnes as a thing possible, and once more, like a Bella Donna beside a Hollyhock, she appeared, with all the effect of the strongest contrast, in the gayest part of Clifton.

This day seemed sent by fate to make up for the misfortunes of the last. On entering the library, Mrs. Barnaby immediately placed herself before the authographic volume in which she took such particular interest, and hardly had she done so, when the tall and the short gentlemen entered the shop. Again it was decidedly evident that the tall one fixed his eyes on the widow, and the

shorter one on her companion. The widow's heart beat. Never had she forgotten the evident admiration her own face and manner produced on her fellow traveller from Silverton, or the chilling effect that followed the display of the calm features of her delicate niece. She knew that Agnes was younger, and perhaps even handsomer, than herself; but this only tended to confirm her conviction that an animated expression of countenance, and great vivacity of manner, would do more towards turning a young man's head than all the mere beauty in the world.

What would she have given at that moment for some one with whom she might have conversed with laughing gaiety ... to whom she might have displayed her large white teeth ... and on whom she might have turned the flashings of her lustrous eyes!

It was in vain to look to Agnes at such a moment as this, for she well knew that nothing she could utter would elicit any better excuse for laughter than might be found in "Yes, aunt," or "No, aunt." So nothing was to be done but to raise a glass recently purchased to her eye, in order to recognize the unknown passers-by; but in doing this she contrived to make "le petit doigt" show off her rings, and now and then cast such a glance at the strangers as none but a Mrs. Barnaby can give.

After this dumb show had lasted for some minutes, the two gentlemen each threw down the newspaper they had affected to read, and departed. Mrs. Barnaby's interest in the subscription-book departed likewise; and after looking at the backs of one or two volumes that lay scattered about the counter, she, too, left the shop, and proceeded with a dignified and leisurely step along the pavement. The next moment was one of the happiest of her life, for on turning her head to reconnoitre a richly-trimmed mantilla that had passed her, she perceived the same pair of gentlemen at the distance of two paces behind them.

This indeed was an adventure, and to the widow's unspeakable delight it was made more piquant still by what followed. Near the end of the street was the well-frequented shop of a fashionable pastry-cook,—an establishment, by the way, which Mrs. Barnaby had not yet lived long enough to pass with indifference, for the two-fold reason, that it ever recalled the dear rencontres of her youth, when the disbursement of one penny was sure to secure a whole half hour of regimental flirting, and also because her genuine love for cakes and tarts was unextinguishable. There was now again a double reason for entering this inviting museum; for, in the first place, it would prevent the necessity of turning round as soon as they had walked up the street, in order to walk down it again, thereby proving that they had no engagements at all; and, secondly, it would give the two uncommonly handsome men an opportunity of following them in, if they liked it.

And it so happened that they did like it. Happy Mrs. Barnaby!... No sooner had she seated herself beside the counter, with a plate of queen cakes and Bath buns beside her, than the light from the door ceased to pour its unbroken splendour upon her elegant dress, and on looking up, her eye again met the gaze first of the one, and then of the other stranger, as they entered the shop together.

Agnes was standing behind her, with her face rather unmeaningly turned towards the counter, for when a plate with various specimens of pastry delicacies was offered to her by one of the shop-women, she declined to take anything by a silent bow.

The two gentlemen passed her, and established themselves at a little table just beyond, desiring that ices might be brought to them.

"You have ices, have you?" said Mrs. Barnaby, delighted at an opportunity of speaking; ... "bring me one, if you please." And then, trusting to her niece's well known discretion, she turned her chair, so as to front both Agnes and the two gentlemen, and said with great kindness of accent ... "Agnes, love!... will you have an ice?"

"No, thank you, aunt," ... the anticipated reply, followed.

"Then sit down, dearest, will you?... while I take mine."

The younger of the two gentlemen instantly sprang from his chair, and presented it to her. Agnes bowed civilly, but passed on to a bench which flanked the narrow shop on the other side; but Mrs. Barnaby smiled upon him most graciously, and said, bowing low as she sat,—

"Thank you, sir, very much ... you are extremely obliging."

The young man bowed again, reseated himself, and finished his ice in silence, when his companion having done the same, each laid a sixpence on the counter, and walked off.

"Who are those gentlemen, pray?... do you know their names?" said Mrs. Barnaby eagerly to the shop-girl.

"The tall gentleman is Colonel Hubert, ma'am; and the other, young Mr. Stephenson."

"Stephenson," ... musingly repeated the widow,— "Stephenson and Hubert?... I am sure I have heard the names before."

"Sir Edward Stephenson was married on Saturday to Colonel Hubert's sister, ma'am," said the girl, "and it is most likely that you heard of it."

"Oh, to be sure I did!... I remember now all about it.... They said he was the handsomest man in the world—Colonel Hubert I mean ... and so he certainly is ... handsomer certainly than even

Major Allen: don't you think so, Agnes?"

"I don't know Major Allen, aunt."

"Not know Major Allen, child?... Oh! I remember ... no more you do, my dear ... come, get up; I have done.... The young man, Agnes," she said, turning to her niece as they left the shop, "seemed, I thought, a good deal struck by you. I wish to goodness, child, you would not always keep that thick veil over your face so.... It is a very handsome veil I know, and certainly makes your mourning look very elegant; but it is only in some particular lights that one can see your face under it at all."

"I don't think that signifies much, aunt, and it makes me feel so much more comfortable."

"Comfortable!... very well, child, poke along, and be comfortable your own way ... but you certainly have a little spice of the mule in you."

The widow was perhaps rather disappointed at seeing no more of the two strangers; they had turned off just beyond the pastry-cook's shop, and were no longer visible; but, while she follows in gentle musings her walk home, we will pursue the two gentlemen who had so captivated her attention.

The only resemblance between them was in the decided air of bon ton that distinguished both; in every other respect they were perfectly dissimilar. Mr. Stephenson, the shorter and younger of the two, had by far the more regular set of features, and was indeed remarkably handsome. Colonel Hubert, his companion, appeared to be at least ten years his senior, and looked bronzed by the effect of various climates. He had perhaps no peculiar beauty of feature except his fine teeth, and the noble expression of his forehead, from which, however, the hair had already somewhat retired, though it still clustered in close brown curls round his well-turned head. But his form and stature were magnificent, and his general appearance so completely that of a soldier and a gentleman, that it was impossible, let him appear where he would, that he should pass unnoticed ... which perhaps to the gentle-minded may be considered as some excuse for Mrs. Barnaby's enthusiastic admiration.

"For Heaven's sake, Hubert!" said the junior to the senior, as they paced onwards, "do give me leave to know a pretty girl when I see one.... In my life I never beheld so beautiful a creature!... Her form, her feet, her movement,—and what a voice!"

"Assuredly," said Colonel Hubert in reply to this tirade, "the sweet variety of tone, and the charming change of her ever musical cadences, must naturally excite your admiration. '*No, thank you, aunt,*' ... it was inimitable! You are quite right, Frederick; such words could not be listened to with indifference."

"You are an odious, carping, old, fusty, musty bachelor, and I hate you with all my heart and soul!" exclaimed the young man. "Upon my honour, Hubert, I shudder to think that some ten or a dozen years hence I may be as hard, cold, and insensible as you are now.... Tell me honestly, can you at all recollect what your feelings were at two-and-twenty on seeing such a being as that sable angel from whom you have just dragged me?"

"Perhaps not exactly; and besides, black angels were never the objects of my idolatry. But don't stamp your foot at me, and I will answer you seriously. I do not think that from the blissful time when I was sixteen, up to my present solemn five-and-thirty, I could ever have been tempted to look a second time at any miss under the chaperonship of such a dame as that feather and furbelow lady."

"Then why, in the name of common sense, did you gaze so earnestly at the furbelow lady herself?"

"To answer that truly, Frederick, would involve the confession of a peculiar family weakness."

"A family weakness?... Pray, be confidential; I will promise to be discreet; and, indeed, as my brother has just made, as the newspapers say, a 'lovely bride' of your sister, I have some right to a participation in the family secrets. Come, disclose!... What family reason have you for choosing to gaze upon a great vulgar woman, verging towards forty, and refusing to look at a young creature, as beautiful as a houri, who happens to be in her company?"

"I suspect it is because I am near of kin to my mother's sister.... Did you never hear of the peculiarity that attaches to my respected aunt, Lady Elizabeth Norris? She scruples not to avow that she prefers the society of people who amuse her by their absurdities to every other."

"Oh yes!... I have heard all that from Edward, who has, I can tell you, been occasionally somewhat horrified at what the queer old lady calls her *soirées antithétiques*. But you don't mean to tell me, Hubert, that you ever take the fancy of surrounding yourself with all the greatest quizzes you can find in compliment to your old aunt?"

"Why, no.... I do not go so far as that yet, and perhaps I sometimes wish that she did not either, for occasionally she carries the whim rather too far; yet I believe truly that I am more likely to gaze with attention at a particularly ridiculous-looking woman than at any young nymph under her protection ... or possessing the awful privilege of calling her AUNT!"

"A young nymph!... what a hateful phrase! Elegant, delicate creature!... I swear to you, Colonel Hubert, that you have lowered yourself very materially in my estimation by your want of tact in

not immediately perceiving that, although a nepotine connexion unhappily exists between them, by marriage probably, or by the half blood, there must still be something very peculiar in the circumstances which have brought so incongruous a pair together."

"Well, Frederick, you may be right ... and perhaps, my friend, my eyes begin to fail me; for, to tell you the truth, your adorable's crape veil was too thick for me to see anything through it."

"To be sure it was!" cried Stephenson, quite delighted at the *amende*; "I thought it was impossible you could underrate such a face as that."

"It is a great blessing to have young eyes," rejoined the Colonel, relapsing into his bantering tone.

"What!... At it again, thou crusty old Mars?... Then I leave you."

"*Au revoir*, my Corydon!..." and so they parted.

CHAPTER II.

THE BALL.

The evening of the ball, so much dreaded by the niece, and so much longed for by the aunt, arrived at last; and by a chance not over common in the affairs of mortals, while the hopes of the one lady were more than realised, the fears of the other were proved to be altogether groundless. Many favourable accidents, indeed, concurred to lessen the difficulties anticipated by Agnes. In the first place, her almost funereal robes (for which, if the truth be spoken, it must be avowed she had not the slightest partiality,) assumed an appearance, under her tasteful fancy, which surprised even herself; for though, when she set about it, she had a sort of *beau ideal* of a black crape robe floating in her imagination, her hopes of giving it form and substance by her own ingenuity were not very sanguine. Mrs. Barnaby, either from the depth of her sorrow, or the height of her elegance, had commanded, when she ordered her widow's mourning, that one dress should touch the heart of every beholder by having a basement of sable crape one yard in breadth around it. This doleful dress was costly, and had been rarely worn at Silverton, that it might come forth in greater splendour at Exeter. But at Exeter, as we have seen, the widow's feelings so completely overpowered her, that she could not wear it at all; and thus it came under the fingers of Agnes in very respectable condition. Of these circumambulatory ells of crape, the young artificer contrived to fabricate a dress that was anything but unbecoming. The enormous crape *gigots* (for those were the days of gigots), which made part of her black treasure, hung from her delicate fair arms like transparent clouds upon the silvery brightness of the moon ... so, at least, would Frederick Stephenson have described it ... while the simple corsage, drawn, *à la vierge*, rather higher than fashion demanded round her beautiful bust, gave a delicate and sober dignity to her appearance, that even those who would have deemed it "a pity to be so covered up" themselves, could not but allow was exceedingly becoming.

As soon as her labour was ended, she prudently made an experiment of its effect; and then, in "trembling hope" of her aunt's approval, made her appearance before her. Her success here perfectly astonished her.

"Mercy on me, child!—What an elegant dress!—Where on earth did you get it from?"

"From your gown, aunt."

"Oh, to be sure!—I understand. It is not many people that would give away such a dress as that, Agnes—perfectly new, and so extremely elegant. I hope it won't turn your brain, my dear, and that you will never forget who gave it to you. Certainly I never thought you so handsome before; and if you will but study my manner a little, and smile, and show your fine teeth, I do really think I may be able to get a husband for you, which would certainly be more creditable than going out as a governess.... So you *can* work, Agnes, I see ... and a good thing too, considering your poverty. It does not look amiss upon the whole, I must say; though I don't see any reason for your covering yourself up so; I am sure your neck is white enough to be seen, and it would be odd if it wasn't, considering who your mother was; for both she and I were noted, far and near, for that beauty; but I can't say I ever hid myself up in that way.... And what shoes, child, have you got to wear with it?"

"These, aunt," said Agnes, putting out her little foot incased in leather, with a sole of very respectable thickness.

"Well, upon my word, that's a pity ... it spoils all ... and I don't think you could dance in them if you did get a partner.... What would you say, Agnes, if I bought you a thin pair of prunella pumps on purpose?"

"I should be very much obliged to you, aunt."

"Well, then, for once I must be extravagant, I believe; so, get on your other gown, child, as quick as you can, and your bonnet and shawl, and let us go to the shop round the corner. I did not mean to stir out to-day ... there is wind enough to make one's eyes perfectly blood-shot.... However, the shop's close by.... Only, if you do marry well, I hope you will never forget what you

owe me."

Agnes had been too hard at work to take any long walk, though invited to do it; but her friend Mary called upon her both Monday and Tuesday; and having found her way into the closet, seemed to think, as she pulled over Agnes's books, and chatted with her concerning their contents, that they might often enjoy themselves *tête-à-tête* there.

"Shall you like it, Agnes?" she added, after sketching such a scheme to her.

"I think, Mary, you could make me like anything ... but can I really make *you* like sitting in this cupboard, instead of your own elegant drawing-room?"

"If you will sit with me here, my new friend," answered Miss Peters with an air of great sincerity.

"Then must I not be wicked if I ever think myself unhappy again ... at least, as long as we stay at Clifton."

"Dear girl!... you should not be so if I could help it.... But I must go ... nine o'clock this evening, remember, and wait for us in the outer room, if you do not find us already there."

These instructions Agnes repeated to her aunt; but that lady's ardent temper induced her to order a fly to be at her door at half-past eight precisely; and when it arrived, she was for at least the fourth time putting the last finishing touch to her blonde, and her feathers, and her ringlets, and her rouge, and therefore it took her not more than five minutes for a last general survey, before she declared herself "ready!" and Jerningham received orders to precede her down the stairs with a candle.

If the former descriptions of the widow's appearance have not been wholly in vain, the reader will easily conceive the increased splendour of her charms when elaborately attired for a ball, without my entering into any minutiae concerning them. Suffice it to say, that if the corsage of the delicate Agnes might have been deemed by some too high, that of Mrs. Barnaby might have been thought by others too low; and that, taken all together, she looked exceedingly like one of the supplementary dames brought forth to do honour to the banquet scene in *Macbeth*.

Arriving half an hour before the time appointed, they, of course, did not find the Peters family; nor did this latter party make their appearance before the patience of Mrs. Barnaby had given way, and she had insisted, much to the vexation of Agnes, upon going on to the ball-room without them.

There the atmosphere was already in some degree congenial to her. The lustres were blazing, the orchestra tuning, and a few individuals, as impatient as herself, walking up and down the room, and appearing greatly delighted at having something new to stare at.

This parade was beginning to realize all the worst fears of Agnes, (for the room was filling fast, and Mrs. Barnaby would not hear of sitting down,) when she descried Mrs. Peters, her son, her three daughters, and two other gentlemen, enter the room.

Mrs. Barnaby saw them too, and instantly began to stride towards them; but timidity now made Agnes bold, and she held back, still courageously retaining her aunt's arm, and exclaiming eagerly,—

"Oh, let them come to us, aunt!"

"Nonsense, child!... Don't hold me so, Agnes; it will be exceedingly rude if we do not join them immediately, according to our engagement."

The pain of violently seizing upon Mrs. Peters was, however, spared her by the watchful kindness of Mary, who caught sight of them immediately, and, together with Elizabeth, hastened forward to meet them.

Miss Peters gave a glance of approbation and pleasure at the appearance of Agnes, who did not look the less beautiful, perhaps, from the deep blush that dyed her cheeks as she marked the expression of Mrs. Peters' countenance, as she approached with her eyes fixed upon her aunt. That lady, however, let her have felt what she might at sight of her remarkable-looking sister-in-law, very honourably performed her part of the compact entered into with her daughters, smiling very graciously in return for her affectionate relative's raptures at seeing her, and shewing no symptom of anything she felt on the occasion, excepting immediately retiring to the remotest corner of the room, where she very nearly hid herself behind a pillar.

Mrs. Barnaby of course followed her, with the young ladies, to the seat she had chosen; but her active genius was instantly set to work to discover how she might escape from it, for the feelings produced by such an eclipse were perfectly intolerable.

"I must pretend that I see some person whom I know," thought she, "and so make one of the girls walk across the room with me;" but at the instant she was about to put this project into execution, James Peters came up to the party, and very civilly addressed her. This was something, for the young man was handsome and well-dressed; but better still was what happened next, for she immediately felt at once that she was about to become the heroine of an

adventure. Major Allen, whose appearance altogether, including moustaches, favoris, collier grec, embroidered waistcoat, and all, was very nearly as remarkable as her own, entered the room, looked round it, fixed his eyes upon her spangled turban, and very decisively turned off from the throng in order to pay his compliments to the Peters' party, distinguishing her by a bow that spake the profoundest admiration and respect.

Elizabeth was the last of the row, her mother (with Mrs. Barnaby next her) being at the other end of it; and close to Elizabeth the dashing Major placed himself, immediately entering into a whispered conversation with her, which obliged her to turn herself round from the rest, in such a manner that not even Lucy, who came next in order, could overhear much of what passed.... Nevertheless, the widow felt as certain as if she could have followed every word of it, that this earnest conversation was about her.

Nor was she mistaken, for thus it ran:

"Good evening, Miss Elizabeth.... You are just arrived, I presume.... An excellent ball, is it not?... I told you it would be.... What an exceedingly fine woman your aunt is, Miss Peters!... It is your aunt, I think?"

"Yes ... our aunt, certainly ... the widow of my mother's brother, Major Allen."

"Ay.... I understood she was your aunt.... She is a woman of large fortune, I hear?"

"Yes, very large fortune."

"But she is in lodgings, is she not?... She does not seem to have taken the whole house."

"Oh, no ... only quite small lodgings: but she does not spend the third of her income, nor near it."

"Really?... then, I suppose, handsome as she is, that she is a little in the skin-flint line, eh?..." and here the Major shewed his horse-like teeth by a laugh.

"Not that at all, I assure you," replied the young lady, amiably anxious to exonerate her aunt from so vile an aspersion; "indeed, I should say quite the contrary; for she has very generous and noble ideas about money, and the use a widow ought to make of a fortune left by her husband, in case she does not happen to marry again. I am sure I hope people won't be so ill-natured as to say she is stingy because she does not choose to spend all her income;—it will be abominable if they do, because her motives are so very noble."

"I am sure she has a most charming advocate in you.... And what, then, may I ask ... for what is noble should never be concealed ... what can be the reason of economy so unnecessary?"

"She does not think it is unnecessary, Major Allen; for she has an orphan niece who is left quite dependent upon her, and what she is saving will be for her."

"Amiable indeed!... Then her property is only income, I presume? Really that is a pity, considering how remarkably well such a disposition would employ the capital."

"Oh! no, that is not so neither; my uncle Barnaby left everything entirely at her own disposal; only she thinks." ... and here the silly and loquacious Elizabeth stopped short, for the idea suddenly occurred to her that it was not right to talk so much of her aunt's concerns to so slight an acquaintance as Major Allen; and not exactly knowing how to end her sentence, she permitted a sudden thought to strike her, and exclaimed, "I wonder when they will begin dancing?"

But the Major had heard enough.

He resumed the conversation, however, but very discreetly, by saying, "That young lady in mourning is her niece, I suppose? and a beautiful creature she is.... But how comes she to be in such deep mourning, when that of her aunt is so slight?"

Had the simple Elizabeth understood the principle of vicarial mourning upon which these habiliments had been transferred from the widow to her niece, she would doubtless, from the talkative frankness of her nature, have disclosed it; but as her confidential conversation with her new relative had left her ignorant of this, she answered, with rather a confused recollection of Mrs. Barnaby's explanation, "I believe it is because she wears it out of romantic sorrow for her own papa, though he has been dead for years and years."

"Will you ask your brother, Miss Peters, to introduce me to Mrs. Barnaby?"

"Certainly, Major Allen, if you wish it.... James," added the young lady, stretching out her fan to draw his attention from Agnes, with whom he was talking, "James, step here ... Major Allen wishes you to introduce him to Mrs. Barnaby."

The Major rose at the moment, and strengthened the request by adding, "Will you do me that honour, Mr. Peters?"

The young man bowed slightly, and without answering moved to the front of the happy widow, followed by the obsequious Major, and said, "Major Allen wishes to be introduced to you, Mrs. Barnaby.... Major Allen, Mrs. Barnaby."

It was not without an effort that this consummation of her dearest hopes was received with some tolerable appearance of external composure by the lady; but she felt that the moment was an important one, and called up all her energy to support her under it. Perhaps she blushed, but

that, for obvious reasons, was not perceptible; but she cast down her eyes upon her fan, and then raised them again to the face of the bending Major with a look that really said a great deal.

The established questions and answers in use on such occasions were going on with great zeal and animation on both sides, when a fresh source of gratification presented itself to the widow in the approach of Mr. Frederick Stephenson to Agnes, in a manner as flatteringly decided as that of the Major to herself; but, being quite a stranger to the Peters family, he was preceded by the master of the ceremonies, who whispered his name and family to Mrs. Peters, asking permission to present him to the young lady in mourning, who appeared to be of her party.

This was of course readily accorded; when the introduction took place, and was followed by a petition from the young man for the honour of dancing with her.

Agnes looked a vast deal more beautiful than he had ever dared to believe possible through her veil as she answered, "I am engaged."

"Then the next?" said Mr. Stephenson eagerly.

Agnes bowed her blushing assent, and the young man continued to stand before her, going through pretty nearly the same process as the Major.

This lasted till the quadrilles began to form, when James Peters claimed her hand for the dance.

Two of the Miss Peters soon followed, when Major Allen said, "As the young ladies are forsaking you, madam, may you not be induced to make a party at whist?"

"I should have no objection whatever, Major," replied Mrs. Barnaby, "provided there was room at a table where they did not play high."

"Of course, if I have the honour of making a table for you, my dear madam, the stakes will be of your own naming.... Will you permit me to go and see what can be done?"

"You are excessively kind.... I shall be greatly obliged."

The active Mars departed instantly, with a step, if not as light, at least as zealous in its speed, as that of Mercury when bent upon one of his most roguish errands, and in a wonderfully short space of time he returned with the intelligence that a table was waiting for her. He then presented his arm, which she took with condescending dignity, and led her off.

"Ah! sure a pair were never seen,
So justly formed to meet by nature!"

exclaimed Mrs. Peters to Lucy, as they walked away; and greatly relieved, she rose and taking her daughter by the arm, joined a party of her friends in a more busy part of the room.

Meanwhile the quadrilles proceeded, and Agnes, notwithstanding the heart-beating shyness inevitably attending a first appearance, did not lose her look of sweet composure, or her graceful ease. James Peters was an attentive and encouraging partner, and she would probably soon have forgotten that this was the first time she had ever danced, except at school, had she not, when the dance was about half over, perceived herself to be an object of more attention to one of the standers-by than any girl, so very new, can be conscious of, without embarrassment. The eyes which thus annoyed her were those of Colonel Hubert. His remarkable height made him conspicuous among the throng, which was rendered more dense than usual by a wish, every moment increasing, to look at the "beautiful girl in deep mourning;" and perhaps her happening to know who he was, made her fancy that it was more embarrassing to be looked at by him than by any one else. The annoyance, however, did not last long, for he disappeared.

Colonel Hubert left the place where he had stood, and the study in which he had certainly found some interest, for the purpose of looking for his friend Stephenson. He found him in the doorway.

"Frederick, I want you," said the Colonel. "Come with me, my good fellow, and I will prove to you that, notwithstanding my age and infirmities, I still retain my faculties sufficiently to find out what is truly and really lovely as ably as yourself. Come on, suffer yourself to be led, and I will show you what I call a beautiful girl."

Stephenson quietly suffered himself to be led captive, and half a dozen paces placed him immediately opposite to Agnes Willoughby.

"Look at that girl," said Colonel Hubert in a whisper, "and tell me what you think of her."

"The angel in black?"

"Yes, Frederick."

"This is glorious, by Heaven!... Why, Hubert, it is my own black angel!"

"You do not mean to tell me that the girl we saw with that horribly vulgar woman, and this epitome of all elegance, are the same?"

"But, upon my soul, I do, sir.... And now what do you say to the advantage of being able to see through a thick veil?"

"I cannot believe it, Stephenson," ... replied Colonel Hubert, again fixing his eyes in an earnest

gaze upon Agnes.

"Then die in your unbelief, and much good may it do you. Why, I have been introduced to her, man ... her name is Willoughby, and I am to dance the next quadrille with her."

"If this be so ... peccavi!..." said the Colonel, turning abruptly away.

"I think so," replied his friend following, and relinquishing even the pleasure of looking at Agnes for that of enjoying his triumph over Hubert. "Won't this make a good story?... And don't you think, Colonel, that for a few years longer, at least, it may be as well to postpone the adoption of your lady aunt's system, and when you see two females together, look at both, to ascertain whether one of them may not be the loveliest creature in the universe, before you give up your whole soul to the amiable occupation of quizzing the other?"

"You think this is a very good jest, Frederick ... but to me, I assure you, it seems very much the contrary."

"Because it is so melancholy for a man of five-and-thirty to lose his eye-sight?"

"Because, Stephenson, it is so melancholy to know that such a being as that fair girl is in the hands of a woman whose appearance speaks her to be so utterly vulgar, to say the very least of it."

"Take care, my venerable philosopher, that you do not blunder about the old lady as egregiously as you before did about the young one. When I got the master of the ceremonies to perform for me the precious service of an introduction, I inquired about the party that she and the furbelow aunt were with, and learned that they were among the most respectable resident inhabitants of Clifton."

"I am heartily glad of it, Frederick ... and yet, if their party consisted of the noblest in the land, I should still feel this *aunt* to be a greater spot upon her beauty than any wart or mole that ever disfigured a fair cheek ... at least, it would, I think, be quite sufficient to keep my heart safe, if I thought this uncommon-looking creature still more beautiful than I do ... which, I confess, would not be easy."

"I wish your heart joy of its security," returned Stephenson. "And now be off, and leave me to my happiness; for see, the set breaks up, and I may follow her to her place, and again present myself... Come, tell me honestly, do you not envy me?"

"I never dance, you know."

"So much the worse for you, *mon cher*," and the gay young man turned off, to follow the way that he saw Agnes lead. This was to the quarter where she had left her aunt and Mrs. Peters, but she found neither.

"Don't be frightened," said her good-natured partner; "we shall find my mother in a moment."... And when they did find her, she received Agnes with a smiling welcome, which contrasted pretty strongly with the stately and almost forbidding aspect with which she ever regarded Mrs. Barnaby.

Young Stephenson saw this reception, and saw also the *empressement* with which the pretty, elegant Mary Peters seemed to cling to her. More than ever persuaded that he was right, and his friend wrong, he suddenly determined on a measure that he thought might ensure a more permanent acquaintance than merely being a partner of a dance; and before presenting himself to claim her hand, he again addressed the master of the ceremonies with a request that he would present him to Mrs. Peters.

That obliging functionary made not the least objection; indeed he knew that there was not a lady in the room, either young or old, who would not thank him for an introduction to Sir Edward Stephenson's handsome brother, himself a Cornet in the Blues, and the inheritor of his mother's noble estate in Worcestershire, which made him considerably a richer man than his elder brother. All this was known to everybody, for the beautiful Miss Hubert and her lover Sir Edward had been for a week or two the lions of Clifton; and though they had mixed very little in its society, there was nobody who could be considered as anybody, who would not have been well pleased at making the acquaintance of Frederick Stephenson. The young man, too, knew well how to make the most of the ten minutes that preceded the second dance; and Mrs. Peters smiled to think, as she watched him leading Agnes to join the set, how justly her keeping faith had been rewarded by this introduction of the most *desiré* partner in the room.

Meanwhile Mrs. Barnaby was led to the card-room by Major Allen; but he led her slowly, and more than once found himself obliged to stop for a minute or two, that she might not be incommoded by pressing too quickly through the crowd. And thus it was they talked, as they gently won their way.

"And what may be the stake Mrs. Barnaby permits herself?" said the Major, bending forward to look into the widow's eyes.

"Very low, I assure you, Major!" replied the lady, with a wave of the head that sent her plumes to

brush the hirsute magnificence of his face.

"Shorts and crown points, perhaps," rejoined the Major, agreeably refreshed by the delicate fanning he had received.

"Oh fie! Major ... how can you suspect me of such extravagance?... No, believe me, I know too well how to use the blessings of wealth, to abuse them by playing so high as that ... but I believe gentlemen think that nothing?"

"Why no, my dear madam, I cannot say that men ... that is, men of a certain fashion and fortune, think much of crown points.... For my own part, I detest gambling, though I love whist, and never care how low I play ... though occasionally, when I get into a certain set, I am obliged to give way a little ... but I never exceed five pound points, and twenty on the rubber; and that you know, unless the cards run extravagantly high, cannot amount to anything very alarming ... especially as I play tolerably well, and, in fact, never play so high if I can help it...."

"But, Major," said the lady, stopping short in their progress, "I really am afraid that I must decline playing at your table ... the amount of what I could lose might not perhaps be a great object to me, any more than to you ... but it is a matter of principle with me, and when that is the case I never swerve ... so take me back again, will you, to my sister Peters and my party."

This was said with a sort of clinging helplessness, and delicate timidity, that was very touching.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Major with great animation, "how very little you know me!... I would take you, charming Mrs. Barnaby, to the world's end, if you would consent to go with me; ... but think not that I would sit down at one table, though I might sweep from it stakes amounting to thousands, when I could play with you for straws at another!"

Remember, reader, that she to whom this was said had been Miss Martha Compton of Silverton but six short years before, and then judge with what feelings she listened to it. They were such, that for a moment no power of speech was left to her ... but she abandoned her purpose of retreat; and when at length they stood before the table at which two sporting-looking gentlemen were waiting to receive them, she gently seated herself, murmuring at the same time in the Major's ear, "Not higher than half-crowns, if you please."

He pressed her hand as he resigned the arm with which she had favoured him, and as he did so replied, "Depend upon me."

Before the arrangements for playing were finally settled, the friendly Major Allen took the two gentlemen a pace or two apart, and communicated in a few words what brought them back to the table, perfectly contented with the half-crown, and gallantly anxious to have the honour of cutting highest, that they might have the happiness of winning the lady as a partner, if they won nothing else.

But this happiness fell to the Major, as well as most others during the three or four rubbers that followed; for he and his fair partner played with great luck, which helped to produce between them that amicable state of spirits which tends to make every word appear a pleasantry, and every look a charm.

In the midst of this very agreeable game, in the course of which both the eyes and the voice of the widow proclaimed how very greatly she enjoyed it, Colonel Hubert wandered into the room, and having given a glance at one or two other tables as he passed them, stationed himself on a sofa, from whence he commanded a full view of that at which Mrs. Barnaby was engaged. His recent examination of her niece gave him a feeling of interest in this aunt, that nearly superseded the amusement he might otherwise have derived from her appearance and manner. That both were likely to be affected by the intense interest and pleasure she took in her occupation, as well as in the partner who shared it with her, may be easily conceived, when it is stated that not even the entrance of the magnificent Colonel was perceived by her.

Her vivacity, her *enjouement*, became more striking every moment; her words were full of piquant and agreeable meaning, which her eyes scrupled not to second; while the Major assumed more and more the air and manner of a man enchanted and enamoured beyond the power of concealment. But it was not the spirit of quizzing that sat upon Colonel Hubert's brow as he contemplated this scene; on the contrary, his fine countenance spoke first disgust, and then a degree of melancholy that might have seemed ill befitting the occasion, and in a few minutes he walked away and re-entered the ball-room.

Whether intentionally or not may be doubted; but he soon again found himself opposite to the place which Agnes occupied in the quadrille, and being there, watched her with a degree of attention that seemed equally made up of curiosity and admiration. "It is strange," thought he, "that the most repulsive and the most attractive women I ever remember to have seen, should be so closely linked together."

In a few minutes the quadrille ended, when Mr. Stephenson, who had danced it with the eldest Miss Peters, said to his friend as he passed him, "We are now going to tea, and if you will come with us, I will introduce you."

Colonel Hubert followed almost mechanically, yet not without a feeling somewhat allied to self-reproach at permitting himself to join the party of a Mrs. Barnaby.

This obnoxious individual was, however, nearly or rather wholly forgotten within a very few minutes after the introduction took place. Mrs. Peters's manners were, as we know, particularly lady-like and pleasing, her daughters all pretty-looking, and one of them, at least, singularly animated and agreeable, her son and the other gentlemen of her party perfectly *comme il faut*, and Agnes ... what was Agnes in the estimation of the fastidious, high-minded, and high-born Colonel Hubert? He would have been totally unable to answer this question satisfactorily himself, nor would it be just that a precise answer to it should be expected from the historian. This interval of conversation and repose lasted rather longer than usual; for the whole party (each for some reason or other of their own) enjoyed it, or at any rate betrayed no wish to bring it to a conclusion. Had Colonel Hubert, indeed, been told that he enjoyed it, he would strenuously and sincerely have denied the statement. He looked at Agnes with wonder and compassion strongly blended,—he listened to the gay and artless tone of her conversation with Mary Peters and young Stephenson, without being able to deny that, whether she had fallen from the stars, or been raised and wholly educated by that terrible incarnation of all he most detested, her vulgar aunt, every word she uttered bore the stamp of well-bred association, right feeling, and bright intelligence ... he allowed all this, and he allowed too that never, through all the varieties of his campaigning life, had he seen in any rank, or in any clime, a loveliness so perfect; yet he almost trembled as he watched the passionate devotion with which his friend gazed at and listened to her.

Colonel Hubert knew the character of Stephenson well; it was generous, ardent, and affectionate in the highest degree; but passionate withal, self-willed, and only amenable to control when it came in the shape of influence exercised by friendship, unmixed with authority of any kind.

He was just three-and-twenty, and had been in possession of a noble property from the day he attained the age of twenty-one. Singularly free from vice of any kind, his friends, in seeing him take the management of his estates into his own hands, had but one fear for him. It was not racing, gambling, debauchery, or extravagance, they dreaded: had he already passed fifty years of sober life exempt from all these, they would scarcely have felt more secure of his being safe from them; but it was in the important affair of marriage that they dreaded his precipitancy. More than once already his distinguished and highly connected family had been terrified by the idea that some irremediable misfortune in this respect was about to fall upon them; and earnestly did they wish that he should speedily form such a connexion as they could approve, and had a right to expect. Unfortunately this wish had been too evident; and the idea of being disposed of in marriage by his brother and sisters had become a bugbear from which the young man shrank with equal indignation and contempt. The marriage of his elder brother with Miss Hubert had naturally led to great intimacy between the families; and of all the acquaintance he had ever made, Colonel Hubert was the one for whom Frederick Stephenson felt the warmest admiration and esteem; and certainly he was more proud of the affectionate partiality that distinguished individual had shewn him than of any other advantage he possessed. Sir Edward Stephenson observed this, and had told his betrothed Emma that he drew the best possible augury from it for his brother's safety. "He is so proud of Montague's friendship," said he, "that it must be a most outrageous love-fit which would make him hazard it by forming a connexion unworthy in any way. So jealously does he deprecate the interference of his own family on this subject, that I have long determined never more to let him see how near it is to my heart ... and I will not even mention the subject to your brother, lest, *par impossible*, he might ever discover that I had done so; but I wish you, love, would say a word to him before we leave Clifton.... Tell him that Frederick has still a great propensity to fall in love at first sight, and that we shall all bless him everlastingly, if he will prescribe change of air whenever he may happen to see the fit seize him."

The fair Emma promised and kept her word; and such was the theme on which their discourse turned the night before the wedding, when, Sir Edward being engaged with the lawyer, who had just arrived from London with the settlements, the brother and sister took that stroll upon the pavement of Sion Row, which had first exhibited the stately figure of Colonel Hubert to Mrs. Barnaby's admiration. Little did Agnes think, when her head was made to obtrude itself through the window upon that occasion, that her ears caught some words of a conversation destined to prove so important to her future happiness.

That the "falling in love at first sight" had already taken place, Colonel Hubert could not doubt, as he watched his enthusiastic friend's look and manner, while conversing with Agnes, and gravely and sorrowfully did he ponder on the words of his sister in their last tête-à-tête.

"Save him, dearest Montague, if you can," said she, "from any folly of this sort; for I really think Sir Edward would never be happy again if Frederick formed any disgraceful marriage."

"And a disgraceful marriage it would and must be," thought he; "neither her surpassing beauty ... nor her modest elegance either, can make it otherwise."

As if sent by fate to confirm him in this conviction, the widow at this moment approached the party, leaning on the arm of the Major. Having finished her fifth rubber, and pocketed her sixteen half-crowns, Major Allen's two friends pleaded an engagement elsewhere, and Mrs. Barnaby accepted his offered escort to the tea-table.

A look of happiness is very becoming to many faces, it will often indeed lend a charm to features that in sorrow can boast of none; but there are others on which this genial and expansive emotion produces a different effect, and Mrs. Barnaby was one of them. Her eyes did not only sparkle, they perfectly glared with triumph and delight. She shook her curls and her feathers with the vivacity of a Bacchante when tossing her cymbals in the air; and her joyous laugh and her

conscious whisper, as each in turn attracted attention from all around, were exactly calculated to produce just such an effect as the luckless Agnes would have lived in silence and solitude for ever to avoid witnessing.

The *habile* Major descried the party the instant he entered the room, and led the lady directly to it. But the table was fully occupied, and for a moment no one stirred but Agnes, who, pale and positively trembling with distress, stood up, though without saying a word.

Mrs. Peters coloured, and for a second looked doubtful what to do; but when she saw Major Allen address himself with the manner of an old acquaintance to Elizabeth, she rose, and slightly saying, "I am sorry you are too late for tea, Mrs. Barnaby," moved off, followed, of course, by her daughters, and the gentlemen attending on them.

"I dare say we shall find a cup that will do ... never mind us.... Agnes, don't you go, but try that pot, will you, at the bottom of the table; this is as dry as hay."

The Major was immediately on the alert, and seizing on the tea-pot seized the hand of Agnes with it. Neck, cheeks, and brow were crimson in an instant; and as she withdrew her hand from his audacious touch, her eye caught that of Colonel Hubert fixed upon her. Shame, vexation, and something almost approaching to terror, brought tears into that beautiful eye, and for a moment the gallant soldier forgot everything in an ardent longing to seize by the collar and fling from the chamber the man who had thus dared to offend her. But Frederick Stephenson, who also saw the action, quitted the side of his partner, contrary to all the laws of etiquette, and quickly placing himself beside Agnes, bestowed such a glance on the Major as immediately turned the attention of that judicious personage to the tea-pot and Mrs. Barnaby.

"You dance with me now, Miss Willoughby," said young Stephenson, which, as he had enjoyed that honour twice before, he had been too discreet to hint at till the arrival of the widow and the Major had rendered her being immediately occupied so particularly desirable. Agnes perfectly understood his motive, and though her cheeks again tingled as she remembered how impossible it was for her to run effectually from the annoyance that so cruelly beset her, she felt touched and grateful for his kindness; and the smile with which she accepted it, would have sufficed to subdue the heart of Frederick had an atom of it been unsubdued before.

CHAPTER III.

MELANCHOLY MEDITATIONS.—AN EVENTFUL WALK.—A PLEASANT BREAKFAST.—A COMFORTABLE CONVERSATION IN A CLOSET.

The slumbers of Agnes that night were not heavy, for she waked while the birds were still singing their morning hymn to the sun, which poured its beams full upon her face through her uncurtained window. She turned restlessly upon her little bed, and tried to sleep again; but it would not do; and as she listened to the twittering without, so strong a desire seized her to leave the narrow boundary of her little closet, and breathe the air of heaven, that after the hesitation and struggle of a few moments she yielded, and noiselessly creeping out of bed, and performing the business of her toilet with the greatest caution, ventured to open the door communicating with her aunt's chamber, when she had the great satisfaction of hearing her snore loud enough to mask any sound she might herself make in passing through the room.

In like manner she successfully made her way down stairs and out of the house, and her heart beat with something like pleasure as she felt the sweet morning breeze blow from the downs upon her cheek. She walked towards the beautiful point on which the windmill stands; but, alas! she was no longer happy enough to feel that the landscape it commanded could confer that sort of perfect felicity which she had before thought belonged to it. She sat down again on the same spot where Mary, Lucy, James, and herself had sat before, but with how different a feeling! and yet it wanted one whole day of a week since that time. What new sorrow was it that weighed thus upon her spirits?... The good-humoured liking that her new acquaintance then testified towards her, had since ripened into friendship ... at the ball of the preceding evening she had, in fashionable phrase, met with the most brilliant success ... she had danced every dance, and three of them with the partner that every lady in the room would best have liked to dance with; and yet there was a feeling of depression at her heart greater than she had ever been conscious of before. How was this?... Could Agnes herself tell the cause of it?... Yes, if she had asked herself, she could have answered, and have answered truly, that it was because she now knew that the better, the more estimable, the more amiable the society around her might be, the more earnestly she ought to endeavour to withdraw from it.... This conviction was enough to make her feel sad, and there was no need to seek farther in order to discover other sources of sadness, if any such there were, within her bosom.

And thus she sat, again pulling thyme from the hill-side; but it was no longer so sweet as before, and she threw it from her, like a child who has broken its toy, and just reached the sage conviction that its gaudy colouring was good for nothing. While indulging in this most unsatisfactory fit of musing, the sound of a horse's feet almost close behind startled her; but instead of turning her head to see whom it might be, she started up, and walked onward. The horseman, however, was perhaps more curious than herself, for he immediately rode past her,

nor scrupled to turn his head as he did so, to ascertain who the early wanderer might be.

But even before he had done so Agnes knew, by a moment's glance at his figure as he passed her, that it was Colonel Hubert.

He checked his horse, and touched his hat, and for half an instant Agnes thought he was going to speak to her: perhaps he thought so too; but if he did, he changed his mind, for looking about in the distance, as if reconnoitring his position, he pressed the sides of his horse and galloped on, a groom presently following.

Agnes breathed more freely. "Thank God, he did not speak to me!" she exclaimed. "If he had, I should have wanted power to answer him.... Never, no, never can I forget ... were I to see him every day to the end of my life, I should never forget the expression of his face as my aunt Barnaby ... and that dreadful man ... walked up the room towards the tea-table!... no, nor the glance he gave, so full of vexation and regret, when his kind-hearted, sweet-tempered friend, asked me again to dance with him!... Proud, disdainful man! I hope and trust that I never may behold him more!... It is he who first taught me to know and feel how miserable is the future that awaits me!" This soliloquy, partly muttered and partly thought, was here interrupted by her once more hearing the sound of a horse's feet on the turf close behind her.

"He has turned back!" thought she, "though I did not see him pass me. Oh! if he speaks to me, how shall I answer him!"

But again the horseman rode past, and another rapid glance showed her that this time it was not Colonel Hubert, nor did she trouble herself to think whom else it might be; and if she had, the labour would have been thrown away, for in this case, as before, the rider looked back, and displayed to her view the features of Major Allen.

He instantly stopped his horse, and jumped to the ground, then skilfully wheeling the animal round, placed himself between it and the terrified Agnes, and began walking beside her.

Her first impulse was to stand still, and ask him wherefore he thus approached her; but when she turned towards him to speak, the expression of his broad, audacious countenance, struck her with dismay, and she suddenly turned round, and walked rapidly and in silence back towards the windmill, and the buildings beyond it.

"Are you afraid of me, my charming young lady?" said the Major with a chuckle, again wheeling his charger so as to place himself beside Agnes.... "No reason, upon my soul.... How is your adorable aunt?... Tell her I inquired for her, and tell her too, upon the honour of an officer and a gentleman, that I consider her as by far the finest woman I ever saw.... But why do you run on so swiftly, my pretty little fawn? Your charming aunt will thank me, I am sure, for not letting you put yourself in a fever;" and so saying his huge hand grasped the elbow of Agnes, and he held her forcibly back.

A feeling of terror, greater than the occasion called for perhaps, induced Agnes to utter a cry at again feeling this hateful gripe, which seemed as if by magic to bring her relief, for at the same moment Colonel Hubert was on the other side of her. Agnes looked up in his face with an undisguised expression of delight, and on his offering his arm she took it instantly, but without either of them having uttered a word.

There was something in the arrangement of the trio that Major Allen did not appear to approve, for having taken about three steps in advance, he suddenly stopped, and saying in a sort of blustering mutter, "You will be pleased to give my best compliments to your aunt," he sprung upon his horse so heedlessly as to render it probable both lady and gentleman might get a kick from the animal, and making it bound forward, darted off across the down.

Agnes gently withdrew her arm, and said, but in a voice not over steady, "Indeed, sir, I am very much obliged to you!"

"I am glad to have been near you, Miss Willoughby, when that very insolent person addressed you," said Colonel Hubert, but without making any second offer of his arm. And a moment after he added, "Excuse me for telling you that you are imprudent in walking thus early and alone. Though Clifton on this side appears a rural sort of residence, it is not without some of the disagreeable features of a watering-place."

"I have lived always in the country.... I had no idea there was any danger," ... said Agnes, shocked to think how much her own childish imprudence must have strengthened Colonel Hubert's worst opinion of her and her connexions.

"Nor is there, perhaps, any actual danger," replied the Colonel; "but there are many things that may not exactly warrant that name, which nevertheless...."

"Would be very improper for me!... Oh! it was great ignorance—great folly!" interrupted Agnes eagerly; "and never, never again will I put myself in need of such kindness."

"Has your aunt always lived with you in the country?" was a question which Colonel Hubert felt greatly disposed to ask, but, instead of it, he said, turning down from the windmill hill, "You reside at Rodney Place, I believe, and, if I mistake not, this is the way."

"No, sir ... we lodge in Sion Row.... It is here, close by.... Do not let me delay your ride any more.... I am very much obliged to you;" ... and without waiting for an answer, Agnes stepped

rapidly down the steep side of the hill, and was half-way towards Sion Row before the Colonel felt quite sure of what he had intended to say in return.

"But it is no matter.... She is gone," thought he, and taking his reins from the hand of his groom, he remounted, and resumed his morning ride.

Mrs. Barnaby had not quitted her bed when Agnes returned; but she was awake, and hearing some one enter the drawing-room, called out, "Who's there?"

"It is I, aunt," said Agnes, opening the door with flushed cheeks and out of breath, partly, perhaps, from the agitation occasioned by her adventure, and partly from the speed with which she had walked from the windmill home.

"And where on earth have you been already, child? Mercy on me, what a colour you have got!... The ball has done you good as well as me, I think. There, get in and take your things off, and then come back and talk to me while I dress myself."

Agnes went into her little room and shut the door. She really was very much afraid of her aunt, and in general obeyed her commands with the prompt obedience of a child who fears to be scolded if he make a moment's delay. But at this moment a feeling stronger than fear kept her within the blessed sanctuary of her solitary closet. She seemed gasping for want of air ... her aunt's room felt close after coming from the fresh breeze of the hill, and it was, therefore, as Agnes thought, that the sitting down alone beside her own open window seemed a luxury for which it was worth while to risk the sharpest reprimand that ever aunt gave.... But why, while she enjoyed it, did big tears chase each other down her cheeks?

Whatever the cause, the effect was salutary. She became composed, she recovered her breath, and her complexion faded to its usual delicate tint, or perhaps to a shade paler; and then she began to think that it was not wise to do anything for which she knew she should be reproached ... if she could help it ... and now she could help it; so she smoothed her chestnut tresses, bathed her eyes in water, and giving one deep sigh at leaving her own side of the door for that which belonged to her aunt, she came forth determined to bear very patiently whatever might be said to her.

Fortunately for Agnes Mrs. Barnaby had just approached that critical moment of her toilet business, when it was her especial will and pleasure to be alone; so, merely saying in a snappish accent, "What in the world have you been about so long?" she added, "Now get along into the drawing-room, and take care that the toast and my muffin are ready for me, and kept hot before the fire;—it's almost too hot for fire, but I must have my breakfast warm and comfortable, and we can let it out afterwards."

Agnes most joyfully obeyed. It was a great relief, and she was meekly thankful for it; but she very nearly forgot the muffins and the toast, for the windows of the room were open, and looked out upon the windmill and the down, a view so pleasant that it was several minutes before she recollected the duties she had to perform. At last, however, she did recollect them, and made such good use of the time that remained, that when her aunt entered bright in carmine and lilac ribbons, everything was as it should be; and she had only to sit and listen to her ecstatic encomiums on the ball, warm each successive piece of muffin at the end of a fork, and answer properly to the ten times repeated question,—

"Hav'n't you got a good aunt, Agnes, to take you to such a ball as that?"

At length, however, the tedious meal was ended, and Mrs. Barnaby busied herself considerably more than usual in setting the little apartment in order. She made Jerningham carefully brush away the crumbs—a ceremony sometimes neglected—set out her own best pink-lined work-box in state, placed the table agreeably at one of the windows, with two or three chairs round it, and then told Agnes, that if she had any of her lesson-book work to do, she might sit in her own room, for she did not want her.

Gladly was the mandate obeyed, and willingly did she aid Betty Jacks in putting her tiny premises in order, for she was not without hope that her friend Mary would pay her a visit there to talk over the events of the evening; an occupation for which, to say the truth, she felt considerably more inclined than for any "lesson-book work" whatever.

Nor was she disappointed ... hardly did she feel ready to receive her before her friend arrived.

"And well, Carina, how fares it with you to-day? Do you not feel almost too big for your little room after all the triumphs of last night?" was the gay address of Miss Peters as she seated herself upon one of Agnes's boxes. But it was not answered in the same tone; nay, there was much of reproof as well as sadness in the accent with which Agnes uttered,—

"Triumphs!... Oh! Mary, what a word!"

"You are the only one, I believe, who would quarrel with it. Did ever a little country girl under seventeen make a more successful début?"

"Did ever country girl of any age have more reason to feel that she never ought to make any début at all?"

"My poor Agnes!..." said Miss Peters more gravely, "it will not do for you to feel so deeply the follies that may, and, I fear, ever will be committed by *your* aunt and *my* aunt Barnaby.... It is a sad, vexing business, beyond all doubt, that you should have to go into company with a woman determined to make herself so outrageously absurd; but it is not fair to remember that, and nothing else ... you should at least recollect also that the most distinguished man in the room paid you the compliment of joining your party at tea."

"Paid *me* the compliment!... Oh! Mary."

"And oh! Agnes, can you pretend to doubt that it was in compliment to you?... And in compliment to whom was it that he danced with you?"

"He never danced with me, Mary," said Agnes, colouring.

"My dear child, what are you talking about? Why, he danced with you three times."

"Oh yes ... Mr. Stephenson ... he is indeed the kindest, most obliging...."

"And the handsomest partner that you ever danced with.... Is it not so?"

"That may easily be, Mary, if by partner you mean a gentleman partner, for I never danced with any till last night; and it is only saying that he is handsomer than your brother and Mr. Osborne, and I think he is."

"And I think so too, therefore on that point we shall not quarrel. But tell me, how did you like the ball altogether?... Did it please you?... Were you amused?... Shall you be longing to go to another?"

"Let me answer your last question first.... I hope *never, never, never* again to go to a ball with my aunt Barnaby.... But had it not been for the pain, the shame, the agony she caused me, I should have liked it very much indeed ... particularly the tea-time, Mary.... How pleasant it was before she came with that horrid, horrid man! Shall you ever forget the sight as they came up the room towards us?... Oh! how he looked at her!"

Agnes shuddered, and pressed her hands to her eyes, as if to shut out an object that she still saw.

"It was tremendous," replied her friend: "but don't worry yourself by thinking Mr. Stephenson looked at her just then, for he really did not. You know he was sitting at the corner of the table by me, and his back was turned to her, thank heaven!... But I will tell you who did look at her, if Stephenson did not ... that magnificent-looking Colonel stared as if he had seen an apparition; but I did not mind that half so much, nor you either, I suppose.... An old soldier like him must be used to such a variety of quizzes, that nobody, I imagine, can appear so preposterous to him as they might do to his young friend.... By the by, I think he is a very fine-looking man for his age; don't you?"

"Who?" said Agnes innocently.

"Why, Colonel Hubert.... His sister, who is just married to Sir Edward Stephenson, is nearly twenty years younger than he is, they say."

"Twenty years?" said Agnes.

"Yes.... Must it not be strange to see them together as brother and sister?... he must seem so much more like her father."

"Her father!" said Agnes.

"Yes, I should think so. But you do not talk half as much about the ball as I expected, Agnes: I think you were disappointed, and yet I do not know how that could be. You dance beautifully, and seem very fond of it; you had the best partners in the room, danced every dance, and were declared on all sides to be the *belle par excellence*,... and yet you do not seem to have enjoyed it."

"Oh! I did enjoy it all the time that she was out of the room playing cards; I enjoyed it very, *very* much indeed ... so much that I am surprised at myself to feel how soon all my painful shyness was forgotten.... But ... after all, Mary, though you call her *your* aunt Barnaby, as if to comfort me by sharing my sufferings, she is not really your aunt, and still less is she your sole protector ... still less is she the being on whom you depend for your daily bread. Alas! my dear Mary, is there not more cause for surprise in my having enjoyed the ball so much, than in my not having enjoyed it more?"

"My poor Agnes, this is sad indeed," said Mary, all her gaiety vanishing at once, "for it is true. Do not think me indifferent to your most just sorrow.... Would to Heaven I could do anything effectually to alleviate it! But while you are here, at least, endeavour to think more of us, and less of her. Wherever you are known, you will be respected for your own sake; and that is worth all other respect, depend upon it. When you leave us, indeed, I shall be very anxious for you. Tell me, dear Agnes, something more about your aunt Compton. Is it quite impossible that you should be placed under her protection?"

"Oh yes!... She would not hear of it. She paid for my education, and all my other expenses, during five years; and my aunt Barnaby says, that when she undertook to do this, she expressly said that it was all she could ever do for me. They say that she has ruined her little fortune by lavish and indiscriminate charity to the poor, and aunt Barnaby says that she believes she has hardly

enough left to keep herself alive. But I sometimes think, Mary, that I could be very happy if she would let me work for her, and help her, and perhaps give lessons in Silverton.... I know some things already well enough, perhaps, to teach in such a remote place as that, when better masters cannot be procured; and I should be so happy in doing this ... if aunt Compton would but let me live with her."

"Then why do you not tell her so, Agnes?"

"Because the last—the only time I have seen her for years, though she kissed and embraced me for a moment, she pushed me from her afterwards, and said I was only more artful than aunt Barnaby, and that I should never be either graced or disgraced by her ... those were her words, I shall never forget them ... and she has the reputation of being immoveably obstinate in her resolves."

"That does not look very promising, I must confess. But wisdom tells us that the possibility of future sorrow should never prevent our enjoying present happiness. Now, I do think, dear Agnes, that just now you may enjoy yourself, if you like us as well as we like you,... for we are all determined to endure aunt Barnaby for your sake, and in return you must resolve to be happy in spite of her for ours. And now adieu!... I want to have some talk with mamma this morning; but I dare say you will hear from me, or see me again, before the end of the day. Farewell!..." And Miss Peters made a quiet exit from the closet and from the house; for she had heard voices in the drawing-room as she came up the stairs, and now heard voices in the drawing-room as she went down; and having business in her head upon which she was exceedingly intent, she was anxious to avoid being seen or heard by Mrs. Barnaby, lest she should be detained.

CHAPTER IV.

A TETE-A-TETE IN A DRAWING-ROOM.—AUTOBIOGRAPHY.—A REMARKABLE DISCOVERY CONCERNING THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON.

The voices which alarmed Miss Peters were those of Mrs. Barnaby and Major Allen. The acquaintance between them had gone quite far enough on the preceding evening to justify the gentleman's *aimable empressement* to inquire for the lady's health; besides, he was somewhat curious to know if the pretty, skittish young creature he had encountered in his morning's ride, had recounted the adventure to her aunt. It was his private opinion that she had not; and if so, he should know what to think of the sudden appearance and protecting demeanour of her tall friend. It was thus he reasoned as he walked towards Sion Row as soon as he had finished his breakfast; and yet, though he had lost so little time, he did not arrive till at least three minutes after the widow had begun to expect him.

"I need not ask my charming Mrs. Barnaby how she rested after her ball ... eyes do not sparkle thus, unless they have been blessed with sleep;" ... and the lady's hand was taken, bowed upon, and the tips of her fingers kissed, before she had quite recovered the soft embarrassment his entrance had occasioned.

"You are very kind to call upon me, Major Allen.... Do sit down.... I live as yet comparatively in great retirement; for during Mr. Barnaby's lifetime we saw an immense deal of company,—that old-fashioned sort of country visiting, you know, that never leaves one's house empty.... I could not stand it when I was left alone ... and that was the reason I left my beautiful place."

"Silverton or Silverton Park, was it not?... I think I have heard of it."

"Yes, Silverton.... And do you know, Major, that the remembrance of all that racket and gaiety was so oppressive to my nerves during the first months of my widowhood, that I threw off everything that reminded me of it ... sold my carriages and horses, let my place, turned off all my servants; and positively, when I set off for this place in order to see my sister Peters and her family, I knew not if I should ever have strength or spirits to enter into general society again."

"Thank God, dearest madam, that you have made the effort!... Though the hardened and war-worn nature of man cannot melt with all the softness of yours, there is yet within us a chord that may be made to vibrate in sympathy when words of true feeling reach it! How well I understood your feelings ... and how difficult it is not to envy, even in death, the being who has left such a remembrance behind!... But we must not dwell on this.... Tell me, dear Mrs. Barnaby, tell,—as to a friend who understands and appreciates you,—do you regret the having left your elegant retirement?... or do you feel, as I trust you do, that Providence has not gifted you so singularly for nothing?... do you feel that your fellow-creatures have a claim upon you, and that it ought not to be in secret and in solitude that the hours of such a being should be spent? Tell me, do you feel this?"

"Alas! Major Allen, there is so much weakness in the heart of a woman, that she is hardly sure for many days together how she ought to feel.... We are all impulse, all soul, all sentiment, ... and our destiny must ever depend upon the friends we meet in our passage through this thorny world!"

"Beautiful idea!... Where is the poet that has more sweetly painted the female heart?... And what a study it offers when such a heart is thrown open to one! Good God! to see a creature so formed

for enjoyment,—so beaming with innocent cheerfulness,—so rich in the power of conferring happiness wherever she deigns to smile, ... to see such a being turn weeping and alone from her hospitable halls, and from all the pomp and splendour that others cling to ... what a spectacle! Have you no lingering regret, dearest lady, for having left your charming mansion?"

"Perhaps there are moments ... or rather, I should say, perhaps there have been moments, when something of the kind has crossed me. But if I had not disposed of my place, I should never have seen Clifton.... My spirits wanted the change, and I feel already better in this delightful air. But I confess I do regret having sold my beautiful greys, ... I shall never meet any I like so well again."

"A set, were they?"

"Oh yes."

"Four greys ... and all well matched?"

"Perfectly.... Poor Mr. Barnaby took so much pains about it.... It was his delight to please me.... I ought not to have sold them."

"It was a pity," ... said the kind Major with a sigh.

"Don't talk about it, Major Allen!..." and here one of the widow's most curiously embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs, delightfully scented with musk, was lightly and carefully applied to her eyes.

"Nay," said the Major, venturing gently to withdraw it, "you must not yield to this dangerous softness.... I cannot bear to have those eyes concealed!... it produces the chilling sensation of an eclipse at noon-day.... I shall run away from you if you will not look at me."

"No, do not," ... said the widow, making an effort to smile, which was rewarded by a look of gratitude, and a seemingly involuntary kiss bestowed upon the hand that had withdrawn the envious handkerchief.

"And that pretty little girl, your niece, Mrs. Barnaby," ... said the Major, as if considerately changing the conversation; "how is she this morning?"

"Oh! quite well, poor child, and in my dressing-room, going over her Italian and French lessons before she does them with me."

"Good Heaven!... Is it possible that you devote yourself thus?... Take care, charming Mrs. Barnaby ... take care that you do not permit your affectionate nature to form an attachment to that young person which may destroy all your future prospects in life!... At your age, and with your exquisite beauty, you ought to be looking forward to the renewal of the tender tie that has already made your happiness;... And who is there ... pardon me if I speak boldly ... who is there who would venture to give his whole heart, his soul, his entire existence to one who has no heart to give in return? Think you, Mrs. Barnaby, that it can be in the power of any niece in the world to atone to a woman of your exquisite sensibility for the loss of that ardent affection which can only exist between a husband and wife?... Tell me, do you believe this?"

"It is a question," replied the widow, casting her eyes upon the ground, "that I have never asked myself."

"Then neglect it no longer.... For God's sake—for the sake of your future happiness, which must be so inexpressibly dear to all who know you ... all who appreciate you justly ... for the sake of the young girl herself, do not involve yourself by undertaking the duties of a mother towards one who from her age could never have stood to you in the relation of a child."

"Alas! no," ... said Mrs. Barnaby; "I lost my only babe a few weeks before its father.... Had it lived, it would this spring have been three years old!... You say true ... the age of Agnes must ever prevent my feeling for her as a child of my own.... My poor sister was indeed so much older than myself, that I always rather looked upon her as an aunt, or as a mother, than as my sister."

"Of course you must have done so; and, interesting and inexpressibly touching as it is to witness your beautiful tenderness towards her child, it is impossible not to feel that this tenderness carried too far will inevitably destroy the future happiness of your life. Forgive, I implore you, a frankness that can only proceed from my deep interest in your welfare.... Is this young person entirely dependent upon you?"

"At this moment she is; but she will be provided for at the death of her great-aunt, Mrs. Elizabeth Compton of Compton Basett; ... and to say the truth, Major Allen, as you so kindly interest yourself in what concerns me, I neither do nor ever shall consider myself bound to retain Agnes Willoughby in my family, under any circumstances that should render her being so inconvenient."

"I delight in receiving such an assurance ... dear, excellent Mrs. Barnaby!... What a heart!... what an understanding!... what beauty!... what unequalled sweetness! No wonder the late Mr. Barnaby delighted, as you say, to please you! 'Lives there the man,' as the immortal Byron says—'Lives there the man with soul so dead,' as to be capable of doing otherwise?... But to return to the subject of this poor little girl ... she might be termed pretty, perhaps, in any society but yours.... Tell me, is this Mrs. Compton, of Compton Basett, wealthy?... Is she also a relation of yours?"

"Yes, she is immensely wealthy.... It is a magnificent estate. She is a maiden sister of my father's."

"Then Miss Willoughby will eventually be a great fortune.... How old is your aunt?"

"My aunt is near sixty, I believe, ... but the provision intended for Agnes is only sufficient to maintain her like a gentlewoman. The bulk of the property is settled on me and my heirs."

"I fear you will think me an unseasonable visitor," said the fully-satisfied Major, rising, "and I will go now, lest you should refuse to admit me again."

"Do not go yet," ... said the gentle widow, playfully refusing the hand extended to take leave. "What in the world now have you got to do, that should prevent your bestowing a little more time on me?"

"It would be difficult, Mrs. Barnaby," said the Major with an eloquent look, "to find any occupation sufficiently attractive to take me from you, so long as I dared flatter myself that it was your wish I should remain."

"Well, then ... sit down again, Major Allen ... for do you know, I want you to tell me all about yourself.... Where have you served?—what dangers have you passed through? You have no idea how much interest I should take in listening to the history of your past life."

"My sweet friend!... Never should I have entered upon such a subject unbidden ... yet with such an auditor, how dear will the privilege become of talking of myself!... But you must check me, if I push your gentle patience too far. Tell me when you are weary of me ... or of my little narrative."

"I will, I will ... depend upon it, ... only do not stop till I do, Major."

"Adorable sweetness!... Thus, then, I am to be my own biographer, and to a listener whose opinion would, in my estimation, outweigh that of all the congregated world, if placed in judgment on my actions. It is probable, my charming friend, that my name as Ensign Allen may not be totally unknown to you.... It was while I still held that humble rank, that I was first fortunate enough to distinguish myself. In an affair of some importance in the Peninsula, I turned what might have been a very disastrous defeat into a most complete victory, and was immediately promoted to a company. Shortly after this I chanced to shew the same sort of spirit, which was, I believe, born with me, in a transaction nowise professional, but which, nevertheless, made me favourably mentioned, and certainly contributed to bring me into the rather general notice with which Europe at present honours me.... Yet it was merely an affair with a party of brigands, in which I put seven fellows *hors de combat*, and thereby enabled that celebrated grandee, the Duke d'Alfonse d'Aragona d'Astrada, to escape, together with his beautiful daughter, and all their jewels. The service might have been, I own, of considerable importance to them, but the gratitude it produced in the minds of both father and daughter, greatly exceeded what was called for ... he offered me ... so widely separated as we now are, there can be no indelicacy in my confiding the circumstance to you, my dear Mrs. Barnaby, but ... the fact is, he offered me his only daughter in marriage, with an immense fortune. But, alas! how capricious is the human will!... my hour, my dear friend, was not yet come.... I felt, beautiful as Isabella d'Alfonse was accounted by all the world, that I could not give her my heart, and I performed the painful duty of refusing her hand. Nothing, however, could be more noble than the subsequent conduct of the duke, ... at the first painful moment he only said ... 'Captain Allen, we must submit' ... of course he said it in Spanish, but it would look like affectation, in such a narrative as this, were I not to translate it ... 'Capitano Alleno, bisogna submittajo nos,' were his words.... I am sure I shall never forget them, for they touched me to the very heart.... I could not speak, my feelings choked me, and I left his palace in silence. Five years had elapsed, and I had perhaps too nearly forgotten the lovely but unfortunate Isabella d'Alfonse, when I received a packet from a notary of Madrid, informing me that her illustrious father was dead, and had gratefully bequeathed me a legacy, amounting in English money to thirty thousand pounds sterling. I was by that time already in possession of the estates of my ancestors, and such a sum might have appeared a very useless bagatelle, had not an accident rendered it at that time of really important convenience."

"Good heaven! how interesting!" exclaimed Mrs. Barnaby. "And what, dear Major, became of the unfortunate Isabella?"

"She took the veil, Mrs. Barnaby, in the convent de Los Ceurores Dolentes, within a few months of her noble father's death.... Before this event she had not the power of disposing of herself as she wished; ... but her excellent father never tortured her by the proposal of any other marriage...."

"Admirable man!" cried Mrs. Barnaby, greatly touched. "Dear Major Allen!" she added, in a voice that seemed to deprecate opposition, "you must, indeed you must, do me an immense favour. When Mrs. Peters took me to Bristol in her coach the other day, I bought myself this album; it has got nothing in it as yet but my own name; now, if you do not wish to break my heart, you must write the name of Isabella d'Alfonse in this first page ... it will be an autograph inexpressibly interesting!"

The Major took the book and the pen that were offered by the two hands of Mrs. Barnaby, and said with a profound sigh,—

"Break your heart!... I should never have broken the heart of any woman, if what she asked had been seconded by such eyes as those!"

A silence of some moments followed, a part of which was employed by the Major in writing the name of Isabella d'Alfonse, and a part in gazing on the downcast lids of the admired eyes

opposite to him; but this too trying interval ended at length by the lady's recovering herself enough to say, "And that accident, Major Allen, that made the duke's little legacy convenient to you?... what was it?... Do not have any reserve with one whom you have honoured by the name of friend!"

"Reserve to you!... never!... While you continue to admit me to your presence, all reserve on my part must be impossible. The accident was this, my friend; and I am not sorry to name it, as it gives me an opportunity of alluding to a subject that I would rather you heard mentioned by me than by any other. After the battle of Waterloo—(concerning which, by the by, I should like to tell you an anecdote)—after the battle of Waterloo, I became, in common with nearly all the officers of the army, an idle man; and like too many others, I was tempted to seek a substitute for the excitement produced by the military ardour in which I had lived, by indulging in the pernicious agitations of the gaming-table. It is very likely, that if you speak of me in general society, you will be told that I have played high.... My dear Mrs. Barnaby, this is true. My large fortune gave me, as I foolishly imagined, a sort of right to play high if it amused me, and for a little while, I confess, it did amuse me; ... but I soon found that a gentleman was no match for those who made gambling a profession, and I lost largely,—so largely, indeed, that I must have saddled my acres with a mortgage, had not the legacy of the Duke d'Almafonte d'Aragona d'Estrada reached me just in time to prevent the necessity."

"I rejoice to hear it," replied the widow kindly; "and you have never hazarded so largely since, dear Major, have you?"

"Oh! never.... In fact, I never enter a room now where anything like high play is going on.... I cannot bear even to see it, and I believe I have in this way offended many who still permit themselves this hateful indulgence; offended them, indeed, to such a degree, that they perfectly hate me, and utter the most virulent abuse every time they hear my name mentioned; ... but for this I care little: I know I am right, Mrs. Barnaby, and that what loses their friendship and esteem, may be the means of gaining for me the regard of those, perhaps, on whom my whole happiness may depend during my future life."

The same dangerous sort of silence as before seemed creeping on them; but again the widow had the courage to break it, by recalling to the memory of her musing and greatly pre-occupied companion the anecdote respecting Waterloo which he had promised her.

"Waterloo!" said he, rousing himself.... "Ay, dearest Mrs. Barnaby, I *will* tell you that, though there are many reasons which render me very averse to speak of it lightly. In the first place, by those who know me not, it might be thought to look like boasting; and, moreover, if I alluded to it in any society capable of the baseness of repeating what I said, it might bring upon me very active, and indeed fatal, proofs of the dislike—I may say hatred—already felt against me in a certain quarter."

"Gracious heaven, Major!... be careful then, I implore you, before whom you speak! There appear to be many strangers here, of whose characters it is impossible to know anything.... If you have enemies, they may be spies expressly sent to watch you."

"I sometimes think so, I assure you.... I catch such singular looks occasionally, as nothing else can account for; and the enemy I allude to is one who has power, as well as will, to punish by evil reports, if he cannot positively crush and ruin, those who interfere with his ambition."

"Is it possible? Thank heaven! at least you can have no doubt of me.... So, tell me, I beseech you to tell me, to whom is it that your alarming words refer?"

The Major drew his chair close to Mrs. Barnaby, took one of her hands between both of his, and having gazed for a moment very earnestly in her face, whispered,—

"The Duke of Wellington!"

"Good God!..." exclaimed the widow, quite in an agony: "the Duke of Wellington! Is the Duke of Wellington your enemy, Major Allen?"

"To the teeth, my fairest! to the teeth!" replied the Major, firmly setting the instruments he mentioned, and muttering through them with an appearance of concentrated rage, the outward demonstration of which was increased by the firmness of the grasp in which he continued to hold her hand.

"But how can this be so?" faltered Mrs. Barnaby.... "So brave a man as you!... one, too, who had distinguished himself so early! How can he be so base?"

"How can he be otherwise, my friend?" replied the Major with increasing agitation, "when" ... and here he lowered his voice still more, whispering almost in her very ear, "it is I—I,—Ferdinand Alexander Allen, who ought by right to be the Duke of Wellington, instead of him who now wears the title!"

"You astonish me more than I am able to express!"

"Of course I do.... Such, however, is the fact. The battle of Waterloo would have been lost,—was lost, positively lost,—till I, disdainingly in such a moment to receive orders from one whom I perceived to be incompetent, rushed forward, almost knocking the Duke off his horse as I did so ... sent back the French army like a flock of sheep before an advancing lion ... seized with my own

hand on the cocked hat of Napoleon ... drew it from his head, and actually flogged his horse with it till horse and rider together seemed well enough inclined to make the best of their way out of my reach.... God bless you, my dearest lady! the Duke of Wellington had no more to do in gaining the battle of Waterloo than you had.... I now leave you to judge what his feelings towards me are likely to be."

"Full of envy and hatred, beyond all doubt!" solemnly replied Mrs. Barnaby; "and I will not deny, Major Allen, that I think there is great danger in your situation. A person of such influence may do great injury, even to a man of your well-known noble character. But how extraordinary it is that no hint of this has ever transpired."

"I beg your pardon, my dear madam; this is very far from being the case. At your peaceful residence beneath the shades of Silverton Park, it is highly probable that you may have remained ignorant of the fact; but, in truth, the Duke's reputation among the people of England has suffered greatly; though no one, indeed, has yet proposed that his sword should be taken from him. The well-known circumstance of stones having been thrown at his windows ... a fact which probably has never reached you ... is quite sufficient to prove that the people must be aware that what the English army did at Waterloo, was not done under his generalship.... No, no, England knows too well what she owed to that victory so to treat the general who achieved it; and had they not felt doubts as to who that general was, no stones would have been levelled at Apsley House. Many of the common soldiers—fine fellows!—have been bold enough to name me, and it is this that has so enraged the Duke, that there is nothing which he has not taught his emissaries to say against me.... I have been called swindler, black-leg, radical, horse-jockey, and I know not what beside; and I should not wonder, my charming friend, if sooner or later your friendship were put to the proof, by having to listen to similar calumnies against me; but now, you will be able to understand them aright, and know the source from whence they come."

"Well, I never did hear anything so abominable in my life!" said Mrs. Barnaby warmly.... "Not content with taking credit to himself for all that was gained by your extraordinary bravery, he has the baseness to attack your character!... It is too detestable!... and I only hope, that when I get among my own connexions in town, I shall not have the misfortune of meeting him often.... I am certain I should not be able to resist saying something to shew what I thought. Oh! if he were really the brave man that he has been fancied to be, how he must have adored you for your undaunted courage!... And you really took Napoleon's hat off his head?... How excessively brave!... I wish I could have seen it, Major!... I am sure I should have worshipped you.... I do so doat upon bravery!"

"Sweet creature!... That devoted love of courage is one of the loveliest propensities of the female mind. Yes, I am brave—I do not scruple to say so; and the idea that this quality is dear to you, will strengthen it in me four-fold.... But, my dear, my lovely friend! I must bid you adieu. I expect the steward of my property in Yorkshire to-day, and I rather think he must be waiting for me now.... Soften, then, the pain of this parting, by telling me that I may come again!"

"I should be sorry indeed to think this was our last meeting, Major Allen," said the widow gently; "I am seldom out in the morning before the hour at which you called to-day."

"Farewell then!" said he, kissing her hand with an air of mixed tenderness and respect, "farewell!... and remember that all I have breathed into your friendly ear must be sacred; ... but I know it would be so without this injunction; Mrs. Barnaby's majestic beauty conceals not the paltry spirit of a gossip!"

"Indeed you are right!... indeed you are right!... To my feelings the communications of a friend are sweet, solemn pledges of regard, that it would be sacrilege to violate. Farewell, Major!—farewell!"

CHAPTER V.

A YOUNG LADY'S PLOT.—A CONSULTATION, AND THE HAPPY RESULT OF IT.—A TERRIBLE INTERRUPTION, AND A DANGEROUS EXPEDITION.—CONFIDENTIAL INTERCOURSE.

Mary Peters left Agnes considerably earlier than she had intended, in order to communicate to her mother a project which had entered her head during the short time they spent together. Though the project, however, was formed during their interview, the idea upon which it was founded had repeatedly occurred to her before, short as the time had been that was given for its ripening. This idea was suggested to her by the evident admiration of Mr. Stephenson for her friend; on which she had meditated as they drove from the Mall to Rodney Place, as she brushed and papilloted her nut-brown curls before her glass, and as she strolled the next morning from her own home to that of Agnes; it might plainly have been expressed thus ... Frederick Stephenson is over head and ears in love with Agnes Willoughby.

Such was the idea; but the project was concerning a much more serious matter,—namely, that a marriage between the parties might easily be brought about; and, moreover, that the effecting this would be one of the very best actions to which it could be possible to dedicate her

endeavours.

To do Miss Peters justice, she was in general neither a busy body nor a match-maker; but she was deeply touched by the melancholy feeling Agnes had expressed respecting her own position; she felt, too, both the justness of it, and the utter helplessness of the poor girl herself either to change or amend it.

"Nothing but her marrying can do it," thought Mary; "and why should she not marry this young man, who is so evidently smitten with her?... Poor Agnes!... What a change—what a contrast it would be!... And if mamma will help me, I am sure we may bring it about. He is perfectly independent, and violently in love already, ... and she is a creature that appears more beautiful and more fascinating every time one sees her."

It was exactly when her meditations reached this point that she discovered it to be necessary that she should go home directly, and home she accordingly went, luckily finding her mother alone in her dressing-room.

"I am delighted to find you by yourself, mamma," began Mary, "I have a great deal to say to you," and then followed a rapid repetition of all Agnes had just said to her.

"Is it not a dreadful situation, mamma?" she added.

"So dreadful, Mary," replied Mrs. Peters, "that were not the youngest of you about three years older than herself, I really think I should propose taking her as a finishing governess. Poor little thing!... what can we do for her?"

"Now listen, mamma," answered Mary, raising her hand gravely, as if to bespeak both silence and attention, "and do not, I implore you, mar the usefulness of what I am going to say by turning it into jest, ... it is no jest, mother. Mr. Stephenson, the young man we saw last night, is most certainly captivated by the beauty of Agnes in no common degree. I was near enough to her all the evening to see plainly how things were going on; and were she less miserable in her present condition, I might think it a fair subject for a jest, or a bet perhaps on the chances for and against his proposing to her. But as it is,—thinking of her as I do, feeling for her as I do,—I think, mamma, that it is my duty to endeavour, by every means in my power, to turn these chances in her favour. Dearest mother, will you help me?"

"But what means have you, my dear girl?" replied Mrs. Peters gravely. "I believe I share both your admiration and your pity for Agnes as fully as you could desire; but I really see not what there is that we can with propriety do to obtain the object you propose ... though I am quite aware of its value."

"I will ask you to do nothing, my dearest mother, in which you shall find a shadow of impropriety. Would there be any in inviting this young man to your house, should you chance to become better acquainted with him?"

"No; but I think we must take some strangely forward steps to lead to this better acquaintance."

"That will depend altogether upon his degree of inclination for it. Should he prove *ritroso*, I consent to draw off my forces instantly; but if, as I anticipate, he should push himself upon us as an acquaintance, I want you to promise that you will not on your part defeat his wishes,—nay, a little more perhaps ... I would wish you, dear mother, to feel with me, that it would be right and righteous to promote them."

"I rather think it would, Mary, as you put the case. Agnes Willoughby is by no means lowly born: her father was a gentleman decidedly; and I understood from my brother that the Comptons, though for some centuries, I believe, rather an impoverished race, derive their small property from ancestors of very great antiquity; so there is nothing objectionable on that tender point.... And for herself, pretty creature, she would certainly be an ornament and a grace as head and chieftainess of the most aristocratic establishment in the world; so, as a matter of conscience, I have really no scruples at all; but, as matter of *convenance*, I can only promise not to check, by any want of civility on my part, whatever advances the gentleman may choose to make. Will this content you, my little plotter?"

"Yes ... pretty well; for I am not without hope that you will warm in the cause, if it goes on at all, and then, perhaps, I shall squeeze an invitation out of you, and so on. And, by the way, mamma, when are we to have our little musical *soirée*? I believe young De Lacy is not going to stay much longer, and if he goes, what are we to do for our bass?"

"We shall be puzzled, certainly. You may write the cards directly, Mary, if you will."

Mary rose at once to set about it; but on opening a certain drawer in the commode, and examining its contents, she said, "We must send to the library, mamma; there are not half enough cards here,... besides ... I want you to walk with us, and I want Agnes to join the party. May I send her a note desiring her to come to take her luncheon here?"

"I comprehend your tactics, my dear.... Agnes is to walk with us just about three o'clock, when all the world are out and about.... We want invitation cards, and may just as well, when we *are* out, go to the library for them ourselves.... There we shall be sure of seeing Mr. Stephenson ... he will be very likely to join us ... etc. etc. etc.... Is not that your plan?"

"And if it is, mamma," replied Mary, laughing, "I see not that it contains anything beyond what

has been agreed to by our compact."

"Very well, Mademoiselle Talleyrand ... write your note."

This was promptly done, and promptly dispatched, and reached Agnes about two minutes after Major Allen had taken his departure. She was aware of his visit; for Betty Jacks had obligingly opened her closet-door to inform her of it; and she now stood with the welcome note in her hand, meditating on the best manner of forwarding the petition to her aunt, not quite liking to send in the note itself, doubtful of Betty's delivering a message on the subject so as to avoid giving offence, but dreading, beyond all else, the idea of presenting herself before the Major.

"Major Allen is still there, Jerningham, is he not?... I have seen nothing of my aunt."

"No, miss, he is this moment gone ... and a beautiful, sweet man he is, too."

Agnes hesitated no longer, but, with Mary's note in her hand, entered the drawing-room to ask leave to obey the summons it contained. She found Mrs. Barnaby in a state of considerable, but very delightful agitation. The album was open before her, her two elbows rested on the table, and her hands shaded her eyes, which were fixed on the interesting name of Isabella d'Almafonte in a fit of deep abstraction.

Agnes uttered her request, but was obliged to repeat it twice before the faculties of the widow were sufficiently recalled to things present for her to be able to return a coherent answer. When at length, however, she understood what was asked, she granted her permission with quite as much pleasure as Agnes received it. At that moment she could endure nothing but solitude, or Major Allen, and eagerly answered ... "Oh yes, my dear! go, go; I do not want you at all."

A liberated bird is not more quick in reaching the shelter of the desired wood, than was Agnes in making her way from Sion Row to Rodney Place; and so great was her joy at finding herself there, that for the moment she forgot all her sorrows, and talked of the ball as if she had not felt infinitely more pain than pleasure there. As soon as the luncheon was ended, Mrs. Peters and Elizabeth, Mary and Agnes, set off upon their walk, not "over the hills, and far away," as heretofore, but along the well-paved ways that led most certainly to the resorts of their fellow mortals. Lucy and James, having heard that the evening for their music party was fixed at the distance only of one fortnight, declared that it was absolutely necessary to devote the interval to "practice," and therefore they remained at home.

If the plan of Mary Peters was such as her mother had described it, nothing could have been more successful; for even before they reached the library, they met Mr. Stephenson and Colonel Hubert. The moment the former perceived them, he stepped forward, quitting the arm of his friend, who certainly rather relaxed than accelerated his pace, and having paid his compliments with the cordial air of an old acquaintance to Mrs. Peters and Elizabeth, passed them and took his station beside Agnes. Both she and her friend received his eager salutation with smiles: Mary, as we know, had her own motives for this; and Agnes had by no means forgotten how seasonably he had led her off on the preceding evening from her aunt, Major Allen, and the forsaken tea-table. Her bright smile, however, soon faded as she marked the stiff bow by which Colonel Hubert returned Mrs. Peters's civil recognition of him. He too passed the first pair of ladies, and joined himself to the second; but though he bowed to both of them, it seemed that he turned and again took the arm of Stephenson, solely for the purpose of saying to him, "Are you going to give up your walk to the Wells, Frederick?"

"Most decidedly, *mon cher*," was the cavalier reply.

"Then I must wish you good morning, I believe," said Colonel Hubert, attempting to withdraw his arm.

"No, don't," cried the gay young man good-humouredly, and retaining his arm with some show of violence; "I will not let you go without me: you will find nothing there, depend upon it, to reward you on this occasion for your pertinacity of purpose."

Colonel Hubert yielded himself to this wilfulness, and passively, as it seemed, accompanied the party into the library. Nothing could be more agreeable than the animated conversation of young Stephenson: he talked to all the ladies in turn, contrived to discover a multitude of articles of so interesting a kind, that it was necessary they should examine and talk about them; and finally, bringing forward the book of names, fairly beguiled Mrs. Peters and her daughters into something very like a little gossip concerning some among them.

It was while they were thus employed that Colonel Hubert approached Agnes, who, of course, could take no part in it, and said,... "Are you going to remain long at Clifton, Miss Willoughby?"

Agnes blushed deeply as he drew near, and his simple question was answered in a voice so tremulous, that he pitied the agitation (resulting, as he supposed, from their meeting in the morning) which she evinced; and feeling perhaps that she was not to blame because his headstrong friend was determined to fall in love with her, he spoke again, and in a gentler voice said, "I hope you have forgiven me for the blunt advice I ventured to give you this morning."

"Forgiven!" repeated Agnes, looking up at him, and before her glance fell again it was dimmed by a tear. "I can never forget your kindness!" she added, but so nearly in a whisper, that he instantly became aware that her friends had not been made acquainted with the adventure, and that it was not her wish they should be. He therefore said no more on the subject; but, led by some impulse

that seemed not, certainly, to proceed from either unkindness or contempt, he continued to converse with her for several minutes, and long enough indeed to make her very nearly forget the party of friends whose heads continued to be congregated round the librarian's register of the Clifton beau monde.

Frederick Stephenson meanwhile was very ably prosecuting the object he had in view, namely, to establish himself decidedly as an acquaintance of Mrs. Peters; and so perfectly *comme il faut* in all respects was the tone of herself and her daughters, that he was rapidly forgetting such a being as Mrs. Barnaby existed, and solacing his spirit by the persuasion that the only girl he had ever seen whom he could *really* love was surrounded by connexions as elegant and agreeable as his *exigeante* family could possibly require. Nor, to say truth, was his friend greatly behind-hand in the degree of oblivion which he permitted to fall upon his faculties respecting this object of his horror and detestation. It was not very easy, indeed, to remember Mrs. Barnaby, while Agnes, awakened by a question as to what part of England it was in which she had enjoyed the rural liberty of which he had heard her speak, poured forth all her ardent praise on the tranquil beauty of Empton.

"It is not," said she, beguiled, by the attention with which he listened to her, into forgetfulness of the awe he had hitherto inspired,—"it is not so majestic in its beauty as Clifton; we have no mighty rocks at Empton—no winding river that, quietly as it flows, seems to have cut its own path amongst them; but the parsonage is the very perfection of a soft, tranquil, flowery retreat, where neither sorrow nor sin have any business whatever."

"And was Empton parsonage your home, Miss Willoughby?"

"Yes ... for five dear happy years," replied Agnes, in an accent from which all gaiety had fled.

"You were not born at Empton, then?"

"No; I was only educated there; but it was there at least that my heart and mind were born, and I do not believe that I shall ever feel quite at home anywhere else."

"It is rather early for you to say that, is it not?" said Colonel Hubert with a smile more calculated to increase her confidence than to renew her awe.... "May I ask how old you are?"

"I shall be seventeen in August," replied Agnes, blushing at being obliged to confess herself so very young.

"She might be my daughter," thought Colonel Hubert, while a shade of melancholy passed over his countenance which it puzzled Agnes to interpret. But he asked her no more questions; and the conversation seemed languishing, when Frederick Stephenson, beginning to think that it was his turn now to talk to Agnes, and pretty well satisfied, perhaps, that he had made a favourable impression upon the Peters family, left the counter and the subscription-book, and crossed to the place where she had seated herself. Colonel Hubert was still standing by her side, but he instantly made way for his friend; and had he at that moment spoken aloud the thoughts of his heart, he might have been heard to say,—"There is nothing here to justify the rejection of any family ... she is perfect alike in person and in mind ... things must take their course: I will urge his departure no further."

Scarcely, however, had these thoughts made their rapid way across his brain, before his ears were assailed by the sound of a laugh, which he recognised in an instant to be that of Mrs. Barnaby. A flush of heightened colour mounted to his very eyes, and he felt conscience-struck, as if whatever might hereafter happen to Stephenson, he should hold himself responsible for it, because he had mentally given his consent to his remaining where the danger lay. And well might the sound and sight of Mrs. Barnaby overturn all such yielding thoughts. She came more rouged, more ringleted, more bedizened with feathers and flowers, and more loud in voice than ever.... She came, too, accompanied by Major Allen.

No thunder-cloud, sending forth its flashings before it, ever threw a more destructive shadow over the tranquil brightness of a smiling landscape, than did this entrée of the facetious pair over the happy vivacity of the party already in possession of the shop. Mrs. Peters turned very red; Miss Willoughby turned very pale; Mary stopped short in the middle of a sentence, and remained as mute as if she had been shot; even the good-natured Elizabeth looked prim; and the two gentlemen, though in different ways, betrayed an equally strong consciousness of the change that had come over them. Mr. Stephenson put on the hat which he had laid beside him on the counter; and though he drew still nearer to Agnes than before, it was without addressing a word to her. Colonel Hubert immediately passed by them, and left the shop.

This last circumstance was the only one which could at that moment have afforded any relief to Agnes; it at once restored her composure and presence of mind, though it did not quite bring back the happy smiles with which she had been conversing five short minutes before.

"Ah! my sister Peters and the children here!" cried Mrs. Barnaby, flouncing gaily towards them.... "I thought we should meet you.... What beautiful weather, isn't it? How d'ye do, sir? (to Mr. Stephenson). I think you were among our young ladies' partners last night?... Charming ball, wasn't it?... Dear Major Allen, do look at these Bristol stones! ain't they as bright as diamonds?... Well, Agnes, you have had your luncheon, I suppose, with the dear girls, and now you will be ready to go shopping with me. We are going into Bristol, and I will take you with us."

Agnes listened to her doom in silence, and no more thought of appealing from it than the poor

criminal who listens to his sentence from the bench; but Mr. Stephenson turned an imploring look on Mrs. Peters, which spoke so well what he wished to express, that, she exerted herself so far as to say, "We had hoped, Mrs. Barnaby, that you meant to have spared Agnes to us for the rest of the day, and we shall be much obliged if you will leave her with us."

"You are always very kind, dear Margaret," returned the widow, "but I really want Agnes just now.... She shall come to you, however, some other time.... Good-b'ye! good-b'ye!—we have no time to lose.... Come, Agnes, let's be off."

A silent look was all the leave-taking that passed between Agnes and her greatly annoyed friends. Mrs. Barnaby took her arm under her own, and as soon as they quitted the shop bestowed the other on Major Allen; she was in high spirits, which found vent in a loud laugh as soon as they had turned the corner.

"What a stuck-up fellow that great tall Colonel is, Major Allen," said she. "Do you know anything of him?... If I am not greatly mistaken, he is as proud as Lucifer."

"I assure you, if he is proud, my dear madam, it must be a pride of the very lowest and vilest kind, merely derived from the paltry considerations of family and fortune; for, *entre nous*, he is very far from having been a distinguished officer. The Duke of Wellington, indeed, has always been most ridiculously partial to him; but you," lowering his voice, "you are a pretty tolerable judge of what *his* good opinion is worth."

"Yes, yes, Major.... I shall never be taken in there again.... Why, Agnes, how you drag, child! I shall be tired to death before I get to Bristol if you walk so."

"Will the young lady take my other arm?" said the Major.

"Thank you, dear Major!... You are very kind. Go round, Agnes, and take the Major's arm."

"No, I thank you, aunt; I do not want any arm. I will walk beside you, if you please, without taking hold of you at all."

"Nonsense, child!... That will look too particular, Major," ... said the widow, turning to him; upon which, without waiting further parley, Major Allen dropped the arm he held, and gaily placed himself between the two ladies, saying, "Now then, fair ladies, I have an arm for each."

Agnes felt the greatest possible longing to run away; but whether it would have strengthened into a positive resolution to do so, upon once more feeling the touch of the Major's hand, which upon her retreating he very vigorously extended towards her, it is impossible to say, for at that moment the sound of a rapidly-advancing pair of boots was heard on the pavement behind them, and in the next Mr. Stephenson was at her side. He touched his hat to Mrs. Barnaby, and then addressing Agnes said, "If you are going to walk to Bristol, I hope you will permit me to accompany you, ... for I am going there too."

Agnes very frankly replied, "Thank you!" and without a moment's hesitation accepted the arm he offered.

"I am sure you are very obliging, Mr. Stephenson," said Mrs. Barnaby, "and we shall certainly be able to walk with much greater convenience. I think you two had better go before, and then we can see that you don't run off, you know."

This lively sally was followed by a gay little tittering on the part both of the Major and the lady, as they stood still for Mr. Stephenson and the suffering Agnes to pass them.

The young man seemed to have lost all his vivacity: he spoke very little, and even that little had the air of being uttered because he felt obliged to say something. Poor Agnes was certainly in no humour for conversation, and would have rejoiced in his silence, had it not made her feel that whatever might be the motive for his thus befriending her, he derived no pleasure from it. Ere they had walked a mile, however, an accident occurred which effectually roused him from the dejection that appeared to have fallen upon his spirits. A herd of bullocks met them on the road, one of which, over-driven and irritated by a cur that worried him, darted suddenly from the road up to the path, and made towards them with its horns down, and its tail in the air. On seeing this, the young man seized Agnes in his arms, and sprang with her down the bank into the road. The animal, whose object was rather to leave an enemy behind him, than to do battle with any other, passed on towards the Major and his fair companion, who were at a considerable distance behind, leaving Agnes trembling indeed, and somewhat confused, but quite unhurt, and full of gratitude for the prompt activity that had probably saved her. As soon as she had in some degree recovered her composure, she turned back to ascertain how her aunt had fared, Mr. Stephenson assiduously attending her, and they presently came within sight of a spectacle that, had any mirth been in them, must have drawn it forth.

Major Allen, by no means approving the style in which the animal appeared inclined to charge them, had instantly perceived, as Mr. Stephenson had done before, that the only means of getting effectually out of its way was by jumping down the bank, which at that point was considerably higher than it was a few hundred yards farther on; nevertheless, though neither very light nor very active, he might have achieved the descent well enough had he been alone. But what was he to do with Mrs. Barnaby? She uttered a piercing cry, and threw herself directly upon his bosom, exclaiming, "Save me, Major!—save me!"

In this dilemma the Major proved himself an old soldier. To shake off the lady, he felt (in every sense of the word) was quite impossible; but there was no reason that she should stifle him; and therefore grasping her with great ardour, he half carried, half pushed her towards the little precipice, and skilfully placing himself so that, if they fell, she should fall first, he cried out manfully, "Now spring!" And spring they did, but in such a sort, that the lady measured her length in the dust, a circumstance that greatly broke the Major's fall; for, although he made a considerable effort to roll beyond her, he finally pitched with his knees full upon her, thus lessening his descent very materially.

When the young people reached them, they had both recovered their equilibrium, but not their composure. Major Allen was placed with one knee in the dust, and on the other supporting Mrs. Barnaby, who, with her head reclining on his shoulder, seemed to have a very strong inclination to indulge herself with a fainting fit. Her gay dress was lamentably covered with dust, her feathers broken and hanging distressingly over her eyes, and her whole appearance, as well as that of the hero who supported her, forlorn and dejected in the extreme.

"Are you hurt, aunt?" said Agnes, approaching her.

"Hurt!... am I hurt?... Gracious Heaven! what a question! If my life be spared, I shall consider it little short of a miracle.... Oh! Major Allen," she continued with a burst of sobbing, "where should I have now been ... but for you?..."

"Trampled or tossed, Mrs. Barnaby ... trampled or tossed to death decidedly," replied the Major, not wishing to lessen her sense of obligation, yet restrained by the presence of witnesses from expressing his feelings with all the ardour he might otherwise have shown.

"Most true!—most true!" she replied. "Never shall I be able to express the gratitude I feel!"

"Can you not stand up, aunt?" said Agnes, whose cheeks were crimsoned at the absurdity of the scene. "How will you be able to get home if you cannot stand?"

"God knows, child!... God only knows what is yet to become of me.... Oh! Major, I trust myself wholly to you."

Poor Agnes uttered a sound not much unlike a groan, upon which Stephenson, on whom it fell like a spur, urging him to save her from an exhibition so painfully ridiculous, (for it was quite evident that Mrs. Barnaby was not really hurt,) proposed that he should escort Miss Willoughby with all possible speed back to Clifton, and dispatch thence a carriage to bring Mrs. Barnaby home.

Major Allen, who desired nothing more ardently than to get rid of him, seconded the proposal vehemently.

"You are quite right, sir; it is the only thing to be done," he said; "and if you will hasten to perform this, I will endeavour so to place Mrs. Barnaby as to prevent her suffering any great inconvenience while waiting till the carriage shall arrive."

"Ought I not to remain with my aunt?" said Agnes to Mr. Stephenson, but in a whisper that was heard only by himself.

"In my opinion, you certainly ought not," he replied in the same tone. "Believe me," he added, "I have many reasons for saying so."

Nothing but her earnest desire to do that, whatever it might be, which was the least improper, (for that, as she truly felt, was all that was left her,) could have induced Agnes to propose inflicting so terrible a penance on herself; but strangely as she was obliged to choose her counsellor, there was a grave seriousness in his manner which convinced her he had not answered her lightly; and therefore, as her aunt said not a word to detain her, she set off on her return with as much speed as she could use, saying as she departed, "Depend upon it, aunt, there shall be no delay."

Mr. Stephenson again offered her his arm; but she now declined it, and the young man for some time walked silently by her side, wishing to speak to her, yet honestly doubting his own power of doing so with the composure he desired.

At length, however, the silence became embarrassing, and he broke it by saying, with something of abruptness,—

"Will you forgive me, Miss Willoughby, if I venture to forget for a moment how short a time it is since I have had the happiness of knowing you, ... will you forgive me if I speak to you like a friend?"

"Indeed I will, and be very thankful too," replied Agnes composedly, ... for his manner had taught her to feel assured that she had no cause to fear him.

"You are very kind," he resumed, with some little embarrassment; "but I feel that it is taking an almost unwarrantable liberty; and were it not that this walk offers an opportunity which I think I ought not to lose, I might perhaps endeavour to say what I wish to Mrs. Peters.... I allude to Major Allen, Miss Willoughby! I wish you could lead your aunt to understand that he is not a person fit for your society. Though he is probably a stranger here, he is well known elsewhere as a needy gambler, and, in short, a most unprincipled character in every way."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed Agnes, "what shall I do?"

"Can you not venture to hint this to your aunt?" said he.

"She would probably be very angry," replied Agnes with spontaneous frankness; "but what is worse than that, she would, I know, insist upon my telling her where I heard it."

"Say that you heard it from me, Miss Willoughby," replied the young man.

New as Agnes was to the world and its ways, she felt that there was something very honourable and frank in this proceeding, and it produced so great a degree of confidence in return, that she answered in a tone of the most unembarrassed friendliness.

"Will you give me leave, Mr. Stephenson, to repeat this to Mrs. Peters and Mary?... They will know so much better than I do what use to make of it."

"Indeed I think you are right," he replied eagerly, "and then the anger that you speak of will not fall on you."

"It will not in that case, I think, fall on any one," said Agnes. "My aunt has fortunately a great respect for Mrs. Peters; and if anybody can have influence over her mind, she may."

Can it be wondered at if, after this, the conversation went on improving in its tone of ease and confidence? It had begun, on the side of the young man, with a very sincere resolution not to suffer his admiration for his lovely companion to betray him into a serious attachment to one so unfortunately connected; but, before they reached Sion Row, he had arrived at so perfect a conviction that he could nowhere find so pure-minded and right-thinking a being to share his fortune, and to bless his future life, that he only refrained from telling her so from a genuine feeling of respect, which perhaps the proudest peeress in the land might have failed to inspire.

"No," thought he, "it is not now, while she is compelled by accident to walk beside me, that I will pour out my heart and all its love before her, but the time shall come...."

Agnes, ere they parted again, appealed to him for his opinion whether she *ought* to go in the carriage sent to meet her aunt.

"No, indeed, I think not," he replied. "Has she no maid, Miss Willoughby, who could go for her?"

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Agnes, greatly relieved; "I can send Jerningham."

"Sweet creature!" whispered the enamoured Frederick to his heart, "what a delicious task to advise, to guide, to cherish such a being as that!"

His respectful bow at parting, the earnest, silent, lingering look he fixed upon her fair face ere he turned from the door that was opened to receive her, might have said much to a heart on the *qui vive* to meet his, half way; but Agnes did not observe it; she was looking up towards the windmill, and thinking of her early morning walk and its termination.

CHAPTER VI.

THE READER IS LET INTO A SECRET, AND THE YOUNG LADY'S PLOT PROVED TO BE OF NO AVAIL.—A JUDICIOUS MODE OF OBTAINING INFORMATION.—A HAPPY AND VERY WELL-TIMED MEETING.

"Well, Mary!... I suppose you are wishing yourself joy on the success of your plottings and plannings," said Mrs. Peters to her daughter about ten days after this memorable walk on the Bristol road, for during that interval much had occurred that seemed to promise success to her wishes. In fact, Frederick Stephenson had quietly become a regular visitor at Rodney Place, and the power of Agnes to accept the constant invitations which brought her there likewise increased in exact proportion to the widow's growing delight in the *tête-à-tête* visits of the Major. The friendly hint of Mr. Stephenson had produced no effect whatever, excepting indeed that it tended greatly to increase the tone of friendly intercourse between the Peters family and himself. He had released Agnes from the task of mentioning the matter at all, and took an early opportunity of confiding to Mrs. Peters his ideas on the subject. She received the communication with the gratitude it really deserved, but confessed that Mrs. Barnaby was a person so every way disagreeable to her, that the task of attempting to guide her would be extremely repugnant to her feelings.

"But Miss Willoughby!..." said Frederick; "it is for her sake that one would wish to keep this odious woman from exposing herself to ruin and disgrace, if possible."

"And for her sake I will do it," answered Mrs. Peters. "She is as deserving of all care as her aunt is unworthy of it."

This reply convinced Mr. Stephenson that Mrs. Peters was one of the most discerning as well as most amiable women in the world, but no other advantage arose from the praiseworthy determination of the "dear Margaret;" for when that lady said to her gravely, at the very first

opportunity she could find,—

"Pray, Mrs. Barnaby, do you know anything of that Major Allen's private character?" The answer she received was,— "Yes, Mrs. Peters, a great deal, ... and more, probably, than any other person whatever at Clifton; ... and I know, too, that there are agents—paid, hired agents—employed in circulating the most atrocious lies against him."

"I am not one of them, I assure you, madam," said Mrs. Peters, abruptly leaving her seat, and determined never again to recur to the subject; a comfortable resolution, to which she reconciled her conscience by remembering the evident devotion of Mr. Stephenson to Agnes, the symptoms of which were daily becoming less and less equivocal.

It was within a few hours after this short colloquy with the widow, that Mrs. Peters thus addressed her daughter, "Well, Mary!... I suppose you are wishing yourself joy on the success of your plottings and plannings."

"Why, yes," ... replied Mary; "I think we are getting on pretty well, and unless I greatly mistake, it will be the fault of Agnes, and of no one else, if she suffers much more from being under the protection of our precious aunt Barnaby."

Mrs. Peters and Mary were perfectly right in their premises, but utterly wrong in their conclusion. Mr. Stephenson was indeed passionately in love with Agnes, and had already fully made up his mind to propose to her, so soon as their acquaintance had lasted long enough to render such a step decently permissible, which, according to his calculations, would be in about a fortnight after he had first danced with her. In short, he was determined to find a favourable opportunity, on the evening of Mrs. Peters's promised music party, to declare his passion to her; for he had already learned to know that few occasions offer, in the ordinary intercourse of society, more favourable for a *tête-à-tête* than a crowded concert-room.

Thus far, therefore, the observations and reasonings of Agnes's watchful friends were perfectly correct. But, alas! they saw only the surface of things. There was an under current running the other way of which they never dreamed, and of which, even had it been laid open to their view, they would neither have been able to comprehend or believe the power. As to the heart of Agnes, by some strange fatality they had never taken it into their consideration at all, or at any rate had conceived it so beyond all doubt inclined the way they wished, that no single word or thought amidst all their deliberations was ever bestowed upon it... But the heart of Agnes was fixedly, devotedly, and for ever given to another.

No wonder, indeed, that such an idea had never suggested itself to her friends, ... for who could that other be?... Could it be James, her first partner, her first walking companion, and very nearly the first young man she had ever spoken to in her life?... Assuredly not; for had she been asked, she could not have told whether his eyes were blue or black, hardly whether he were short or tall, and certainly not whether she had seen him twenty times, or only twelve, since their first meeting.

Who, then, could it be? There was but one other person whom the accidents of the last important fortnight had thrown constantly in her way; and Mrs. Peters and Mary would as soon have thought that the young Agnes had conceived a passion for the Pope, as for the stately, proud, reserved Colonel Hubert.

Yet "she could an if she would" have told her how far above all other mortals his noble head rose proudly, ... she could have told that on his lofty brow her soul read volumes, ... she could have told that in the colour of his thoughtful eye, the hue of heaven seemed deepened into black by the rich lash that shaded it... All this she could have told; and, moreover, could have counted, with most faithful arithmetic, not only how many times she had seen him, but how many times his eyes had turned towards her, how many times he had addressed a word to her, how many smiles had been permitted to cheer her heart, how many frowns had chilled her spirit as they passed over his countenance... Little could any one have guessed all this, but so it was; and Frederick Stephenson, with all his wealth, his comeliness, and kind heart to boot, had no more chance of being accepted as a husband by the poor, dependant Agnes Willoughby than the lowest hind that ploughs the soil by the proudest lady that owns it.

Meanwhile my real heroine, the Widow Barnaby, thought little of Agnes, or any other lady but herself, and less still perhaps of Mr. Stephenson, or any other gentleman but the Major. The affair on the Bristol road, though injurious to her dress, and rather dusty and in some degree disagreeable at the time, had wonderfully forced on the tender intimacy between them. Yet Mrs. Barnaby was not altogether so short-sighted as by-standers might suppose; and though she freely permitted herself the pleasure of being made love to, she determined to be very sure of the Major's rent-roll before she bestowed herself and her fortune upon him; for, notwithstanding her flirting propensities, the tender passion had ever been secondary in her heart to a passion for wealth and finery; and not the best-behaved and most discreet dowager that ever lived, was more firmly determined to take care of herself, and make a good bargain, "*if ever she married again*," than was our flighty, flirting Widow Barnaby.

She was fully aware that many difficulties lay in the way of her getting the information she wanted. In the first place, she had no acquaintance except the Peterses, who were his declared

enemies; and she loved both justice and the Major too well to let his happiness (which was now avowedly dependant upon her accepting his hand) rest on such doubtful testimony.... And secondly, there was considerable caution required in the manner of asking questions *so special* as those she wished to propose, lest they might reach the ears of her lover; and it was necessary, if the tender affair finally terminated in wedlock, that it should be brought about without any appearance on her side of such sordid views, lest a suspicion might arise on his that her own wealth was not quite so great as she wished him to believe. Respecting settlements, she had already decided upon what she should propose ... she would make over the whole of her fortune unconditionally to him, provided he would make her a settlement of one poor thousand a-year for life in return.

Some days passed away after the Major had actually proposed and been conditionally accepted ... in case a few weeks' longer acquaintance confirmed their affection ... before Mrs. Barnaby had discovered any method by which she might satisfy her anxious curiosity respecting the actual state of Major Allen's affairs. During this time she was willing to allow, even to herself, that her affections were very deeply engaged, but yet she steadfastly adhered to her resolution of not bestowing upon him the blessing of her hand, till she learned from some one besides himself that he was a man of large fortune.

At length, when almost in despair of meeting with any one whom she could trust on such a subject, it occurred to her that Betty Jacks, who had not only continued to grow till she was nearly as tall as her mistress, but had made such proficiency in the ways of the world since she left Silverton, as rendered her exceedingly acute, might make acquaintance with Major Allen's groom, and learn from him what was generally considered to be the amount of his master's income. The idea had hardly struck her before she determined to put it in execution; and having rung the bell, Betty, after the usual interval that it took her to climb from the kitchen, stood before her.

"Come in, Jerningham," said Mrs. Barnaby, "and shut the door. I have something particular that I wish to say to you."

Betty anticipated a scolding, and looked sulky.

"I am very well satisfied with you, Jerningham," resumed the lady, "and I called you up chiefly to say that you may have the cap with the pink ribbons that I put off yesterday morning."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Betty, turning to go.

"Stay a moment, Jerningham: I have something I want to talk to you about."

Betty advanced, and took hold of the back of a chair to support her lengthy person, a habit which she had fallen into from the frequent long confidential communications her lady was accustomed to hold with her.

"Pray, Jerningham, do you know Major Allen's groom?" inquired Mrs. Barnaby in a gentle voice.

"Lor! no, ma'am; how should I come for to know his groom?"

"Nay, my good girl, there would be no harm in it if you did. I have remarked that he is a particularly smart, respectable-looking servant, and I must say I think it would be quite as well if such a good-looking girl as you did make acquaintance with the servant of a gentleman like Major Allen; it would give you a proper protector and companion, Jerningham, in a Sunday evening walk, or anything of that kind; and really it looks as if he did not think you worth noticing, considering how intimate the two families are become."

"Oh! for that, ma'am, I don't believe the young man would have any objection; and I don't mean to say as how I never spoke to him," replied Betty.

"Very well, Jerningham, that is just what I wanted to know; because, if you are sufficiently acquainted to speak, such a sharp clever girl as you are, would find it easy enough to improve the intimacy, and that's what I want you to do, Jerningham. And then I want you, some fine evening, perhaps, after I have had my tea, to let him take a walk with you; and when you are talking of one thing and the other, I want you to find out whether his master is reckoned a rich gentleman or a poor one.... Do you understand, Jerningham?"

Betty Jack's black eyes kindled into very keen intelligence at this question, and she answered with very satisfactory vivacity, "Yes, ma'am, I understands."

"Well, then, set about it as soon as you can; and remember, Jerningham, if he asks any questions about me, that you make him understand my fortune is a great deal larger than it appears to be, which it really is, you know,—only just now I am travelling quietly by way of a change. If you do all this cleverly and well, I will give you my old parasol, which only wants a stitch or two to make it quite fit to use."

"Thankee, ma'am.... I could find him in a minute at the beer-shop, if you like it."

"Well, then, do so, my good girl, and you may say, if you will, that you could take a walk with him this evening."

The arrangement was probably made without great difficulty, for on the following morning Betty was ready with her report. Any detailed account of the interview between the Major's man and

the widow's woman would be unnecessary, as the girl's account of it was what principally affected the interests of our widow, and that shall be faithfully given.

Betty Jacks made her appearance in the drawing-room as soon as Agnes had left it after breakfast, with that look of smirking confidence which usually enlivens the countenance of a *soubrette* when she knows she has something to say worth listening to.

Her anxious mistress instantly saw that the commission had not been in vain.

"Well, Jerningham!" she cried with a deep respiration that was more like panting than sighing, "what news do you bring me?"

"All that is best and honourablest for the Major, ma'am. His man William says that he is a noble gentleman every way, with plenty of money to spend, and plenty of spirit to spend it with; and that happy will the lady be who wins his heart, and comes to the glory and honour of being his wife."

"That is enough, Jerningham," said the happy Mrs. Barnaby.... "You seem to have behaved extremely well, and with a great deal of cleverness; and as I see I may trust to your good sense and prudent behaviour, I will give you leave to go to the play at Bristol, and will give you a gallery ticket any evening that the Major's worthy and faithful servant may like to take you.... Indeed, I should not mind giving him a gallery ticket too, and so you may tell him."

Betty Jacks turned her head to look out of the window, and a furtive sort of smile kindled in her eye for a moment; but she thanked her mistress for her kindness, and then made her exit with great decorum.

It was just two days after this that Mrs. Barnaby yielded to Major Allen's request that she would taste the air of a delicious morning by taking a little turn with him in the Mall. Twice had they enjoyed the sunny length of the pavement, indulging in that sort of tender conversation which their now fully avowed mutual attachment rendered natural, when, in making their third progress, they were met by a gentleman somewhat younger than the Major, but with much his style of dress and whiskered fashion, who, the instant he saw Major Allen, uttered a cry of joy, ran towards him, and caught his hand, which he not only shook affectionately, but even pressed to his heart with an air of the most touching friendship.

"My dearest Maintry!" exclaimed the Major, "what an unexpected pleasure is this!... When did you reach England?... What brings you here?..." Then, suddenly recollecting himself, he turned to Mrs. Barnaby, and entreated her forgiveness for the liberty he had taken in thus stopping her.

"But I well know," he added, "that your generous heart will find an excuse for me in its own warm feelings, when I tell you that Captain Maintry is the oldest friend I have in the world—the oldest and the dearest.... We have served together, Mrs. Barnaby ... we have fought side by side through many a well-contested field ... and since universal peace has sheathed our swords, we have shared each other's hospitality, hunted on each other's grounds, studied nature and mankind together, and, in a word, have lived and loved as brothers, ... and yet we have now been parted for two years. A large property has devolved to him from his mother's family in Westphalia, and the necessity of attending to his farms and his signioral privileges, has separated him thus long from his friend.... You will forgive me, then, my beloved Martha!... Maintry ... from thee I can hide nothing!... you have told me a thousand times that I should never be brought to resign my freedom to mortal woman.... Look here!... and tell me if you can wonder that such vaunting independence can attach to me no longer?"

Nothing could be more kind than Mrs. Barnaby's reply to this, nothing more gracious than Captain Maintry's flattering answer; and the next minute they were all walking on together as if already united by the tenderest ties. Many interesting questions and answers passed between the two gentlemen concerning absent friends of high rank and great distinction, as well as some good-natured friendly questions on the part of Captain Maintry relative to many of the Major's principal tenants in Yorkshire, as honourable to the kind feelings of the inquirer as to the good conduct and respectability of the worthy individuals inquired for.

After all this had lasted most agreeably for some time, Captain Maintry suddenly paused, and said to his friend,—

"My dear Allen, the pleasure of seeing you, and the unexpected introduction to this honoured lady, have together turned my brain, I believe, or I should have told you at once that I have brought letters from Prince Hursteinberg for you which require an immediate answer. I never heard one man speak of another as he does of you, Allen; he declares you are the most noble character he ever met with in any country, and that is no light thing for such a man as the Prince to say. His letter is to ask whether you can spare him a hunting mare of your own breeding, and three couple of those famous pointers for which your principal estate is so celebrated. He made me promise that I would see that you sent off an answer by the first post, for if you cannot oblige him in this, he must apply elsewhere. You know his passion for *la chasse*, and he must not be disappointed. Come, my dear fellow ... tear yourself away from this attractive lady for one short hour, and then the business will be done."

"Certainly not till I have seen Mrs. Barnaby safely home," replied the Major gravely.

"Then you will be too late for the post.... We have told Mrs. Barnaby that we are brothers ... let her see you treat me as such.... Trust her to my care; I will escort her to her own home while you

go for an hour or so to yours. I have left the packet with your faithful William.... By the by, I am glad to see that you still retain that capital good fellow about you.... An honest servant is worth his weight in gold, Mrs. Barnaby.... There, Allen, you see, I am in possession of the lady's arm; so you may be off, and I will join you as soon as I have escorted her to her quarters."

"Most cordially do I congratulate my friend, madam," said Captain Maintry, as soon as Major Allen had taken his leave, "on the happy prospects that have opened before him.... To see you, and not appreciate his felicity, is impossible. Friendship may conquer envy, but it cannot render us blind!... Nor is it Major Allen alone whom I must congratulate; ... permit me to indulge my feelings towards that long-trying and dearly-valued friend, by telling you, Mrs. Barnaby, that you are a very happy woman indeed!... Such worth, such honour, are rarely—alas! too rarely—met with in man. And then he has such a multitude of minor good qualities, as I may call them, such an absence of all ostentation ... nobody would believe from his manner of living that he possessed one of the finest estates in Yorkshire ... yet such is the fact.... His courage, too, is transcendently great, and his temper the sweetest in the world!... Yet this man, Mrs. Barnaby, great and good as he is, has not been able to escape enemies.... You have no idea of the lies that have been put in circulation concerning him by those who envy his reputation, and hate his noble qualities."

"I know it, Captain Maintry, but too well," replied Mrs. Barnaby; ... "but a woman who could be influenced by such idle and malevolent reports, would be unworthy to become his wife; and for myself, I can assure you that, far from its producing the desired effect upon me, such malignity only binds me to him more closely."

"There spoke a heart worthy of him!" fervently exclaimed the Captain.... "And I doubt not, my dearest madam, that these generous feelings will be put to the proof, for ... I blush for my species as I say it ... there are many who, when they hear of his approaching happiness, will put every sort of wickedness in action to prevent it."

This conversation, with a few little amiable sentiments in addition from both parties, brought them to the door of the widow's home, when Captain Maintry resisted her invitation to enter upon the plea that he must devote every moment he could command to his friend, as unhappily he was obliged to return to Bath, on business of the greatest importance, with as little delay as possible.

After this it was quite in vain that even the amiable, soft-hearted Elizabeth,—who had grown exceedingly ashamed, by the by, of her speaking acquaintance with Major Allen,—it was in vain that even she ventured to hint that she believed Major Allen was no longer invited anywhere.... Mrs. Barnaby knew all about it, on better authority than any one else; and she quietly made up her mind to leave Clifton and proceed to Cheltenham as speedily as possible, in order that her marriage, within seven months of her husband's death, might not take place under the immediate observation of his nearest relations.

CHAPTER VII.

TRANSIENT HAPPINESS.—AN ACCIDENT, LEADING TO THE DISCOVERY OF AN UNKNOWN TALENT IN MISS WILLOUGHBY, AND UNEXPECTED APPRECIATION OF IT IN COLONEL HUBERT.—SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PECULIARITIES OF THE FEMALE MIND.

It must be remembered that all these interesting particulars respecting the affairs of Mrs. Barnaby's heart were perfectly unknown both to Agnes and her friends. It had, indeed, been quite as much as the posthumous affection of Mrs. Peters for her brother could achieve, to endure with some appearance of civility the advances of his widow towards intimacy; but to pursue her with attentions when she seemed desirous of escaping them, was quite beyond her strength and courage; so, rejoicing in the effect without investigating the cause, she permitted her to keep herself within the retirement of her own drawing-room without ever seeking the reason of her so doing.

Treacherous as was this interval of calm, it was productive of most exquisite happiness to poor Agnes while it lasted. Delightful walks, abundance of books, lively conversation, and a thousand flattering marks of kindness from everybody who came near her, formed a wonderful contrast to the vulgar brow-beating of her selfish aunt, and even to the best joys of her solitary closet.

But it was an interval delusive in every way. Mrs. Peters had no suspicion that her brother's widow, within seven months after his death, was on the eve of marriage with a pennyless swindler.

Agnes had no suspicion that she was herself desperately in love with Colonel Hubert, or that Mr. Stephenson was desperately in love with her.

Colonel Hubert began to think, that, as he saw Agnes constantly with the Peters family, and no

longer saw Mrs. Barnaby at all, the connexion between them was neither so permanent nor so injurious as he had supposed, and therefore that he would act more prudently by letting matters take their course, than by any further interference; convinced that, if Frederick did choose a wife for himself, instead of permitting his friends to choose for him, he would never find a woman more likely to do him honour than Miss Willoughby. There were, moreover, some other delusions under which he laboured, both as to his own feelings and those of others; but for the present he was destined, like the rest of the party among whom he lived, to remain enveloped in a mist of error and misconception.

Poor Stephenson, more fatally deluded than all of them, guessed not that he was standing on a pinnacle of hope from whence he was soon to be dashed a thousand fathom deep into the whirlpool of despair.... In short, preparations for the music party went on very prosperously, while

"Malignant Fate sat by and smiled"

at all that was to happen before that music party was over.

Mrs. Peters confessed, after a little battling the point with her family, that it would be impossible to avoid sending a card of invitation to Mrs. Barnaby, and sent it was; when, as she said herself, her virtue was rewarded by receiving through Agnes a message in return, expressing much regret that a previous engagement must prevent its being accepted.

On the morning of the day fixed for this party Agnes remained in her closet at least one hour beyond the time at which it was now her daily custom to set off from Rodney Place, some little preparation for her evening appearance requiring her attention. When at length she arrived there she found a note desiring her to sit down, and wait for the return of the ladies, who, after remaining at home till beyond her usual time of coming, had all driven to Bristol to execute sundry errands of importance.

On reading this note, Agnes walked up stairs to the drawing-room, which she found uncarpeted, in preparation for the music of the evening, and a grand pianoforte standing in the middle of it. Now it so happened that, notwithstanding the constant visits of Agnes in Rodney Place, and the general love of music which reigned there, she had never been asked if she could play or sing, and had never by any chance done either. There are some houses, and very pleasant ones, too, in their way, in which music is considered by the family as a sort of property belonging of right to them, *en portage* with professors indeed, but with which no one else can interfere,—at least within their precincts, without manifest impertinence. The house of Mrs. Peters was one of these. James, who, as we have seen, was an exceedingly amiable young man, never did anything from morning to night, if he could help it, but practise on the violoncello, and sing duets with his sister Lucy. Miss Peters was the only one who shared not in the talent or the monopoly, for Elizabeth played the harp, and Lucy sang and accompanied herself on the piano during by far the greater part of every day. Agnes was delighted by their performance; and though she longed once more to touch the keys herself, and perhaps to hear her own sweet voice again, she had never found courage sufficient to enable her to ask permission to do so.

When, therefore, she found herself perfectly alone, with the tempting instrument before her, and a large collection of music placed beside it, she eagerly applied her hand to try if it were open: it yielded to her touch, and in a moment her hands were running over the keys with that species of ecstasy which a young enthusiast in the science always feels after having been long deprived of the use of an instrument.

Agnes played correctly, and with great taste and feeling, but she could by no means compete with Lucy Peters as an accomplished pianiste; she had enjoyed neither equal practice nor equal instruction. But there was one branch of the "gay science" in which she excelled her far beyond the reach of comparison, for Agnes had a voice but rarely equalled in any country. Of the pre-eminence of her power she was herself profoundly ignorant, and if she preferred hearing her own glorious notes to those of any other voice which had yet reached her, she truly believed it was because there was such a very great pleasure in hearing one's-self sing,—an opinion that had been considerably strengthened by her observations on Lucy.

It was with very great delight, unquestionably, that Agnes now listened to the sounds she made. The size of the room, the absence of the carpet, the excellence and the isolation of the instrument, were all advantages she had not enjoyed before, and her pleasure was almost childish in its ecstasy. She let her rich voice run, like the lark's, into wanton playfulness of ornament, and felt her own power with equal joy and surprise.

But when this first out-pouring of her youthful spirit was over, she more soberly turned to the volumes beside her; and hesitating a moment between the gratification of exploring new regions of harmony with an uncertain step, and that of going through, with all the advantages of her present accessories, what had so often enchanted her without them, she chose the last; and fixing upon a volume of Handel, which had been the chief source from which the old-fashioned but classic taste of Mr. Wilmot had made her master draw her subjects of study, she more soberly set about indulging herself with one of his best-loved airs. The notes of "Angels ever bright and fair," then swelled gloriously through the unpeopled room, and "Lord, remember David," followed.

After this she "changed her hand," and the sparkling music of Comus seemed to make the air glad, as she carolled through its delicious melodies.

Amidst all this luxury of sound, it is not surprising that the knocker or the bell should give signal either of the return of the family, or the approach of some visiter, without the fair minstrel's being aware of it. This in fact occurred, and with a result that, had she been in the secret, would have converted the clear notes of her happy song into inarticulate "suspitations of forced breath."

Colonel Hubert had promised his friend Frederick, when they parted at the breakfast-table, to join him at Rodney Place, as he had often within the last few days done before, for the purpose of joining the party in their usual morning walk. But Frederick had arrived there so early, that he had handed Mrs. Peters and her daughters into their carriage when they set off for Bristol, and then turned from the door in despair of seeing Agnes for some hours.

Having sought his friend Hubert, and missed him, he betook himself to a gallop on the downs by way of beguiling the time till two o'clock, when he intended to make another attempt to meet her, by joining the luncheon party on Mrs. Peters's return. Colonel Hubert, meanwhile, knocked at that lady's door exactly at the moment when the happy performer in the drawing-room was giving full license to her magnificent voice in a passage of which he had never before felt the power and majesty.

Colonel Hubert stopped short in the midst of the message he was leaving; and the butler who opened the door to him, and who by this time knew him as one of the most honoured guests of the mansion, stepped back smiling into the hall,—a sort of invitation for him to enter, which he had no inclination to refuse. He accordingly stepped in, and the door was closed behind him.

"Pray, who is it that is singing?" inquired the Colonel, as soon as the strain ended.

"I think, sir, it must be Miss Willoughby, for I have let in nobody else since the ladies went," replied the man.

"Miss Willoughby!" repeated Colonel Hubert unconsciously; "Miss Willoughby!... Impossible!"

"I think, sir, by the sound," rejoined the servant, "that one of the drawing-room doors must be open; and if you would please to walk up, Colonel, you might hear it quite plain without disturbing her."

If Colonel Hubert had a weakness, it was his unbounded love for music, though even here he had proved his power of conquering inclination when he thought it right to do so. When quite a young man he had been tempted by this passion to give so much time to the study of the violin, as to interfere materially with all other pursuits. A friend, greatly his senior, and possessing his highest esteem, pointed out to him very strongly the probable effect of this upon his future career. The next time the beloved professor arrived to give Colonel Hubert a lesson, he made him a present of his violin, and gave up the pursuit for ever ... but not the love for it ... that Nature had implanted beyond the power of will to eradicate.

In short, this invitation from Mrs. Peters's butler was too tempting to be resisted, and nodding his approval of it to the man, he walked softly up the stairs, and found, as that sagacious person had foreseen, that the door of the back drawing-room was open. Colonel Hubert entered very cautiously, for the folding-doors between the two apartments were partly open also, but he was fortunate enough to glide unseen behind one of its large *battants*, the rising hinges of which were in such a position as to permit him, without any danger of being discovered, to see as well as hear the unsuspecting Agnes.

Poor girl! could she have been conscious of this, her agitation would have amounted to agony; and yet no imaginable combination of circumstances could have been so favourable to the first, the dearest, the most secret wish of her heart ... which was, that when she lost sight of him, which she must soon do,—as she well believed, for ever,—he might not think her too young, too trifling, too contemptible, ever to recall her to his memory again.

There was, perhaps, no great danger of this before; but now it could neither be hoped nor feared that Colonel Hubert should ever forget what he, during these short moments, heard and saw. There is perhaps no beautiful woman who sings well, who would not appear to greater advantage, if thus furtively looked at and listened to, than when performing, conscious of the observation of all around her. But to Agnes this advantage was in the present instance great indeed, for never before had he seen her beautiful countenance in the full play of bright intelligence and unrestrained enthusiasm, ... and never had he imagined that she could sing at all! She was lovely, radiant, inspired; and Colonel Hubert was in a fair way of forgetting equally that she was the chosen of his friend, the niece of Mrs. Barnaby, and that he was just twenty years her senior, when the house-door was assailed by the footman's authoritative rap, and the moment after the ladies' voices, as they ran up the stairs, effectually awakened him to the realities of his situation.

He now for the first time felt conscious that this situation had been obtained by means not perfectly justifiable, and that an apology was certainly called for, and must be made. He therefore retraced his steps, but with less caution, through the still open door; and meeting Mrs. Peters just as she reached the top of the stairs, said in a voice, perhaps somewhat less steady than usual,—

"Will you forgive me, Mrs. Peters, and plead for my forgiveness elsewhere, when I confess to you

that I have stolen up stairs, and hid myself for at least half an hour in your back drawing-room, for the purpose of hearing Miss Willoughby sing?... She is herself quite ignorant of this *délit*; ... and when you pronounce to her my guilt, I hope, at the same time, you will recommend me to mercy."

"Miss Willoughby singing!" exclaimed Mrs. Peters; "surely you must be mistaken, Colonel Hubert.... Agnes never sang in her life."

"Agnes singing!... Oh no!..." cried Lucy; "that is quite impossible, I assure you."

"And what says the young lady herself?" replied Colonel Hubert, as Agnes came forward to meet her friends.

But she was assailed with such a clamorous chorus of questions, that it was some time before she in the least understood what had happened. To the reiterated.... "Have you really been singing, Agnes?..." "Do you really sing?..." "How is it possible we never found it out?..." and the like; she answered quietly enough, ... "I sing a little, and I have been trying to amuse myself while waiting for you." But when Mrs. Peters laughingly added, "And do you know, my dear, that Colonel Hubert has been listening to you from the back drawing-room all the time?" all semblance of composure vanished. She first coloured violently, and then turned deadly pale; and, totally unable to answer, sat down on the nearest chair instinctively, to prevent herself from falling, but with little or no consciousness of what she was about.

Colonel Hubert watched her with an eye which seemed bent upon reading every secret of the heart that so involuntarily betrayed its own agitation; but what he saw, or thought he saw there, seemed infectious, for he, too, lost all presence of mind; and quickly approaching her with heightened colour, and a voice trembling from irrepressible feeling, he said,—

"Have I offended you?... Forgive me, oh! forgive me!"

There was a world of eloquence in the look with which she met his eyes; innocent, unpractised, unconscious as it was, it raised a tumult in the noble soldier's breast which it cost many a day's hard struggle afterwards to bring to order. But nobody saw it—nobody guessed it. The whole bevy of kind-hearted ladies were filled, from the "crown to the toe," with the hope and belief that Frederick Stephenson and Agnes Willoughby were born for each other, and they explained all the agitation they now witnessed by saying,—

"Did any one ever see so shy a creature!"—"How foolish you are to be frightened about it, Agnes;" and ... "Come, my dear child, get the better of this foolish terror; and if you can sing, let us have the pleasure of hearing you."

"That's right, mamma!" said Lucy laughing; "make her sing one song before we go down to luncheon.... It is not at all fair that Colonel Hubert should be the only person in the secret."

"Sing us a song at once—there's a dear girl!" said Mrs. Peters, seating herself upon a sofa.

"Indeed, indeed, ma'am, I cannot sing!" replied Agnes, clasping her hands as if begging for her life.

"Upon my word, this is a very pretty mystery," said Mary. "The gentleman declares that he has been listening to her singing this half hour, and the lady protests that she cannot sing at all. Permit me, mamma, to examine the parties face to face. If I understand you rightly, Colonel Hubert, you stated positively that you heard Miss Willoughby sing. Will you give me leave to ask you in what sort of manner she sang?"

"In a manner, Miss Peters," replied Colonel Hubert, endeavouring to recover his composure, "that I have seldom or never heard equalled in any country.... She sings most admirably."

"Good, very good," said Mary; "a perfectly clear and decisive evidence. And now, Miss Willoughby, give me leave to question you. If I mistake not, you told us about five minutes ago that you possessed not the power of singing in any manner at all?"

"Not at this moment, Mary, certainly," replied Agnes rallying, and infinitely relieved by perceiving that the overwhelming emotion under which she had very nearly fainted, had neither been understood nor even remarked by any one.

"Then will you promise," said Lucy with *tant soit peu* of new-born rivalry, "will you promise to sing for us to-night?"

"You do not mean at your concert, do you, Lucy?" replied Agnes, laughing.

"And why not?" said Lucy. "Colonel Hubert declares that you sing admirably."

"Colonel Hubert is very kind to say so," answered Agnes, while rather more than her usual delicate bloom returned to her cheeks; "but he would probably change his opinion were he to hear me sing before a large party."

"I am too hungry to battle the point now, Agnes," said Mrs. Peters, "so let us come down to luncheon; but remember, my dear, if you really can sing, if it be only some easy trifling ballad, I shall not take it well of you if you refuse, for I am sorry to say there is a terrible falling off among our performers. I find three excuses sent since I went out; and I met Miss Roberts just now, our prima donna, after Lucy, who says she is so hoarse that she doubts if she shall be able to sing a

note."

This was said as the party descended the stairs, so that Agnes escaped without being obliged to answer; at which she greatly rejoiced, as refusal or acquiescence seemed alike impossible.

Colonel Hubert stopped at the door of the dining-room, wished the party good morning, and persisted in making his retreat, though much urged by Mrs. Peters to join their meal. But he was in no mood for it—he wanted to be alone—he wanted in solitude to question, and, if possible, to understand his own feelings; and with one short look at Agnes he left them, slipped a crown into the hand of the butler who opened the door for him, and set off for a long walk over Durdham Downs, taking, as it happened, exactly the same path as that in which he had met Agnes a fortnight before.

As soon as he was gone, another rather clamorous assault was made on Agnes upon the subject of her having so long kept her power of singing a secret from them all.

"I cannot forgive you for not having at least told me of it," said Mary.

"And what was there to tell, my dearest Mary? You that are used to such playing as that of Elizabeth and Lucy, would have had fair cause to laugh at me, had I volunteered to amuse you in their stead."

"I don't know how that may be," said Lucy; "what Colonel Hubert talked about was your singing. Do you think you can sing as well as me?"

"It is a difficult question to answer, Lucy," replied Agnes with the most ingenuous innocence; "but perhaps I might, one of these days, if I were as well instructed as you are."

"Well, my dear, that is confessing something, at any rate," said Lucy, slightly colouring. "I am sure I should be very happy to have you in a duet with me, only I suppose you have not been taught to take a second."

"Oh yes!... I think I could sing second," replied Agnes with great simplicity; "but I have not been much used to it, because in all our duets Miss Wilmot always took the second part."

"And who is Miss Wilmot, my dear?" said Mrs. Peters.

"The daughter of the clergyman, mamma, where Agnes was educated," replied Mary.

"Here comes Mr. Stephenson," exclaimed Mrs. Peters gaily. "Now, Agnes, you positively must go up stairs again, and let us hear what you can do. I shall be quite delighted for Mr. Stephenson to hear you sing, if you really have a voice, for I have repeatedly heard him speak with delight of his sister, Lady Stephenson's, singing."

"Then I am sure that is a reason for never letting him hear mine," said Agnes, who was beginning to feel very restless, and longing as ardently for the solitude of her closet, in order to take a review of all the events of the morning, as Colonel Hubert for the freedom of the Downs. But the friends around her were much too kind and much too dear for any whims or wishes of her own to interfere with what they desired; and when, upon the entrance of Frederick, they all joined in beseeching her to give them one song, she yielded, and followed meekly and obediently to the pianoforte.

She certainly did not sing now as she had done before; the fervour, the enthusiasm was passed; yet, nevertheless, the astonishment and delight of her auditors were unbounded. Praises and reproaches were blended with the thanks of her female friends, who, forgetting that they had never invited her performance, seemed to think her having so long concealed her talent a positive injury and injustice. But in the raptures of Frederick Stephenson there was no mixture of reproach; he seemed rapt in an ecstasy of admiration and love, the exact amount of which was pretty fairly appreciated by every one who listened to him except herself. A knavish speech sleeps not so surely in a foolish ear, as a passionate rhapsody in one that is indifferent. Our Agnes was by no means dull of apprehension on most occasions; but the incapacity she shewed for understanding the real meaning of nineteen speeches out of every twenty addressed to her by Frederick, was remarkable. It is probable, indeed, that indifference alone would hardly have sufficed to constitute a defence so effectual against all the efforts he made to render his feelings both intelligible and acceptable; pre-occupation of heart and intellect may account for it better. But whatever the cause of this insensibility, it certainly existed, and in such a degree as to render this enforced exhibition, and all the vehement praises that followed it, most exceedingly irksome. A greater proof of this could hardly be given than by her putting a stop to it at last by saying,—

"If you really wish me to sing a song to-night, my dear Mrs. Peters, you must please to let me go now, or I think I shall be so hoarse as to make it impossible."

This little stratagem answered perfectly, and at once brought her near to the solitude for which she was pining.

"Wish you to sing to-night, *petite?*..." said Mrs. Peters, clapping her little hands with delight ... "I rather think I shall.... I have had the terror of Mrs. Armstrong before my eyes for the last fortnight, and I think, Mary, that we have a novelty here that may save us from the faint praise usually accorded by her connoisseur-ship...."

"I imagine we have, mamma," replied Mary, who was in every way delighted by the discovery of

this unknown talent in her favourite. "But Agnes is right; she must really sing no more now.... You have had no walk to-day, Agnes, have you?" kindly adding, "if you like it, I will put on my bonnet again and take a stroll with you."

Agnes blushed when she replied,—“No, I have not time to walk to-day.... I must go home now;” much as she might have done if, instead of intending to take a ramble with her thoughts, she had been about to enjoy a *tête-à-tête* promenade with the object of them.

"At least we will walk home with you," replied her friend; and accordingly the two eldest girls and Mr. Stephenson accompanied her to Sion Row.

Ungrateful Agnes!... It was with a feeling of joy that made her heart leap that she watched the departure of her kind friends, and of him too who would have shed his blood for her with gladness ... in order that in silence and solitude she might live over again the moments she had passed with Hubert—moments which, in her estimation, outweighed in value whole years of life without him.

Dear and precious was her little closet now. There was nothing within it that ever tempted her aunt to enter; her retreat, therefore, was secure, and deeply did she enjoy the conviction that it was so. It was not Petrarch, it was not Shakspeare, no, nor Spencer's fairy-land, in which, when fancy-free, she used to roam for hours of most sweet forgetfulness, that now chained her to her solitary chair, and kept her wholly unconscious of the narrow walls that hemmed her in. But what a world of new and strange thoughts it was amidst which she soon lost herself!... Possibilities, conjectures, hopes, such as had never before entered her head, arose within her as, with a singular mixture of distinctness of memory and confusion of feeling, she lived again through every instant of the period during which Colonel Hubert had been in her presence, and of that, more thrilling still as she meditated upon it, when she unconsciously had been in his. How anxiously she recalled her attitude, the careless disorder of her hair, and the unmeasured burst of enjoyment to which she had yielded herself!... How every song she had sung passed in review before her!... Her graces, her *roulades*, her childish trials of what she could effect, all seemed to rise in judgment against her, and her cheeks tingled with the blushes they brought. Yet in the midst of this, perhaps,

... a sense of self-approving *power*
Mixed with her busy thought ...

and she felt that she was not sorry he had heard her sing.

Then came the glowing picture of the few short moments that followed the discovery ... the look that she had seen fixed upon her ... the voice that trembled as he asked to be forgiven ... his flushed cheek ... the agitation—yes, the agitation of his manner, of the stately Hubert's manner, as he approached, as he stood near, as he looked at, as he spoke to her! It was so; she knew it, she had seen it, she had felt it.... How strange is the constitution of the human mind!... and how mutually dependent are its faculties and feelings on each other!... The same girl who was so "earthly dull" as to be unable to perceive the undisguised adoration of Frederick Stephenson, was now rapt in a delirium of happiness from having read, what probably no other mortal eye could see, in the involuntary workings of Colonel Hubert's features for a few short instants, while offering an apology which he could hardly avoid making.

CHAPTER VIII.

SOME FARTHER PARTICULARS RESPECTING THE STATE OF MRS. BARNABY'S HEART.—TENDER DOUBTS AND FEARS, ON THE PART OF THE MAJOR, ALL SET TO REST BY THE GENTLE KINDNESS OF THE WIDOW.—SOME ACCOUNT OF MRS. PETERS'S CONCERT, AND OF THE TERRIBLE EVENTS WHICH FOLLOWED IT.

We have left the Widow Barnaby too long, and must hasten back to her. There was altogether a strange mixture of worldly wisdom and of female folly in her character, for first one and then the other preponderated, as circumstances occurred. Had a man, richer than she believed the fascinating Major to be, proposed to her even at the very tenderest climax of his courtship, there is no doubt in the world but she would have accepted him, but when all her pecuniary anxieties were lulled into a happy doze by the pleasing statements of Messrs. William and Maintry, her love-making propensities awoke; she was again the Martha Compton of Silverton; and became so exceedingly attached to the Major's society, that neither Mrs. Peters's concert, nor any other engagement in which he did not share, could have compensated for one of those delightful *tête-à-tête* evenings during which Agnes enjoyed the society of her friends.

When Major Allen saw the invitation card from Rodney Place lying on the table, he said,—

"Do you intend to go, dearest?"

"Have you a card, Major?" was the reply; and when the rejoinder produced a negative, she added,—"Then most assuredly I shall not go;" a degree of fidelity that was very satisfactory to the

Major, who began to discover that his newness in the society of Clifton was wearing off, and that he was eyed askance whenever he ventured to appear where gentlemen assembled.

A thousand fond follies, of course, diversified these frequent *tête-à-têtes*; and upon one occasion the Major in a sudden burst of jealous tenderness declared, that, notwithstanding the many proofs of affection she had granted him, there was one without which he could not be satisfied, as his dreams perpetually tormented him with visions of rivals who succeeded in snatching her from him.

"Oh! Major, what folly!" exclaimed the lady. "Have you not yet learned to read my heart?... But what is there ... foolish as you are ... what is there that I could refuse to you ... that it was not inconsistent with my honour to grant?..."

"Your honour!... Beautiful Juno! know you not that your honour is dearer to me than my own?... What I would ask, my beloved Martha, can attach no disgrace to you, ... but, in fact, I shall not know a moment's ease till you have given me a promise of marriage. I know, my love, that you have relations here who will leave no stone unturned to prevent our union, ... and the idea that they may succeed distracts me!... Will you forgive this weakness, and grant what I implore?"

"You know I will, foolish man!... but I will have your promise in return, or you will think my love less fervent than your own," returned the widow playfully.

To this the Major made no objection; and so, "in merry sport," these promises were signed and exchanged amidst many lover-like jestings on their own folly.

This happened just three days before the eventful concert; and in the interval Major Allen received a letter from his friend Maintry, who was still at Bath, requesting him to join him there in order to give him the advantage of his valuable advice on a matter of great importance. It was, of course, with extreme reluctance that he tore himself away; but it was a sacrifice demanded by friendship, and he would make it, as he told the widow, on condition that she would rescind her refusal to Mrs. Peters, and pass the evening of his absence at her house. She agreed to this, and he left her only in time to enable her to dress for the party.

The being accompanied by her aunt was a considerable drawback to any pleasure Agnes had anticipated from the evening, and the stroke came upon her by surprise, for Mrs. Barnaby did not deem it necessary to stand on such ceremony with her sister as to ask leave to come after having been once invited.

Mrs. Peters looked vexed and disconcerted when she entered; but, perceiving the anxiety with which Agnes was watching to see how she bore it, she recalled her smiles, placed her prodigiously fine sister-in-law on a sofa with two other dowagers, desired Mr. Peters to go and talk to her, and then seizing upon Agnes, led her among the party of amateurs who were indulging in gossip and tea at a snug table in the second drawing-room. She was immediately introduced as a young friend who would prove a great acquisition, and two or three songs in her own old-fashioned style were assigned, pretty nearly without waiting for her consent, to her performance; but with an observation from Mrs. Peters that she could not refuse, because they were the very songs she had sung when Mr. Stephenson was there in the morning.

All this was said and done in a bustle and a hurry, and Agnes carried off captive to the region where the business of the evening was already beginning with the tuning of instruments and the arrangement of desks, before she well knew what she intended to do or say. She would have felt the embarrassment more had her mind been fully present to the scene; but it was not. She knew that Mr. Stephenson and his friend were expected, and no spot of earth had much interest for her at that moment except the doorway.

Her suspense lasted not long, however, for they soon entered together, and then her heart bounded, the colour varied on her cheek, and her whole frame trembled. Mr. Stephenson was by her side in a moment; but she was conscious of this only sufficiently to make her feel a pang because Colonel Hubert had not followed him. Far from approaching her, indeed, he seemed to place himself studiously at a distance, and instantly a deep gloom appeared in the eyes of Agnes to have fallen upon every object.... The lights were dim, every instrument out of tune, and the civilities of Mr. Stephenson so extremely troublesome, that she thought, if they continued, she must certainly leave the room.

The overture began, and she was desired to sit down in the place assigned her; but this, as she found, left her open on one side to the pertinacious whisperings of Mr. Stephenson, and with a movement of irritation quite new to her, she got up again, with her cheeks burning, to ask for a place in the very middle of a row of ladies who could not comply with her request without real difficulty.

As soon as she had reached her new station she raised her eyes, and looked towards the spot where she had seen Colonel Hubert place himself; there he was still, and moreover his eyes were evidently fixed upon her.

"Why will he not speak to me?" mentally exclaimed poor Agnes; ... "or why does he so look at me?"

It would not have been difficult for Colonel Hubert to have given an answer. While they were taking coffee together half an hour before they set off, Frederick Stephenson told his friend that his fate would that night be decided, for he had made up his mind to propose to Miss Willoughby.

Colonel Hubert started.... "Of course, Frederick, you do not decide upon this without being pretty certain what the answer will be," was the reply of Colonel Hubert.

"You know the definition Silvius gives of love," returned Frederick. "It is to be all made of faith and service ... and so am I for Agnes.... Wherefore, as my service is, and shall be perfect, so also shall be my faith, nor will I ever submit myself to the misery of doubting.... Either she is mine at once, or I fly where I can never see her more."

After this, Colonel Hubert very naturally preferred looking on from a distance, to making any approach that might disturb the declared purpose of his friend.

"By-standers see most," ... is an old proverb, and all such speak truly. Frederick, notwithstanding his "perfect service," was not by many a degree so near discovering the true state of Miss Willoughby's feelings as his friend: not, indeed, that Colonel Hubert discovered anything relating to himself, but he saw weariness and distaste in the movement of Agnes's head, and the mournful expression of her face, even before the decisive manœuvre by which she escaped from him, who was only waiting for an opportunity of confessing himself "to be all made of adoration, duty, and observance."

An indescribable sensation of pleasure tingled through the veins of Colonel Hubert as he observed this, but the next moment his heart reproached him with a bitter pang. "Am I then a traitor to him who has so frankly trusted me?" thought he. "No, by Heaven!... Poor Frederick!... Angel as she is, he well deserves her, for from the very first he has thought of her, and her only; ... while I ... the study of her aunt's absurdities I deemed the more attractive speculation of the two.... Agnes, you are avenged!"

The good-humoured Frederick, mean time, though foiled in his hope of engrossing her, quickly found consolation in listening to Miss Peters, who confided to him all her doubts and fears respecting the possibility of her friend's finding courage to sing before so large an audience.

"For God's sake, do not plague her about it," said he. "Though, to be sure, such a voice as hers would be enough to embellish any concert in the world."

"It is only on mamma's account," replied Mary, "that I am anxious for it; ... she has been so disappointed about Miss Roberts!... I wish, after Lucy's next duet with James, while Elizabeth is accompanying the violoncello, that you would contrive to get near her, where she is trying to keep out of the way, poor thing!... and tell her that my mother wishes to speak to her."

Frederick readily undertook the commission, not ill pleased to be thus confirmed in his belief that she had not run away from him, but for some other reason which he had not before understood. Miss Peters was far from imagining what an effectual means she had hit upon for making her friend Agnes take a place among the performers. She had continued to sit during the long duet, triumphing in the clever management that had placed her out of the way of everybody, and perfectly aware ... though she by no means appeared to watch him steadily ... that Colonel Hubert did not feel at all more gay or happy than herself. But, lo! just at the moment indicated by Mary, the smiling, bowing, handsome Frederick Stephenson contrived civilly and silently to make his way between crowded rows of full-dressed ladies to the place where Agnes fancied herself in such perfect security. He delivered his message, but not without endeavouring to make her understand how superlatively happy the commission had made him.

This was too much.... To sit within the same room that held Colonel Hubert, without his taking the slightest notice of her, and that, too, after all the sweet delusive visions of the morning, was quite dreadful enough, without having to find answers for words she did not hear, and dress her face in smiles, when she was so very much disposed to weep. "I will sing every song they will let me," thought she. "Ill or well, it matters not now.... I will bear anything but being talked to!"

Giving the eager messenger nothing but a silent nod in return for all his trouble, Agnes again rose, and made her way to Mrs. Peters.

It chanced that Mary, Lucy, and one or two other ladies were in consultation with her at a part of the room exactly within sight of Mrs. Barnaby, who, having found her neighbours civilly disposed to answer all her questions, had thus far remained tolerably contented and quiet. But the scene she now witnessed aroused her equally to jealousy and astonishment. Mrs. Peters—who, from the moment she had deposited her on the sofa, had never bestowed a single word upon her, but, on the contrary, kept very carefully out of her way,—had hitherto been supposed by her self-satisfied sister-in-law to be too much occupied in arranging the progress of the musical performance to have any time left to bestow upon her relations; yet now she saw her in the centre of the room, devoting her whole attention to Agnes, evidently presenting her to one or two of the most elegant-looking among her company, and finally taking her by the hand, as if she had been the most important personage present, and leading her with smiles, and an air of the most flattering affection, to the pianoforte.

"Who is that beautiful girl, ma'am?" said one of Mrs. Barnaby's talkative neighbours, thinking, perhaps, that she had a right, in her turn, to question a person who had so freely questioned her.

"What girl, ma'am?" returned Mrs. Barnaby; for use so lessens marvel, that she had become almost unconscious of the uncommon loveliness of her niece; or, at any rate, was too constantly occupied by other concerns to pay much attention to it.

"That young lady in black crape, whom Mrs. Peters has just led to the instrument.... Upon my

word, I think she is the most beautiful person I ever saw!"

"Oh!... that's my niece, ma'am; ... and I'm sure I don't know what nonsense my sister Peters has got in her head about her.... I hope she is not going to pretend to play without asking my leave. It is time I should look after her." And so saying the indignant Mrs. Barnaby arose, determined upon sharing the notice at least, if not the favour, bestowed upon her dependant kinswoman. But she was immediately compelled to reseat herself by the universal "Hush!..." that buzzed around her; for at that moment the superb voice of Agnes burst upon the room, and "startled the dull ear" of the least attentive listener in it.

The effect was so wholly unlooked-for, and so great, that the demonstration of it might naturally have been expected to overpower so young a performer; Miss Peters, therefore, the moment the song was over, hastened to her friend, expecting to find her agitated, trembling, and in want of an arm to support her; but instead of this she found Agnes perfectly tranquil ... apparently unconscious of having produced any sensation at all in the company at large, and in fact looking, for the first time since she entered the room, happy and at her ease.

The cause of this could only be found where Miss Peters never thought of looking for it,—namely, in the position and countenance of Colonel Hubert. He had not, indeed, yet spoken much to her; but enough, at least, to convince her that he was not more indifferent than in the morning, and, ... in short, enough to raise her from the miserable state of dejection and annoyance which made her fly with such irritated feelings from the attentions of Frederick, to such a state of joyous hopefulness as made her almost giddily unmindful of every human being around her, save one.

Though Agnes had restlessly left the place whence she had first seen Colonel Hubert ensconce himself in a corner, apparently as far from her as possible, she chose another equally convenient for tormenting herself by watching him, and for perceiving also that nothing, save his own will and pleasure, detained him from her. From this, as we have seen, she was again driven by poor Frederick; and forgetting her shyness and all other minor evils in the misery of being talked to when her heart was breaking, she determined upon singing, solely to get out of his way.

Her false courage, however, faded fast as she approached the instrument. She remembered, with a keenness amounting almost to agony, those songs of the morning that she had since been rehearsing in spirit, in the dear belief that they had charmed away his stately reserve for ever; and she was desperately meditating the best mode of making a precipitate retreat, when, on reaching the spot kept sacred to the performers and their music-desks, she perceived Colonel Hubert in the midst of them, who immediately placed himself at her side, (where, according to rule, he had no business to be,) and asked her in a whisper, if she meant to accompany herself.

The revulsion of feeling produced by this most unexpected address was violent indeed. Her whole being seemed changed in a moment. Her heart beat, her eyes sparkled with recovered happiness, and she literally remembered nothing but that she was going to sing to him again. In answer to his question, she said with a smile that made him very nearly as forgetful of all around as herself, "Do you think I had better do it?... Or shall I ask Elizabeth?"

"No, no; ask no one," he replied.

"And what shall I sing?" again whispered Agnes.

"The last song you sang this morning," was the reply.

Orpheus was never inspired by a more powerful feeling than that which now animated the renovated spirit of Agnes, and she performed as she never had performed before.

The result was a burst of applause, that ought, *selon les regles*, to have been overpowering to her feelings; yet there she stood, blushing a little certainly, but looking as light-hearted and as happy as the Peri when readmitted into Paradise. Just at this moment, and exactly as Colonel Hubert was offering his arm to lead her back again to a place among the company, Mrs. Barnaby, feathered, rouged, ringleted, and desperately determined to share the honours of the hour, made her way, proud in the consciousness of attracting an hundred eyes, up to the conspicuous place where Agnes stood. She had already taken Colonel Hubert's arm, and for an instant he seemed disposed to attempt leading her off in the contrary direction; but if he really meditated so bold a measure, he was completely foiled, for Mrs. Barnaby, laying her hand on his in a very friendly way, exclaimed in her most fascinating style of vivacity,—

"No, no, Colonel ... you are vastly obliging; but I must take care of my own niece, if you please!... She sings just like her poor mother, my dear Mary," she added, changing her tone to a sentimental whine.... "I assure you it is almost too much for my feelings;" and as she said this she drew the unhappy Agnes away, having thrown her arm round her waist, while she kissed her affectedly on the forehead.

Colonel Hubert hovered about her for a few minutes; but whatever might be the fascinations that attracted him, they were apparently not strong enough to resist another personal attack from Mrs. Barnaby.

"What a crowd!" she exclaimed, suddenly turning towards him. "Do, Colonel, give me your arm, and we will go and eat some ice in the other room;" upon which he suddenly retreated among the throng, and in two minutes had left the house. It is true, that at the moment the widow so audaciously asked for his arm, Frederick Stephenson was just presenting his to Agnes, which it is possible might have added impulse to the velocity of this sudden exit; but whichever was the

primary feeling, both together were more than he could bear; and accordingly, like many other conquered heroes, he sought safety in flight.

Of what happened in that room during the rest of the evening, poor Agnes could have given no account; to sing again she assured her friends was quite beyond her power, and she looked so very pale and so very miserable as she said this, that they believed she had really over-exerted herself; and, delighted by the brilliant success of her one song, permitted her to remain unmolested by further solicitations.

Frederick Stephenson also doubted not that the unusual effort she had made before so large a party was one cause of her evident dejection, though he could not but feel that the appearance and manner of her aunt were likely enough to increase this; but, at all events, it was no time to breathe into her ear the tale of love he had prepared for it; so, after asking Miss Peters if he should be likely to find her friend at Rodney Place on the following morning, and receiving from her a cordial ... "Oh! yes, certainly," he also took his leave, more in love than ever; and though mortified by the disappointment this long-expected evening had brought him, as sanguine as ever in his hopes for the morrow.

Mrs. Barnaby was one of the last guests that departed, as, next to the pleasure of being made love to, the gratification of finding herself in a large party, with the power of calling the giver of it her "dear sister," ranked highest in her present estimation. Agnes was anxiously waiting for her signal to depart; but no sooner was she shut up in the *fly* with her than she heartily wished herself back again, for a torrent of scolding was poured forth upon her as unexpected as it was painful.

"And it is thus, ungrateful viper as you are, that you reward my kindness!... Never have you deigned to tell me that you could sing ... no, you wicked, *wicked* creature, you leave me to find it out by accident; while your new friends, or rather new strangers, are made your confidants,—while I am to sit by and look like a fool, because I never heard of it before!..."

"It was only because there was a pianoforte there, aunt.... I cannot sing without one."

"Ungrateful wretch!... reproaching me with not spending my last shilling in buying pianofortes! But I will tell you, miss, what your fine singing shall end in.... You shall go upon the stage ... mark my words ... you shall go upon the stage, Miss Willoughby, and sing for your bread. No husband of mine shall ever be taxed to maintain such a mean-spirited, ungrateful, conceited upstart as you are!"

Agnes attempted no farther explanation; and the silent tears these revilings drew, were too well in accordance with her worn-out spirits and sinking heart to be very painful. She only longed for her closet, and the unbroken stillness of night, that she might shed them without fear of interruption. But this was destined to be a night of disappointments, for even this melancholy enjoyment was denied her.

On arriving at their lodgings, the door was opened by the servant of the house; and when Mrs. Barnaby imperiously demanded, "Where is my maid?... where is Jerningham?" she was told that Jerningham had gone out, and was not yet returned.

Now Jerningham was an especial favourite with her mistress, being a gossip and a sycophant of the first order; and the delinquency of not being come home at very nearly one o'clock in the morning, elicited no expression of anger, but a good deal of alarm.

"Dear me!... what can have become of her?... Poor dear girl, I fear she must have met with some accident!... What o'clock was it when she went out?..." Such questionings lasted till the stairs were mounted, and the lady had entered her bed-room.

But no sooner did she reach the commode and place her candle upon it, than she uttered a tremendous scream, followed by exclamations which speedily explained to Agnes and the servant the misfortune that had befallen her. "I am robbed—I am ruined!... Look here!... look here!... my box broken open, and every farthing of money gone.... All my forks too!... all my spoons, and my cream-jug, and my mustard-pot!... I am ruined—I am robbed!... But you shall be answerable,—the mistress of the house shall be answerable.... You must have let the thieves in ... you must, for the house-door was not broke open."

The girl of the house looked exceedingly terrified, and asked if she had not better call up her mistress.

"To be sure you had, you fool!... Do you think I am going to sleep in a room where thieves have been suffered to enter while I was out?... How do I know but they may be lurking about still, waiting to murder me?"

The worthy widow to whom the house belonged speedily joined the group in nightcap and bedgown, and listened half awake to Mrs. Barnaby's clamorous account of her misfortune.

As soon as she began to understand the statement, which was a good deal encumbered by lamentations and threats, the quiet little old woman, without appearing to take the least offence at the repeated assertion that she must have let the thieves in herself, turned to her servant and said,—

"Is the lady's maid come in, Sally?"

"No, ma'am," said Sally; "she has never come back since she went out with the gentleman's servant as comed to fetch her."

"Then you may depend upon it, ma'am, that 'tis your maid as have robbed you," said the landlady.

"My maid!... What! Jerningham?... Impossible!... She is the best girl in the world—an innocent creature that I had away from school.... 'Tis downright impossible, and I never will believe it."

"Well, ma'am," said the widow, "let it be who it will, it won't be possible to catch 'em to-night; and I would advise you to go to bed, for the poor young lady looks pale and frightened; ... and to-morrow morning, ma'am, I would recommend your asking Mr. Peters what is best to be done."

"And how am I to be sure that there are no thieves in the house now?" cried Mrs. Barnaby.... "Open the door of your closet, Agnes, and look under the beds; ... and you, Mrs. Crocker, you must go into the drawing-room, and down stairs and up stairs, and everywhere, before I lay my poor dear head upon my pillow.... I don't choose to have my throat cut, I promise you.—Good Heavens!... What will Major Allen say?"

"I don't think, ma'am, that we should any of us like to have our throats cut," replied Mrs. Crocker; "and luckily there is no great likelihood of it, I fancy.... Good night, ladies."

And without waiting for any further discussion, the sleepy mistress of the mansion crept back to bed ... her hand-maiden followed her example, and Agnes was left alone to receive upon her devoted head the torrent of lamentations by which the bereaved Mrs. Barnaby gave vent to her sorrows during great part of the night.

On the following morning the widow took Mrs. Crocker's very reasonable advice, and repaired to Rodney Place in time to find Mr. Peters before he set off on his daily walk to Bristol. Agnes, pale, fatigued, and heavy-hearted, accompanied her, and so striking was the change in her appearance from what it had been the day before, that those of the party round the breakfast-table, who best loved her, were much more pleased than pained, when they learned that the cause of her bad night and consequent ill looks, was her aunt's having been robbed of nearly a hundred pounds and a few articles of plate.

They were too judicious, however, to mention their satisfaction, and the sorrows of the widow received from all the party a very suitable measure of condolence. Mr. Peters indeed did much more than condole with her, for he cordially offered his assistance; and it was soon settled, by his advice, that Mrs. Barnaby should immediately accompany him to the mayor, and afterwards proceed according to the instructions of a lawyer to whom he immediately dispatched a note, requesting that he would meet them forthwith before the magistrate. The carriage was then ordered: Agnes, by the advice of all parties, was left at Rodney Place; and Mrs. Barnaby, somewhat comforted, but still in great tribulation, set off in her dear sister's *coach* (her best consolation) to testify before the mayor of Bristol, not only that she had been robbed, but that there certainly was some reason to suppose her maid Jerningham the thief.

Mr. Peters found his lawyer ready to receive them, who, after hearing the lady's statement, obtained a warrant for the apprehension of Elizabeth Jacks and of William — (surname unknown), groom or valet, or both, to Major Allen, lodging at Gloucester Row, Clifton. The widow had very considerable scruples concerning the implication of this latter individual; but having allowed that she thought he must be the "gentleman's servant" spoken of by Mrs. Crocker's maid as having accompanied Jerningham when she left the house, she was assured that it would be necessary to include him; and she finally consented, on its being made manifest to her that, if he proved innocent, there would be no difficulty whatever in obtaining his release. Mrs. Barnaby was then requested accurately to describe the persons of her maid and her supposed companion, which she did very distinctly, and with the less difficulty, because the persons of both were remarkable.

"There wasn't another man likely to be in her company, was there, ma'am?" said a constable who was in attendance in the office.

"No," replied Mrs. Barnaby confidently, "I don't know any one at all likely to be with her. I am almost sure that she had not any other acquaintance."

"But the man might," observed another official.

"That's true," rejoined the first, "and therefore I strongly suspect that I saw the girl and the man too enter a house on the quay just fit for such sort of company; ... but there was another fellow along with them."

"Then we will charge you with the warrant, Miles," said the magistrate. "If you can succeed in taking them into custody at once, it is highly probable that you may be able to recover the property."

This hint rendered the widow extremely urgent that no time should be lost; and in case the constable should succeed in finding them at the place he had named, she consented to remain in a room attached to the office, that no time might be lost in identifying the parties.

"There will be no harm, I suppose, in taking the other fellow on suspicion, if I find them still together?" said the constable; adding, "I rather think I know something of that t'other chap already." He received authority to do this, and then departed, leaving Mrs. Barnaby, her faithful

squire, Mr. Peters, and the lawyer, seated on three stools in a dismal sort of apartment within the office, the lady, at least, being in a state of very nervous expectation. This position was not a pleasant one; but fortunately it did not last long, for in considerably less than an hour they were requested to return into the office, the three prisoners being arrived.

Mr. Peters gave the lady his arm, and they entered by a door exactly facing the spot on which stood the three persons just brought in, with the constable and two attendant officers behind them. The group, as expected, consisted of two men and a girl, which latter was indeed the tall and slender Betty Jacks, and no other; the man at her left hand was William, the Major's civil groom; and he at her right was ... no, it was impossible, ... yet she could not mistake ... it must be, and, in fact, it was that pattern of faithful friendship, Captain Maintry!

Mrs. Barnaby's agitation was now, beyond all suspicion of affectation, very considerable, and his worship obligingly ordered a glass of water and a chair, which having been procured and profited by, he asked her if she knew the prisoners.

"Yes!..." she answered with a long-drawn sigh.

"Can you point them out by name?"

"The girl is my maid Jer ... Betty Jacks ... that man is William, Major Allen's groom ... and that other...."

"You had better stop there," interrupted the self-styled captain, "or you may chance to say more than you know."

"You had better be silent, I promise you," said the magistrate. "Pray, ma'am, do you know that person?... Did you ever see him before?"

"Yes, I have seen him before," replied Mrs. Barnaby, who was pale in spite of her rouge; for the recollection of all the affectionate intimacy she had witnessed between this man and her affianced Major turned her very sick, and it was quite as much as she could do to articulate.

"I should be sorry, ma'am, to trouble you with any unnecessary questions," said the magistrate; "but I must beg you to tell me, if you please, where it is you have seen him, and what he is called?"

"I saw him in the Mall at Clifton, sir," ... replied Mrs. Barnaby.

"And many an honest man besides me may have been seen in the Mall at Clifton," said the *soi-disant* Captain Maintry laughing.

"And you have never seen him anywhere else, ma'am?"

"No, sir, never."

"Pray, was he then in company with that groom?"

"No," ... replied the widow faltering.

Maintry laughed again.

"You cannot then swear that you suspect him of having robbed you?"

"No, sir."

Here the constable whispered something in the ear of the magistrate, who nodded, and then resumed his examination.

"Did you hear this man's name mentioned, madam, when you saw him in the Mall?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"That has nothing to do with the present business," interrupted Maintry, "and therefore you have no right to ask it."

"I suspect that you have called yourself in this city by more names than one," replied the magistrate; "and I have a right to discover this if I can.... By what name did you hear him called when you saw him at Clifton, ma'am?"

"I heard him called Captain Maintry."

"Captain indeed!... These fellows are all captains and majors, I think," said the magistrate, making a memorandum of the name. Mrs. Barnaby's heart sunk within her. She remembered the promise of marriage, and that so acutely as almost to make her forget the business that brought her there.

The magistrate and the lawyer, however, were less oblivious, and proceeded in the usual manner to discover whether there were sufficient grounds of suspicion against any of the parties to justify committal. The very first question addressed to Betty Jacks settled the business, for she began crying and sobbing at a piteous rate, and said, "If mistress will forgive me I'll tell her all about it, and a great deal more too; and 'twasn't my fault, nor William's neither, half so much as Joe Purdham's, for he set us on;" and she indicated Joe Purdham with a finger which, as her lengthy arm reached within an inch of his nose, could not be mistaken as to the person to whom

it intended to act as index. But had this been insufficient, the search instituted on the persons of the trio would have supplied all the proof wanted. Very nearly all the money was discovered within the lining of Purdham's hat; the pockets of Betty were heavy with forks and spoons, and the cream-jug and mustard-pot, carelessly enveloped each in a pocket-handkerchief, were lodged upon the person of William.

In a word, the parties were satisfactorily identified and committed to prison; the property of Mrs. Barnaby was in a fair way of being restored, and her very disagreeable business at Bristol done and over, leaving nothing but a ride back in her sister's coach to be accomplished.

Mr. Peters offered his arm to lead her out, and with a dash of honest triumph at having so ably managed matters, said, "Well, madam ... I hope you are pleased with the termination of this business?"

What a question for Mrs. Barnaby to answer!... Pleased!... Was she pleased?... Pleased at having every reason in the world to believe that she had given a promise of marriage to the friend and associate of a common thief!... But the spirit of the widow did not forsake her; and, after one little hysterical gasp, she replied by uttering a thousand thanks, and a million assurances that nothing could possibly be more satisfactory.

She was not, however, quite in a condition to meet the questionings which would probably await her at Rodney Place; and as Mr. Peters did not return in the carriage, she ordered the man to set her down at Sion Row. She could not refuse to Mrs. Crocker the satisfaction of knowing that Jerningham was the thief, that Jerningham was committed to prison, and that she was bound over to prosecute; but it was all uttered as briefly as possible, and then she shut herself in her drawing-room to take counsel with herself as to what could be done to get her out of this terrible scrape without confessing either to Mr. Peters or any one else that she had ever got into it.

For the remainder of the day she might easily plead illness and fatigue to excuse her seeing anybody; and as it was not till the day following that she expected the return of the Major, she had still some hours to meditate upon the ways and means of extricating herself.

Towards night she became more tranquil, for she had made up her mind what to do.... She would meet him as fondly as ever, and then so play her game as to oblige him to let her look at the promise she had given. "Once within reach of my hand," thought she, "the danger will be over." This scheme so effectually cheered her spirits, that when Agnes returned home in the evening she had no reason whatever to suspect that her aunt had anything particularly disagreeable upon her mind, ... for she only called her a fool twice, and threatened to send her upon the stage three times.

CHAPTER IX.

MAJOR ALLEN PAYS A VISIT AT BATH PRODUCTIVE OF IMPORTANT RESULTS.—SYMPATHY BETWEEN HIMSELF AND THE WIDOW BARNABY.—EXCHANGE IS NO ROBBERY.—VALEDICTORY COMPLIMENTS.

The adventures of Major Allen have no connexion with this narrative, excepting as far as the widow Barnaby is concerned, and therefore with his business at Bath, or anything he did there, we have nothing to do beyond recording about ten minutes' conversation which he chanced to have with one individual of a party with whom he passed the evening after his arrival.

Among the many men of various ages who were accustomed to meet together wherever those who live by their wits were likely to prosper, there was on this occasion one young man who had but recently evinced the bad ambition of belonging to the set. Major Allen had never seen him before; but hearing him named as a famous fine fellow who was likely to do them honour, he scrupled not to converse with perfect freedom before him. The most interesting thing he had to record since the party last met, was the history of his engagement with the widow Barnaby, whom he very complacently described as extremely handsome, passionately in love with him, and possessed of a noble fortune both in money and land.

The Nestor of the party asked him with very friendly anxiety if he had been careful to ascertain what the property really was, as it was no uncommon thing for handsome widows to appear richer than they were.

"Thank you for nothing, most sage conjuror," replied the gay Major; "age has not thinned my flowing hair; but I'm not such a greenhorn neither as to walk blindfold. In the first place, the lady is sister-in-law to old Peters, one of the wealthiest of turtle-eaters, and it was from one of his daughters that I learned the real state of her affairs,—an authority that may be the better depended on, because, though they receive her as a sister, and all that, it is quite evident that they are by no means very fond of her.... In fact, they are rather a stiff-backed generation, whereas my widow is as gay as a lark."

"Is she a Bristol woman?" inquired one of the party.

"No, she is from Devonshire," was the reply. "The name of her place is '*Silverton Park*.'"

"Silverton in Devonshire?" said the young stranger. "May I ask the lady's name, sir?"

"Her name is Barnaby," replied Major Allen briskly; "do you happen to know anything about her?"

"The widow Barnaby of Silverton?... Oh! to be sure I do, and a fine woman she is too,—no doubt of it. She is the widow of our apothecary."

"The widow of an apothecary?... No such thing, sir; you mistake altogether," replied the Major. "Do you happen to know such a place as Silverton Park?"

"I never heard of such a park, sir; but I know Silverton well enough," said the young man, "and I know her house, or what was her house, as well as I know my own father's, which is at no great distance from it neither. And I know the shop and the bow-window belonging to it, and a very pretty decent dwelling-house it is."

Major Allen grew fidgety; he wanted to hear more, but did not approve the publicity of the conversation, and contrived at the moment to put a stop to it, but contrived also to make an appointment with his new acquaintance to breakfast together on the following morning; and before their allowance of tea and toast was dispatched, Major Allen was not only fully disenchanted respecting Silverton Park, and the four beautiful greys, but quite *au fait* of the reputation for running up bills which his charmer had enjoyed previous to her marriage with the worthy apothecary.

It was this latter portion of the discourse which completed the extinction of the Major's passion, and this so entirely, that he permitted himself not to inquire, as he easily might have done, into the actual state of the widow's finances; but, feeling himself on the edge of a very frightful precipice, he ran off in the contrary direction too fast to see if there were any safe mode of descending without a tumble. It may indeed be doubted whether the snug little property actually in possession of his Juno, would have been sufficient for his honourable ambition, even had he been as sure of her having and holding it, as she was herself; for, to say the truth, he rated his own price in the matrimonial market rather highly,—had great faith in the power of his height and fashionable *tournure*, and confidence unbounded in his large eyes and *collier Grec*. It is true, indeed, that he had failed more than once, and that too "when the fair cause of all his pain" had given him great reason to believe that she admired him much; nevertheless, his self-approval was in no degree lessened thereby, nor was it likely to be, so long as he could oil and trim his redundant whiskers without discovering a grey hair in them.

In short, what with his well-sustained value for himself, and his much depreciated value for the widow, he left Bath boiling with rage at the deception practised upon him, and arrived at Clifton determined to trust to his skill for obtaining a peaceable restitution of the promise of marriage, without driving his Juno to any measures that might draw upon them the observation of the public, a tribunal before which he was by no means desirous of appearing.

The state of Mrs. Barnaby's mind respecting this same promise of marriage has already been described, wherefore it may be perceived that when Major Allen made his next morning visit at Sion Row, a much greater degree of sympathy existed between himself and the widow than either imagined. It was in the tactics of both, however, to meet without any appearance of diminished tenderness; and when he entered with the smile that had so often gladdened her fond heart, she stretched out a hand to welcome him with such softness of aspect as made the deluded gentleman tremble to think how difficult a task lay before him.

Neither was Mrs. Barnaby's heart at all more at ease. Who could doubt the sincerity of the ardent pressure with which that hand was held?... Who could have thought that while gazing upon her in silence that seemed to indicate feelings too strong for words, he was occupied solely in meditating how best he could get rid of her for ever?

The conversation was precluded by a pretty, well-sustained passage of affectionate inquiries concerning the period of absence, and then the Major ejaculated ... "Yes, my sweet friend!... I have been well in health, ... but it is inconceivable what fancies a man truly in love finds to torment himself!..." Whilst the widow mentally answered him,... "Perhaps you were afraid I might see your friend Maintry stuck up in the pillory, or peeping at me through the county prison windows;" ... but aloud she only said with a smile a little forced,... "What fancies, Major?"

"I am almost afraid to tell you," he replied; "you will think me so weak, so capricious!"

This word *capricious* sounded pleasantly to the widow's ears ... it seemed to hint at some change—some infidelity that might make her task an easier one than she expected, and assuming an air of gaiety, she said,—

"Nay ... if such be the case, speak out without a shadow of reserve, Major Allen; for I assure you there is nothing in the world I admire so much as sincerity."

"Sincerity!" muttered the half entrapped fortune hunter aside.... "Confound her sincerity!..." and then replied aloud,— "Will you promise, dear friend, to forgive me if I confess to you a fond folly?"

Mrs. Barnaby quaked all over; she felt as if fresh grappling-irons had been thrown over her, and that escape was impossible. "Nay, really," said she, after a moment's reflection; "I think fond follies are too young a joke for us, Major; they may do very well for Agnes, perhaps ... but I think

you and I ought to know better by this time.... If I can but make him quarrel with me," thought she, ... "that would be better still!"

"If I can but once more coax her to let me have my way," thought he, ... "the business would be over in a moment!"

"Beauty like yours is of no age!" he exclaimed; "it is immortal as the passion it inspires, and when joined with such a heart and temper as you possess becomes...."

"I do assure you, Major," said the widow, interrupting him rather sharply, "you will do wrong if you reckon much upon my temper ... it never was particularly good, and I can't say I think it grows better."

"Oh! say not so, for this very hour I am going to put it to the test.... I want you to...."

"Pray, Major, do not ask me to do anything particularly obliging; for, to say the truth, I am in no humour for it.... It has occurred to me more than once, Major Allen, since you set off so suddenly, that it is likely enough there may be another lady in the case, and that the promise you got out of me was perhaps for no other purpose in the world but to make fun of me by shewing it to her."

"Hell and furies!" growled the Major inwardly, "she will stick to me like a leech!"

"Oh! dream not of such villany!" he exclaimed; "it was concerning that dear promise that I wished to speak to you, my sweet Martha.... Methinks that promise...."

"I tell you what, Major Allen," cried the widow vehemently, "if you don't let me see that promise this very moment, nothing on earth shall persuade me that you have not given it in jest to some other woman."

"Good Heaven!..." he replied; "what a moment have you chosen for the expression of this cruel suspicion! I was on the very verge of telling you that I deemed such a promise unworthy a love so pure—so perfect as ours; and therefore, if you would indulge my fond desire, you would let each of us receive our promise back again."

The Major was really and truly in a state of the most violent perturbation as he uttered these words, fearing that the fond and jealous widow might suspect the truth, and hold his pledge with a tenacity beyond his power to conquer. He had, however, no sooner spoken, than a smile of irrepressible delight banished the frowns in which she had dressed herself, and she uttered in a voice of the most unaffected satisfaction,... "If you will really do that, Major Allen, I can't suspect any longer, you know, that you have given mine to any one else."

"Assuredly not, most beautiful angel!" cried the delighted lover: "thus, then, let us give back these paper ties, and be bound only by...."

The widow stretched out her hand for the document which he had already taken from his pocket-book; but to yield this, though he had no wish to keep it, was not the object nearest his heart; holding it, therefore, playfully above his head, he said, "Let not one of us, dearest, seem more ready than the other in this act of mutual confidence!... give mine with one hand, as you receive your own with the other."

"Now then!..." said Mrs. Barnaby, eagerly extending both her hands, in order at once to give and take.

"Now then!..." replied the Major joyously, imitating her action; and the next instant each had seized the paper held by the other with an avidity greatly resembling that with which a zealous player pounces upon the king when she has the ace in the hand at "shorts."

"Now, Mrs. Barnaby, I will wish you good morning," said the gentleman, bowing low as he tore the little document to atoms.... "I have been fortunate enough, since I last enjoyed the happiness of seeing you, to discover the exact locality of Silverton Park, and the precise pedigree of your beautiful greys."

The equanimity of the widow was shaken for a moment, but no longer; she, too, had been doing her best to annihilate the precious morsel of paper, and, rising majestically, she scattered the fragments on the ground, saying in a tone at least as triumphant as his own, "And I, Major Allen, or whatever else your name may chance to be, have, since last I had the felicity of seeing you, enjoyed the edifying spectacle of beholding your friend Captain Maintry, alias Purdham, in the hands of justice, for assisting your faithful servant William in breaking open my boxes and robbing me.... Should the circumstance be still unknown to you, I fear you may be disappointed to hear that both my money and plate have been recovered. There may be some fanciful difference between Silverton Park and a snug property at Silverton, ... but I rather suspect that, of the two, I have gained most by our morning's work. Farewell, sir!... If you will take my advice, you will not continue much longer in Clifton.... I may feel myself called upon to hint to the magistrates that it might assist the ends of justice if you were taken up and examined as an accomplice in this affair."

The lady had decidedly the best of it, as ladies always should have; for the crest-fallen Major looked as if he must, had he been poetically inclined, have exclaimed in the words of Comus,—

"She fables not, I feel that I do fear,"...

and without any farther attempt to carry off the palm of victory, he made his way down stairs; and it is now many years since he has been heard of in the vicinity of Clifton.

CHAPTER X.

A DISAGREEABLE BREAKFAST-TABLE.—MR. STEPHENSON GIVES HIS FRIEND COLONEL HUBERT WARNING TO DEPART.—A PROPOSAL, AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

Mrs. Barnaby and Major Allen were not the only persons to whom that twenty-sixth of April proved an eventful day.

Colonel Hubert and his friend Stephenson met as usual at the breakfast-table, and it would be difficult to say which of them was the most pre-occupied, and the most unfit for ordinary conversation. Stephenson, however, though vexed at not being already the betrothed husband of his lovely Agnes, was full of hopeful anticipation, and his unfitness for conversation arose rather from the fulness of his heart, than the depression of his spirits.

Not so Colonel Hubert: it was hardly possible to suffer from a greater feeling of melancholy dissatisfaction with all things than he did on the morning after Mrs. Peters's concert.

That the despised Agnes, the niece of the hateful Mrs. Barnaby, had risen in his estimation to be considered as the best, the first, the loveliest of created beings, was not the worst misfortune that had fallen upon him.

There was, indeed, a degree of perversity in the case that almost justified his thinking himself the most unfortunate of mortals. After having attained the sober age of thirty-seven years, if not untouched, at least uninjured, by all the reiterated volleys which he had stood from Cupid's quiver, it was certainly rather provoking to find himself falling distractedly in love with a little obscure girl, young enough to be his daughter, and perhaps, from the unhappy circumstance of her dependence upon such a relative as Mrs. Barnaby, the very last person in the world with whom he would have wished to connect himself. This was bad enough; but even this was not all. With the airs of a senior and a Mentor, he had taken upon himself to lecture his friend upon the preposterous absurdity of giving way to such an attachment, thus rendering it almost morally impossible for him under any imaginable circumstances to ask the love of Agnes, even though something in his inmost heart whispered to him that he should not ask in vain. Nor did the catalogue of his embarrassments end here, for he was placed *vis-à-vis* to his open-hearted friend, who, he was quite certain, would within five minutes begin again the oft-repeated confidential avowal of his love; accompanied, probably, with renewed assurances of his intentions to make proposals, which Colonel Hubert, from what he had seen last night, fancied himself quite sure would never be accepted.

What a wretched, what a hopeless dilemma was he placed in! Was he to see the man he professed to love expose himself to the misery of offering his hand, in defiance of a thousand obstacles, to a woman who, he felt almost sure, would reject him? Or could he interfere to prevent it, at the very moment that his heart told him nothing but the pretensions of Frederick could prevent his proposing to her himself.

Colonel Hubert sat stirring his coffee in moody silence, and dreading to hear Frederick open his lips; but his worst fears as to what he might utter, were soon realized by Stephenson's exclaiming,—

"Well, Hubert!... it is still to do. I was defeated last night, but it shall not be my fault if I go to rest this, without receiving her promise to become my wife. Her aunt is a horror—a monster—anything, everything you may please to call her; but Agnes is an angel, and Agnes must be mine!"

Colonel Hubert looked more gloomy still; but he continued to stir his coffee, and said nothing.

"How can you treat me thus, Hubert?..." said the young man reproachfully. "There is a proud superiority in this affected silence a thousand times more mortifying than anything you could say. Begin again to revile me as heretofore for my base endurance of a Barnaby ... describe the vexation of my brother, the indignation of my sisters!... this would be infinitely more endurable than such contemptuous silence."

"My dear, dear Frederick, I know not what to say," replied the agitated Hubert.... "Had my words the power to make you leave this place within the hour, I would use my last breath to speak them ... for certain am I, Frederick,—I am most surely certain,—that this suit can bring you nothing but misery and disappointment. Let me acknowledge that the young lady herself is worthy of all love, admiration, and reverence; ... I truly think so.... I believe it.... I am sure of it ... but" ... and here Colonel Hubert stopped short, resumed his coffee-cup, and said no more.

"This is intolerable, sir," said the vexed Frederick. "Go on, if you please, say all you have to say, but stop not thus at unshaped insinuations, more injurious, more insulting far, than anything your eloquence could find the power to utter."

"Frederick, you mistake me.... I insinuate nothing.... I believe in my inmost soul that Agnes Willoughby is one of the most faultless beings upon earth.... But this will not prevent your suit to her from being a most unhappy one.... Forget her, Frederick ... travel awhile, my dear friend ... leave her, Stephenson, and your future years will be the happier."

"Colonel Hubert, the difference in our ages is your only excuse for the unnatural counsel you so coldly give. You are no longer a young man, sir.... You no longer are capable of judging for one who is; and I confess to you, that for the present I think our mutual enjoyment would rather be increased than lessened were we to separate. If I remember rightly, you purposed when we came here to stay only till your sister's marriage was over. It is now a fortnight since that event took place, and it is probably solely out of compliment to me that you remain here. If so, let me release you.... In future times I hope we may meet with pleasanter feelings than any we can share at present; and, besides, my stay here,—which which for aught I know may be prolonged for months,—will, under probable circumstances, throw me a good deal into intimacy and intercourse with your detested Mrs. Barnaby, wherein I certainly cannot wish or desire that you should follow me; and therefore ... all things considered, you must hold me excused if I say ... that I should hear of your departure from Clifton with pleasure."

Colonel Hubert rose from his seat and walked about the room. He felt that his heart was softer at that moment than befitted the age with which Frederick reproached him. He was desired to absent himself by one for whose warm-hearted young love he had perhaps neglected the soberer friendships of superior men, and that, too, at a moment when he felt that he more than ever deserved a continuance of that love. Was he not at that instant crushing with Spartan courage a passion within his own breast which he believed ... secretly, silently, unacknowledged even to his own heart, to be returned ... and this terrible sacrifice was made, not because his pride opposed his yielding to it, but because he could not have endured the idea of supplanting Frederick even when it should be acknowledged that no shadow of hope remained for him. And for this it was that he was thus insultingly desired to depart.

Generous Hubert!... A few moments' struggle decided him. He resolved to go, and that immediately. He would not remain to witness the broken spirit of his hot-headed friend after he should have received the refusal which, as he so strongly suspected, awaited him, ... neither would he expose himself to the danger of seeing Agnes afterwards.

Without as yet replying to Frederick, he rang the bell, and desired that post-horses might immediately be ordered for his carriage, and his valet told to prepare his trunks for travelling with as little delay as possible. These directions given, the friends were once more *tête-à-tête*, and then Colonel Hubert ventured to trust his voice, and answer the harsh language he had received.

"Frederick," he said, "you have spoken as you would not have done had you given yourself a little more time for consideration, ... for you have spoken unkindly and unjustly. I would still prevail on you, if I could, to turn away from this lovely girl without committing yourself by making her an offer of marriage. I would strongly advise this—I would strongly advise your remembering, while it is yet time, the pang it may cost you should anything ... in short, believe me, you would suffer less by leaving Clifton immediately with me, than by remaining under circumstances which I am sure will turn out inimical to your happiness.... Will you be advised, and let us depart together?"

"No, Colonel Hubert, I will not. I have no wish to detain you, ... I have already said this with sufficient frankness; be equally wise on your side, and do not attempt to drag me away in your train."

These were pretty nearly the last words which were exchanged between them; Frederick Stephenson soon left the house to wander about till the hour arrived for making his visit in Rodney Place; and in less than two hours Colonel Hubert was driving rapidly through Bristol on his way to London.

As soon as Mrs. Barnaby and the friendly Mr. Peters were fairly off the premises, and on their road to look after the thief, Mary called a consultation on the miserably jaded looks of poor Agnes; and having her own particular reasons for not choosing that she should look half dead ... inasmuch as she was persuaded the promised visit of Frederick was not intended to be for nothing ... she peremptorily insisted upon her taking sal volatile, bathing her eyes in cold water, and then either lying on the sofa or taking a walk upon the down till luncheon-time, that being the usual hour of Mr. Stephenson's morning visits.

Agnes submitted herself very meekly to all this discipline, save the depositing herself on the sofa, to which she objected vehemently, deciding for the walk on the down as the only thing at all likely to cure her head-ache. It was on their way to this favourite magazine of fresh air that Mr. Stephenson met them. To Agnes the rencontre was an extreme annoyance, for she wanted to be quite quiet, and this was what Frederick Stephenson never permitted her to be. But she could not run away; and so she continued to walk on till, just after passing the turnpike, she discovered that Mary and Elizabeth Peters were considerably in their rear. This *tête-à-tête*, however, caused her not the slightest embarrassment; and if she was to be talked to, instead of being permitted to sink into the dark but downy depths of meditation, which was now her greatest indulgence, it mattered very little to her who was the talker. She stopped, however, from politeness to her

friends, and a sort of natural instinct of *bienséance* towards herself, saying, "I was not aware, Mr. Stephenson, that we had been walking so fast; I think we had better turn back to them."

"May I entreat you, Miss Willoughby," said the young man, "to remain a few moments longer alone with me.... It is not that you have walked fast, but your friends have walked slowly, for they, at least, I plainly perceive, have read my secret.... And is it possible that you, Agnes, have not read it also?... Is it possible that you have yet to learn how fervently I love you?"

No young girl hears such an avowal as this for the first time without feeling considerable agitation and embarrassment; but many things contributed to increase these feelings tenfold in the case of Agnes ... for first, which is rarely the case, the declaration was wholly unexpected; secondly, it was wholly unwelcome; and, thirdly, it inspired a feeling of acute terror lest, flattering and advantageous as she knew such a proposal to be, it might tempt her friends ... or set on her terrible aunt ... to disturb her with solicitations which, by only hearing them, would profane the sentiment to which she had secretly devoted herself for ever.

Greatly, however, as she wished to answer him at once and definitively, she was unable to articulate a single word.

"Will you not speak to me, Agnes?" resumed Frederick, after a painful pause. "Will you not tell me what I may hope in return for the truest affection that ever warmed the heart of man?... Will you not even look at me?"

Agnes now stood still as if to recover breath. She knew that he had a right to expect an answer from her, and she knew that sooner or later she should be compelled to speak it; so, making an effort as great perhaps in its self-command as many that have led a hero to eternal fame, she said, but without raising her eyes from the ground, "Mr. Stephenson, I am very sorry indeed that you love me, because it is quite, *quite* impossible I should ever love you in return."

"Good God! Miss Willoughby, ... is it thus you answer me?... Do you know that the words you utter so lightly, so coldly, must, if persisted in, doom me to a life of misery? Can you hear this, Agnes, and feel no touch of pity?"

"Pray do not talk in that way, Mr. Stephenson!... It gives me so very much pain."

"Then you will unsay those cruel words?... You will tell me that time and faithful, constant love may do something for me.... Oh! tell me it shall be so."

"But I *cannot* tell you so, Mr. Stephenson," said Agnes with the most earnest emphasis. "It would be most wicked to do so because it would be untrue. You are very young and very gay, Mr. Stephenson; and I cannot think that what I have said can vex you long, particularly if you will believe it at once, and talk no more about it. And now I think that we had better walk back to Mary, if you please."

Having said this she turned about, and began to walk rapidly towards Clifton.

"Can this be possible?..." said the young man, greatly agitated; "so young, and seemingly so gentle, and yet so harsh and so determined. Oh! Agnes, why did you not let me guess this end to all my hopes before they had grown so strong? You must have seen my love—my adoration.... You must have known that every earthly hope for me depended upon you!"

"No, no, no," cried Agnes, greatly distressed. "I never knew it—I never guessed it.... How should I guess what was so very unlikely?"

"Unlikely!... Are you laughing at me, Agnes?... Unlikely! Ask your friends—ask Miss Peters if she thought it unlikely."

"I do not believe so strange a thought ever entered her head, Mr. Stephenson; for if it had, I am sure she would have put me on my guard against it."

"On your guard against it, Miss Willoughby! What is there in my situation, fortune, or character, that should render it necessary for your friend to put you on your guard against me?... Surely you use strange language."

"Then do not make me talk any more about it, Mr. Stephenson. It is very likely that I may express myself amiss, for I am so sorry and so vexed that indeed I hardly know what I say; ... but pray forgive me, and do not be unhappy about me any longer."

"Agnes!... you love another!" suddenly exclaimed Frederick, his face becoming crimson.... "There is no other way of accounting for such cold indifference, such hard insensibility."

Agnes coloured as violently in her turn, and bursting into tears, said with great displeasure, "That is what nobody in the world has a right to say to me, and I will never, if I can help it, permit you to say it again."

She now increased her speed, and had nearly reached the Misses Peters, notwithstanding all the beautiful summer flowers they had found by the way's side; saying no more in reply, either to the remonstrances or the passionate pleadings of Mr. Stephenson, when at length he laid his hand upon her arm, and detained her while he said, "Agnes, if you accept my love, and consent to become my wife, I will release you from the power of your aunt, place you in a splendid home, and surround you with friends as pure-minded and as elegant as yourself. Is this nothing?... Answer me then one word, and one word only.... Is your refusal of my hand and my affection

final?"

"Yes, sir," said Agnes, still weeping; for his accusation of her having another love, continued to ring in her ears, and make her heart swell almost to bursting.

"Speak not in anger, Agnes!..." said he mildly. "What I have felt for you does not deserve such a return."

"I know it, I know it," replied Agnes, weeping more violently still, "and I am very wrong, as well as very unhappy. Pray, Mr. Stephenson, forgive me," and she held out her hand to him.

He took it, and held it for a moment between both his. "Unhappy, Agnes?..." he said, "why should you be unhappy? Oh! if my love, my devotion, could render you otherwise!... But you will not trust me?... You will not let me pass my life in labouring to make yours happy?"

"Nothing can make me happy, Mr. Stephenson; pray do not talk any more about it, for indeed, indeed, I cannot be your wife."

He abruptly raised her hand to his lips, and then let it fall. "May Heaven bless and make you happy in your own way, whatever that may be!" he cried, and turning from her, reached the verge of the declivity that overhung the river, then plunging down it with very heedless haste, he was out of sight immediately.

This was a catastrophe wholly unexpected by Miss Peters, who now hastened to meet the disconsolate-looking Agnes. "What in the world can you have said to him, my dear, to send him off in that style? I trust that you have not quarrelled."

Most unfeignedly distressed and embarrassed was Agnes at this appeal, and the more so because her friend Mary was not alone.... To her perhaps she might have been able to tell the terrible adventure which had befallen her, but before Elizabeth it was impossible; and, pressing Mary's arm, she said in a whisper, "Ask me no questions, dearest Mary, now, for I cannot answer them ... wait only till we get home."

But to wait in a state of such tormenting uncertainty was beyond the philosophy of Mary, so she suddenly stopped, saying, "Elizabeth! walk on slowly for a few minutes, will you?... I have something that I particularly wish to say to Agnes."... And the good-natured Elizabeth walked on, without ever turning her head to look back at them.

"What has happened?... what has he said to you?... and what have you said to him?" hastily inquired the impatient friend.

"Oh, Mary!... he has made me so very unhappy ... and the whole thing is so extremely strange.... I cannot hide anything from you, Mary, ... but it will kill me should you let my aunt hear of it.... He has made me an offer, Mary!"

"Of course, Agnes, I know he has.... But how does that account for his running off in that strange wild way? and how does it account for your crying and looking so miserable? Why did he run away as if he were afraid to see us, Agnes? and when are you going to see him again?"

"I shall never see him again, Mary," said Agnes gravely.

"Then you *have* quarrelled!... Good Heaven, what folly! I suppose he said something about your aunt that you fancied was not civil; ... but all things considered, Agnes, ought you not to have forgiven it?"

"Indeed, Mary, he said nothing that was rude about my aunt, and I am sure he did not mean to be uncivil in any way ... though certainly he hurt and offended me very much ... but perhaps he did not intend it."

"Hurt and offended you, Agnes?... Let me beg you to tell me at once what it was he did say to you."

"I will tell you everything but one, and that I own to you I had rather not repeat ... and it does not signify, for that was not the reason he ran off so."

"And what was the reason?"

"A very foolish one indeed, and I am sure you will laugh at it ... it was only because I said I could not marry him."

"You said that, Agnes?... You said you could not marry him?"

"Yes, I did! I do not wish to marry him; indeed, I would not marry him for the world."

"And this is the end of it all!" exclaimed Miss Peters with much vexation. "I have much mistaken you, Agnes.... I thought you were suffering greatly from being dependent on your aunt Barnaby."

"And do you doubt it now, Mary?"

"How can I continue to think this, when you have just refused an offer of marriage from a young man, well born, nobly allied, with a splendid fortune, extremely handsome, and possessed, as I truly believe, of more excellent and amiable qualities than often fall to the share of any mortal. How can I believe after this that you really feel unhappy from the circumstances of your present

situation?"

"All that you say is very true, and I cannot deny a word of it; ... but what can one do, Mary, if one does not happen to love a man?... you would not have one marry him, would you?"

"How like a child you talk!... Why should you not love him? with manners so agreeable, such excellent qualities, and a fortune beyond that of many noblemen."

"But you don't suppose I could love him the better for his being rich, do you, Mary?"

"You are a little fool, Agnes, and I know not what to suppose. Perhaps, my dear, you think him too old for you? Perhaps you will not choose to fall in love till you meet an Adonis about your own age?"

"It is you who are talking nonsense now," replied Agnes with some warmth. "So far from his being too old, I think ... that is to say I don't think.... I mean that I suppose everybody would think people a great deal older, might be a great deal.... But this is all nothing to the purpose, Mary.... I would not marry Mr. Stephenson if.... But let us say no more on the subject ... only, for pity's sake, do not let my aunt know anything about it!"

"She shall not hear it from me, Agnes," replied Miss Peters.... "But I cannot understand you,—you have disappointed me.... However, I have no right to be angry, and so, as you say, we will talk no more about it. Come, let us overtake Elizabeth; we must not let her go all the way to Clifton in solitary state."

And so ended the very promising trial at match-making, upon which the pretty Mary Peters had wasted so many useless meditations! It was a useful lesson to her, for she has never been known to interfere in any affair of the kind since.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. BARNABY FEELS CONSCIOUS OF IMPROVEMENT, AND REJOICES AT IT.—HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.—A CONVERSATION IN WHICH MUCH GENEROUS SINCERITY IS DISPLAYED.—A LETTER INTENDED TO BE EXPLANATORY, BUT FAILING TO BE SO.

Mrs. Barnaby's first feelings after the Major left her were agreeable enough. She had escaped with little injury from a great danger, and, while believing herself infinitely wiser than before, she was conscious of no reason that should either lower her estimate of herself, or check the ambitious projects with which she had set forth from her native town to push her fortune in the world. But her views were improved and enlarged, her experience was more practical and enlightened, and her judgment, as to those trifling fallacies by which people of great ability are enabled to delude people of little, though in no degree changed as to its *morale*, was greatly purified and sharpened as to the means to be employed. Thus, by way of example, it may be mentioned that, during the hour of mental examination which followed Major Allen's adieux, Mrs. Barnaby determined never again to mention Silverton Park; and, if at any time led to talk of her favourite greys, that the pastures they fed in, and the roads they traversed, should on no account be particularly specified. Neither her courage nor her hopes were at all lowered by this her first adventure; on the contrary, by setting her to consider from whence arose the blunder, it led her to believe that her danger had been occasioned solely by her own too great humility in not having soared high enough to seek her quarry.

"In making new acquaintance," thus ran her soliloquy—"in making new acquaintance, the rank and station of the party should be too unequivocal to render a repetition of such danger possible.... I was to blame in so totally neglecting the evident admiration of Colonel Hubert, in order to gratify the jealous feelings of Major Allen.... That was a man to whom I might have devoted myself without danger, his family and fortune known to all the world ... and himself so every way calculated to do me honour. But it is too late now!... His feelings have been too deeply wounded.... I cannot forget the glances of jealous anger which I have seen him throw on that unworthy Allen.... But my time must not be wasted in regrets; I must look forward."

And look forward she did with a very bold and dashing vein of speculation, although for the present moment her power of putting any new plans in action was greatly paralyzed by her having been bound over to prosecute Betty Jacks and her accomplices at the next Bristol assizes. Now Bristol and its vicinity had become equally her contempt and aversion. The Major had taught her to consider the trade-won wealth of the Peterses as something derogatory to her dignity; and though she still hoped to make them useful, she had altogether abandoned the notion that they could make her great. During the time that it would be necessary for her to remain at Clifton, however, she determined to maintain as much intimacy with them as "their very stiff manners" would permit, and carefully to avoid anything approaching to another affair of the heart till she should have left their neighbourhood, and the scene of her late failure, behind.

As soon as her spirits had recovered the double shock they had received from the perfidies of Betty Jacks and Major Allen, she remembered with great satisfaction the discovery made of

Agnes's singing powers. Though more than eighteen years had passed since her musical father and mother had warbled together for the delight of the Silverton *soirées*, Mrs. Barnaby had not forgotten the applause their performances used to elicit, nor the repeated assurances of the best informed among their auditors, that the voices of both were of very first-rate quality. The belief that Agnes inherited their powers, now suggested more than one project. In the first place, it would make the parties she was determined to give extremely attractive, and might very probably be sufficient to render her at once the fashion, either at Cheltenham, which she intended should be the scene of her next campaign, or anywhere else where it was her will and pleasure to display it. Nor was this ornamental service the only one to which she thought it possible she might convert the voice of Agnes. She knew that the exploits she contemplated were hazardous, as well as splendid; and that, although success was probable, failure might be possible, in which case she might fall back upon this newly-discovered treasure, and either marry her niece, or put her on the stage, or make her a singing mistress, as she should find most feasible and convenient.

With these notions in her head, she attacked Agnes on the singular concealment of her talent, as well as upon other matters, during breakfast the morning after the unlamented Major's departure, which was in fact the first time they had been alone together, Agnes having passed the whole of the preceding day at Rodney Place.

In answer to her niece's gentle salutation, she said in a tone very far from amiable, though it affected to be so,—

"Yes, yes, good morning, aunt!... that's all very well; ... and now, please to tell me where I shall find another young lady living with a generous relation to whom she owes her daily bread, who, knowing that relation's anxiety about everything concerning her, has chosen to make a secret of the only thing on earth she can do.... Tell me, if you can, where I shall find anything like that?"

"If you mean my singing, aunt, I have told you already why I never said anything about it.... My only reason was, because I did not like to ask you for a piano."

"That's all hypocrisy, Miss Agnes; and let who will be taken in by you, I am not ... and you may just remember that, miss, now and always. You were afraid, perhaps, that I might make you of some use to me. But the scheme won't answer. With the kindest temper in the world, I have plenty of resolution to do just whatever I think right, and that's what I shall do by you. I shall say no more about it in this nasty, vulgar, merchandizing sort of a place; but as soon as we get among ladies and gentlemen that I consider my equals, I shall begin to give regular parties like other people of fashion, and then ... let me hear you refuse to sing when I ask you ... and we shall see what will happen next."

"Indeed, aunt, I believe you are mistaken about my voice," replied Agnes; "I have never had teaching enough to enable me to sing so well as you seem to suppose; and, in fact, I know little or nothing about it, except what dear good Mr. Wilmot used to tell me; and I don't believe he has heard any really good singing for the last twenty years."

"And I was not at Mrs. Peters's the other night, I suppose, Miss Willoughby?... and I did not hear all the praise, and the rapture, and the fuss, didn't I?... What a fool you do seem to take me for, Agnes!... However, I don't mean to quarrel with you.... You know what sacrifices I have made, and not all your bad behaviour shall prevent my making more still for you.... You shall have a master, if I find you want one; and when we get to Cheltenham, you shall be sure to have a pianoforte. Does that please you?"

"I shall be very glad to be able to practice again, aunt, only...."

"Only what, if you please?"

"Why, I mean to say that I should be sorry you should expect to make a great performer of me; ... for I am certain that you will be disappointed."

"Stuff and nonsense!... Don't trouble yourself about my disappointments—I'll take care to get what I want.... And there's another talent, Miss Agnes, which I shall expect to find in you; and I hope you have made a secret of that too, for I never saw much sign of it.... I want you to be very active and clever, and to act as my maid till I get one. Indeed, I'm not sure I shall ever get one again, they seem to be such plagues; and if I find you ain't too great a fool to do what I want, I have a notion that I shall take a tiger instead—it will be much more respectable.... Pray, Agnes, have you any idea about dressing hair?"

"I think I could do it as well for you, aunt, as Jerningham did," replied Agnes with perfect good-humour.

"And that's not quite so well as I want; but I suppose you know that as well as I do, only you choose to shew off your impertinence.... And there's my drawers to keep in order ... dunce as you are, I suppose you can do that; and fifty other little things there will be, now that good-for-nothing baggage is gone, which I promise you I do not intend to do for myself."

Did Agnes repent having sent the enamoured possessor of seven thousand a-year from her in despair, as she listened to this sketch of her future occupations? No, not for a moment. No annoyances that her aunt could threaten, no escape from them that Mr. Stephenson could offer, had the power of mastering in her mind the one prominent idea, which, like the rod of the chosen priest, swallowed up all the rest.

And this engrossing, this cherished, this secretly hoarded idea ... how was it nurtured and sustained? Did the object of it return to occupy every hour of her life by giving her looks, words, and movements to meditate upon? No; Colonel Hubert appeared no more at Clifton; and Agnes, notwithstanding the flashes of fond hope that, like the soft gleaming of the glow-worm, had occasionally brightened the gloom of her prospects, was left to suppose that he had taken his departure in company with his offended friend, and that she should probably never hear of him more. Was he then angry at her refusal? Was the notice he had taken of her for his friend's pleasure rather than his own? Poor Agnes! there was great misery in this thought. They had indeed both left Clifton on the same day, though they had not left it together. But that she knew not.... Colonel Hubert, as we have seen, was already on his way to London when the impetuous Frederick staked all his dearest hopes upon his sanguine, but most mistaken judgment of a young girl's heart; and when the ill-fated experiment was over, he posted with all speed across the country to Southampton, and there embarked to take refuge among the hills and the orchards of Normandy.

The recollection of the manner in which he had driven Colonel Hubert from him, was no slight aggravation of his unhappiness, when he gave himself time to take breath, and to reflect a little. He felt deeply, bitterly, the loss of Agnes, but perhaps he felt more bitterly still the loss of his friend. The first, as he could not help confessing to himself, was the loss of a good he had possessed only in his own fond fancy; the last was that of the most substantial good that man can possess ... a tried, attached, and honourable friend.

For many days, and many nights too, Frederick suffered sorely from the battle that was going on between his pride and his consciousness of having been wrong; but, happily for his repose, his pride at length gave way, and the following letter was written and directed to the United Service Club, whence, sooner or later, he knew it would reach the friend to whom it was addressed.

"MOST men, my dear Hubert, would be too angry at the petulance I exhibited during our last interview even to receive an apology for it, ... but you are not one of them; and you will let me tell you, without receiving the confession too triumphantly, that I have never known a moment's peace from that day to this, nor ever shall till you send me your forgiveness as frankly as I ask it. You may do this with the more safety, dear Hubert, because we shall never again quarrel on the same occasion; and so perfectly have I found you to be right in all you said and all you hinted on that fair but unfortunate subject, that henceforward I think I shall be afraid to pronounce upon the colour of a lady's hair, or the tincture of her skin, till I have heard your judgment thereon. Let us, therefore, never talk again either of the terrible Mrs. Barnaby or her beautiful niece; but, forgetting that anything of the kind could breed discord between us, remember only that I am, and ever must be,

"Your most affectionate friend,

"FREDERICK STEPHENSON."

How many times did Colonel Hubert read over this letter before he could satisfy himself that he understood it? This is a question that cannot be answered, because he never did by means of these constantly repeated readings ever arrive at any such conclusion at all. Had Mrs. Barnaby's name been altogether omitted, he might have fancied that his own deep but unacknowledged belief that Miss Willoughby would refuse his friend, had been manifest in the dissuasive words he had spoken, notwithstanding his caution. But this allusion to the widow, who had so repeatedly been the theme of his prophetic warnings, left him at liberty to suppose that Frederick's solitary and repentant rumination upon all he had propounded on that fertile subject, had finally induced him to give up the pursuit, and to leave Clifton without having proposed to her niece.

Anything more destructive to the tranquillity of Colonel Hubert than this doubt can hardly be imagined. He had long persuaded himself, it is true, that it was impossible, under any circumstances, he could ever confess to Agnes what his own feelings were, as his friendship for Stephenson must put it totally out of his power to do so.... The frankness of Frederick's early avowal of his passion to him, and the style and tone of the opposition with which he had met it, must inevitably lay him under such an imputation of dishonour, if he addressed her himself, as he could not bear to think of.... Nevertheless, he felt, or fancied, that he should be much more tranquil and resigned could he have known to a certainty whether Stephenson had proposed to her or not. It was long, however, ere any opportunity of satisfying himself on this point arose. The reconciliation, indeed, between himself and his friend, was perfect, and their letters breathed the same spirit of affectionate confidence as heretofore; but how could Colonel Hubert abuse this confidence by asking a question which could not be answered in any way, without opening afresh the wound that he feared still rankled in the breast of his friend?

It would be selfish and ungenerous in the extreme, and must not be thought of; but this forbearance robbed the high-minded Hubert of the only consolation that his situation left him,—namely, the belief that the young Agnes, notwithstanding the disparity in their years, had been too near loving him to accept the hand of another. Of the two interpretations to which the letter of Frederick was open, this, the most flattering to himself, was the one that faded fastest away from the mind of Colonel Hubert, till he hardly dared remember that he had once believed it possible; and he finally remained with the persuasion that his too tractable friend had yielded to his arguments against the marriage, without ever having put the feelings of Agnes to the test, which he would have given the world to believe had been tried, and been withstood.

CHAPTER XII.

A LUCKY ESCAPE.—A MELANCHOLY PARTING.—MRS. BARNABY SETTLES HERSELF AT CHELTENHAM.—HER FIRST SORTIE.—BOARDING-HOUSE BREAKFAST.—A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.—A MEDICAL CONVERSATION.

In addition to Mrs. Barnaby's pretty strong confidence in herself and her own devices, she soon learned to think that she was very especially favoured by fortune; for just as she began to find her idle and most unprofitable abode at Clifton intolerably tedious, and that the recovery of her property hardly atoned for the inconvenience of being obliged to prosecute those who had stolen it, she received the welcome intelligence that the trio had escaped by means of the superior ingenuity of Captain Maintry, alias Purdham. The ends of justice being considerably less dear to the widow's heart than the end of the adventures she promised herself at Cheltenham, she welcomed the intelligence most joyfully, and set about her preparations for departure without an hour's delay.

Several very elegant shops at Clifton had so earnestly requested the honour of her name upon their books, that Mrs. Barnaby had found it impossible to refuse; and the consequence was, that when she announced her intended departure, so unexpected an amount of "mere nothings" crowded in upon her, that she would have been very considerably embarrassed, had not the manner of raising money during the last years of her father's life been fresh in her memory, shewing her, as her property was all in the funds, and, happily or unhappily, standing in her own name, that nothing could be more easy than to write to her broker, and order him to sell out a couple of hundreds.

Confidence in one's self,—the feeling that there is a power within us of sufficient strength to reach the goal we have in view,—is in general a useful as well as a pleasant state of mind; but in Mrs. Barnaby it was very likely to prove otherwise. In all her meditations, in all her plottings, in all her reasonings, she saw nothing before her but success; the alternative, and all its possible consequences, never suggested itself to her as possible, and therefore no portion of her clever ingenuity was ever employed, even in speculation, to ward it off.

In a word, then, her bills, which, by the by, were wholly and solely for her own dress, were all paid without difficulty or delay, and the day was fixed for the departure of herself and Agnes by a stage-coach from Bristol to Cheltenham.

Poor Agnes wept bitterly as she received the affectionate farewells of her friends in Rodney Place; and Mary, who really loved her, wept too, though it is possible that the severe disappointment which had attended her matrimonial project for her, had a little dulled the edge of the enthusiasm at first excited by the sweetness and beauty of the poor motherless girl. But, under no circumstances, could the grief of Miss Peters at losing sight of her have been comparable to that felt by Agnes herself. How little had the tyranny of Mrs. Barnaby, and all the irksome *désagrémens* of her home, occupied her attention during the month she had spent at Clifton! How completely it had all been lost sight of in the society of Mary, and the hospitable kindness of Rodney Place!

"But, Oh! the heavy change!"... That which had been chased by the happy lightness of her young spirit, as a murky cloud is chased by the bright sun of April, now rolled back upon her, looking like a storm that was to last for ever! She knew it, she felt its approach, and, like a frightened fawn, trembled as she gazed around, and saw no shelter near.

"You will write to me, dear Agnes!" said Mary. "I shall think of you very often, and it will be a real pleasure to hear from you."

"And to write to you, Mary, will be by far the greatest pleasure I can possibly have. But how can I ask you to write to me in return?... I am sure my aunt will never let me receive a letter; ... and yet, would it not be worth its weight in gold."

"Don't take up sorrow at interest, Agnes," replied Mary, laughing. "I don't think your dragon will be so fierce as that either.... I can hardly imagine she would refuse to let you correspond with me."

Agnes endeavoured to return her smile, but she blushed and faltered as she said, "I mean, Mary, that she would not pay postage for me."

"Impossible!" cried Miss Peters, indignantly; "you cannot speak seriously.... I know my mother does not believe a word about her *very* large fortune, any more than she does her *very* generous intention of leaving it to us. But she says that my uncle must have left something like a respectable income for her; and though we none of us doubt (not even Elizabeth) that she will marry with all possible speed, and when she has found a husband, with all her worldly goods will him endow; still, till this happens, it is hardly likely she will refuse to pay the postage of your letters."

"Perhaps she will not," said Agnes, blushing again for saying what she did not think; "but, at any

rate, try the experiment, dearest Mary.... To know that you have thought of me will be comfort inexpressible."

"And suppose Mr. Frederick Stephenson were to ramble back to Clifton, Agnes, ... and suppose he were to ask me which way you are gone ... may I tell him?"

"He never will ask you, Mary...."

"But an' if he should?" persisted Miss Peters.

"Then tell him that it would be a great deal more kind and amiable if he never again talked about me to any one."

Arrived at Cheltenham, Mrs. Barnaby set about the business of finding a domicile with much more confidence and *savoir faire* than heretofore. A very few inquiries made her decide upon choosing to place herself at a boarding-house; and though the price rather startled her, she not only selected the dearest, but indulged in the expensive luxury of a handsome private sitting-room.

"I know what I am about," thought she; "faint heart never won fair lady, and sparing hand never won gay gentleman."

It was upon the same principle that, within three days after her arrival, she had found a tiger, and got his dress (resplendent with buttons from top to toe) sent home to her private apartments, and likewise that she had determined to enter her name as a subscriber at the pump-room.

The day after all this was completed, was the first upon which she accounted her Cheltenham existence to begin; and having informed herself of the proper hours and fitting costume for each of the various stated times of appearing at the different points of re-union, she desired Agnes carefully to brush the dust from her immortal black crape bonnet, and with her own features sheltered by *paille de fantaisie*, straw-coloured ribbons, and Brussels lace, she set forth, leaning on the arm of her niece, and followed by her tiger and parasol, to take her first draught at the spring, at eight o'clock in the morning.

Her spirits rose as she approached the fount on perceiving the throng of laughing, gay, and gossiping invalids that bon ton and bile had brought together; and when she held out her hand to receive the glass, she had more the air of a full-grown Bacchante, celebrating the rites of Bacchus, than a votary at the shrine of Hygeia. But no sooner had the health-restoring but nauseous beverage touched her lips, or rather her palate, than, making a horrible grimace, she set down the glass on the marble slab, and pushed it from her with very visible symptoms of disgust. A moment's reflection made her turn her head to see if Agnes was looking at her; ... but no ... Agnes indeed stood at no great distance; but her whole attention seemed captivated by a tall, elegant-looking woman, who, together with an old lady leaning on her arm, appeared like herself to be occupied as spectators of the water-drinking throng.

Satisfied that her strong distaste for the unsavoury draught had not been perceived, Mrs. Barnaby backed out of the crowd, saying, as she took the arm of her niece in her way, "This water must be a very fine medicine, I am sure, for those who want it; but I don't think I shall venture upon any more of it till I have taken medical advice ... it is certainly very powerful, and I think it might do you a vast deal of good, Agnes."

These words being spoken in the widow's audible tone, which she always rather desired than not should make her presence known at some distance ... excepting, indeed, when she was making love ... were very distinctly heard by the ladies above mentioned; and the elder of them, having witnessed Mrs. Barnaby's look of disgust as she sat down her unemptied glass, laughed covertly and quietly, but with much merriment, saying, though rather to herself than her companion, "Good!... very good, indeed!... This will prove an acquisition."

A turn or two up and down the noble walk upon which the pump-room opens was rendered very delightful to the widow by shewing her that even at that early hour many dashing-looking, lace-frocked men, moustached and whiskered "to the top of her bent," might be met sauntering there; and having enjoyed this till her watch told her the boarding-house breakfast hour was arrived, she turned from the fascinating promenade in excellent spirits, and after a few minutes passed at the mirror in arranging her cap and her curls, and refreshing her bloom, entered for the first time the public eating-room, well disposed to enjoy herself in every way.

Having left the Peters family behind her, she no longer thought it necessary to restrain her fancy in the choice of colours; and, excepting occasionally on a provincial stage, it would be difficult to find a costume more brilliant in its various hues than that of our widow as she followed the obsequious waiter to the place assigned her. Agnes came after her, like a tranquil moon-lit night following the meretricious glare of noisy fireworks; the dazzled sight that had been drawn to Mrs. Barnaby as she entered, rested upon Agnes, as if to repose itself, and by the time they both were seated, it was on her fair, delicate face, and mourning garb, that every eye was fixed. The vicarial crape and bombasin which she wore in compliance with the arrangement of her too sensitive aunt, did Agnes at least one service among strangers, for it precluded the idea of any near relationship between her companion and herself; and though no one could see them together without marvelling at the discordant fellowship of two persons so remarkably contrasted in

manner and appearance, none explained it by presuming that they were aunt and niece.

The party assembled and assembling at the breakfast-table consisted of fourteen gentlemen and five ladies; the rest of the company inhabiting the extensive and really elegant mansion preferring to breakfast in their own apartments, though there were few who did not condescend to abandon their privacy at dinner. Of the gentlemen now present, about half were of that lemon tint which at the first glance shewed their ostensible reason for being there was the real one. Of the other half it would be less easy to render an account. The five ladies were well dressed; and, two being old, and three young, they may be said for the most part to have been well-looking. Any more accurate description of them generally would but encumber and delay the narrative unnecessarily, as such among them as may come particularly in contact with my heroine or her niece will of necessity be brought into notice.

Our two ladies were of course placed side by side, Mrs. Barnaby being flanked to the right by a staid and sober gentleman of middle age, who happily acted as a wet blanket to the crackling and sparkling vivacity of the widow, obliging her, after one or two abortive attempts at conversation, and such sort of boarding-table *agaceries* as the participation of coffee and eggs may give room for, either to eat her breakfast in silence, or to exercise her social propensities on the neighbour of Agnes. This was an elderly lady, who, though like Mrs. Barnaby, but just arrived for the season, had, unlike her, been a constant visiter at Cheltenham for the last twelve years; and being an active-minded spinster of tolerably easy means, and completely mistress of them, was as capable of giving all sorts of local information as Mrs. Barnaby was desirous of receiving it. Miss Morrison (such was her name) being now, and having ever been, a lady of great prudence and the most unimpeachable discretion, might probably have taken fright had she chanced, at first meeting with our widow, to see her under full sail in chase of conquest; but luckily this was not apparent at their first interview, and the appearance and manner of Agnes offering something like a guarantee for the respectability of the lady to whose charge she was intrusted, she met Mrs. Barnaby's advances towards making an acquaintance with great civility.

Before many sentences had been exchanged between them, the spinster had the satisfaction of perceiving, that all her minute acquaintance with Cheltenham and its ways gave her an immeasurable superiority over her richly-dressed new acquaintance; while the widow with like facility discovered that all she most particularly desired to know, might be learned from the very respectable-looking individual near whom her good fortune had placed her.

The consequence of this mutual discovery was so brisk an exchange of question and answer as obliged Agnes to lean back in her chair, and eat her breakfast by means of a very distant communication with the table; ... but she was thankful her aunt had fallen upon a quiet though rather singular-looking female of forty, instead of another whiskered Major Allen, and willingly placed herself in the attitude least likely to interrupt their conversation.

"Never been at Cheltenham before?... really!... Well, ma'am, I have little doubt that you will soon declare it shall not be your last visit, though it is your first," said Miss Morrison.

"Indeed, ma'am, I think you will prove right in that opinion," replied Mrs. Barnaby, "for I never saw a place I admired so much. We are just come from Clifton, which is called so beautiful, ... but it is not to be compared to Cheltenham."

"You are just come from Clifton, are you, ma'am?... I understand it is a very beautiful place, but terribly dull, I believe, when compared to this.... If a person knows Cheltenham well, and has a little notion how to take advantage of all that is going on, he may pass months and months here without ever knowing what it is to have an idle hour.... I don't believe there is such another place in the whole world for employing time."

"I am sure that's a blessing," replied Mrs. Barnaby earnestly. "If there is one thing I dread and hate more than another, it is having nothing to do with my time. Idleness is indeed the root of all evil."

"I'm pleased to hear you say so, ma'am," said Miss Morrison, "because it is so exactly my own opinion, and because, too, you will find yourself so particularly well off here as to the avoiding it; and I shall be very happy, I'm sure, if any advice of mine may put you in the way of making the most of the advantages in that line that Cheltenham offers."

"You are exceedingly kind and obliging, ma'am," returned Mrs. Barnaby very graciously; "and I shall be very grateful for any counsel or instruction you can bestow. With my handsome fortune I should consider it quite a crime if I did not put my time to profit in such a place as Cheltenham."

This phrase produced its proper effect; Miss Morrison eyed the speaker not only with increased respect, but increased good-will.

"Indeed, my dear madam, you are quite right," she said; "and by merely paying attention to such information as I shall be able to give you, I will venture to say that you will never have the weight of an idle hour upon your hands while you remain here; for what with the balls, and the music at the libraries, and the regular hours for the walks, and attendance at all the sales, (and I assure you we have sometimes three in a day,) and shopping, and driving between the turnpikes, if you have a carriage, and morning visits, and evening parties, and churches and chapels, if you have a taste for them, and looking over the new names, and the pump-room, and making new acquaintance, and finding out old ones, there is not a day of the week, or an hour in the day, in which one may not be well employed."

"I am sure, ma'am, it is perfectly a pleasure to a person of my active turn of mind to listen to such a description; and it is a greater pleasure still to meet with a lady like yourself, with taste and good sense to value what is valuable, and to find out how and where to enjoy it.... I hope we shall become better acquainted; I have a private drawing-room here where I shall be delighted to see you.... Give me leave to present you with my card."

A gilt-edged and deeply-embossed card, inscribed—

MRS. BARNABY,
The — Hotel and Boarding House.
No. 5.

was here put into Miss Morrison's hand, who received it with an air of great satisfaction, and reiterated assurances that she would by no means fail of paying her compliments.

Unlike many vain persons who receive every civility under the persuasion that it is offered for their own *beaux yeux*, Miss Morrison had sufficient good sense and experience to understand that any convenience or advantage she might derive from Mrs. Barnaby, or Mrs. Barnaby's private drawing-room, must be repaid by accommodation of some sort or other. All obligations of such kind were, for a variety of excellent reasons, always repaid by Miss Morrison with such treasure as her own lips could coin, aided by her wit and wisdom, without drawing on any other exchequer; and now, having placed her little modest slip of pasteboard, bearing in broad and legible, though manuscript characters,—

MISS MORRISON,
The — Hotel and Boarding House.

by the side of Mrs. Barnaby's buttered roll, she began at once, like an honest old maid as she was, to pay the debt almost before it was incurred.

"I don't know how they do those sort of things at Clifton, Mrs. Barnaby," she said, "but here the medical gentlemen, or at least many of them, always call on the new-comers; and though I hope and trust that neither you nor this pretty young lady,—who, I suppose, is your visiter,—though I hope with all my heart that you won't, either of you, have any occasion in the world for physic or doctors, yet I advise you most certainly to fix on one in your own mind beforehand, and just let him know it. There are not more kind and agreeable acquaintances in the world than gentlemen of the medical profession ... at least, I'm sure it is so here. There are one or two apothecaries in particular,—surgeons, though, I believe they are called,—who certainly are as elegant, conversable gentlemen, as can be met with in London or anywhere, unless, indeed, just in Paris, where I certainly found the apothecaries, like everything else, in a very out-of-the-common-way style of elegance, *toutafay par fit*, as we say on the Continent. Of course, you have been abroad, Mrs. Barnaby?"

"No, Miss Morrison, I have not," replied the widow, making head against this attack with great skill and courage. "I am obliged to confess that the extreme comfort and elegance of my own home, have absolutely made a prisoner of me hitherto; ... but since I have lost my dear husband I find change absolutely necessary for my health and spirits, and I shall probably soon make the tour of Europe."

"Indeed!... Oh dear! how I envy you!... But you speak all the languages already?"

"Oh! perfectly."

"I'm so glad of that, Mrs. Barnaby, ... for, upon my word, I find it quite out of my power to avoid using a French word every now and then since I came from abroad, and it is so vexing when one is not understood. A lady of your station has, of course, been taught by all sorts of foreigners; but those who can't afford this indulgence never do get the accent without going abroad.... I'm sure you'll find, before you have been a week on the Continent, a most prodigious difference in your accent, though I dare say its very good already. But, a *prop po*, about the apothecaries and surgeons that I was talking about.... I hope you will give orders at the door that, if Mr. Alexander Pringle calls, and sends in his card, he shall be desired to walk up; and then, you know, just a *prop po de nang*, you can talk to him about whatever you wish to know; ... and you can say, if you like it, that Miss Morrison particularly mentioned his name.... There is no occasion *do too* that you should give him any fee; but you may ask him a few questions about the waters *cum sa*, and you will find him the most agreeable, convenient, and instructive acquaintance *do mund*."

The breakfast was now so evidently drawing to its close, that the new friends deemed it advisable to leave the table; and Mrs. Barnaby having repeated her invitation, and Miss Morrison having replied to it by kissing her fingers, and uttering "*Mercy! Mercy! O revor*," they parted ... the widow to give orders, as she passed to her drawing-room, that if Mr. Alexander Pringle called on her, he should be admitted; and the spinster to invent and fabricate, in the secret retirement of her attic retreat, some of those remarkably puzzling articles of dress, the outline of which she had studied during a three weeks' residence in Paris, and which passed current with the majority of her friends and acquaintance for being of genuine Gallic manufacture.

The prediction of Miss Morrison was speedily verified; Mr. Alexander Pringle did call at the hotel to leave his card for Mrs. Barnaby, and, in consequence of the orders given, was immediately

admitted to her presence.

She was alone; for Agnes, though unfortunately there was no little dear miserable closet for her, had received the welcome *congé*, now always expressed by the words, "There, you may go to your lessons, child, if you will," and had withdrawn herself to an out-of-the-way corner in their double-bedded room, where already her desk, and other Empton treasures, had converted about four feet square of her new abode into a home. The sofa, therefore, with the table and its gaudy cover, adorned with the widow's fine work-box, a boarding-house inkstand of bright coloured china, and THE ALBUM (still sacred to the name of Isabella d'Almafonte), had all been set in the places and attitudes she thought most becoming by Mrs. Barnaby herself, and, together with her own magnificent person, formed a very charming picture as the medical gentleman entered the room; ... but it is probable Mr. Alexander Pringle expected rather to find a patient than to be ushered into the presence of a lady in a state of health apparently so perfect.

"Pray, sit down, sir!... Mr. Pringle, I believe?" said Mrs. Barnaby, half rising, and pointing to a chair exactly opposite her place upon the sofa.

Mr. Pringle took the indicated chair; but before he was well seated in it, the idea that some mistake might be the source of this civility occurred to him, and he rose again, made a step forward, and laid his card, specifying his name, profession, and address, on the table immediately before the eyes of the lady.

"Oh yes!" said she, smiling with amiable condescension, "I understand perfectly; ... and should myself, or my young niece, or any of my servants, require medical assistance, Mr. Pringle, this card (placing it carefully in her work-box) will enable us to find it. But, though at present we are all pretty well, I am really very glad to have an opportunity of seeing you, sir.... Miss Morrison ... I believe you know Miss Morrison?... (Mr. Pringle bowed).... Miss Morrison has named you to me in a manner that made me extremely desirous of making your acquaintance.... Gentlemen of your profession, Mr. Pringle, have so much knowledge of the world, that it is a great advantage for a stranger, on first arriving at a new place, to find an opportunity of conversing with them. Will you afford me five minutes while I explain to you my very peculiar situation?"

"Assuredly, madam," replied Mr. Pringle, "I shall be most happy to listen to you."

"Well, then ... without farther apology I will explain myself. My name is Barnaby.... I am a widow of good fortune, and without children ... for I have lost both my little ones!" Here Mrs. Barnaby drew forth one of her embroidered handkerchiefs, as she always did when speaking of her children "which were not;" and this frequently happened, for she had a great dislike to being considered as one unblessed by offspring,—a peculiarity which, together with some others, displaying themselves in the same inventive strain, proved an especial blessing to Agnes, inasmuch as it made her absence often desirable. Having wiped her eyes, and recovered her emotion, she continued: "I have no children; ... but an elder sister ... so much older, indeed, as almost to be considered as my mother, ... died several years ago, leaving an orphan girl to my care. In truth, I am not a great many years older than my niece, and the anxiety of this charge has been sometimes almost too much for me.... However, she is a good girl, and I am most passionately attached to her. Nevertheless she has some peculiarities which give me pain, ... one is, that she will never wear any dress but the deepest mourning, thus consecrating herself, as I may say, to the memory of her departed parents. Now this whim, Mr. Pringle, shews her spirits to be in a state requiring change of scene, and it is on this account that I have left my charming place in Devonshire, in the hope that variety, and a gayer circle than is likely to be found in the immediate neighbourhood of a large mansion in the country, might be of service to her."

"Indeed, ma'am, I think you are quite right," replied Mr. Pringle. "What age is the young lady?"

"Just seventeen ... and I should have no objection whatever to take her into company ... and this is indeed the point on which I most wish for your advice. I came to Cheltenham, sir, fully expecting to find my friends the Gordons ... near relations of the Duke, and persons of first-rate fashion and consequence, who would at once have placed us in the midst of all that is most elegant in the way of society here.... But, by a letter they sent to meet us at Clifton, I find that they are absolutely obliged to pay a visit of some weeks to the Duchess of Bedford, ... and thus I find myself here a perfect stranger, without any means whatever of getting into society."

"A most vexatious *contretems*, certainly, madam," replied Mr. Pringle; "but there can be no doubt of your obtaining quite as much society as you wish, for Cheltenham is extremely full just now, and a lady in your situation of life can hardly fail of meeting some of your acquaintance.... Of course you will go to the pump-room, Mrs. Barnaby, and look over the subscription-books, and I doubt not you will soon find there are many here whom you know.... Besides, I will myself, if you wish it, take care to make it known that you intend to enter into society ... and probably intend to receive...."

"Indeed, sir, you will oblige me.... On my own account I should certainly never particularly desire to make acquaintance with strangers, but there is nothing I would not be willing to do for this dear girl!... Of course I shall make a point of subscribing to everything, and particularly of taking my poor dear niece to all the balls.... She is really very pretty, and if I can but contrive to get suitable partners for her, I think dancing may be of great service. Are there many of the nobility here at present, Mr. Pringle?"

"Yes, madam, several, and a great deal of good company besides."

"That gives us a better chance of finding old acquaintance certainly.... But there is another point, Mr. Pringle, on which I am anxious to consult you.... My niece is decidedly very bilious, and I feel quite convinced that a glass of the water every morning would be of the most essential benefit to her.... Unfortunately, dear creature, she is quite a spoiled child, and I do not think she will be prevailed on to take what is certainly not very pleasant to the taste, unless ordered to do it by a medical man."

"I must see the young lady, ma'am," replied Mr. Pringle, "before I can venture to prescribe for her in any way."

Mrs. Barnaby internally wished him less scrupulous, but feeling that it would be better he should send in a bill and charge a visit, than that she should lose a daily excuse for visiting the delightful pump-room, and, moreover, feeling more strongly still that, in order to make Agnes swallow the dose instead of herself, it would be good economy to pay for half a dozen visits, she rose from the sofa, and said with a fascinating smile.... "I will bring her to you myself, my dear sir, but I hope you will not disappoint me about prescribing the Cheltenham waters for her. I know her constitution well, and I venture to pledge myself to you, that she is exactly the subject for the Cheltenham treatment.... So bilious, poor girl!... so dreadfully bilious!"

Mrs. Barnaby left the room, and presently returned with Agnes, who was considerably surprised at being told that it was necessary a medical man should see her; for, in the first place, save a heaviness at her heart, she felt quite well; and in the second, she had never before, since she left Empton, perceived any great anxiety on the part of her aunt as to her being well or ill. However, she yielded implicit obedience to the command which bade her leave the letter she was writing to Miss Peters, and meekly followed her imperious protectress to their sitting-room.

Mr. Alexander Pringle was decidedly a clever man, and clever men of his profession are generally skilful in discerning diagnostics of various kinds. He had expected to see a yellow, heavy-eyed girl, looking either as if she were ready to cry with melancholy, or pout from perverseness; instead of which, he saw a lovely, graceful creature, with a step elastic with youth and health, and an eye whose clear, intelligent glance, said as plainly as an eye could speak, "What would you with me?... I have no need of you."

He immediately perceived that the amiable child-bereaved widow had quite misunderstood the young lady's case.... It might be, perhaps, from her too tender affection; but, let the cause be what it would, it was not to solve any professional doubts that he took her delicate hand to feel the "healthful music" of her pulse. Nevertheless, Mr. Pringle, who had seven promising children, knew better than to reject the proffered custom of a rich widow who had none; so, looking at his beautiful patient with much gravity, he said,—

"There is little or nothing, madam, to alarm you. The young lady is rather pale, but I am inclined to believe that it rather proceeds from the naturally delicate tint of her complexion than from illness. It will be proper, however, that I should see her again, and, mean time, I would strongly recommend her taking about one-third of a glass of water daily. If more be found necessary, the dose must be increased; but I am inclined to hope that this will prove sufficient, with the help of a few table-spoonfuls of a mixture ... by no means disagreeable, my dear young lady ... which I will not fail to send in." And so saying, Mr. Pringle rose to take leave, but was somewhat puzzled by Agnes saying, with a half smile in which there was something that looked very much as if she were quizzing him,—

"You must excuse me, sir, if I decline taking any medicine whatever till I feel myself in some degree out of health."

Mr. Pringle, who was very near laughing himself, answered with great good-humour,... "Well then, Mrs. Barnaby, I suppose we must do without it, ... and I don't think there will be much danger either." He then took his departure, leaving Mrs. Barnaby quite determined that Agnes should drink the water, but not very sorry that she was to have no physic to pay for ... whilst Agnes was altogether at a loss to guess what this new vagary of her aunt might mean.

"What made you think I was ill, aunt?" said she.

"Ill?... Who told you, child, that I thought you ill?... I don't think any such thing, ... but I did not choose you should drink the waters till I had the opinion of the first medical man in the place about it. There is no expense, no sacrifice, Agnes, that I am not ready to make for you."

"But I don't mean to drink the waters at all, thank you, aunt," replied Agnes.

"Don't mean, miss?... you don't mean?... And perhaps you don't mean to eat any dinner to-day? and perhaps you don't mean to sleep in my apartment to-night?... Perhaps you may prefer walking the streets all night?... Pretty language, indeed, from you to me!... And now you may take yourself off again, and, as you like to stick to your lessons, you may just go and write for a copy, 'I must do as I'm bid.'"

Agnes quitted the room in silence, and Mrs. Barnaby prepared to receive her new friend, Miss Morrison, who she doubted not would call before the hour she had named as the fashionable time for repairing to the public library; nor was she at all displeased by this abrupt departure, as, for obvious reasons, it was extremely inconvenient for her to have Agnes present when she felt inclined to enter upon a little autobiography. But, while anticipating this agreeable occupation, she recalled, as she set herself to work upon one of her beautiful collars, the scrape she had got

into respecting her park, and firmly resolved not even to mention a paddock to Miss Morrison by name, whatever other flights of fancy she might indulge in.

"This has been no idle day with me as yet," thought she, as she proceeded with her elegant "satin-stitch".... "I have got well stared at, though only in my close straw-bonnet, at the pump-room,—have made a capital new acquaintance, and,"—remembering with a self-approving smile all she had said to Mr. Pringle,—"I know I have not been sowing seed on barren ground.... I have not forgotten how glad my poor dear Barnaby was to get hold of something new.... He will repeat it every word, I'll answer for him."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ACQUAINTANCE RIPENS INTO FRIENDSHIP.—USEFUL INFORMATION OF ALL SORTS.—AN EXCELLENT METHOD OF TALKING FRENCH, ATTENDED WITH LITTLE LABOUR AND CERTAIN SUCCESS.—A COLLECTOR.—A SALE-ROOM.—A PEER OF THE REALM.

The visit of Miss Morrison, which quickly followed, was long and confidential. Mrs. Barnaby very condescendingly explained to her all the peculiar circumstances of her position, which rendered her the most valuable friend in the world, and also the most eligible match extant for a man of rank and fortune; but all these latter particulars were communicated under the seal of secrecy, never, upon any account, to be alluded to or mentioned to any one; and in return for all this, Miss Morrison gave the widow a catalogue *raisonnée* of the most marriageable men at present in Cheltenham, together with the best accounts of their rent-rolls and expectancies that it had been in the power of pertinacious questionings to elicit. But it would be superfluous to narrate this part of the conversation at length, as the person and affairs of many a goodly gentleman were canvassed therein, who, as they never became of much importance to Mrs. Barnaby, can be of none to those occupied by the study of her character and adventures. There were other points, however, canvassed in this interview, which were productive of immediate results; and one of these was the great importance of attending the sales by auction, which, sometimes preluded by soft music, and always animated as they went on by the most elegant conversation, occupied the *beau monde* of Cheltenham for many hours of every day.

"Your descriptions are delightful, Miss Morrison!" exclaimed the animated widow. "I could almost fancy myself there already, ... and go I will constantly, you may depend upon that; ... and I want to consult you about another thing, Miss Morrison.... There's my niece, you know—the little girl you saw at breakfast ... do you think it would be quite the thing to make her leave her books and lessons, and all that, to waste her time at the sales?... And besides, baby as she is, she gets more staring at than I think at all good for her."

"*Jay non doot paw*," replied Miss Morrison, "for she is divinely handsome, *say toon bow tay par fit*, as they say at Paris; and my belief is, that if you wish to be the fashion at Cheltenham, the best thing you can do is to let her be seen every day, and all day long. That face and figure must take, *say clare*."

Mrs. Barnaby fell into a reverie that lasted some minutes. That she did wish to be the fashion at Cheltenham was certain, but the beauty of Agnes was not exactly the means by which she would best like to obtain her wish. She had hoped to depend solely on her own beauty and her own talents, but she was not insensible to the manifest advantage of having two strings to her bow; and as the ambition, which made her determine to be great, was quite as powerful as the vanity which made her determine to be beautiful, the scheme of making Agnes a partner in her projects of fascination and conquest was at least worthy of consideration.

"I must think about it, Miss Morrison," she replied; "there is no occasion to decide this minute."

"*Poing do too*," said Miss Morrison; "I always like myself to walk round a thing, as I call it, before I decide to take it. Besides, my dear madam, a great deal depends upon knowing what is your principal object.... *Bo coo depong de sell aw*.... If you intend to be at all the parties, to be marked with a buzz every time you enter the pump-room, the ball-room, or the sales, I would say, dress up that young lady in the most elegant and attractive style possible, and you will be sure to succeed ... *paw le mowyndra doot de sell aw*.... But if, on the other hand, your purpose is to marry yourself, *set o tra shews*, and you must act altogether in a different way."

"I understand you, my dear Miss Morrison, perfectly," replied the widow, greatly struck by the sound sense and clear perception of her new friend; "and I will endeavour, with the most perfect frankness, to make you understand all my plans, for I feel sure that you deserve my full confidence, and that nobody can be more capable of giving me good advice.... The truth is, Miss Morrison, that I do wish to marry again. My fortune, indeed, is ample enough to afford me every luxury I can wish for; ... but a widowed heart, my dear Miss Morrison ... a widowed heart is a heavy load to bear, where the temper, like mine, is full of the softest sensibility and all the tenderest affections.... Therefore, as I said, it is my wish to marry again; but God forbid I should be weak and wicked enough to do so in any way unbecoming my station in society,—a station to which I have every right, as well from birth as fortune. No attachment, however strong, will ever

induce me to forget what I owe to my family and to the world; and unless circumstances shall enable me rather to raise than debase myself in society, I will never, whatever my feelings may be, permit myself to marry at all."

"*Crowyee moy vous avay raisong share dam!*" exclaimed Miss Morrison.

"Such being the case," resumed the widow, "it appears to me evident, that the first object to be attended to is the getting into good society; and if, in order to obtain this, I find it necessary to bring forward Agnes Willoughby, it must certainly be done ... especially as her singing is much more remarkable, I believe, than even the beauty of her person."

"*Et he po-se-ble?*" said Miss Morrison, joyfully. "Then, in that case, *share a me*, there is nothing in the whole world, of any sort or kind, that can prevent your being sought out and invited to every fashionable house in the place. An ugly girl, that sings well, may easily get herself asked wherever she chooses to go; but a beautiful one, *aveck ung talong samblabel*, may not only go herself, but carry with her as many of her friends as she pleases."

"Really!..." said Mrs. Barnaby, thoughtfully. "This is a great advantage; ... and you feel sure, Miss Morrison, that if I do make up my mind to bring her forward, this will be the case?"

"*O we*," replied her friend confidently, "*set ung fay certaing* ... there is no doubt about it; and if you will, I am ready to make you a bet of five guineas, play or pay, that if you contrive to make her be seen and heard once, you will have your table covered with visiting cards before the end of the week ... *nong douty paw*."

"Well!... we must consider about it, Miss Morrison; ... but I should like, I think, to go first to some of these crowded places that you talk about without her, just to see ... that is, if you would be kind enough to go with me."

"Most certainly I will," replied Miss Morrison, "*aveck leplu grang plesire*.... Suppose we go to the sale-rooms this morning? There is a vast variety of most useful and beautiful things to be sold to-day, and as they always go for nothing, you had better bid a little. It is thought stylish."

"And must certainly draw attention," said Mrs. Barnaby, with vivacity.

"You are quite right ... *say sa*, ... and it is just about time to get ready.... All our gentlemen will be there, you may be sure; and perhaps, you know, some one of them may join us, which is a great advantage, ... for nothing makes women look so much like nobody as having no man near them.... As to marriage, I don't think of it for myself ... *jay pre mong party*; ... but I confess I do hate to be anywhere without the chance of a man's coming to speak to one ... *mays, eel foh meytra mong shappo* ... *o reyvoyr!*"

Mrs. Barnaby now found herself at last obliged to confess she did not understand her.

"Of course I know French perfectly," she said; "but as I have never been in the country, and not much in the habit of speaking it, even at home, I cannot always follow you.... I would give a great deal, Miss Morrison, to speak the language as beautifully as you do!"

"It is a great assistance in society, certainly," replied Miss Morrison, very modestly; "but I do assure you that it is quite impossible for anybody in the world to speak it as I do without being in the country, and taking the same incessant pains as I did. As to learning it from books, it is all nonsense to think of it ... how in the world is one to get the accent and pronunciation?... But I must say that I believe few people ever learned so much in so short a time as I did. I invented a method for myself, without which I should never have been able to speak as I do. I never was without my pencil and paper in my hand, and I wrote down almost every word I heard, in such a manner as that I was always able to read it myself, without asking anybody. The English of it all I got easily afterwards, for almost everybody understands me when I read my notes according to my own spelling, especially English people; and these translations I wrote down over against my French, which I call making both a grammar and dictionary entirely of my own invention, ... and I have often been complimented upon it, I assure you."

"And I'm sure you well deserve it. I never heard anything so clever in my life," replied Mrs. Barnaby. "But how soon shall we begin our walk?"

"Now directly, if you please.... I will go and put on my hat ... that was what I said to you in French.... *Eel foh meytra mong shappo*."

Mrs. Barnaby then repaired to her toilet; and having done her very utmost to make herself as conspicuously splendid and beautiful as possible, turned to Agnes, who was still writing in her dark corner, and said,... "You had better finish what you are about, Agnes, and I hope it is something that will improve you.... I am going out with Miss Morrison on business ... and if the evening is fine, I will take you a walk somewhere or other."

Agnes again blessed their rencontre with this valuable new friend, and saw the satin and feathers of her aunt disappear with a feeling of great thankfulness that she was spared the necessity of attending them.

On leaving Mrs. Barnaby, Mr. Alexander Pringle paid a visit to his good friend and patient Lady

Elizabeth Norris, (the aunt of Colonel Hubert,) who, as usual, was passing a few weeks of the season at Cheltenham, as much for the sake of refreshing her spirits by the variety of its company, as for the advantage of taking a daily glass of water at its spring. The worthy apothecary was as useful by the information and gossippings he furnished on the former subject, as by his instructions on the latter, and was invariably called in, the day after her ladyship's arrival, however perfect the state of her health might be; and given moreover to understand that a repetition of a professional visit would be expected at least three times a week during her stay.

He now found the old lady sitting alone; for Sir Edward and Lady Stephenson, who were her guests, were engaged in one of their favourite morning expeditions, exploring the beautiful environs of the town, a pleasure which they enjoyed as uninterruptedly as the most sentimental newly-married pair could desire, as, by a strange but very general spirit of economy, few of the wealthy and luxurious visitants of Cheltenham indulge themselves in the expense of a turnpike.

"Soh! Pringle ... you are come at last, are you?" said Lady Elizabeth.... "I have been expecting you this hour ... the Stephensons' are off and away again to the world's end, in search of wild flowers and conjugal romance, leaving me to my own devices—a privilege worth little or nothing, unless you can add something new to my list here for next Wednesday."

"Perhaps I may be able to assist your ladyship," returned her Esculapius; "that is, provided Lady Stephenson knows nothing about it, for I fear she has not yet forgiven my introduction of Mr. Myrtle and the two Misses Tonkins."

"Stuff and nonsense!... What does it signify, now she is married and out of the way, what animals I get into my menagerie?... But I don't think, Pringle, that you are half such a clever truffle-dog as you used to be.... What a time it is since you have told me of anything new!"

"Upon my word, my lady, it is not my fault," replied the apothecary, laughing; "I never see or hear anything abroad without treasuring it in my memory for your ladyship's service; and I am now come expressly to mention a new arrival at the —, which appears to promise well."

"I rejoice.... Is it male or female?"

"Female, my lady, and there are two."

"Of the same species, and the same race?"

"Decidedly not; but the contrast produces a very pleasant effect; and, moreover, though infinitely amusing, they are quite *comme il faut*. I understand the elder lady is sister to Mrs. Peters of Clifton."

Mr. Pringle then proceeded to describe his visit to Mrs. Barnaby, and did justice to the florid style of her beauty, dress, and conversation. But when he came to speak of the young girl who was *vouée au noir*, and of her aunt's pertinacious resolution that she should take the waters and be treated as an invalid, notwithstanding the very excellent state of her health, the old lady rubbed her hands together, and exultingly exclaimed, "Good!... admirable!... You are a very fine fellow, Pringle, and have hit this off well. Why, man, I saw your delightful widow this morning at the Pump, rouge, ringlets, and all;... I saw her taste the waters and turn sick; and now, because she must have a reason for shewing herself at the Pump, she is going to make the poor girl drink for her.... Capital creature!... I understand it all ... poor little girl!... And so the widow wants acquaintance, does she?... I offer myself, my drawing-room shall be open to her, Pringle.... And now, how can I manage to get introduced to her?"

"You will not find that very difficult, Lady Elizabeth, depend upon it.... I will undertake to promise for this Mrs. Barnaby, that she will be visible wherever men and women congregate. At the ball, for instance, to-morrow night; does your ladyship intend to be there?"

"Certainly.... And if she be there, I will manage the matter of introduction, with or without intervention, and so obtain this full-blown peony for my shew on Wednesday next."

Whilst fate and Mr. Pringle were thus labouring in one quarter of the town to bring Mrs. Barnaby into notice, she was herself not idle in another in her exertions to produce the same effect. The sale-room, to which the experienced Miss Morrison led her, was already full when they entered it; but the little difficulty which preceded their obtaining seats was rather favourable to them than otherwise; for, as if on purpose to display the sagacity of that lady's prognostications, two of the gentlemen who had made part of their company at breakfast, not only made room for them, but appeared well disposed to enter into conversation, and to offer every attention they could desire.

"Mr. Griffiths, if I mistake not," said Miss Morrison, bowing to one of them; "I hope you have been quite well, sir, since we met last year.... Give me leave to introduce, Mr. Griffiths, Mrs. Barnaby."

"I am happy to make your acquaintance," said the gentleman, bowing low. "Your young friend whom I saw with you this morning is not here ... is she?"

"No, sir," replied Mrs. Barnaby, in the most amiable tone imaginable; "the dear girl is pursuing her morning studies at home."

"Introduce me, Griffiths," whispered his companion.

"Mr. Patterson, Mrs. Barnaby; Mr. Patterson, Miss Morrison," and a very social degree of intimacy appeared to be immediately established.

"Oh! what a lovely vase!" exclaimed Mrs. Barnaby. "What an elegant set of candle-sticks!" cried Miss Morrison, as the auctioneer brought forward the articles to be bid for, which being followed by a variety of interesting observations on nearly all the people, and nearly all the goods displayed before them, afforded Mrs. Barnaby such an opportunity of being energetic and animated, that more than one eye-glass was turned towards her, producing that reciprocity of cause and effect which it is so interesting to trace; for the more the gentlemen and ladies looked at her, the more Mrs. Barnaby talked and laughed, and the more Mrs. Barnaby talked and laughed, the more the gentlemen and ladies looked at her. Flattered, fluttered, and delighted beyond measure, the eyes of the widow wandered to every quarter of the room; and for some time every quarter of the room appeared equally interesting to her; but at length her attention was attracted by the almost fixed stare of an individual who stood in the midst of a knot of gentlemen at some distance, but nearly opposite to the place she occupied.

"Can you tell me, sir, who that tall, stout gentleman is in the green frock-coat, with lace and tassels?... That one who is looking this way with an eye-glass."

"The gentleman with red hair?" returned Mr. Patterson, to whom the question was addressed.

"Yes, that one, rather sandy, but a very fine-looking man."

"That is Lord Mucklebury, Mrs. Barnaby.... He is a great amateur of beauty; and upon my word he seems exceedingly taken with some fair object or other in this part of the room."

The sight of land after a long voyage is delightful ... rest is delightful after labour, food after fasting; but it may be doubted if either of these joys could bear comparison with the emotion that now swelled the bosom of Mrs. Barnaby. This was the first time, to the best of her knowledge and belief, that she had ever been looked at by a lord at all ... and what a look it was!... No passing glance, no slight unmeaning regard, directed first to one and then to another beauty, but a long, steady, direct, and unshrinking stare, such as might have made many women leave the room, but which caused the heart of Mrs. Barnaby to palpitate with a degree of ecstasy which she had never felt before—no, not even when the most admired officer of a new battalion first fixed his looks upon her in former days, and advanced in the eyes of all the girls to ask her to dance; ... for no Lord *anything* had ever done so; and thus, the fulness of her new-born joy, while it had the vigorous maturity of ripened age, glowed also with the early brightness of youth. It might indeed have been said of Mrs. Barnaby at that moment, that, "like Mrs. Malaprop and the orange-tree, she bore blossom and fruit at once."

One proof of the youthful freshness of her emotion was the very naïve manner in which it was betrayed. She could not sit still ... her eyes rose and fell ... her head turned and twisted ... her reticule opened and shut ... and the happy man who set all this going must have had much less experience than my Lord Mucklebury, if he had not immediately perceived the effect of himself and his eye-glass.

Could Mrs. Barnaby have known at that moment the influence produced by the presence of Miss Morrison, she would have wished her a thousand fathoms deep in the ocean; for certain it is, that nothing but her well-known little quizzical air of unquestionable Cheltenham respectability, prevented the noble lord from crossing the room, and amusing himself, without the ceremony of an introduction, in conversing with the sensitive lady, whose bright eyes and bright rouge had drawn his attention to her. As it was, however, he thought he had better not, and contented himself by turning to his ever-useful friend Captain Singleton, and saying in a tone, the familiarity of which failed not to make up for its imperiousness, "Singleton!... go and find out who that great woman is in the green satin and pink feathers ... there's a good fellow."

Mrs. Barnaby did not hear the words, but she saw the mission as plainly as my Lord Mucklebury saw her, and her heart thereupon began to beat so violently, that she had no breath left to demand the sympathy of her friend under circumstances so pregnant with interest. But though she hardly knew where she was, nor what she did, she still retained sufficient presence of mind to mark how the obedient envoy addressed himself (and, alas! in vain) first to one lounge, and then to another, who all replied by a shake of the head, which said with terrible distinctness, "I don't know."

"Gracious heaven, how provoking!" murmured Mrs. Barnaby, as she pressed her delicately-gloved hand upon her heart to still its beating.... "He will leave the room without finding out my name!"... Had she been only a few hours longer acquainted with Mr. Patterson, it is highly probable she would have desired him, if asked by the little gentleman in black, so actively making his way through the crowd, what her name was, just to have the kindness to mention that it was Barnaby. But though very civil, Mr. Patterson was rather ceremonious; and the unsuccessful messenger had returned to his lord, and delivered all the shakes of the head which he had received condensed into one, before she could resolve on so frank a mode of proceeding. For a few moments longer, however, the amused nobleman continued his fascinating gaze; and then, giving a signal with his eye to Singleton that it was his pleasure to move, that active personage cleared the way before him; and the fat viscount, with his hands in his waistcoat-pockets, stalked out of the room, but not without turning his head, and giving one bold, final, open-eyed, steady look at the agitated widow.

"That man is my fate!" she softly whispered to her soul, as the last frog on the hinder part of his coat has passed from her eye; ... and then, like the tender convolvulus when the sunbeam that reached it has passed away, she drooped and faded till she looked more like a sleeping picture of Mrs. Barnaby than Mrs. Barnaby herself.

"Do you not find the room very close, Miss Morrison?" said she, after enduring for a minute or two the sort of vacuum that seemed to weigh upon her senses.

"*Poing do too*," replied Miss Morrison, speaking through her nose, which was one method by which she was wont to convey the true Parisian accent, when she desired that it should be particularly perfect.... "*Poing do too*, Mrs. Barnaby, ... however, I am quite ready to go if you like it, for I don't think I shall buy anything this morning, and I don't see many acquaintance here."

Mrs. Barnaby immediately rose; the two civil gentlemen made way for them, and the widow, followed by her friend, walked out a more pensive, though not, perhaps, a less happy woman, than when she walked in.

CHAPTER XIV.

A CHELTENHAM BALL.—AN INTRODUCTION.—A CONQUEST.

A great deal of profound meditation was bestowed by Mrs. Barnaby on the occurrences of that morning before the time arrived for the toilet, preparatory to the ball of the succeeding night. All these will shew themselves in their results as they arise; and for the present it will be only necessary to mention, that, in providing for this toilet, everything approaching to the sordid cares dictated by economy was banished. The time was too short to admit of her ordering a new dress for this occasion; though the powerful feeling at work within her caused a white satin, decorated in every possible way with the richest blonde, to be bespoke for the next. Every other article that Cheltenham could furnish, (and it being the height of the season, Paris itself could hardly do more for her,) every other species of expensive decoration, short of diamonds and pearls, was purchased for this important ball, at which something within her—speaking with the authority of an oracle—declared that she should become acquainted with Lord Mucklebury. Busy as were the afternoon and morning which intervened, she found time for the very necessary business of ordering her broker (he had been her father's broker too) to sell out five hundred pounds stock for her; and this done, and her letter safely deposited in the boarding-house letter-bag, she turned her thoughts towards Agnes.

She had certainly, to use her own language when reasoning the point with herself, the very greatest mind in the world not to take her to the ball at all. But this mind, great as it was, was not a settled mind, and was presently shaken by a sort of instinctive consciousness that there was in Agnes, independent of her beauty, a something that might help to give consequence to her *entrée*. "As to her dress," thought she, "I am perfectly determined that it shall be the same she wore at Clifton, ... not so much on account of the expense ... at the present moment it would be madness to permit such a consideration to have any effect; ... but because it gives her an air more distinguished, more remarkable than any one else; ... and besides ... who knows but that the contrast of style, beautiful as she is, may be favourable to me?... I have not forgotten our fellow-traveller from Silvertown ... she seemed to freeze him. And let her freeze my adorable viscount too, so that I".... But here her thoughts came too rapidly to dress themselves in words, and for a few minutes her reverie was rather a tumult than a meditation.

"Yes, she shall go!" she exclaimed at last, rising from the sofa, and collecting a variety of precious parcels, the result of her shopping; "Yes, she shall go to the ball; and should any mischief be likely to follow, I will make her go out to service before the end of the week."

Having thus at last come to a determination, and upon reasonings which she felt were not likely to be shaken, she mounted to her sleeping apartment, and after indulging herself by spreading forth various articles of newly-purchased finery upon the bed, she turned to the corner in which Agnes, her tiny table, her books, and writing apparatus, were all packed away together in the smallest possible space, and said, "Come here, Agnes ... you must have done lessons enough for to-day, and I have great news for you. Where do you think I mean to take you to-night?"

Agnes cast her eyes upon the bed, and immediately anticipating some public display of which she was doomed to be a witness, replied in a tone that was anything but joyful,—

"I don't know, aunt."

"I don't know, aunt!" retorted Mrs. Barnaby indignantly, mimicking her tone. "What an owl of a girl you are, Agnes!... Oh! how unlike what I was at the same age.... You don't know?... I suppose you don't, indeed. There is not another woman under the sun besides myself who would do for a dependant, penniless girl, all I am doing for you. I sacrifice everything for you ... my feelings, my health, my money, and yet you look exactly as if I was going to take you to school again, instead of to a ball!"

Agnes sighed; she thought of her last ball, of all its pains and all its pleasures; and feeling but too sure that it was as impossible she should escape the former, as improbable that she should find

the latter, she replied mournfully enough, "I would rather not go, if you please, aunt ... I do not like balls."

"Upon my honour, Agnes, if I had not a temper that was proof against everything, I should be tempted to box your ears.... Is it possible to see anything more disgustingly hypocritical, than a girl of seventeen screwing herself up, and saying, '*I do not like balls*'.... I wonder what you do like, Miss Prim? But, I promise you, I do not intend to ask your leave for what I do; and as long as you eat my bread, you will do as I bid you ... or else, turn out, and provide for yourself at once. Let me hear no more such stuff, if you please; but take care to make yourself decent, and be ready to get into the carriage exactly at nine o'clock.... Do you hear?"

Agnes meekly turned to her travelling magazine of sable suits, and was considerably surprised by being told that she must instantly get ready to go out for the purpose of buying satin shoes, white gloves, and one or two other trifles, which the newly-enlarged views of her aunt now rendered necessary. All this was done. Miss Morrison engaged to join their party, the labours of the hair-dresser were completed, and a toilet of two hours' duration was brought to a most satisfactory conclusion within ten minutes of the early hour she had named, and to the ball-room they repaired considerably before any other person entered it.

"I told you it would be so, my dear Mrs. Barnaby," said Miss Morrison, looking rather disconsolately round her: "*noo sum tro toe*; ... but never mind: let us sit down comfortably on this sofa, and I dare say I shall be able to tell you the names of most of the principal people. Cheltenham is so very delightful, that almost everybody comes over and over again: *say too ta fey law mode*."

A few straggling strangers began to enter almost immediately, and in about half an hour, the well-pleased Miss Morrison was enabled to redeem her promise by pointing out some scores of well-dressed individuals by name. But still Lord Mucklebury came not, and the widow's heart grew sad, till, happily, she heard a young partnerless lady say as she swept by,—"What a bore it is that all the best men come so late!" In a moment hope was rekindled in Mrs. Barnaby's eye, and with renewed interest she listened to the catalogue of names which her friend poured into her ear.

"Oh! here comes the bride, Lady Stephenson.... What a handsome man her husband is!... I have seen her here often with her aunt, Lady Elizabeth Norris, before she was married.... The old lady dotes upon Cheltenham, they say.... I wish you knew some more people ... but, *name port*, it will all come by and by, I dare say, and I will introduce you to Lady Elizabeth if I can; ... but I must ask her first, or she may take miff.... *Ell hay ung pew fear*."

"Stephenson?..." said Mrs. Barnaby,—"*is it Sir Edward Stephenson?*"

"Yes, Sir Edward, that's his name: do you know him, Mrs. Barnaby?"

"We were most intimately acquainted with his brother at Clifton, ... and with Colonel Hubert too; that's her brother, you know. Pray, is he here too?"

How Agnes trembled as she waited for the answer!

"I don't know ... I have not seen him yet," replied Miss Morrison, "and it is impossible to overlook him—*set hun um seuperb!*... but *comb heel hay fear!*... Perhaps he will come in presently: he is always *ung pew tar* at the balls, for he never dances."

"Oh! I know that," said Mrs. Barnaby.... "I know him perfectly well, I assure you ... he is a most elegant person; but I suspect he is rather of a violent and jealous temper.... However, I'm sure I wish he was here, and his friend Frederick Stephenson too.... He's a charming young man, and used to walk to Bristol with us, and dance three times a night with Agnes."

"Dear me! you don't say so!" exclaimed Miss Morrison, to whom the intelligence was extremely agreeable, as it removed at once all doubts and fears respecting Mrs. Barnaby's real station in society.... "Well, then, I'm sure you ought to know Lady Elizabeth Norris; and I really must, somehow or other, contrive to let her hear of your acquaintance with her nephew Colonel Hubert. They say she dotes upon him, and that he is to be her heir ... and that's almost a pity, for he has a noble fortune of his own already. Do you happen to know how much his sister had, Mrs. Barnaby?... Some say twenty, some thirty, some fifty thousand."

"Young Stephenson never happened to say anything about it that I recollect," replied the widow.... "But, look! Lady Elizabeth is coming this way.... You had better step forward, Miss Morrison, that she may see you."

But there was no occasion for any contrivance on the part of Miss Morrison in order to obtain the notice of Lady Elizabeth; for that lady having descried and recognised the party, she immediately decided that Miss Morrison, whose acquaintance she had cultivated for several successive seasons on account of her admirable French, should be for her the medium of introduction to the pompous widow, who was clever enough to make her niece drink the waters instead of herself.

It was, therefore, by a straight and direct line that, supported by the arm of Sir Edward Stephenson, and followed by his lady, she crossed the room from her own place to that occupied by those whom (in her own particular manner) she delighted to honour.

Miss Morrison's surprise was as great as her satisfaction when she perceived this to be the case;

and she felt her triumph doubled by her fine new acquaintance being the witness of it.

"*Bon jour*, Miss Morrison," said the old lady, holding out her hand; "*toujours en bonne santé j'espere?*"

Amidst smiles and bows, and blushes and courtesies, Miss Morrison replied in her favourite jargon,—

"*Mey we, me ladee* ... and I hope your ladyship is the same."

"A good many old faces here, Miss Morrison, and a good many new ones too. You have friends with you whom I do not remember to have seen before.... You must introduce me."

This request threw the good-natured spinster into a twitter of delight which almost deprived her of the power of obeying it: first she made a little movement with one hand, and then with the other; while the ample Mrs. Barnaby stood in happy smiling expectation, and the tall, stiff-looking old lady continued gazing at the group through her half-closed eyes, and determined on no account to hasten a process from which she derived so great amusement.

At length the respective names were pronounced in their proper order, that of the blushing Agnes being included. The old lady gave her a look in which something of surprise was mingled with curiosity, and suddenly turning round to Lady Stephenson who stood behind her, she said,—

"Come, Emily, you must be introduced too.... Miss Willoughby ... Lady Stephenson."

Mrs. Barnaby had prepared another smile, and another majestic bend for the presentation of herself to the fair bride; but it did not follow; a disappointment for which she was soon consoled by Lady Elizabeth's sitting down, and graciously intimating, by an action of her hand, that the widow might sit beside her.

Agnes meanwhile stood trembling from head to foot with her eyes timidly fixed on the beautiful countenance of Colonel Hubert's sister. As it was quite impossible her ladyship could understand the cause of the agitation she inspired, so neither was she at all aware of its strength; but she saw that the beautiful girl before her, notwithstanding the quiet, unstudied grace of her appearance, was not at her ease, and could only account for it by supposing that she was suffering from extreme shyness. Lady Stephenson had not yet forgotten the time when she, too, had hardly dared to look up unless her paternal brother, as she was wont to call him, stood very near to sustain her carriage, and sympathising with a weakness that was in some degree constitutional in herself, she felt disposed to take more notice of the fair stranger than she usually bestowed upon persons introduced to her by the whimsical caprices of her aunt.

Lady Stephenson was, however, altogether mistaken.... Agnes was not at that moment suffering from shyness; there was timidity certainly in the pleasure with which she listened to the voice and gazed at the features of Colonel Hubert's sister; but still it was pleasure, and very nearly the most lively she had ever experienced.

"You are at Cheltenham for the first time, Miss Willoughby?" said the bride.

"Yes," replied Agnes; "we only arrived two days ago."

There was not much opportunity of indicating feeling of any kind by these words; nevertheless, the manner in which they were spoken, and the sweet expression of the beautiful eyes that were raised to hers, convinced Lady Stephenson that however shy her new acquaintance might be, she greatly liked to be spoken to, and accordingly continued the conversation, which, to her own surprise, warmed so much as it proceeded, that at length her aunt being evidently settled down for an elaborate development of the absurdities, whatever they might be, of her new acquaintance, she offered her arm, inviting her to take a turn round the room.

Could this be real?... Was it possible that she was walking round the Cheltenham ball-room on the arm of Colonel Hubert's sister? But though the happy Agnes asked herself this question again and again, neither the asking nor the answering it prevented her bearing her part in a conversation that made her so exquisitely happy with all the pretty earnestness of one interested in every word that was said to her, and too young and fresh-minded to conceal the pleasure she felt.

Lady Stephenson was unexpectedly pleased with her young companion; there was no mixture of *niaiserie* in the simplicity of Agnes; and though her ladyship in no degree shared her aunt's extravagant passion for originals, she had in her own quiet way a reasonably strong liking for whatever appeared to her untainted by affectation. The beauty of Agnes might perhaps have had some share in the pleasure she gave; but certain it is, that, after taking two or three turns together instead of one, and perceiving Lady Elizabeth about to move her quarters in search of fresh amusement, she shook hands with Agnes before parting with her so cordially, that she felt called upon to offer some reason for it to her husband, who had quitted her during her promenade, but was now returned.

"That is by far the most enchanting girl, Edward, in person, mind, and manners, that I ever remember to have met with.... How very strange that she should belong to one of my aunt's collection."

"She is vastly beautiful, Emily," replied Sir Edward, "and I suspect that covers a multitude of sins in your eyes; for I observe you never fail to pick out the beauties, go where you will: I declare I

think your eyes are infinitely sharper than mine in this way.... Having once found out the fairest of the fair, I do not feel so much interest as I used to do in looking about me."

"A very pretty speech, Sir Edward," returned the lady, laughing; "but that sweet girl's beauty is not her greatest fascination. I must ask Lady Elizabeth whether she found the magnificent lady to whom she has been devoting herself answer her expectations."

When this question was put to the old lady, however, she bluntly answered, "No, not at all.... She is as dull as a prize-ox decorated with ribbons at a fair."

"I am sorry to hear it," observed Lady Stephenson, "for I have lost my heart to the fair girl in black whom she seems to lead about as a contrast to her radiant self.... I marvel what the connexion can be.... It is plain they are not related, from the deep mourning of the one and the rainbow brilliance of the other."

"Your inference is altogether wrong, my Lady Stephenson; ... one of this Madam Barnaby's long stories was about this melancholy miss, who is her niece, and who will wear mourning in spite of her.... I must watch them at the pump, just to see if the girl makes up for her disobedience in this respect by swallowing the waters which Pringle says the aunt is determined she shall take, ... and after that I shall trouble myself no more about them.... The great woman does not answer; she is a vulgar, pompous, every-day bore."

"Pray do not give her quite up, aunt, for my sake," said Lady Stephenson; "for I have set my fancy upon seeing a great deal more of her niece ... who, by the way, for so pertinacious a mourner, is wonderfully sprightly; ... but I must flatter myself she found consolation in my society. I must beg you to cultivate the acquaintance a little farther."

"This is something quite new, Emily," replied the old lady. "It is the first time, I believe, that you ever condescended to take any interest in my menagerie.... Far be it from me, my dear, to check so happy a symptom of an improving intellect.... I have already asked the expansive widow and her delicate shadow for Wednesday; and if your fever for cementing a friendship with the latter should happen to continue, yield to it by all means.... You know, Emily, I never wish to control anybody's set of favourites, provided always that nobody interferes with my own."

The only pleasure which the rest of the evening afforded Agnes arose from studying the features, and still more the countenance, of Lady Stephenson, whenever she was fortunate enough to be within sight of her. No one asked her to dance, and no word was uttered within her hearing that gave her the least amusement. One single circumstance cheered the tedious hours during which she was doomed to sit, with her aunt Barnaby before her eyes, in a terror which increased every moment lest she should draw the eyes of every one else in the room upon her. This single circumstance was, that the sister of Colonel Hubert, when standing at three feet of distance from her, turned her head and said, with a smile of strong family affinity to his own,—

"I find that I am to have the pleasure of seeing you on Wednesday at my aunt's, Miss Willoughby ... I am very glad of it.... Good night!"... and soon afterwards the party left the room.

Far different was the fate of Mrs. Barnaby. The evening began for her very gloriously, for she had been spoken to by a Lady Elizabeth; but it ended in rapture, ... for, before its close, Lord Mucklebury made his appearance, stared at her again with the most marked impertinence, inquired and learned her name from Mr. Pringle, by whom he was at his express desire presented, and finally he placed himself beside her on the sofa, where he remained for at least twenty minutes, talking to her in a style that might be said without the slightest exaggeration to have thrown her into a state of temporary delirium.

Nor had it failed to produce some emotion in the noble lord; nay, it is probable it might have lasted longer, had it amused him less; for when he took his leave of the widow, expressing his hope that he should be happy enough to meet her again, he moved with a step rather quicker than ordinary to ensconce himself among a knot of men who were amusing themselves by communicating to each other the most ludicrous remarks on the company, in a distant corner of the room.

"Have you really torn yourself away from that magnificent specimen of womanhood, Mucklebury?" said one of the group as he approached them.... "She is evidently magnetic, by the manner in which you have been revolving round her for some time; and if magnetic, and the power at all proportioned to the volume, it is a miracle that you ever left her side again."

"I never would leave her side again," replied Lord Mucklebury, laughing immoderately, "did I not fear that I should fall at her feet in a fit.... Oh! she is glorious!"

"Who and what is she, in God's name?" said another.

"Who is she?... Barnaby!... Bless her!—Mistress Barnaby!... What is she?... A widow.... Darling creature!... a widow, fair, fat, and forty ... most fat!—most fair!... and, oh! a pigeon, a dove,—a very turtle-dove for kindness!"

"She is really handsome, though ... isn't she, Mucklebury?" said one.

"Yes, upon my soul she is!" replied the Viscount more seriously, "and bears looking at too remarkably well, notwithstanding the pot-full of coarse rouge that it pleases her to carry about on each of her beautiful cheeks."

"And by what blessed chance has your lordship been favoured with an introduction?... Or did your lordship so far overcome your constitutional timidity as to introduce yourself?"

"Alarm not your spirit on that score, Digby," replied Lord Mucklebury. "The medium of introduction was illustrious, ... but my passion was anterior to it, ... for the history of our loves was in this wise. It is said of me ... I know not how truly ... that my taste in beauty tends somewhat towards the Blowzabella order.... Be this as it may, it is certain that yesterday morning between the hours of two and three, being actively employed for the good of myself and my country in Johnson's sale-room, I felt myself penetrated, perforated, pierced, and transfixed by the very bright eyes of this remarkable lady; ... whereupon, overpowering my constitutional timidity, Digby, I fixed my regards, eye-glass and all, upon her; ... but the result was astonishing.... Did any of you, gentlemen, ever happen to watch the effect of the sun's rays when thrown upon some soft substance (a pound of butter for example) through the medium of a burning-glass?... Such and so great was that produced by the rays of my right eye when sent through my eye-glass upon this charming creature.... She warmed, trembled, yea, visibly melted under it. I inquired her name on the spot, but in vain. This evening I have been more successful, and now I have the inexpressible felicity of being enrolled as an acquaintance of this inimitable widow."

"A very interesting narrative," said one of his auditors; "and may I ask your lordship what it can be that has now induced you to leave her fair side all unguarded?"

"Ecstasy, Tom!... I had not strength to witness the emotions I inspired.... I tell you, I must have fallen at her feet had I continued near her."

The conversation of these merry gentlemen went on for some time longer in the same strain, forming a contrast, perhaps not very uncommon, to the solemn and serious meditations of Mrs. Barnaby on the very same circumstances which caused their mirth. Far, however, from exaggerating the effect he had produced, Lord Mucklebury had little or no idea of its strength and reality. He fancied the lady inflammable, and easily touched by any appearance of admiration; but it never entered his head to suppose that his flourishing speeches and audacious eyes had given birth in her mind to the most sanguine hope, and the most deliberate intention, of becoming Viscountess Mucklebury.

Sudden as the formation of these hopes and intentions may appear, it would be doing injustice to Mrs. Barnaby were the reader suffered to believe that they were permitted to take possession of her heedlessly. She remembered Major Allen ... she remembered the agony of the moment in which she beheld his friend Maintry appear in the character of a thief; and sweet to her ears as was the title of her new conquest, she did not suffer it to charm away her resolution of discovering whether he were poor or rich. Every inquiry tended to prove that she was safe in the direction which her ambition and her love had now taken. Lord Mucklebury was a widower, with an only son very nobly provided for, and as capable of making a good jointure, if he married again, as a widow's heart could wish.

Now then all that remained to be done was to foster the admiration she had inspired into a passion strong enough to induce the noble Viscount to settle that jointure upon her. Nothing could be more just than her reasoning—nothing more resolute than her purpose. She knew she was handsome, she felt it to be advisable that she should appear rich; and with the devoted feeling of a warrior who throws away his scabbard as he rushes to the onslaught, Mrs. Barnaby heroically set herself to win her way to victory—*coûte qui coûte*.

CHAPTER XV.

NEW HOPES BEGET A NEW STYLE OF EXISTENCE—A PARTY.—AGNES HAS SOME SUCCESS, WHICH MRS. BARNABY DOES NOT QUITE APPROVE.—LORD MUCKLEBURY ENTERS INTO EPISTOLARY CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE WIDOW, BY WHICH HER HOPES ARE RAISED TO THE HIGHEST PITCH.—BUT LORD MUCKLEBURY LEAVES CHELTENHAM.

Lord Mucklebury was a gay man in every sense of the word. He loved a jest almost as well as a dinner, and would rather have been quoted as the sayer of a good thing than as the doer of a great one. He had enjoyed life with fewer drawbacks from misfortune than most men; and having reached the age of forty, had made up his mind, as soberly as he could do on any subject, that the only privilege of the aristocracy worth valuing was the leisure they enjoyed, or might enjoy if they chose it, for amusing themselves. Nature intended him for a good-tempered man, but fun had spoiled him; having laughed with everybody for the first twenty years of his life, he learned during the second that it was a better joke still to laugh at them; and accordingly the principal material for the wit on which his reputation rested was derived, at the time Mrs. Barnaby made his acquaintance, from an aptitude to perceive the absurdities of his fellow creatures, and a most

unshrinking audacity in exposing them.

Having pointed out Mrs. Barnaby to a set of his clever friends as the joke in which he meant to indulge during the three or four weeks of Cheltenham discipline to which he annually submitted, it became necessary to his honour that he should prove her to be ridiculous enough to merit the distinction; and he knew well enough that all she required to make her perfect in this line was as much nonsense from himself as would keep her vanity afloat. The occupation suited him exactly; it threatened little fatigue, and promised much amusement; so that by the time Mrs. Barnaby had made up her mind to win and wear his lordship's coronet, he had decided with equal sincerity of purpose to render her the jest of the season to his Cheltenham acquaintance.

An hour's close examination of Miss Morrison concerning the *manière d'être* of the *beau monde* during the season, sufficed to convince the widow that, expensive as the boarding-house had appeared to her, it was far from being all that was necessary for her present purpose. She must have a carriage, she must have a tall footman, she must have a smart lady's-maid; and great was the credit due to the zeal and activity of this invaluable friend for the promptitude and dispatch with which these indispensable articles were supplied. Some idea of this may be gathered from the fact, that the carriage which conveyed them to the house of Lady Elizabeth Norris, was one hired, horses, coachman, and all, for the season; while the first applicant of six feet high who appeared, in consequence of the earnest requisition for such an individual made at half a dozen different shops, followed the widow in a full suit of livery the following Sunday to church.

Agnes looked on at first with wonder, which a little reflection converted into great misery. She knew absolutely nothing as to the amount of her aunt's fortune; but there was a wild heedlessness of expense in her present manner of proceeding that, despite her ignorance, made her tremble for the result. The idea that she might by persevering industry render herself fit to become a governess, was that which most tended to console her; but Agnes's estimate of what was required for this was a very high one; and greatly did she rejoice to find that her aunt permitted her to be wholly mistress of her time, seldom inviting her to go out, and receiving her apologies for declining to do so with a degree of complacency which plainly enough shewed they were not unwelcome.

Lady Elizabeth Norris's party was five days after the ball; and before it arrived Mrs. Barnaby had persuaded herself into the firmest possible conviction of Lord Mucklebury's devoted attachment and honourable intentions. Had his lordship not been one of the invited guests, Mrs. Barnaby would unquestionably have given up the engagement, though but a few short days before it had appeared to her very like a permission to enter the gates of paradise; but her estimate of all things was changed; she was already a viscountess in all her reasonings, and perhaps the only person who held an unchanged value was the poor Agnes, whose helpless dependance could not place her in a position of less consideration than it had done before.

"Pray, Miss Agnes, is it your pleasure to go to Lady Elizabeth Norris's this evening?" said Mrs. Barnaby, while watching her new maid's assiduous preparations for her own toilet.

"Oh! yes, aunt, if you have no objection.... I should like to go very much indeed."

"Nay, child, you may go if you wish it.... I imagine it will prove but a humdrum sort of thing.... Wear the same dress that you did at the ball.... My maid shall arrange your hair for you."

Yet notwithstanding all this increase of dignity, Agnes never for a moment guessed what was going on; she had never seen Lord Mucklebury excepting at the ball, and her imagination had not suggested to her the possibility that so casual an acquaintance could be the cause of all she saw and heard.

Had Agnes been as light-hearted as when she used to sit upon her travelling trunk in her closet at Clifton, listening to the lively gossip of her friend Mary, the party at Lady Elizabeth's would have been pregnant with amusement. But as it was, she sat very sadly alone in a corner; for during the first portion of the evening Sir Edward Stephenson and his lady were not present, having dined out, where they were detained much beyond the hour at which the majority of Lady Elizabeth's guests assembled.

But the lively old woman wanted no one to assist her in the task of entertaining her company, for in truth she was not particularly anxious about their entertainment, her sole object in bringing them all together being to amuse herself, and this she achieved in a way less agreeable, perhaps, to one who, like Agnes, was a mere passive spectator, than to those who were expected to take a more active part. During the early part of the evening, few persons appeared excepting such as she had expressly desired to come early, and there was not one of these undistinguished by some peculiarity from which the whimsical old lady derived amusement.

It was her custom to place herself immoveably in a huge arm-chair, with a small table before her, on which was placed her tea, coffee, ice, biscuits, or anything else she might choose, with quite as little ceremony as if alone. A book or two also, with a pair of wax-lights having a green shade over them, never failed to make part of the preparation for her evening's amusement, and to these she never scrupled to address herself, if "her people" proved less entertaining than she expected.

Every one as they entered approached this throne to pay their compliments, and then seated themselves at some distance, one single chair alone being permitted to stand near her. To this place all those whom she wished to listen to, were called in succession, and dismissed when she

had had enough of them, with the same absence of all ordinary civility as she was sure to display to all those who were so ill-advised as to appear at her unceremonious bidding.

Both her nephew and niece had often remonstrated with her on the subject of these strange *réunions*; but she defended herself from the charge of behaving rudely to those who, in accepting her invitations, had a right to expect civility, by saying, "I am as civil as they deserve. My title is the '*Duc ad me*' that calls fools into my circle, and till I cease to be Lady Elizabeth, they get what they come for."

For the most part, the company were rather odd-looking than elegant, and the newly-awakened grandeur of Mrs. Barnaby was a little wounded by observing how few persons there were present whose dress entitled them to the honour of meeting her and her dress. Lady Elizabeth, moreover, received her very coldly, though to Agnes she said, "How d'ye do, my dear? Lady Stephenson will be here presently."

"What vulgar ignorance!" thought the widow, as she retreated to a sofa commanding a perfect view of the door by which the company entered.... "Notwithstanding her title, that woman must have been wretchedly brought up.... Should I in my second marriage be blessed with offspring, I shall make it my first object to teach them manners befitting their rank."

The absurdities of Lady Elizabeth's guests on this evening were not sufficiently piquant to justify a detailed description.... One old gentleman was summoned to THE chair that he might recount how many habitual drunkards, both male and female, he had converted into happy water-drinkers by the simple process of making them take an oath; another amused her ladyship for several minutes by what she called "*saying his peerage*,"—that is, by repeating a catalogue of noble names, all of which he stated to belong to his most familiar friends. One lady was had up for the purpose of repeating her own poetry; and another that she might, by a little prompting, give vent to some favourite metaphysical doctrine, which it was her *forte* to envelop in words of her own construction. Miss Morrison, too, was courted into talking of Paris in her own French; but altogether the meeting was not successful, and Lady Elizabeth was in the act of arranging the shade of her lights, so as to permit her reading at her ease, when her eye, as she looked round the room, chanced to fall upon Agnes. She was on the point of calling to her by name; but there was a modest tranquillity in her delicate face, that the imperious old lady felt no inclination to startle, and instead of speaking to her, she addressed her aunt.

"Pray, Mrs. Barnaby, does your young lady play or sing? We are mighty drowsy, I think, to-night, all of us; and if she does, I should be really much obliged if she will favour us. Lady Stephenson's instrument is a very fine one."

Mrs. Barnaby was so little pleased by her reception, and so completely out of sorts at the non-arrival of Lord Mucklebury, that she answered as little graciously as it was well possible, "I don't think there is any chance of her amusing your ladyship."

Great was the widow's surprise when she saw the quiet unassuming Agnes rise from her distant chair, walk fearlessly across the circle to that of Lady Elizabeth, and heard her say in a low voice, but quite distinctly,—

"I do sing and play a little, Lady Elizabeth; and if it be your ladyship's wish that I should make the attempt now, I shall be happy to obey you."

Perhaps Lady Elizabeth was as much surprised as Mrs. Barnaby; but though she understood not the feeling that had prompted this wish to oblige her, she was pleased by it, and rising for the first time that evening from her chair, she took Agnes by the arm, and led her to the pianoforte.

"Does your ladyship love music?" said Agnes, trembling at her own temerity, but longing irresistibly to be noticed by the aunt of Colonel Hubert.

"Yes, my dear, I do indeed," replied the old lady. "It is one of our family failings,—I believe we all love it too well."

"Which does your ladyship prefer, old songs or new ones?" said Agnes.

"Old ones most decidedly," she replied. "But at your age, my dear, and in the present state of musical science, it is hardly likely you should be able to indulge my old-fashioned whim in this respect."

"My practice has been chiefly from the old masters," replied Agnes, turning over the leaves of a volume of Handel.

"Say you so, my little girl?... Then I will sit by you as you play."

The delighted Agnes, wondering at her own audacious courage, assiduously placed a chair for the old lady, and with a flutter at her heart that seemed almost like happiness, turned to the song that she had seen produce on Colonel Hubert an effect never to be forgotten. It had brought tears to the eyes of the gallant soldier, and given to his features such dangerous softness, that the poor minstrel had never recovered the effects of it. To sing it again to the ear of his aunt was like coming back towards him; and the alleviation this brought to the terrible fear of having lost sight of him for ever, not only gave her the courage necessary to bring her to the place she now occupied, but inspired her with animation, skill, and power, to sing with a perfection she had never reached before.

The pleased attention of Lady Elizabeth had been given in the first instance to reward the ready effort made to comply with her wishes; but long before the song was ended, she had forgotten how she had obtained it, had forgotten everything save her own deep delight, and admiration of the beautiful siren who had caused it. Silent and motionless she waited till the last chord of the concluding symphony had died away; and then rising from her chair she bent down over Agnes, and having gazed earnestly in her face for a moment, kissed her fair forehead once, twice, and again with a cordiality that thanked her better than any words could have done.

Agnes was greatly touched, greatly gratified, and forgetting the inexpediency of giving way to feelings that it was neither possible nor desirable should be understood, she seized the good lady's hand, pressed it to her bosom, and looking up to her with eyes swimming in tears of joy, said in a voice of deep feeling, ... "I am so very glad you like me!"

"Why, what a precious little creature you are!" exclaimed Lady Elizabeth, half aroused and half softened; "as original to the full as any of my queer company here, and quite as remarkable for sweetness and talent as they for the want of it.... Where did you grow, fair lily-flower?... And how came you to be transplanted hither by so.... But never mind all this now; if we get on well together we shall get better acquainted. What shall I call you, pretty one?"

"Agnes, if you please, Lady Elizabeth ... Agnes Willoughby," replied the happy girl, becoming every moment more delighted at the result of the bold measure she had taken.

"You must come to me to-morrow morning, Agnes, while I am at breakfast, at ten o'clock remember, for then I am alone.... And you must come prepared, my child, to talk to me about yourself, ... for I can't understand it at all ... and I never choose to be puzzled longer than I can help it upon any subject.... But listen to my monsters! If they are not presuming to be noisy behind my back!...

Then lull me, lull me, charming air,
My senses wrap in wonder sweet.
Like snow on wool thy footsteps are,
Soft as a spirit's are thy feet,"—

exclaimed the old lady in a whisper close to the ear of Agnes...." Sing to me again, my child, and I will send a message to them in words borrowed from the famous epitaph on Juan Cabeca, ... 'Hold your tongues, ye calves!'"... and turning herself round she beckoned to a servant who had just entered with refreshments, saying to him in a voice which might have been heard by most of those in the apartment, "Set down the tray, Johnstone; nobody wants it; ... and go round the room begging they will all be silent while this lady sings."

It was in the middle of the song which followed that Sir Edward and Lady Stephenson returned. The door opened without Agnes being aware of it; and her rich voice swelling to a note at the top of its compass, and sustaining it with a power given to few, filled the chamber with a glorious volume of sound that held Colonel Hubert's sister transfixed as she was about to enter. Unconscious that there was another of the race near her, whom she would have almost breathed her soul away to please, Agnes warbled on, nor raised her eyes from the page before her till the strain was ended. Then she looked up and perceived Lady Stephenson, who had noiselessly crept round to ascertain whom the gifted minstrel might be, immediately opposite, and looking at her with a most gratifying expression of surprise and pleasure. A very cordial greeting and shaking of hands followed; while Lady Elizabeth, her hand resting on her new favourite's shoulder, said almost in a whisper,—

"Who would have thought, Emily, that I should come at last to take lessons from you as to the selection of my natural curiosities?... But you have made a hit that does you immortal honour ... this little singing bird is worth all the monsters I ever got together.... Your ladyship need not look so grave, however," she added in a voice still lower. "I do not intend to treat her as if she were stolen from the Zoological Gardens.... She is to come to me to-morrow morning, and then we shall know all about her.... I wish your fastidious brother were here!... Do you remember what he said the other day about some miss he had heard at Clifton? I fancy we might have a chance of correcting his outrageous judgment concerning her.... What think you?"

Lady Stephenson answered by expressing the most cordial admiration of Agnes's voice, but added.... "There are many people coming in now, dear aunt.... If Miss Willoughby will have the kindness to come to us to-morrow, we shall enjoy hearing her much more than we can now, ... and I think she would like it better too."

Agnes gave her a very grateful look, and whispering an earnest "Thank you!" as she passed, glided back to the place she had left beside her aunt.

"Upon my word, Miss Agnes, you are improving fast in impudence," said Mrs. Barnaby in her ear.... "I desire, if you please, that next time you will wait till I bid you sing."

Agnes did not reply. Nothing that it was in the power of her aunt to say could in that happy moment have caused her the slightest serious uneasiness. She was blessed beyond the reach of scolding, which was the more fortunate, as the widow had seldom been in a more irritable mood. Quarter after quarter had heavily struck upon her ear from the time-piece on the marble slab behind her; eleven o'clock (the hour at which her carriage was ordered) approached with fearful strides, and yet Lord Mucklebury came not.... Had her toilet upon this occasion been less fearfully expensive she could have endured it better; but that all the charms a milliner could give

should have been freely ventured on, and HE not see it, was hard to bear.

It is true that, with the dogged firmness of a resolute purpose, Mrs. Barnaby scorned to shrink or tremble as she played her desperate game; nevertheless she knew that selling out stock three times within a fortnight *was* a strong measure; and anything that seemed to check her approach to the goal she felt so sure of reaching, did produce a disagreeable sort of spasm about her heart. There was no help for it, however; go she must, as nearly all the rest of the company had gone before her, with nothing to console her but an indifferently civil nod from Lady Elizabeth, and the surprise, less agreeable perhaps than startling, of seeing her dependant niece parted with in a manner that shewed she was considered of infinitely greater importance than herself, notwithstanding her carriage, her tall footman, and her magnificent attire.

Miss Morrison was accommodated with a seat in the carriage she had so actively exerted herself to procure, and the first words spoken after they drove off were hers.

"*Nest paw que jay raisong?...* Did I not say so, Mrs. Barnaby?... Did I not tell you, my dear madam, that you need do nothing but make this young lady sing in order to become the fashion at Cheltenham?... You have no idea what a number of visits you will have to-morrow.... *Noo verong.*"

"Really, Miss Morrison," replied the widow tartly, "I am surprised to hear a person of your good sense speak so foolishly.... How can you suppose that a person in my station of life could desire the visits of such a set of people as we met to-night?... And as to making this poor penniless girl talked of as a singer, I should be ashamed to think of such a thing. Remember, miss, if you please, that from this time forward I never will permit you to sing again, ... unless, indeed, you mean to get your bread by it, ... and I'm sure I won't undertake to say but what you may want it.... I can answer for nobody but myself; and I don't think it probable that others may be inclined to shew the same devoted generosity that I have done to a girl that never shewed the slightest affection for me in return."

And so she ran on till she fell asleep ... but her words fell like rain on a water-proof umbrella; they made a noise, but they could not reach the head which they seemed destined to deluge. Agnes was wrapped in armour of proof, and nothing could do her harm.

Happily for her, one of the facetious Lord Mucklebury's modes of extracting amusement from the widow was by writing her notes, which elicited answers that often threw him into a perfect ecstasy, and which he carefully preserved in an envelope endorsed "Barnaby Papers," lodging them in a corner of his writing-desk, from whence they were not unfrequently drawn for the delectation of his particular friends. One of these notes, intended to produce an answer that should add a gem to his collection, was delivered to Mrs. Barnaby as she passed from the breakfast-table of the boarding-house to her own sitting-room. The emotions produced by these notes were always very powerful, and on the present occasion more so than ordinary, for there were apologies for not appearing last night, and hopes for an interview that morning, which were to be answered instantly, for the servant waited.

Mrs. Barnaby, panting with haste and gladness, seated herself at her table, opened her writing-desk, seized a pen, and was in the very act of venturing the words "My dear Lord," when Agnes drew near, and said, "May I go out, aunt, to call on Lady Elizabeth?"

"Gracious Heaven!... what a moment to torment me! Go!... go where you will ... plague of my life as you are! Get along at once, can't you?"

Agnes vanished,—a Barnaby paper was written; and while the niece was enjoying three hours of the most flattering and delightful intercourse with the nearest relations of Colonel Hubert, the aunt, with a degree of felicity hardly less perfect, was receiving a *tête-à-tête* visit from Lord Mucklebury, in which he as carefully studied her looks, attitudes, and words, as if their effect on him were all she believed them to be. Nor did either interview pass without producing some important results. His lordship carried away with him wherewithal to keep half-a-dozen of his friends who dined with him on that day in a continued roar for nearly an hour.... Mrs. Barnaby was left with a sweet assurance that all was going well, which led to the purchase of a richly-laced mantelet and a new bonnet ... while Agnes, inspired by so strong a wish to please as to make her follow the lead of her new friends, and converse with them of all her little history just as they wished to make her, created in them both an interest too strong to be ever forgotten, and she left them with a confidence in their kindness that made her endure much subsequent suffering with firmness; for it was long ere she wholly lost the hope that they might meet again in future years.

During the next fortnight this agreeable intercourse was very frequently repeated; for there were few hours of the day in which Mrs. Barnaby was not in some way or other so occupied by the sentiment that engrossed her, either by the presence of its object, or the anticipation of his presence, or meditation upon it when it was passed, that she was well pleased to have Agnes out of the way; and Lady Elizabeth and her charming niece were, on the contrary, so well pleased to have her, that scarcely a day passed without some hours of it being devoted to them.

Lady Stephenson in particular seemed to study her character with peculiar attention. There was a fond devotion in the gratitude which their kindness had produced that could not be mistaken, and which, from one so artless and so every way interesting, could not fail of producing affection in return. From such a friend it was impossible for Agnes to conceal, even if she had wished it, that her home was a very wretched one; and they often conversed together on the possibility of her releasing herself from it by endeavouring to obtain some sort of independence by her own

exertions. Lady Elizabeth was repeatedly a party in these consultations, but uniformly gave it as her opinion that any home was better for such a girl as Agnes, than an attempt to support herself, which must inevitably expose her to a degree of observation more dangerous than any annoyance from her aunt Barnaby. Agnes by no means clearly understood the grounds upon which this sturdy opposition to her wishes was founded; and as Lady Stephenson, who seemed more able to sympathise with her actual sufferings, listened without venturing to answer these mysterious threatenings of something remote, she at length took courage herself and said, ...

"Will you tell me, dear Lady Elizabeth, what it is you think would happen to me if I went into a family as a governess?"

"You are a little fool, Agnes," replied the old lady, unable to repress a smile; "but as I do really believe that your ignorance is genuine, I will tell you.... Don't be frightened, my poor child; but the fact is, that you are a great deal too handsome for any such situation."

Agnes blushed instantly a most celestial rosy red, and felt shocked and ashamed at having drawn forth such an answer; but, though she said nothing in reply, she at once decided that Lady Elizabeth Norris should never have reason to believe that she was capable of neglecting her friendly caution. All hopes from her power of teaching ended for ever, and the next time her aunt Barnaby was particularly cross (which happened that night while they were undressing to go to bed) Agnes very seriously began to revolve in her altered mind the possibility of learning so late in life the profitable mystery of satin-stitch.

Once, and once only, during the many hours Agnes passed with his relations, did she venture to pronounce the name of Colonel Hubert. She had often determined to do it, but had never found courage and opportunity till one morning, after an hour or two passed in singing duets with his sister, Lady Elizabeth again alluded to the *Clifton miss* that her nephew had so vaunted, and whose voice must, she was sure, be so immeasurably inferior to that of Miss Willoughby.

It was under cover of this observation that Agnes ventured to say, ... "I knew Colonel Hubert a little when I was at Clifton."

"Did you?"... said the old lady briskly; "then I'll bet my life he heard you sing."

"Once or twice he did."

"Oh! hah!... that explains it all.... You need not blush so about it, my dear; why did you not tell me so at once?"

"I do not think it is quite certain," returned Agnes, attempting to smile, "that Colonel Hubert spoke of me."

"Don't you, my dear ... but I do, and I know him best, I suppose.... And what was it you sang to him, Agnes?"

Agnes mentioned the songs; but her voice trembled so, that she grievously repented having brought on herself questions that she found it so difficult to answer.

Her embarrassment was not greatly relieved by perceiving,—when at length she looked up to save herself from the awkwardness of pertinaciously looking down,—that the eyes of Lady Stephenson were earnestly fixed upon her.

"Did you ever see Frederick Stephenson with my brother?" said her ladyship; "they were at Clifton together this summer.... Perhaps you don't know that I was married there, Agnes?... and Sir Edward and I left our two brothers there together."

This change of subject was a considerable relief; and Agnes answered with tolerable composure,—"Oh yes!... I did know you were married there, for I heard it mentioned several times; ... and I saw you too, Lady Stephenson, the evening before you were married, walking up and down Gloucester Row with ... with your brother."

"Did you indeed?—Were you walking there, Agnes?"

"No ... we were at the drawing-room window, and my aunt made me look out to see your brother."

"Why particularly to see my brother?" inquired Lady Stephenson with a smile.

"Because ... because he was so tall, I believe," replied Agnes, looking considerably more silly than she had ever done in her life.

"And so you watched us walking up and down, did you, Agnes?"

"Yes, once or twice," answered Agnes, again blushing violently.

"And did you hear what we said, my dear?"

"No!... but I am sure it was something very interesting, you seemed to be talking so earnestly."

"It was very interesting ... it was about Frederick.... You knew him too, did not you?"

"Oh yes!... very well."

"Really!... I wonder you never told me so before."

It was impossible to look at Agnes at this moment, as Lady Stephenson now looked at her, without perceiving that there must be some cause for the agitation she evinced. It immediately occurred to her that it was likely enough Frederick might have laid his heart at her feet, or perhaps stopped short before he did so from the effect of that very conversation of which Agnes had been an eye, though not an ear, witness.

"Poor little thing!"... thought Lady Stephenson; "if this be so, and if she has given her young heart in return, how greatly is she to be pitied!"

No sooner had this idea struck her, which many trifling circumstances tended to confirm, than Lady Stephenson determined to drop the subject for ever; and much as Agnes secretly but tremblingly wished it, no allusion was ever made to the two gentlemen again.

Days and weeks rolled on till the time fixed by Lord Mucklebury for his departure arrived. His collection of the Barnaby papers was quite as copious as he wished it to be; and having indulged himself and his friends with as many good stories as any one lady could be the heroine of, without being fatiguing, he parted with the widow on Saturday evening, assuring her, with a thousand expressions of passionate admiration, that he should be early on the walks to look for her on the morrow, and by noon on Sunday was on his road to London behind four galloping post-horses.

During the whole of that fatal Sunday Mrs. Barnaby roamed through all the public walks of Cheltenham with the disconsolate air of a pigeon whose mate has been shot.... She was sad, cross, tender, and angry by turns; but never for a moment during that long dismal day did she ever once conceive the terrible idea that her intended mate was flown for ever. Nay, even on the morrow, when in answer to an inquiry at the reading-room, of whether Lord Mucklebury had been there that morning, the man replied,—"I believe his lordship has left the town, ma'am!"—not even then did her mind receive the terrible truth.

It was from the hand of her friend Miss Morrison that the blow came at last.... That lady on Wednesday evening entered her room, bringing a London newspaper with her; she was much irritated.

"*Mong Dew*, Mrs. Barnaby!" she cried, "look here."

The widow seized the paper with a trembling hand, and before she fainted read as follows:—

"Lord Viscount Mucklebury arrived this morning at Mivart's Hotel from Cheltenham. It is rumoured that his lordship is about to depart in a few days for the Continent, in order to pass the winter at Rome, but rather with the intention of kissing the hands of the beautiful Lady M— S — than the toe of his holiness."

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WIDOW BARNABY. VOL. 2 (OF 3) ***

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